



“Mediating” modern-day slavery across the Mediterranean: A linguistic investigation of news discourse

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ABSTRACT: Ever since the regime of Gaddafi collapsed in 2011, Libya has become the main gateway for people attempting to reach Europe by sea and the focal point of smuggling networks. While such humanitarian crisis is well-documented, the International Organization for Migration reported the existence of slave markets in Tripoli where Africans were sold in the open. This trade was largely still undocumented, until the CNN released a video showing migrants being sold by an auctioneer for the equivalent of \$400. International news agencies and networks gave extensive coverage to the event, depicting Tripoli as the city of modern-day slave markets. This paper analyses the reporting following the release of the CNN footage, comparing and contrasting the media construal of the phenomenon from a ‘Southern’ and ‘Northern’ perspective metaphorically standing for the two shores of the Mediterranean Sea. It, therefore, takes into account a corpus of news reports published by Al-Jazeera, Al-Araby, Middle East Eye, on the one hand, and BBC, Reuters and EuroNews, on the other, over a time-span ranging from November (when the video was released) to December 2017. Such news networks were chosen since the former are the main English-language, independent sources of news concerning the Arab world, while the latter are the principal English-language media outlets in Europe. Examination of the texts comprised in the corpus is meant to uncover not only the differences and similarities in the linguistic construal of the event, but is also deemed to offer a lens to frame the power-relations embedded in the spatial and symbolic opposition between Libya and the European countries, thus highlighting how different geo-political actors are discursively portrayed.

KEY WORDS: slavery; migration; Mediterranean; news discourse.



It is a well-established fact that the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings induced significant population movements in the Mediterranean area, generating new and more complex migratory tendencies, which have affected the relations between the EU and the Southern Mediterranean countries (European Commission 2011). Libya, in particular, has usually hosted a high number of migrant workers from the neighbouring states as much as from sub-Saharan Africa (Guinea, Senegal, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Gambia) (see: Seeberg).¹

When the regime of Gaddafi collapsed in 2011, the power vacuum was filled by rivalling factions wrestling for power and militias running the streets. This caused Libya to become the main gateway for people attempting to reach Europe by sea and the focal point of regional smuggling networks. The country has, since then, witnessed the largest flow of African migration in modern times, with smugglers packing hundreds of people into flimsy vessels heading to Southern European countries. Back in 2010, Gaddafi himself highlighted the racial subtext of this flow; in his words, “Europe runs the risk of turning black from illegal immigration, it could turn into Africa”.² In other words, he used migration as a political tool to put Europe under pressure. Accordingly, he requested five billion euros to the European Union in exchange for keeping migrants away, patrolling the Libyan maritime border. He thus tapped into the EU’s deepest fear of unwanted foreigners and concerns about the ‘disturbing’ consequences of a massive arrival of migrants on European territories. After his overthrow, deteriorated conditions and armed conflict between factions fighting for supremacy and legitimacy engulfed the country in a general chaos.

Migrants from West and sub-Saharan Africa started to arrive in the capital city of Tripoli to make their crossing to Europe, after being detained in camps and warehouses, held for ransom, then risking their life in the Mediterranean Sea (see: Koenig; Martin et al., among others). The journey to the EU typically comprises three stages: firstly, a desert crossing to the Libyan border; secondly, a journey within Libya towards the northern coastal cities and towns; thirdly, a sea crossing to Italy. The nature of the journey heavily depends on whether the traveller can enter Libya legally or not. In fact, those pursuing legal channels (Egyptians, for example) can benefit from a straightforward journey; for others, instead, especially the majority coming from sub-Saharan Africa, the journey is characterised by treacherous conditions, starvation, beating, rape and, sometimes, death.

¹ According to the IOM, almost 800,000 migrants left Libya by November 2011, which “awarded” the country with the status of “migration corridor”. See: http://www.migrationpolicycentre.eu/docs/fact_sheets/Factsheet%20Libya.pdf. Accessed 18 Jan. 2019.

² During his two-day visit to Italy in 2010, Gaddafi gave a speech that caught the attention of international observers: “Italy needs to convince her European allies to accept this Libyan proposal: five billion euros to Libya to stop illegal immigration. Europe runs the risk of turning black from illegal immigration, it could turn into Africa. We need support from the European Union to stop this army trying to get across from Libya, which is their entry point. At the moment there is a dangerous level of immigration from Africa into Europe and we don’t know what will happen. What will be the reaction of the white Christian Europeans to this mass of hungry uneducated Africans? We don’t know if Europe will remain an advanced and cohesive continent or if it will be destroyed by this barbarian invasion. We have to imagine that this could happen but before it does, we need to work together” (Qtd. in Dickinson 76).



