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Terrorism as Order-Word

1.0 Introduction

Terrorism shapes opinions about the events and groups to which the term is applied in the media. In the days after September 11, 2001, *terrorism* and *terrorist attacks* were applied overwhelmingly to the events of September 11, 2001. The meaning of *terrorism*, we will argue, also encompasses a group of people. We will demonstrate in data from September 12 - 15, 2001 from the New York Times, LA Times, and Washington Post the word's ability to signify these two things at once. We will show how the word's semantic peculiarity, which we will call cosignification, is facilitated by a morphological peculiarity. We will also discuss the implications of this semantic ambiguity for the socio-political significance of the term, using Whorf and Deleuze and Guattari.

1.1 Definitions

Beres (1993) defines *terrorism* on the basis of a violation of just cause and just means in violent political action¹. Beres constructs the definition for international law. However, this definition does not capture the way the term works in public media use.

This investigation into media use of the term has implications for legal discourse, as well as linguistics of the media and a critical semiotics. The way the term works in the media shapes legal discourse in spite the attempts by those who work in legal discourse on precise and rigorous in terminology. The way the term is used in the media effects what might happen in a courtroom simply in that judges and jurists read newspapers.

¹ Beres, 1

Hitchens (1989) writes of *terrorism*, that the term is without a definition “held in common by all who use the term” and that it is “in search of a meaning.” It is for this reason “a junk word” which “disguises reality and impoverishes language and makes a banality out of the discussion of war and revolution and politics. It’s the perfect instrument for the cheapening of public opinion and for the intimidation of dissent.”²

Hitchens’ polemics capture the semantic loadedness of the term *terrorism*, but overlook the possibility of work on developing linguistic structure to describe the intricacies of the term’s meaning. Our interpretation of the semantic data we have collected on *terrorism* and discussion of the word’s morphology and history will help describe some of the intricacies in the meaning of the term.

2.0 Semantic Ambiguity

Reviewing the corpus, we looked at contextual cues that might help us categorize *terrorism*. The word is straightforwardly a nominal. Within that categorization, though, we can distinguish events from non-events. We can ask if *terrorism* is an event or a non-event.

A simple way to distinguish event nominals from non-events is to look for contextual cues that locate the nominal in time as something that *occurs* or *happens*. For example, reference to a time period over which a nominal took place or phrasing that indicates that a nominal *happened* or *occurred* signal that nominal in that instance, as being applied to an event. We applied this as a diagnostic to instances of *terrorism* in the corpus data.

² Hitchens 149-151

Grimshaw (1996) argues that complex event nominals have argument structure. Events, by this semantic and syntactic categorization, are a particular sub-class of nouns. Event nominals accept theta roles from prepositional phrases. We looked in the corpus data to see if *terrorism* took objects of prepositional phrases as arguments or if inserting arguments, as objects of prepositional phrases was compatible with the syntactic contexts of instances of *terrorism*.

Another effective diagnostic for testing if an instance of *terrorism* was signaled by its context as an event was substituting other nominals, which are clearly event nominals or non-event nominals, substituted for *terrorism* while preserving a basic semantic coherence.

2.1 Event Data

We will begin exhibiting the data by looking at examples where *terrorism* clearly refers to an event. Data marked with a lowercase letter is from the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, or Washington Post from September 12-15, 2002. Data marked with a number are from sources other than the corpus.

(a) *the worst domestic terrorism—Oklahoma City*

This nominal phrase explicitly assigns *terrorism* to an event, the April 1996 bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building.

(b) *the terrorism that began at 8:45 in New York City*

The nominal phrase in (b) clearly refers to *terrorism* as an event that *began*, locating it in time.

It is worth mentioning that non-events might be said to *begin*, as in

(1) *The United States began in 1776*

The *United States* is not an event, but it did *begin* in 1776. However, the time of day in (b) clearly locates *terrorism* in time to a degree of specificity ordinarily reserved for events. It would take a semantic stretch to say that the *United States* began at a certain time of day.

