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Interdiscursive Elements in the #JeSuisChien Campaign. A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Introduction

The November 2015 attacks in Paris, France, were a series of coordinated terrorist attacks, including mass shootings and suicide bombings, that killed 130 people and left another 413 injured. Then-president François Hollande deemed these attacks an “Act of War” and declared a three-month state of emergency (put in place by the French parliament) during which public protest was forbidden and police could search homes without a warrant, place individuals under house arrest without trial, and any website deemed problematic could be blocked.

Not included in the death toll, however, is the police dog “Diesel,” who died after being used by the police to seize a suspected perpetrator. Following his death, the Twitter hashtag trend “#JeSuisChien/#JeSuisDiesel” began, generating over 15,000 tweets during the week and indexing 100 on Google Trends the day after his death. This Twitter trend was clearly echoing the hashtag #JeSuisCharlie (I am Charlie) which became immensely popular after a previous terrorist attack at the headquarters of the popular French political satire magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. By drawing on the same linguistic structure of this earlier campaign, we are given a hint at how this discursive environment was evolving and how Diesel – and his death – became part of it.

The following is a critical discourse analysis on the BBC News web article headlined: *Thousands declare ‘Je Suis Chien’ and ‘Je Suis Diesel’ after dog killed in Paris raid*, which overviews and ultimately contributes to the discourse in question as it demon-

strates how the text can be seen as a link in an intertextual chain, or “a series of texts in which each text incorporates elements from another text or other texts” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis drawn on here is that of Norman Fairclough and Lilie Chouliaraki, which will be reviewed below.

Critical Discourse Analysis as a method

A primary concept of Fairclough and Chouliaraki’s Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is that discourse is a form of social practice that both constitutes the social world and is constituted by other social practices (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). It is “critical” in the sense that it aims to reveal the role of discursive practice in the maintenance of the social world, including those social relations that involve unequal relations of power (Fairclough, 1999). As this text aims to conduct a critical social analysis that contributes to the rectification of injustice and inequality in human-animal relationship, CDA is employed as a theory and a method to investigate the discursive reproduction of the identity of police dogs in relation to other texts and in a wider social context (Fairclough, 2002).

This discourse analysis is based on Fairclough and Chouliaraki’s three-dimensional model, in which they claim that every instance of language use is a communicative event consisting of three dimensions: text, discursive practice, and social practice (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Thus, our analysis will include and focus on the following levels: 1. The linguistic features of the BBC article and the #JeSuisChien campaign as it appears within it, 2. The interdiscursive mix that reshapes how we understand Diesel and other police dogs for various purposes, and 3. The dialectical relationship that the discursive practice had with other social practices -- how the communicative event shapes and is shaped by the wider social practice through its relationship to the order of discourse.

Analysis: Fairclough’s three dimensional model

Fairclough lays out a model through which one can begin to analyze several levels of discourse. The model is comprised of three levels specifically: the text itself, the discursive practice (both production and consumption of text), and social practice as the context in which a communicative event takes place (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The following analysis examines the article in question through this model.

First level: Text

On a textual level, the article reads like a standard news story. It does this by giving a standard overview of the facts as they are known: lists of numbers of deaths/casualties and an overview of the events that unfolded. This contributes to an assumed sense of ‘credibility’ and accuracy on behalf of the reader. Further, among the most notable features for analysis are the following:

Textual Structure: An important connection made in the article is between the hashtags “Je suis Chien” and “Je suis Charlie.” The latter was made famous as a solidarity hashtag for the victims of the attack on the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo in 2015, and arguably also as an expression of national unity and Western or liberal values, particularly in the face of Islamic terrorism and not just as the article claims, “sharing messages of grief.” To claim “je suis” (in French: I am) is a way of expressing strong empathy and solidarity, not only showing sympathy, but actually claiming that I am you, I feel your pain/loss/sorrow, and we are one. Using this hashtag in this way therefore not only appeals to sympathy for the police dog but for the Western state in the face of terrorism more broadly.

Vocabulary: The species differences between humans and dogs are simultaneously erased and reinforced throughout the article due to different phrasings and choice of words. For example, while the narrative of the story as a whole attempts to demonstrate how dogs and humans stand united, both as victims of terrorism and in protecting the French nation, the words used in the article also point to how dogs differ from humans. Using words such as “creatures” when talking about the dogs in the hashtag and quoting how the hashtag’s creator started it with the aim of being “a little bit funny” are examples of words that would never be used about humans in a similar context.

Modality: the news article makes clear through an active voice that responsibility for Diesel’s death is on the hands of the terrorists and not the police. Wording such as: “police dog Diesel, a 7-year-old Belgian Shepherd, was killed by terrorists,” establish an agent responsible for his death. This, as we will see next, works to shift the blame for his death. At the same time, the article demonstrates grammatically how this campaign was grassroots and not managed by any organization. There is a recurring passive modality, as seen in quotes such as: “A “Je Suis Diesel” Facebook page **has also been set up**”, and “Later a new slogan, “Je Suis Diesel,” **was adopted**.” It uses the passive voice to show that these phenomena are happening but we

are not sure who is responsible for them, but implies a broad support of Diesel as the police dog, a reflection the embedded normality of the state using dogs as weapons. Broad appeal through the passive voice may contribute to the reader a feeling of comradery or sense of support for Diesel, which could make the reader feel sympathy for police violence more generally.

Semiotics: In looking at the images, particularly the first, it is interesting to see how they reinforce notions of both subordination and of pledging allegiance to the nation-state, in this case, France. These notions of subordination and being a faithful servant to the republic are multifaceted. A dog holding the French flag in his mouth is shown in a subordinate posture, his ears folded backward and holding up his paws and front legs, expressing symbolism similar to the young soldier. But this being a dog pictured, the symbolism also connotes the role of dogs as a subordinate species to humans, at the service of humans and human nation-states.

