

## BOOK REVIEW

**Paul Baker, Rachelle Vessey & Tony McEnery** (2021). *The Language of Violent Jihad*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
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Previous research on terrorist materials has been mainly conducted from a communications approach, with a focus on the communicative strategies of perpetrators (e.g. Abrahms 2005; Holbrook 2013). This co-authored book drives forward the field of studies on terrorism as it approaches the phenomenon from a linguistic perspective. Such linguistic analysis aims at identifying the linguistic and discursive strategies frequently employed by a number of convicted British terrorists based on texts produced to persuade readers to carry out violent acts. The book consists of six chapters besides introductory and conclusive chapters.

In the Introduction, after pointing out the crucial role of language in human interaction, the authors define four concepts underpinning their analysis, namely *language*, *ideology*, *discourse* and *representation*. They then trace the historical development of violent jihad to finally stress the potential role that violent texts play in inciting violence.

Chapter 2 reviews previous research on terrorism and language from four aspects: problems with terrorism terminology, terrorism as a communication strategy, terrorist discourse, and its themes. After clarifying the definition of terrorist discourse used in this study, the authors state that online communication allows terrorists to strategically communicate contradictory content to diverse audiences. Next, the following central trends in the discourse of violent jihad are presented: polarizing, grievance-based, positive, authoritative and deeply embedded in historical and theoretical texts.

Chapter 3 elaborates on data and methodology used in the book. The authors classify the extremist texts which are given access to into three categories (Extreme, Fringe and Moderate). The authors adopt Biber's (1988) multi-dimensional analysis (MDA) to explore register in the three sub-corpora, uncovering no obvious differences between them in terms of register variation. Next, as part of a Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) approach frequency, keywords, collocation and concordances are explained and applied to the three sub-corpora. Specific attention is paid to keywords which results in the identification of six main categories, four of which (Us, Them, Killing, and Argumentation) are used as the basis for analysis in Chapters 4–7.

Chapter 4 examines nine ‘Us’ keywords shared across the three sub-corpora, namely *Islam*, *Allah*, *Muslims*, *believer*, *believers*, *brother*, *brothers*, *Ummah*, and *you*. The analysis unveils a number of representations around the in-group, with Islam repeatedly represented as a collective entity through a series of linguistic strategies, including the use of relational words like *brother*, plural nouns like *believers*, and personal pronouns like *you*. Moreover, the findings indicate that while both the Fringe and Extreme texts engage more frequently in a wider range of representations, the latter focus more on inducing believers to act, with Islam, Muslims and brothers viewed as under attack. The authors hold that differences in representations suggest a progression in ideology of advocating violent jihad.

In Chapter 5, the authors focus on four ‘Them’ keywords, namely *kufur/ disbelief*, *kuffar/ disbelievers*, *America* and *evil*. The findings suggest that the out-group with the most significant characteristic of *kufur/ disbelief* is represented as cunning and aggressive in both Fringe and Extreme texts, while *America*, the nation of *kuffar/ disbelievers*, is pictured as a flawed opponent that is destined to lose in the Extreme sub-corpus. Contrary to the authors’ expectation, Fringe texts have more mentions of evil people overall and all sub-corpora tend to refer more to evil as deeds rather than as people. Nevertheless, the concept of *evil* helps to set up a distinction between different sides in the Extreme texts, justifying the use of extreme measures against opponents.

Chapter 6 examines keywords relating to violence (e.g., *jihad*, *kill*) and related categories like martyrdom and the afterlife (e.g., *martyrdom* and *Paradise*). The analysis suggests that although *jihad* is pictured as fighting across the three sub-corpora, it is viewed as obligatory in Extreme texts and as being for Allah in Fringe texts. The examination of *kill*\* reveals that all associated representations, most common in the Extreme sub-corpus, help to position Muslims as victims and are used to justify the killing of civilians. Next, the authors find that *martyrdom* is represented as an extremely desirable state in Extreme texts. Moreover, death is not deemed the end of life in the Extreme texts, but the ultimate reward in the form of Paradise with the company of beautiful women.

While Chapters 4–6 focus on conceptual keywords relating to social identities and violence, Chapter 7 explores specific linguistic strategies used in the data, with a focus on the use of formal registers and Arabic. The analysis starts with three sets of keywords relating to the use of formal register and the concepts of truth and quotation, such as *upon*, *truth* and *claim*. The authors find that a formal, archaic or religious register is more frequently used in the Extreme and Fringe texts to lend weight to persuasive arguments. The second part of Chapter 7 examines multilingualism, specifically Arabic, adopted in the data. The findings that Arabic words, Arabic spellings and Arabic script are used more in the Extreme sub-corpus indicate that Arabic is employed strategically to advocate more explicit

violence. The chapter ends with a conclusion that the use of formal, archaic or religious English along with Arabic terms contributes to the persuasiveness of the extremist discourse.

Chapter 8 concludes with a summary of the findings, implications for countering extremism, and reflections on future research directions.

Overall, the book is a valuable contribution to the fields of corpus linguistics and discourse analysis. Three characteristics of the book are worthy of particular attention. First, methodologically, the authors compare the three sub-corpora against a reference corpus and elicit keywords in order to analyze both differences and similarities between them. This echoes Taylor's (2018) emphasis on similarity in corpus approaches to discourse studies, where direct comparisons of corpora abound with a focus only on differences. Second, in order to obtain additional perspectives on typical language use, the authors employ larger corpora, such as the British National Corpus and the Corpus of Historical American English, which provides great accuracy and accountability for their findings. Third, the analysis carried out in the four chapters is done in a systematic and easy-to-follow way, with each chapter beginning with a table of keywords and nearly each keyword analysis with a summarizing bar graph. A minor limitation is that the frequent use of Romanized Arabic words in the data makes it sometimes difficult for readers to follow.

In sum, the book fulfills its main goals through sound theoretical and analytical sections, making itself a unique and original contribution to terrorism discourse analysis. It thus not only provides a template for graduate students and researchers in corpus linguistics and discourse analysis, but also offers invaluable guidance for counter-terrorism organizations.

## References

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