Terrorism is also clearly an event in,

(c) *terrorism as a tactic of warfare*

A *tactic* is an event or a sequence of events, therefore, *terrorism* is indicated as an event or a sequence of events. Further, we could put this nominal phrase in a larger clause with a prepositional phrase. The object of the preposition is clearly an argument.

(2) *Al-Queda is enacting terrorism on the United States, as a tactic of warfare.*

In (2), the United States is clearly a recipient, theme, and/or locative. *Terrorism* is stated as *enacted* and this phrasing is adequately coherent. *Terrorism* is clearly an event/action in these examples.

2.2 Non-event Data

There are those instances of terrorism that are not clearly located in time or not marked contextually as events, and are that are therefore ambiguous. There are, however, other instances in which the contextual cues actually conflict with a classification of *terrorism* as an event.

(d) *a war on international terrorism*

In (2), we showed *terrorism on the United States* is an event. If we take the *United States* as a locative, the phrase would be equivalent with

(3) *terrorism that happened in the United States*

However, the notion of making *a war on* something does not match with notion of an event that *happens*. Take the following,

*(4) *Nations must make a war on terrorism on the United States.*

*(5) *Nations must make a war on terrorism that happened in the United States.*

The phrases in (4) and (5) seem quite incoherent semantically. Grimshaw shows that even simple events have some kind of argument structure. *Terrorism* from (d) doesn't have even a simple argument structure like that which is appropriate to instances of *terrorism* that are marked as events. Try this diagnostic with other examples of *terrorism* that we classed as non-event data,

(e) *terrorism cells*

(f) *a global assault against terrorism in general*

(g) *solace in the strictures of organized terrorism's clutches*

(h) *the fight against terrorism and radical Islam*

(i) *expecting a white flag from terrorism is futile*

Inserting prepositional phrases that assign arguments to terrorism like the diagnostic performed in (4) or contextual cues that locate terrorism in time like the diagnostic performed in (5) result in a semantic incoherence for all of (e) through (i). This is strong evidence that *terrorism* is not behaving as an event in these cases.

We will label these non-event instances of *terrorism*, categorially, as political agentive nominals. *Terrorism* in (e) through (i) represents an ideology or politic and refers indirectly the group of people that stands for that particular politic. Words for political parties or political agendas substitute paradigmatically into the contexts of

terrorism in (e) through (i) and preserve a basic semantic coherence. Try substituting *communism*, *fascism*, or *racism* into the contexts of *terrorism* in (e) through (i) and the resultant nominal phrases will be satisfactorily coherent. Also nation words substitute coherently into (e) through (i). Substituting events, however, will result in nominal phrases that don't make sense. When events are substituted for *terrorism* in (e) through (i), the resultant phrases at least require a sort of metonymic work in interpretation to make them coherent.

2.3 Ambiguous Data

As we mentioned, there are also those instances of *terrorism* in the corpus data that don't show contextual cues to signal the instance as either event or non-event. These instances are semantically ambiguous. For an example, take,

(j) *One of those threats is terrorism.*

One could easily substitute the event *earthquakes* in the place of *terrorism* and this phrase would be semantically coherent. One could also substitute, *Al-Queda*, *China*, or another political agentive nominal and this phrase would be semantically coherent. The majority of the instances of *terrorism* in our corpus were ambiguous.

2.4 Cosignification

We have established the ability of *terrorism* to occur as an event nominal and a political agentive nominal. This is unusual, these two semantic classes of nominal are ordinarily mutually exclusive.

We assert that *terrorism*, the event nominal, and *terrorism*, the political agentive nominal, refer to different entities. In examples where there are no contextual cues which

signal *terrorism* as either event or political agentive nominal the nominal can be considered as referring to both entities at the same time. We will call this double-referring, cosignification. Even in examples where the context clearly marks the instance as one or the other nominal class, there is still the connotation of both at work in the interpretation of the phrase. This shared connotation is also a kind of cosignification.

