



Research Article

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Investigating the Syrian “Other” in Donald J. Trump’s Twitter Campaign Rhetoric

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Abstract: This study investigates the discursive techniques and processes employed by Donald J. Trump to portray Syrian refugees as a negative out-group and threat in tweets during his 2016 election campaign. The article argues that this anti-immigration argument facilitated and materialized not only as a right-wing populist discourse but also as an actual policy as evidenced by the travel ban of 2017. The data are comprised of 32 tweets from Trump’s personal Twitter account between his first available commentary tweets on the Arab Spring situation in November 2011 and his inauguration in January 2017. The article employs the Ideological Square (van Dijk 1992, van Dijk 1995, van Dijk 2013) and proximization theory (Cap 2008, Cap 2010, Cap 2013) to study how Donald J. Trump employs an ideological “othering” of Syrian refugees and constructs threatening representations of them as a political agenda to set himself apart from competitors and advance his election campaign.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, proximization, “us vs them”, ideological square, Twitter, Donald J. Trump, Syrian refugees

1 Introduction

While Populism is not a new phenomenon, it appears to have gained momentum, especially in the last decade (Wodak 2015, Wodak and Krzyżanowski 2017). To give a few examples from the contemporary political scene, in Italy, in 2013, 50% of the Italian electorate voted for a party that “could be labeled populist” (Verbeek and Zaslove 2016). In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders’ Freedom Party, one of the populist right-wing parties that entered politics in 2000, remains a recognizable force because of its steadfast concentration on anti-immigration and the purity of the Dutch people (van Kessel 2011). In Germany, a reaction to Angela Merkel’s open-borders-to-refugees policy led the Alternative für Deutschland right-wing populist party to gain 5.92 million votes in the 2017 German federal elections, a huge jump from the 1.42 million votes it gained in 2013 (Henley 2017).

According to Mudde and Kaltwasser, populism as an ideology has three main components: “the pure people,” “the corrupt elite,” and the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). The idea of the purity of the people, specifically, is a demarcation line that sets apart the citizen from the noncitizen and dictates the constitutional rights contingent on this demarcation. Populists argue that this line is apparent, indisputable, and clear-cut while many studies show that the entities of “us” and “them” are merely “imagined” social constructs (c.f. Anderson 2006). Purity, therefore, is merely politics and politics is perception. This makes perception an essential tool at the disposal of populists who manipulate it on semiotic and discursive levels in an attempt to effect and create political realities (for a discussion

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on Populism and Semiotics c.f. Ekström et al. 2018). The analytical tools employed in this article aim to examine the ideological manifestation of these realities on two levels. First, the level of nomenclature where the “them” part of the Ideological Square (van Dijk 1992, 1995, 2013) helps in identifying epithets and lexemes ascribed to refugees and helps us to examine the processes applied to these nomenclature choices. Second, at the level of threat representation of Syrian refugees, I find Proximization theory (Cap 2008, 2010, 2013) well equipped as a framework to explore the physical as well as the ideational atmosphere built around refugees because of its three dimensions: the temporal, spatial, and ideological.

What makes populist political realities more interesting nowadays is the availability of social media. Van Dijk argues that elite types of discourse, such as political or legal discourse, are “accessible directly only to a small segment of the ingroup” (van Dijk 1989: 203). Mass circulation of this elite discourse then requires and presupposes the employment of mass media which is in no way a neutral observant or unbiased transmitter of knowledge. It actively constructs and reconstructs knowledge. It also shifts the focus from one topic to another influenced by institutional and political ideologies.

In addition to these traditional properties, especially in the case of Twitter, there is the added factor that Twitter is an unmediated mass media outlet (Lassen and Brown 2010: 421). What this means is that politicians, through Twitter, have a direct window to their audience bypassing reframing and interpretations by other media. Thus, politicians are free to present the reader of their tweets with their firsthand ideological interpretation or construction of reality. Such ideologically motivated tweets contribute to constructions of “reality” as “ideologies create and propagate a secondary reality which one either has to believe in (totalitarian systems) or may believe in (democratic systems),” according to Wodak (1989: 140). In other words, there is “no such thing as a ‘pure,’ unbiased statement” as the production of a statement entails an inherent and concurrent attachment of purposes and wishes (Sornig 1989: 95).

