

A Critical Discourse Analysis of News on the Assassination of Russian Ambassador Andrey Karlov

Prof. Dr. Ömer Özer

Anadolu Üniversitesi

İletişim Bilimleri Fakültesi

Basın ve Yayın Bölümü, Yunus Emre Kampusu

Tepebasi-Eskisehir-Türkiye-(Turkey)

Abstract

This study, by using Teun Adrian van Dijk's critical discourse approach analyzes the news published in YeniŞafak newspaper between 20-21-22 December 2016 covering the assassination of Andrey Karlov, Russian Ambassador to Turkey who was shot dead on December 19, 2016 in Ankara. The reason for the choice of YeniŞafak newspaper is that it stands close to the Justice and Development Party (AKP). It is possible to say that Karlov's assassination news was presented ideologically. As a result of the critical discourse analysis, it is seen that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan strongly condemned the murder and described it as a despicable and treacherous act. Erdoğan has done his duty and called Putin. Both leaders have come to an agreement: The assault is a clear provocative act against Turkey-Russia relations. This might be true. Nevertheless there are still issues that need to be clarified. Russian Ambassador lost his life. He could have been alive today. How did the murderer, an off-duty police officer, enter the exhibition hall? How did he kill him freely? These questions remain unanswered. The Republic of Turkey could not protect the ambassador. Ambassador's unwillingness for security guards cannot be the justification of this incident.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, ideology, Russian Ambassador Karlov's murder

Introduction

On December 19, 2016, Andrey Karlov, Russian Ambassador to Turkey has been assassinated and shot in the back by an off-duty police officer Mevlüt Mert Altıntaş in Ankara. The incident took place in Ankara Contemporary Arts Center. Karlov participated in the opening of a photography exhibition organized by Russian Embassy and Çankaya Municipality and was making speech when the incident happened. In this study, the news related to incident published in YeniŞafak newspaper between 20-21-22 December, 2016 are analyzed through Teun Adrian van Dijk's critical discourse analysis approach. The reason for choosing YeniŞafak newspaper is that it stands close to the Justice and Development Party (AKP).

What is Critical Discourse Analysis?

Critical discourse analysis does not have a unitary theoretical framework because it does not demonstrate a special research statement. There are lots of examples of both analytical and theoretical critical discourse analyses. The critical analysis of conversations is quite different than written news reports or what is taught at schools. Therefore, since the general aims of critical discourse analysis and its common trends are prescribed one can find close theoretical and conceptual frameworks with common features (van Dijk, 2001: 353). The vocabulary that some academicians in critical discourse analysis use involves the following notions, which are "power, hegemony, ideology, class, social gender, race, discrimination, interests, reproduction, institution, social structures, and social order". Discourse analysis is an area of study within social sciences and humanities. Discourse analysis systematically studies the functions and structures of text and speech in their social, political, and cultural contexts. When applied to studies of the mass media in terms of this approach, it is, on one hand, essential to pay detailed attention to the strategies and structures of some discourses and how these discourses relate to institutional regulations; on the other hand, it would be appropriate to consider the receiver of the message.

Thus, the themes or quotation samples from the news reflect the styles of those who are the source of such news media or those of different news actors. However, the form and content of a headline in press might cunningly influence its interpretation. Hence, the news report has a convincing impact among its readers. If we presuppose that the news media is directive on readers and audience, we must know the certain conditions which also include the structural components of the news report (van Dijk, 1995: 10).

As a type of discourse analytical research, critical discourse analysis particularly studies the concept of dominance, inequality, social power abuse and the way they are produced, reproduced and resisted through talk and text within social and political framework. Hence, critical discourse analysts takes a clear stance in such research and wants to “understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality (van Dijk:2001, 352). According to van Dijk, the following requirements should be taken into consideration in order to conduct a critical research on discourse:

1. As is often the case for more marginal research traditions, critical discourse analysis research has to be “better” than other research in order to be accepted.
2. It focuses primarily on social problems and political issues, rather than on current paradigms and fashions.
3. Empirically adequate critical analysis of social problems is usually multidisciplinary.
4. Rather than merely describe discourse structures, it tries to explain them in terms of properties of social interaction and especially social structure.

