An Analysis of Two Major Global News Channels’ Twitter Feeds

The British Broadcasting Corporation and Al Jazeera

English
Abstract

Twitter is an online social networking service which functions as an information sharing medium, hence it is perfect for media to convey pieces of news. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Al Jazeera English (AJE) are two international news channels that actively use Twitter to share their news stories. Previous investigations have found that depending on the news story, the BBC and AJE convey their pieces of news slightly differently. This study aims to give an analysis of the textual content in these two news channel’s text messages (tweets) on Twitter to see if there are linguistic variations. The tweets were analysed in terms of tone, word choice and information richness. Tweets where the words Syria and kill occurred were chosen for a more thorough analysis, and the results show that the BBC had a slightly more negative tone, provided more detailed news reports and used a more informative language than AJE. It might be that the findings were a result of chance considering the fact that the collection of tweets analysed was rather small and differed in size. Nevertheless, the differences that were revealed by the study were of an apparent nature and occurred too frequently and consistently in this small material to be discarded as merely incidental.

Keywords

Twitter, BBC, Al Jazeera English, tweets, news channels, news reports, comparison
## Contents

1. Introduction ........................................................................................................... 1  
   1.1 Aim, scope and research questions ....................................................................... 2  

2. Contextual and theoretical background .................................................................. 2  
   2.1 What is Twitter? .................................................................................................. 2  
   2.2 The British Broadcasting Corporation & Al Jazeera English ................................. 3  
   2.3 Previous research .............................................................................................. 4  
   2.4 Passive and Active sentences .............................................................................. 6  
   2.5 Quotation marks and Scare Quotes ..................................................................... 7  

3. Materials and methods ........................................................................................... 7  
   3.1 Materials ........................................................................................................... 7  
   3.2 Methods ............................................................................................................ 8  

4. Results .................................................................................................................... 9  
   4.1 Passive sentences from the BBC and AJE containing the word *kill* ...................... 10  
   4.2 Tweets covering the same news stories ................................................................ 12  
   4.3 Comparison of the use of numerals .................................................................... 18  

5. Conclusion and discussion ...................................................................................... 19  

References ................................................................................................................. 21  
   Primary sources ....................................................................................................... 21  
   Secondary sources .................................................................................................... 21
1. Introduction

The Internet is used in a large variety of ways. Reading online magazines, watching the newscast, communicating with people and other web-based activities such as forums and blogs are just a few examples of its possible use. Blogs on the Internet are popular nowadays and used by many. One particular blog called **Twitter** is an online networking service which is freely available and has about 500 million users around the world (TechCrunch). Users can post short text messages or **tweets** on the Twitter wall or **timeline**. “Authors of those messages write about their life, share opinions on a variety of topics and discuss current issues” (Pak & Paroubek, 2010:1320). The content of these tweets vary, and they can be about practically anything. Conversational, self-promotion, nonsensical chatter and news are a few examples. The news category covers only a small percentage of Twitter’s sector of application, but considering the vast number of users on Twitter it is still good for commercial purposes and also a great way to spread new ideas and recent news.

Almost all of the existing traditional news broadcasters today operate news websites that provide their audience with audio visual news. In 1997, **British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)** launched its online service and six years later one of its main challengers the Middle Eastern news channel **Al Jazeera English (AJE)** introduced theirs (Mellese & Müller, 2012). The BBC World News is situated in Western Europe and AJE in the Middle East. Unfortunately, the Middle Eastern part of the world has been exposed to a series of different conflicts for some time. Rebellions against the government and leadership are two factors that have caused the uprisings in many of these conflicts. Some countries in the Middle East, more than others, have been especially covered in news media, and Syria is one of them. The conflicts are globally known, since major international and national news channels across the world have reported about the situations in each country. The AJE and the BBC World news have actively kept their audiences updated on this part of the world, especially the last few months since the conflict in Syria has been heavily criticized and has grown very serious.

Previous studies have found tendencies in the change of tone in different news networks, depending on what these networks report, and where the news network is headquartered. There are major cultural differences and ways of living between the two parts of the world where the BBC and AJE are situated, and given these circumstances it would be interesting to carry out a study of the textual content of their tweets. Does the language structure vary between the BBC and AJE? This study will compare how two of the World’s
largest global news channels, the *BBC World News* and *Al Jazeera English*, use the English language on Twitter.

