



Representations of the Armed Forces of Myanmar in News Headlines: A Case Study of Myanmar Coup d'état in 2021

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Abstract

This present study aims to examine the representations of the Armed Forces of Myanmar in Thai news headlines as well as to unearth the ideologies of the news headline writers that are hidden in the headlines based on the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. The data used in the analysis were headlines written in Thai which were gathered from a well-known and credible Thai local news website. These headlines were all related to the protests against the military coup d'état which took place in 2021 in Myanmar. The theoretical frameworks employed in the analysis of the collected headlines include the representational strategies (van Leeuwen, 1996) and the transitivity analysis (Machin and Mayr, 2012). In terms of the representational strategies, the results of the analysis showed that the Armed Forces of Myanmar were represented mainly using functionalization and collectivization. Each division in the army was represented by their roles and they were collectivized and viewed as groups because the headline writers did not refer to any particular individuals who were involved in the coup d'état and the violent suppressions of the protests. In addition, the results from the transitivity analysis showed that the Armed Forces of Myanmar were represented as actors or agents in the material process which involved a lot of violent action verbs such as kill, suppress, and shoot. The findings of the study clearly reflected the representations of the Armed Forces of Myanmar and also how news may construct the social identities of the Armed Forces of Myanmar among people.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis, Representations, Transitivity, The Armed Forces of Myanmar, Coup d'état*

1. Background

Throughout centuries, newspapers have provided readers with information about the events of the day (Tanikawa, 2017). They could influence the readers' perceptions and bring about changes in various aspects such as politics, culture, social issues, and even religions (Abbas & Talaat, 2019). Most newspapers were originally in a printed format. However, with the emergence of the online platform, newspapers have changed a lot in terms of the formats and the styles of writing (Tanikawa, 2017). These days, most people no longer buy printed newspapers since they could easily gain access to online news sites anytime and anywhere using their mobile phones or other electronic devices. Since there are several local and international online news sites, each news publisher needs to compete with each other in drawing people's attention. One thing that the news publishers could do is to use an eye-catching headline.

According to Pasha (2011), a headline refers to a type of text whose primary function is to summarize the whole story or the main point of the news article. It functions as a forerunner to the body of the news since the readers would normally scan and read the headlines before they read the news (Javed & Mahmood, 2011). In addition, the headline is also used to catch the readers' attention and lure the readers into opening the news article (Chen, Conroy, & Rubin, 2015). A distinctive headline tends to receive more attention from the readers (Thongkliang, 1995 as mentioned in Thanomsak 1999). To create an effective headline to impress the readers, language use plays an important role. Moe (2014) proposed that writing an effective headline involves a unique set of grammatical rules. The news writers often deploy various techniques and strategies. They might employ unusual grammar patterns, well-chosen words, as well as figurative devices to write headlines. In this present study, the Thai headlines for the news related to the Myanmar Coup d'état in 2021 were brought into the analysis



2. Related Literature

2.1 Myanmar Coup d'état in 2021

According to Maizland (2021), after gaining independence from the British in 1948, Myanmar had been under the control of a military junta for many years and had experienced various internal problems such as ethnic division, and isolation from the international community, as well as poverty. However, after Aung San Suu Kyi had won a majority of seats in the combined parliament in the 2015 Myanmar general election which was held for the first time since 1990, the country itself and the whole world were with the hoped that Myanmar politics would finally be based upon democratic principles. It also reflected how Myanmar citizens defied political authoritarianism and promoted democracy (Ebbighausen, 2020).

Nevertheless, such a victory doesn't seem to solve the country's long-lasting problems. This is because Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) party fail to negotiate and deal with the ethnic minorities, who could be deemed the third polar of power in Myanmar apart from the military and the civilian government. Consequently, the people's expectations to see peace and the termination of civil wars have not yet been fulfilled. Furthermore, the NLD's refusal to truly open the country and accept outside expertise has greatly decreased the country's potential for economic transformation. This carried away the chance of having large international companies investing in the country. The incident which led Aung San Suu Kyi to face an international condemnation was when she denied the accusations of genocide at the International Court of Justice in the Hague despite having many reports on domestic genocide against the Rohingya (Ebbighausen 2020).

