Identity stereotypes (on Islam and Muslims) in French media discourse: Between reality and illusion; Descriptive and analytical study

Abdelhamid Skikri [1]

[1]*Graduate Student, Paul Valéry University, Montpellier III, France. E- mail:* abdelhamid.skikri@gmail.com

Abstract

In a climate marked by economic insecurity, health emergencies, identity crisis, wars of all kinds, the relationship to the other in the media discourse has never been so fragile. A lot of stereotypes arise from this. Long before the Crusades, it acquired a new meaning and a new name each time. Words, like loaded guns" and their uses, contribute to a reading beyond information as such. "To name things baldly is to bring more misfortune of the world" (Albert Camus). This way, wordplay can be judgmental rather than neutral in the political discourse conveyed by the media on a daily basis. According to Charaudeau (2013): "Any given Muslim has become the new scapegoat of populist discourse. Moreover, a headline in 'Le Monde' emphasizes that "Le musulman a remplacé l'immigré dans le discours de Marine Le Pen" (The Muslim has replaced the immigrant in Marine Le Pen's discourse).
It is in this context that this article proposes a descriptive and semiotic analysis of the identity stereotypes relayed by the French media, based on a corpus drawn from French press titles. However, stereotypes in political discourse lead us to shed light on language issues - here, we are interested in the antagonisms to the connotations and denotations of Islam and Muslims, as reported by the media, within a debate on the construction of a pictorial identity, which places it in a diachronic rather than a synchronic framework. At the end of this analysis, the results will be discussed.

Keywords: Stereotypes, Greimas and Courtès, Cognitive psychology, Semiotic theory

Introduction:

The stereotypes conveyed by the Western media around Islam and Muslims remain the main issues that have received a lot of attention from researchers in several fields; since, as we all know, the geopolitical aftermath of the September 11th attacks in the United States has put this issue at the heart of media debates in the West.

The aim of this work is to study the way in which the French written media have treated the theme of Islam and Muslims in the French press. In addition, what are the aims of this work?

The corpus on which this study is based is drawn from media discourse articles that have dealt with the issue of Islam in some French written newspapers. The choice of the corpus submitted for study is not arbitrary; it reflects our concern about the current geopolitical wake, but also our positioning as researchers in language sciences and intercultural studies. Indeed, this wake has greatly contributed to increasing the interest clearly granted to this subject by the Western media. Thus, the objective of this article is, moreover, to contribute to highlight the most recurrent stereotypes about Islam and Muslims in the French press.

In order to answer the main question in this study, we postulate a hypothesis according to which the French press - represented by the selected newspapers - continues to report negative images about Islam, since it is supposedly considered a threat to the West for political reasons. Thus, in order to confirm or refute this postulate, we focus on the daily and weekly mainstream newspapers in the French press.

In order to examine this hypothesis, we started from the theoretical framework that could interpret the bases and the conceptual framework of the subject under study. This is why our approach is semiotic descriptive, based on the analysis model of Greimas and Courtès. Subsequently, we will analyze the content of the above-mentioned articles, which raise questions about Islam and Muslims. Thus, we will show the different stereotypes diffused explicitly or implicitly among its readership.

Theoretical framework:

Before proceeding with the content of our study, it should be pointed out that the term "stereotype" has been the subject of several theoretical approaches, such as sociology and socio-cognitive psychology. According to several researchers, "stereotype" can be defined by received images that are frozen and fixed, which summarize all things and beings. These are images that individuals receive from their social environment and that, more or less, shape their thinking methods, impacting their emotions and behavior[1] (Morfaux, 1980), but also the meanings given to this notion. There is often a tendency to confront notions such as: belief, idea, positioning, judgment, image and representation, etc. These various definitions can be explained through the fields of reflection that deal with the notion of stereotypes and the interests that they serve.

Media discourse has been a fertile subject of many studies and research in sociology, anthropology, psychology and language sciences, including those by discourse analysts, who adopt media products as a subject of research and inquiry.