3.0 Morphology

The suffix *-ism* according to Marchand (1966) indicates a “system of principles... *Leninism*”, “a single principle”, or “an abnormal condition... *Cocainism*.”³ These semantic glosses seem to coincide with our non-event classification of *terrorism*. Political agentives as we have described them refer to a system of principles of a group of people or a condition of people. As we have said, political agentive nominals also indirectly refer to that group of people.

The suffix also forms a noun of action from verbs ending in *-ize* such as *baptize*. Marchand writes, “It is not, however, with this function that the *sf* has become productive in English or the various other European languages.”⁴

3.1 Lexical History

In the case of *terrorism*, the *-ism* seems to indicate meanings that Marchand defines as different types. We might ask how *terrorism* came to work as both a noun of action and a political agentive. The Oxford English Dictionary (1989) finds *terrorism* first came into use in 1795,

³ Marchand, Bullets 4.51.1-4.51.3

⁴ Marchand, Bullets 4.51.4

Government by intimidation as directed and carried out by the party in power in France during the revolution of 1789 to 1794; the system of "Terror"

The OED finds the word came to be used with a different meaning in 1798,

A policy intended to strike with terror those against whom it is adopted; the employment of methods of intimidation; the fact of terrorizing or condition of being terrorized.

The first, and earlier gloss, most clearly coincides with our characterization of *terrorism* as political agentive. The first gloss defines *terrorism* as *government*. The second, later, gloss is most like our notion of an event/action. *Employment*, a *policy* we read as most clearly descriptive of a noun of action.

The OED, by our reading, documents *terrorism* applied to a political agentive before being applied as a noun of action. According to these facts, we might conjecture that the word came to be used as both, because the suffix was able to accept both meanings though originally maybe it carried only one of them. Perhaps also, the word was used, from the beginning, differently by different strata of the population.

Also important in the history of the term is that *terror* was being used before *terrorism* as a noun of action "the action or quality of causing dread," and "*concr* a thing or person that causes terror." This gloss applies, according to the OED, as far back as the sixteenth century.

The free root, *terror*, was already applied to both agent and action. However, according to the OED, *terror* referred to an agent not in the sense of a political agentive, like a government or set of principles.

The affixation of the *-ism* made a word which more strongly signified a principled, state or political *terror*. In the last several months, though, *terror* did seem to

signify a political entity and political action like *terrorism*, though this investigation did not do the same work on

4.0 *Terrorism as cryptotype*

Whorf, in “Grammatical Categories” (1937), discusses the cryptotype. The cryptotype is “a covert category... [the] name [cryptotype] calls attention to the rather hidden, cryptic nature of such word groups.”⁵ *Terrorism* covertly belongs to the two classes of event and non-event in examples where there are no contextual cues to clarify it either way. In this way that *terrorism* cosignifies, the term is a cryptotype, a covert category that, in a way, hides the conceptual discrepancy between its two referents. Even when there are contextual cues that clarify the instance of *terrorism* as an event or a political agentive nominal, there is still the effect of the cryptotype in the covert connotation of both.

Whorf writes in “The Relationship of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language,” (1939)

[It is in language’s] constant ways of arranging data and its most ordinary everyday analysis of phenomena that we need to recognize the influence it has on other activities, cultural and personal⁶. ...there is a relation between a language and the rest of the culture of the society which uses it.... there are connections within this integration, between the kind of linguistic analyses employed and various behavioral reactions and also the shapes taken by various cultural developments.⁷

The data about *terrorism* that we have been looking at can and, according to Whorf, should, be placed in its cultural context. It is Whorf’s idea that language shapes

⁵ Whorf, 92

⁶ Whorf, 135

⁷ Whorf, 159

culture and culture shapes language. We are authorized by Whorf's ideas to make responsible connections between the shapes and developments of culture and the shapes and structures of language.

If *terrorism* is a cryptotype then there is something that it conceals or something that it allows to escape notice by its covert cosignification. This concealment would have a cultural effect. What is contained or covert in the lexical item *terrorism* is the connection between act and agent. The corresponding cultural effect is the encouragement to not interrogate how *terrorism* the action and *terrorism* the political agentive are actually connected.

