

1 Introduction

1.1 Sticks and Stones May Break My Bones but Words Will Never Harm Me

The above rhyme, which is sometimes used to persuade children to ignore taunts or name-calling, is an example of a useful untruth. In fact, words have the potential to cause enormous amounts of different kinds of harm. Words are the foundation of language, and language is perhaps the most important and distinctive aspect of human interaction. It has long been argued that language is performative with phrases like ‘I pronounce you married’, ‘I resign’, ‘I declare war’ and ‘I sentence you to death’, when used under the right conditions, changing social reality (Austin, 1962). Language is the vehicle which is used to make sense of the world around us, to form relationships, share emotions and ideas and to influence others. It allows us to make sense of the world around us as well as giving us a vehicle to travel to the past, the future and imaginary worlds. Language influences our perceptions of what is good or bad, lawful or criminal, real or illusory. It is generally through language that people encounter the concept of an omnipotent Deity who created everything in the universe. It is through language that we are told how this Deity expects us to behave and what will happen to us after we die. Someone can use language to create a text, which will be read by an individual living in a different country who will never meet the text producer, but that text may inspire them to kill a third person, who is also unconnected to either their killer or the writer of the text. It is sequences of events such as this that we are concerned with in this book. More specifically, we examine the language in a set of texts which were found on the hard drives of computers owned by people who have been convicted of acts of terrorism connected to the concept of violent jihad. While the Arabic term *jihad* literally translates into English as a struggle or striving, some people have interpreted it as referring to armed struggle against outsiders. The main question we consider in this book is: in what ways is language used to persuade people to engage in violent jihad?¹

¹ When writing about concepts from Islamic tradition like jihad and Hadith we represent them with standard English orthography as we do not expect that all readers will understand the meaning of

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Strangely, the link between language and violence is a notion relatively neglected by linguists yet prominent in the wider literature. For example, in legal studies, a close link between language and violence is accepted, with many studies focusing on a specific set of words, so-called hate speech (Delgado and Stefancic, 2004; Greenawalt, 1989; Matsuda et al., 1993; Wolfson, 1997). While insightful, these studies are not written from a linguist's perspective and tend to focus upon words which are overtly offensive. A wider link between language and violence has been implied by legal scholars, with Freedman and Freedman (1995: ix) making the important claim that '[w]hen the message is violent, language can itself be a form of violence.'

Yet while this link between language and violence has been asserted, less attention has been paid to *how* language is used to incite violence. The Freedman and Freedman volume, for example, focuses on matters other than the specific linguistic mechanisms which are used to promote violence, leaving their assertions about the link between language and violence as one of a number of 'reasonable, but largely unsupported assumptions' (Silverstein, 1996: 27) which limit this work. Silverstein (1996: 27) rightly points out that '[f]or most of the contributors to this volume, these assertions need no support ... but ... empirical support for these assertions would have been a welcome addition.'

Linguists have written upon a range of issues related to language and violence, such as impoliteness (e.g. Culpeper, 2011) and swearing/bad language (e.g. McEnery, 2005). There have also been small-scale qualitative studies of incitements to violence in the context, for example, of anti-Semitism and racism (e.g. Reisigl and Wodak, 2001; Wodak et al., 2009; van Dijk, 1991). A similar picture emerges in psychology, where studies of specific aspects of language and violence may be found. Psychologists have studied, in some detail, overtly aggressive language (for overviews, see Baron and Richardson, 1994; Geen, 2001). For example, Robertson and Murachver's (2010) study of facilitative and non-facilitative language features in the speech of people with a history of intimate partner violence points to a less facilitative interactional style in couples in an abusive relationship. Indeed, even early literature in psychology (e.g. Buss, 1961) considered verbal acts of aggression alongside physical acts. Yet no general theory of the link between the verbally and physically violent has been presented, and indeed a discussion of violence is notable by its absence from major works on psychology and language (e.g. Carroll, 2008; Clark and Clark, 1977; Harley, 2001).