1.1 Aim, scope and research questions

The aim of this study is to investigate the textual content of the BBC’s and AJE’s tweets in order to find out if there are linguistic differences, and if so in what ways they are evident. The words *Syria* and *kill* will be the focus of the study because of their high frequency in the different news reports and also due to the fact that it is easier to see connections and tendencies if the news stories concern the same topic. Since the news channels differ culturally, seeing that the BBC is a broadcaster from the Western World, whereas AJE is a broadcaster from the Middle East, the hypothesis of this study is that there will probably be differences in their storytelling. Focus is placed on the textual content of the text messages on Twitter, known as *tweets*, and a comparison will be carried out between the two news channels in order to see if the words used to describe the events in the tweets differ. The study will try to identify differences in the tone of the messages, that is to say, the usage of strong words which are used to enhance the urgency of the tweets. The study will also investigate if there is a difference between the BBC and AJE in how informative and thoroughly described the events in the tweets are, for instance by analyzing if numerals are used and if scare quotes are evident. The following questions will be answered in this study:

- Are there differences in tone and choice of words in the BBC’s and the AJE’s tweets?
- Does one of the news channels provide more informative news reports than the other?

2. Contextual and theoretical background

2.1 What is Twitter?

Twitter was invented by a small company located in San Francisco and launched in 2006. It has grown immensely in popularity in countries all over the world since then (Honeycutt & Herring, 2009:1). Only a few years after it was launched and had acquired its first users, the number of users soared. In July 2009 the number had grown to more than 41 million (Kwak et al., 2010) and as previously stated, the number of users has reached over 500 million as of today.
Anyone can create a Twitter-account and then read tweets on the Twitter wall or timeline, which can also be seen and commented on by others. A user on Twitter who subscribes to someone else’s account is known as a follower, and users can add several other users to a “following-list”, and follow these people’s activity on Twitter (Honeycutt & Herring, 2009:2). According to one of the earliest studies of Twitter use, the users can be divided into three different categories: information sources, friends and information seekers (Honeycutt & Herring, 2009:2). User profiles such as news channels and newspapers belong to the category information sources, as they usually acquire large numbers of followers, which is the case for both the BBC’s and AJE’s twitter accounts. Twitter functions in different ways, and not only is it possible to post messages through the homepage twitter.com, but also via mobile phones, which makes it a mobile application (Honeycutt & Herring, 2009:2). It is an easily accessible medium with rich sources of data (Pak & Paroubek, 2010), consequently making it an effective tool for news channels such as the BBC and AJE to spread their news and opinions to large numbers of people.

Twitter has a limitation when it comes to the length of the tweets, and they consist of no more than 140 characters. Most of the tweets contain the symbol “#”, which is a number sign also known as “hashtag”. These symbols are used to mark someone or something. Twitter’s definition is as follows “The # symbol, called a hashtag, is used to mark keywords or topics in a Tweet. It was created organically by Twitter users as a way to categorize messages.” (Twitter). Furthermore, if a user clicks on a “hashtagged” word in a tweet, a timeline with all the tweets containing that particular word appears. Thus, hashtagging is a way for users to emphasize and categorize words in their tweets.

2.2 The British Broadcasting Corporation & Al Jazeera English

The BBC is a British world leading broadcast service that broadcasts via radio, television and the Internet in more than 200 countries and districts. It was founded in 1922, and the international news channel, that is the BBC World News, was introduced in 1991 (BBC 15/10). Their mission is to “enrich people's lives with programmes and services that inform, educate and entertain” (BBC, 15/10). They also strive towards being the most innovative and creative news service company in the World. According to their values, trust is the foundation of the organization. The company is promoted as independent, impartial and honest” (BBC 15/10). The BBC is available in approximately 300 million homes across the globe.
AJE is an international news channel, headquartered in Doha, Qatar which was established in 2006. Since then it has rapidly grown in popularity and become particularly well known for its coverage from underreported regions. It is available through satellite and cable in more than 250 million homes in 130 different countries and territories (Al-Jazeera 15/10). The mission of Al Jazeera English is “to provide accurate and impartial news with a global, international perspective” (Al-Jazeera 15/10). Since the aim of this analysis is to compare the BBC and the Al Jazeera English alone, it is important to emphasize the difference between the news channels Al Jazeera (AJ) and AJE. Al Jazeera consists of more than twenty channels, for instance Al Jazeera Sport, Al Jazeera Documentary and the Arabic version of Al Jazeera which broadcasts all news reports in Arabic. Al Jazeera English is an international version, which means that all new stories are broadcast in English (Al Jazeera 4/12, 2012)

2.3 Previous research

One of the previous studies by Kwak et al., (2010) explored whether Twitter functions as an online social networking service, or as an information spreading micro-blog and the latter function was observed to be more prominent. In the same analysis, trending topics on Twitter, such as celebrities, famous organizations and companies, elections and other pieces of news, were studied to see if there was a connection with trending topics in other media. They looked particularly at CNN (which is an American cable news network) and the headline news from their collection of CNN tweets. They found a few instances where some pieces of news were posted on Twitter before CNN had broadcast it (Kwak et al., 2010), which is an example of how effective Twitter serves as an information spreading medium.

Furthermore, researchers that have investigated and compared the BBC’s and AJE’s news broadcasts have found both differences and similarities. These investigations have various aims and scopes, however they all focus primarily on the online news stories and broadcasts and how they differ. There are two studies which have provided material that has been particularly interesting for this analysis. The first one is written by Mastewal Adane Mellese and Marion G. Müller (2012) and the second by Kenneth D. Loomis (2009).

