

## Deception Strategies in the Discourse of American Think Tanks: An Argumentative-Pragmatic Analysis

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Received: 1/21/2022

Accepted: 4/3/2022

Published: 6/24/2022

### Abstract

Deception is a misrepresentation of reality that attracted many researchers examining it from various perspectives. However, no due attention has been given to the discursive deception strategies in the work of think tanks. This study aims at exposing the deception strategies deployed in the conservative American think tanks' discourse which concern itself with the (re)production of socio-political realities. The study holds the significance of the detection and explication of argumentative and pragmatic discursive deception strategies which impose ideological hegemony and socio-political polarization of the positively presented *Self* against the negatively presented *Other*. This study attempts to answer a twofold question: what are the discursive deception strategies involved in the work of think tanks, and why/how these strategies are applied? To this end, eight political texts from three think tanks were analyzed adopting an eclectic model based on van Dijk (2000) and Yule (1996). The analyzed data mainly focuses on four political themes namely (1) terrorism in Islam, (2) Russian role in the Middle East, (3) the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, (4) the U.S. policy in the Middle East. The results demonstrate the pervasiveness of discursive deception strategies in the think tanks' discourse which endeavor to communicate an ideological polarization of a positive presentation of the *Self* against a negative presentation of the *Other* and reinforce a hegemony of particular socio-political realities. Findings can be beneficial for students of (critical) discourse analysis, media, communications studies, and English for special purposes.

**Keywords:** Critical discourse analysis, deception, ideology, political discourse, think tanks

**Cite as:** Al-juboori, A., & Mustafa, S. S. (2022). Deception Strategies in the Discourse of American Think Tanks: An Argumentative-Pragmatic Analysis. *Arab World English Journal*, 13 (2) 123-139. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol13no2.9>

## Introduction

Social or political gains are achieved in a variety of ways. In politics, deception may be realized through *discursive* deception strategies to fulfill political domination. In the realm of policymaking, language is of pivotal role in laying out the desired policies that may eventually guide the performance of governments. Of great, and indeed inevitable, importance to some policymakers is the act of deception as it allows them more freedom to exploit the social and political resources. We attempt in this study to tackle the deception strategies utilized in the discourse of think tanks where these institutions may well be considered a vast manifestation of political discourse in which deception is strategically practiced. Think tanks are public and private research institutions that rely on roughly academic procedures to make up policy analyses to help policymakers inform their policies (McGann, 2019). While most of the work of think tanks passes unchallenged (Wiarda 2010), advocacy think tanks (ATTs) are a prevalent type of think tanks that promotes and is established based on market conservative ideologies. Weaver (1989) points out that ATTs work towards partisan policy-making that is ideologically motivated while heavily investing in marketing their products to practice a strong influence over policy debates. Plehwe (2015) mentions that critical analyses of think tanks must tackle the validity of the independent and objective 'scientific' public image since most think tanks provide no financial and funding transparency. One example about the political influence of an ATT is the way Heritage Foundation and Cato Institute mobilized mainstream media in the U.S. and the very policy of the White House towards the alleged development of Iraq to weapons of mass destruction (Paolucci, 2009). We have set the goal of this study to be the exploration and exposition of pragmatic and argumentative ideological strategies of deception deployed in the work of ATTs. For this purpose, we developed an eclectic CDA model to analyze eight texts from the work of three U.S.-based think tanks that are well-known of following a conservative political orientation. The analysis focuses on the ideological polarization of a positive presentation of the *Self* against a negative presentation of the *Other*. Analyses also concentrate on the way think tanks reinforce a hegemony of particular (i.e., preferred) socio-political realities. With that said, we seek to answer are:

- 1- What is the extension to which argumentative and pragmatic deception strategies are used in the conservative think tanks' discourse to polarize the positive *Us* against the negative *them*?
- 2- What are the contextual interpretations that explicate why and how these strategies are applied to impose an ideological hegemony?