As we will show in Chapter 2, texts that have been created to inspire people to commit acts of violent jihad have been studied in a range of ways; for example, they have been examined in terms of communication strategy, with

diacritics sometimes used to represent these words, and as we show later, the use of diacritics can be inconsistent.

consideration of their production and audience consumption. Regarding their content, research has tended to focus on the topics, themes, concepts or arguments that they contain, with a small amount of work based around writing style or use of legitimation. The intention of our book is to put language at the forefront of the analysis, to identify the linguistic and discursive strategies that the authors of texts that advocate violent jihad employ frequently in order to manipulate readers into thinking in particular ways. In Chapter 3 we outline the approach that we take in our analysis, grounded in Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS), a methodology which involves using computer software to identify linguistic features that are representative of a large dataset of language (called a corpus). These features can then be subjected to detailed human analysis. Chapters 4–7 centre on the analysis of a number of keywords, words which occur (statistically speaking) much more often than expected by chance and play important roles in terms of manipulating readers, while the book concludes in Chapter 8 by summarising the main findings, reflecting on the study and considering its implications for countering extremism and future directions. Prior to that, we use this short introductory chapter to provide some contextualising detail regarding our use of concepts like *discourse*, the rise to prominence of forms of politically motivated Islam that advocate violent jihad and the potential role that violent texts have to play in inspiring violence.

1.2 Language, Ideology, Discourse, Representation

In this book we make use of the four above interrelated terms which are used frequently in scholarship on persuasion and power but can sometimes have multiple meanings or be used inconsistently. There is also little agreement on the relationship between the four terms – the extent to which they are synonymous or connect to one another. The aim of this section of the book is not to resolve these issues in a once-and-for-all definitive way, but to provide a brief outline of how we use the terms for the purposes of the analysis in this book, as well as to give some background regarding the ways we have derived our definitions.

We define language here as a system of intentional communication which involves the use of agreed-upon symbols (usually sounds produced by human voices or written marks produced on paper or on screens via keyboards), as well as rules governing the order in which they appear, that are used to transmit a message from one person to another. Alongside the sounds or written marks are numerous accompanying paralinguistic features which also play a role in the communication of various messages – in writing this could involve the colour of the pen one uses or the choice of typeface, while in speech it could relate to the use of gesture, facial expression or the tone or pitch of someone's voice. These features can have specific meanings for different cultures so again they constitute conventionalised meanings within a particular group. There is a close

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relationship between language and discourse, with some writers implying that the terms are practically synonymous or at least strongly overlap. Indeed, discourse is perhaps the most complex term to define of the four terms considered in this section, as it has several sets of meanings that were developed by different linguists and philosophers. A broad linguistic meaning of discourse makes it barely different from language itself – Brown and Yule (1983) refer to it as ‘language in use’, as opposed to say, studying language as a system in itself. Stubbs (1983: 1) provides a slightly more specific definition of discourse as ‘language above the sentence or above the clause’. Within this context, research on discourse may involve examining the structures of text, such as marking the boundaries between discourse units (stretches of language use which have internal coherence, marked, for example, by paragraph breaks in written text; Csomay, 2005). Or we could consider discourse markers, words like *OK*, *well* and *right*, which carry out some of the organisational work of language, especially in speech. A broader linguistic notion of discourse involves the set of features which contribute towards the particular style or register of a text, and in this sense we could write of political discourse, advertising discourse, religious discourse or scientific discourse and so on, noting when the features of several discourses combine within a single text and the potential effects of this for persuasion (see Chapter 7). Yet another linguistic term is discourse prosody (Stubbs, 2001), which relates to the potential for words to be used repeatedly in a range of similar contexts so that they begin to be imbued with meanings which are often unconsciously processed. For example, the phrase *exposed to* often comes before words like *radiation*, *risks*, *infection* and *danger*, so we could say that it has a negative discourse prosody which would influence how people interpret the meaning of a neutral-sounding utterance like *exposed to his ideas*.

