

Interrogating the “Good” Muslim

Challenging Representations of Muslims Through Linguistic Analysis

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Abstract

In this assignment, students learn to critique the frequently stereotypical and problematic depictions of Muslims in media sources. Based on their own linguistic analyses of TV shows, movies, or political speeches, students build arguments about the messaging and judgment of Muslims in the United States. Close linguistic analysis is a powerful method to practice critical-thinking skills as students select and analyze evidence in order to construct original arguments. I select sources that challenge students to question and critique not just Orientalist and racist stereotypes of Muslims, but also representations that seem to be positive on the surface but subtly reinforce inequitable expectations of Muslims. This assignment allows students to explore some of the social justice issues facing Muslims in the U.S., such as the reinforcement of Islamophobia, the expectations to prove their allegiance to the nation, and the demand to conform to “good Muslim” expectations. Based on an exploration of their thesis statements, my analysis demonstrates that students used evidence from their sources to build arguments that condemn the perpetuation of stigma associated with Islam and Muslims. Additionally, many students critiqued media sources for subtly encouraging expectations that Muslims need to continually demonstrate patriotism and particular kinds of assimilation in order to be deemed “good” Muslims. Through this and similar assignments, students practice more critical perspectives on media and explore the challenges of representation through the perspectives of marginalized populations.

In the fall of 2018, a student group at Duke University invited a speaker to campus for a talk titled, “The American Muslim Identity: Patriot or Insurgent?” Although the speaker was described as “an American Muslim” and the child of Syrian immigrants, the talk prompted backlash from the university’s Muslim Student Association (MSA). The MSA organized a teach-in to protest the event, stating that “we are tired of being told we have to ‘choose’ between being ‘insurgents’ and ‘patriots.’” The MSA’s reaction highlights two social justice and equity issues confronting Muslims in the United States: (1) they face negative stereotypes due to their religion and (2) they must prove (repeatedly) their allegiance to America in order to be accepted as part of a decent civilian public. These expectations reflect the idea that “good Muslims” are determined by virtue of their patriotism and assimilation, leading to the perception that outward expression of Islam is viewed as incompatible with Americanness (Alsultany, 2012; Mamdani, 2004).

The MSA’s reaction echoes some of the key issues in teaching about social justice that are at the root of the assignment I present here: how do we help students feel co-suffering with marginalized groups of which they may not be a part rather than continue to think from their own limited perspectives? What ethical implications are tied to the representations of stigmatized communities? And how do we encourage students to think about the complexities of representation, including how superficially positive, sympathetic representations can still reinforce problematic stereotypes? While these questions can be explored with many marginalized groups, my assignment asks students to think critically about the representations of Muslims found in news and political media, as well as in popular TV shows and media created by Muslim Americans.

prompt
a journal of academic
writing assignments

Volume 6, Issue 1 (2022),
pages 5–13.

DOI: 10.31719/pjaw.v6i1.82
Submitted May 29, 2020; accepted
October 26, 2021; published January
31, 2022.

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The vast majority of students in my class are not Muslim and were taught in education systems that do not convey the cultural, ethnic, and interpretational diversity of Muslims (Hirji, 2019). Rather, students' understandings of Islam are filtered through mainstream news and media. These largely Orientalist discourses often paint Muslims as violent, anti-modern, and uncivilized (Said, 1978). The issue of representation is not purely a matter of religious affiliation but draws on the way that the experiences of being Muslim are complex and differently shaped by context as well as by immigration status, race, class, gender, and ability. While the "good Muslim" who aligns with American values may escape some negative stereotypes, the existence of the "good Muslim" reinforces the looming existence of the "bad Muslim" (Alsultany, 2012; Mamdani, 2004). In my writing assignment, I curate an exercise that asks students to examine not only how Muslims are being represented, but to explore the equity issues in *what* the media expects Muslims to be and *how* those expectations impact Muslims.