The aim of this study is, therefore, to analyze French media discourse based on a semiotic approach. According to Fontanille, this approach starts, from the outset, from the principle according to which "all discourse is not a macro-sign or an assembly of signs, but a process of signification supported by an enunciation"[2]. Thus, semiotic theory, which draws its analytical tools from several fields, such as linguistics, anthropology and psychology, attempts to activate elements or structures in order to clarify the possible meanings of any text.

Theoretical issues, concepts and definitions:

Before proceeding to the analysis of the contents of the French media discourse on Islam and Muslims, it is advisable to run quickly by some notions deemed necessary for our analysis, such as: the generative path, the semen, the sow and the isotopy.

The generative path, according to Greimas and Courtès, is: "The set of successive conversions which, starting from the deep elementary structure invested by the semiotic square (simple, abstract) leads to the textualization (complex, concrete) which precedes the manifestation in a natural language or non-verbal semiotics"[3]; in other words, the reconstitution of the generative path of any text is manifested by the representation of its themes and values.

As far as the sowing is concerned, it is defined, according to researchers, as being "the minimal unit of meaning: and since it is posed at the level of content, then it is proportional to the level of expression. Keeping the balance between the two levels of language, we can say that the semes are elements that form the sememe". In reality, this element, i.e. the sememe (in semioticians) forms the minimal unit that has a semantic basis. It is determined by its relationship with the other semen, in order to achieve the three properties (contradiction, metonymy and implication) that are proportional to the relationships that form the semiotic square. We shall bear in mind that there are

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[1]Morfaux (1980), vocabulary of philosophy and the humanities, p 341
[2]Fontanille, J., Semiotics and Literature, Éd PUF, p.3.
[3]A.j. Greimas and J.Courtès (1979) "semiotics. Reasoned Dictionary of Language Theory," S. 157

two types of semes that coexist in discourse, the nucleic sem and the set of semantic units (the classème). These two semes are two constituents of the "sememe", which means "the set of semes detectable in a minimal sign (a morpheme). The semantic unit, defined like this, is composed of three semantic subsets: the classème, the semantème and the virtuème.

Finally, as far as isotropy is concerned, Greimas defines it as "a repetitive set of semantic citations that make it possible to read the narrative homogeneously. It also results from partial readings of the statements and deconstructs of its oriented ambiguity by seeking the only reading"[4]. As an example, the repetition of words belonging to the religious lexical field in a journalistic article leads us to extract the subject treated by the speaker-journalist. Thus, thanks to the work of Greimas, this notion becomes a preliminary tool in every analysis of a semantic-semiotic nature"[5]. It is also a relevant element in coherence, as shown by the definition suggested by Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni, who sees in isotropy: "a textual principle guaranteed by the succession of very precise linguistic statements"[6].

Over all, the exploratory study of semen, semen and isotopes is an avenue of research that makes it possible to highlight the themes dealt with by the discourse sequences studied. The latter help us to determine the stereotypes activated by the French press with regard to Islam and Muslims.

Stereotype: design and use

The term stereotype is applied to "images in the head" and is synonymous with the word "cliché". Stereotypes are mental representations of a human group that allow us to classify it into a social category. In most cases, they are bad generalizations and categorizations that are wrong because they are not based on real facts.

Generally, stereotypes distort the judgments we make about people and things. They can also guide our behavior because they have a particular psychological impact on target individuals. Studies on the psychology of relationships state that we can only interact with the world around us through cultural patterns of mediation and interpretation. From this point of view, the process of stereotype construction is a cognitive process of categorization, which makes it possible to classify a set of information.

It is obvious that the stereotype is important for the construction of identities for reasons of cognitive exigency, before it is instrumentalized by bad conscience to the point of becoming an object of discrimination[7].

Concerning the media, the existence of stereotypes is unavoidable. Even more so when it comes to the field of information. Indeed, information must be grasped quickly and by the majority. Stereotypes allow the journalist to save time by generalizing. They take the form of "codes" and "common denominators" that make it possible to identify a social group based on race, ethnic and religious origin.