Most worryingly, in November 2017, the CNN aired a video documenting the existence of slave markets in Tripoli where migrants were auctioned and sold in the open as commodities, as slaves. This paper investigates the media coverage that followed the release of the video, contrasting the perspective adopted by news networks like Al-Jazeera English, Al-Araby, Middle East Eye, on the one hand, and BBC, Reuters, EuroNews, on the other. Moving from the assumption that they metaphorically represent the Southern and Northern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, the way they construe this case of modern-day slavery seems central to examine how they discursively represent not only Libya but also another pivotal geo-political actor (more or less implicitly) involved in the event, namely the European Union.

IRREGULAR MIGRATION AND LIBYA: THE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Since the 1990s, there has been a widespread and growing concern in the EU over migration across the Mediterranean Sea, especially because it was increasingly linked to human smuggling and trafficking. Due to their geographical proximity, some North African countries, in particular Libya and Morocco, have been at the forefront in the phenomenon of migration.³ The rising numbers of migrants arriving in Italy, Spain and Malta since 2000 led the EU to initiate cooperation to manage and secure borders which brought to a gradual militarisation of Mediterranean borders (see: Lutterbeck).

The case of Libya was particularly complex because of its closed nature, its initial lack of formal relations with the EU and its persistently poor human rights records (see: Hamood *EU-Libya*). The country was widely criticised for not having a proper asylum system or the necessary measures for effective refugee protection; in fact, migrants were regularly held in detention camps in unbearable conditions. However, since the Arab Spring uprising, Libya has become a regional hub for migrants, serving as the EU's coast guard for migration management in exchange for the provision of financial aid.

Despite the EU's efforts to balance the respect of human rights and the fight against immigration, the extent of the cooperation with Libya seemed hindered by the fact that the country was not a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. The situation for migrants was further complicated by a legal framework that did not even recognise the presence of refugees on Libyan territory, which resulted in refugees not being entitled to any special treatment (Hamood *EU-Libya* 25). According to a number of studies (see, among others, Hamood *African*), the majority of migrants, especially from sub-Saharan Africa, enter Libya illegally or risk being illegal due to a lack of clarity over their legal status. Generally speaking, this is a problem affecting the so-called 'black Africans', namely migrants who have no access to a lawyer and no information on why they are made to face beatings, insults, and racist remarks while being detained. Indeed, the Libyan society seems to suffer from some prevalent

³ The Straits of Gibraltar was the main hotspot for migration since the distance between Spain and Morocco amounts to only 14 km. As for Libya, the distance between its coastal towns and the Italian island of Lampedusa is about 300 km, while it is slightly higher to Malta, about 355 km. See: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/morocco-setting-stage-becoming-migration-transition-country> . Accessed 18 Jan. 2019.



racist attitudes which result in extremely harsh treatment for sub-Saharan Africans – and a massive disparity compared to Libyan nationals – by police forces and ordinary citizens as well (Hamood *EU-Libya* 27).

THE MOD_SLAVERY CORPUS

In April 2017 the IOM reported the existence of slave markets in Tripoli where hundreds of Africans were sold in the open, with people placing a bid and ending up ‘owning’ a human being. This vast trade was relatively still undocumented, until CNN launched an investigation into the slave trade of the post-Gaddafi era, and then released a video (aired on November 14, 2017) showing migrants being sold by an auctioneer for the equivalent of \$400.⁴ The US broadcaster sent a news team to Tripoli, where they secretly filmed a night-time auction of sub-Saharan migrants for use as farmhands, thus exposing the brutal realities of migration. In their attempt to maintain their profits high, smugglers no longer target and treat migrants as potential passengers, but rather turn them into enslaved manual labour. International news agencies and networks gave extensive coverage to the event, addressing this phenomenon depicting Tripoli as the city of modern-day slave markets. A wave of demonstrations erupted across Europe, urging to halt slavery. Hundreds of protesters gathered in Stockholm, Brussels, Berlin, London, Paris and Rome, eliciting a reaction from EU governments.

Although modern slavery was a problem long before the CNN video footage was released (with women and girls being disproportionately affected as victims of the commercial sex trade), the ‘incident’ caused dismay among Western and African leaders and within the international community. The UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, called it horrific and described it as a crime against humanity; the EU expressed its abhorrence and urged a meeting for the Security Council on the sale of African migrants as slaves. In an open letter to the European governments, the head of *Medicins sans Frontières*, Joanne Liu, also denounced the “vast network of kidnappings, torture and extortion in Libya”, and further added: “in their efforts to stem the flow, is allowing people to be pushed into rape, torture and slavery via criminal pay offs a price European governments are willing to pay?”⁵

This paper specifically analyses the reporting following the release of the CNN footage, comparing and contrasting the media construal of the phenomenon from a ‘Southern’ and ‘Northern’ perspective, metaphorically standing for the two shores of the Mediterranean Sea. It, therefore, takes into account a corpus of news reports published by Al-Jazeera English, Al-Araby, Middle East Eye, on the one hand (namely the *Southern shore* sub-corpus), and BBC, Reuters and EuroNews, on the other, (constituting the *Northern shore* sub-corpus), over a time-span ranging from November (when the video

⁴ See the report “People for sale: Where lives are auctioned for \$400” at <https://edition.cnn.com/specials/africa/libya-slave-auctions>. Accessed 18 Jan. 2019. Media investigations into modern-day slave markets in Tripoli and Libya were initially prompted by information revealed by the IOM, in fact *The Guardian* and *Reuters* had already reported on the issue in April and May 2017.

