

التمثيل الأيديولوجي للعراقيين في أفلام الحرب في هوليوود: المنهج التاريخي التحليلي للخطاب

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الملخص

غالبًا ما تتضمن أفلام الحرب في هوليوود سرديات أيديولوجية تُسهم في تشكيل تصوّرات الجمهور عن الصراع والعدو. تُحلل هذه الدراسة كيفية بناء الهويات الأميركية مقابل العراقية أيديولوجيًا في فيلم القناص الأمريكي (٢٠١٤)، وذلك باستخدام المنهج التاريخي التحليلي للخطاب كإطار تحليلي. ومن خلال تحليل نوعي نقدي لمشاهد حوارية رئيسية في الفيلم، تكشف الدراسة أن الخطاب السينمائي يُكرّس ثنائية "نحن مقابل هم": إذ يُصوّر الجنود الأميركيون بصورة بطولية وفردانية، في حين يُقدّم العراقيون عبر قوالب نمطية سلبية كـ"آخر" بلا ملامح يثير التهديد. وباستخدام أدوات التحليل التي يقدمها منهج التاريخي التحليلي للخطاب، مثل الاستراتيجيات الإشارية والوصفية والحجاجية، تبين أن لغة الفيلم وسردياته تُعيد إنتاج الصور النمطية الاستشراقية والتمثيلات الثنائية المتضادة. فالأميركيون يُسمّون ويُجسّدون إنسانيًا في الغالب (حيث يُعرضون كبطل رئيسي يمتلك قصة شخصية)، بينما يُوصّف العراقيون بشكل جماعي بألفاظ قذحية مثل "الهمج"، مما يؤدي إلى تجريدهم من الإنسانية وتصنيفهم كأعداء من خارج الجماعة. كما يوظف الفيلم توبوي التهديد والحماية. وتُبرز هذه النتائج كيف يمكن للسينما الحربية الجماهيرية أن تعمل كأداة أيديولوجية تُعزز التفاوتات في القوة والتحيّزات المجتمعية تحت ستار الترفيه. وتؤكد الدراسة على أهمية الوعي النقدي بالإعلام في التعرف على هذه التمثيلات الأيديولوجية وتحديّها داخل الأفلام.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التحليل النقدي للخطاب؛ المنهج التاريخي للخطاب؛ الاستشراق؛ الأفلام الحربية؛ الأيديولوجيا؛ التمثيل

Ideological Representation of Iraqis in Hollywood War Movies: A Discourse-Historical Approach

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Abstract

Hollywood's war films often embed ideological narratives that shape audience perceptions of conflict and the enemy. This study analyses how U.S. versus Iraqi identities are ideologically constructed in the film *American Sniper* (2014) using the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) as the analytical framework. A critical qualitative analysis of key scenes and dialogues reveals that the film's discourse entrenches an "us versus them" binary: American soldiers are portrayed with heroism and individuality, whereas Iraqis are depicted through negative stereotypes as a faceless, menacing "Other." Adopting DHA's tools of analysis (e.g., referential, predicational, argumentation strategies), the study finds that the film's language and narratives perpetuate Orientalist tropes and polarised representations. Americans in the film are frequently named or humanised (often shown as protagonists with personal backstories). At the same time, Iraqis are collectively labelled with pejorative terms like "savages", dehumanising them and marking them as out-group enemies. The film also explores the topos of threat and protection. These findings highlight how popular war cinema can function ideologically, reinforcing power asymmetries and societal prejudices under the guise of entertainment. The paper underscores the importance of critical media literacy in recognising and challenging such ideological representations in film.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis; Discourse-Historical Approach; Orientalism; War Films; Ideology; Representation

1. Introduction

Hollywood war films often embed ideological narratives that shape audience perceptions of conflict and the enemy. In particular, depictions of Iraqis/Arabs and Muslims have historically tended toward stereotypical "Othering," reflecting Orientalist tropes that portray Eastern peoples as exotic, backwards, or violent. These cinematic representations are not mere entertainment; they carry sociopolitical weight, influencing how viewers understand real-world groups and conflicts. Film scholars note that popular cinema, as a form of soft power, can reinforce dominant group ideologies by normalising specific images and narratives (Chouliaraki, 2008). This dynamic is evident in post-9/11 Hollywood war films, which frequently present a binary opposition between a virtuous Western "us" and a barbaric non-Western "them". *American Sniper* (2014), directed by Clint Eastwood, provides a compelling case study of such ideological construction. The film, based on the memoir of U.S. Navy SEAL Chris Kyle, achieved massive commercial success and sparked controversy for its portrayal of the Iraq War. Notably, advocacy groups like the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee warned that *American Sniper's* depiction of Arabs and Muslims was inciting anti-Muslim sentiment, calling it a "turning point" in rising Islamophobia (Balter, Cultural Weekly) (Guarino, 2015). This indicates that the film's impact extended beyond the screen, resonating with contemporary sociopolitical discourses about the Middle East. By examining *American Sniper* through a critical discourse lens, the researcher can gain insight into how mainstream media texts contribute to the construction of national identity and enemy images during wartime.