There was no previous research to found about the news channels’ use of the English language on Twitter, but these analyses show how these television networks’ news stories are portrayed on their websites, which also surely reflects the content of their tweets on Twitter. Mellese & Müller’s (2012) study focuses on how the BBC and Al Jazeera portray their news
stories, both textually and visually, exclusively in Sub-Saharan Africa. The comparative analysis consists of 311 news stories collected over a time period of three consecutive months, the aim being to reveal whether the BBC or the Al Jazeera portrayed this region more positively, negatively or neutrally in their news stories. By looking at the content of the collection of news stories, Mellese & Müller were able to see if there were any signs of “pro-African bias” or if the tone of the news stories differed between the television networks (Mellese & Müller, 2012). They assumed that there would be a difference since Al Jazeera claims to be a network that reports from underreported regions more than any other television network, and therefore framing the new stories differently than the BBC. According to the results of the study, the Al Jazeera news website had a slightly more negative tone, both textually and visually, in comparison to the BBC website, which was not in line with their hypothesis. However, the comparison showed that overall; there was no major difference in the news reports from the Sub-Saharan African region (Mellese & Müller, 2012).

As mentioned earlier there is a difference between Al Jazeera and Al Jazeera English and this is discussed in Loomis’s (2009) study. Loomis argues that AJE differs from AJ in tone and that its news stories differ especially when it comes to the graphical stories on the Websites. AJE gives a different point of view and tries not to give news stories in a way that offends Western audiences (Loomis, 2009). Even though the two news channels differ, AJ is still the “parent” of AJE; more specifically “This site is owned and operated by Aljazeera Satellite Network ("Aljazeera")” (aljazeera.com).

Furthermore, Loomis (2009) has carried out a content analysis of the BBC and AJE and additionally two American widely known television networks, the American CBS and CNN (Loomis, 2009). According to Loomis (2009), the purpose of the study is to find possible differences between AJE and other international news networks. One of the areas that the investigation focused on is the networks’ language use in different regions, that is, when strong and emotionally charged words were used the most (Loomis, 2009). As it turns out, all four networks used more emotionally charged words in stories about the Middle East, and especially in stories about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Although AJE had a slightly higher frequency than the others, there was no significant difference. Another study by Barkho (2007) explores AJE’s and the BBC’s webpages and show some differences in how they describe the news stories. As an example from AJE, “Israeli tanks have killed at least 18 Palestinians” might be considered more direct than, “At least six people have been killed and 15 injured in an Israeli strike” which was BBC’s representation of the same incident (Loomis, 2009:146).
Another research question that was presented for Loomis’s study was: “Were there differences in how the United States was presented on each Web outlet?” (Loomis, 2009:147). The author compared how the different websites’ depicted the United States in the news stories to see if there was a difference in tone. In spite of the fact that the results of the analysis showed that AJE had fewer stories expressing a positive attitude toward the United States, the difference was less significant than the author had expected and the great majority of the stories had a neutral tone toward the US (Loomis, 2009). The CBS had the highest rate of negative news stories, but only slightly higher than AJE, BBC and CNN.

2.4 Passive and Active sentences

The way in which news channels use their language in the media can have an effect on the readers and listeners and make them perceive the news in different ways. Thompson (2004) says that “there is usually a particular reason for choosing a passive clause, whereas an active clause is the natural choice when there are no particular reasons for not choosing it” (Thompson, 2004:92). The examples from Loomis (2009:146) can serve to illustrate the difference between one active and one passive sentence. An active sentence, as exemplified in AJE’s report “Israeli tanks have killed at least 18 Palestinians” indicates that the subject of the sentence performs the action, in this case the Israeli tanks. In a passive sentence, the action is instead performed on the subject, as in the second example: “at least six people have been killed”. Here the subject is the “six people” and the action was performed on them.

Klenbort and Anisfeld (2007) discuss active and passive sentences and they investigated the functions of the grammatical subject and object, and according to them the subject is more important and has a higher emphatic role than the object, and that the grammatical subject in the passive carries greater emphasis (2007).

Moreover, according to Huddleston & Pullum (2005:26) in passive sentences the receiver of the action is in focus, and not the one who performs the action, that is the “agent”. Since the agent is placed at the end of a passive sentence or clause, i.e. the default position for new information, as in the sentence: “the action was performed by the agent” it is a good spot to put something one wishes to emphasize (Huddleston & Pullum, 2005). Therefore it is also a way for news channels to put emphasis on their most important pieces of news. The choice between active and passive voice can thus be exploited to foreground and background different kinds of information.
2.5 Quotation marks and Scare Quotes

Paul Saka (2012) writes about quotation marks and scare quotes and he suggests that scare quotes are used to distance oneself from a given word. This means that it can be seen and interpreted as a substitute for the source of information in a text. A writer might not want to express the information source and simply substitutes it by placing the given words within scare quotes. In addition to that, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2012) defines scare quotes as “quotation marks used to foreground a particular word or phrase, esp. with the intention of disassociating the user from the expression or from some implied connotation it carries” (OED, 2012). These definitions suggest that scare quotes are not mainly used for emphasizing words and phrases, but instead in order to disassociate the writer from the traditional meaning of words and phrases. The appearance of scare quotes and quotation marks sometimes differs and according to the OED, quotation marks can be either single or double inverted commas (2012) and the same goes for scare quotes.

