# The Egyptian Revolution of 2011 and the Power of Its Slogans: A Critical Discourse Analysis

## Khaled Al Masaeed[a],*

[a]PhD. School of Middle Eastern & North African Studies, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, US.
*Corresponding author.

## Abstract

Egypt, the most populated country in the Arab world, erupted in mass protests in January 2011 against the oppressive rule of President Hosni Mubarak. Protesters all over Egypt in general and in Tahrir Square in Cairo wanted Mubarak to leave. Protesters used different dialects, languages, and modes to get their message across. After 18 days of angry protests and after losing the support of the military and the US, Mubarak finally understood the message and resigned on Feb. 11, ending almost 30 years of dictatorial rule. This article builds on studies in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and its implementation of interdisciplinarity to investigate the slogans—fixed expressions, usually chosen carefully by organizers and activists, which are often chanted by political groups and protestors at demonstrations that were used during the Egyptian revolution in late January and February 2011. Moreover, the article shows how CDA—through embracing text as a dialogue and site for interaction, social goods and social languages, interpersonal relations and discourse, multimodality, and intertextuality can help to produce theoretically sound interpretation that is appropriate for the analysis of how Egyptians used the power of language through these slogans to empower themselves, challenge their government, and overthrow the former president Hosni Mubarak.

**Key words:** Critical discourse analysis; Egyptian revolution; Multimodality; Language and power

## INTRODUCTION

The slogans of the Egyptian revolution (see Figures 1-2 below) were very powerful and worth analyzing. These slogans call for us to unpack what is in them to gain a better understanding of the way they were written, who they were written for, what purpose or purposes they have, what identity the protesters create for themselves through the language being used in this kind of text, and so much else that we can (learn) through analyzing these slogans. Barbara Johnstone (2008) posits that:

> The basic question that a discourse analyst asks is "Why is this stretch of discourse the way it is? Why is it no other way? Why these particular words in this order?"…We also need to think about who said it…who the intended audience was and who the actual hearers or readers were, because who the participants in a situation are and how their roles are defined clearly influences what gets said and how. We need to think about what motivated the text, about how it fits into the set of things people in its context conventionally do with discourse…Each of there categories corresponds to one way in which contexts shape texts and texts shape contexts. (p.9)

In analyzing this kind of text (i.e., Slogans of the Egyptian Revolution), I chose to apply, besides "Critical Discourse Analysis" (Fairclough, 1995; Kress, 1989; Van Dijk, 2001; Wodak & Meyer 2009) as the main umbrella, *some of* the key concepts that CDA employs in studying texts. These concepts include "dialogism"

(Waugh 1977), "text as a site for interaction" (Hoey, 2001), "Social goods and social languages" (Gee, 2011, a&b), "interpersonal relations and discourse" (Johnstone, 2008), "Multimodality" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Kress, 2003), and "intertextuality" (Kress, 1989; Baezerman, 2004).

## 1. CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is mainly concerned with investigating the relationship between discourse and power in society. Teun A. Van Dijk (2001) defines CDA as "a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context" (p.352).

An important perspective in CDA related to the notion of 'power' is that it is very rare that a text is the work of only one person. In texts, discursive differences are negotiated; they are governed by differences in power that is in part encoded in and determined by discourse and by genre. Therefore, texts are often sites of struggle in that they show traces of differing discourses and ideologies contending and struggling for dominance. Fairclough (1995), whose approach to CDA is similar to van Dijk's, sees CDA "as a resource for people who are struggling against domination and oppression in its linguistic terms" (p.1). Therefore, language and power are the center of investigation in CDA and that is what Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer (2009) pointing out by stating that:

> Power does not necessarily derive from language, but language can be used to challenge power, to subvert it, to alter distributions of power in the short and the long term. Language provides a finely articulated vehicle for establishing differences in power in hierarchical social structures…CDA aims to investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, constituted, legitimized, and so on, by language use (or in discourse). (p.10)

Moreover, CDA, through its implementation of interdisciplinarity, is also useful in doing close analysis of the texts and situating them in the larger social, cultural, and political context. Wodak and Meyer (2009) point out this characteristic of CDA by stating that "CDA uses the concepts of intertextuality and interdiscursivity…it may be concluded that CDA is open to a broad range of factors exerting an influence on texts" (p.21). Therefore, Van Leeuwen (2006) argues that "[c]ritical discourse analysis has also moved beyond language, taking on board that discourses are often multimodally realized, not only through text and talk, but also through other modes of communication such as images" (p.292). Looking at what the slogans used during the Egyptian revolution provides a clear example of how language and power are very related and affect each other. Egyptians used a lot of slogans in several languages such as English, French, Chinese, Hebrew, German, etc. These multilingual slogans were

written on signs and chanted out loud in the streets of Egypt throughout massive protests asking Hosni Mubarak to step down.

