The Grammar of Persuasion: An Analysis of The *Rumiyah* of ISIS

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Abstract

ISIS is known for its influential propaganda activities, which includes their online publication (e.g. the *Rumiyah* magazine). Their language of propaganda has proven to be very effective in recruiting foreign fighters from many countries. It therefore makes it worth analyzing it. This research examines the grammar of ISIS’s language of persuasion, more specifically, the mood types of the clauses, their speech-function realization, and the SFL patterns of persuasion. A discourse analysis on the clauses of an article (text) in the *Rumiyah*, entitled, ‘Just Terror Tactics’, was applied. The Hallidayan SFL theory was used as the basis of analysis. The result shows that the writer mainly applied declarative moods functioning as indirect directives and presented them as suggestions to soften their instructions to do knife terror. In terms of clause patterns, the writer applied four typical patterns to make suggestions, four typical patterns to make trivialization, and four typical patterns to make amplification.

Keywords: ISIS, Hallidayan SFL, Language Mood, Grammar of Persuasion, *Rumiyah*

Introduction

ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) or later known as IS (Islamic State) is well recognized for its influential propaganda activities. Through its Al-Hayat Media Center, its media wing, ISIS has been generating many online propaganda publications, including their main e-magazines (e.g., the *Rumiyah* and its predecessor *Dabiq*), written in many languages and aimed at readers outside Arab countries (including the West).

The magazines have become ISIS’s influential means for recruiting foreign combatants from many countries and nationalities.

Vergani and Bliuc (2015) stated that, compared to other jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda, ISIS has been more effective in recruiting fighters from many countries including the Westerners. A study by European Union revealed that ISIS was the most effective jihadist group in recruiting youths from Western countries (Archick, Belkin, Blanchard, Humud, & Mix, 2015). One of the media used was their online publications such as *An-Naba*, *Dabiq*, and *Rumiyah*.

ISIS must have been successful and able to use the language effectively and properly because of their success in attracting many recruits all over the world. There must be linguistic techniques or strategies applied by ISIS to have the readers comply or agree with them. Wardhaugh (2006, p. 104) explains that “a change of topic requires a change in the language used” which indicates that different linguistic techniques or strategies of persuasion must have been applied for different themes or topics. For instance, asking a person to conduct a terror will likely need different linguistic techniques or strategies from asking the same person to do daily routines as a Muslim.

The power of the language used by ISIS had been broadly analyzed. However, most of them concerned with the level of words instead of grammar (e.g., Vergani & Bliuc, 2015; Georges, 2015). However, powerful words may not be sufficient to persuade others. The words should be organized in such a way into proper clauses or sentences to make them more influential. In other words, grammar is indispensable in
persuasion (Power, 1998; Hogan & Speakman, 2006). In ordering, directing, guiding, or persuading others effectively, one should have correct selections of clause/sentence patterns. Hence, this present research would deal with the investigation of clause/sentence patterns employed by ISIS in their propaganda magazine ‘Rumiyah’.

The main concern of this research is to reveal the types of mood and speech function realization of the clauses and reveal the SFL (Systemic Functional Linguistic) patterns used by ISIS to persuade their readers on how to create terrors using knives. The text chosen for analysis was the propaganda article entitled, ‘Just Terror Tactics’, that exists in Rumiyah (2nd edition). In this article, ISIS reasoned that the adversities experienced by Muslims must be retaliated by counteracting violence. Therefore, ISIS asked their supporters to play a part in knife attacks to terrorize the enemies of Islam in their own lands. The article presents thorough procedures of how to use knives to commit a terror, including how to get knives, types of knives to use or avoid, the target of the knife attack, and what should be avoided when using a knife for terror.

THEORY

Mood System in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

Systemic Functional Linguistics was first presented by Halliday in 1960s. Bloor and Bloor (2004) explained that SFL is a grammar model considering language as a set of semantic choices as a “meaning system”. There are three metafunctions in SFL, and one of them is the interpersonal metafunction which becomes the concerns of this current research.