In Barkho’s study (2011) the BBC’s and AJE’s use of scare quotes in their headlines was analysed. Headlines introduce a piece of news and briefly describe what the news article is about, which is also the case for the news channels’ tweets on Twitter. That is to say, headlines have the same structure and usually do not consist of more than one or two sentences, hence similar to a tweet. Out of 23 headlines analysed from the BBC, seven of them contained scare quotes, which was slightly more than AJE. (Barkho, 2011). The study further suggests that using scare-quoted structures is a way to attract the readers’ attention. Moreover, they show that the writer is somewhat hesitant towards the information between the square quotes (Barkho, 2011), which comports with the definitions mentioned above.

3. Materials and methods

3.1 Materials

All the analysed tweets were exclusively taken from the BBC’s and AJE’s twitter timelines, and they form the primary material in this analysis. Among the tweets that have been posted by the BBC and AJE on Twitter, there are tweets and comments made by others in the same timeline, and not by the news channels. Since this study focuses exclusively on the presentational choices made by the news channels, tweets that include quotations and comments by other users have therefore been excluded from the data set. The choice of news
channels is based on their profiles and size, as both news channels are globally known and convey news from all over the world. The BBC and the AJE were chosen partly because of their fame and popularity, but also because they are situated in two completely different parts of the World. These news channels were also the most interesting primary sources among the selection of news channels considered for this research.

Altogether, 1250 tweets were collected from each of their Twitter timelines which makes a total of 2500 tweets and they were collected from each timeline between the 10th and 22nd of October 2012. The reason for this is that both news channels frequently tweet about the same news story on the same date. Hence, the possibility that they referred to the same piece of news was high. Ädel (2006) argues that when comparing many texts or large corpora, the way in which the comparison is carried out is important to consider so that it is consistent throughout.

In every tweet there is a link and either a BBC logo or an AJE logo. Here are two examples of their appearance: “BBC News (World) @BBCWorld” and “Al Jazeera English @AJEnglish”. On every Twitter timeline, regardless of the user, there are different alternatives that come with every tweet. A follower can choose to either “reply”, “retweet” or “favourite”, meaning “mark as favourite” after having read a post. The user logos and the alternatives to each tweet have been excluded, to ensure that the material only includes the number of words in the actual message. The table below shows the number of tweets and average number of words per tweet from the BBC and AJE:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BBC</th>
<th>AJE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tweets</td>
<td>1250</td>
<td>1250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.2 Methods

The initial pilot studies of the material chosen for this analysis showed a high frequency of the words *Syria* and *kill*. These words were therefore selected for a more profound analysis of the contexts in which these words occur. The reason why these particular words were chosen is primarily because they should concern topics that are connected to conflicts or wars. Topics like these are frequently presented and part of most news channels’ news reports. Words such as *kill, death, murder, massacre, battle, weapon*,
*bomb* et cetera and all its lemmas where investigated, and *kill* happened to be the most frequent. In many of the tweets from both the BBC and AJE where the word *kill* occurred, the word *Syria* also occurred. Because of its high frequency in the tweets and since there was an ongoing conflict in Syria when this study was conducted, the words *kill* and *Syria* were chosen for a more thorough analysis. Since this is a study which aims to compare the two news channels, it seemed an appropriate choice since the tweets would then concern the same topics and it would therefore be easier to find similarities and differences. In order to spot a wider range of textual differences between these two news channels, a content analysis of the material was carried out. It is a necessity to analyse a greater number of tweets (1000 or more) and not a small sample (100 or less), as most of the tweets consist of only one or two short sentences. Word files with all the tweets from the BBC’s and AJE’s timelines were studied by using the search function in Microsoft Word. The tweets were analysed more thoroughly for tone, word usage and informativeness.

The reason for analysing the use of numerals is due to the fact that expressing exact numbers of, for instance casualties in an incident, can be understood as more objective and comprehensive than approximations. That is to say, we are more inclined to trust reports that include exact numbers.

As in all investigations, limitations and problems occur when gathering and studying the material. It is of course difficult to draw conclusions based on the small sample analysed in this study. That is to say, the initial pilot studies generated two small subsets, which are the tweets which contained the words *Syria* and tweets which contained the word *kill*. By only analyzing these tweets, it makes it hard to generalize and say that the differences and similarities found are the same for all tweets posted by the BBC and AJE.