⁵ See: <http://www.msf.org/en/article/libya-open-letter-european-governments-are-feeding-business-suffering>. Accessed 18 Jan. 2019.



was released) to December 2017 – which, in terms of news value, is of greatest salience for its proximity in time. Such news networks were specifically selected for inclusion in the *MoD_Slavery* (modern-day slavery) corpus since the former are the main English-language, independent sources of news concerning the Arab world, while the latter are the principal English-language media outlets in Europe. About 50 news reports were collected from the networks’ websites, searching for the string “slave market Libya”. Tables 1 and 2 detail the number of news reports and tokens in the two sub-corpora.

<i>Media network</i>	<i>Al-Jazeera</i>	<i>Al-Araby</i>	<i>Middle East Eye</i>	<i>TOT.</i>
No. of news reports	15	9	7	31
No. of tokens	8,512	4,017	6,188	18,717

Table 1 – Detailed information on the *Southern shore* sub-corpus

<i>Media network</i>	<i>BBC</i>	<i>Reuters</i>	<i>EuroNews</i>	<i>TOT.</i>
No. of news reports	5	5	6	16
No. of tokens	2,659	2,907	3,390	8,956

Table 2 – Detailed information on the *Northern shore* sub-corpus

By providing a general numerical overview of the *MoD_Slavery* corpus, tables 1 and 2 allow an initial comparison of the amount of news reports published by the news networks and also shed light on publication frequency over the time-span under investigation, which signals, to some extent, the consistency in the way the event was reported. As is evident, there was a greater coverage in the *Southern shore* sub-corpus, which results both from the number of news reports as well as the number of tokens (signalling that articles are longer texts and possibly offer more in-depth overviews), amounting to the double of the news reports comprised in the *Northern shore* sub-corpus.

THE THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

As for the theoretical and methodological framework adopted for the investigation of the *MoD_Slavery* corpus, since the case-study takes into account a small corpus (of only 47 news reports and less than 28,000 tokens), a qualitative approach was privileged. Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA) has thus provided the main assumptions for investigating news discourse – given the centrality of language in media contexts in the process of construing meaning. CDA is probably one of the most authoritative research lines in the study of media discourse (Fairclough *Media*; Fairclough *Analysing*; van Dijk *News Analysis*, van Dijk *News as Discourse*; Wodak *Disorders*; Wodak and Chilton, to name only some of the most prominent works in this field). CDA scholars are generally concerned with the relationships between language and power, relations of dominance, discrimination and social inequality as expressed in language, relations between texts and social practices. More specifically, language and discourse are viewed as a form of social practice (see: Fairclough and Wodak), each discursive event being dialectically tied to society insofar as it is not only socially constitutive but also



socially conditioned. In this process, language indexes power and power relations, exposing the causes and consequences of specific discourses. To such an extent, while stressing the ideological nature of language (see: Habermas 259), CDA appears as an engaged form of social theory, bearing far-reaching implications for social and political entities (see: Chouliaraki and Fairclough). Critical thinking appears crucial in this context, especially pertaining to questions on why some information is reported while some other content is not, how it is formulated and what its potential implications are, what is absent from texts, silenced or downplayed as far as data, viewpoints and arguments are concerned.

Generally speaking, media discourse is characterised by a (re)construction – rather than a mere description – of reality, which largely depends on the news values operating in societies (see: Gans). Starting from the assumption that there is a “dialectical relationship between particular discursive practices and the specific fields of action (including situations, institutional frames and social structures) in which they are embedded” (Wodak and Meyer 66), media and news discourse appears as an important arena for social and political intervention. The media implicitly or explicitly shape social realities extra- or supra-textually, through a series of discursive effects and strategies which determine how discourse impacts on and affects the evolution, structuration, and possibly institutionalization of social and political issues (see: Carvalho 165).

As such, CDA seems particularly relevant for this case-study in that it aims at uncovering and disclosing what is implicit – or not immediately obvious – in the relations of discursively enacted dominance between the two shores of the Mediterranean Sea. All focus here is on the strategies through which the news networks position themselves and the stances they take, examining whether they discursively construe the event similarly or differently, and which patterns they employ in representing it. This kind of analysis is meant to offer a lens to frame the power-relations that are deeply embedded in the spatial, geo-political, and symbolic opposition between Libya and the European countries, thus highlighting how different spatial entities and geo-political actors are discursively framed in response to the same event.