Halliday (2014) explains two basic terms in the mood system: imperative (negotiation of a proposal) and indicative (negotiation of a proposition). There are two types of indicative mood: declarative and interrogative. The typical speech-function realization of a declarative is as a statement (facts, opinion, etc.) that serve to provide information; while interrogatives are the mood of the question that serves to request information (Halliday, 2014; Eggin, 2004). Imperative Mood is the mood of the verb and the principal mood of will and desire (Lyons, 1977). This mood is characterized by a verbal group in the form of a basic form of a verb.

Imperatives have typical speech-function realization as orders, requests, and directives (Eggin, 2004). The imperative mood does not occur in subordinate clauses or subordinate questions because basically, this kind of mood is performative (Palmer, 2001). However, the mood type is not always one on one with its typical speech functions. A declarative or a question, for example, may have a directive function as in ‘You should go now’ or ‘Can you go now?’

Each type of mood comprises some constituent structures. A full English clause without ellipsis has some functional elements: Subject, Finite, Predator, Complement, and Adjunct. The position of the subject and finite in a clause determines the mood type of the clause, while the elements of Predator, Complement, and Adjunct fill out the clause residue.

Some researchers (e.g., Lilian, 2008; Ayoola, 2013; Jalali, 2014; Kondowe, 2014; Al-Ameedi, 2015; Lirola, 2016; Milovich, 2017) conducted a study on the language of political propaganda from the mood viewpoint. However, the analyses commonly relate only to uncovering the types of mood and the reasons for their application in persuasion. Ayoola (2013), for example, has carried out a study of the interpersonal meaning (the mood system) of selected advertisements of two political parties during the last general election in Nigeria. He found out that the interpersonal meaning of a structure was not always consistent with its lexicogrammar analysis.

Persuasion: Definition

Persuasion is the superordinate term of influence. There are different definitions of persuasion. Gass & Seiter (2010) explain that persuasion is generally intended for influencing a person’s beliefs, attitudes, intentions, motivations, or behaviors. A more general definition of persuasion was given by Simons, Morreale, and Gronbeck (2001). They define persuasion as human communication intended to persuade the independent judgments and actions of others. Dillard and Pfau (2002) define persuasion as a symbolic transaction, which uses reason and/or emotional appeals to change behavior. Although the definitions are delivered in different words, the definitions share one thing in common that is changing the behavior and thoughts of others. Hence, in this current
research, persuasion is defined as any linguistic devices structurally employed by the writer for changing the readers’ actions (behaviors), attitude, or thought.

**Persuasion: Types of persuasive texts**

A persuasive text is also understood as an argumentative or expository text. In this research, this kind of text is defined as a form of rhetorical production involving the identification of a thesis or claim, the establishing of supportive evidence, and the evaluation of warrants that connect the thesis, evidence and subject matter of the argument (Newell, Beach, & Smith, 2011).

According to Coffin (2004), there are two terms in persuasive texts that are commonly used to distinguish the purposes and strategy of persuasion: analytical and hortatory expositions. An ‘analytical exposition’ text is aimed at “persuading that” which provides a well-formulated objective statement or thesis, with the nature of the relationship between writer and reader is interpersonally separated. Its social function is to convince the readers or audience that something is imperative and needs to get attention. Besides it also functions to persuade the readers that the opinion is true and backed up by robust arguments.

In contrast, a ‘hortatory exposition’ is aimed at “persuading to” which convinces the readers to do something in a certain way – to perform a social action. In such persuasive texts, the nature of the relationship between readers/audience and writer/speaker is often closer (Coffin, 2004). In this kind of Text, the writer provides his opinions and arguments to support the topic of the text. The recommendation is commonly put at the end of the text. Here the writer/speaker asks and convinces the readers/audience to do something.