In 2020, the general elections were held for the second time, and the NLD party won most seats in the parliament although the elections were claimed to be flawed by the Human Rights Watch due to the disenfranchisement of Rohingya and other laws which barred them from casting their vote fairly (Maizland, 2021). Enraged by the election defeat, the military, and its USDP party, under the leadership of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, alleged voter fraud, and staged a coup d'état in February 2021 and issued a year-long state of emergency, resulting in the detention of Aung San Suu Kyi as well as the NLD party members (Elliott, 2021). This has led to the largest protests over the coup in Myanmar history. The anti-coup protesters included people from different professions such as lawyers, teachers, students, bank officers, as well as government officers. The military had responded to the protests in various aggressive ways. Apart from implementing curfews and limits to gatherings, water cannons, rubber bullets, and live ammunition had been used to disperse the gatherings. From this violent suppression, it has been reported that more than 900 people were killed, and thousands of people were arrested (Cuddy, 2021).

The 2021 Myanmar coup d'état has surely drawn global attention. News sources in each region and country have constantly reported the incidents happening in Myanmar to people. It is, therefore, interesting to see how the Myanmar military was represented through the news, especially in the news headlines.

2.2 Critical Discourse Analysis

In this study, critical discourse analysis was selected as an approach to analyzing the representation of the Myanmar military in the news headlines. Critical discourse analysis (abbreviated as CDA) is an area of language study that is rapidly developing. According to Fairclough (1989 as cited in Machin and Mayr, 2012), this critical discourse analysis aims to analyze "linguistic elements to reveal connections between language, power, and ideology that are hidden from people." This critical language study stems from the view of language as a means of social construction in the sense that language shapes and are simultaneously shaped by society. In other words, CDA highlights a dialectical relationship between discourse or text and its contexts. This means that the production of discourse is shaped by social factors such as culture or setting, language, participant, and purpose, and at the same time discourse itself shapes and reshapes the thoughts and practices of the speech community (Johnstone, 2000). In a similar vein, van Dijk (2001) proposes that CDA is "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." So, CDA usually addresses the outcomes of the transparent inequality of power in the society in terms of gender, race, class, as well as ethnicity which is represented and reproduced in the discourse. According to Bloor and Bloor



(2007), CDA is multidisciplinary in nature. In other words, CDA can be employed in the studies of various disciplines, i.e., social psychology, politics, sociology, and more.

In CDA, the individuals or groups of people involved in a particular social event or practice are called 'social actors' or 'participants' (Machin & Mayr, 2012). According to van Leeuwen (1996), these social actors or participants could be represented differently in the discourse. Based upon his Sociosemantic Inventory approach, there were two major ways to represent the social actors or participants, i.e., exclusion and inclusion.

For the exclusion, van Leeuwen (1996) mentioned that a social practice requires sets of social actors, but when representing reality, some social actors might be intentionally excluded from the text. In other words, not all the social actors are represented in the discourse. Representatives may exclude social actors to suit their purposes in the production of the discourse or the target readers. The exclusion could be done in two ways, i.e., through suppression and backgrounding.

Inclusion, on the other hand, is when the social actors in the social practice are included or represented in the text. According to van Leeuwen (1996), the representation of the social actors could be done in various ways. The representation strategies are, for example, 1) the role allocation or the role which the social actors are assigned to play, either activated or passivated, 2) personalization and impersonalization or whether the social actors are represented as human beings (personalized) or other means such as abstract nouns and concrete nouns (impersonalized), 3) functionalization and identification or when the social actors are represented using their occupation or role or when the social actors are defined in terms of what they are, respectively, 4) genericization and specification or whether the social actors are referred to generically or specifically, and 5) individualization and assimilation or when the social actors are referred to as individuals or groups, respectively. According to Machin and Mayr (2012), these representation strategies could help discourse producers, especially news writers, to identify the social actors and, at the same time, shape people's perspectives on the social practice.