In an analysis of the textual content like the one carried out in this study, there are limitations when it comes to interpreting what is being said in the text, in this case the tweets. Depending on how the words are used and what the sentence structure is like in the tweets, they are surely not perceived in like manner for everyone. Thus, the interpretation of the textual content of the tweets is important to keep in mind when viewing the results.

4. Results

This section describes the differences and similarities found in the tweets where the words *Syria* and *kill* occurred, and among these, tweets that covered the same news stories were
picked out and analysed. As mentioned earlier, the tweets where chosen because of the high frequency of the words Syria and kill in the tweets, and because they were easier to analyse as they concerned the same topic. As previously stated, all tweets have been analysed in terms of tone, word choice and how informative they are. In section 4.1, passive sentences from the BBC and AJE containing the word kill have been analysed and discussed, which are displayed in Table 3 and 4. In section 4.2, tweets that covered the same news stories are studied, which are displayed in Table 5, 6, 7 and in section 4.3 main focus is placed on the news channels use of numerals in the tweets where the word kill occurred.

4.1 Passive sentences from the BBC and AJE containing the word kill

The table below displays a list of examples where the word kill was used in passive sentences from the BBC and AJE. In some tweets the word was not used as verb, for instance “killer question for #Romney on taxes” and these sentences were sorted out and not part of the analysis. As previously stated, it is easier to see differences and similarities if the data sample, i.e. the tweets from the BBC and AJE concern the same field, consequently making this data sample of passive sentences suitable to investigate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Showing the number and percentage of passive and active sentences in tweets containing the word kill.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AJE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the whole sample of tweets there were 36 from the BBC and 22 from AJE that contained the word “kill”. The number of tweets differ, which has to be taken into account, but the interesting thing here is not the number of tweets, but the textual content of the tweets and which words that are used in connection with the word kill in the passive sentences and how it differs between the BBC and AJE.

As mentioned in section 2.3, the subject, i.e. the receiver of the action, in passive sentences has a higher emphatic role than the object. It can therefore be seen as a way for the news channels to choose which “part” of the piece of news they want to convey and deem the most important, hence passive sentences were analysed in the following tables.

Table 3. Subset of passive sentences from the BBC containing the word kill.
When looking for differences in the textual content to see in which tweets in Table 3 and 4 the word *kill* is used in passive sentences, there are some variations. Since the subject in passive sentences has an emphatic role it is therefore interesting to see how the subjects in these different tweets have been portrayed by the BBC and AJE.

The tweets differ when it comes to how explicitly the BBC and AJE mention the victims’ nationalities. That is if the word describing where the victims come from is an adjective, and is in close connection to the subject. Since *killed* is a strong word, the idea is that it enhances the seriousness of the tweet when the victim’s nationalities immediately are conveyed to the reader of the tweet, as in example (6): *A Mexican drug lord is killed* and his body disappears - Correspondent @will_grant’s take on the narcotics war.

This is the case for the examples in Table 3 which constitutes 28 % of the sample of passive sentences where the word *kill* occurred from the BBC, and 53 % of the sample from AJE, as shown in Table 4. Furthermore, the tweets were also analysed in order to see if this
particular collection of tweets where the word *kill* occurred, differed when it comes to which regions the BBC and AJE most frequently tweet about. Out of the 21 examples from the BBC, 12 tweets referred to events or incidents from the Middle East and 2 to the Western World. The remaining examples referred to other regions and countries. Secondly, 11 out of 13 examples from AJE referred to the Middle East, and the remaining two examples referred to other regions. In order to find a more reliable pattern, one would have to analyse a larger collection of tweets. Nevertheless, according to the reports that involve the word *kill*, the AJE tweet more frequently about the Middle East than the BBC.

Since this is just a subset of 21 tweets from the BBC and 13 from AJE, it does not necessarily mean that the entire tweet sample in this analysis is like that when it comes to the sentence structure and word choice. On the other hand, the textual content of the tweets in Table 3 and 4 clearly differ, regarding how the events are described in these different news stories, which given that it is a random sample that has been selected, might indicate that this is a more general tendency in these news channels tweets. Each tweet from the BBC is on average longer than the ones from AJE. The average number of words in each tweet in this particular subset, i.e. all tweets containing the word *kill*, is 15.8 for the BBC and 7.2 for AJE., hence these examples show that the BBC provide more detailed reports as they use more than twice as many words to describe the news stories. This also accords with the average number of tweets for the BBC which is 15.4, but not entirely with AJE which is 9.6 (see Table 1).