To scaffold this assignment, I guide students through an analysis centered on issues of social justice by examining media portrayals of Muslims. For example, students practice close, linguistic analysis on a trailer for Season 4 of the TV show *Homeland* (cited in Stern [2014]¹). This analysis entails viewing the trailer multiple times and providing the opportunity to watch excerpts again on their own or in small groups. As they view, students pay close attention to how Muslims are represented. In forming their arguments, students cite particular images, text, musical lyrics, dialogue, or the juxtapositions of images in order to defend the representations they plan to argue. Theories such as Orientalism or arguments made in an assigned chapter from Evelyn Alsultany's (2012) *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* help deepen analysis. Through this exercise, students meet secondary objectives as they articulate and critique the overtly anti-Muslim messages and Orientalist tropes, including the white savior complex, the conflation of religion and culture, Muslim women as oppressed, and Arabs/Muslims as suspicious (reinforcing the "bad" Muslim that Alsultany discusses). Students point to the removal of the headscarf to argue how oppression and the white savior complex are triggered; they analyze the lyrics and tone conveyed by the music to argue about messages of the superiority of Western values. However, because the negative representations in *Homeland* are so blatant, this exercise teaches students how to watch, draw out evidence, and find themes to analyze as they practice linguistic analysis. But the exercise does not necessarily challenge their critical thinking about representation. For my assignment, I deliberately pick sources that complicate students' ideas about representation. On the surface, most of the sources seem to positively represent Islam and Muslims, encouraging deeper reflection on the difficulties entailed in socially just representations.

Language and Power: Course Context & Overview

This assignment comes from my 2017-18 Writing 101 course called Language and Power: Words as Actions in Shaping Social Identities. Writing 101 is a one-semester introduction to academic writing required of all incoming undergraduates at Duke University. Sections were capped at 12 to allow for discussion-based classes and individualized writing instruction (small group work and one-on-one conferences). Some of the main writing goals are to learn to articulate a position and situate one's writing within a specific disciplinary context. Instructors have autonomy to select the topics, disciplinary foci, assignments, and specific writing goals. In Language and Power, we use the discipline and methods of linguistic anthropology to explore the way language interacts with race, class, gender, and religion to reinforce hierarchies of power. The course teaches students to recognize the subtle ways in which interactions can legitimate or even heighten inequalities. From questions about "where are you *really* from?" to assumptions made about the intelligence of speakers of African American Vernacular English, language plays a key

role in marking who has and who lacks privilege. I root the course in the concept of language ideologies, as associations and stigmas attached to forms of talk are mediated by ideologies of language (Kroskrity, 2004; Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). This includes beliefs in the existence and superiority of a “standard language” variety or the associations between one language and one nation. In the course, we examine how ideologies impact perceptions in contemporary media, including advertisements, TV, and the news. One of the underlying goals of the course is to help students be more critical of the media they ingest every day so that they can question and push back against injustices towards marginalized groups.

Course activities teach students to write arguments based on their own linguistic analysis. The readings model linguistic analysis as a tool to illuminate the relationship between language and social hierarchies, including William Labov’s (1972) work on language and class distinctions, Samy Alim’s (2004) research on the grammar of African American Vernacular English, and John Rickford and Sharese King’s (2016) analysis of race and court testimony. Students also engage in peer workshops and individual conferences with the professor to strengthen their analyses and writing skills. The course has three major linguistic analysis-based writing assignments. In the first, students analyze the use of gender in Barbie’s 2017 “Dads who Play Barbie” advertising campaign. The second paper, presented here, asks the students to examine representations of Muslims. For the final assignment, students select their own media sources and topic for analysis.

Setting up the Assignment: Language, Islam, and Justice

This assignment explores language, hierarchy, and Islam. We read a chapter from Inmaculada García-Sánchez’s (2014) ethnography about Moroccan immigrants in Spain. García-Sánchez analyzes classroom interactions, including recorded peer tattling and the teacher’s response. She breaks down the differences in the peer tattling targeting Spanish students versus targeting Moroccan students. She contrasts how Spanish school teachers quickly stop overt prejudice against the Moroccan students, but overlook peer tattling that can contain subtle racism and negative moral value judgments of the Moroccans that are not expressed towards Spanish peers and could easily be missed without close analysis (García-Sánchez, 2014). This reading highlights the importance of linguistic analysis to demonstrate the complexities of racism that go beyond overt forms.

To prepare for analysis of media, students read Alsultany (2012), who argues that media representations of Muslims immediately after 9/11 were surprisingly positive. However, these “good Muslims” not only emphasize the presence of the potential “bad Muslim,” but also reinforce problematic discourses of American exceptionalism. As she describes, “the Other is portrayed sympathetically in order to project the United States as an enlightened country that has entered a postracial era” (p. 16). We also discuss Edward Said’s theories of Orientalism, and this prepares the students for an in-class practice analysis and argument construction on *Homeland*. We close the unit with this assignment, which goes through peer review and the option for individual guidance during office hours.