Apart from the representation of social actors, CDA also aims to analyze the processes that occur in the world via formal grammatical components as well (Beji, 2016). This could be done via an analysis of transitivity. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), transitivity is referred to as "a system of the clause, affecting not only the verb serving as a process but also participants and circumstances." Similarly, Simpson (1993) stated that "transitivity refers generally to how meaning is represented in the clause. It shows how speakers encode in language their mental picture of reality and how they account for their experience of the world around them." To put it simply, the analysis of transitivity is to answer the questions of who (or what) does what to whom (or what) (Beji, 2016).

The analysis of transitivity is related to three key components including participants, processes, and circumstances. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), the participants refer to the doers (actors) and the done-to (goals) in the clause which could be people, things, or abstract ideas. The process refers to the verb or verb phrase in the clause. The circumstances mean the surrounding elements in the clauses such as prepositional phrases and adverbial phrases, which help signify where, when, and how something has happened. Considering the processes, in particular, there are six types including 1) material processes which refer to the processes of doing something such as shooting, killing, and murdering, 2) mental processes which refer to the processes of sensing such as like, see, and understand, 3) verbal processes which refer to processes of saying such as say, explain, and tell, 4) relational processes which refer to processes of being such as verbs to be (is, am, are) and has/have, 5) behavioral processes which refer to processes which identify psychological and physical behavior such as a watch, smile, laugh, dream, and breathe, 6) existential processes which refer to processes which signify the existence of something such as exist, arise, and occur.

In this study, the representational strategies and transitivity were employed as the framework for the analysis of the representation of the Myanmar military in the news headlines. The key objectives of the study were as follows.

- 1) To examine the representations of the Myanmar military in Thai new headlines
- 2) To discover the ideologies embedded in the representations of the Myanmar military in Thai new headlines.



From the key objectives stated above, the research questions that the present study would like to answer are as specified below.

- 1) How is the Myanmar military represented in Thai new headlines?
- 2) What are ideologies about the Myanmar military embedded in Thai News Headlines?

3. Materials and Methods

The data used in the analysis were headlines of the news regarding the protests against the military's coup d'état which took place in Myanmar in 2021. These headlines were written in Thai and were gathered from a local Thai online newspaper called 'Thairath' which could be accessed through www.thairath.co.th. This online newspaper was selected because it was well-known among Thai people due to the fact that it was the oldest and the best-selling newspaper in Thailand, and now it offered an online news site where people could gain access to news anywhere and anytime. To retrieve all the headlines related to the Myanmar coup d'état, the keyword "พม่า" (Myanmar) was placed in the search bar of the news website so that all the news about Myanmar and its people would appear. Then, only headlines of the news regarding the Myanmar coup d'état were collected and the irrelevant were excluded. The period from which the headlines were collected was from March to April 2021. The total number of headlines collected was 42. All the headlines were analyzed and discussed using the framework of representational strategies and transitivity.

4. Results and Discussion

According to Richardson (2007), the way persons are identified or referred to in the media has a significant influence on how they are perceived by society. It also mirrors the ideologies of the text producers since the choices of words and sentence structure come from their decision. From the analysis of the representations of the Armed Forces of Myanmar in the Thai news headlines based upon the representational strategies proposed by van Leeuwen (1996), it was found that the Armed Forces of Myanmar was mentioned or included in most of the headlines as one of the key social actors, which indicated that the news writer's emphasis on the role of the military in the coup d'état as well as its involvement in the violent suppression of the protests which resulted in civilian casualties. In addition, it was apparent that the Myanmar military was referred to through functionalization since, in most headlines, the military was named by their roles. The examples of functionalization were shown below.