Analysis will also draw on Halliday and Matthiessen’s assumptions (2004) according to which a detailed investigation of participants and processes is needed to examine the links between linguistic structures and social values. The participants (realized by nominal groups) enter into meaningful relations with other functional elements, construing and conveying the message as a composite entity with embedded patterns of meaning (see: Halliday and Matthiessen 71). Therefore, besides looking for the main “social actors” (see: van Leeuwen) within the texts, attention will be paid to verbal groups realizing material, verbal, mental processes and states.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Qualitative analysis was therefore carried out by paying attention to the geopolitical and social actors mentioned in the news reports – whether they were individuals and/or institutions – concentrating on how they are represented. Such investigation seems relevant in that it also pertains to the influence they exercise in shaping the overall



meaning of the text and the recurrent themes mentioned in connection to modern-day slavery. Meticulous reading of all the articles led to the identification of the following major participants in the *MoD_Slavery* corpus (listed according to their frequencies within the texts):

- migrants and refugees;
- smugglers;
- the European Union, EU governments and EU leaders;
- Libya and Libyan authorities;
- other African countries;
- the IOM.

However, since they are not always present in all the news reports, they will be detailed in relation to every news network. African migrants and refugees as well as smugglers will be omitted from the individual lists since, given the nature of the events, they are expectedly, and more or less invariably, described in the shocking vulnerability of their condition (the former) and in the (equally) shocking brutality of their misdeeds (the latter).

THE SOUTHERN SHORE SUB-CORPUS

A close reading of Al-Jazeera English's⁶ news reports reveals the presence of the following main actors:

- the European Union, EU governments and EU leaders;
- Libya and Libyan authorities;
- the IOM.

The news network makes clear that modern-day slavery is far from being a rare occurrence, and that, apart from the Libyan government and authorities' involvement – firstly, in detecting the slave markets and, secondly, in punishing the perpetrators of these crimes – it is precisely EU migration policies which have resulted in slavery. Examples 1-3 show this point very distinctly:

1) The migration policies of the European Union have directly resulted in slavery conditions for migrants in Libya (29/11/17).

2) Who is to blame for African migrants' slavery in Libya? [...] Politicians in Europe are eager to stem the flow of African migrants (29/11/17).

3) Still, human rights observers say some EU governments fuel the crisis by failing to provide alternative safe and legal paths for migrants and refugees (1/12/17).

⁶ In order to better contextualize data emerging from analysis, it seems worth to briefly introduce the news networks, as analysis progresses. Al-Jazeera English hit the airwaves in 2006, when it was started with the motto of giving voice to untold stories, promoting debate, and challenging established perceptions. As the first English-language news channel to be headquartered in the Middle East, it has the stated objective of emphasizing news from the developing world, "reversing the North to South flow of information".



Al-Jazeera massively concentrates not so much on the responsibilities of Libyan authorities – which have allowed such atrocities on their territory – but rather on the involvement of the European Union. It further explicitly states that “while outrage has focused on the Libyan authorities, it has very much ignored the role the European Union has played in enabling such despicable abuse” (29/11/17), thus highlighting its stance on the issue. Far from placing the burden of slavery on Libya, Al-Jazeera points to the fact that the EU has outsourced the responsibility of migration control to countries such as Libya, despite warnings by IOM and a number of humanitarian organizations of inhuman treatment of migrants. In fact, it straightforwardly refers to “deadly ‘Fortress Europe’ policies” (29/11/17), hinting at the EU’s attempts to curb migration, aware that slavery could be a direct consequence of it. Accordingly, the network notes, the EU political narrative on fighting smugglers (which are easily and conveniently identified as guilty) becomes rather controversial and problematic, since the EU has, indeed, created the most favorable conditions for human trafficking.

The news network Al-Araby⁷ takes a stance that is extremely similar to the previous one. A qualitative reading of its news reports has revealed the presence of the following participants:

- the European Union and European countries;
- Libya and Libyan authorities;
- African leaders;
- the IOM;
- protesters.

Quite unsurprisingly, Libya is described as a failed, chaos-ridden state, which has become a major transit hub for migrants due to its weak central government. However, apart from the country’s responsibilities, the network very clearly states its position on the issue, as evident from the instances below.

4) It comes after European authorities clamped down cross-Mediterranean migration leaving people smugglers with hundreds of migrants in their hands. [...] Libyan authorities have been given support by European countries to help stem the flow of migration from Africa to Europe (18/11/17).

5) Some European countries have been evading their international responsibilities and their commitment to international laws; and in doing so, are effectively leaving passing the buck to Libya (27/11/17).

6) Libya cannot be used as a convenient place to park the blame for the international community’s failure to deal with a global migration crisis (27/11/17).

While stressing the unprecedented torture and brutality sub-Saharan migrants are subjected to (something the network does by interviewing and directly quoting a number of survived migrants’ testimonies),⁸ Al-Araby harshly criticizes European countries in general – and Italy, in particular, with open accusations of paying money to

⁷ Al-Araby (literally “the new Arab”) is a pan-Arab media outlet headquartered in London. It was first launched in 2014 as an online news website and then established a daily newspaper.

⁸ The network provides detailed descriptions of scenes from the CNN video, verbally reproducing the smugglers’ violence.



