

Connotations of the Word “Muslim” Portrayed in Newspapers Before and After the 9/11 Attack

MSc. Flaka Jonuzi

University of Sheffield, CITY College

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ABSTRACT

The negative image of Muslims is often assumed to be reinforced to a large extent after the 9/11 attack, with the spread of negative stereotypes towards them. Given this, this study found the collocates of the word “Muslim” and verified if these collocates have changed before and after the 9/11. Moreover, an in-depth comparison was provided on the question whether the connotations of the collocates have changed in newspapers due to the terrorist attack of the 9/11. The mechanism of analyzing the data required a mixture of qualitative and quantitative approach. A Corpora Analysis using the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) was necessary for the purpose of this study, as it gives us access to separate years in balanced manner and allows us to see the authentic language that newspapers have employed to portray Muslims. The results showed that the collocates remained almost the same after the attack but the connotations of these collocates have drastically changed.

INTRODUCTION

The 9/11 attack has made a twist in the American History, making the entire world turning the eyes to Muslims. Many studies have demonstrated how the Media influenced American people against Muslims, portraying them as dangerous with an aggressive attitude (Saleem et al.2015). Consequently, an FBI report states that the hate crimes against Muslims have multiplied by 1,600% after 2001 (Alsultany 2013). Given this, it is assumed that the 9/11 attack has really found the word “Muslim” with more negative connotations, compared to the before-the-attack period.

Having this scenario, this study aims to find the connotations of the word “Muslim” before and after the 9/11 attack, and find out whether the attack has affected the way Muslims are portrayed in newspapers. In order to have these data, this study considered using the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) as it contains numerous genres with separate years in a balanced manner. Moreover, the data will also show whether the 9/11 attack has really affected the way newspapers portrayed Muslims.

The findings of this study will contribute to every adult, as we are all exposed to some types of Media every day and we might be affected by stereotypes spread by them. Therefore, this will raise awareness in becoming more critical towards the language portrayed in newspapers rather than being receptive. Additionally, these findings will also contribute in the teaching area, where in addition to the learning of the denotative meanings of words, students can be introduced to different connotations that a single word can contain.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media has played a crucial role in creating prejudice and stereotypes about people since the beginning of the

20th century (Roskos-Ewoldsen & Monahan 2007). Numerous studies have shown that media have done a huge contribution in marginalization of minorities or particular ethnic groups, creating mental images of threat (Nairn et al. 2006). Moreover, the authors argue, the media repeatedly modify people's image by taking the side of the dominant group. By taking sides, media often describes minority groups, immigrants, or some specific communities as a threat to society (Hancock 2013). Not surprisingly, it is also proved several times that various media overemphasized violence and other events, making the audience create extreme fear of crimes (Nellis & Savage 2012).

Muslims have oftentimes been in the media spotlights with predominantly negative comments. They have been given negative images for over a century (Alsultany 2013). It is argued that this constant negative image is due to the reporters, who make massive generalization, claiming that all Muslims are either oil suppliers or terrorists (Saeed 2007). Nevertheless, the 9/11 attack made the negative stereotypes and criticism towards Muslims grow (Alsultany 2013). According to El Sayed (2013), Media worldwide, but particularly in the United States, have treated Muslims as extremists, violent and non-modern, blaming for the attacks caused by terrorists. These negative connotations caused fear and Islamophobia among citizens. Similarly, Hancock (2013) states that since 2001, every single discourse representation of Muslims by Western Media tend to be negative and full of hatred.

Just like the other forms of Media, newspapers are full of polarized language, helping the stereotypes spread quite rapidly (Hancock 2013). Given that around 52 million copies of 1,400 printed newspapers are sold every day in the US, the impact of newspapers seems to be a factor in people's mental images towards Muslims (Dente Ross 2011). However, not sufficient studies have been conducted in the corpus of all newspapers, comparing the connotations before and after the tragedy of 9/11 attack.

THE PRESENT STUDY

Hypothesis

Following the claim of Saeed (2007) that all Muslims were portrayed as terrorists and violent in newspapers after the 9/11 attack, it was hypothesized that:

The collocations of the word "Muslim" in newspapers change through the years 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000 and 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004.

Thus, the research questions that are going to lead this study are:

RQ1: What are collocates of the word "Muslim" over the years, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000 and 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004?

RQ2: What are the different connotations of the collocates, before and after the 9/11 attack?