For instructors adapting this assignment, there is room to engage more substantially with relevant social theories that will aid analysis and meet different course goals. I limited this topic to two 75-minute sessions to discuss García-Sánchez, Alsultany, and practice on the *Homeland* trailer. However, to help students develop more critical perspectives to guide the direction of their analyses and writing projects, I recommend more time for a stronger theoretical foundation. I also advise assigning excerpts of Said’s (1978) theory of Orientalism. Additionally, an analytical tool like intersectionality would help students see how representations and treatments of Muslims cannot be reduced to religious affiliation but are inseparable from issues of race, class,

gender, and immigration status. Some readings which address intersectionality and the Muslim-American experience are Alsultany (2012), Khalid Beydoun (2018), and Su'ad Abdul Khabeer (2016). Racial tensions and anti-Black sentiments within the Muslim community are further compounded by the ways in which the “model minority” myth (Kim, 1999) can encourage expectations around assimilation for some segments of the Muslim population.

Analysis of the Final Papers

I taught 59 first-year college students across five sections of “Language and Power.” After the project received IRB approval, 52 students granted permission to use their final papers in my data set (88% approval response rate). The goal of the research was to explore how writing pedagogy can be used to build understanding across lines of difference. The most popular sources included President Obama’s (2015) national address following the San Bernardino mass shooting, and President Trump’s (2017) speech at the Arab Islamic American Summit. Comedic sitcoms were also popular, including *Halal in the Family* (Mandvi et al., 2015). (The rest of the potential sources are listed in the assignment.) Since teaching this class, recent media created by Muslim Americans provides an opportunity for additional sources. Shows such as *Ramy*, *Patriot Act*, and *East of La Brea*, may serve as additional material, depending on access. Some are only available through paid services.

While the key goal of the writing assignment is to teach argumentative writing based on linguistic analysis, the assignment also serves secondary goals. Here, I focus on two secondary concerns, demonstrated in the MSA’s reaction to the speaker in the opening anecdote: do students recognize the inequitable challenges faced by Muslims when it comes to representation, and can students articulate the complexities of representation faced by this particular population?

For the first concern, it did seem that all students articulated that Muslims face stigma through unjust and unfair representations, as evidenced in their titles, thesis statements, and/or conclusions. Regardless of how they used their sources and evidence, all the students argued that Muslims face unjust challenges due to stereotypes. However, I cannot separate this result from the fact that students may have been appealing to me as both the instructor and grader. All students were aware that my own research focuses on Islam and Muslims, and some may have known that I identify as Muslim American.

Further, I explored whether and how students articulated the complexities of representation. This was especially important as I read a few papers that recognized that Muslims are stigmatized but ignored how politicians and media (even by Muslim Americans) perpetuate the marginalization of minority groups by reinforcing the existence of the “bad Muslim” or through unjust expectations that Muslims must assimilate. While setting up a stronger theoretical foundation before the exercise may help, I found an in-class rehashing of aspects of Alsultany’s article on the impact of the USA PATRIOT Act prompted a more critical look in many final drafts.

One way that students articulated complexities of representation was to embed multiple readings of the representation into their thesis statements, recognizing both positive and problematic interpretations. This was done in 22 of the papers (42%). For example, one student argued:

Though much of the President’s address focused on healing America through emphasizing our collective unity...President Obama *fails to include Muslim Americans* in this vision by creating a binary between non-Muslim and Muslim Americans and *calling on all Muslim Americans to hold themselves more accountable for preventing terrorist activity and organization*. (My italics for emphasis.)

The writer critiqued Obama’s speech for the way in which U.S. Muslims are unfairly asked to prevent terrorism. They supported their thesis with explicit evidence from the speech that shows both the positive message as well as the expectations for Muslim self-policing and responsibility. For example, the writer quoted Obama saying, “we must enlist Muslim communities as some of our strongest allies. . . . [Extremist ideology] is a real problem that Muslims must confront.” The writer argued that the inclusive “we” Obama had previously created now excludes Muslim Americans, and further argued that Islam is explicitly linked to terrorism, making Muslims responsible and obligated to combat something not related to their religion.

Students also demonstrated understanding complexities and consequences of representation by drawing on the “good Muslim/bad Muslim” binary, seen in 20 of the papers (38%). For example:

Not only does the show reveal that there is a lack of... appreciation of Islamic culture in the United States, but it shows how this ignorance is perpetuated through stereotyping and *how this stereotyping creates pressure for Muslim Americans to assimilate and assert their American identity.* (My italics for emphasis.)

The author argued that *Halal in the Family*, a comedic sitcom about the day-to-day lives of Muslim Americans, challenged the societal ignorance about Muslims and the often easily perpetuated stereotypes about them. Additionally, the writer deepened their reflection with what those stereotypes do to Muslims—force Muslims to assimilate patriotic values if they wish to be considered “good,” highlighting the inequitable expectations placed on Muslims.