4.2 Tweets covering the same news stories

Table 5 below shows different tweets covering the same news stories in which the word *Syria* occurs. Since the word can be used in different ways, all lemmas of the words have been considered and taken into account. As previously stated, the analysed tweets were collected over a time period of twelve days and the different examples in the table have been divided so that the date of publication of the tweets is the same for both the BBC and AJE. In each tweet a link to the article about the news story is added. This has been excluded in the table below, as it has no importance for the results of this study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BBC – Oct 10</th>
<th>AJE – Oct 10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td><em>Turkey intercepts Syrian plane</em></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Tweets about the conflict in Syria from the BBC and AJE between October 10th and 11th.
Example (14) and (15) show the same news story tweeted by the BBC and AJE. There is no difference in the choice of words, although the use of scare quotes is evident in AJE’s tweet and not in the BBC’s. Hence, emphasis is put on the part within scare quotes, i.e. intercepts Syrian plane. This suggests that the lead item in the message was the fact that the intercepted plane was Syrian and not that Turkey performed the action. It is not possible to say whether this was a conscious choice from AJE, since scare quotes can be used as a way to disassociate the writer from the expression, which indicates that the information is attributed to a source other than AJE, or as an emphasis marker. Howsoever, they still catch the readers’ attention.

Tweet (16) and (17) also convey the same story, however differently. In Example (16), the BBC more explicitly announce that the Syrian passenger plane was carrying “illegal cargo”. AJE wrote that the plane “carried Russian-made munitions” as seen in example (19), where no strong words, such as illegal are used. Hence the BBC’s choice of word affects the tone of the tweet, and it might therefore be conceived in a slightly more negative way.

When looking at example (16), the phrases forced to land and illegal cargo imply that a negative action has taken place. In addition to this, the words in example (18) and (20) from the BBC, express more clearly that the cargo was Russian-made defence equipment and ammunition for Syria government, compared to AJE’s tweet (19), where they simply mention that the cargo was Russian-made munitions. In this case, munitions is a more general term, which according to the Oxford English Dictionary (2012) is defined as “military equipment.
of any kind”. The words *ammunition* and *defence equipment*, used in the BBC’s tweets, suggest that the cargo was used for waging war, which also enhances the seriousness of the tweet. Also, AJE do not say who the cargo was for, which the BBC do. In example (18) they clearly state that the equipment was for the Syrian government.

When observing tweets (16), (18) and (20), in comparison with AJE’s corresponding tweets in Table 4, there is a difference concerning the information source, i.e. where the news channels received the information about the particular incidents. In examples (16), (18) and (20) the BBC explicitly say *Turkey’s foreign minister says* or *Turkish PM says*, that is to say the information conveyed in the tweets is according to the BBC based on what those two people have said. On the contrary, AJE do not mention the information source in the different tweets, they instead use scare quotes as seen in example (15) and (19). The scare quotes in these particular tweets may be interpreted as emphasis markers as mentioned above, or as substitutes for the information source. More specifically, since the source is unidentified in AJE’s tweets they simply put the information within scare quotes which expresses disassociation with the given words; hence it can be seen as a substitute for the source of information. It is difficult to determine what the writer intended with the scare quotes, and there is of course a possibility that they were used to give the sentences emphatic roles in the tweets.

In the subset of tweets where the word *Syria* occurred which consisted of 41 tweets from the BBC and 71 tweets from AJE, there were more tweets from the BBC where they explicitly mentioned the information source than from AJE. That is, 15 out of the 41 tweets from the BBC, which constitutes 36 % and 5 out of the 71 tweets from AJE, which constitutes 7 %. In the BBC’s editorial guidelines (bbc.co.uk), they express that whenever possible; they use first hand sources when gathering material for their pieces of news. This is also the case for AJE, since a part of their overall mission is to provide accurate news, as mentioned earlier. This is probably a general guideline for most news networks, but still it needs to be mentioned to the readers to ensure that the pieces of news they read are correct.

In any event, the BBC expresses the information source more clearly in their tweets than AJE. One might suggest that by mentioning the source of information directly in the tweets, it may be perceived as more accurate by the reader. Although this does not necessarily mean that the BBC is more accurate overall than AJE, but it might be implied as such. AJE does not describe in any of their tweets in Table 5 where the information in the tweet comes from and this suggests that the source is insignificant to convey according to AJE. It could also be interpreted as a way for AJE to be unbiased in their utterances, as they
do not give as thorough descriptions in comparison with the BBC. However, AJE probably describe the incident in more detail in the actual news report, but that will not be investigated as it is not the aim and focus of this analysis.

The fact that AJE did not post any more tweets than the ones presented in Table 5 about the “plane incident” compared to the BBC which all in all tweeted seven times about that particular story, also gives the impression that the BBC is more descriptive in their storytelling. However, this observation merely suggests this, and it cannot be determined by simply looking at the number of times each news channel has tweeted about the same news story, but rather what is conveyed in the tweets.

Moreover, when looking at examples (14), (15), (17) and (20) both the BBC and AJE describe Turkey as being the entity that intercepts Syrian plane or seizes cargo aboard Syria-bound plane. This is a metonymy for the human actors that actually carried out the action. Although it might be interpreted as a way for the news channels to avoid specifically mentioning who performed the action. The reason for using Turkey as a metonymy is, from one point of view, probably a matter of wanting to express easily understandable information which does not confuse the readers, as they surely understand that Turkey as a whole did not perform the action. From another, it implies that the whole country supports the action, but howsoever, this is difficult to determine.