For the purposes of this article, Donald J. Trump as a presidential candidate in 2016 stands out as a perfect example of a populist leader who makes use of Twitter to disseminate ideology. He employs anti-immigration rhetoric as a campaign platform where “he uses an informal, direct, and provoking communication style to construct and reinforce the concept of a homogeneous people and a homeland threatened by the dangerous other” (Kreis 2017). His rhetoric coincided with the Syrian War and the Syrian refugee crisis of 2014–2016. It also coincided with the Paris attack of November 13, 2015, from which Trump drew parallels and advanced his campaign as a populist candidate with an agenda “founded on isolationist beliefs and a general lack of openness to ‘outsiders’” (Bhatia and Jenks 2018: 5). In the course of his campaign, he brought immigration to the forefront and made it stand out in the midst of other contemporary issues with controversial tweets such as:

Europe and the U.S. must immediately stop taking in people from Syria. This will be the destruction of civilization as we know it! So sad!

(@realDonaldTrump, March 24, 2016)

In a plethora of tweets, Trump espoused his views and appealed to sections of the public evoking an image of terrorist refugees and devising discursive strategies, the central purpose of which was to impose a narrative that would help him win the election and translate his prevailing rhetoric to actual policies such as the travel ban from seven Muslim-majority countries, including Syria.

Therefore, it is important to examine the manner in which Donald J. Trump describes the “other” in his tweets because his tweets seem to be a firsthand representation of the ideological paradigm within which he operates and hopes to influence others. Additionally, as Sornig points out (Sornig 1989: 95), it appears to be that the way things are said rather than “the verifiable truth of a message that is relevant and likely to impress an audience and make it act upon a certain impulse.”

While Trump’s populist rhetoric as a presidential candidate has already undergone scholarly scrutiny (Enli 2017, Ott 2017) and his representation of the self and the other has also been studied (Kreis 2017), his rhetoric that pertains to the Syrian refugees as a threat in his campaign tweets remains unexplored, motivating this study. More specifically, I focus on how Trump’s tweets confuse and adopt certain nomenclature for political reasons and how they represent Syrian refugees as a threat and a negative out-group.

2 The concept of *Refugee* and critical discourse analysis studies

Refugee studies have received, and still receive, wide attention from the scholarly community, especially from interdisciplinary perspectives. A major problem with refugee studies is the fact that the terms associated with refugees are problematic. Officially defining someone as a *refugee* also means granting asylum status and obliges the host state to provide for that person. Therefore, there is a debate on the nomenclature and on who deserves refugee status and who does not (Wellman 2008: 12, Gibney 2014: 2). For instance, when a refugee is described as a forced migrant, *forced* is an “evaluative term [...] [that casts] moral judgment about [...] the movement in question” (Gibney 2014: 48).

Another issue related to nomenclature is exemplified in the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951), where the term *refugee* only applies to a person who is outside their country of origin and who has crossed international borders (Goodwin-Gill 2014: 52). It fails to consider the fact that a person may be internally displaced within their country of origin (Gibney 2014: 61). Many formulations of definitions have been attempted. For example, Matthew Price argues that what makes the refugee morally distinctive is their need for an alternative political membership (citizenship) (cited in: Gibney 2014: 61). Therefore, in the context of responses to refugee crises, the definitions and terminology used to identify those in need of sanctuary are important as they have practical implications such as economic, political, demographic, and religious concerns.

In the United States context, problems with post-9/11 immigration and terminology are not new. For example, in 2010 a campaign to ban the phrase *illegal immigrant* was launched by an advocacy group for illegal immigrants, Race Forward. The group argued that the term was being used by anti-immigration groups to de-humanize immigrants (Coulter 2015: 30).

For the purposes of this article, this issue of nomenclature and terminology and the rights contingent on it provide Donald J. Trump and right-wing populists a platform on which the terminology used to describe the refugees becomes the point of contention rather than the humanitarian aspect involved. When Trump terms Syrian refugees as *terrorists* or *rebels*, he takes the debate to a different dimension, away from whether to accept them into the United States. Additionally, the term *terrorist* risks providing a legitimization needed for the deportation of those already accepted by the previous administration.

In Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), ample studies have explored media coverage, stigmatization, and issues related to refugees and immigration. For example, Khosravinik adopts the acronym refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants (RASIM) to signify refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants in his study of British newspapers during the Balkan conflict (Khosravinik 2009). He employs a five-level analytical method from the Discourse-Historical Approach. These include naming, attribution, argumentative strategies, distancing strategies, and mitigation vs intensification. He concludes that the qualities attributed to RASIM are linked with the proximity of these people to the UK. He also concludes that conservative newspapers reproduce negative stereotypes about RASIM; while liberal newspapers highlight the “dramatic” themes of the plight these people had suffered from. His study is important for this research because it sheds light on the importance of collectivization vs individualization processes of representing refugees and the importance of stereotypes in the reproduction of exclusivist rhetoric employed in the representation of Syrian refugees.