One of the most powerful and discursive slogans was "People want to overthrow the regime" (Figure 1). This slogan was very powerful and shocking at the same time. It was shocking because a lot of people thought that the Arab World in general and Egyptians in particular would never protest in such a serious way against their oppressive governments. This slogan was also very powerful because of the way it was stated; it clearly states that "the people" do not want the president. That meant the country and its people are the ones who decide who should rule and they have spoken and therefore must be heard. The most powerful aspect of this slogan is the fact that people have realized that they are powerful and can make change if they want to—and this means that they do not have to bear oppression anymore.

Egyptians used language to challenge their government and their president who ruled the country with a heavy hand for almost thirty years. This exactly what Wodak and Meyer (2009) explain when they state that:

> Power is about relations of difference, and particularly about the effects of differences in social structures. The constant unity of language and other social matters ensures that language is entwined in social power in a number of ways: language indexes and expresses power, and is involved where there is contention over and a challenge to power. Power does not necessarily derive from language, but language can be used to challenge power, to subvert it, to alter distributions of power in the short and the long term. Language provides a finely articulated vehicle for establishing differences in power in hierarchical social structures. (p.10)

And the slogan "People want to overthrow the regime" (Figure 1) is one strong example among many that shows how people employ languages to strengthen their case and challenge power.

## 2. SLOGNAS AS DIALOGS AND SITES FOR INTERACTION, SOCIAL GOODS AND SOCIAL LANGUAGES, AS WELL AS INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS AND DISCOURSE

These slogans are a dialog between the Egyptian protesters and their government represented by the former president Hosni Mubarak on the one hand, and the rest of the world on the other. Texts are certainly and necessarily dialogic. Linda Waugh (1997), just like Jakobson and Bakhtin, argues that dialogue is the basis of language. She points out that:

For Jakobson, in the history of linguistics, everything is related in some way to everything else, whether the relation be near or far, complementary or contradictory. Everyone is engaged in collective research in which everybody can benefit from the insights of others (p.105).

Slogans of the Egyptian revolution are definitely dialogic in the sense that they have an addresser, addressee(s), and an audience. We have the protestors/addresser protesting against/addressing their president and his government and the rest of the world/audience. Protesters are demonstrating that they do not want Hosni Mubarak as a president and want him to step down. They also have a dialogue with rest of the world asking for their support.

Slogans are also an interaction between the Egyptian people, on the one hand, and the Egyptian government and the rest of the world on the other. Let us take a close look at one of the most powerful slogans during the revolution "People want to overthrow the regime" (Figure 1). This slogan represents a site for interaction and dialogism between the protesters and the readers/people who watch the news and the media that cover the revolution—whether in Egypt or outside Egypt. In such a case, Hoey (2001) argues that the text should fulfill the writer/author's goals and, at same time, remember the power of the reader(s)/audience in accepting or rejecting the text (p.18). The way the slogan is written reflects the protesters' awareness of their readers/audience, which, as a result, led them to make sure they focus on their needs, on the one hand, and the action that should be taken by their government on the other.

Furthermore, Egyptians thought of another audience other than their government; it is everybody else whether in the Arab World or the Western world. This is clear through the use of multiple languages that are used in their slogans and signs. The same slogan was written in several languages including Arabic and English as can be seen in Figure 1.

Another look at the text would certainly lead us to consider the language that Egyptians use in this slogan. That is because language mirrors the identity of its user—the way writers/speakers choose their vocabulary plays a significant role in telling what social identity they carry out. Therefore, when it comes to register or what James Gee (2011b) calls "Social languages," Gee argues that

> Vocabulary in English is one marker of different styles of languages—different registers or social languages. A preponderance of Germanic words marks a style as less formal and more vernacular than a preponderance of Latinate words, which marks a style as more formal…For any English communication, ask what sort of words are being used in terms of whether the communication uses a preponderance of Germanic words or of Latinate words. (p.53)