Today, the media has become an integral part of life in modern societies. The development of new technologies and computer and entertainment industries, including the film industry, has encouraged "a titanic struggle among some of the largest corporations in the world for control of a consolidated information industry" (Hamelink, 1997). Hollywood, often used as a metonym for American cinema, is the birthplace of some of the biggest film production companies, which have been responsible for producing many of the most famous blockbusters of all time. This symbol of the film industry has had a profound impact on modern societies since the early 20th century (Miller, 2007, as cited in Amirian et al., 2012). Furthermore, the constant usage of stereotypes defines how Orientalist attitudes toward the 'Other' are still visible in Hollywood films today. Arab characters in films, particularly Iraqis, are often portrayed as the antithesis of Western personalities and are consistently depicted as inferior, primitive and terrorists.

Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) – a branch of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) – as the sole analytical framework. The DHA is well-suited for this study because it considers discourse in its broad historical and social context, enabling a nuanced understanding of how the film’s language and narratives align with post-9/11 American ideologies. The central questions guiding the analysis are:

1. How are Iraqis ideologically represented in the *American Sniper* Film?
2. What discursive strategies are employed to construct specific identities for Iraqis?

The study aims to achieve the following:

1. To analyse how Iraqi characters and culture are linguistically portrayed in *American Sniper* film.
2. To identify the key discursive strategies used to construct U.S. versus Iraqi identities on screen.

Additionally, this study hypothesised that:

1. *American Sniper* will depict Iraqi characters primarily through negative stereotypes.
2. The film’s dialogue will employ a polarised Us vs. Them discourse.
3. The film industry, particularly Hollywood, neutrally reflects reality rather than shaping or reinforcing ideological narratives.

By answering the above questions, the study aims to illuminate the role of cinematic discourse in reinforcing or challenging ideological assumptions. It contributes to the literature on media and ideology by providing an in-depth discourse analysis of a prominent war film. Moreover, focusing on DHA allows for an exclusive examination of the film’s text and context without diluting the analysis with multiple frameworks. In what follows, the theoretical underpinnings of the DHA are outlined, followed by the methodology of data selection and analysis. The core of the paper presents a detailed DHA-guided analysis of selected scenes from *American Sniper*, illustrating how linguistic choices and narrative structures construct an ideological divide between Americans and Iraqis. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings and suggestions for future research on war discourse in media.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Orientalism

Edward Said's Orientalism, published in the latter half of the 20th century, continues to exert significant influence on contemporary studies of media representation. It offers a critical framework for understanding how the West, particularly through its media, constructs and propagates representations of the East, including Iraqis, Arabs, Muslims, and Islam. Said's work elucidates the ideological dichotomy between the West and the East, wherein the former is depicted as superior and the latter as inferior (Haq & Masroor, 2019). This study explores the ideological process of Iraqis in Western media and cinema, drawing on Said's theories (1978–2001), with a specific focus on the portrayal of Iraqis in the Hollywood film, i.e., *American Sniper* (2014).

Key terms in Orientalism, such as Orient, Occident, and Others, are central to Said's discourse and have become foundational in postcolonial studies. These terms extend beyond mere description; they function as mechanisms through which the West asserts cultural and intellectual dominance. The Orient, a constructed representation of the East, is often portrayed as mysterious, stagnant, and backwards. In contrast, the Occident is depicted as rational, progressive, and civilised (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1995, as cited in Hussein, 2024). This binary opposition reinforces the West's self-image as superior and legitimises its imperial ambitions. As Said asserts, the relationship between the Orient and the Occident is a relationship of power, domination, and varying degrees of complex hegemony (Said, as cited in Hussein, 2024).