Another way of conceiving of discourse, however, is to take the view that it concerns ‘practices which systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (Foucault, 1972: 49). Here, discourse is a count noun, concerning a ‘system of statements which constructs an object’ (Parker, 1992: 5) or ‘ways of seeing the world, often with reference to relations of power’ (Sunderland, 2004: 6). A key way that discourses are manifested is through language or ‘linguistic traces’ (Sunderland, 2004: 28). For example, a sexist discourse could be embedded in phrases which place men before women (*boys and girls* tends to occur more frequently than *girls and boys* in general English²), use of specific terminology which suggests inequalities in terms of representation (e.g. calling promiscuous women *sluts* and promiscuous men *studs*) or statements which contain generalisations or implications about expected or atypical male or female qualities and roles, such as ‘a woman’s place is in the kitchen’ or ‘she wears the pants in

² In the 100-million-word British National Corpus used in some of the analysis in this book, the phrase *boys and girls* occurs 339 times, while *girls and boys* occurs 85 times.

that relationship'. Discourses are both constituted by and constitutive of social practices. Burr (1995: 48) defines discourse as 'a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events', thereby implying that a representation is something which makes up part of a discourse.

Used by cultural theorists such as Hall (1997) 'representation includes the signifying practices and symbolic systems through which meanings are produced and we position ourselves as subjects' (Woodward, 1997: 14). For the purposes of this book, we are interested in representations that are constituted through language, taking the view that a representation can be characterised in terms of the statement 'X is Y' where X is typically a noun and Y is some form of description. For example, the representation 'Islam is under attack' could be manifested in different grammatical structures (as a passive or active sentence – 'Islam is being attacked' vs 'they are attacking Islam') or involving nominalisations, such as 'the war on Islam'. A collection of related representations could contribute towards a discourse, although such representations are sometimes combined in complex or unusual ways. Potter and Wetherell (1987) have shown, for example, how interviewees held seemingly contradictory attitudes about race which were presented in a way that appeared to be coherent.

We follow van Dijk (2013: 177) as viewing ideology as a system of beliefs that are shared collectively by members of a specific social group but are not typically shared by everyone (so are thus contentious). We characterise ideology as encompassing an overarching worldview which covers a model of both how the world currently is and how it should be. Ideologies can thus cover beliefs about how people should be governed, how people should behave towards each other and how resources should be divided up. They are often labelled with the suffix *-ism*, such as fascism, neo-liberalism, pacificism. Ideologies are largely acquired, expressed and reproduced by discourse (van Dijk, 2013: 176), both in terms of discourse as collections of representations or discourse as collections of features and practices that appear in particular types of texts. We would therefore see Islamism, for example, as an ideology that is expressed through discourses that in turn are made up of representations (see Section 1.3). The line between discourse and ideology or discourse and representation is difficult to demarcate though (e.g. we could refer to *sexist discourse* but also to *sexism* as an ideology), and for this reason in this book we mainly use the term *discourse* to refer to the features and social practices around the texts we examine; for example, we write about *extremist discourse* which suggests representations and their accompanying language features that all have an ideological goal, but we also consider concepts like *legal discourse* that is more based around stylistic and organisational features of a particular text

type. In the parts of our analysis that are involved with ‘ways of looking at the world’, we have tended to refer to these as representations, rather than calling them discourses.