Methodology

The mechanism of analyzing the data will require a mixture of qualitative and quantitative approach as the collocates of the word "Muslim" will be found and analyzed semantically. This study considers using the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), as a source of information. This tool is chosen due to the variety of genres, such as spoken, fiction, magazines, journals, newspapers, and so forth. Moreover, it contains more than 485,202 texts, including 20 million tokens each year from 1990 until 2019, which will give us more accurate results (Davies 2008). However, due to the big number of genres, this study focuses only on newspapers, as they are an important source of information in America. The entire Newspapers sub corpora is going to be subject of this study as we consider that we have to do with a bigger audience and a

bigger impact on the mass. This sub corpus consists of 123 million tokens and it includes various newspapers from across the US, such as: New York Times, USA Today, Washington, etc. (Davies 2008).

Even though there is a wider range of the words referring to Muslim people, we believed that the word “Muslim” is more used in the context that we need. The connotations of this word are found by analyzing the semantic meaning of collocates. As we are looking for the attributes of the Muslims given in newspapers, we are going to focus only on adjectival collocates.

Analysis Procedure

In order to obtain all collocates before and after the 9/11 attack, these steps were followed:

1. The newspapers sub corpora was selected, along with year 1997. In order to get the adjectives regarding Muslims, the study considered only the adjectives collocates in the [POS] column. On the collocations axes, +2 was selected in both sides since adjectives can come before and after nouns.
2. The procedure described was followed seven more times, once for each year, 1998, 1999,2000, 2001, 2002,2003 and 2004.
3. The first 10 collocates were taken from each year and were put into tables separately.
4. These collocates were first grouped according to their period of time, before the attack including years 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, and after, including years 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004.
5. Afterwards, the most frequent collocates from both periods were found and their context was analyzed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Year	1997	1998	1999	2000
1	Christian	Christian	Christian	Christian
2	Arab	Old	Arab	Arab
3	Jewish	Arab	Jewish	Jewish
4	Hindu	Jewish	Non-Muslim	Non-Muslim
5	Non-Muslim	Non-Muslim	Hindu	Other
6	Bosnian	Hindu	Bosnian	Hindu
7	Holy	Holy	Other	Shiite
8	Western	Western	Western	Holy
9	Palestinian	Other	Orthodox	Palestinian
10	Other	Fundamentalist	Only	Religious

Year	2001	2002	2003	2004
1	Christian	Christian	Arab	Christian
2	Arab	Arab	Christian	Arab
3	Holy	American	Shiite	Shiite
4	Other	Other	Other	Jewish
5	Jewish	Jewish	American	Hindu
6	Hindu	Hindu	Jewish	Other

7	Non-Muslim	Non-Muslim	Holy	Non-Muslim
8	Largest	Good	Hindu	Holy
9	Devout	Holy	Non-Muslim	Yong
10	American	Local	Radical	Good

Needless to say, almost all collocates that were used over the years 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000 are repeated during 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004. This shows that the 9/11 attack did not change the collocates of “Muslim”. However, we cannot say that these collocates convey the same semantic meaning. Therefore, we need to analyze and compare their connotations between these two periods.

As it is impossible for this study to deal with all collocates, only seven of the most frequent collocates from 1997 until 2004 will be analyzed.

Collocates that were used frequently before the 9/11 attack and continued to be used afterwards are:

Christian, Arab, Jewish, Non- Muslim, Other, Holy, Shiite

It must be clarified that the categorization of the meaning will not be fully based on dictionaries, as it will be found in the context.

Christian

This collocate allowed us to see the relation between Christians and Muslims before and after the attack. Relying on corpora, we find years 97/98/99 and 2000 with a friendly relationship between these religions. Many newspapers, including the ones below, show explicitly that there was a good relation between the two religions.

“Muslim and Christian minorities co-exist peacefully with Hindus Atlantic” (Christian Science Monitor in 1999)

“Muslims and Christian populations, who had lived side by side for centuries” (Christian Science Monitor in 2000)

However, this relation seems to be vanished after 2001 and hostility started to develop. This is evidently shown in the Christian Century Newspaper in 2002:

“The events of September 11 ushered in a new stage in Muslim-Christian relations”

Given this, it is clearly revealed that the attack has really had an impact on the relation and friendship of the two religions.

Arab

According to (Saeed 2007), the Arabs have always been represented as inferior in political discourses and they are either portrayed as oil suppliers or as terrorists. Therefore, it is believed that Muslim Arabs had bad connotations in both periods.

“Although scholars and intellectuals agree that terrorists are a small minority within the Muslim Arab population...” (Denver Post in 2000).

According to this, Arabs Muslims are part of terrorists groups, although some scholars believe they are just a minority. Moreover, the consequences of the attack seem to have touched the Arabs and Muslims as well

and this can be supported by the two sentences below:

“In Boston, Fleet Bank has closed at least 15 accounts of Muslim and Arab holders, without explanations” (Christian Science Monitor in 2003)

“...the current racism facing Muslim and Arabs” (San Francisco Chronicle in 2003)

Relying on the contexts given in corpora, it is explicitly shown that Arabs have the same negative connotations as Muslims. Thus, we see both groups with negative representation in newspapers.