Egyptians, in this and many other slogans, expressed their anger and frustration with their government through using this kind of language. If we zoom into the slogan "People want to overthrow the regime", it becomes clear to us as readers that it is the "*people*" of Egypt, not a certain party or an individual who "*want*" to "*overthrow*" the "*regime*". Vocabulary choice here is important because we usually do not see it this way in the everyday

language. This style is chosen this way to show the Egyptians' agreement and seriousness on the one hand and their dissatisfaction with the regime, on the other. This goes hand in hand with what James Gee (2001a) calls "social goods" when he states that "we can speak or write so as to accept others as "winners" or "losers" in the game of practice in which we are engaged. In speaking and writing, then, we can both gain or lose and give or deny social goods" (p.7). It is clear throughout this slogan that Egyptians used this kind of language to be "socially good" and to be taken seriously by their audiences (the regime and the rest of the world). Johnstone (2008) highlights the significant role of "interpersonal relations" in shaping the text. Johnstone argues that:

> The interpersonal relations connected with discourse include relations among the speakers and writers, audiences, and overhearers who are represented in texts, as well as the relations among speakers and writers, audiences, and overhearers who are involved in producing and interpreting texts. (p.15)

It is clear at this point that analyzing this text in terms of interaction, and language has helped in gaining a deeper understanding of how powerfully protesters expressed themselves against their oppressive president and his cruel corrupted system.

## 3. MULTIMODALITY

A multimodal theory of communication is based "on an analysis of the specificities and common traits of semiotic modes which take account of their social, cultural and historical production" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, p.4). Multimodality could be defined as the use of two or more modes in the production of meaning or representation of social life. "Modes are semiotic resources which allow the simultaneous realisation of discourses and types of (inter)action" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, pp.21-22). These semiotic modes are then selected and combined from the options available "according to the interests of a particular communication situation"(Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, p.22). It is possible nowadays to use multiple modes, such as verbal texts, sounds, and images. It is also worth mentioning that color and font can be considered as modes too (Kress, 2003, Ch.8).

In multimodality, it is important to mind the difference between the terms "mode" and "medium". Mode is a semiotic resource whereas a medium is the material used to make that mode possible. Therefore, one mode could be expressed in more than one medium. For example, the linguistic mode could be expressed in writing or in speech. Kress & Leeuwen (2001) expressed this distinction clearly as they observe that:

> Media are the material resources used in the production of semiotic products and events, including both the tools and the materials used (e.g. the musical instrument and air; the chisel and the block of wood). They usually are specially produced

for this purpose, not only in culture (ink, paint, cameras, computers), but also in nature (our vocal apparatus). (p.22)

Furthermore, Kress contends that the relation between the signifier/form and the signified/meaning is a motivated (not arbitrary) one. This means "representation" is "engaged" not "neutral": "that which is represented in the sign, or in sign complexes, realises the interests, the perspectives, the positions and values, of those who make signs" (p.44).

In a multimodal screen, modes may have what Kress (2003) calls "functional specialization": "writing used for the representation of event structures, and image used for the representations of displays of aspects of the world" (p.117). Since the multimodal text may be read in multiple ways (what is called the "perlocutionary act" by Austin (1962)), the reading path is determined by "the principles of relevance of the reader" (p.162). In other words, there is not one possible analysis of any multimodal text. It may be analyzed potentially in as many ways as there are readers. Another important concept in analyzing text is that a text is usually meant to communicate a message to an audience (what is called the "illocutionary act" by Austin (1962)). So the understanding of such a message depends on the "semiotic community" which "describes the people in the same culture, sharing the same assumptions, and selecting choices within the common semiotic resources to make meaning" (Lim, 2004, p.60).



**Figure 1**
**"People Want to Overthrow the Regime" Slogans on Arabic** (Left) **and English** (Right) **Protest Banners**

In Figure 1 (which consists of two banners—English on the right and Arabic on the left), has a lot to express from a multimodal point of view. Starting with language, it is obvious that the message is expressed through two languages to show i) Mubarak and the world, especially the West, that we are not satisfied with the regime and therefore want it to go; ii) that Egyptians are educated and deserve a better regime to lead their country. The use of more than one language really engaged different parts of the world and, in a way, "pushed" the US and other powerful and influencing countries to intervene and call Mubarak and make it clear to him that he needs to listen

to what his people want and respect their wishes. This also led different parts of the world to identify with Egyptians and support them.