More specifically, critical discourse analysis focuses on the ways discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power and dominance in society. (van Dijk:2001, 353)

Aims and Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis

There are many fields focused their study on social injustices. The approach of Van Dijk, focuses on the role of discourse both in the reproduction and defiance of dominance. Dominance refers to the practice of social power by circle of elites, institutions or groups which results in social injustices including political, cultural, class, ethnic, racial and gender inequalities (van Dijk, 1993: 249-250). In this respect, “critical discourse analysts want to know what structures, strategies or other properties of text, talk, verbal interaction or communicative events play a role in these modes of reproduction” (van Dijk, 1993:250). Critical discourse analysis is primarily about the discursive dimension of abuse of power, injustice and inequality. Critical discourse analysis is motivated by social problems which would be better understood with discourse analysis and deals with these issues. Critical discourse analyst, unlike others, takes an open socio-political stance. They frankly express their viewpoints, orientations and aims in their discipline or in rather general public. Their work is obviously and ultimately political despite being absent on some stages of grounded theory and analysis. They are the ones who suffer from inequality and dominance as far as their basis of orientation. Their critical targets are power holding elites who ignore or tolerate, justify, support and legalize social injustice and inequality. Their problems are real (van Dijk, 1993: 252). Their discourse criticism includes the ones who are responsible for the perversion in reproduction of inequality and injustice (van Dijk, 1993: 252-353). Critical discourse academics have to be social activist and critics as much as they are social and political scientists (van Dijk, 1993: 253).

Critical discourse analysis is not easy. This area requires demonstration of complex relationships in between multi-disciplines and text, speech, social cognition, power, society and culture. It doesn't find observational, descriptive and even expressive criteria as sufficient (Faiclough, 1985 qtd. in van Dijk, 1993). Its success and efficiency is determined by its contributions supporting the change. In this sense, modesty is a must: Academic contributions can be marginal in the course of change. In this process of change those who are directly involved and their resistant stance, are the truly effective change actors. “This has become particularly clear from large processes of change such as class struggles, decolonization, the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement” (van Dijk, 1993: 253). If immigrants, refugees and other minorities put up with prejudice derived from discrimination and racism, and if women are still subjected to male dominance, violence or sexual harassment, such issues have to be examined from their viewpoint and critical discourse analysis focuses on these subjects in its discipline (van Dijk, 1993: 253).

Ideology

The theory of ideology is multidisciplinary. Ideologies have some cognitive and social functions (van Dijk, 2006: 117). Ideology is a special form of social cognition shared by social groups.

Hence, ideologies become the foundational base for social representations and practices of group members who at the same time serve as tools of ideological production, reproduction and resistance as well as bearing their discourse (van Dijk, 1998; van Dijk, 2001: 12). Ideology is articulated into a conjunctive threesome group of society, discourse and social cognition within the frame of critical discourse analysis (van Dijk, 1995a: 17). In this sense, ideologies are basic frames for organization of social cognition of social groups, organizations or members of institutions that are sharing those (van Dijk, 1995a: 18). In this context, ideologies are cognitive as well as social.

Those are functioning as “interface” between the basis of cognitive representations and process of discourse and action on the one hand; and interests and social statuses of the social groups on the other hand. This kind of theorization of the ideology let us correlate the vital relation between individual interaction and micro level work on discourse with analysis of social formation and macro social structure (van Dijk, 1995a: 18). Some ideologies of groups and group relations are formed by a group based choice of proper social values. On the one hand, feminist choosing some values like equality, autonomy and independence attribute special emphasis to those. On the other hand, racists focus on the identity and supremacy of their own groups and want to have a privilege of optional access of valuable social resources. They also focus on inequality while defending priority of their group (van Dijk, 1995a: 18-19). Ideologies explain and define the similarities of social practices of the social members. However, this theoretical frame is at the same time a compass for personal differentiation as well. Theoretical frame for ideology shows deviation within other modern approaches to ideologies. In this orientation ideologies are not just “system of thoughts”. Not a “false consciousness” as well. They are more like very special basic frames of social cognition with its specific cognitive and social functions and special intrinsic construction. Ideologies are not limited to dominant group. Opponent and dependent classes are also sharing ideologies at the same time. The problem of most of the critical approaches to ideology is being discussed by social sciences and more surprising philosophical approaches. They neglected a comprehensive and clear cognitive analysis so they are not sufficient to create a connection in open way between individual discourse and social practices and constructions as social members (van Dijk, 1995a: 21).