The concept of Othering refers to the process of marginalising individuals or groups by disregarding or diminishing their intrinsic value (Hajjat, 2021). This phenomenon extends beyond mere insult, shame, or blame; it involves the denial of the Other's humanity. Through Othering, individuals or societies construct their own identities and establish their position in the world by rejecting and excluding those deemed different. The Other, whether defined by religion, ethnicity, race, gender, or nationality, is relegated to the margins of society and denied full recognition of their humanity. As a result, marginalised groups are often exploited and deprived of a platform to express their perspectives (Uenal et al., 2021).

Lockman, 2010, as cited in Aljubouri (2020), defines Orientalism as: "[...] that branch of the humanities which studied something called the Orient from the beginning of recorded history until the present, including the predominantly Muslim lands of Asia usually conceived of as components of a distinctly Islamic civilisation" (p.103).

Lockman, 2010, as cited in Aljubouri (2020), associated the Orient specifically with the regions inhabited by Muslims in Asia, excluding other parts of the continent and focusing primarily on areas connected to Islamic civilisation. Xypolia (2011) offers a more precise geographical delineation, arguing that the British Empire redefined and reshaped the concept of the Orient in the 19th century by renaming it the Middle East, referring to the territories along the eastern shores of the Mediterranean.

The Western perception of the East often contradicts reality, as the concept of "Otherness" has historically shaped the relationship between the two regions. The East is frequently portrayed negatively in Western literature, art, and film (Haq & Masroor, 2019). McLeod (2013) asserted that the Orient is generally depicted in unfavourable terms, reinforcing the discourse of Western superiority and dominance.

The post-9/11 "war on terror" further entrenches a series of binary oppositions between the Occident and the Orient, including dichotomies such as good versus evil, progressive versus backwards, rational versus irrational, and civilised versus barbaric (Khalid, 2011).

2.2 Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA)

The Discourse-Historical Approach, developed by Ruth Wodak and colleagues, is a framework within Critical Discourse Analysis that integrates linguistic analysis with historical and social context (Baker et al., 2008; Chilton & Wodak, 2005; Hyland, 2011). DHA's primary aim is to unmask how ideology and power relations are embedded in discourse by examining not only text-internal features but also the broader context in which the discourse occurs (Richardson & Wodak, 2009). In the DHA view, "discourse" is defined as a cluster of thematically related texts, acts, and symbols that both shape and are shaped by social practice. Importantly, DHA emphasises that discourses are socially and historically situated, meaning that any analysis of a given text (such as a film) must account for intertextual links to other discourses, socio-political variables, and historical continuities or shifts (Wodak & Meyer, 2015, p. 27).

A hallmark of DHA is its focus on discursive strategies – systematic ways of using language that serve specific functions in constructing and conveying meaning (especially in terms of identities, relationships, and ideologies). According to Wodak and Meyer (2015), five key discursive strategies are typically analysed in DHA:

1. **Referential/Nomination Strategies:** This strategy involves representing social actors by establishing in-groups and out-groups. This is achieved through linguistic and rhetorical devices

such as metaphors, metonymies, and synecdoches. For example, the film may use metaphors to symbolise Americans as protectors (in-group) while portraying Iraqis with dehumanising tropes (out-group), contributing to ideological divisions.

2. Predication Strategies: This strategy characterises social actors according to the stereotypical, evaluative attribution of positive or negative traits in linguistic form, implicit or explicit predicates (KhosraviNik, 2010, p. 57; Wodak, 2009). For instance, American soldiers in the film may be depicted with valour and heroism, while Iraqis may be linked to violence or terror. These evaluative attributions function to label actors in ways that align with broader ideological narratives. Notably, nomination and predication strategies are deeply interconnected, as the labels used in referential strategies often carry implicit evaluative meanings.

3. Perspectivation (Framing) Strategies: This strategy analyses how speakers position themselves within discourse. This involves the reporting, description, narration, or quotation of events or utterances, revealing the speaker's stance and level of involvement (Wodak, 2009). For instance, in *American Sniper*, framing strategies might highlight how the film positions American soldiers as protagonists while portraying Iraqis through a lens of opposition or threat, thus shaping the viewer's perspective.

4. Argumentation Strategies: This strategy is defined as the means of persuading the audience (Fetzer, 2007, as cited in Katea, 2018, p. 66). It involves justifying positive or negative attributions through the use of topoi. These strategies legitimise or delegitimise actions, policies, or actors within the discourse (Wodak, 2009). It is often reliant on topoi; topoi (sometimes called loci, singular topos) are an aspect of argumentation, defined as persuasive strategies or rules which connect an argument to a claim or conclusion. Topoi are thus broad beliefs which help to maintain an argument without constituting the argument itself. Reisigl and Wodak (2001) have identified several topoi that are often used to justify discriminatory practices toward particular groups (Ellece & Baker, 2010).