Most recently Bhatia and Jenks studied the discursive portrayal of Syrian refugees in the context of the American dream by employing a multiperspective methodology that covers historicity, linguistic and semiotic action, and social impact (Bhatia and Jenks 2018). The study concludes that different versions of reality emanate from the immigration discourse and are used to “fabricate the American Dream in the portrayal of Syrian refugees” (Bhatia and Jenks 2018: 16). The study is closely related to the issue this article attempts to examine because it focuses on the image of the Syrian refugees in the media sparked by 2014–2016 mass migration movement. Their article is important for this research because it focuses on historical recontextualization of nomenclature and categorization.

3 Research methodology

3.1 Data

At the time of writing, over 50,000 tweets and retweets were found in Trump's twitter account. I aim to explore only the tweets directly related to Trump's portrayal of Syrian refugees and his commentary on the Syrian War and the Arab Spring changing into an "Islamist Winter" (@realDonaldTrump, November 11, 2011) because these tweets built an atmosphere of fear that set Trump apart from his competitors and centralized the immigration issue in the 2016 elections. For this purpose, I manually collected 32 tweets between November 11, 2011, Trump's first available tweet on the status of the Arab Spring, and February 28, 2017, his inauguration, from his personal Twitter account, @realDonaldTrump, using search words such as "Arab Spring," "Syria," and "Syrian refugees." These words are directly related to the Syrian War and the Syrian refugee crisis on which Trump partly built his campaign and platform and disseminated a populist discourse. I coded the tweets in terms of the ideological dichotomy of "us" vs "them" and proximization theory that studies temporal, physical, and ideological threat representations.

In this study, I attempt to answer questions such as:

1. How are Syrian refugees represented in Trump's tweets in terms of nomenclature?
2. How are Syrian refugees represented in Trump's tweets as a threat?
3. What properties of these refugees are emphasized and by what process?

3.2 Identity construction

Identity politics is an ever present construct in political encounters. Visible polarization of "us" and "them" indicates a subtext of dominance and power of one entity over the other. These two themes are fundamental concepts in establishing "legitimate and stable hierarchy in the political sphere" (Wirth-Koliba 2016: 1). This raises the question of the processes and techniques with which this dominance and power are presented.

To study the linguistic portrayal of Syrian refugees as the less dominant and less powerful out-group, I employ the Ideological Square (van Dijk 1992, van Dijk 1995, van Dijk 2013). In its simplest definition: it is the study of ideological representational structures that typically "emphasize positive properties of us, the ingroup, and negative properties of them, the outgroup" (van Dijk 2013: 222). Trump's tweets concerning Syrian refugees can be classified into two main themes. First, there is the rhetoric against Syrian refugees. Second, there is the positive self-presentation of Trump's position accompanied by continued critique of the Obama administration on the issue of immigration and critique of opponent candidates on their willingness to open borders for Syrians. However, it is important to note that the demarcation between these two themes is difficult to establish in most tweets because Trump self-presents while concurrently forming his immigration rhetoric. For example,

The **terrorists** in Syria are calling themselves **REBELS** and getting away with it because **our leaders are so completely stupid!** [boldface emphasis added]

(@realDonaldTrump, Sept 5, 2013)

In this tweet, Trump labels Syrian "rebels," whom he in other tweets maintains constitute the Syrian refugee groups, as "terrorists" while, at the same time, setting himself apart from what he perceives a negative aspect of "us," i.e. the "stupidity" of the Obama administration. In such cases and for the purposes of this article, I focus solely on the construction and negative representation of "them" rather than the self-presentation of "us" as the article's focus is the portrayal of the Syrian refugees and because there is much previous research that focused on Trump's "us" representations (c.f. Kreis 2017).