**Persuasion: Kellermann and Cole’s 64 Compliance-gaining techniques**


**Method**

This current research is a discourse analysis, which is qualitative in nature to see how grammar was played for the purpose of persuading the readers. The data source (the article, “Just Terror Tactics”) was taken from the *Rumiyah* magazine (2nd edition). 51 major clauses in the article were analyzed. Each simple sentence or complex sentence was counted as one clause. One compound sentence consisting of two major clauses was calculated as 2 clauses, depending on the number of main clauses that construct the sentence. The data (major clauses) were then analyzed to see the types of the mood and the speech-function realization of the clauses and reveal the commonly used SFL patterns to construct the persuasive clauses. The discussion emphasizes on the major findings of SFL patterns that characterized the article in relation to the persuasive function of the clauses and the text types.
Findings

The following are the findings as a result of an analysis on the clauses that exist in the ISIS article, “Just Terror Tactics”. The findings relate to the types of mood and speech function realizations and the SFL patterns commonly used in persuading the readers.

Types of Mood and Speech-Function Realizations

The table below shows the mood types and the speech function realization of the clauses in “Just Terror Tactics”.

Table 1: The Mood Types of Clauses and Speech Function Realization in “Just Terror Tactics”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mood Type</th>
<th>Speech Function Realization</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Declarative</td>
<td>Indirect directive</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Statement of Opinion</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Statement of fact</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Question</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imperative</td>
<td>Direct directive</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows that out of 51 main clauses, two types of mood exist in the article: declarative and imperative moods. The declarative mood commonly employs the normal clause arrangement that is the Subject precedes the Finite (S+F), while the imperative mood is arranged in an unmarked imperative construction (P+C).

Usually the declarative moods are employed by the writer to exchange commodities (information) to the readers. In this perspective, they are utilized to produce statements that function in different ways. However, in the majority (30 clauses), the writer employs the declarative mood to function as indirect directives (requesting someone to do something indirectly). Although superficially they are statements, their speech function realizations indicate that they function as indirect directives. In this article, the writer commonly gives instructions to the readers by providing tips and suggestions of what to do when committing a terror using knives. The rest of declarative moods, however, are utilized by the writer to have different functions: 17 clauses as statements of opinion, 2 clauses as statements of

opinion, 2 clauses as statements of fact, and 1 clause as a question.

SFL Patterns commonly used

Among the clauses, three interesting grammatical phenomena mainly characterize the text: the high use of suggestions, trivialization, and amplification. Firstly, the occurrence of modality indicating suggestions to the readers greatly characterizes this text. In this case, the modulated modality ‘should’ is highly used. This kind of modality is employed by the writer to give suggestions to the readers of what the readers should do in committing a knife terror. In this text, the suggestions are divided into two types: (a) suggesting the readers do something, and (b) talking about something to do or use.

In suggesting the readers do something, the modal verb ‘should’ is frequently used. The writer, in this case, asks the readers to do something through a suggestive clause. The subject ‘one’ instead of ‘you’ is chosen by the writer to make the suggestions sound less obtrusive and more subtle. The typical pattern commonly applied in this type of suggestion is:

(1) One + should (modulated modality) + do something

Example: ..., one should focus firstly on sharpness (clause 14)

Besides, the writer also uses subjunctive expressions such as ‘it is advised to’ or ‘it is advised that’ to express a suggestion. The word ‘advised’ expresses a recommendation which is obviously an indirect instruction to the readers to do/not to do something. The typical patterns used by the writer are:

(2) It is advised to (not) (modulated modality) + do something

Example: ... it is advised to not necessarily attempt to fully detach the head (clause 39)

(3) It is advised that (modulated modality) + something should be in certain condition

Example: it is advised that ..., the target should be a smaller crowd, ... (clause 27)

The second type of suggestion is talking about something advised to use/not to use. In this case,
the subject of the clause is the impersonal subject (the thing being discussed) instead of the personal one (the readers). In clause 22, for example, the phrase ‘folding knives’ (the impersonal subject) becomes the object of the clause; hence becoming the theme of the clause. In this instance, the writer asks the readers not to use folding knives when conducting a terror operation. The typical pattern used is:

(4) something + should (modulated modality) + be/not be + used/done

Example: Folding knives that do not feature a stable locking system should be avoided, ... (clause 22)

Secondly, the writer often uses words or phrases that indicate a trivialization of situation. The clause elements employed to do this vary from adjuncts, modalities to complement. Among them, the element of adjunct is the most widely used. By these elements, the writer makes comments that (a) making terror is easy, (b) knives are easy to find and easy to hide, (c) the method of using a knife for terror is easy to apply.