## Literature Review

### *Deception and Critical Discourse Analysis*

Deception is essentially communicative when people are targeted to embrace a particular set of truths as it arises when falsified statements are made to manipulate the audiences' minds where falsity is key to defining deception (Galasinski, 2000). One facet of the pragmatics of H. P. Grice is seen as a practical attempt that may be the intrinsic definition of deception, i.e., Grice's four maxims of Relation, Quality, Manner, and Quantity, and inform all the factors that regularize how people mean and communicate which immediately makes deception the intention to *deviate* from these maxims and violate the cooperative principle (Oswald, Didier, & Saussure, 2016). The deceiver eventually drives at having his/her (political) adversaries construe a preferred version of

a particular reality which consequently pushes forward the deceived to support the deceivers' agenda (Macdonald, 2007). Challenging deception is then at the heart of achieving social equality. To this end, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is well-positioned to tackle the social and political equalities since a naturally occurring text can be, and should be, viewed as a communicative vehicle through which deception is manufactured, disseminated, and inculcated. This is so due to ideological and attitudinal prejudices pushing the linguistic behavior of writers and speakers to manifest their socio-political relations. This further confirms the inseparability of linguistic meaning and ideology which necessarily makes any linguistic analysis an influential instrument in studying the ways ideology mediates power (Fowler, Hodge, Kress, & Trew, 1979). Therefore, (critical) discourse analysts carry the burden of challenging dominant social and political realities to lessen the suffering of people (Fairclough, 2012).

According to van Dijk (2015), CDA is an emancipatory and interdisciplinary analytical apparatus used to analyze spoken and written discourses for revealing and criticizing the enactment, (re)production, and legitimation of power abuse and inequality realized as various generic discourses. The core objective of CDA is "to examine critically the relationship between language, ideology, power and social structure, for example, social inequality as it is constructed, re-produced, legitimized, and resisted in language" (Catalano & Waugh, 2020, p. 1). To achieve this, CDA breaks down *naturalized* discourses by analyzing the dynamics between society and discourse, i.e., the way macropolitical ideology-informed institutions/actors manifest themselves in everyday textual micropolitics that in turn makes up polarized and biased power relations (Luke, 2002). The main tenet of CDA "draws heavily on social theories and seeks to develop a critically contextualized approach to linguistics which identifies issues of ideology, power, and inequality" (Flowerdew & Richardson, 2018, p. 1).

While it has such a "strong interest in power and ideology, CDA naturally shares ground with politics and political actors" (Filardo-Illamas & Boyd, 2018, p. 315).

### ***Political Deception***

The ultimate goal of a deceptive political discourse is to make adversaries perceive reality in a particular way which helps the deceiver persuade the deceived to do something that is in the interest of the former (Macdonald, 2007). Political deception sees the light when politicians put together convincing cover stories provided that audiences have no access to accurate information (Godson & Wirtz, 2010). Novel, and/or alternate meanings are created when political actors bend the meanings of words. According to Dunmire (2012), political meaning-making is actualized at two levels (a) first, *actional ideas*, and (b) second, a descriptive *linguistic content* that materializes those ideas. A socio-political reality may well be the *direct and pure* product of the politically wrought language in everyday political happenings (Edelman 1988, as cited in Dunmire, 2012). Indeed, Edelman assumes that politics is known to be a direct reflection of the language used to realize contextual political events. Politics can manifest itself in so many different ways, reproduce particular realities and attain undisclosed goals. The outcome, Teubert (2010) explains, is a reality that is discursively manufactured and one that has more public acceptability in a particular time and place. When new political meanings are produced, they are the result of how a nonentity is rendered as an existent *meaningful* entity, and how various meanings arise because of the many ways by which one entity is described (Chilton, 2004).

### *Previous Studies*

El-Zawawy (2017) explored political lying in electoral speeches given by the then-presidential candidates Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump. He novel linguistic analytical model was based on criteria-based content analysis. Al-Zawawy concluded that such models lack context-sensitivity and are therefore limited in determining whether a discourse is deceptive or non-deceptive. Olajimbiti (2019) surveyed the political deception in 250 sampled political posts on Facebook out of which 50 posts are selected as the most politically deceptive at the time of the Nigerian 2019 general elections. The posts were found to achieve other-criticism, positive self-presentation, and mobilized the public, yet they fell short of addressing the ideology-laden motivations according to which politicians (re)act.