5. Intensification and Mitigation Strategies: This strategy modifies a proposition's force and epistemic status. Intensification strategies enhance the illocutionary force of a statement, often amplifying its emotional or rhetorical impact. In contrast, mitigation strategies soften the statement, reducing its assertiveness or impact (Wodak, 2009). These strategies are particularly relevant to the film's narrative techniques, as they can amplify moments of American heroism or

mitigate the depiction of controversial military actions, subtly influencing the audience's perception of events and characters.

By analysing these five types of strategies, DHA provides a structured way to dissect texts like film dialogues. It connects micro-level linguistic choices to macro-level social meanings. For example, referential and predicational strategies work together to create representations of social actors – in the context of *American Sniper*, this means how “Americans” and “Iraqis” are constructed in language. Argumentation strategies reveal the justificatory logic underpinning the narrative – how the film legitimises the actions of one side and delegitimises the other. Perspectivation shows whose point of view is foregrounded, and intensification/mitigation reveal which aspects are emphasised or downplayed.

Crucially, DHA insists on historical context and intertextuality as part of the analysis (Wodak, 2015). In practice, this means that when examining *American Sniper*, one must consider the broader discourse of the War on Terror, the historical narrative of 9/11 and the 2003 Iraq invasion, and existing stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims. The DHA approach “transcends the purely linguistic dimension” by integrating this background knowledge into the interpretation. For instance, the film’s repeated use of the term “savages” to describe Iraqis resonates with a much older colonial discourse of civilised vs. savage, and DHA would trace that resonance as part of the meaning. Likewise, references in the film to real events or figures (such as mentioning Al-Qaeda leader Zarqawi) create intertextual links to external texts and narratives, anchoring the film’s discourse in real-world ideology.

In summary, DHA provides the theoretical and methodological toolkit for this study. It guides us to look systematically at what is being said (naming, describing, arguing) and how it is said (framing, emphasising, backgrounding), while always asking why: what is the social or political significance of these discursive choices? By employing DHA, the analysis remains attuned to both the textual details of *American Sniper* and the larger ideological and historical forces that those details both reflect and reinforce.

3. Methodology

The Discourse-Historical Approach, developed by Ruth Wodak and colleagues, is a framework within Critical Discourse Analysis that integrates linguistic analysis with historical and social context. The subsequent critical discourse analysis employs Wodak’s Discourse-Historical Approach to investigate how the film constructs Iraqis as threatening.

4. Data Selection

The primary data for this research consists of the film *American Sniper* (2014). This film was selected purposefully for its direct relevance to the research questions – it explicitly portrays numerous interactions (both direct and indirect) between American and Iraqi characters. To manage the scope of analysis, the study focused on a scene and dialogue within the film. Using purposive sampling, a key scene was selected in which Iraqis appear or are discussed by American characters. The rationale for choosing this particular scene was to cover instances where the film most overtly constructs the identity of Iraqis and contrasts it with that of Americans.

The selected scene was transcribed verbatim from the film's audio, capturing the explicit dialogue. Transcription ensured that the linguistic material could be systematically examined. Additionally, brief descriptions of relevant visual context were noted (for instance, whether a scene showed an Iraqi character as menacing or innocent-looking) to complement the linguistic analysis, although the core analysis remained focused on language use.

4.1 Analytical Procedure

The study adopts the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) as the sole analytical framework. The analysis proceeded through the following steps:

- Contextualization: Drawing on DHA's emphasis on context, the film was contextualised within the post-9/11 and Iraq War discourse. Background research was done on American public narratives of the Iraq War (e.g., political speeches, media coverage) to inform interpretations of the film's content. This step ensured awareness of intertextual references or historical cues in the film (for example, mentions of "September 11" or WMDs) that carry ideological significance.
- Identification of Discursive Strategies: Using the DHA toolkit, instances of the five key discursive strategies (referential, predicational, perspectivation, argumentation, intensification/mitigation) were identified in the transcribed scenes. This involved a close reading of the dialogue to determine how characters and groups are named and referred to, what attributes are ascribed to them, how the point of view is established, what arguments or justifications are presented, and where the language is amplified or softened.
- Validation: To bolster reliability, the evolving analysis was compared with findings from existing research where available. For instance, the pattern of derogatory naming in *American*

Sniper has been observed by other studies, and noting such correspondence helped validate that the identified strategies were not over-interpretations by this researcher alone.