3.3 Proximization theory

To study the representation of Syrian refugees as a physical and security threat and analyze the populist argument for legitimizing countermeasures, I employ proximization theory. Proximization as a concept (Chilton 2004) and theory (Cap 2008, 2010, 2013) is a relatively recent development in CDA put forth to account for strategic regularities underlying “forced” constructions in political discourse (Cap 2013: 294). As a research method, it emerged to explore legitimization in the interventionist discourse of the Bush administration regarding the war on Iraq in 2003. Proximization is a discursive strategy of presenting physically and/or temporally distant events as increasingly and negatively consequential to the speaker and their addressee (Cap 2013: 293). The aim of proximization study in discourse is to explore legitimization of interventionist action against these negative imminent events. The two main entities in proximization are the outside-the-deictic-center (ODC) entities and inside-the-deictic-center (IDC) elements. The relationship between them is governed by three aspects: Spatial proximization (where the discourse peripheral entities ODC encroach physically upon the discourse central entities “addressee and speaker” or IDC), Temporal proximization (where a conflict is portrayed as imminent and dangerous requiring preventive measures), and Axiological proximization (where “home values” of the IDC are under constant potential threat by “foreign values” of the ODC regardless of the state of the current conflict, thereby opening a window for further legitimization and change in strategy based on eclecticism).

4 Results

The results of this research are organized into four sections:

Nomenclature is analyzed in one section that explores Trump’s lexical choices to describe Syrian refugees. Another section is dedicated to the dynamics and processes that the nomenclature undergoes and how these processes relate to the real-world events. Spatial and temporal proximizations are studied as one unit in a third section to account for the physical understanding of the discourse space crossed by refugees and what that means for Trump.

Finally, and separately, there is a discussion on axiological (ideological) proximization, which can be thought of as an umbrella framework that combines all the units above and best accounts for the overall political agenda. This final section is merged with the conclusion section to provide an evaluative account of all the units above.

4.1 Nomenclature choice: freedom fighters, rebels, jihadis, or terrorists

As early as 2013, Trump took a dim view of the Arab Spring and the fighting parties in Syria, in particular. He criticized what he perceived as the Obama administration’s support of “rebels” in Syria and the Middle East. He took one step further by labeling them “Jihadi.”

a. Remember, all these **‘freedom fighters’** in Syria want to fly planes into our buildings. [boldface emphasis added]

(@realDonaldTrump, Aug 28, 2013)

b. The **terrorists** in Syria are calling themselves **REBELS** and getting away with it because our leaders are so completely stupid! [boldface emphasis added]

(@realDonaldTrump, Sept 5, 2013)

c. Many of the Syrian **rebels are radical jihadi Islamists** who are murdering Christians. Why would we ever fight with them? [boldface emphasis added]

(@realDonaldTrump, Sept 6, 2013)

There is much attention paid to the choice of lexemes used in the debate, and Trump uses the general ambivalent term “rebel,” see (1-c), and mocks the term “freedom fighters,” see (1-a), because the latter casts favorable light on these people and brings to mind historical heroic actions such as those of the French resistance against the Nazis. Additionally, the ambivalence of the term “rebel” renders it susceptible to linkage with less favorable terms such as “Jihadis” and “Terrorists,” see (1-c) and (1-b). These choices of nomenclature are important because many of these “rebels” and their families were to become refugees and this naming strategy with its excluding consequences extends to them. Another function of Trump’s choices is to establish a portrayal of militarized refugees who in reality may or may not have actively participated on either side of the Syrian War.

4.2 Nomenclature processes: collectivization and potential violence

a. **refugees** from Syria are now **pouring** into our great country. Who knows who they are – some could be **ISIS**. Is our president insane? [boldface emphasis added]

(@realDonaldTrump, Nov 17, 2015)

b. **13 Syrian refugees** were caught trying to get into the U.S. through the Southern Border. How many made it? **WE NEED THE WALL!** [boldface emphasis added]

(@realDonaldTrump, Nov 22, 2015)

c. Crooked Hillary Clinton wants **to flood our country with Syrian immigrants** that we know little or nothing about. The **danger** is massive. **NO!** [boldface emphasis added]

(@realDonaldTrump, Jul 27, 2016)

d. **refugees** from Syria over **10k plus** more coming. **Lots young males, poorly vetted.** [sic, boldface emphasis added]

(@realDonaldTrump, Sept 19, 2016)

e. **“Five people killed** in Washington State by a **Middle Eastern immigrant.**” [boldface emphasis added]

(@realDonaldTrump, Sept 26, 2016)

In these tweets, the theme of potential violence is further developed as the link between refugees and terrorism is now made explicit. Trump exaggerates and emphasizes the negative properties of the Syrian refugees by singling out the fact that they are young and able-bodied, see (2-d). He also instills negative sentiments and fear by casting doubt on their identities, see (2-a).