The elements of finite (clause 3) and complement (clause 4), for example, convince the readers that committing terror is not hard to do. By stating that doing a terror is easy, it is expected that the readers will change their previous belief that committing a terror is very hard and risky and can only be done by very skilled individuals. The main purpose of such statement is to shift an old belief to a new one, from ‘difficult’ to ‘easy’. The typical patterns to do such trivialization are:

(5) someone + need not (trivialization) + be someone else + to do something

Example: ..., one need not be a military expert or a martial arts master, ... (clause 3)

(6) something + is + complement (trivialization)

Example: A hardened resolve, ... are enough .... (clause 4)

In addition, trivialization is applied to convince the readers that knives are easy to get as well as easy to conceal.

The implication is that the writer assures that knives are the right weapons for a ‘lone wolf’ to commit a terror. For example, with the comment adjunct ‘finding no difficulty in acquiring another one’ (clause 13), the writer tries to ensure that knives can be found everywhere so that the readers should not have any doubt to use a knife when committing a terror. The typical pattern used is:

(7) someone do something + trivialization (comment adjunct)

Example: ..., he could dispose of his weapon after each use, finding no difficulty in acquiring another one. (clause 13)

The author also presents to his readers that the method of killing with a knife is easy. In clause 40, for example, the writer compares killing a target of terror with slaughtering a goat. The mood adjunct ‘simply’, the comment adjunct ‘just as one would slaughter a sheep’, and the complement ‘sufficient’ in the 4th clause are used by the writer to convince the readers that the method of killing a target of terror using a knife is as simple as the method of slaughtering a goat. The typical pattern used is:

(8) trivialization (mood adjunct) + doing something (subject) + trivialization (comment adjunct) + is + trivialization (complement)

Example: Simply cutting the throat, just as one would slaughter a sheep, is sufficient. (clause 40)

Thirdly, in addition to suggesting and trivializing the situation, the writer also uses words/phrases that indicate amplification or intensification. The writer seeks to amplify the significance of certain elements that the readers have to take more seriously or see as particularly important. Some SFL elements commonly used to do this are the adjunct, subject, and complement. This technique is applied for (a) amplifying a necessity, (b) amplifying a situation, and (c) amplifying a quality.

The first function (amplifying a necessity) can be seen in clause 7. The mood adjunct ‘never’ emphasizes that any such ‘squirm and discomforts’ should not become the reason for not doing jihad. By using the word never, the writer can emphasize the necessity to do jihad even though there are situations which may
make someone feel uncomfortable doing so. The typical pattern used is:

(9) something is + amplification (modality) + something

Example: ..., any such squirms and discomforts are never an excuse for abandoning jihad, ... (clause 7)

The second function is amplifying a situation. For example, in clause 8, the writer emphasizes information that knives are very familiar weapons among the Sahabah (companions) of the Prophet. The comment adjunct ‘with which the Sahabah were well acquainted’ is used by the writer to amplify the situation of knives as weapons. The Amplification of a situation also occurs in clause 11 where the writer provides information to the readers that knives are very easy to get anywhere. The typical patterns used are:

(10) subject is something + amplification (comment adjunct)

Example: The knife was a weapon with which the Sahabah were well acquainted. (clause 8)

(11) subject is + amplification (mood adjunct) + complement

Example: Knives, ..., are widely available ...and thus readily accessible. (clause 11)

The third function, amplifying a quality, is seen in clause 12 in which the author emphasizes that a knife is an exceptionally lethal weapon and is very easy to hide. The mood adjunct ‘extremely’ amplifies the complement ‘easy to conceal’ and the mood adjunct ‘highly’ amplifies the complement ‘lethal’. The typical pattern used is the same as that used for amplifying a situation.