Throughout the analysis, careful attention was paid to maintaining objectivity and transparency, in accordance with DHA principles. All interpretative steps (from transcription to coding to context linking) were documented. Example extracts from the film's dialogue are presented in the next section to illustrate each analytical point, with timestamps and context described so that the reader can evaluate the analysis. The goal is to ensure that the link between the film's text and the interpretive claims about ideology is clear and evidence-based. By applying this methodology, the study ensures a comprehensive and systematic analysis of American Sniper's discourse. In the following section, the results of this analysis are presented and discussed, organised around the strategies that emerged.

5. Analysis and Discussion

Using the Discourse-Historical Approach, the analysis of American Sniper reveals a consistent pattern of language and narrative that constructs a polarised opposition between the American "Self" and the Iraqi "Other." The film's discourse works on multiple levels to achieve this: through the labels and names characters use, through the attributes and stereotypes attached to each side, and through the justificatory narratives that run beneath the surface. In this section, the researcher discusses these findings in detail, with illustrative examples from the film's dialogue.

5.1 *American Sniper* (2014) Film

In American Sniper, a historical war drama directed by Clint Eastwood, Chris Kyle is depicted as the most lethal sniper in U.S. military history, with a record-setting 160 confirmed kills in Iraq. He is characterised as unnervingly composed, highly methodical, and resolute in his mission to protect the Marines from relentless attacks by Iraqi insurgents. The film is loosely adapted from Kyle's memoir, which recounts his experiences during four combat tours in Operation Iraqi Freedom. His exceptional marksmanship and military achievements solidified his status as a near-legendary figure, elevating him to the realm of a modern folk hero. American Sniper received widespread critical acclaim and achieved significant commercial success, grossing over \$547 million worldwide. Film critics broadly commended Bradley Cooper for his compelling portrayal of Kyle and lauded Clint Eastwood's directorial skill. The film garnered six nominations at the 87th Academy Awards, including Best Actor, Best Picture, and Best Film Editing, ultimately winning the award for Best Sound Editing.

5.2 The selection of the target content

American Sniper (2014) is replete with scenes and dialogues that can be used for the analysis. Various scenes and dialogues in this film portray a subjective image of Iraqis. However, only a number of lines are selected for analysis due to time and space constraints. Purposive sampling design is employed to select the specific lines that best align with the objective of this study.

Background of Scene 1: The American Sniper Film begins its opening scene as a microcosm of the film's ideological framing. It starts with the Islamic call "Adhan" to prayer, echoing as U.S. troops convey rolls through a street in Fallujah, Figure 1.1. Sniper Chris Kyle positions himself on a rooftop, scanning for potential threats as in Figure 1.2. Through both visual and verbal elements—such as Kyle's observations as in Figure 1.3 and the depiction of a woman in an Abaya and her kid approach carrying a grenade launcher; Kyle shoots and kills them both as in Figure 1.4, the scene delineates a binary opposition between American forces and Iraqi individuals.



Figure 1.1



Figure 1.2



Figure 1.3



Figure 1.4

Extract 1:

1.1. CHRIS KYLE: **Fucking hot box.**

1.2. Solider: **Dirt** over here tastes **like dog shit.**

1.3. CHRIS KYLE: Ah, well, you'd know, wouldn't you?

1.4. CHRIS KYLE: I got a **military-aged male**, on a cell phone, watching the convoy. Over.

1.5. COMMANDING OFFICER (OS): If you think he's reporting troop movement you have a green-light. Your call. Over.

- 1.6. **Soldier:** He could be calling his old lady
- 1.7. **CHRIS KYLE:** He stepped off.
- 1.8. **Chris Kyle [radioing his commanding officer]:** Hold on. I got a **woman** and a **kid**, 200 yards out, moving towards the convoy. Her arms aren't swinging. She's carrying something. She's got a grenade. She's got an **RKG** Russian grenade. **She gave it to the kid.**
- 1.9. **Commanding Officer:** You say a woman and kid?
- 1.10. **Chris Kyle:** You got eyes on this? Can you confirm?
- 1.11. **Commanding officer:** Negative. You know the ROEs. Your call.
- 1.12. **Soldier:** They're gonna fry you if you're wrong. They'll send you to Leavenworth.
- 1.13. **Soldier:** That was gnarly. **Fucking evil bitch!**
- 1.14. **COMMANDING OFFICER (OS):** Nice shooting, Tex. Helluva call.
- 1.15. **COMPANY COMMANDER (OS):** Roger that. Good lookin' out Navy.
- 1.16. **Soldier:** You hear that?
- 1.17. **CHRIS:** Get the fuck off me.