Libyan traffickers to stop them from sending migrants on boats – for their poor migration policies. The network goes so far as to explicitly ask who is really responsible for Libya's slave trade, with a slightly ironic tone towards the shock and condemnation expressed by the international community. Above all, the message that appears probably most strongly conveyed is that Libya cannot serve as a place where the EU can wash its hands of its responsibilities and inability to handle the ongoing migration crisis. In fact, according to Al-Araby, migration issues should be treated as a whole: rather than being just a Libyan concern, as a global matter.

Unlike other cases within the *Southern shore* sub-corpus, Al-Araby also reports on the several protests following the release of the CNN video, giving voice to demonstrators criticizing Western governments for having enacted a sort of silent political manipulation returning black people to a state of slavery: "For France, for Europe, for the United States, there is a massacre of millions of people, and they say nothing" (19/11/17). In this respect, it is probably worth noting – as specified by the network itself – that the wave of protests that followed the CNN video was almost exclusively led by black Africans living in European countries which is, in itself, an indicator of the Western world's (rather silent) reaction to the news. While stressing that sub-Saharan Africa is facing a major challenge – with 60% of the population suffering from poverty and persecution – the network advocates a joint approach involving Africa and Europe. In fact, it views the 5th African Union-European Union summit held in 2017 in Ivory Coast as a timely opportunity for EU leaders to show real commitment to solving migration issues with long-term proposals.

In line with the reporting of the two other news networks included in the *Southern shore* sub-corpus, Middle East Eye⁹ takes on a very straightforward stance, expressing a very critical position towards a series of actors that, to different degrees, took part in the events:

- the EU and European leaders and governments;
- Libya;
- the African Union;
- the IOM.

A close reading of the texts revealed a fundamental, binary opposition between two geo-political entities: Libya and the EU. While Libya is, once again, described as a conflict-torn nation, incapable of managing the situation autonomously, the EU seems to face several accusations and indictments – as emerges from the instances below.

7) Don't be fooled by the "shock", we've known about this for a while now. European leaders have prioritized halting the flow of migrants to Europe and have pushed thousands into the hands of slave traffickers. The outrage now expressed is hollow (5/12/17).

⁹ Middle East Eye is an online news portal covering events in the Middle East. It is an independently funded online news organization, founded in 2014. Its aim is to be the primary portal of Middle East news.



8) In the central Mediterranean, the EU, with a robust lead from Italy, has sent funding and elite forces to equip and train the Libyan coast guard to push migrant boats back to Libyan shores (10/12/17).

9) The European governments have struck deals with local authorities, armed groups and tribal leaders in the North African country, encouraging them to prevent the smuggling of people to Europe (12/12/17).

10) Since 2016, the Italian government's position shifted from prioritizing saving lives at sea, to reducing the number of people who cross to Europe (12/12/17).

By bluntly exhorting its audience not to be fooled by the recent shock, Middle East Eye ironically wonders why the world leaders were not expressing outrage before the CNN undercover investigation, given that the existence of slave markets in Libya is old news – especially after the IOM reported on victims of slavery in April 2017 and Amnesty International documented, for over two years, the case of a migrant who was sold in Libya.¹⁰ All the sources quoted in the news reports lead to a basic assumption: since the European countries have taken all measures to prevent migrants from crossing Mediterranean waters, they can be deemed knowingly complicit in the tortures and abuses suffered by migrants, their actions having originated such a horrific event.

The news network also acknowledges that racism is, indeed, a problem in the Arab world, which appears disturbingly ironic considering that Muslims and Arabs have long been subjected to imperial and racist practices.¹¹ In its analysis, the network highlights that modern-day slavery – and the anti-black racism that is at its root – directly stems from Africa's colonial past. Over the years, also in recent history, black Africans have remained relatively unprotected, and rather exposed to beatings, mass detention and slavery. Middle East Eye straightforwardly posits that the time for words is over, advocating for international leaders to gather and act: "The moment for apparent shock has passed. If leaders want to get in a room together and utter words of condemnation and half-baked solutions, they should start by looking across at each other and reflect on how they have been part of the problem" (5/12/17). With migrants becoming commodities, 'merchandise', in Libya as a consequence of EU policies, world leaders are exhorted to intervene in the web of potential abuse they have created.

Additional analysis was carried out by examining the most widely-used verbal processes co-occurring with the actor "EU/EU governments/leaders/policies" within the *Southern shore* sub-corpus. The list of verbal groups below could be retrieved from the three news networks, thus providing important insight into how the EU – which appears as the most frequently mentioned participant after migrants and smugglers – is discursively depicted:

¹⁰ They also refer to the Thomson Reuters Foundation which, in March 2016, wrote that Libya had become a trafficking market where people were bought and sold on a daily basis. However, this information landed on deaf ears. As such, the general incredulity expressed by both African and European leaders is judged hypocritical and hard to believe.