- 1) **Thai headline:** พม่าวิปโยค ทหารโหด ยิงใส่ผู้ชุมนุมไม่ยั้ง ดับอีก 5 ยอดตายกว่า 550 แล้ว
Translation: Myanmar is grievous. Brutal **soldiers** shot the demonstrators. Five were killed. The death toll reached 550.
- 2) **Thai headline:** จนท.เมียนมาใช้กระสุนจริงสลายผู้ประท้วง นานาชาติเตือนอาจนำไปสู่ผลลัพธ์ที่เลวร้าย
Translation: **Myanmar officers** used live ammunition against the demonstrators. Many nations warned that this could lead to devastating outcomes.
- 3) **Thai headline:** ช็อก พม่านองเลือดหนักสุด ตร.ยิงมือปืนร้ายรัฐประหาร วันเดียวตาย 7 ศพ
Translation: Shocked. Myanmar sees more outrageous bloodshed. **Police** opened fire on anti-coup demonstrators. Seven were killed in one day.

In the examples above, the word "ทหาร" (soldiers), "จนท.เมียนมา" (Thai abbreviation for Myanmar officers), and "ตร." (Thai abbreviation for police) were employed. Typically, they all were parts of the Myanmar military, but when writing the headlines, the writers pointed out clearly the involvement of some particular military divisions in the incidents through functionalization. In addition, these words contained a sense of plurality, which means that the soldiers, Myanmar officers, and police were treated and depicted as groups. The headline writers did not name the actual soldiers, officers, or police who fatally harmed the citizen individually, but chose to collectivize them as a whole. In the view of the headline writers, they all took part in the brutal attacks on the protestors who come out to peacefully raise their voices against the military dictatorship. Since the Myanmar coup d'état had been staged by the Armed Forces, it might be inevitable to



see some of the headlines mentioning “กองทัพบม่า” (the Armed Forces of Myanmar or the Myanmar military) as the agent of the actions, and this could be also considered using collectivization since the headline writers did not specify the individuals who were behind the brutal and undemocratic suppression of the demonstrators. The examples brought to illustrate this are shown below.

- 4) **Thai headline:** สุดอัปยศ กองทัพบม่ายิงไม่เลือกหน้า ด.ญ. 7 ขวบโดนกระสุนดับคาอกพ่อ
Translation: Shameful. The Myanmar military opened fire randomly. A seven-year-old girl was shot to death on her father's chest.
- 5) **Thai headline:** เกษะหรือกว่า 3 พันหนีตายข้ามชายแดนไทย กองทัพบม่าส่งปืนรบโจมตีทางอากาศ
Translation: More than three thousand Karen people fled to Thailand. Myanmar military launched airstrikes.
- 6) **Thai headline:** กองทัพบม่าโยนบาปให้ผู้ชุมนุม ใช้ความรุนแรงจนเมียมาถูกคว่ำบาตร
Translation: Myanmar military blamed protestors for violence leading to a global boycott.

In some headlines, it was found that the armed forces were not directly mentioned but impersonalized and referred to using a country's name “พม่า” or “เมียนมา” (both are equivalent to Myanmar). According to Machin and Mayr (2012), the purpose of using impersonalization is mainly to conceal the agent who is responsible for a particular incident. Therefore, some writers might intentionally avoid making a direct reference to the armed forces. The examples of the headlines with the use of impersonalization are demonstrated below.

- 7) **Thai headline:** นองเลือดที่สุด เมียนมาสังหารผู้ชุมนุม 114 ศพ เช่นวันกองทัพ
Translation: Bloodshed. Myanmar killed 114 protestors on Armed Forces Day.
- 8) **Thai headline:** พม่าปล่อยนักโทษกว่า 600 คนพื้นเรือนจำ หลังนองเลือดเด็ก 7 ขวบตาย
Translation: Myanmar released 600 prisoners after a seven-year-old child was killed in a bloodshed incident.