1.3 Violent Jihad: Background and Context

Islam is an Abrahamic religion which teaches that there is only one God (Allah) and Muhammad, a man born in the sixth century³ in the city of Mecca, is God’s Messenger. At the age of forty, Muhammad reported being visited by the angel Gabriel in a mountain cave called Hira, receiving revelations from God. After preaching these revelations, Muhammad attracted followers but also experienced hostility from the polytheists he lived amongst, so he and his followers migrated to Medina, an event known as the Hijrah. Eventually, Muhammad returned to Mecca with 10,000 converts and took control of the city. Most of the Arabian Peninsula had converted to Islam by the time of his death. Now it is the second largest religion in the world with over 1.6 billion followers or almost a quarter of the world’s population in 2010 (Pew Research Centre, 2015: 7). The first caliphate (or Islamic state) was established immediately after Muhammad’s death in 632 CE. The most important texts in Islam are the Qur’an, which is claimed to be the verbatim word of God as revealed to Muhammad, and the teachings called the Sunnah, composed of accounts, or Hadith, of Muhammad, which were compiled several generations after Muhammad’s death. While the number of texts pertaining to law are relatively few in the Qur’an, the bulk of the rules of Sharia (Islamic law) are derived from the Hadith.

Most Muslims are of two main denominations, Sunni or Shia, although these are further divided into numerous branches. Different schools of Islam have created methodologies for deriving rulings (Islamic law or Sharia law) from holy texts. A Sunni movement called Salafism was based on the interpretations of a thirteenth-century theologian called Taqi al-Din Ahmad ibn Taymiyyah. He put emphasis on the importance of jihad, writing that ‘it is allowed to fight people for [not observing] unambiguous and generally recognized obligations and prohibitions, until they undertake to perform the explicitly prescribed prayers, to pay zakat, to fast during the month of Ramadan, to make the pilgrimage to Mecca and to avoid what is prohibited, such as marrying women in spite of legal impediments, eating impure things, acting unlawfully against the lives and properties of Muslims and the like’ (DeLong-Bas, 2004: 252). Ibn Taymiyyah also believed that martyrdom resulted in eternal rewards and blessings. In the eighteenth century, a religious leader called Muhammad

³ The Islamic calendar employs the Hijri era, whose epoch was established as the Islamic New Year of 622 CE (when Muhammad and his followers migrated from Mecca to Medina). Dates in this book are given in CE (Common Era) form.

ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab founded a reform or revivalist movement within Sunni Islam which is known today as Wahhabism. It has been influenced by Salafism and these two movements are sometimes referred to interchangeably while others view them as separate, or that Wahhabism is an orientation within Salafism. However, generally they are viewed as having merged in Saudi Arabia in the 1960s. These movements have been called strict or ultra-conservative interpretations of Islam (the Qur'an is interpreted literally), with some detractors referring to them as a distorted version of Islam (see Commins 2009: *viv*). Wahhabism bans all use of intoxicating substances including tobacco, requires women to wear a black abaya (a garment covering the whole body except the hands and eyes), while men are not allowed to shave, there is strict segregation of the sexes and severe punishment for adultery. In the past, practices like listening to music, dancing, playing board games, acting in plays or writing fiction have been reported as forbidden by Wahhabi officials or religious police. Wahhabism scholars have advocated that Muslims do not take non-Muslims as friends. Abd al-Wahhab's teachings are the official state-sponsored form of Sunni Islam in Saudi Arabia, and with the help of funding from Saudi petroleum exports, along with a range of other factors, Wahhabism has grown in popularity since the 1970s and now has worldwide influence (Abou El Fadl, 2005; Kepel, 2002).

An important distinction is made between *Islam*, the religion, and *Islamism*, which relates to Islamic political ideology, although there is little agreement on what the latter term means exactly. Broadly speaking, it refers to various forms of social and political activism aiming to establish Islamic principles in public and private life. More specifically it can refer to movements which wish to impose Sharia law, while some scholars (e.g. Fuller, 2003: 21) view Islamism as a form of identity politics. Within academia, the term Islamism does not in itself specify the political vision that is advocated or how it should be achieved, and while it is a term that has tended to be associated with extreme political views, 'Moderate Islamism' is characterised by participation within democratic frameworks.