On the left side of Figure 1 we can see the picture of the people protesting and asking the regime to leave. The image here, in a way, looks like a fire that comes up from the people and the Egyptian flag to build up and burn Mubarak at the top left where he seems to be fading away and can hardly be seen. This, again, reflects the strength of the people's will and unity. A will that is powerful and irresistible that will eventually burn Mubarak and his regime. Furthermore, if we pay attention to the way the words are written, it is clear that there is a focus on the word "regime". It is written in a way that highlights that "People want to overthrow the **Regime**" to stress the fact that the people of Egypt are after the regime and will not let go till Mubarak is totally gone.

Besides, these words are written in red and this color denotes danger and seriousness and these words therefore should be carefully read. The Egyptian flag is clear in the colored part of Figure 1. It represents Egyptians' unity and their love of their country. The flag shows that the people of Egypt are doing this for the sake of their country not for an individual interest. Mubarak is shown as the enemy of Egypt and therefore has to step down.

Moreover, it is worth noting that on the right side of the colored part of Figure 1, there is a hint of the Tunisian revolution and the overthrown president Bin Ali. We can see the Tunisian flag and a famous phrase that states 'you are first and we are second' which means that Bin Ali first and you Mubarak will be next. This interpretation best fits under intertextuality, which is discussed in further details later in this article.

Figure 2 also has a lot to tell us about the way Egyptians expressed themselves during the revolution against Mubarak. On the right part of Figure 2, we have the slogan "MUBARAK!/THE PEOPLE/ HAVE SPOKEN/ TAKE YOUR REGIME/& GET OUT" with emphasis on **MUBARAK** and **GET OUT**. These are written in bold red and the importance of this color has already explained. These words are written this way to shock Mubarak and clearly show him that he is not wanted as a president anymore and he needs to leave.

The other part of Figure 2 is very expressive through the use of both images and writing. In this part of Figure 2 we see Mubarak being pushed to a hole in front of him by a big rock from behind. He is struggling and trying to resist but the rock is very powerful and hard to be resisted. The people in this image are represented through the rock. The Arabic writing on the rock says "people's will". On the right side of this image we have some words addressed to Mubarak stating: "you have one push and you are OUT". Again the word 'out' is written in red to shock Mubarak and emphasize that he will step down whether he likes is or not.

Furthermore, the Arabic phrase that might be directly translated "No Mubarak" has two interpretations that go hand in hand with expressing dissatisfaction with Mubarak: i) we do not want Mubarak as the president; ii) Mubarak "which means Blessed in Arabic" is not "blessed" because of his brutal way of running the country and because of the people's anger at him. All these Slogans with their writing and images stress the fact that people in Egypt do not want Mubarak and that they are aware of the fact that they have the whole right to choose who is to lead their country.

Protesters expressed their message through different languages to show that their audience was not only the regime but also the world. Arabic and English were not the only languages of the revolution; slogans were written with several other languages such as German, Chinese, Hebrew, and Egyptian Hieroglyphics. The employment of these languages was to show the world that Egyptians are modern, educated, and aware of the fact that the world is watching. In addition, besides Arabic, English was in favor throughout the revolution to show the world in general and the West in particular that Egyptians speak English and realize that it is the global language.

Social networking stimulated the eruption of the revolution through the use of Facebook, twitter, and other forms of social networking. English played an important role in starting the revolution due to the fact that it is the main language of these social networks. There was a long process of preparing for this revolution through Facebook by the Google executive Wael Ghonim who set up a popular Facebook group for this purpose. Setting up this group caused him to be arrested for about 10 days. However, that did not stop protesters from using technology to express themselves. They kept using different modes of communication even after the government cut the Internet and disabled mobiles and phones in Egypt. For example, young protester went out in the streets carrying signs of computers with writings on screen showing "Delete Mubarak", "Facebook", "Google", and "Twitter".

## 4. INTERTEXTUALITY

Intertextuality also was clearly implemented in the language of the Egyptian revolution. Intertextuality takes place when a text borrows or alludes to word(s), ideas, or thoughts from another text. Everything we say or write is being said or written in reaction to something we read, heard, or said before. Texts therefore are certainly and inevitably dialogic and intertextual in the sense that any text is a link in an organized chain of other texts. For this reason Gunther Kress (1989) argues that:

> No text is ever the text of a single speaker or writer. All texts show traces of differing discourses, contending and struggling for dominance. Texts are therefore the sites of struggle, and in being the sites of struggle, texts are the sites of linguistic and

cultural change. Individuals…are the bearers and agents of that struggle. (p.32)
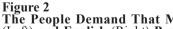
In CDA, it is important to take intertextuality into consideration and analyze it because it helps in revealing speakers' and writers' strategies in reinforcing or re-constructing ideas and beliefs.
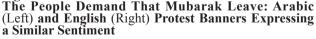
In the case of the main slogan of the Egyptian revolution "People want to overthrow the regime", this slogan itself is intertextual in the sense that it echoes the last two lines of the Tunisian National Anthem. These final two lines were written by the famous Tunisian poet Abo Al-Qassim Al-Shabbi. The two lines can be translated as follows: "if the people want to live, then destiny must respond/ darkness will disappear, and chains will surely break/".