**Table 6. Tweets from the BBC and AJE covering the same news story**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BBC – Oct 18</th>
<th>AJE – Oct 16</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21 <strong>Air strikes in #Syria’s Idlib and Aleppo provinces kill at least 20 people, activists say</strong></td>
<td>22 'Airstrikes' pound Syrian rebel strongholds</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The examples in Table 6 were tweeted on different days, but since these were the only tweets that covered this piece of news in the entire collection of tweets, the BBC and AJE most likely referred to the same incident. These two tweets vary when it comes to the words used to describe the incident. The BBC’s tweet contains 15 words, while AJE’s contains 5 which means that the BBC chose to describe the incident more thoroughly than AJE.

Firstly, the BBC describes that Air strikes have hit Idlib and Aleppo provinces in Syria and secondly that these attacks killed at least 20 people. When reading this, it comes across as serious and negative. The number of casualties is mentioned and by writing at least before
the numeral, it enhances the negativity of the tone in the tweet. For instance, if they would have written *no more than* or *approximately* instead, it would decrease the seriousness of the event. In example (22) AJE also say that ‘*Airstrikes*’ have been carried out, but as they simply mention that these attacks *pound Syrian rebel strongholds* and do not mention if people have been killed, the tone of the tweet may be conceived as less negative and serious by the reader.

Furthermore the information source is expressed in tweet (21). At the end of the sentence the BBC writes *activists say*, and when reading this one perceives this as more serious, since it is likely to be a first hand source, in comparison with AJE who do not mention the source of information. This implies that AJE compared to the BBC does not find the source of information as important to convey. However, AJE have placed the word ‘*airstrikes*’ within scare quotes which in this case suggests that they want to emphasize this. The reason for this could be that they want to convey that ‘*Airstrikes*’ have been carried out, without mentioning the damages the airstrikes caused. It might be that AJE considered it to be enough information to express, as the word itself implies that a deadly action has taken place. In any case, it is evident in these two tweets that the BBC’s tweet is described more seriously and negatively than AJE’s.

The tweets in Table 6 where not posted on the same day, and there is of course a risk that they do not refer to the same piece of news, which is important to take into consideration. It might be that the BBC received more detailed information about this piece of news two days after AJE had tweeted about it, but had this been the case one would presume that AJE would upload a new tweet explaining the incident further, as they did with the tweet about the Syrian plane incident.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 7. Tweets from BBC and AJE covering the same news story</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>BBC – Oct 20</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 At least 11 people are killed and 48 injured in bomb blasts and shootings in #Iraq, officials say</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this table tweets about the same news story from the BBC and AJE were analysed. In the entire sample of tweets from the BBC and AJE, these were the only tweets that dealt with this particular incident. The fact that the BBC numerates the casualties in this news
story, and also more specifically explain in what way these people were killed, immediately makes it sound more serious, and again, by writing *at least* before the numeral, it enhances the negativity of the tone in the tweet. AJE, chooses to tone down the seriousness of the tweet by only writing *Iraqis killed*. Since both these sentences are passive, the emphasis in example (23) lies on the number of people who were killed, i.e. at the beginning of the sentence, and not their nationality, whereas in example (24) focus lies on the fact that the victims were *Iraqi* and not on number of killed Iraqis and how they were killed. The fact that the BBC only said that the incident took place in Iraq, and not that the victims were Iraqi, slightly tones down the negativity. For instance if they would have written (23a) *At least 11 Iraqis are killed and 48 injured in bomb blasts and shootings in #Iraq* it may have been interpreted differently.

Furthermore, the BBC expresses the source of information in this particular tweet, while AJE do not. In any case, these differences still make the tone of the BBC’s tweet more negative and serious than AJE’s.

**Table 8.** Tweets from BBC and AJE covering the same news story

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BBC – Oct 19</th>
<th>AJE – Oct 19</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>25</strong> Massive roadside bomb kills at least 18 people on their way to wedding in Balkh province of northern Afghanistan</td>
<td><strong>26</strong> Wedding guests killed in Afghanistan blast</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These tweets were posted on the same day, and in the whole sample of tweets for this analysis, these were the only pieces of news about this particular incident. The BBC mentioned, not only that a bomb had killed wedding guests, but also the number of casualties which AJE did not. In this example, as well as in previously observed instances, the BBC write *at least* before the numeral which enhances the negativity of the tone. Although both tweets are negative due to the fact that people lost their lives in a bomb attack, the BBC explain more thoroughly what happened, and also clearly mention that the incident took place in Afghanistan. AJE instead uses the words *Afghanistan blast* which suggest that the bomb necessarily was not a roadside bomb. In addition to the lack of explicit information about the location in the tweet, it also indicates that the incident might not even have taken place in Afghanistan, but could have been carried out by Afghans somewhere else. The fact that the BBC chose to write that it was a *massive* bomb in combination with the number of people
killed in the incident makes the piece of news appear even more impactful. This is at least how it could be interpreted considering the fact that some people likely just overlook the different tweets and rather browse the headlines on each news channels’ timeline, and do not always click on the added link to the article. While the tweets compared in Tables 7, 8 and 9 are just a few tweets from the subset, it is nonetheless worth noting that the tweets differ clearly in terms of tone. The BBC more accurately describes the incident, consequently depicting it in a slightly more negative way, whereas AJE have a more neutral approach to the news stories.