Wahhabism and Salafism can be seen as forms of Islamism, along with the ideology of a twentieth-century Egyptian author, Sayyid Qutb, who believed that use of violence was acceptable in order to achieve Islamist goals. He viewed the United States as materialistic and obsessed with sex and violence and was executed in 1966 after being convicted of plotting the assassination of the Egyptian president. His views were influential to the group al-Qaeda, a militant organisation founded by Osama Bin Laden in 1988. Bin Laden, who was born to a wealthy Saudi family, joined mujahidin (those who are engaged in jihad) forces in Pakistan in 1979, fighting against what has been variously called an invasion or intervention by the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. He declared jihad on the United States in 1996 and masterminded

attacks that took place on 11 September 2001, which involved the hijacking of four passenger aeroplanes. Two planes were crashed into the North and South Towers of the World Trade Center complex in Manhattan, the third was flown into the headquarters of the United States Department of Defense (known as the Pentagon), while the fourth crashed in a field in Pennsylvania after passengers attacked the hijackers.

The '9/11' attacks killed 2,997 victims, injuring over 6,000 others. Thousands of people who were present at the time and during the following days have died of cancers and lung conditions as a result of exposure to toxins produced by the attacks. The attacks had a profound effect on human societies around the world. They were not the first jihadist terror attacks of this kind but their co-ordinated nature, the use of passenger planes and the high number of deaths in a familiar, and until-then 'safe', location resulted in widespread grief, anger and fear. The United States, under Republican President George W. Bush, responded by launching what it called the 'War on Terror', leading a coalition of countries, including the UK, to invade Afghanistan. This resulted in the deposition of the Taliban, a military group who ruled there, which had supported Bin Laden. In 2003 the United States led another invasion, this time of Iraq. The invasion was ostensibly to end the leader, Saddam Hussein's, support for terrorism, free the Iraqi people and remove weapons of mass destruction. However, such weapons were never found and while the attack successfully deposed Hussein, it is estimated that many thousands of Iraqi civilians died during the invasion, with many more dying subsequently as a result of the country's instability.⁴

Along with these invasions, the United States government has been criticised for its response to 9/11, including its use of waterboarding and detention of terror suspects. The invasion of Iraq was viewed by the International Institute for Strategic Studies as swelling the ranks of al-Qaeda and related groups.⁵ Indeed, a group formed in 1999 called Jama'at al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad, which had pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda, participated in an insurgency in Iraq which took place from 2003 to 2011. This group began to refer to itself as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and was later known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as a result of its participation in the civil war in Syria that began in 2011. In 2014 it declared itself a worldwide caliphate and called itself IS (Islamic State). The group is sometimes known as Daesh (after the pronunciation of the acronym in the Arabic language). It is a Salafi jihadist organisation which releases videos of beheadings of soldiers and civilians, as well as destroying cultural heritage sites. Both al-Qaeda and IS produce large amounts of propaganda, which is usually distributed online. One aim of these texts is to encourage readers to carry out attacks in public spaces, which are likely to

⁴ www.iraqbodycount.org/. ⁵ www.theguardian.com/world/2003/oct/16/politics.alqaida.

result in deaths, both of bystanders and the person who carries out the attack, due to them being killed by police, by blowing themselves up or by dying while crashing a vehicle. The group also distributes material which instructs its readers on how they may achieve these fatalities. Since 9/11, numerous terror attacks of this nature have taken place across the world.

In the following section, we discuss the extent to which we can attribute some sort of role to these texts in terms of influencing individuals to carry out terrorist acts.