¹¹ In fact, the Arabic word for "slave" – "abid" – is usually colloquially employed to address black Africans in the Middle East. This shows that the idea of black inferiority still has deep roots in the Libyan society.



stop(ped), curb(ed), exploited, paid, lifted, pledged, ignored, engaged, (has not) provided, push(ed), closed, clamped down, spent, send/t back, (is) outsourcing, profited, fail(ed), chose, fuel, halt(ed), demanded, struck (deals), evading, state(d), cause(d), enforce(d), (has) trained, announce(d), consider(ed), reduce(d), prioritiz(ed/ing), (has) led, pull(ed) out, (has) played, dodge (responsibility).

Apparently the news networks – Al-Jazeera English, Al-Araby, and Middle-East Eye – tend to recurrently employ activity verbs, which are more numerous among the predicates employed with the agent “EU”. Quite invariably, the EU is construed in relation to its misdeeds, as the *doer* of a series of actions that bear a rather negative connotation. Verbal groups such as “curb”, “exploit”, “clamp down”, “send back”, “dodge (responsibility)”, to mention just some of them, refer to volitional activities intentionally performed by the agent, suggesting powerful negative associations.

THE NORTHERN SHORE SUB-CORPUS

In stark contrast with the features emerging from the *Southern shore* sub-corpus, in the BCC¹² news reports there is no mentioning of the European Union – quite surprisingly, not even a single occurrence of the lexical items “European Union” or “EU” could be found.¹³ The major actors that could be identified in the texts were:

- Libya;
- the African Union;
- some African countries (ex. Rwanda);
- the IOM.

Generally speaking, a major space within the articles is certainly devoted to interviews with African migrants who survived the experience of being priced and sold as slaves. The news network extensively quotes their testimonies and stories, explaining how their journey began in the most dreadful conditions, kidnapped and then treated worse than cattle. The long interviews with migrants who were victims of human smugglers constitute the prevailing part of the BBC reporting on the issue, verbally reproducing migrants’ sufferings and tortures (see example 13). A number of reports by the IOM and the UN Security Council (the authoritative sources on the issue) are also occasionally mentioned, portraying Libya as the epicenter of abuse.

Contrasting with the striking absence of references to the EU, another pivotal aspect in the BBC news reports relates to the frequent mention of the African Union and other African countries, something which seems to effectively serve the purpose of exclusively placing the onus – and the consequent handling of events – either on supra-

¹² The BBC is the British public service, headquartered in London and established under the Royal Charter in 1920. It is a statutory corporation, independent from government intervention (it has the second largest budget of any UK-based broadcaster).

¹³ BBC articles do mention “Europe”, of course, but solely in reference to the geographical space, the destination migrants hope to reach, rather than to the EU as a political actor.



national organizations or on political actors that are linked to Libya by a geographical proximity (see examples 11-12).

11) The African Union has expressed outrage after footage emerged appearing to show sub-Saharan migrants being sold at slave markets in Libya (18/11/17).

12) Rwanda has offered to give refuge to around 30,000 African migrants stuck in Libya often in enslaved conditions. [...] Its Foreign Minister said Rwanda is a small country but it would find space (23/11/17).

13) "They tortured us, putting plastic bags on our faces, tying our hands behind our backs, and throwing us upside down into a barrel full of water. They beat us with steel wires." (29/11/17)

The fact that almost all the actors mentioned by the news network (with the only exception of the IOM which is a UN-related agency) are geographically located in Africa seems to have the effect of discursively creating and highlighting a spatial – and symbolic – distance between Africa and the (un-named) EU. If Libya, together with other African countries and the African Union are the only actors involved, then slavery is something that *they* have to deal with. Therefore, by framing the news drawing on geographical space, a distinction is clearly marked, with the result of conveniently leaving the EU out of the narrative. The same discursive effect is further reinforced by the recurrent references to "a despicable trade from another era" (18/11/17), which clearly locates Libya in another temporal dimension, separated from Europe by a distance that is both spatial and temporal.

Additional negative connotation is also obtained by further stressing that Libya is a lawless country, beset by chaos since NATO-backed forces overthrew Gaddafi in 2011, leaving a myriad of armed militias to wield power: accordingly, BBC incidentally hints at increasing concerns about the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which has built and strengthened its presence in the country. News reports seem to offer a portrayal of Libya as providing a safe haven for jihadists to train, fund and then plan attacks across the Mediterranean.

Close reading of the news reports published by Reuters¹⁴ uncovered the following main social actors:

- Libya;
- Europe;
- some African countries (ex. Burkina Faso, Senegal).