There is no productive morphological construct that we can apply to *terrorism* to separate out *terrorist groups* and *the act of terrorism* with an adequate semblance of meaning. The speaker must make recourse to syntactic and extra-lexemic mechanisms in order to differentiate act and agent.

Morphologically, *terror* and *terrorism* permit and encourage that in media discourse, the two of act and agent be thought of as inseparable. The speaker is given an option to talk about *terrorism* that circumvents the assignment of different terms to the act and to the agent. It is reasonable to say that circumventing the assignment of different terms has the effect of discouraging the consideration of the two different ideas that the two terms might represent. In this way, a speaker can feel that they've talked about *terrorism* without talking about the way a political agentive comes to be known as responsible for a particular act of violence.

The speaker is able to ignore the complex of discursive channels through which responsibility for an event becomes reified as political and historical fact. A speaker can

feel that they've articulated an idea about *terrorism*. and formed a belief without addressing critically that people's and their own beliefs about the responsibility attributed to the political agent, *terrorism*, for traumatic events, also called *terrorism* is socially constructed and not merely objective fact.

4.1 *Terrorism as Order-Word*

Deleuze and Guattari (1982) describe their idea of the order-word,

...language is the transmission of the word as order-word, not the communication of a sign as information. We call *order-words*, not a particular category of explicit statements (for example, in the imperative), but the relation of every word or every statement to implicit presuppositions...⁸

The notion of order-word is appropriate to *terrorism* because it captures the notion that even statements that are not issued in the imperative, still function as commands. By the implicit presuppositions of every statement, every statement is an order or recommendation to think and therefore to behave in a certain way instructed by the acceptance of those presuppositions.

The order-word goes further than Whorf's cryptotype in describing the way a language leaves certain facts assumed and unquestioned by implicit presupposition. Further, the order-word captures that statements in which there are assumptions and presuppositions are effectively commands to accept those assumptions and presuppositions. Whorf's cryptotype indicates that language works covertly but the order-word captures that the workings of language are not the workings of a static system. Rather the way a language works changes as the language changes. But those changes are traceable in the records of speech acts.

⁸ Deleuze, 79

The implicit presupposition that the term *terrorism* covers over is that there is a stable and objective connection between events of *terrorism* and the political agentive responsible. This semantic presupposition can be read pragmatically as the statements analyzed in the preceding sections were issued in a particular historical context by the collective of writers in the media organizations of the New York Times, Washington Post and Los Angeles Times. When read pragmatically against this background, the implicit presupposition of using *terrorism*, because of its cosignification, is the presupposition that the political agentive that these media organizations portrayed as responsible for the acts of September 11, 2001 over the time period contemporaneous with this corpus and the groups that they would continue to portray as responsible afterwards were responsible according to an objective, absolute, and reportable reality.

We assert that the cosignification in the application of the term *terrorism* in the media from September 12 through 15, 2001 issued a command, therefore, by its implicit presuppositions, to the readerships of the media organizations involved that the connection between act and agent was not to be critically evaluated because the linguistic portrayal of the actions and responsible agents of September 11, 2001 put forward by those media organizations was and remains a objectively correct linguistic portrayal of a reality.

Below is the full corpus of data, labeled by publication and date and according to our interpretation based on event/action and political agentive.

Washington Post September 12

Ambiguous

- (1) *horror of terrorism*
- (2) *terrorism expert*
- (3) *support for terrorism*
- (4) *war on international terrorism*
- (5) *counterterrorism experts warned*
- (6) *terrorism experts depicted*
- (7) *counterterrorism programs*
- (8) *counterterrorism budgets*
- (9) *policy towards terrorism*
- (10) *hold responsible governments that support terrorism*
- (11) *bring a government terrorism sponsor to its knees*
- (12) *accused of plotting terrorism*
- (13) *accused of supporting terrorism*
- (14) *suspected terrorism sponsor*
- (15) *terrorism consultant to several government agencies*
- (16) *trend in terrorism*
- (17) *a major and immediate escalation in America's worldwide war against terrorism*
- (18) *a "turning point" in the global war against terrorism*
- (19) *America's battle against terrorism*