4.3 Comparison of the use of numerals

There is a difference between the BBC and AJE when it comes to the use of numerals. That is to say, if the news channels mention the number of people that have been killed or simply that people have been killed without mentioning how many casualties there were. By specifying the number of casualties in the tweets, the idea is that the tone of the tweet might be interpreted more negatively. Out of the 22 examples of tweets containing the word *kill* from AJE, only two stated how many were killed with the use of numerals, which constitutes 9% of the tweets. The tweets are displayed below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 9. Tweets from AJE containing the word <em>kill</em> where numerals are displayed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There were however 4 examples where AJE mentioned that *dozens* were killed. For instance *Nigerian soldiers kill dozens of civilians or dozens of children reportedly killed in Syria*. Although they hint that many people have been killed, it is still not as explicit as conveying the actual number of casualties. Out of the 36 tweets from the BBC that contained the word *kill* there were 22 tweets with numerals which constitute 61%. Consequently, there is a distinct difference between these two news channels use of numerals in the sample of tweets where the word *kill* occurred.

Moreover, the tweets from AJE where the number of casualties were expressed only concerned other regions than the Middle East. As for the BBC, the reports concerned a variety of regions. Since the use of numerals enhances the urgency of the tweet, the sample of tweets investigated in this section suggests that the BBC deem the number of casualties
more important to mention than AJE. The use of numerals between the news channels apparently varies and in spite of the fact that these are just a few examples, which perhaps cannot be used to draw any conclusions, the difference is too evident to be discarded as incidental.

5. Conclusion and discussion

This study has investigated the BBC’s and AJE’s tweets and found that there are considerable linguistic differences. Since previous research have found differences between the two news channels’ storytelling, the preliminary assumption of this investigation was that the tweets would reflect these differences in their language usage as well. The aim of this investigation was to look at the textual content of the tweets from the BBC and AJE to see if there were differences and in what ways they were evident. The results show that overall the BBC had longer and more descriptive tweets than AJE. As for the usage of scare quotes, the difference was insignificant. However, since AJE used scare quotes in tweets where the BBC instead expressed the source of information, suggests that AJE finds this less important to include than the BBC. Moreover, in the tweets where the word kill occurred, the results show that AJE slightly more frequently emphasized the nationalities of the victims, instead of the number of casualties as the BBC did. Furthermore in the same subset, AJE also had more tweets that concerned the Middle East. On the hand this implies that AJE deems the fatal incidents from their own region more important to convey than incidents from other regions. On the other hand it might be that they simply tweeted about the most current and serious events that took place during the period of time the tweets were collected.

All in all, the results show that in both, that is tweets where the words Syria and kill occurred; there are distinct linguistic variations between the two news channels. The BBC uses more words on average and their choice of words in the majority of the tweets is stronger and more descriptive. The BBC frequently announces the source of information and to a large extent also use numerals more frequently than AJE. In conclusion, the BBC’s uses a more informative language which enhances the seriousness and urgency of the tweets, and they provide more detailed news reports in their tweets compared to AJE.

Since the subsets which were chosen for a more thorough analysis were rather small and differed in size between the BBC and AJE, it might be that the findings were a result of chance, consequently affecting the conclusions and results of the study. This has to be taken into consideration. Nevertheless the differences that were revealed by the study were of an
apparent nature and occurred too frequently and consistently in this small material to be discarded as merely incidental.

This thesis focused exclusively on the textual content of the tweets, and as these tweets are so easily accessible and easy for the reader to perceive, it is quite an impactful way for the news channel’s to spread their news, consequently making them particularly interesting to analyse. It would of course be interesting to investigate tweets which concern other topics than the ones analysed in this study, which would also surely bring even more depth and understanding to how these news channels’ choose convey their pieces of news. Also, the news articles the tweets represent could also be explored to see how the content is expressed in relation to the tweet.

Moreover, since Twitter is such a popular micro-blog considering its vast number of users and wide sector of application, the use of the English language in the tweets can be studied in many different ways. In an article published by Giles (2012) he discusses how the English language on Twitter evolves and that several new terms have been formed and are rapidly spreading. Hence, Twitter as a linguistic phenomenon could be further analysed and perhaps lay the foundation for future studies.
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