The flood metaphor (Khosravinik 2009: 486, Hart 2010: 82, Featherman 2015: 78) figures in the verb “pouring,” see (2-a). This verb denotes a threatening action in an overwhelming capacity. For Trump, to “flood the country with Syrian refugees” necessarily means a rise in danger, see (2-c).

Another tool in the creation of the feeling of this overwhelming danger is Trump’s employment of explicit numbers such as “13 Syrian refugees,” see (2b), “over 10k plus,” see (2d), which are contrasted with the numbers of terror attack victims “Five” in an attack carried out by “Middle Eastern immigrant,” see (2e). This use of figures and numeric descriptions collectivizes refugees and transforms them from individuals with unique names and identities who are faced with plights to mere numbers that dehumanize them. Furthermore, in the case of one Middle Eastern immigrant killing five people, we note that there is collectivization by omission. The Middle Eastern immigrant mentioned in tweet 2e, Arcan Cetin, is of Turkish descent and emigrated with his family to the USA as a child. On September 23, 2016, he shot and killed four women and one man at random while shouting women’s names. Authorities could not establish a terrorist motive behind the killings (Anderson 2016, BBC 2016). So there is a number of potential reasons why this

Middle Eastern immigrant committed this crime. Omitting documented details and emphasizing the sole act of violence are part of a collectivization strategy on the part of Trump with the goal of drawing on a violence theme in his portrayal of immigrants including refugees.

4.3 Spatiotemporal threat construction

Within proximization theory, negative properties of “them,” such as the ones pointed to in the previous section, count as a call to legitimize a protectionist and preemptive prerogative of the United States to protect itself. This opens a window to examine Trump’s tweets for proximization strategies against the Syrian refugees from three angles: Spatial, Temporal, and Axiological.

a. If our **border is not secure** we can expect another attack. A country with open borders is open to the **terrorists**. [boldface emphasis added]

(@realDonaldTrump, July 31, 2014)

b. Everyone is **now** saying how right I was with illegal immigration & the wall. **After Paris** they’re all on the bandwagon. [boldface emphasis added]

(@realDonaldTrump, November 19, 2015)

c. Europe and the U.S. must **immediately stop taking in people from Syria**. This will be the **destruction of civilization** as we know it! So sad! [boldface emphasis added]

(@realDonaldTrump, March 24, 2016)

Temporal proximization can be seen in Trump’s warning of the Syrian refugees as imminent danger and a crisis waiting to happen. This is most visible in Trump’s employment of temporal adverbials to highlight the importance of his rhetoric in light of the Paris terrorist attack of November 2015, see (3b), perpetrated by ISIS and claiming the lives of 130 people. Syrian and Egyptian passports were found on-site (Wikipedia 2020). Trump sets a timeline of an impending danger and uses adverbial expressions of time to present this argument. While positively self-presenting with “I was right,” he is also saying that “now” and “after” the Paris attack is a different time than before. “Now” is the time for legitimizing an action against illegal immigration which potentially has links to terrorism. “Now” and “after” the Paris attacks, the potential violent intentions of some refugees are laid bare which make their looming danger a reality from a temporal perspective.

Spatial proximization can be traced in the Syrian refugees being represented as crossing the discourse space as ODC, encroaching on IDC, i.e. the United States (see 3a). It seems that representations of Syrian refugees are often linked with immigrants that cross the southern border. This can be explained in two ways. First, Trump and his supporters already share anxiety over illegal immigrants crossing the southern border. Claiming that Syrian refugees come from a distant country that Trump’s supporters know little or nothing about has more impact if these refugees are alleged to infiltrate and mix with already negatively viewed illegal immigrants. Second, constructing a theme of potential violence to describe the Syrian refugees as radical Jihadis and linking them to terrorist attacks in Europe motivates a preemptive and protectionist stance on a higher level than when dealing with ordinary illegal immigrants, which adds to the “WE NEED THE WALL!” narrative (@realDonaldTrump, November 11, 2015).

Trump keeps reminding his audience that the physical distance between the IDC and ODC is “shrinking” (Cap 2010: 395). He also keeps reminding them of the need to preemptively keep this distance by securing the borders, see (3-a), because ODC are assumed to bring with them a radical and terrorist ideology that can materialize anytime and anywhere. Axiological proximization strategy is the overall framework within which nomenclature, epithets, temporal proximization, and spatial proximization work, and it will be discussed separately in the next part.