Event

- (20) *terrorism at home aimed at innocent civilians*

Political Agentive

- (21) *terrorism cells*

September 13

Ambiguous

- (22) *deny knowledge of any evidence that he has been involved in terrorism*
- (23) *According to U.S. terrorism experts*
- (24) *not part of an ongoing wave of terrorism*
- (25) *have yet to devise a coherent anti-terrorism program*
- (26) *politically and religiously inspired terrorism as a law enforcement problem*

- (27) *prevent future acts of terrorism*
- (28) *chief of CIA counterterrorism operations*
- (29) *Nation to Boost Anti-Terrorism Precautions*
- (30) *in case of an act of terrorism*
- (31) *the seat of American democracy will not be scared shut by terrorism*
- (32) *deal with terrorism*
- (33) *take on terrorism*
- (34) *counterterrorism specialist*
- (35) *important target of U.S. counter-terrorism forces*
- (36) *that the decent people of the world make common cause against terrorism*

Event

- (37) *'preempting terrorism'*

September 14

Ambiguous

- (38) *declaration of an international campaign against terrorism*
- (39) *Terrorism is becoming more sophisticated and much more ferocious*
- (40) *states that facilitate terrorism*
- (41) *efforts to fight terrorism*
- (42) *response to terrorism*
- (43) *discussions with the Taliban about terrorism*
- (44) *reassessing an approach to fighting terrorism*
- (45) *"depoliticize" terrorism and "deligitimize" it in the eyes of the world*
- (46) *sponsoring terrorism*
- (47) *how the nation defends itself against terrorism*
- (48) *a stronger response to terrorism*
- (49) *a weak U.S. policy on terrorism*
- (50) *a horrific act of terrorism*
- (51) *tighten the screws on those who would support terrorism*
- (52) *the wicked world of terrorism*
- (53) *enacted anti-terrorism and immigration control legislation*
- (54) *efforts to counter and investigate domestic or international terrorism*
- (55) *a global assault against terrorism in general*

Event

- (56) *appears to herald a significant shift in the nation's strategy for coping with terrorism*
- (57) *treating terrorism as a criminal manner*
- (58) *the worst domestic terrorism—Oklahoma City*
- (59) *history's worst episode of terrorism*

Political Agentive

- (60) *the fight against terrorism and radical Islam*
- (61) *a multi-front attack on terrorism*
- (62) *it's going to take some time to root out terrorism*
- (63) *war against terrorism*
- (64) *"lead the world to victory over terrorism"*

September 15

Ambiguous

- (65) *suspected by American officials of sponsoring terrorism*
- (66) *support for terrorism*
- (67) *willingness to tackle terrorism*
- (68) *additional terrorism*
- (69) *international efforts to ensure that terrorism never succeeds again*
- (70) *those behind the deadliest act of terrorism in American history*
- (71) *campaign against terrorism*
- (72) *anti-terrorism campaign*

Event

Political Agentive

- (73) *declared war against terrorism*
- (74) *eliminate the terrorism whose roots lie in that region*
- (75) *a war against international terrorism*
- (76) *to combat terrorism*
- (77) *forming a common front against terrorism*

New York Times September 12

Ambiguous

- (78) *this newly disclosed threat of large-scale sophisticated terrorism*
- (79) *joint action to protect the world from terrorism, nuclear or otherwise.*
- (80) *One of those threats is terrorism.*
- (81) *terrorism security alert*
- (82) *phrases issued at earlier times after earlier acts of terrorism*
- (83) *anti-terrorism lieutenant*
- (84) *America's helplessness in the face of terrorism*

- (85) *America's susceptibility to terrorism*
- (86) *National counterterrorism strategy*
- (87) *Most people in counterterrorism were talking about the likelihood of a doomsday scenario involving germ warfare or nuclear weapons*
- (88) *National Commission on Terrorism*
- (89) *Anticapitalism terrorism*
- (90) *The foundation for modern terrorism*
- (91) *much to fear from terrorism that strikes at innocent civilians*
- (92) *resort to terrorism*