In a more recent study, Ricketts (2021) examined the way politicians draw on deception strategies on the platforms of social media. He utilized machine learning and a model of natural language processing to deal with texts from politicians' accounts on social media to explain the way they downplay their publicly perceived wealth during the time of elections. The study concluded that rich politicians attempt to belittle their wealth while their poorer counterparts attempt to magnify it. Although analytical accuracy is addressed when using natural language processing to uncover deception, this study provided no contextual explications of the texts analyzed as to what ideological interpretation is behind the minimization or exaggeration of perceived wealth at the time of elections.

Mattes, Popova, and Evans (2021) investigated the way voters perceive deception when watching videos of politicians' speeches. Compared to those of non-verbal nature, they found that the level of delineation of verbally produced indications is far better in aiding voters to identify dishonest politicians. However, Mattes et al. (2021) offer no discursive (textual) evidence, and judgment is left to voters whose anecdotal, relative, and personal perception of socio-political realities may well be of great discrepancy. Results even take a gender bias where females politicians are judged to be more honest.

Chadwick and Stanyer (2022) presented deception as a concept that can collectively explain how we disinform, misinform, and misperceive. Their model is the work of various social disciplines establishing a connection across the information, intentions, attitudes, and behaviors of the actors in terms of "media-systemic distortions in information supply; the relational interactions that both produce and activate cognitive biases; and the attributes, strategies, and techniques of deceptive entities" (p. 1). However, they admit that their model of analysis pays no attention to delineating the influence of this multi-layered deceptive content.

These studies have attempted to detect and explain the (linguistic) nature of deception yet a gap can be identified in terms of (1) the lack of a contextual discursive interpretation of the deception strategies employed, and (2) these studies refrain from addressing the ideological premises embedded in producing a deceptive content. The current study seeks to bridge this gap as it explores the discursive deception strategies at the *argumentative* as well as *pragmatic* levels. It attempts to present a more comprehensive and contextualized detection of the way deception is

produced and put to use in the institutions of think tanks with a critical interpretation as to *why* such content is socio-politically harmful.

## Methods

This study develops an eclectic analytical model based on some of the discursive tools van Dijk's (2000) Ideology and Discourse offer, and also on Yule's (1996) Pragmatics. The main critical orientation is van Dijk's 'ideological square' of the (1) emphasis on our good qualities while covering up our good ones, and (2) emphasis on their bad qualities while covering up our bad ones (e.g. van Dijk, 2006). To satisfy the qualitative analysis, the deployment of discursive deception strategies is explored at the argumentative and pragmatic levels while the quantitative analysis will cover the frequency of the detected discursive deception strategies.

**Argumentative level:** the argumentative encounters attempt to make one's standpoint more palatable, conceivable, and plausible by developing arguments that appear to back up a point of view which then leads to specific conclusive remarks (van Dijk, 2000). This may develop false conditional or logical relational events (i.e., through fallacies), or through providing examples and illustrations. *Fallacies*, according to van Eemeren, Garssen, and Meuffels (2009), are argumentative strategies developed with flawed premises which in turn give rise to groundless or false arguments. Fallacies arise when the relational and logical connection between premises and conclusions is manipulated in a particular argument (van Dijk). To set up the premises for substantiating a particular policy, politicians may present or cite premises in a vague manner (van Dijk). *Exemplification* is another argumentative strategy that offers one or more detailed examples or illustrations to make one or more propositions powerful enough to be imagined and memorized. The strategy of Examples also polarizes an 'Us' (good-doers) versus 'Them' (bad doers) ideological equation (van Dijk, 2000).