Jewish

Pearl (1999) claims that Jewish have always had negative connotations in books and TVs. This is because they are always considered as a minority, and also as a group of people with no identity. Nevertheless, the corpora of newspapers show a neutral representation of Jewish as collocate of Muslims. Most of the cases reveal just some religious views of both groups, without providing any negative representations of them.

Moreover, this collocate is mainly used together with other religions, e.g.:

“School that blended the city’s Jewish, Muslim and Christian children” (New York Times in 2004).

The non-Muslim

The word itself shows that newspapers tend to categorize people into two groups, Muslims and non-Muslims, an issue that shows a great nuance of racism. This implies that people were considered either Muslims or non-Muslims, and the rest of their identity was not important. However, racism was not shown so explicitly before 2001. Sentences such as “Muslim and Non-Muslim alike...” (Atlantic Newspaper in 2000) show that this collocate was rather neutral before the attack. Unfortunately, the 2001 attack has put more light on the racism towards Muslims. This can be found in sentences, such as:

“Considerable hostility has arisen between non-Muslim and Muslim children” (New York Times in 2002)

“Muslim versus non-Muslim states” (Foreign Affairs Newspaper in 2002)

Both examples above show the hostility created between two categorizations, which take place after 2001.

Other

Van Dijk (1998) argues that the adjective “other” usually represent the “negative other” and implies the “positive” self. However, this is not the case found in corpora. “Others” was mainly used to refer to a person or a group of Muslims distinct from one already mentioned.

E.g. “other Muslim people (International Affairs Newspaper in 2000)

Holy

The Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary explains the word “holy” as something pure or good because of the relation to God (Walter 2008). Surprisingly enough, “holy” seems to be related to wars in many times and convey negative connotations.

“a veteran of the Muslim holy war” (Denver Newspaper in 2002)

“Muslim holy war against the Soviet army” (CBS Newspaper in 2002)

“Muslim holy warrior” (Christian Science Monitor in 2003)

Nevertheless, such bad connotations were not found in the period before the 9/11 attack. In most of the cases, “holy” tent to refer to the purity of religious days of Muslims, such as:

“Muslim holy month of Ramadan” (New York Times in 1997) or

“Muslim holy city of Meca” (Christian Science Monitor in 1997).

These sentences show that the word “holy” referring to Muslims have changed its connotation after 2001, due to the stereotypes and Islamophobia spread everywhere.

Shiite

Word “Shiite” refers to a specter or branch of Islam. Broning (2008) claims that there are two divisions of Muslims, “Sunnis”, who are modern and “Shiite”, who are perceived as aggressive. It is obvious that Shiite were always perceived negatively by Americans as they have always been represented negatively by American Newspapers. Newspapers of the Corpora show that the connotations have not been changed for better over years 1997-2004. In 1998, The New York Times newspaper represented them as people “wearing the black turban”. In 2000, Washington Post writes “Shiite Muslim political and military movement” which is obviously related to terrorism. At the same year, the same newspaper states: “Shiite Muslim Hezbollah movement gathered with weapons”. As expected, 2001 finds “Shiite” in a closer relation with terrorism. Right after the attack, in 2001, New York Time writes “Shiite terrorist organization”. These negative connotations seemed to be continued even in the following years, since in 2003, the Houston Newspaper writes “The recent upsurge in anti-American agitation by some Shiite Muslim clerics”. Needless to say, these negative connotations about Muslims seem to have existed even before the attack; however, it is assumed that the attack reinforced these comments to be more explicit.

CONCLUSION

Using corpora as a source, this study intended to find whether the portrayal of Muslims in newspapers have changed after the 9/11 attack. In order to do so, all the collocates of the word “muslim” were found from 1997 until 2004. It was clear that there were no changes in the collocates of the word, however, most of the collocates have changed their connotations drastically. This tells that the attack of 2001 did affect the way newspapers portray Muslims and the language towards them became very unpleasant. Needless to say, this study also showed how the 9/11 attack paved the way for discrimination by Christians and non-Muslims citizens towards all Muslims in America.

However, due to the nature of this study, not enough collocates were analyzed and compared in means of their connotations. This is probably a great restriction which might have limited the results of this study. This is why further research is recommended regarding the possible changes in all the collocates of the word “Muslim”.

Yet, this study will play a part in raising people’s awareness towards newspapers and information they receive from the Media. This is going to open the door for being more critical instead of giving credence to whatever we read. On top of that, this study is going to be instrumental in teaching as well. Students will be exposed to more than one meaning or connotation that one word can convey and see how these connotations can change with time.

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