Nevertheless, the danger of stereotypes appears when they intervene by masking very diverse realities under the same common denominator, which risks perpetuating social injustices: this tendency to generalize, to stigmatization repeated in each edition of newspapers, misleads the public. It ends up considering stereotyping as the absolute reality. The reader's race is often the motive that pushes journalists to privilege spectacular events such as terrorism, illegal immigration, drug trafficking; by dint of consuming news in all its forms: headlines, texts and violent images, the receivers' vision of the world is altered.

However, it is not only commercial reasons that push journalists to privilege certain events. The media are often supported by political parties, and sometimes even constitute an electoral lever for certain politicians. Stereotypes are therefore used for political purposes, at the risk of distorting

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[4]Ibid. 333
[5]Ibid, p. 333
[6]Ibid, p. 334
[7]Leyens J.P. Poladino P. M., Demoulin S. (1999), "*Can we live without stereotypes about others?*". in Journal of Human Sciences No.94-May 1999. p.3.

and disfiguring objective reality. The stereotype is therefore more often connected political and media origin; But what explains its adoption by the public?

There is undoubtedly a form of historical predisposition to welcoming stereotypes. The media do not invent anything; they only perpetuate clichés produced by history. Stereotypes are born out of the history of relations between different groups. They have cultural, political, economic, geographical and other components that make them consensual. They can also evolve and cover new forms over time. This is the case of stereotypes about Islam and Muslims.

Stereotypes in the media and the power of words:

Our belonging to a society dominated by imaginary technologies shapes us. These technologies are "devices for the production of myths, worldviews and lifestyles"[8]. It is not so much information that is sought, but the manipulation and control of the mass without the direct use of physical force[9].
If the media have become the main vectors of information today, the use of discriminatory and racial stereotypes against Muslims when it comes to Islam responds to the logic of infotainment and makes the world a festival of events. Journalists use processes of categorization and stigmatization that feed the identity crisis on both sides and fuel Islamophobic acts. For his part, Baudrillard denounces what lies behind the "scoops", "exclusivity", treatment of news and press kits, which actually correspond to the injunctions of competition through ratings.

The media stereotype of Islam conveys the image of a backward and violent Islam, which subdues women, incites *jihad*. It points fingers at young immigrants from the suburbs. This daily distorting treatment leads to certain slips and deviations.

Media labelling dehumanizes racial minorities through words such as "savage", gratuitous violence" used in an abusive and repetitive manner and used in "forgetting their historicity"[10]. Far from being neutral, the media's point of view is not a simple description of the facts, but often reflects the relations between existing social groups in the same sphere. For example, when Van Dijk analyses 1,500 titles in the Dutch press that deal with ethnic issues, there is no title that involves minorities as responsible and dynamic agents, unlike the majority national group[11].

Presentation of the Analytical Results:

Check the following units

Reference	Subject
L'Express Journal: from 9th to 15th October 2013	Islam: Danger of communatarism
L'Express journal of 27 Septmeber 2012	The fear of Islam
L'Express 18 September 2003	Secularism in the face of Islam prevents moderate solutions
L'Express 29 October 2008	The shock : Jesus - Muhammad
Le Point, 6th march 2003	Christians in Islam: A Search For Global Shock
Marianne 7th January 2002	The Problem of Muslims in France
Marianne 14 May 2011	Why the Islamic veil is a nuisance
Marianne 15 November 2011	Why the Islamic veil is a nuisance
Le Point 22 April 2004	The Crusades in the Iraqi Conflict: Islam and the West Fourteen Centuries of War and Misunderstanding
Le Point 3th February 2011	The Islamic specter

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[8]Da Silva, J.M. (2008). *The technologies of imagination, Media and culture in the age of total communication, translated from Portuguese (Brazil) by Erwan Pottier.* Paris. Editions la Table Ronde, 2008, pp. 32-33.
[9]*Op. Cit.*
[10]Dupuy P.O. and Marchand P., "Media, Stereotypes and Discrimination", in Prejudice and Stereotypes, Project on the initiative of AFPS and www.psychology-social.orf, carried out with the help of the Ministry of Research, France
[11]T.A Van Dijk, Racism and the press, London New York: Routledge, 1991, City in Media, Stereotypes and Descriminisation, op.cit.