**Pragmatic level:** pragmatic strategies account for the way writers implicitly communicate more than what is written (Yule, 1996). *Presuppositions* are inferences manifested as grammatical structures based on the immediate forms of sentences' constructions which are heavily context-dependent (Levinson, 1983). Three types are prevalent in the ATT discourse, namely existential, factive, and non-factive. *Existential Presuppositions* subconsciously stimulate the existence of certain *entities* and *states of affairs* by constructing a definite or indefinite noun phrase to promote the taken-for-granted existence of that entity or state of affairs (Yule, 1996). *Factive presuppositions* are triggered when verbs such as 'know', 'regret', 'acknowledge', 'realize', 'report', 'be' + (aware of, odd, glad, happy, sad, etc.) are used to load presupposed information (Yule, 1996). *Implicature* is another pragmatic strategy to encode more than what is said in a shared context. *Fabrication* in politics is the non-adherence to or non-observation of the maxim of Quality to cause the audiences to embrace a false proposition that explicitly lacks adequate textual and/or contextual evidence which renders these statements unsupported (May, 2001). *Equivocation* is a strategy to make vague, loose, or hedged statements to mislead the audiences (Al-Hindawi & Al-Aadili, 2017). This is done through violating the maxim of Manner in Grice's terms, i.e., providing equivocal propositions, and also through floating the maxim of Quantity, i.e., providing either less or more than the required information (Yule, 1996). *Speech Acts* is the pragmatic dimension within which people do and perform various practices using words to communicate. Political discourse uses different types of speech acts such as those of

representatives (Yule, 1996). *Representative speech acts* present assertions, conclusions, or descriptions to convey the speakers' belief toward a particular state of affairs which may receive a *performative* interpretation such as 'I hereby assert that X is the case' (Yule, 1996).

### Data Description

Eight written texts are selected for analysis. The original writing language of the texts is American English, they cover the period of 2012 to 2020, they vary in their number of words, and they are obtained from the internet websites of the respective ATTs. To qualify as analytical materials, texts must be (a) a written text as opposed to T.V. or radio programs, (b) is the special work of one of the respective ATTs, and (c) reflective of one of the political themes of (1) the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, (2) Islamic terrorism, (3) the U.S. policy in the Middle East, and (4) the Russian role in the Middle East. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is analyzed in the work of the think tank of the Heritage Foundation. The think tank of the Hoover Institute is selected to reflect the theme of terrorism in Islam. The Russian Role in the Middle East is studied in the work of The Brookings Institution. Finally, and The Washington Institute is of good reflection to the U.S. policy in the Middle East. The corpus of texts is illustrated in the following tables.

Table 1. *The corpus of analysis*

Political Theme	No. of texts	N. of words	Publication year	Text type
Terrorism in Islam	2	2,089	2016, 2016	Article, research brief
The Russian role in the Mid. East	2	7,161	2017, 2016	Policy report, testimony
The Israeli-Palestinian conflict	2	2,434	2015, 2020	Issue brief, policy commentary
The U.S. policies in the Middle East	2	2,987	2017, 2012	Policy analysis, policy analysis
Total	8	14,671		

### Analysis

The quantitative frequency of the deceptive strategies in think tanks is explained through the statistics below. Yet, the numbers provided are not meant to constitute analytical comparisons among these strategies since this task is beyond the scope of this study. A moderate-to-high frequency of deceptive strategies is detected in the eight texts analyzed as shown in Table (1 and Table 2.

Table 2. *Distribution of deception strategies per political theme*

Deception strategies	Terrorism in Islam	The Russian Role in the Middle East	The Israeli-Palestinians Conflict	The U.S. Policy in the Middle East
<b>The Argumentative Level</b>				
Exemplification	13	5	8	7
Fallacies	6	8	7	5
<b>The Pragmatic Level</b>				
Implicature (Fabrication)	5	6	3	3
Implicature (Equivocation)	5	7	5	7
Presupposition (Existential)	4	8	17	8
Presupposition (Factive)	3	8	2	3
Speech acts (Representative)	13	11	15	7

Total	49	53	57	40
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At the argumentative level, the *exemplification* is the most applied strategy in realizing terrorism in Islam while *fallacies* is the most frequent of the strategy deployed in the reproduction of the Russian role in the Middle East.