(12) subject is + amplification (mood adjunct) + complement

Example: They are extremely easy to conceal and highly lethal, ... (clause 12)

Discussion

In this text, the declarative moods play an important role. They shorten the distance between the writer and the readers because they directly provide the readers with the intended information. Unlike interrogative or imperative moods, a declarative mood does not require a confirmation from the readers for the success of the proposition (Halliday, 2014; Eggins, 2004). The writer applies the declarative moods to function differently throughout the text. At the beginning paragraphs (1-3), the declarative moods function as statements, but in the middle to the end of the text, the declarative moods mainly function as indirect directives (suggestions).

The use of declarative moods as directives or requests is interesting to discuss because they are abundantly applied in this text. The four patterns representing suggestive clauses (patterns 1-4) mainly contain the modulated modality either in the form of a modal verb (e.g., should), a phrase (e.g., It is advised to), or a clause (e.g., It is advised that). The forms (words, phrases, and clauses) referring to suggestion are deontic in nature which indicates how the world ought to be in accordance with certain norms, expectations, speaker desire, etc. (Palmer, 2001; Lillian, 2008).

In this case, the writer tends to avoid direct directives/requests in order not to appear too obtrusive to the readers. It is in line with Khalib and Tayeh’s statement (2013) that people will tend to command or request indirectly to people who are not or less familiar with. The relationship between the writer and the readers is relatively distant as they do not know each other. Therefore, in this text the writer tends to be more polite to the readers and avoids what is known as Face Threatening Acts (FTA). Held (2005, p. 141) provides explanations for why indirectness is often perceived to be polite: “indirectness lowers the obligations of both partners in interaction and thus relieves them of direct responsibility by appearing to put all the cards in the addressee’s hand, indirectness [encourages] the hearer to cooperate indirectly is an explanatory technique for maintaining face.”

In addition, the risk factor plays a significant role in the writer’s choice for indirectness. As explained by Leech (1983), people will tend to give an order for action more subtly if the risk factor is greater for the doer. In other words, we can say that the higher the risk, the subtler the language of command or request used. Therefore, the writer chooses to use indirectness in the form of suggestions in ‘giving orders’ to the readers because the action (doing terror) is
very risky – the loss of the doer’s life. In this text, the writer frequently uses the modal verb ‘should’ (and its equivalent, e.g., may) and clause like adjunct ‘it is advised to/that’ to express a suggestion.

In Kellermann and Cole’s classification (1994), the clauses containing ‘should’ or ‘it is advised to/that’ are used to present a suggestion as one of the techniques for getting the readers’ compliance. The writer tries to do it by subtly suggesting an idea that indirectly indicates and describes what it is he wants them to do. According to Mulholland (1994), when making a suggestion, someone has made assumptions: (a) that the hearers/readers need to be advised about something. Here, the writer assumed that the readers need useful advice of how to do a knife terror correctly and efficiently; (b) what it is that the hearer needs to be advised about. In this case, the writer assumes that there is some information that needs to be advised to the readers, specifically about how to use knives for terror and what types of knives should be used; and (c) that they have the right to offer advice. In this case, the writer positions himself as an expert so that he has the right to give useful and valuable advice to the readers about doing terror using knives.

Besides indirectness, two other interesting phenomena mainly characterize the text: trivialization and amplification. In the patterns of clauses containing trivialization (patterns 5-8), the writer commonly uses the elements of adjuncts, complements, and modality to do it. Trivialization in persuasion becomes important in the process of persuasion. Based on Kellermann and Cole’s compliance-gaining techniques, the patterns the writer uses to indicate trivialization can be categorized as a disclaimer technique in which the writer tries to have others (the readers) comply by downplaying or trivializing what he is asking them to do. That is, he tries to gain the readers’ compliance by showing that what he suggests them to do is easy, not difficult, and shouldn’t be problematic (Kellermann & Cole, 1994). According to Dooley (2013), someone will tend to do what we ask if it looks easy to do. Trivialization is one of the ways to ‘reframe’ a situation. Reframing is presenting reality in a different point of view; for example, making something that is actually difficult to do seem easy to do (Simons & Jones, 2017). Likewise, the writer wants to present to the readers that committing terror using a knife is easy to do by anyone, including the readers.