Analysis of extract

In the opening scene of *American Sniper*, the film's text, including dialogue and sounds, establishes a stark ideological dichotomy through specific lexical choices and symbols. The scene begins with the **Adhan** (Islamic call to prayer) echoing over a barren Fallujah¹ Street, immediately invoking an aura of Orientalist otherness and foreboding. This unfamiliar prayer call functions as what Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) terms a **referential strategy**, audibly marking the setting and its people as the Islamic "Other." To Western audiences, this sound is often cinematic shorthand for danger or "bad omen," juxtaposing the "exotic, dangerous Orient" against the rumble of U.S. military vehicles (Weil, 2015). Such framing primes viewers to perceive the locale as hostile even before any characters speak, aligning with Jack Shaheen's observation that Hollywood frequently uses Islamic symbols to construct an atmosphere of menace (Shaheen, 2008, as cited in Bajuwaiber, 2023). Through these textual details above, Iraq is depicted as an inhospitable warzone, implicitly validating the U.S. soldiers' presence as an incursion into barbaric terrain. This portrayal exemplifies the Orientalist binary of civilisation versus barbarism, wherein Americans are depicted as an orderly force amid a savage land.

¹ Fallujah, a city in the Iraqi province of Anbar, is historically significant due to intense battles during the Iraq War, particularly the 2004 conflict between American-led coalition forces and Iraqi insurgents, marking it as a symbol of resistance and conflict-related devastation (Filkins, 2004; Cockburn, 2005).

As Shaheen (2008) notes, Arabs and Muslims in such films are routinely shown as dangerous, irrational foes against whom Western might is justified (Shaheen, 2008, as cited in Bajuwaiber, 2023). The scene's very first signals, therefore, load the text with ideological content before a single shot is fired, painting Iraq and its people in ominous strokes that serve the film's broader "us versus them" narrative. Dialogue and character references in this scene further reveal how language carries ideological weight. Chris Kyle, perched as a sniper overwatch on a rooftop, scans for threats and uses terse, clinical language to label potential enemies. Spotting a suspicious figure, he reports, "*I got a military-aged male on a cell phone, watching the convoy. Over*" (1.4). This phrasing is strikingly impersonal: the unknown Iraqi is identified solely by age and presumed role as a "*military-aged male*" rather than as a named or humanised individual. Such a referential strategy reduces the Iraqi man to a category of combatant, effectively stripping him of personal identity or civilian status. In Wodak's DHA terms, this is a clear example of labelling the out-group via categorisation instead of personalisation, a linguistic dehumanisation that primes the audience to view the man not as a person but as a target. The phrasing also reflects what Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 54) calls **aggregation** – treating people as instances of a generic group (*here, enemy combatants*) rather than individuals. This linguistic choice carries ideological assumptions: any "*military-aged*" Iraqi male with a phone can automatically be read as a threat (a possible spotter for insurgents), normalising suspicion toward the entire demographic. As Ullah and Shahzor (2017, p. 174) argued, Hollywood war films often adopt monolithic and essentialist portrayals of the "enemy," using such stereotyping and labelling as an "essential part of organising experience" for viewers. The language in *American Sniper* Scene 1 is therefore far from neutral; it encodes a biased schema in which Iraqi males of a specific profile are inherently dangerous, a narrative simplification that aligns with wider post-9/11 cinematic tropes of Arab-as-terrorist (Mohamed, 2023).

The confrontation intensifies when a new threat emerges: *Hold on. I got a woman and a kid, 200 yards out, moving towards the convoy [...] She's carrying something. She's got a grenade[...] She gave it to the kid* (1.8), Kyle's urgent radio updates introduce an even more jarring referential and predicational shift. By describing the pair only as "*a woman and a kid*," the film emphasises their status as civilians in appearance. However, the predication immediately subverts this, as they are carrying a deadly **RKG grenade**². The juxtaposition of "*woman and kid*" with an

² RKG grenade (Ruchnaya Kumulyativnaya Granata) refers to a Soviet-designed, hand-thrown, shaped-charge anti-tank grenade, widely employed by insurgents during the Iraq War due to its effectiveness against lightly armored military vehicles and its ease of concealment and deployment (Wikipedia).

act of violence is a striking departure from conventional expectations. Traditionally, women and children connote innocence or non-combatant status; here, they are cast as active perpetrators of an attack. This inversion serves an ideological purpose. It amplifies the **negative representation** of the Iraqi out-group: even those whom one might presume to be innocent (a mother and child) are depicted as fanatically bent on killing Americans. By contrast, this scenario implicitly highlights the **positive self-representation** of the American soldiers, and they must be ever vigilant since anyone could be the enemy. The mother handing her kid a grenade becomes a hyperbolic symbol of barbarity, echoing Bajuwaiber's critique that Arab characters in U.S. films are often portrayed as having "no moral compass" – irrational, "sub-human" aggressors beyond the pale of civilised behaviour (Bajuwaiber, 2023).