Conclusion

Just as the reactions of the students in the MSA indicated in the opening of this article, representations of Muslims can have tangible impacts on Muslims. It is easy for representation to reinforce the idea that Islam is by its nature “un-American” or to unintentionally fortify the existence of the potentially “bad” Muslim. With this assignment, most students practiced questioning the power of media to potentially bias the treatment of an entire group. Their papers demonstrated the injustice of the expectations that Muslims must be either “patriots or insurgents” and critiqued its use in media representations, even those created by Muslims or that seem positive on the surface. This assignment demonstrates the importance of linguistic anthropology theory and analysis to think critically about the power of language to reinforce and also challenge injustice around us.

In reflecting on this assignment, I found it challenging to read those papers that praised politicians for “correcting” stereotypes about Muslims, while ignoring the surveillance of mosques and the deportation and arrest of Muslim immigrants (Alsultany, 2012; Beydoun, 2018). At the same time, the fact that the sources are complex and not overtly anti-Muslim provides space for students to develop unique analyses and interpretations. Overall, this assignment allowed students to step into the shoes of marginalized populations, if only superficially. Even as an in-class activity, linguistic analysis of media engages students, stimulates critical analysis, and teaches social justice. This activity can be adapted to a variety of topics, from the representation of LGBTQ+ individuals or the depiction of disabilities on TV. Bringing in case studies and practicing linguistic analysis or even a close reading helps students see the complexities of representation and reflect on their own biases and assumptions.

This assignment gives students the chance to think critically and empathetically about marginalization, leading to powerful impacts on how they watch and create media in the future. While teaching assignments that center controversial topics or marginalized populations can be daunting, the use of linguistic analysis can be a powerful teaching tool. Because students

are asked to cite explicit evidence for their claims, students most commonly take a stance of empathy and understanding for marginalized populations. These exercises shift the task of learning and empathizing onto all students; one by-product is that marginalized students feel seen in the classroom without being asked to “speak for” aspects of their complex and intersectional identities. Linguistic analysis activities have a lingering impact on students as they continue to think about their arguments: some develop them into bigger projects, and students even forward media sources to me (some positive, some problematic) that remind them of the course. It is through this type of assignment that students become more critical consumers and producers of media.

ASSIGNMENT

Language and the Representation of Muslims

Suggested length: 4-6 pages (not including works cited page or appendix. You may include transcripts in the appendix.)

Reference Material: *The Craft of Research* chapters 7, 8, and 9

Assignment Details:

Description: This writing assignment will allow you to practice analytic skills to create an argument and explore the architecture of writing arguments. Building from the class discussion on the representation of Muslims, you will analyze media and linguistic data to make your own arguments about how language shapes, manipulates, and influences social identities.

Assignment Purpose: The purposes of the assignment are to (1) learn how to analyze linguistic data; (2) practice constructing arguments by making claims and supporting them with evidence and reasons; (3) contextualize linguistic data in the social context; and (4) become more critical thinkers and writers.

Audience: As all the issues below are contemporary issues, not much analysis through the lens of linguistic anthropology has been done. Your writing would be a contribution both to scholarly analysis but also to reflections on problematic and under-observed issues around the reproduction of social inequity and injustice. Imagine your audience to be smart, critical people, interested in contemporary challenges but not well versed in linguistic anthropology.

Revising - Small Group Workshops: For this paper, you will receive feedback on your first draft from a small group of your peers. Groups will be determined in advance and you will post to the forum section of the course website.

Linguistic Data:

You can either choose from the following list or select your own (if you choose something not on this list, please discuss the source with me before proceeding):

- Political Speeches
 - President Trump’s (May 2017) Speech to the Arab Islamic American Summit.
 - President Obama’s (December 2015) Address to the Nation on the San Bernardino shooting.
- Other Media
 - *Halal in the Family* (2015) – a sitcom parody TV show about a Muslim family.
 - *Master of None* (2017) Season 2, episode 3 “Religion” – comedy show featuring Aziz Ansari (this source requires a Netflix account).

- *By the Dawn's Early Light: Chris Jackson's Journey to Islam* (2005) – documentary about the basketball player Chris Jackson/Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf who converted to Islam and refused to stand for the anthem.
- *All-American Muslim* (2011-2012) – reality show about Muslims in America.
- *Arranged* (2007)– a film about a friendship between two teachers, who are both going through the marriage process. One teacher is an Orthodox Jew and the other Muslim.

