Politicizing COVID-19 Lingua in Western and Arab Newspapers: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract
COVID-19 has struck the world in an unprecedented way. Countries quickly tried to counter the rapid spread of the virus by imposing strict measures and national lockdowns. At the same time, some governments took advantage of the pandemic to besmirch their opponents. We utilize van Dijk (J Polit Ideol 11(2):115–140 2006) critical discourse analysis model to investigate how newspaper headlines reacted to COVID-19 from through ideological lenses. Results show that while the US implied that China is the origin of the virus, headlines in Arab newspapers showed that Saudi Arabia blamed travel to Iran for the early increases of COVID-19 cases.

Keywords COVID-19 · Critical discourse analysis · Ideology · Van Dijk · Headlines · Media

1 Introduction

In a world where media plays a central role in our lives every day, news headlines are still of great importance to attract readers and, most importantly, reflect ideologies and sociocultural norms and values. The importance of media was highlighted in the recent COVID-19 catastrophe that has struck the world in an unprecedented way, altering various aspects of life, including education, transportation, economy, health and politics as well as sociocultural customs and traditions. In addition to COVID-19 lockdowns causing school closures, and cancelling of commercial passenger flights [1], the tourism industries received a harsh hit contributing to the
crippling of the world economy. According to the World Health Organization (2020) [2], more than 37 million COVID-19 cases and 1 million deaths were reported globally from December 2019 to October 2020. In terms of politics, storms of accusations started among countries relating to the origin of the coronavirus [3]. Amidst all these events, people’s attention was fixed on news headlines to know more about the disease and act accordingly. However, headlines were inconsistent across different countries and media outlets. Therefore, it is interesting to investigate how contrasting ideological underpinnings might be manifested across different sociocultural contexts. In that light, using the Critical Discourse Analysis, this paper aims to identify and analyse sociolinguistic and socio-political features included in the front-page COVID-19 headlines of two newspapers, western USA Today and the Saudi Asharq Alawsat. The analysis explores the following points: (1) what textual devices of COVID-19 headlines are utilised in the western USA Today and the Saudi Asharq Alawsat. (2) identifies which discursive strategies used to express textual devices each newspaper. (3) examines how do those strategies reflect the social practices in each newspaper. Via scrutinising different levels of interpretation using the van Dijk model of tracing ideologies in discourse structures, this method is inclusive of all aspects used in influencing the perspectives of readers and alluding to further socio-political contexts. The paper’s findings concluded that while USA Today’s linguistic representation alludes to political and social friction, the Saudi Asharq Alawsat had implied no further than general concern over needed precautions to overcome the pandemic.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Language and Ideology

One of the most effective methods to tackle media texts and unravel embedded ideologies is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is a discursive analytical apparatus that mainly aims to investigate how discourse institutes, reproduces and resists the misuse of social power, dominance and inequality in social and political settings [4]. Wodak [5] views CDA as an interdisciplinary and case-oriented research approach that includes a number of paths with different epistemological hypotheses, theoretical patterns and methodologies. Contrary to other discourse approaches, CDA is not an orientation, doctrine or specialty; instead, it proposes a distinctive mode of theorising, analysis and application [4]. Wodak [6] also maintains that CDA is neither restricted to a particular theory nor to a specific methodology but originates from multifarious theoretical frameworks. She further mentions that CDA is particularly interested in the connection between language and power. According to Wodak and Meyer, CDA is “interested in analysing hidden, opaque, and visible structures of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language” [7, p. 12].

In contrast to other discourse approaches, CDA is ‘critical’, which means that it does not demarcate itself to the existing features of a text but takes into consideration the social, economic, historical, cognitive and political settings as well as
the intertextuality [8]. Renkema [9] contends that the term ‘critical’ implies that the analysis should not be neutral or value-free. Therefore, a critical analysis has to be interested in compromising inequality and injustice and be in favour of the powerless and suppressed [10]. In addition, Fairclough [11] stresses that being critical designates an analysis to be a type of research that aims to improve the lives of human beings and link semiosis to various social processes.

The concept of ‘ideology’, which van Dijk [12] sociocognitively defines as mutual belief systems that foster ‘axiomatic’ rules of social groups and are constitutive of their identities. In most cases, ideologies are manifested in discourse, though they are not restricted to discourse only because they can be expressed in various forms and actions, such as in semiotic content [13]. CDA primarily seeks to disclose ideologies in various forms of discourse [8].