Aside from the representation strategies mentioned previously, the study also found the exclusion or the suppression of the agent, the military armed forces in particular. In other words, in some headlines, the military armed forces who were the cause of bloodshed incidents in Myanmar were not mentioned at all. Similar to the impersonalization, the exclusion of the agent of the action was mainly to conceal or distract the readers' attention from the agent of the action. Again, this reflected that the writers did not want to make a direct reference to the armed forces. However, it was also possible that the writers wanted to draw people's attention to the victims of the suppression and what happened to them. Such exclusion was clearly seen in the examples below.

- 9) **Thai headline:** เมียนมา "ประท้วงแบบไร้คน" หลังผู้ชุมนุมโดนปราบปรามนองเลือด ตายแล้ว 216 ศพ
Translation: Myanmar adopted a “non-participation movement” after the protestors were suppressed, and 216 people were killed.
- 10) **Thai headline:** ชาวเมียนมาสุดอาลัยเข้าร่วมงานศพ "นศ. แพทย์ วัย 18 ปี" ถูกยิงตายกลางมืออย่างกึ่ง
Translation: Myanmar people mournfully attended the funeral of an 18-year-old medical student who was shot to death amid the protest in Yangon.
- 11) **Thai headline:** สลด ผู้ประท้วงเมียนมาดับอีก 5 ศพ หลังเผชิญวันที่นองเลือดที่สุด
Translation: Melancholy. Five protestors were killed on the worst day of bloodshed.

In order to create explicitness in the representation of the Myanmar military in Thai headlines news, the analysis of transitivity was conducted. This helps reveal the writer's choice in the selection of the doers and the done-to for the headlines that recirculated for a while. The results of the analysis clearly revealed that the Armed Forces of Myanmar were mainly represented in the material process as the doers of actions in



mostly the active form. The selected headlines exemplified below vividly showed the representation of the Armed Forces of Myanmar in the material process.

- 12) **Thai headline:** เมียนมาสุดนองเลือด คร.ปราบหนักผู้ชุมนุม
Translation: Bloodshed in Myanmar. **Police** violently suppressed *protestors*.
- 13) **Thai headline:** คร.จัดการชุมนุมจริงยิงมีอ้อมมีมทะเลย์ ดาข 2 ศพ เจ็บอื้อ
Translation: **Police** shot *protestors* in *Mandalay* with real bullets. Two dead. Many injured.
- 14) **Thai headline:** เมียนมานองเลือดอีก ตำรวจปะทะผู้ชุมนุม ดับ 24 ศพ รง. ทอผ้าจีนโดนเผา
Translation: Bloodshed in Myanmar again as **police** confronted *protestors*. Twenty-four dead. One textile factory burned.
- 15) **Thai headline:** ช่วย 7 ผู้บาดเจ็บ พบทั้งระเบิดหมู่บ้านกะเหรี่ยง เพชรบิลด์ 2 รอบ
Translation: Seven injured people were rescued. **Myanmar** bombed *Karen villages*, announcing that airstrikes were launched two times.
- 16) **Thai headline:** ทหารกะเหรี่ยง ถือปืนนำหน้าคุ้มกันผู้ชุมนุม หลังทหารพม่าโหดยิงใส่ไร้ปราณี
Translation: *Karen* soldiers armed with guns protected the *protesters* after brutal **Myanmar** **soldiers** mercilessly shot them.

From the examples 12 to 16 above, it could be seen that the Armed Forces of Myanmar were represented as the active agents or actors of the violent actions such as suppressing, shooting, confronting, killing, and bombing, meanwhile, the protestors and some ethnic people were represented as goals or victims of such barbaric actions. It might not be surprising to see the frequent use of these war-related verbs since these headlines were meant to talk about the violent suppression of protests. However, what was interesting was that the representation of the Armed Forces of Myanmar here clearly depicted how the headline writers purposively emphasized their role as the initiators of inhumane practices against the protests by positioning them as the active subject or doers instead of omitting or excluding them from the headlines which could be easily done by using passivization.