As usual, Libya is depicted as a lawless country where armed groups compete for power and resources while smugglers operate with impunity. However, the UN-backed government is also quoted when claiming that the country is a victim of illegal migration, and cannot consequently shoulder all the responsibilities deriving from migration crisis as well as from the presence of slave markets (see example 14 below). As emerging from the analysis of BBC news reports, Reuters appears to similarly draw

¹⁴ Reuters is an international news agency initially headquartered in London, currently in New York, established in 1851. According to its editorial policy, it takes a value-neutral approach, it is committed to reporting the facts, avoiding the use of emotive terms (unless someone is quoted directly or in indirect speech) in all situations.



on the “horrors from another era” rhetoric (see example 15), to construe the event of slavery in an apparently different and distant time the EU does not share. Nonetheless, unlike BBC, in this case, we can find some occasional references to the EU and its migration policies. Interestingly, the EU is mostly mentioned in relation to its contribution in terms of humanitarian aid, rather than for its contribution in terms of accepting the serious responsibilities stemming from its decisions (see example 16).

14) Many Libyans reacted with anger to the outcry, with some pointing to a European push to stop migrants from crossing the Mediterranean to Italy. [...] “We, in Libya, are victims of illegal migration and we are not a source for it” (23/11/17).

15) Reports of white Libyan slave traders selling black African migrants at markets in Libya – a grim echo of the trans-Saharan slave trade in centuries past – have drawn worldwide horror and condemnation (30/11/17).

16) “We now need EU member states and others to step up with offers of resettlement places and other solutions, including family reunification slots” said the UNHCR representative to Libya (29/11/17).

17) “Europe and Africa have joint responsibility for making migration more humane and orderly so they can end horrifying abuses being committed against African migrants by people smugglers [...]. [...] The worst we can do is to start the blame game. What we need now are common solutions [...] our common duty is to step up the fight against these unscrupulous criminals” (29/11/17).

The positive references to the EU are further reinforced by quoting authoritative contributions, for instance the one by the European Council President, Donald Tusk, who aptly stresses the role of the EU for future developments and improvements – once again, leaving past responsibilities aside to concentrate on the (only) perpetrators of those crimes (see example 17).

Overall, although Reuters aligns to its editorial policy and seems to successfully adopt a value-neutral approach – trying to feature a politically-correct attitude – the prevailing perspective emerging from texts provides a very specific angle on the events, portraying the EU almost exclusively as a savior willing to help Africa in general and Libya in particular (mostly following the ‘white/Western savior complex’ that was so widespread in colonial times).

As for EuroNews,¹⁵ the most recurrent participants emerging from a qualitative reading were:

- EU member states and European governments (ex. France, Sweden, Italy);
- Amnesty International;
- Libya and Libyan authorities.

¹⁵ EuroNews is a news media service headquartered in Lyon, France, created in 1993. Its aim is to cover world news from a pan-European perspective and it is currently majority owned by an Egyptian businessman.



The news network often refers to reports by international and humanitarian organizations providing evidence of slave markets enslaving sub-Saharan Africans heading for Europe. Amnesty International, for instance, is extensively quoted when expressing its criticism of how the EU governments have been cooperating with the Libyan authorities and how this cooperation actually traps migrants, condemning them to human rights violations. In doing so, EuroNews does not strictly align with the positions previously observed in the *Northern shore* sub-corpus, as examples 18-20 show.

18) Ivory Coast's President called on the International Criminal Court to indict criminals who were selling black African migrants in Libyan slave markets. [...] The report was embarrassing to Libya, but also to Europe, which has increasingly been relying on Libyan security forces and militias to prevent migrants crossing the Mediterranean to Europe (25/11/17).

19) Non-governmental organization Amnesty International has delivered stinging criticism of the EU and its handling of the migrant crisis, saying European governments are complicit in grave human rights violations in Libya through their support for authorities there that often work with people smugglers, and torture refugees and migrants (12/12/17).

20) Since 2016, EU member states – particularly Italy – have implemented a series of measures aimed at closing off the migratory route through Libya, with little care of the consequences for those trapped within Libya's lawless borders (12/12/17).

As is evident, unlike BBC and Reuters, EuroNews reports on and uncovers the web of collusion existing between Libya and EU governments which are accused of being entirely aware of the migrants' plight. Yet, they enact a policy of containment which ends up exploiting migrants. By supporting this system of abuse and exploitation, the EU is therefore said to be complicit in such crimes.

The other central feature emerging from analysis is that, besides devoting a strikingly greater media coverage to framing the event from a humanitarian perspective, EuroNews also devotes great attention to the European leaders' reactions and their commitment to intervene. It thus mentions the French President Macron's call for a Euro-African agreement to evacuate Libya's populations in danger, to stop this crime against humanity; it further cites his request to the Chair of the UN's Sanctions Committee – in Sweden – to act; it then refers to Sweden's deputy UN ambassador's claim that all states have an obligation to prevent, deter, and penalize the crime of slavery. In doing so, allowing a variety of voices and viewpoints to surface in its reporting, EuroNews seems to offer a more balanced perspective, among the three networks, in its narrative on modern-day slavery.

Although the EU is not the most recurrent actor in the *Northern shore* sub-corpus, examination of the verbal processes co-occurring with the agent "EU/EU governments/leaders/policies" was still carried out for a contrastive analysis with the *Southern shore* sub-corpus. Specific investigation allowed the identification of the following verbal groups:



announce(d), said, stop(ed), aid(ed), called, (is) helping, support, pledge(d), state(d), cause(d), present(ed), (is) cooperating, launch(ed), curb, demand(ed), consider, rethink.