2.2 News Headlines

Newspaper headlines manifest the current social, cultural and national realities within societies [14]. The number of people who read the headlines is five times more than those who go through the body copy [15]. Conboy [16] lists three functions that headlines serve: (a) summarise the news, (b) attract readers and (c) reflect the news values of the newspaper. Unlike the language of news stories, the language of headlines is highly manipulative and usually characterised by ellipses, emotional terms, puns and rhetorical devices. Headlines are generally designed to be persuasive in order to catch readers’ attention, but they can be used to influence the audience’s opinions as well [17]. They are usually written by editors and not by the actual authors [18, 19]. This situation opens the window for news publishers to mediate their ideologies through the headlines [20]. According to Reah [17], headlines influence readers’ opinions by playing with the perspective from which a story is being told. Unfortunately, most of the time, readers fail to realise that stories may be narrated from the perspective of the newspaper. Creating ambiguity is another strategy that editors employ in headlines to express the concealed intentions of newspapers. Thus, headlines can be a rich source for investigating ideologies.

Several studies have investigated news headlines from a CDA perspective. Lombardi looked into headlines on school shootings in the USA, and her analysis showed certain biases in the use of verbs and terminology [12]. Similarly, Hassan [21] utilised CDA to compare Pakistani news headlines and assess the effects of the textual strategies used in them. To illustrate the massive impact of newspaper headlines on readers and rate them according to their direct cause-and-effect relationship, Adams and others conducted four experiments where the participants were shown different types of newspaper headlines, for example, ‘Being Breast Fed Makes Children Behave Better’ [22]. The above study concluded that using wording like ‘makes’ or ‘causes’ emphasises direct cause and effect as opposed to using ‘can’ or ‘make’. Therefore, some scholars suggested that cause-and-effect relationships could be used appropriately or inappropriately in newspaper headline [22].
2.3 News Headlines, COVID-19, and Politics

During Covid-19 pandemic, the media has been used not only to disseminate policy, legal precautions, and news on the virus but also on influencing citizens’ behaviour towards the COVID-19 crisis. The news were in a frenzy mode as a source for any legal actions concerning the virus and people affected by it. Since then, many scholars have tabbed on the scholarly work of the virus and its impact on people’s movement and legal questions looking for answers to safe themselves from the virus as well as from being persecuted if new virus laws are not being followed.

El-Haija [23] in dealing with the pandemic and its consequences, “several legal questions arise, the answers to which are not always easy in view of the novelty of the facts and which also cause a certain amount of uncertainty among market participants” [23, p. 1062]. Tenants have been also affected not able to pay rent due the virus lockdown preventing them from going to work. In times of COVID-19 and the current pandemic phase, El-Haija has shed lights on the commercial tenants are who “faced with a situation in which they could, in principle, continue to use the rented property, but such use makes little business sense—or even orders to prohibit or close down operations” [23, p.1062]. Wagner et al. state that consequences of the virus are still being investigated. As scientific knowledge about the virus evolved, “this war economy consisted in giving high priority to the first front line by trying to provide them with all the necessary means to combat but also to protect them” [24, p. 1082]. Lockdowns were enforced at some point when the pandemic was said to be uncontrollable.

So, bodies were manipulated to activate precise controls and regulations over them, in a power relation producing and sustaining a “system of constraints and privations, obligations and prohibitions” [24, p. 1084]. Mihalis Kritikos tried to examine early efforts to “combat mis- and disinformation regarding the COVID-19 ‘infodemic’ from the perspective of functioning of the democracy” [25, p.369]. According to Kużelewska and Tomaszuk “misinformation or conspiracy theories are not just a problem of content, they are rather problem of transmission. Even state officials are able to activate emergency alerts systems across mobile phones and radio to reach the public, no such emergency protocols exist for social media” [26, p.2]. This, in turn, has led others to invent a mammoth of conspiracy theories with the help of media platforms [26]. In fast and wired virtual we live in “pandemic became a fertile ground for the bloom of the conspiracy theories already existing, but struggling for the global attention” [26, p.1]. Lockdowns and curfews will in total affect.

Wagner et al. [24] various curfews and penalties for breaching them immobilized bodies on an unprecedented scale. Some countries, like “France, Poland, introduced shopping hours reserved solely for seniors. It meant that from 10.00 a.m. till 12.00 only people over 65 years old were allowed to enter shops. Others were not allowed to be served even if the shops were empty. Shops serving younger persons were risking paying high financial penalties” [24, p.1107]. Mazzi there is no denying the potentially ambiguous and highly controversial nature of phrases such as common good and public interest, let alone extraordinary measures. To begin with, “the notion of common good is inherent in a view of society as a community whose
members jointly pursue shared values and goals” [27, p. 1235]. As such, the common good “refers to that which constitutes the well-being of the community—its safety, the integrity of its basic institutions and practices, the preservation of its core values” [28, p. 6].

3 Purpose of the Study

This study focuses on the textual features of news headlines in two newspapers: the American USA Today and the Saudi Asharq Alawsat. Using CDA, the study attempts to look at how the different social contexts of the two newspapers are reflected differently in an analysis of their textual and discursive strategies for COVID-19 headlines.

3.1 Research Questions

1. What are the textual features of the front-page COVID-19 headlines of the Western newspaper USA Today and the Saudi newspaper Asharq Alawsat?
2. What are the discursive strategies used to express the textual features in each newspaper?
3. How do the discursive features reflect the social practice in each newspaper?