Analysis

This analysis was realized through the analysis in one of van Dijk’s works (van Dijk, 2012). Phonetics: Knowledge, Information and the Role of the Focus “The Russian ambassador in Ankara, Karlov, who lost his life in a despicable assault, was a friend I appreciated as a diplomat. On behalf of myself and my people, I strongly curse and condemn it. Immediately after the incident I called Putin. We are in agreement that this treacherous assault is a clear provocation against the Turkey-Russia relations.” (YeniŞafak, 21 December 2016: 13) It might be said that Erdoğan’s speech, from which this first paragraph was taken, consists of three parts. In the first part, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announces the killing of the Russian ambassador Karlov; in the second part his condemnation of the murder and in the third parts his calling Russian President Putin. In English, pronouns are generally used while making a sentence. For example “I go.” However, in Turkish, pronouns are not often used. To illustrate, instead of using “I go,” only “go” is uttered with a suffix at the end of the verb referring to the pronoun. To put it in a different way, the subject or the pronoun is hidden. In this context, there is a difference between the analysis of an English sentence and a Turkish one, but this difference should not be a semantic one. On the other hand, the knowledge and focus in the previously mentioned sentences are based on “a despicable assault, he was a friend I appreciated, I strongly curse and condemn it, treacherous assault and we are in agreement that this treacherous assault is a clear provocation against the Turkey-Russia relations.”

The Russian ambassador was killed by being stabbed in the back. Erdoğan describes this as despicable and treacherous. He condemns strongly. Erdoğan has done his duty and called Putin. Both leaders have made their decision: The assault is a clear provocative act against Turkey-Russia relations. This might be true. Nevertheless there are still issues need to be clarified. Russian Ambassador lost his life. He could have been alive today. How did the murderer off-duty police officer enter the exhibition hall? How did he freely kill him? These issues are not mentioned. It is not sufficient to verbalize the assault through the stated words and sentences. Turkish police, National Intelligence Organization (MİT), the government and the Republic of Turkey could not do their part. The Russian ambassador was killed publicly. After the murder, describing the attack as despicable and treacherous, condemning strongly, calling Putin and extending an estimated justification do not show that Erdoğan and Turkey in his charge, did their duty.

Erdoğan, in this regard, tries to make positive representation by presenting himself in terms of his duties. Would it make any difference if Karlov, as a diplomat, had not been a person Erdoğan appreciated? At this point, it is necessary to mention about the “provocation” statement in Erdoğan’s speech. In fact the meaning generates itself within the context of the news. However, it should be noted that the depiction of the assault through “provocation” statement may also be a presentation of justification related to the incident. In addition, this statement is denoted of a mutual thought of both leaders and creates a connotation as if the incident took place in a third country, and supports its presentation as justification. In other words, “it can be received as the incident happened because of an intended act of provocation and as a country we are not a part of it, and we are entrapped in such a situation”. In this context, the meaning can even be extended to implication of “victimization”.

Syntax

“We started working by establishing a joint commission of investigation with Russia. We are in agreement with Mr. Putin that our ever expanding collaboration areas with Russia, primarily on Syria, will not be affected by this assault. We are never going to let our relations with Russia deteriorate or get damaged.” (YeniŞafak, December 21, 2016:13) What must be mentioned first is that Erdoğan speaks in plural form. Instead of subject pronoun “I”, the subject pronoun “we” is used. Pronoun is hidden. Sentences are used in active form. This emphasizes the fact that Erdoğan is determined. But it seems that the ambassador is forgotten here. What comes to mind is stabilizing relations with Russia. As understood, Putin also has the same concern. Another point to be stated about the contrast of subject pronouns is that, by using plural subject pronouns and mentioning Putin, what is desired to be announced is a common enemy. The murderer of the ambassador and the forces behind this act are declared as the common enemy of Russia and Turkey. The struggle will be maintained as partners. Here Erdoğan emphasizes his positive properties. At the same time he stresses bad properties of others.

