

Tracing the meaning of ideological keywords; a diachronic corpus-assisted study of the discursive construction of 'allibraliah' in the Saudi context

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1. Introduction

Modernism and social reform have been the subject of much debate in the predominantly conservative Saudi society. Within this debate, a number of ideological key terms have been contested between the two main groups: the conservatives and the progressives. One of the most significant of these is 'allibraliah', a loan word in Arabic that corresponds to 'liberalism' in English. In Laclau's words, 'allibraliah' is considered an *empty signifier*, as different groups attempt to fill it with their own ideological meanings in order to gain or to maintain power (1996). In this talk, I will discuss how corpus methods can contribute to the study of the discursive construction and change of 'allibraliah' as an empty signifier. In addition, I will briefly show the means by which corpus analysis can be integrated with critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2001; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001) for an in-depth analysis of *the mechanisms* by which the construction of 'allibraliah' is changing.

The salient discursive analysis of the node 'allibraliah' follows Firth's contextual theory of meaning, which views the meaning of a word as largely dependent on its relationship with co-occurring words (1957). For an empirical investigation of the usage of 'allibraliah', I employed Sinclair's (1991) units of meaning model with a particular focus on analysing three types of lexico-semantic relations which are collocation, semantic preference and semantic prosody.

2. Data and methods

A corpus was compiled for this study, which consists of 575 articles (505,122 words) that contain the lemma 'librali' (*liberal*). These articles are taken from four Saudi newspapers published in the period between 2007 and 2016. Each article has been annotated for time, and part-of-speech tagged using Madamira tool for processing Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) texts developed by Pasha *et al.* (2014). The corpus was uploaded to the Sketch Engine corpus tool (Kilgarriff *et al.*, 2004) in order to carry out a corpus analysis.

The designed methodological framework aims to answer the following research questions:

- A) What are the fields of discourse associated with the discourse of 'allibraliah'?
- B) What are the semantic preferences around the term 'allibraliah'?
- C) What attitudes towards 'allibraliah' are held by Saudi newspapers and do they change over the whole period?

To answer these questions, an analysis of the word list was conducted to identify the top lexical items in the corpus and the meaning preferences associated with these words. This was followed by an analysis of the usage of these lexical items over time using trend analysis. Analysis of collocations was also conducted, to examine the words surrounding the term 'allibraliah'. Finally, a concordance analysis of these

collocates was carried out for a close examination of the usage of the collocates with 'allibraliah' and the way they contribute to the construction of the meaning of 'allibraliah' over time.

3. Some findings

An initial analysis of the usage of 'allibraliah' over the period (2007-2016) has shown that it has been mostly used and contested in 2010. This finding emerged when reviewing the number of articles that constitute the corpus as seen in figures (1)

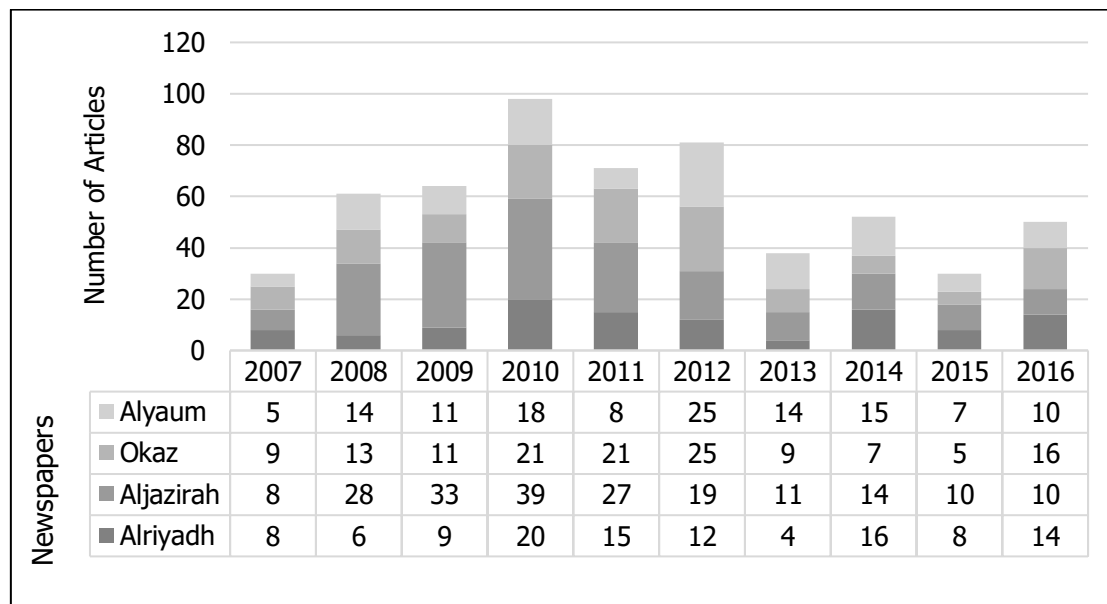


Figure 1: Number of articles per year in the corpus (2007-2016)

A close analysis of the discourses associated with 'allibraliah', performed by conducting a word list analysis has revealed that 'allibraliah' is associated with the discourse of religion (co-occurring with terms such as *Islam*, *Muslim* and *Allah*) and with the discourse of human rights (co-occurring with the use of terms 'hurriah' means *freedom*, 'insan'/'human and 'haq'/'right'). The trend analysis for the usage of these terms over time has shown remarkable results in that words indexing the discourse of religion decrease in use, while terms indexing the discourse of human rights show an increase over the same period.

A look at the collocations of the term showed similar results, with the lexical items 'Islam' and 'hurriah' (*freedom*) being the most frequent collocates with 'allibraliah'. The concordance analysis of these collocations over time reveals that 'allibraliah' was negatively represented at the beginning of the period, in which it has been described as a concept that contradicts Islam and that its association with freedom is a foreign negative concept. However, towards the end of the period, 'allibraliah' is positively represented, where its association with Islam indicates the possibility of its coexistence with the religion and where its association with freedom implies the possibility of creating a special version of liberalism for Saudi society.

Despite these informative results concerning the salient discursive construction of 'allibraliah', these findings still do not provide insights into the mechanisms by which these trends emerge within the social context. It is thus necessary to integrate the

corpus analysis with critical discourse analysis approaches. According to Baker *et al.* (2008), corpus analysis is not sufficient to explain why particular lexical patterns were found as it does not address the social, political and historical contexts. Therefore, critical discourse analysis of individual texts will be conducted to examine the way these changes are results of strategic use and the means by which these strategies are intertextualised in a chain of texts over time, and the relationship between these trends and the wider sociocultural context in Saudi Arabia over the period. This integration of the micro analysis will be illustrated with some examples.

4. Conclusion

Corpus analysis has revealed remarkable results about the salient features of the discursive construction of 'allibraliah' and the change of the discourse over time. It has shown the main discourses associated with 'allibraliah' and the shifts in these discourses. However, this informative corpus analysis of the discursive construction of 'allibraliah' would be more fruitful when integrated with an in-depth analysis of individual texts using critical discourse analysis approaches.

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