The slogan was also taken directly from the successful Tunisian revolution that was, in fact, the first to use this slogan to overthrow the former president of Tunisia, Bin Ali. "People want to overthrow the regime" (Figure 1) is clearly based on Al-Shabbi's notion of the power of people's will that has to be heard and eventually lead to change.

Moreover, it is worth pointing out that the same idea and intertextuality were discursively used in other slogans throughout the serious mass protests and the use of slogans like the one in Figure 2 below which basically asks Mubarak to leave because that is what the people want. Egyptians were able to show their former president that their voices deserve to be heard and that they want him to go and therefore will not stop protesting till he steps down.



**Figure 2**
**The People Demand That Mubarak Leave: Arabic** (Left) **and English** (Right) **Protest Banners Expressing a Similar Sentiment**

Finally, based on dialogism and intertextuality, it might be safe to claim that for any particular text there is a set of other texts and voices that are potentially relevant, and potentially incorporated into the text. It is clear at this point to see how intertextuality is a powerful tool in interpreting the relationship between discourse and power in society. Intertextuality analysis, as Charles Bazerman

(2004) observes, "helps us understand the meaning of the text more deeply" (p.83). CDA and intertextuality go hand in hand and both of them helped in achieving a better understanding of the origins and the goals of the discourse that Egyptians used in their revolution.

## CONCLUSION

This article, informed by Critical Discourse Analysis and its implementation of interdisciplinarity, aimed at understanding how Egyptians used language to express their dissatisfaction with the former president Hosni Mubarak and finally push him to step down. I have demonstrated throughout the article how CDA is a powerful tool in explaining the relationship between language and power and showing the text as a site of struggle where language and power are always related to each other.

Through integrating text as site for interaction, social goods and social languages, interpersonal relations and discourse, multimodality, and intertextuality, CDA helped to reach what I call a sound interpretation that is appropriate for the analysis of how playing with language could successfully work in challenging oppressive regimes. Egyptians used language through different modes as a weapon in the form of slogans to empower themselves, engage the world, challenge their government, and overthrow the former president Hosni Mubarak.

Teachers could benefit from this article and implement it in their classrooms. The role of languages, especially English, on the world stage provides us with an interesting opportunity to discuss the political implications of language choices with our students. What the Egyptians did through their revolution, as can be seen through the data in this article, is just another example to show that language is powerful and can work as a tool to challenge power.

## REFERENCES

Austin, J. (1962). *How to do things with words.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bazerman, C., & Prior, P. (Eds.). (2004*). What writing does and how it does it: An introduction to analyzing texts and textual practices*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study* of *language.* London: Longman.

Gee, J. (2011a). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method* (3rd ed.). London: Routledge.

Gee, J. (2011b). *How to do discourse analysis: A toolkit.* London: Routledge.

Hoey, M. (2001). *Textual interaction.* London: Routledge.

Johnstone, B. (2008). *Discourse analysis* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Blackwell.

Kress, G. (1989). *Linguistic processes in sociocultural practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kress, G. (2003). *Literacy in the new media age.* London: Routledge.

Kress, G., & Van Leeuwen, T. (2001). *Multimodal discourse: The modes and media of contemporary communication.* London: Arnold.

Lim, F. (2004). Problematising "semiotic resource". In E. Ventola, C. Charles, & M. Kaltenbacher (Eds.), *Perspectives on multimoda/ity* (pp.51-63). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Van Dijk, T. A. (2001). Critical discourse analysis. In D. Schiffrin, D. Tannen, & H. E. Hamilton (Eds.), *The handbook of discourse analysis* (pp.352-371). Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Van Leeuwen, T. (2006). Critical discourse analysis. In K. Brown (Ed.), *Elsevier Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics* (pp.290-294). UK: Elsevier.

Waugh, L. (1997). Roman Jakobson's work as a dialogue: The dialogue as the basis of language, the dialogue as the basis of scientific work. *Acta Linguistica Hafniensia, 29*, 101-120.

Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (Eds.). (2009). *Methods of critical discourse analysis* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.