This scene encapsulates the topos of **threat and savagery**: a fundamental argumentative device (topos) in war discourse wherein any action (even shooting a child) is justified by the overwhelming danger the Other poses. The **argumentation strategy** here draws on a topos of **self-defence**. If a woman and child are about to obliterate American lives with a grenade, then the soldier has no choice but to eliminate them first. Another topos is the topos of **danger/threat**: Kyle's commanding officer radios, *'If you think he's reporting troop movement, you have a green-light.' Your call. Over*, (1.5). This conditional argument, "if suspect, then shoot," frames lethal action as a necessary defence. It considers an implied claim: If Iraqis pose a threat, then violence against them is justified. Kyle's immediate suspicion, e.g., *military-aged male[...] watching the convoy*, in (1.4) employs this topos. The topos of **responsibility**: Kyle is reminded of the consequences if he is wrong *"They fry you if you're wrong. Send you to Leavenworth"* (1.12). This appeal to military rules and punishment functions as both a warning and a justification: it underscores that only an accurate threat warrants shooting, thereby implying that any shots Kyle takes are taken with due cause.

By scripting an Iraqi mother as so fanatical that she sacrifices her child, the film intensifies the **us vs. them** divide, intensifying negative attributions to Iraqis while mitigating any potential guilt on the American side. The audience, guided by Kyle's perspective, is led to the same grim conclusion he reaches: pulling the trigger is not only necessary but morally right given the grotesque scenario unfolding. Throughout this exchange, the perspectivization remains firmly aligned with the American soldiers' point of view, both literally and narratively. We see through Chris Kyle's rifle scope – a camera perspective that encloses viewers in his subjective experience. We hear only the Americans' radio chatter and dialogue; the Iraqi characters are voiceless except

for the distant call to prayer. This aligns with DHA's **perspectivization strategy**: the discourse is framed entirely from the U.S. military's situational awareness and emotional reactions. Such one-sided perspectivalisation reinforces what van Dijk describes as the ideological exclusion of the out-group voice, ensuring that the narrative focus remains on legitimising the "in-group" actions.

The language used by the American characters in this scene further cements the ideological message through **predicational strategies**, that is, through evaluative labelling of people and environment. The U.S. soldiers pepper their speech with profanities and crude metaphors that demonise the enemy and disparage the locale. After Kyle takes the fatal shots, one soldier exclaims in awe and anger: That was gnarly. *Fucking evil bitch!* (1.13) (referring to the Iraqi woman he has just killed). This reaction explicitly predicates the woman as "evil", casting her not as a tragic civilian casualty but as a malevolent combatant who deserved her fate. The extreme language, e.g., *fucking... bitch*, is an act of **intensification** that leaves no ambiguity about moral judgment; she is condemned in the harshest terms, reinforcing a moral evaluation that the Iraqi female enemy is monstrous. Here, earlier bits of dialogue indirectly characterise Iraq itself in hostile terms. Kyle quips about the heat, e.g., *Fucking hot box* (1.1) and another soldier jokes, e.g., *Dirt over here tastes like dog shit in* (1.2). These seemingly offhand complaints carry ideological weight: they predicate the land as foul, dirty, and infernal. Such descriptions align with long-standing Orientalist depictions of Middle Eastern lands as filth-ridden and uncivilised. While these remarks primarily convey the soldiers' discomfort, they also contribute to othering the setting; Iraq is figuratively a place of dirt and excrement in their eyes.

Furthermore, the soldier occasionally resorts to misogynistic or dehumanising terms for the enemy e.g., *Fucking evil bitch!*" (1.13). The word "bitch" is a strongly gendered insult, reducing the woman to a malign female figure. Such language is an example of how soldiers linguistically frame opponents as morally depraved, justifying lethal force. Linguists have noted that Chris Kyle and his comrades consistently use dehumanising labels for Iraqis, e.g., calling them "savage," "uglies," or "Saddam's bitches" (Ullah & Shahzor, 2017, p. 171) rather than humanising terms.