1.4 The Pen Is Mightier than the Sword

The crimes committed or planned by the individuals who collected the texts we analyse in this book were terrible. They took away the lives of people they had never met before and devastated those people's families forever. In many cases they ruined the lives of their own family members and harmed the perception of their co-religionists in the eyes of many non-Muslims. These crimes further affected wider society in a way that is impossible to quantify. The fear of an attack by terrorists, which involves the injury or death of a set of people who are usually unknown and unconnected to the perpetrators, is known as a dread risk (Fischhoff et al., 1978). While a terror attack is usually only likely to cause direct harm to a tiny proportion of people in a society, those who are involved tend to be random targets and are severely affected. As a result, people tend to react to dread risks with avoidance behaviour (Gigerenzer, 2004: 347), focussing on the horrific and random nature of the event and over-estimating the probability that they will be targeted. In terror attacks the targets are not just the people who are killed and the goal is not simply to end lives. The targets are the societies that the victims came from and the goal is to cause fear, panic, suspicion, distrust, resentment and counter-attacks, resulting in spiralling conflict which draws in more and more people. There are other consequences, too: the terrorised population has to endure longer security checks when they travel or enter buildings, and while the presence of armed police in public spaces might be reassuring, it also serves as a reminder that the threat is ever-present. Dread risk can cause people to avoid using public transport or visiting cities, while those who share aspects of the terrorist's identity are likely to experience prejudice and hate crime, acting as focal points for the fears of the wider population (Das et al., 2009). An ideologically inspired terror attack has the potential for greatly negative consequences in a society.

Winter (2015a) describes how in a single thirty-day period in 2015, IS released 1,146 pieces of 'propaganda' which included photo essays, videos, audio statements, news bulletins, posters and essays. Much of the material is available online in an ever-growing digital archive, including hundreds of thousands of Arabic writings and many thousands of videos. Frampton,

Fisher and Prucha (2017: 7) estimate that IS produces around 100 pieces of new content per week, and often much more. These estimates do not include materials produced by individuals affiliated with and in support of IS, who produce more than 90,000 tweets or other social media responses each day (Winkler et al., 2016: 1–2). Recirculation of material is a major concern, with other estimates of an average of three videos and more than fifteen photographic reports circulated per day (Winter, 2015b: 12). These figures show that the volume of output produced by these groups far exceeds most estimates, which have been very conservative (Winter, 2015a: 5).

Both al-Qaeda and IS have produced English-language magazines (*Inspire* and *Dabiq*, respectively), aimed largely at Muslims living in Westernised countries, encouraging them to carry out violent jihad. Magazines have proven to be an effective way of unifying audiences through the construction of communities around topics. Abrahamson (2007) calls this phenomenon ‘magazine exceptionalism’, which he attributes to the lack of journalistic distance among editors, authors and readers due to their shared personal interest in a publication’s topic (cited in Sivek, 2013: 5). Sivek (2013: 6) argues that magazines ‘draw readers into their content and often encourage lifestyle changes. Specialized magazines encourage readers to identify with the images presented.’ The frequent use of second-person address is common in magazine language (Machin and van Leeuwen, 2005) and ‘this direct address implies that the reader should act upon the magazine’s messages, often through lifestyle changes’ (Sivek, 2013: 6). Issues of these magazines, along with a range of other texts, have been found on computer hard drives of individuals in the UK who have been convicted of terrorism (see Holbrook, 2019). We are not privy to the thoughts of the people who wrote these texts nor do we know how they affected those who read them and subsequently committed crimes. But the fact that these kinds of texts were a common factor, linking these criminals together, indicates that they are worthy of attention; they most certainly have played a role in radicalisation.

We are not arguing that the texts analysed in this book have special powers that will turn anybody into a killer. They will not affect the vast majority of people who read them to that extent, although we believe that they do have the power to negatively influence some readers’ attitudes, even if violence is not the final outcome. While those who carry out terrorist attacks could be viewed as mentally disturbed or abnormal in some way, perhaps having a psychological disorder like sociopathy, such theories have been largely dismissed in the terrorism literature (Pisoiu, 2012: 36). A related explanation is that there must have been some sort of event or specific context, such as social, political or economic circumstances, that has adversely impacted on the terrorist in some way. This ‘grievance’ explanation blames a range of related phenomena like discrimination, alienation, economic deprivation,