Second level: Discursive practice

i. Text production

*Building solidarity with the victims - first Charlie Hebdo,
then Diesel the [police] dog*

The article in question displays an interdiscursive mix (Fairclough, 1999), providing insight into how the police dog identity is being subtly reconstructed. Here we understand interdiscursivity as a process occurring “when different discourses and genres are articulated together in a communicative event” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). As mentioned in the textual analysis, the most notable discourse in this communicative event is #JeSuisCharlie. This discourse promotes solidarity with the victim: Je suis ____ = I am _____. As those identifying with this discourse would be feeling symbolically a sense of victimhood with Diesel the dog and against the perpetrators of the terrorism (the terrorists), the natural next step would be to feel a sense of solidarity with the protector professing to fight the terrorists; in this case, those are one and the same. This shift from solidarity with the civilian victims (those killed at Charlie Hebdo) to solidarity with the state as the victim (Diesel the police dog) contributes to reinforcing the legitimacy of measures the state may take in return, like the state of emergency mentioned in the introduction, or others. Taking these actions in the name of “national security”

is a key element of the discussion, and it is aided in part by constituting those who die fighting as national heroes.

Establishing Diesel as a national hero

The next discourse being drawn on in this instance is the notion of Diesel as a national hero who fought and died for the freedom of the people. A tweet reading: “True hero! He died today for your freedom tomorrow! #wewillneverforget #hero #JeSuisChien #jesuismin #diesel” with the text of an accompanying meme stating: RIP DIESEL, THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE, is one example of adding this national hero/freedom-fighting discourse into this discursive mix. As such, it pays tribute to Diesel and his death and essentially shifts blame from the National Police, who forced him into the situation, to the terrorists who committed the killing. By extension, as the frame shows that Diesel is fighting for our freedom, the people are then implicated in the blame of his death. Furthermore, this positions Diesel and other police dogs as part of the state law enforcement agency with which many might now be feeling a more profound solidarity because they “fight the terror.” This is a primary way in which we see this subtle reconstruction of the police dog identity as reinforcing the legitimacy the use of dogs as weapons AND of state-sanctioned violence more generally, since it draws on these discourses as the solution to the ambiguous and imminent threat of terror in real time (here, directly after an instance of terrorism).

This articulation of the police dog identity is an example of interdiscursive elements changing boundaries of it into something new. Yet, it simultaneously works in a very conventional way by reinforcing the dominant social order: namely, that of the French Republic’s use of violence to maintain order. Ultimately, we claim that the discourse “hero” or “freedom fighter” – i.e., those who fight and die for our ‘freedom,’ are the powerful frames utilized to support this.

Text consumption: Opposing uses of #JeSuisChien

As the article suggests, there seemed to be some disagreement about the seriousness of the campaign on the part of individuals. On the one hand, there were thousands who used the hashtag to pay tribute to Diesel, of which many were uploading photos of their own dogs and using the hashtag. On the other hand, however, the article spends a little less than half of its time discussing those who used the hash-

tag ironically, including the creator of the hashtag himself, who is quoted in the article saying he started it: “to be a little bit funny.” Among the memes that were created and spread was one mentioned in the BBC article, mimicking threats that the hacker group Anonymous made toward the Islamic State, but with the face of a dog photoshopped over the mask of the member of Anonymous making the announcement.

These opposing uses of the hashtag – and of each individual’s understanding of the campaign – shed light on the instability of the meaning in this case. Furthermore, it leads us into our discussion on social practice by exemplifying what Fairclough calls the “dialectical relationship” between discourse and other social dimensions.

Third level: Social practice

There are a number of social practices at play within this article. It concerns a grassroots Twitter trend, and we therefore look first to the social practice of tweeting since the campaign would not have existed (or at least in a very different context) without Twitter as a platform. #JeSuisChien and #JeSuisCharlie both grew exponentially through the use of Twitter and in turn spread to other platforms. The BBC article demonstrates that spread in two ways; first, by actually bringing the discussion off Twitter and onto their proprietary website (then distributed by their social media accounts), as well as linking to a Facebook page created in honor of Diesel called “Je Suis Chien.” We characterize this campaign as a communicative event within the larger social practice of tweeting and, by extension, social media use.

We understand social media use as the major social practice at play because the ways in which the platform was used varied. As shown above, a large part of the individuals using social media to participate in this communicative event was using it to show support and solidarity for either Diesel, the police, or both. As the BBC article points out, however, a portion was also using the hashtag ironically. In this way, we see exemplified the dialectical relationship between discourse and other social dimensions: “Discourse is a form of social practice which both constitutes the social world and is constituted by other social practices” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The article does not mention, nor hint at, what the irony seeks

to trivialize. Is it downplaying Diesel's death? Or is it attempting to express sarcasm toward this type of social media campaign (i.e. #JeSuisCharlie, #JeSuisChien)?

Conclusion

In sum, we can see a number of different ways that the #JeSuisChien campaign as overviewed in this article, subtly – yet ultimately – contributes to reifying both the state's use of dogs as property/weapons as well as legitimizing their use of violence and/or seizing rights of the people. First, we see the various ways that this story is built on a textual level, giving the tools to participate in the discussion. Next, while Diesel was forced to work for the police – a situation which ultimately cost his life – the #JeSuisChien campaign paying tribute to his death works to shift the blame of his death from the French National Police to the terrorists as if forgiving that the police forced him into that situation in the first place. Lastly, we see how this can fit into the wider social practice of social media use, using hashtags to bring their posts into different communicative events, whether their intention aligns with the campaign or is ironic.

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