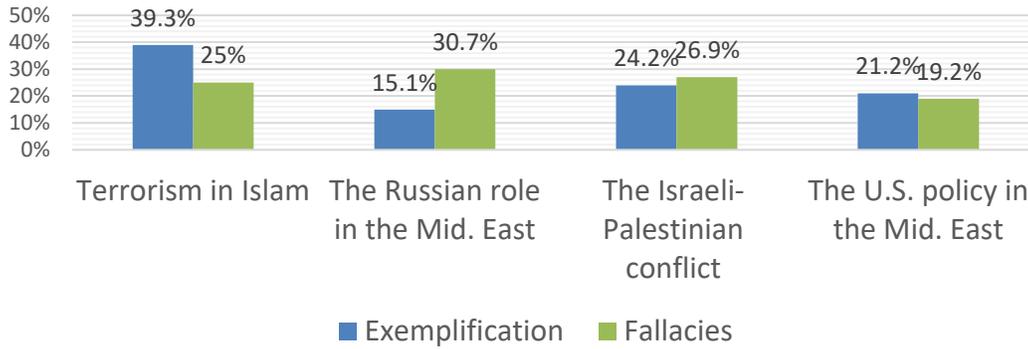


Figure 1. Argumentative deception strategies

At the pragmatic level, the political theme of the Russian role in the Middle East received the most used strategy of *fabrications*, while *equivocation* is found to mostly applied in the political themes of the Russian role in the Middle East as well as the U.S. policy in the Middle East. The highest frequency of *existential presuppositions* is observed in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict whereas the theme of Russian role in the Middle East harbors the maximum number of factive and non-factive presuppositions. Finally, the strategy of representative speech acts is most pervasive in the re-introduction of the Israeli-Palestinians conflict. Below is an illustration of the deployed frequencies of the detected deception strategies of the political themes analyzed.

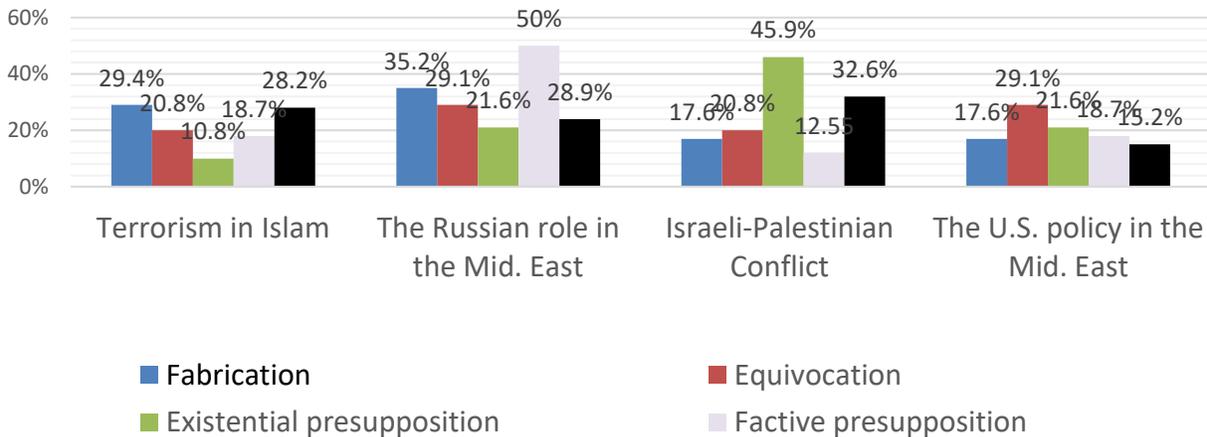


Figure 2. Pragmatic deception strategies

Deception Strategies: Argumentative Level  
Exemplification

One panelist noted that the Soviet Union ran into a similar problem. The moment stability arrives in the Middle East, Russia's role will largely evaporate. (Brookings, 2017)

Brookings (2017) brings to the discussion the Soviet Union's political approach toward the Middle East to add more weight to the negative role that Russia is supposed to have assumed in this region of the world. In order to negatively reproduce this role, Brookings mentions that Russia is but an extension of the same political irrationality which stems from the 'similar problem' that the Soviet Union went through as it also relied on political instability. While Brookings compares Russia's irrationality to that of the Soviet Union, the strategy of exemplification is employed to convey that Russia feeds on political unrest and that this is not new to the Russians since their ancestors had done the same thing, i.e., creating chaos in the Middle East and benefiting from it politically. In other words, Russia's ineffective and indeed detrimental actions should not surprise anyone. The Russians, Brookings confirms, are politically labeled as a historical failure. They are depicted in an ideological polarization of Us (the West) who bring peace and stability to this region, and Them (the Soviet Union/Russia) who always attempt to keep the unrest in the Middle East.