Semantics: From Lexical Elements to Propositions

Propositions of statements consist of the conditions they address to, events and point of views. The reflection of propositions onto languages can be in the forms of adjectives or verbal adjectives. Or it can occur with stable verbs. When Erdoğan’s words are considered, there is always a contrast of positive and negative. The first step in the complicated strategy of understanding discourse is the interpretation of words and encoding. The well-meaning of words in our mental lexicon is inextricably in touch with our world knowledge related to the things that are mentioned about. That’s why we know what “a despicable assault”, “he was a friend I appreciated”, “I strongly curse”, “I condemn” and “a treacherous assault” mean. Or “We are in agreement that this treacherous assault is a clear provocation against Turkey-Russia relations.” These also are about the feelings and opinions of Erdoğan or the people supporting him and point out positive feelings in terms of traditional, cultural unity or connotation. With these statements, Erdoğan realizes the political communicative implication of positive self-presentation. In terms of van Dijk’s theory, it can be said that Erdoğan emphasizes his own power, political and moral position by using these statements. Erdoğan wants to create a positive effect about himself with regard to his audience, readers and listeners’ mental models and wishes to make a good impression on them. These words do not seem alone. They are part of a subordinate clause. This subordinate clause is a part of a complex sentence. Hence, we need to give meaning only to these words. The meaning of the full sentence is also meaningful.

Order of Propositions: Local Coherence

“The Russian Ambassador in Ankara, Karlov, who lost his life in a despicable assault, was a friend I appreciated as a diplomat. On behalf of myself and my people, I strongly curse and condemn it. Immediately after the incident I called Putin. We are in agreement that this treacherous assault is a clear provocation against the Turkey-Russia relations.” (YeniŞafak, 21 December 2016: 13). There is the local coherence relationship between the sentences in this paragraph. Indeed, we understand from Erdoğan’s strong condemnation that the Russian ambassador lost his life in a despicable assault. Due to the despicable assault, we understand that there is an agreement between Erdoğan and Putin that this treacherous assault is a clear provocation against Turkey-Russia relations. All the propositions in these sentences are different mental expressions of Erdoğan. These sentences are semantically and pragmatically meaningful. In fact, the sequence of these propositions has not been randomly chosen. The propositions are locally coherent. Based on van Dijk’s theory, these can be interpreted as a mental model of the sentiments and acts of Erdoğan at that time. The repetition or continuation of discursive reference -for instance, expressed by pronouns- is not necessary or adequate regarding local discursive coherence. What necessary here is all of the propositions. Not primarily the meaning of propositions which defines the local coherence of discourse.

Yet, discourse is rather understood by the mental models of participants, and transferred to the actions, incidents and situations. Here, the fundamental role of knowledge-based models on the production and understanding of coherent discourse is observed (van Dijk, 2012: 595).

Implications

“1.The following procedure, as you know an investigative team has arrived from Russia and together with our investigation committees, they carry out their work. 2. I wish, there will be an immediate arrival at a conclusion through this joint work 3. There are also some clues related to what foreign links this person has. 4. At the moment, our National Intelligence Organization, other investigative units continue their works. 5. We will announce the final result, after the conclusion of investigation.” (YeniŞafak, 22 December 2016: 17).