Event

- (93) *a large-scale operation to prevent terrorism*
- (94) *overwhelming reminder of the terrorism that remains a scar on the city's psyche*

Political Agentive

- (95) *A common battle against terrorism*

September 13

- (96) *the country's worst confrontation with terrorism*
- (97) *solace in the stricture's of organized terrorism's clutches*
- (98) *coalition against terrorism*

Event

- (99) *to say that the justifiable response to it is suicide terrorism is utterly sick*

Political Agentive

- (100) *terrorism that strikes at innocent civilians*

September 14

Ambiguous

- (101) *Terrorism will not disappear if one terrorist or 10 terrorists are arrested*
- (102) *Terrorism will only disappear when the reasons are cured*
- (103) *how much you're going to tell a ten-year old about terrorism*
- (104) *creating one agency to handle terrorism*
- (105) *\$10 billion a year to fight terrorism*
- (106) *somebody specifically in charge of our counterterrorism efforts*
- (107) *stand with us against terrorism*

- (108) *ending states that sponsor terrorism*
(109) *support among Arab countries for an antiterrorism coalition*

Event

Political Agentive

- (110) *coming together and whipping terrorism*
(111) *consolidate power to combat terrorism*
(112) *combat cyberterrorism*

September 15

Ambiguous

- (113) *a new wave of midair terrorism*
(114) *trained and motivated to stop terrorism*
(115) *a target of fundamentalist terrorism*
(116) *suicide bombings are a prime tool of terrorism*
(117) *the shifting dynamics of international terrorism*
(118) *previous terrorism investigations*
(119) *pictures from places where terrorism is woven into the fabric of everyday
life*
(120) *the organization that brought the terrorism about*

Event

- (121) *prevention of terrorism*

Political Agentive

- (122) *if law enforcement becomes more global to match terrorism's global
reach*
(123) *expecting a white flag from terrorism is futile*
(124) *terrorism suspects*

Los Angeles Times Sept. 12

Ambiguous

- (125) *possible terrorism targets*
(126) *tactics of terrorism*

- (127) *terrorism has become the leading threat to national security*
- (128) *Many of the turning points in terrorism over the last four decades*
- (129) *The most sensational act of airline terrorism*
- (130) *Terrorism came to U.S. soil for the first time*
- (131) *The largest terrorism plot concerning aviation*
- (132) *Abroad, terrorism turned even nastier*
- (133) *The terrorism that began at 8:45 in New York City*
- (134) *A region plagued by terrorism*
- (135) *their own battle with terrorism*
- (136) *a more united international front to fight terrorism*
- (137) *condemned all forms of terrorism as "hateful"*
- (138) *eradicate the plague of terrorism*
- (139) *unite their forces in fighting the scourge of terrorism*
- (140) *not a battle between the United States and terrorism but between the free
and democratic world and terrorism*
- (141) *a major force behind international terrorism*
- (142) *The number of Americans killed by international terrorism*
- (143) *The worst siege of terrorism waged against the United States...*
- (144) *Nothing like today's attack, "in the history of terrorism."*
- (145) *the profoundest miscalculation of the threat not just to U.S. interests but to
U.S. lives that terrorism represents*
- (146) *would not deter terrorism*
- (147) *flag terrorism attacks*
- (148) *protect against terrorism*

Event

- (149) *terrorism as a tactic of warfare*
- (150) *This kind of terrorism is the face of war in the 21st century*
- (151) *retaliation would be viewed as "state terrorism"*
- (152) *day of terrorism*
- (153) *We didn't have any terrorism in mind when the buildings went up
originally*
- (154) *prevent terrorism*

Political Agentive

- (155) *Crucible of much of the world's terrorism*
- (156) *against the foot soldiers of terrorism*
- (157) *Pledged solidarity in the fight against terrorism*

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