In the four patterns of clauses containing amplification (patterns 9-12), the writer uses the elements of adjuncts, subjects, and complements to make an amplification. Through the elements, the writer positions himself as an expert who understands the situation well. Regularly, in persuasive situations, one tries to direct the other’s attention to ideas that reinforce his argument and away from points that weaken his argument. We thus both amplify the supportive points and weaken other points (Straker, 2002; Westmaas, 2017). Based on Kellermann and Cole’s classification, the amplification made by the writer falls into expertise technique and duty. Through the element of adjunct, the writer positions himself as an expert who knows very well about something. For example, in clause 11, the adjuncts ‘widely’ and ‘readily’ indicate that the writer possesses very well knowledge about the situation. He knows very well that knives are very easy to get everywhere. The amplification is also used to indicate a duty that should be done by the readers as Muslims. In clause 7, the modality (never) gives an amplification that something should be done though something bad or discomfort may arise.

In general, the findings of this research prove that ISIS does not only rely on the power words like *khilafah*, Allah, etc. to persuade their potential recruits (readers) as proposed by (Georges, 2015), but also on the grammar of the clauses they used. Based on the common patterns found in the text, it can be seen that the writer craftily uses grammar in persuading the readers. For example, in persuading the readers to do something, the writer does not use blatant grammar (i.e., imperative mood) but uses declarative moods, instead. It means that the writer has understood that a certain form of grammar will have certain consequence on the readers, which may make them agree or disagree with him.

Related to the types of persuasive text, the text combines the analytical and hortatory text types. In the first three paragraphs, the main aim is to persuade the readers that doing terror is an obligation of and can be done by every Muslim (analytical exposition). The rest of the paragraphs mainly ask the readers to do something related to the methods of knife terror (hortatory exposition).
In line with these types, the techniques also vary. The first three paragraphs were mainly characterized by clauses indicating trivialization and amplification. The elements of adjuncts and complements in the clauses well play the functions of assuring the readers that doing terror is easy and knives are the right weapons because they are easy to get and hide. The elements of adjuncts and complements also significantly play their roles in amplifying a necessity of doing jihad, a certain situation, and a quality. Committing terror using a knife is easy to do by anyone, including the readers.

The rest of the paragraphs were used by the writer to have the readers do something concerning the methods of doing terror. The paragraphs were mainly dominated by declarative clauses functioning as suggestions. The writer seems to avoid using imperative clauses in order that he would like to present himself not too obtrusive to his readers because the risk of doing terror is very high, i.e., the loss of the doer’s live. The modulated modality (e.g., should) and subjunctive expressions (e.g., ‘It is advised to’ and ‘It is advised that’) are extensively used by the writer.

**Conclusion**

Based on the findings and discussion above, it can be concluded that in terms of the technique of persuasion used, the writer tends to use different techniques in line with the types of persuasion applied. In persuading the readers that doing terror is an obligation of every Muslim (analytical), the writer mainly uses trivialization and amplification. To do this, the writer uses various clause elements such as adjuncts and complements. The writer assures the readers that doing terror is easy and knives are the right weapons because they are easy to get and hide. The writer also uses amplification to amplify a necessity of doing jihad, a certain situation, and a quality. Whereas in persuading the readers to do something (hortatory), the writer tends to use the declarative moods functioning as suggestions. The main purpose is that he would like to present himself not too obtrusive to his readers because the risk of doing terror is very high.

However, this study has a limitation because it only analyzes one text focusing on one theme (the method of terror). An analysis of more broad themes and more texts would make the results of analysis more comprehensive.

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