6. Discussion and Results

Several clear patterns emerge. First, the film consistently privileges American perspectives and marginalises Iraqi voices. Iraqi characters function only as background threats or faceless victims. Second, the discourse relies on repeated binary motifs (good vs. evil, civilised vs. barbaric,

freedom vs. terrorism). These patterns have powerful ideological implications, as they naturalise the U.S. military's role.

The analysis strongly confirms that Iraqi characters are portrayed using overwhelmingly negative stereotypes. Across the scenes examined, Iraqis are almost exclusively depicted as dangerous, fanatical, or uncivilised. For example, numerous Iraqi figures are called *savages*, and are shown indiscriminately shooting at American soldiers or plotting violence. These findings align with prior work on Hollywood films, commentators noted that *American Sniper* "has generated so many stereotypes about Iraq" that the land and its people are seen as "savage and evil" (Ullah & Shahzor, 2017). Similarly, Ennaciri and Jebbar (2023) observed that the film "reinforces the perception of Muslims as primitive savages deserving of... cruelty". Therefore, the results support **Hypothesis 1**. They confirm that the film consistently depicts Iraqi characters in derogatory terms or negative stereotypes.

The analysis finds that the film's discourse consistently employs a 'Us vs. Them' polarisation. Pronouns and collective labels (we/our vs they/them) emphasise group boundaries. Our scene analysis reveals that American characters consistently speak about defending freedom and saving lives. In contrast, Iraqis speak in furtive or aggressive terms (and are often not given a voice at all). According to Jhally (2016), this binary language aligns with Said's critique of Western media. On-screen, Arabs "almost always play the role of terrorists and violent people", implicitly casting Americans as heroes. Therefore, **Hypothesis 2** is confirmed: the film's discourse is framed in polarised Us versus Them, oppositional language that continually sets Americans against Iraqis.

Finally, the analysis rejects **Hypothesis 3**, i.e., that the film industry, particularly Hollywood, neutrally reflects reality rather than shaping or reinforcing ideological narratives. This hypothesis posits that films like *American Sniper* merely represent events without ideological framing, aligning with a common perception of media objectivity. However, this study provides substantial evidence that this is not the case—that instead, *American Sniper* operates ideologically through discourse. This study rejects this hypothesis by showing how: representations are shaped by post-9/11 ideology and Orientalist thinking, and Hollywood functions as an ideological apparatus, not a neutral mirror of reality.

7. Conclusion

In examining *American Sniper* (2014) through the Discourse-Historical Approach, this article has shed light on the ideological underpinnings of the film's portrayal of Americans and

Iraqis. The analysis finds that the film systematically constructs a dichotomous world where American soldiers embody the protective, valorous in-group and Iraqis are cast as a dangerous, dehumanised out-group. Through discursive strategies of referential labelling, predication of attributes, perspectivation, argumentation via topoi, and intensification/mitigation, the film's language and narrative reinforce an "Us versus Them" ideology at multiple levels. Americans are named, individualised, and associated with positive values, while Iraqis are denied individuality, lumped into collective derogatory categories like "savages", and associated only with violence or treachery. This polarised representation is not merely a matter of storytelling convenience; it reflects and perpetuates real-world power relations and prejudices. American Sniper's discourse aligns with a broader post-9/11 narrative that rationalises war and marginalises the enemy's humanity

The findings of this study underscore that *American Sniper* is not a neutral war drama but an ideologically charged text. It ideologically represents Iraqis in an overwhelmingly negative light, as an undifferentiated hostile mass, through linguistic othering and stereotypical tropes, while constructing American identity as valorous and morally superior via positive self-representation and appeals to core values. In a broader sense, *American Sniper* exemplifies how popular media can propagate and reinforce dominant narratives of power.

8. Suggestions for Further Studies

The researcher presents the following suggestions for further studies:

1. Conduct critical discourse analyses on other Iraq War films or modern American war movies – for example, *The Hurt Locker* (2008), *Green Zone* (2010), *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), or *13 Hours* (2016), etc., to compare how each represents Iraqi or Middle Eastern characters.
2. Future studies could examine ideological representation in films about other conflicts, for instance, the war in Afghanistan, the Syrian conflict, or even earlier wars like Vietnam, using a similar CDA approach.
3. It would be fruitful to extend the investigation to other media forms that depict Middle Eastern conflicts. For example, researchers might study popular war-themed video games, television series, or news media coverage of the Iraq War using CDA and related frameworks.

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