4 Methodology

4.1 Data Collection and Sampling

The data of this study consist of headlines that mention COVID-19 and were collected from the websites of two newspapers in two languages and social contexts and in two different periods. The authors gathered three-week data according to when the first COVID-19 case was reported in the US and in Saudi Arabia. Consequently, 53 English headlines were collected from January 21 to February 11, 2020 from USA Today, an American daily newspaper that is considered to be the third-highest circulated newspaper in the world [29] and the highest circulated newspaper in the US. Meanwhile, 57 Arabic headlines were gathered from March 2 to March 23, 2020 from Asharq Alawsat, a well-known Arabic international newspaper headquartered in London.

The authors employed purposeful sampling, which is the wilful selection of an entrant based on a particular quality of that entrant [30]. Purposeful sampling chooses the data based on what is relevant to the study [31], aiming mainly to answer the question(s) under investigation [32, 33].

1 Top 10 U.S. Newspapers by Circulation. 2020. Retrieved June 4, 2020, from https://www.agilitypr.com/resources/top-media-outlets/top-10-daily-american-newspapers/
4.2 Data Analysis

The data were analysed according to van Dijk’s model [12] of tracing ideologies in discourse structures. The model is organised by three main discourse levels, namely meaning, form and action, which comprise subordinate levels that codify the underlying ideological underpinning. The meaning level deals with the semantic aspects of the text while the form level is concerned with the syntactic and/or phonological features of discourse as well as the argumentation structures and rhetorical devices. Finally, the action level deals with the pragmatic angle of discourse, such as speech acts and interaction strategies. These three levels all operate within the basic mutual interaction between discourse, cognition and society. The model is summarised in the following table, which is adopted from [12].

5 Data Analysis and Findings

The analysis will tackle the headlines selected from the dataset based on the model presented in Table 1. The analysis starts with tackling the instances that reflect ideological underpinnings on the meaning level. This is followed by an analysis on the form level and the action level.

5.1 USA Today

5.1.1 Meaning Level

5.1.1.1 Topics The main topic that can be found in the headlines is ‘coronavirus’ and ‘coronavirus outbreak’. However, several negative topics about China can be found throughout the data as well. Those headlines attribute the virus to China, labelling it as ‘China coronavirus’ and ‘Wuhan coronavirus’. The explicit attribution of the virus to China can be seen as an exemplification of othering [34], which suggests that the virus comes from an ‘other’ source.

5.1.1.2 Local Meanings and Coherence To begin with, USA Today makes good use of modal verbs to indicate the probability of events. One example is the headline ‘Coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, China: Vaccine may be ready in three months’. The modal verb ‘may’ here is used to help calm the panic caused by the pandemic. In addition, modality seems to have been used to lessen the public’s fear, as in ‘Coronavirus in Wuhan, China, may become seasonal illness like the flu’.

Besides modality, USA Today employs evidentiality to quote in favour of its ideologies. The newspaper seems to adopt an ideological stance that undermines President Trump. This is achieved by quoting Trump’s opponent Joe Biden to accuse Trump of being responsible for the shortcomings of dealing with the pandemic, such as ‘Joe Biden: Trump has weakened our capacity to deal with coronavirus’.
Table 1  van Dijk’s (2006) [12] model

Context  Speaker speaks as a member of a social group; and/or addresses recipient as group member; ideologically biased context models: subj. representations of communicative event and its participants as members of categories or groups

Text, discourse, conversation
Overall strategy: positive presentation/action of Us, negative presentation/action of Them
Emphasize Our good things, and Their bad things, and De-emphasize Our bad things, and Their good things

MEANING

O Topics (semantic macrostructures)
  Select/Change positive/negative topics about Us/Them

O Local meanings and coherence
  Positive/Negative Meanings for Us/Them are
  Manifestation: Explicit versus Implicit
  Precision: Precise versus Vague
  Granularity: Detailed/fine versus Broad, rough
  Level: General versus Specific, detailed
  Modality: We/They Must/Should
  Evidentiality: We have the truth versus They are misguided
  Local coherence: based on biased models
  Disclaimers (denying Our bad things): ‘We are not racists, but…’

O Lexicon  Select Positive/Negative terms for Us/Them (e.g. ‘terrorist’ versus ‘freedom fighter’)

FORM

O Syntax (De)emphasize Positive/Negative Agency of Us/Them
  Cleft versus non-cleft sentences (‘It is X who…’)
  Active versus Passives (‘USA invades Iraq’ versus ‘Iraq invaded by USA’)
  Full clauses/propositions versus nominalizations (The invasion of Iraq’)