Furthermore, the negative image of the Armed Forces of Myanmar was accentuated by the use of some adjectives and adverbs which were intentionally added to modified nouns and verbs in the headlines, respectively. For example, in headline no. 16, the adjective “โหด” which was equivalent to the word “brutal or savage” was used to modify the word “ทหาร” or “soldiers” in English. In the headline no. 16, the adverb “ไร้ปราณี” which was equivalent to the word “mercilessly” in English was employed to modify the verb “shoot” and it gave a vivid image of how the soldiers dealt with the protestors. These adjectives and adverbs could be considered as words showing appraisal and they reflected the fact that the Armed Forces of Myanmar was negatively evaluated by the news headline writers.

Aside from representing the Armed Forces of Myanmar as active actors in the material process, in some headlines, the agents of the violent actions were totally omitted from the clauses. This aspect was obvious in the headlines exemplified below.

- 17) **Thai headline:** เมียนมา "ประท้วงแบบไร้คน" หลังผู้ชุมนุมโดนปราบปรามนองเลือด ดาขแล้ว 216 ศพ
Translation: Myanmar adopted a “non-participation movement” after **the protestors** were suppressed, and **216 people** were killed.
- 18) **Thai headline:** ชาวเมียนมาสุดอาลัยเข้าร่วมงานศพ "นศ. แพทย์ วัย 18 ปี" ถูกยิงดาขกลางมีอบย่างกุ้ง
Translation: Myanmar people mournfully attended the funeral of **an 18-year-old medical student** who was shot to death amid the protest in Yangon.
- 19) **Thai headline:** สลด ผู้ประท้วงเมียนมาดับอีก 5 ศพ หลังเผชิญวันนองเลือดที่สุด
Translation: Melancholy. **Five protestors** were killed on the worst day of bloodshed.



From the examples above, it could be seen that only the goals or done-tos of the material processes were represented using passivization. In the headline no. 17, the word ‘ผู้ชุมนุม’ or ‘the protestors’ was the goal at which the process ‘ปราบปราม’ or ‘suppress’ was directed. Similarly, in the headline no. 18, the word ‘นศ. แพทย์ วัย 18 ปี’ or ‘an 18-year-old medical student’ was the goal of the process ‘ยิง’ or ‘shoot.’ Again, in the headline no. 19, the word ‘ผู้ประท้วงเมียนมา’ was the goal of the material process at which the process ‘kill’ was directed. In these three headlines, it could be seen that the actors or agents of these material processes were obscured or made implicit by the headline writers. On one hand, the writers who produced these headlines might have intentionally avoided mentioning the Armed Forces of Myanmar who were agents of the violent actions for some reasons. On the other hand, it could be posited that the writers might want to put a spotlight on the victims of the violent suppressions and the undesirable consequences of the coup d’état.

5. Conclusion

This present study investigated the representation of the Armed Forces of Myanmar in the headlines related to the protests against the military coup d’état in 2021. The results of the analysis clearly showed that the Armed Forces of Myanmar were negatively portrayed in the headlines as being involved in violence and brutality which results in the death and injury of many innocent people who participated in the demonstrations just to voice their opinions and disagreement towards the military coup d’état. From the analysis of the representational strategies, it was found that the Armed Forces of Myanmar were included and represented through functionalization and collectivization. The headline writer did not mention the individuals involved in the incidents. From the transitivity analysis, it was found that the Armed Forces of Myanmar were mainly represented in the headlines as the active actors of the material process, while the protestors or the victims in the incidents were represented as goals of the material process. The representations of the Armed Forces of Myanmar in the headlines could generate ideologies that may become realities that shape people’s perspectives toward the Armed Forces of Myanmar.

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