The kidnapping of U.S. diplomatic personnel in Tehran by a group called "Muslim Students Following the Line of the Imam" sent us a message that we were engaged in the religious war the jihadists warned would come. (Hoover, 2016a)

Hoover's (2016a) strategy of examples deployment strengthens an already existing stereotypical perception of Islam. This strategy instills reproducible memories which may well be reflected in more concrete ideological social practices (van Dijk 2000). Hoover provides a list of seven additional examples to further reinforce a negative perception of the Islamic faith which states in that even students may be recruited to kill innocent diplomats who work within internationally respected political norms. Hoover then goes on to stress the 'message' that should have been construed from this accident: Islam and Muslims are the West's avowed enemy and there exist unequivocal examples of the 'religious war' Muslims now lead. The examples Hoover uses are employed to *reduce* the religion of Islam to the violence of a few people which Islam and Muslims condemn. This reduction, if solely considered, would dismiss all religions as merely false instructions of violence.

There are few "happily ever afters" in the Middle East; developments that begin with remarkable hope and inspiration rarely end that way. Look at the bloodless revolution in Tunis, the spirit of Tahrir Square, and the amazing courage of the peaceful protestors in Deraa, and then look at where they are today. (The Washington Institute, 2012)

The Middle East is full of political failure and these are just some examples to show that it is a hopeless endeavor (The Washington Institute, 2012). Although the examples may well be truly indicative of political happenings, audiences are invited to compare a before-after scenario with these examples in mind to develop a negative depiction of this region. The examples are exploited to reinforce an already-existed stereotypical perception of the Middle East. No matter how promising these protests and revolutions may appear, The Washington Institute invites its

audiences to 'look' at how things have turned out now, i.e., the middle east has always been this way, a political vacuum that cannot be remedied correctly with democracy.

### *Fallacies*

The Palestinians' "all or nothing" negotiating stance has left them with nothing that gives hope for a better future. Now they are turning their backs on Trump's vision, despite the potential economic benefits it offers. (The Heritage Foundation, 2020)

This excerpt shows the way one or more premises are provided as reasonably sufficient to welcome a particular argument. The Heritage Foundation (2020) puts forward a supposedly valid political environment of of the recent U.S.-sponsored Abraham Accords between the Israelis and Arabs as the latter being represented by the countries of the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. Heritage yet defends more of an economic agreement and reproduces the accords to offer 'economic benefits' deemed to be most Palestinians' dire need. The fallacious aspect arises when Heritage advances these 'benefits' as they are *necessarily* valid premises upon which the accords should be accepted by the Palestinians. That is, the fallacy goes, what else do the Palestinians want from Israel when such an agreement is offered to them and they simply refuse it! This argument, and the entire scope of the accords, is immediately groundless once Israel's settlement program is considered by the Palestinian negotiator. The ideo-political polarization, a typical strategy in Heritage's treatment of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is thus re-produced successfully. The Palestinians are (re)presented as the ones who reject such an economically valid 'vision' while the Israelis' proactive peace efforts are positively foregrounded.

As much as we would like to wish it so, it is a mistake to think the United States can pivot away from the Middle East and toward Asia, as though we have a fixed amount of bandwidth and the luxury of reapportioning it based on our preference. (The Washington Institute, 2012)

The superficial interpretation of this excerpt is intended to convey that the (conservative) U.S. 'wish' they can just leave the Middle East alone. However, The Washington Institute (2012) sets the argument of avoiding such a political and strategic 'mistake' since the U.S. has the 'bandwidth' and the 'luxury' to control the region, i.e., the advantage to re-organize the Middle East in a way that best brings its economy and strategic interests to highest standarts. The argument loses validity once a question such as *why the U.S. can't just leave the region if they want* is posed. According to the Washington Institute, the answer is: we sincerely want to leave, but we must stay. Taking into account the extremely important oil considerations, among many other pivotal concerns, the U.S. would simply commit political suicide if it were to leave the Middle East. The fallacious argument emerges when the Washington Institute communicates a typical false narrative of the U.S. being *compelled* to stay in the Middle East for the sake of promoting democracy while it strives to establish its military and political presence in this part of the world and heavily invests to maintain that presence.