O Sound structures  Intonation, etc., (de)emphasizing Our/Their Good/Bad things

O Format (schema, superstructure: overall form)
Positive/Negative meanings for Us/Them in
  First, dominant categories (e.g. Headlines, Titles, Summaries, Conclusions) versus last, non-dominant categories
  Argumentation structures, topoi (stereotypical arguments, e.g. ‘For their own good’)
  O Fallacies that falsely conclude Our/Their Good/Bad things, e.g. overgeneralizations, authority, etc

O Rhetorical structures
Emphasizing or de-emphasizing Our/Their Good/Bad things by
  Meanings: Comparisons, metaphors, metonymies, irony; euphemisms, hyperboles, number games, etc

ACTION

O Speech acts, communicative acts, and interaction
Speech acts that presuppose Our/Their Good/Bad things: promises, accusations, etc
Another technique used by the newspaper to establish a negative image of China is through quoting the Chinese’s admission of weaknesses in dealing with coronavirus. ‘Coronavirus: China admits “shortcomings and difficulties” in response’. The newspaper likewise quotes the US Federal Reserve to positively present its economy during the pandemic: ‘Fed: Economy is strong despite risk of China virus’.

5.1.1.3 O Lexicon In terms of lexicon, the virus is linked to China in some of the headlines and given a fatal description by calling it ‘China coronavirus’, ‘Wuhan coronavirus’ and ‘Deadly China virus’.

5.1.2 Form Level

5.1.2.1 O Syntax When the pandemic started, the newspaper initially uses active voice to report the incidents; a week later; passive voice is used to represent the same events. Additionally, to attract readers, the newspaper plays with agency by concentrating on reporting the events from the perspective of an American teacher in the city of Wuhan: ‘Coronavirus outbreak: American teacher documents life in Wuhan’ and ‘Coronavirus outbreak: City of Wuhan recorded by American teacher’.

5.1.2.2 O Format In terms of argumentation structures (topoi), we adopt Wodak’s list of topoi [35]. The list comprises 15 topoi that cover a wide range of arguments related to discriminatory issues. We present these topoi based on their frequency of occurrence in the data. The most recurrent is the topos of danger or threat, which, according to Wodak [35], operates based on the use of conditionals:

If a political action or decision bears specific dangerous, threatening consequences, one should not perform or do it. Or, formulated differently: if there are specific dangers and threats, one should do something against them. [35, p.75].

USA Today employs this topos to justify the decisions that the US has considered and taken against China as measures of safety. Examples of the headlines include ‘U.S. airlines suspend China flights over virus fear’, ‘White House considers ban on China flights amid coronavirus outbreak’, ‘Coronavirus: Cruise lines ban passport holders from China, Hong Kong’ and ‘Coronavirus: United, American, Delta suspend China flights until April’.

Another topos is responsibility, which can be represented by the following formula: ‘Because a state or a group of persons is responsible for the emergence of specific problems, it or they should act in order to find solutions to these problems’ [35, p. 75]. The USA Today newspaper exercises this topos in order to ascribe the responsibility for what happened to the US president and China in the first place. Examples of such headlines include ‘Joe Biden: Trump has weakened our capacity to deal with coronavirus’, ‘Coronavirus: China admits “shortcomings and difficulties” in response’ and ‘Coronavirus: US citizen dies in China, first American fatality’.
A third argumentation strategy is the topos of reality that Wodak formulates as follows: ‘[B]ecause reality is as it is, a specific action/decision should be performed/made’ [35, p. 76]. In the present study, the topos of reality is combined with the topos of threat to argue for the emergence of anti-Chinese racism due to COVID-19: ‘Coronavirus spreads anti-Chinese racism, xenophobia concerns’.

5.1.2.3 O Rhetorical Structures  According to van Dijk [36], rhetorical structures are mainly used to convince the audience by either promoting or mitigating discourse meanings. This can be done by repetition and figures of speech. The newspaper uses the term ‘China coronavirus’ several times as the header of headlines, attributing the virus to China.

In terms of figures of speech, USA Today compares coronavirus to the flu and claims that the flu is more dangerous than coronavirus in order to reassure Americans that the virus is not dangerous, as in the headline ‘Coronavirus: Flu is deadlier, more widespread than Wuhan, China, virus’. Although full information on the disease was not available at the time, the headlines affirm that no serious harm is expected from the disease. Another rhetorical usage is irony. The newspaper seems to mock President Trump with the following headline: ‘President Trump claims coronavirus “goes away in April with the heat”’. In addition, the newspaper constantly accuses China of not reporting the accurate number of infections and deaths, such as in the following examples: ‘Coronavirus in China: US diplomats ordered to leave Wuhan; 56 dead’ and ‘Coronavirus: 106 dead, Americans flee Wuhan outbreak; US threat is low’.