5 Discussion and conclusion

Twitter and social media have recently become platforms for national and international social interactions. They provide a Habermasian digitized “public sphere.” This sphere provides “communication spaces in society that permit the circulation of information, ideas that facilitate debate leading to the formation of public opinion” (Dahlberg 2005: 114, Barnett et al. 2016: 1). This sphere deals with a multitude of topics ranging from transformative diplomacy (Duncombe 2018) to cultural and international relations (Mowlana 2015, Barnett et al. 2016). It also provides a space where national identity can be built as well as contested (Yadlin-segal 2017). Twitter gives its user the “capacity to both represent emotions and also provoke strong emotional reactions from other users, leading to large-scale debates that become integrated into offline political outcomes” (Duncombe 2019).

Using Twitter, Trump centralized the immigration theme in the 2016 presidential elections and used it as a platform to provoke a reaction from the American public, focusing on concepts such as the uncertainty of the refugees’ identities and their supposed affiliation to extremist organizations and, in the process, enhanced his electoral position.

Regarding nomenclature, Trump’s upgrade of the general term “rebel” into “Jihadi” and “terrorist” is a neorealist wholesale tactic reminiscent of the one taken by George W. Bush after the attacks of 9/11.

Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. (Bush 2001)

Trump’s choice is also a detachment from the liberal Obama term *violent extremists* (Obama 2009), where Obama’s term requires tracing a radicalization process to identify extremists. This radicalization may or may not be associated with violence. So the lethality of Obama’s term is not as apparent since “to be radical is merely to reject the status quo, and not necessarily in a problematic or violent way” (Bartlet and Miller 2012: 2). Therefore, the lexical choice of *terrorist* is more direct, comprehensive, and suited to Trump’s political framework and campaign platform while Obama’s is a two-step verification process. Trump’s campaign regards national interests and threats to national security as physical and tangible statistics rather than social constructs contingent on the state’s understanding of the refugees and immigrants. This is why, Trump’s naming techniques reflect a different view of world politics than that of Obama’s.

Regarding the theme of potential violence, while it may or may not be a valid assumption that Syrian refugees who arrived in Europe were “poorly vetted,” it is certainly not the case of the 15,583 Syrian refugees in the USA who were admitted between 2014 and 2016 (Kallick et al. 2016: 2). The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) vetting process is lengthy and strict. Multiple Biographic checks, biometrics registration, and travel documentation reports are only the first step in this rigorous process. This step occurs even before the diplomatic mission interview and before the national security processing (USCIS 2020). “Even if USCIS approves an applicant for refugee status, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) must still find that applicant admissible to the United States,” and it reserves the right to conduct “additional background checks of these individuals upon arrival at a U.S. port of entry” before finally clearing them for admission (USCIS 2020).

So by pointing to the uncertainty of refugees’ identities, rendered impossible by USCIS procedures, Trump not only demonizes refugees but also conducts an axiological (ideological) proximization strategy that seeks to legitimize preemptive distance keeping via building a wall and securing borders. In other words, if spatiotemporal proximization of the potentially violent refugee crossing the discourse space and infiltrating the southern borders for any reason loses its momentum, the ideological construction of the uncertainty of refugees’ identities and documents will serve as a fail-safe argument to maintain the legitimization of the preemptive rhetoric. This uncertainty is harder to refute, and it maintains the sense of an imminent threat which is achieved by fearmongering about the Syrian refugees.

The aim of Trump’s axiological strategy is to build the argument for building the “wall” and cutting down on immigration. This was the pillar objective on which Trump’s 2016 campaign was built. This argument set Trump apart from his predecessor and from his political opponents during the campaign and helped him win by appealing to the average American’s fear of terror attacks similar to 9/11.

Additionally, Trump used this axiological proximization to also represent his political competitors, Hillary Clinton for example, as irresponsible for wanting to flood the country with Syrian refugees. His strategy, also, legitimized his administration’s protectionist stance on the southern border of the United States. The elaborate narrative devised by fearmongering and the adoption of certain nomenclature contributed to Trump’s winning the elections, and its ultimate prevalence over competing narratives facilitated later policies of his administration. The prime example here is the Executive Order 13769, banning people from seven Muslim-majority countries, including Syria, which is one direct result of this axiological proximization as it relies on a populist narrative of immigrants and refugees that links them to terrorism. Trump’s tweets present a distorted political interpretation of reality and indicate strategical representations of Syrian refugees aimed at establishing and legitimizing anti-immigration rhetoric benefiting from the fact that Twitter allows reaching large sections of the society directly and without third-party mediation.

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