Research Question:

Analyze one of the media/political documents above and write a paper asking and answering a question about the representation of Muslims. You will need to design the specific question as you analyze and write.

Building your assignment:

Week 1 – Steps 1-5

Step 1: Transcription

Like we have done in class, start your linguistic analysis with a transcript. After you have viewed your data, transcribe the most relevant scenes/episodes or the places where you want to start/focus your analysis.

Step 2: Preliminary Analysis

Begin marking up your transcript with things that catch your attention, intrigue you, surprise you, or seem worth noting. You can create your own coding system; just remember to design a key for all the codes. Watch and re-watch the clip, each time adding codes/notes of things you notice. Some things to pay attention to may include: intonation, pauses, gestures, eye gaze, how objects are being used or not used, who speaks first, who speaks the most/least, how are people positioning themselves and others, who is aligning with whom, etc. I find this works best/easiest on a printed version with multiple colors to help you see layers of analysis.

Some ideas/question to keep in mind to guide you:

- How is “Islam” or “Muslim” used? What/who do those categories refer to and what do they mean? What are the implications of such labels?
- Who is automatically assumed to be Muslim and what associations does it come with? Which Muslims can “pass” and what does that allow?
- To what extent do the categories of Muslim and American overlap and under what situations? When do they NOT overlap?
- Which negative actions/activities are projected onto which social identities and how? What positive actions/activities are projected onto which social identities and how?
- How are pronouns being used (“us” vs “them”; who is included in “we”)?
- How does the representation of Muslims in the data meet the broader context of Muslims in America? How does that social context impact your data?

Step 3: Develop a research question

Now that you have some preliminary analysis, draft a research question that you want to explore in the paper. Identifying something that surprises you is an effective way to start. What about the issue of representation do you want to explore? We will workshop research questions in class so that you get some support and feedback on this part.

Step 4: Building a thesis

Once you have a draft research question, continue your analysis in ways that will help you answer that question. This should lead you to a draft thesis. It is okay for your research question and thesis to change as you work. Refer back to the suggestions under step 2 to continue your analysis.

Step 5: Outline your argument

Outline your argument with the subclaims and evidence to support it.

Week 2 – Steps 6- 7

Step 6: Draft 1

Write the first draft of your paper.

Step 7: Peer review

In addition to whatever editing and revision processes that you find helpful, submit your draft to your small group for peer review. Read and comment on each of the drafts prior to the workshop so you are prepared to share your thoughts and suggestions during class.

Week 3 – Step 8

Step 8: Final revisions

Complete any final revisions and submit your final draft on the course website.

Structure of the argument: Begin with an introduction that introduces your data, sets up the context of looking at Muslims in America, proposes a question, mentions the significance of the question and ends with your thesis (your answer to the question).

The body of your paper lays out claims that elaborate on your thesis and are supported by reason and evidence. You will need to reference parts of the text from your data explicitly to support your arguments. You can do so by integrating excerpts of your transcripts (interactions), quoted lines or image stills from your data, just as the authors we read cite linguistic or visual evidence in their papers. Your analysis, coding schemes, theories, patterns you notice, analysis of word choice will also help you connect the evidence from the data to the thesis you are arguing. This may become the “reason” that supports some of your claims.

Your conclusion only needs a few sentences of summary. Use your conclusion to go further into why your argument is significant. Why is your argument important and worth knowing?

Citing sources: You may cite outside sources in your paper. Some of these sources may be course material to contextualize Muslims in America, or theoretical lenses by which to look at the data. They may also be outside sources to further the context in which you are examining your data. Include a Works Cited page for anything you cite.

Grading: Assignments are evaluated with a letter grade based on how successfully the paper analyzes the data, builds an argument, and reflects critical thinking and writing.

A successful essay will:

- Take a focused, arguable position articulated in a clear, identifiable, and significant thesis.
- Be clear and conceptually organized, which means that rather than listing points as you move from paragraph to paragraph, each paragraph should logically build from the previous paragraph and help to explain to the reader your thesis.
- Offer supporting evidence for all the claims you make, drawn from your linguistic data and your observations as well as your analysis of the material that explains how your observations are working to support your argument.

- Incorporate course theories and ideas to support your interpretation of political language and concepts of inclusion and exclusion.
- Situate your analysis in the context of the representation of Muslims.

Notes

¹There are several versions of the trailer. The one I used can be viewed in Stern (2014).

Supplementary Material

For supplementary material accompanying this paper, including a PDF facsimile of the assignment description formatted as the author(s) presented it to students, please visit <https://doi.org/10.31719/pjaw.v6i1.82>.

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