5.1.3 Action Level

5.1.3.1 O Speech Acts, Communicative Acts and Interaction  USA Today implicitly accuses China of not telling the truth about the pandemic or the current situation by asking a question in the following headline: ‘Coronavirus: What is China not telling us?’ Another negative speech act towards China is the US instructions against travelling to China: ‘Coronavirus outbreak: US instructions against travelling to China: ‘Coronavirus outbreak: US says “do not travel” to Wuhan, China’, ‘Coronavirus: State Department says, “Do not travel to China”’. The newspaper also quotes China’s explicit accusation of the US to stimulate Americans’ anger towards China: ‘Coronavirus outbreak: China says US is spreading fear, not helping’.

5.2 Asharq Alawsat

Similar to the analysis of the headlines from USA Today, this section presents samples from the pan-Arab newspaper Asharq Alawsat. Since the headlines are in Arabic, their English translations and transliterations are presented.

5.2.1 Meaning Level

5.2.1.1 O Local Meanings and Coherence  The newspaper specifies that Saudi Arabia’s first coronavirus case was a civilian coming back from Iran to indicate that Iran is a focus of the pandemic.
The newspaper employs the strategy of evidentiality to achieve a number of purposes. It quotes Qatif’s notables and sheiks to convince the public to disclose their visits to Iran by describing this disclosure as a national and religious obligation. Another quote also targets the consciousness of the public to fight the coronavirus. The newspaper cites Saudi Arabia’s elite religious scholars to persuade those who are infected with the virus not to attend mosques (for prayers) in order to contain the pandemic.

| Arabic headline | Transliteration | English translation |
|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| السعودية تسجل أول إصابة بـ(كوفيد-19) لمواطن قادم من إيران | as-sa'ūdiah tusjil ?awal ?iṣābah bi Kūrūna li muṭṭin qadīm min ?irān/ | Saudi Arabia reports the first infection with ‘Corona’, for a citizen coming from Iran |

| Arabic headline | Transliteration | English translation |
|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| مشايخ ووجهاء القطاع: الإفصاح عن زيارتين إيرانيتين واجب ديني ووطني | mashaykh wa wujahā? al-qatīf: ?al-?iṣāḥ ūn ziyarat ?irān wājib dinī wa waṭanī/ | Qatif’s sheikhs and notables: Disclosure of visiting Iran is a religious and national obligation |
| هيئة كبار العلماء السعودي: المصابون بSYMptoms يجب أن يحذروا الجمعية والجماعة | hay?[at kibar al-ṣulama? as-sa'ūdiah: al-muṣāDrivers bi wabā? yahrum shuhuduhum al-jamā'ah w al-jamā'ah | The Saudi Council of Senior Scholars: Those affected by the epidemic are forbidden from attending Friday prayer and mosques |

5.2.2 Form Level

5.2.2.1 O Format  
*Asharq Alawsat* newspaper also made use of the topos of threat to justify the measures that Saudi Arabia has taken against COVID-19.

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2 Qatif is a city in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, with a large number of Shia communities.
| Arabic headline | Transliteration | English translation |
|----------------|----------------|-------------------|
|اد دكيل للسعودية| ad-akhirah| Saudi Ministry of Interior takes additional procedures on borders to face ‘Corona’ |
| يرجى منفسلة النص من الكتب والنشرات| jurjih minasfah al-jawab| ‘Corona’ postpones ‘Red Sea Film Festival’ for an unknown time |
| تأجيل المراقبة على البيئات| taaijil mrasab al-biayya min kurina| Additional preventive procedures against ‘COVID-19’ across Saudi ports |
| قصر الدخول إلى السعودية| qasr ad-daxul ila as-suudiah| To confront Corona, entry into Saudi Arabia was temporarily restricted to the airports |
| تعلق السفر إلى الدوحة| tulaq as-safar ila al-doha| Saudi Arabia suspends travel to 14 Arab and foreign countries to confront Corona |
| تعلق السفر إلى الاتحاد الأوروبي والدول الأخرى| tulaq as-safar ila al-athani al-afraki wal-dula| Saudi Arabia suspends travel to the European Union and other countries to prevent the spread of ‘Corona’ |
| تلعب دور في تجميات الأفراد والاتحادات المنظمات إذا استمرت التهديدات بالإنفلونزا| tulaq as-suudiah ila ta’jamaat al-afrah wa al-adhanat min al-tahdath bi al-influnza| Saudi Arabia cancels gatherings of weddings and events to combat the spread of ‘Corona’ |
| توقف الرحلات البحرية مع عدة دول بسبب الوباء| taqfiq as-safar ila-babrih maas siddat dual bi sabab is-lah| Saudi Arabia stops cruises with several countries due to ‘Corona’ |
| تعلق عملياتSegments on Economic and Trade| tulaq as-suudiah ila-babrih maas siddat dual bi sabab is-lah| Saudi Arabia suspends government departments’ work and closes markets to besiege Corona |
Another topos to be found is responsibility. The newspaper utilises this topos in order to hold Iran responsible for spreading coronavirus in the Kingdom and globally as well.