The prevalence of communication verbs, denoting verbal processes, seems to point to a backgrounding of the EU's deeds, while foregrounding its propositions and pledges, effectively marking the praiseworthy initiatives launched by the EU to manage migration. On the other hand, the overall limited number of activity verbs employed by the news networks – in this case only two, Reuters and EuroNews – mainly hints at the EU's laudable actions. Verbal items such as “help”, “support”, “cooperate”, “launch”, for instance, feature a distinctly positive connotative value when defining the EU's actions.

CONCLUSIONS

While the Sahara desert buries migrants' dried bones and the Mediterranean Sea swallows their floating dead bodies, Libya has gradually turned into the biggest slave market in the world due to illegal migration with the complicity of the EU. In this scenario, the auctioning of black bodies acts as a reminder for European countries of the disturbing past dating back to the Atlantic triangle. If what originated the slave trade, a few centuries ago, was a cannibalistic exploitation of Africa by Western imperialist and colonial governments, such exploitation has currently taken a neocolonial form, drawing also on a collaboration with African regimes. Far from being abolished in the 19th century, slavery continues to exist nowadays.

Although the Mediterranean Sea has been often regarded as a bridge intertwining cultures and histories, there are increasing and pressing tensions to view it as a border, a barrier, a dividing space between North and South. This separation runs along the line between highly industrialised, prosperous and stable countries, on the one hand, and countries which are plagued by political and social conflicts and poverty (Lutterbeck 78). In this context, the question of who should bear responsibilities and how such responsibilities should be shared has resulted in what some scholars have described as “schizophrenic policy responses among EU member states, with many states prioritising national interests over European solidarity” (Greenhill 317). Most Western democracies do seem to show a schizophrenic - and possibly hypocritical - relationship with migrants and the pressing issues they pose. As remarked by Scalvini,

the anxiety over a refugee invasion from Africa reveals the contradictions present in Europe today, where, on the one hand, the moral imperative of universal emancipation is proclaimed, but on the other, policies and practice continue the trend of refusing a safe haven to the very refugees they have helped to create.¹⁶

¹⁶ Scalvini, Marco. “Humanitarian Wars and Rejected Refugees”, *OpenDemocracy.Net*, 2011. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/marco-scalvini/humanitarian-wars-and-rejected-refugees>. Accessed 18 Jan. 2019.



Overall, the EU seems to be pursuing a security agenda that is not centred on aspects such as human rights and refugee protection, but it rather appears to be failing to close the gap between rhetoric and practice by addressing the root causes of migration.

Against this backdrop, the role of the main news networks should be crucial in monitoring the design of media content, especially when some particular sensitive issues are at stake. Indeed, they can either reproduce and reflect the discursive practices of the dominant élites or they can challenge those very practices. As a window for the public to a number of questions that would not be otherwise encountered, the media shape people's understanding of critical topics, such as modern-day slavery and human trafficking.

In the aftermath of the CNN video, the news networks under scrutiny showed differing attitudes towards the news. Data emerging from this case-study indicate that, overall, within the *Southern shore* sub-corpus, Al-Jazeera English, Al-Araby, and Middle East Eye were much more prone not only to cover the event (by ensuring a higher number of news reports over the time-span investigated) but also to highlight that modern-day slavery is not a rare occurrence and, above all, that there is a direct link between slavery and the EU migration policies. As a matter of fact, the three news organizations quite uniformly and straightforwardly stress the need for EU governments to take responsibility for it, avoiding conveniently putting the blame on Libyan authorities and smugglers. On the other hand, within the *Northern shore* sub-corpus, BBC, Reuters, and EuroNews, show dissimilar features, to a certain degree. If EuroNews gives voice to varying views – criticizing the EU for its being complicit in the phenomenon of slavery, while also stressing the positive contribution EU leaders can make – BBC and Reuters adopt a strikingly different approach leaving out any (or almost any) reference – and consequently, symbolically, any involvement – of EU countries. By thoroughly omitting such aspect in their reporting, they avoid acknowledging any role played by the European countries in the event of modern-day slavery in Libya, thus silencing an important aspect of the issue.

This case-study has, therefore, uncovered the underlying power relations binding the EU and some of the major Western news networks, making them equally complicit – the former in the very creation of the phenomenon of slavery, the latter in discursively construing it for a mainstream audience from a perspective that purposely backgrounds the EU's involvement. Very differently, media from the Southern shore of the Mediterranean Sea endorse the idea that the European much-proclaimed shock following the release of the CNN video can be nothing but offensive, if not turned into action. They posit that the erasure of black African migrants' enslavement comes as a result of the European 'selective' solidarity. If linguistic and discursive construal is central to how the media frame the events they report, then the awareness of which representations become dominant and whose representations they are is fundamental.



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