In the first sentence, it is stated that Turkey is ready for collaboration. However, an opposite comment could also be made to a degree. They call her “Powerful Turkey” but she cannot solve the murder on her own. In the second sentence, it is stated the Turkey and Russia are powerful countries. In the third sentence, the murderer is stated as a member of FETÖ terror organization. As a matter of fact, in the following paragraph Erdoğan clearly utters: “All links with the assassination of Russian Ambassador lead to FETÖ. The assassin is a member of FETÖ, there is no need to hide it. From where he was raised to his associations, everything leads to FETÖ”. We need to make a clarification here. FETO terror organization is really a terror organization. It has been active in Turkey for long years. The organization was also active during the years when Erdoğan was in charge as Prime Minister. FETO terror organization could be diminished in those years. Also an investigation on FETO terror organization was conducted in the Police Organization. Why wasn't the murderer caught as a result of investigation. The assassination happened towards evening. The newspaper gathered news and announced the murderer as a member of FETO terror organization before it went to press. Such information is reached in a very short period of time, but why the knowledge of murder plan and the necessity of protection weren't reached. These questions come to mind. In the fourth sentence, it is again stated that Turkey is a powerful country. In the fifth sentence, investigation of the incident will certainly be concluded. What is inferred from those statements is that Erdoğan presents himself positively and this is ideological.

General Stance of the Newspaper

Yeni Şafak newspaper has regarded FETO terror organization responsible for the incident. The news with the main headline on its Dec 20, 2016 issue entitled as “Great Sabotage” was as “THE PRO-FETO ASSASSINS OF THE C.I.A HAVE BEEN MOBILIZED”. There were two spots used for these headlines. The former was as follows: “A great sabotage happened in Ankara while Turkey and Russia were strategically about to make a stride on a number of issues primarily Syria. Pro-FETO police officer of Ankara riot squad has assassinated Russian Ambassador Andrey Karlov. Karlov lost his life while the assassin was neutralized. Russia has made a statement “The attack targets Turkey-Russia relations” Again this spot had an emphasis that the assassin was a Pro-FETO police officer. In the second spot, there was an emphasis on formerly shot down Russian plane that it was also downed by FETO members. Additionally, there was a reference on 15th July coup (d'état) attempt , and FETO was regarded as the common ground of the incidents: “ Those who shot down the Russian plane has taken two countries on the brink of war and committed 15th July attacks has swung into action again.” This time they recourse to assassination in order to undermine Turkish-Russian rapprochement. It's been stated that USA has openly attacked through FETO. In today's meeting of Turkey-Russia-Iran in Moscow, a mutual ceasefire on Syria would be discussed.” If we look at news closely, FETO terror organization is not acting alone in downing the plane, the coup attempt on 15th July and the ambassador assassination, but almost acts as subcontractor of the U.S.A. The assassination targets deteriorating Turkey-Russia relations on Syria negotiations. The newspaper has also reflected sections from the life of the assassin in the news entitled as “Pro-FETO murderer” and has tried to prove his connection with FETO terror organization. This reminds us the question why there were no security guards in this murder. The answer arises from the newspaper. The first page was totally designated to the assassination; the central news stated the heading as “he (ambassador) never went to the exhibitions with guards. Here, it is presented as the responsibility was on the Ambassador Karlov. In fact, in such fragile times, the ambassador should have been protected.

Conclusion

It is possible to state that the news in this study, in other words, Russian Ambassador Andrey Karlov assassination news was presented ideologically. As a result of the critical discourse analysis, it is seen that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan strongly condemned the murder and described it as a despicable and treacherous assault. Erdoğan has done his duty and called Putin. Both leaders have made their decision: The assault is a clear provocative act against Turkey-Russia relations. This might be true. Nevertheless there are still issues need to be clarified. Russian Ambassador lost his life. He could have been alive today.

How did the murderer off-duty police officer enter the exhibition hall? How did he freely kill him? These questions remain unanswered. The Republic of Turkey could not protect the ambassador. Ambassadors' unwillingness for security guards cannot be the justification of this incident. The sentence structures in the news are active. Hence, Erdoğan presents his actions positively. In other words he makes a positive self-presentation. In fact, calling Russian President Putin after the incident does not necessarily mean that he did his duty. Erdoğan presents himself positive with the words he has chosen. There is coherence between the propositions.

According to the newspaper and Erdoğan, the incident was realized by FETO terror organization. This might be true, and not questioned. The problem is that in operations carried out against FETÖ, the whole police organization was said to be "cleared". Why then was this assassin unarrested? To conclude, Russia's Ankara Ambassador Andrey Karlov could have been alive today. "It's a shame that he is no longer alive".

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