| Arabic headline | Transliteration | English translation |
|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| السعودية تندد بسلوك إيران اللامسؤول وتسبها في نشر "كرونا" | as-saṣūdiah tunadīd bi sīlūk ʾīrān al-lāmās?ūl wa tasabubhā fi nashar kūrūna wa tafashīh | Saudi Arabia denounces Iran’s irresponsible behaviour and its cause of spreading Corona |

| Arabic headline | Transliteration | English translation |
|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| السعودية تدين تسهيل إيران إدخال سعوديين مصابين بـ’كرونا’ إلى المملكة | as-saṣūdiah tuḍīn taṣ-ḥīl ʾīrān ʾidkhāl suṣūdīn muṣābaḥīn bi kūrūna ḫila al-mamlakah | Saudi Arabia condemns Iran’s facilitation of the entry of Saudis infected with ‘Corona’ into the Kingdom |

The last argumentation scheme combines threat with culture. [35, p.76] formulates the culture topos as follows; ‘[B]ecause the culture of a specific group of people is as it is, specific problems arise in specific situations’. Given the centrality of religion in Saudi Arabia—which is considered an indispensable part of its culture—the newspaper justifies the religious restrictions that the government has posed as a way to stop the outbreak.
| Arabic headline | Transliteration | English translation |
|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| السعودية: إيقاف الصلاة في المساجد باستثناء الحرمين الشريفين | as-sa'udiah  ṭaqāf aṣ-ṣalāh fi al-masājid bi astīthnā’  al-ḥaramayn ash-sharifayn/ | Saudi Arabia: Stopping prayer in mosques, except for the Two Holy Mosques |
| السعودية توقف صلاة الجمعة والجماعة وتستثني الحرمين الشريفين | as-sa'udiah tuaqīf šalāt al-jumūlah w al-jamā'ah wa taštīnā’ al-ḥaramayn ash-sharifayn/ | Saudi Arabia stops Friday and congregational prayers ... and excludes the Two Holy Mosques |
| بين التعليق وتقليص وقت الخطبية.. صلاة الجمعة تتأثر بـ’كوفيدنا’ | Bayn at-ṭa'liq wa taqlīl waqt al-khuṭbah šalāt al-jumūlah tataṭhar bi kūrīnā/ | Between suspension and reducing the time of the sermon ... the ‘Friday’ prayer is affected by ‘Corona’ |
| السعودية توقف العمرة وزارة المسجد النبوي مؤقتاً للمواطنين والمقيمين | as-sa'udiah tuaqīf al-ṣumrah wa zayrāt al-masjid an-nabawī muqattāt il muṭāthin w al-muqīmīn/ | Saudi Arabia temporarily stops Umrah and visits to the Prophet’s Mosque for citizens and residents |

5.2.2.2 O Rhetorical Structures  The newspaper repeats its reportage of Saudi Arabia’s first coronavirus case to emphasise the involvement and relation of Iran to the case. Another repetition involves Saudi Arabia’s re-accusation of Iran’s irresponsible activity towards fighting coronavirus.
Besides quoting social and religious figures, *Asharq Alawsat* uses the following metonymy:

| Arabic headline | Transliteration | English translation |
|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| السعودية تسجل أول إصابة بـ«كروننا الجديد» | as-sa'udiah tusajil ʾawal ʾisābāh bi Kūrūna al-jadīd li muqṭīn qadīm min ʾīrān | Saudi Arabia reports the first case of ‘new Corona’ for a citizen coming from Iran |
| السعودية تجند إدانتها لإيران لتفويضها الجهود الدولية لمكافحة «كروننا الجديد» | as-sa'udiah tujādīd ʾidānatuhā li ʾīrān li taqwīdahā al-juhūd ad-dīlālah li mukāfahat Kūrūna al-jadīd/ | Saudi Arabia renews its condemnation of Iran for undermining international efforts to combat ‘new Corona’ |

The order represents the government’s encouragement to those who have been in Iran to speak up. Later on, the newspaper highlights the numbers of citizens who have disclosed their visits to Iran and how many were still there. The newspaper also provides statistics to present Saudi Arabia positively during the pandemic.

| Arabic headline | Transliteration | English translation |
|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| الرياض تدعو مواطنيها إلى الإصلاح عن وجودهم في إيران | ar-riyād taddū muwaṭṭina ʾīlā al-ʾisābāh šān wājūdum fī ʾīrān | Riyadh calls on its citizens to disclose their presence in Iran |

| Arabic headline | Transliteration | English translation |
|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| السعودية: 114 مواطناً أُسمحوا عن وجودهم في إيران بينهم 95 ما زالوا هناك | as-sa'udiah 114 muṭāfinan ṣafṣaḥu šan wajūdahum fī ʾīrān baynahum 95 mazālū ḫunāk/ | Saudi Arabia: 114 citizens have disclosed their presence in Iran, 95 of whom are still there |
| السعودية في المرتبة 27 عالمياً و2 عريباً بمؤشر السعادة | as-sa'udiah fī al-martabah 27 yālāmian wa 2 šarabīn bi mūjīshier as-saṣādah/ | Saudi Arabia is ranked 27th in the world and 2nd in the Arab world in the happiness index |
5.2.3 Action Level