Our research spans the period 2002 to 2014. The latter is characterized in particular by the events that shook the international scene after September 11; which targeted New York City, and the repercussions that accompanied it on the part of Western countries against Afghanistan and Iraq. This has prompted several media and political leaders to assert that the outbreak of a new war of civilizational and religious character has just threatened the world today. However, there is still a choice to be made in this perspective.

That said; our interest in this research will be restricted to the two concepts of Islam/West. The first is linked to the threat/problem dichotomy, while the second refers to the secularism/identity duo. Therefore, it is possible to explain the paths of the two concepts as follows:

Domain/The Islam
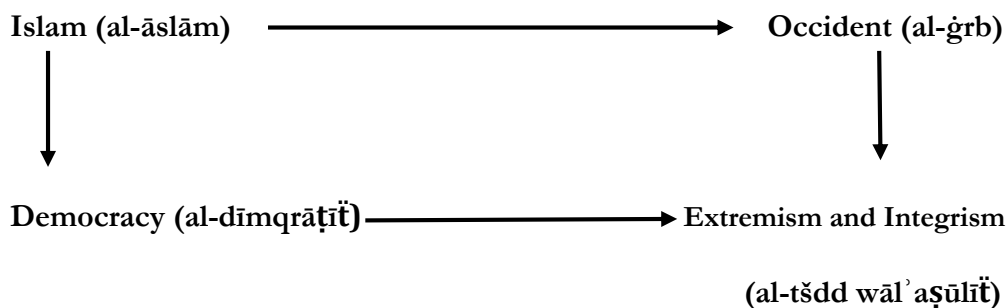Danger, threat, communalism, shock, fear, spectre
Arabic transcription: al-ḫaṭar, al-twahْdīd, al-ṭāʾifﺕ, al-ġazْū, al-ṣwadْmaﺕ, al-ḫaūْf, al-ṭwaīْf

Domain/The West
Democracy, secularism, identity, freedom, universal values
Arabic transcription: al-dīmqrāṭﺕ, al-ʿlmānﺕ, al-hwyﺕ, al-ḥrﺕ, al-qīm al-kūnﺕ

The subject of our research highlights the duality between Islam and the West. It sees Islam as a real threat to the values of democracy and secularism. This allows us to suggest the following semiotic square:

Islam (al-āslām) ————————————→ **Occident (al-ġrb)**

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Democracy (al-dīmqrāṭﺕ) —————————→ **Extremism and Integrism**

(al-tšdd wālʾaṣūlﺕ)

Why is Islam scary?
-Fear of Islam
-the problem of Muslims in France
-the spectrum of Islam

On the basis of the above, journalists point out the problematic nature of the Muslim religion in French society. They aim to manipulate the emotions of the readers receiving such discourse, based on the fact that Islam and Muslims constitute a threat on French territory, with all that accompanies these headlines: diagrams and illustrations depicting bearded men with tense and violent faces, or totally veiled women. This gives a problematic impression about the existence of this religion, and even calls into question its legitimacy and legality to exist in France. Moreover, we can see the domination of a lexical field that is fundamentally based on fear of Islam and Muslims. The aim of journalists is, therefore, to create an unhealthy climate between the two religions, and thus between the two sects.

<u>Conclusion:</u>

Over all, it is noteworthy that the French media generally report negative images of Islam and Muslims. It can also be concluded that the subject of Islam is reported in the majority of French newspapers and magazines, which constitute an imposing factor in the production of social values and stereotypes. These stereotyped images are in use by more political parties that adopt a hateful discourse towards Islam during elections, particularly among the right-wing parties, known for their classic hatred of the existence of Arabs and Muslims in France. Backed by their theories, they were able to convince many voters to adopt an anti-Muslim discourse.

It is obvious, then, that the stereotypes (texts and images) conveyed about Islam and Muslims in the French press and media over the last decade have contributed to the spread of racist anti-Islamic and Muslim ideas and the recrimination of inter-religious animosity. This contravenes the principles of the French Revolution and international charters that aspire to the values of difference, diversity, coexistence, tolerance and freedom of confession.

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