- Speech acts, communicative acts and interaction

On the action level, some headlines show Saudi Arabia asking its citizens not to travel to Lebanon due to the coronavirus.

| Arabic headline | Transliteration | English translation |
|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| قطر تسجل أول إصابة بـ كورونا، وعمان أول شفاء، والسعودية تطلب عدم السفر إلى لبنان | Qatar tusajil ʔawal ʔišābah bi Kūrūna wa Şumān ʔawal šifā? w as-saʕudiah taʕlub ʕadam as-safar ʔila lubnān/ | Qatar reports the first infection with ‘Corona’ ... and Oman the first recovery ... and Saudi Arabia asks not to travel to Lebanon |

Another headline asks Saudis not to travel to Iran at all.

| Arabic headline | Transliteration | English translation |
|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| السعودية تدعو مواطنيها لعدم السفر إلى إيران نهائيًا | as-saʕudiah tauḍiʕu muʕātınahā li ʕadam as-safar ʔila ʔirān nihāʔan | Saudi Arabia calls on its citizens not to travel to Iran at all |

Unlike the travel ban to Lebanon, which appears to be temporary, the travel ban to Iran is permanent. This is due to the unstable relationship between the two countries and, at the same time, reflects the attitudes of Saudi Arabia towards Iran.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia explicitly inveighs Iran for undermining global efforts to contain the pandemic and spreading the virus onto its land.
The Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia confirms the Kingdom’s determination to decrease the negative economic impacts of coronavirus to help reduce worry among Saudis and maintain the country’s economic reputation worldwide.

In terms of interaction strategies, the newspaper reflects Saudi Arabia’s goodwill to fight the pandemic by cooperating with other countries. This is achieved through reporting the Crown Prince’s meetings with the representatives of other countries.
6 Discussion

From the analysis and the aforementioned examples, it can be said that COVID-19-related headlines that appeared in USA Today represent China negatively. Those headlines specify China as the source of the virus and criticise the US president for his management of the pandemic. By contrast, headlines in the Arabic international newspaper Asharq Alawsat do not allocate blame to China but rather criticise the irresponsible acts of Iran for causing the spread of the virus in Saudi during the early stages of the outbreak. The headlines in Asharq Alawsat emphasise the positive actions and measures taken by the Saudi government, either through statements made by the Crown Prince or by describing how Saudi Arabia dealt with the pandemic. What it did not attempt to do was elicit implicit or explicit anger towards China, compared to the headlines found in USA Today. In a recent report, the Saudi government was ranked first globally in facing the pandemic [37]. The health measures were prompt and efficient [38], and the Saudi government switched learning to online platforms rather swiftly starting on March 8, 2020. Those platforms were proven to be effective and were received positively by students [39].

In USA Today, whether in terms of local interpretation and coherence or the actual language used, from a political perspective, it may be considered that calling the virus ‘Chinese’ is inappropriate, even discriminatory (e.g., racially divisive). As a result, the headlines could drive US citizens towards hatred for Chinese people. In
fact, there have been a number of news reports from the US of ethnic Chinese being spat on in public places such as shopping malls [40].

Consequently, in *USA Today* headlines, the pandemic has taken on a political aspect as part of the presidential campaign. As can be seen from the analysis, although modal verbs are used extensively to appease the reader, accusations are made against China for the origin and spread of the virus. By contrast, there are no specific references to the virus in Saudi news reporting, with no country being singled out as the source or mentioned by name. Instead, immediate measures taken by the Saudi government are announced, regardless of any political or religious aspects; for example, sheikhs being requested to instruct worshippers not to pray in mosques and to advise residents of Qatif not to travel to Iran.

In terms of syntax, the two newspapers adopt differing approaches. For instance, a change from active to passive voice indicates a shift in focus from one aspect to another, and this can be used for positive or negative purposes. In the case of *USA Today*, both active and passive voice are used to assign blame to China for being the source of the pandemic, which is not evident in the language used in *Asharq Alawsat*’s headlines.

In addition, the various topoi adopted in *USA Today* demonstrates discrimination against China, encouraging attacks against the Chinese economy by suspending flights. However, responsibility was also cast upon the US president for failing to control the pandemic and, more precisely, to impose a travel ban on flights from China. A similar topos is used differently in *Asharq Alawsat*, where the measures taken to stop the spread of the virus are highlighted, with no specific reference to China. Instead, the spread of COVID-19 in Saudi Arabia is attributed to irresponsible acts by Iranians to maintain certain customs and religious rituals without considering the effect of these actions on neighbouring countries. Nevertheless, although some responsibility for the spread of the virus in Saudi Arabia may be attributed to Iran for the reasons mentioned above, Iran is not implicated as the source of the virus and neither is there any explicit incitement of discrimination against Iran in the newspaper. Furthermore, the ongoing association of COVID-19 with China and the sarcastic statements that the virus will disappear once the US president has ended his term of office in the summer could be regarded as an illustration of the rhetoric used to influence the readership of *USA Today*. However, in *Asharq Alawsat*, although the headlines highlight the Saudi government’s objection to irresponsible behaviour on the part of Iran, leading to the spread of the virus in Saudi Arabia, no inflammatory language is used to incite anger against Iran among the Saudi population. This approach is unlike the wording of headlines in *USA Today* and its attacks against China. These attacks include the inference that China is covering up the truth and hiding information as well as other explicit warnings to incite the American people against China.

The Saudi Crown Prince also reassured the Saudi people by explaining the government’s solutions to alleviate economic crises during the pandemic. In sum, newspaper headlines can have an impact on the minds of the public, attracting readers to various topics and opinions, as Conboy [16] and McCombs [41] explain. News media, therefore, have the potential to set a nation’s agenda and focus public attention on a few key public issues. This is an immense and well-documented influence.
Not only does the public acquire factual information about public affairs from news media, readers and viewers also identify how much importance to attach to a topic on the basis of the emphasis placed on it in the news. Newspapers present a host of cues about the salience of topics in daily news by, for example, placing the lead story on the front page, displaying other content on the front page, using big headlines and so forth.

The use of cause-and-effect relationships [22] is likewise evident in *USA Today* to infer negative connotations, as in the case of the words and actions of the former President, for example, ‘President Trump claims coronavirus…’. On the contrary, this kind of political rivalry is not raised in *Asharq Alawsat*, which is rather more concerned with describing the strategies to be implemented to address the pandemic effectively in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This concern has not solely been displayed in newspaper headlines, however, as the Kingdom has been able to keep its financial state strong in real terms, despite the pandemic affecting many other countries. For example, one *Arab News* headline in Saudi Arabia reads as follows: ‘Saudi Arabia faces coronavirus crisis from position of strength: Finance minister’ [42].

The analysis of the projected examples can be used in deducing the ideological underpinnings that drive the formulation of headlines in the manners presented. It can be said that *USA Today* uses the headlines to politicise the pandemic [43]. Describing the virus as ‘China’s virus’ is a clear indication of the negative other-presentation of others [12] and manifests a discourse of othering [34]. On the other hand, *Asharq Alawsat* utilises topoi and several discourse structures and strategies to contribute to positive self-presentation [12] by showing that health, social, economic and political measures were well justified. This goes in line with recent studies showing a general positive sentiment in the way the Saudi government and media report or discuss news on the pandemic [44]. Even when warnings are issued, the reports often depend on evidentiality and the use of statistics [45], as shown on several headlines analysed in the current paper.

In light of the above discussion, it is clear from many of the newspaper headlines published over the past year that positive measures have been taken by the Saudi government to mitigate the impact of COVID-19. Furthermore, these measures have been applied in reality in the lives of the citizens and residents in KSA, which is the main priority in Saudi government policy, with no consideration for political vengeance in any way or by any means.

### 7 Conclusion

This study investigated headlines on COVID-19 in two newspapers in different sociocultural contexts by utilising van Dijk’s [12] discourse structures, which serve as indicators to underlying ideologies. The analysis of representative samples of the data showed that *USA Today* politicised the pandemic and emphasised that, since China is the source of the virus, blame should be placed on it as well. The newspaper also implied blame on Trump as the president who failed to take the pandemic seriously and protect the nation from its negative consequences. On the other hand, *Asharq Alawsat* focused on the preventive measures that the Saudi government has
taken to face the spread of the virus. Although Iran was blamed for facilitating the entry of infected citizens to the Kingdom, it was not singled out as the source of the outbreak and was always mentioned in the context of the measures that were planned and taking place. It should be pointed out that while the current paper focused on two newspapers only, future studies can widen the investigation to include more newspapers from other sociocultures. Headlines can be further investigated using quantitative and corpus methods.

Appendix 1

Transliteration table.

1 Consonants.
| Letter | Transcription |
|-------|--------------|
| ء | o |
| ب | b |
| ت | t |
| ث | th |
| ج | j |
| ح | h |
| خ | kh |
| د | d |
| ذ | d |
| ر | r |
| ز | z |
| س | s |
| ش | sh |
| ص | s |
| ض | d |
| ط | t |
| ئ | e |
| ظ | z |
| ع | u |
| غ | gh |
| ف | f |
| ق | q |
| ك | k |
| ل | l |
| م | m |
| ن | n |
| ه | h |
| و | w |
| ي | y |

2 Vowels and diphthongs.
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