George W. Bush pursued a delusional program of democracy promotion in Iraq and Afghanistan, with scant appreciation for the profound cultural differences between Islam and the West. (Hoover, 2016a)

Hoover (2016b) brings to the discussion of terrorism in Islam President's Bush attempt to export a democracy 'program' to Iraq and Afghanistan. But this attempt, Hoover says, has failed miserably as Bush had no real understanding of the real problem: Islam. That such emancipatory attempts are deemed to fail is a patterned argument in the conservative think tanks. The fallacy in this excerpt lies in the product of the premisses of (a) Islamic countries neither accept democracy nor adapt to it and most importantly (b) Islam is never compatible with the democratic West. The first premise gives rise to the first fallacious argument, i.e., Muslims live in corrupt governing Islamic systems yet they still refuse to adapt to the western successful democracies. The second premise facilitates a false argument of a deeper ideological polarization. Hoover (2016a) dissolves Islam into bare cultural practices that stand *against* the sophisticated American governing system. While the latter offers programmed lessons of doing democracy yet it is Islam that rejects it.

#### *Deception Strategies at The Pragmatic Level*

##### *Presupposition: Existential Presuppositions*

At all turns, Putin has shown he is willing to pay a high economic and diplomatic price as he seeks to tip regional balances of power in Europe and the Middle East in Moscow's favor. (Brookings, 2016)

The Russian role in the Middle East is contingent upon and is a result of President's Putin ignorantly compromising policy targeting the 'regional balance' of the way international powers exist in the Middle East (Brookings, 2016). There are at least two intertwined propositions that are presupposed to *exist* in this example, (a) a 'high economic' risk, i.e., Putin is indifferent to his own country's economy and foreign political relationships, and (b) a 'high diplomatic' risk, i.e., he is approvingly willing to compromise the Russian economy and its foreign political gains to keep the Russians' military presence in the Middle East. Both of the presupposed propositions are respectively realized by two indefinite phrases of 'a high economic price and 'a high diplomatic price' through which the presupposed information is simply presented as unassailable. While Putin is being presented as a leader who is 'willing to be' a political fanatic to maintain Russia's image as a major superpower, this excerpt reproduces Russia as a country that may destroy its economy and determinedly cut off any foreign political ties only to maintain a military presence in the Middle East.

Contrary to the claims of the Palestinian Authority, this effort is not intended to breathe new life into the peace process. It is a deliberate attempt to: (1) avoid negotiating a peace accord in which the Palestinians would have to recognize Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state. (The Heritage Foundation, 2015)

Another manifestation of existential presupposition is the use of a possessive structure. The mention of the Israelis' perceived 'right' to exist is of high prevalence in the discourse of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The possessive structure in this example conveys the unacceptable refusal of

the Palestinians to an implicitly assumed right-to-exist of the state of Israel. For lay audiences, this may well appear to be a legitimate right that anyone can and should demand. However, in the discourse of conservative think tanks, the Israelis' existence 'right' is misleadingly recreated. While it is unequivocally true that human beings have such a right, in the discourse of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict this particular 'right' to exist is constructed to be perceived as if there is presumptively a party from which such a right is demanded. In other words, it is the Palestinians who must adhere to granting the Israelis what is it originally a *natural* right to live in a state of their own. Otherwise, the Palestinians will be the ones who willfully prevent that natural justice from taking place. To further clarify the deceptive message, one can say that while the Israelis do have the natural right to exist and live in a Jewish state, yet this does not necessarily entail any assumptions that they are entitled to practice that right on Palestinian soil.

### *Factive Presuppositions*

With institutions like the EU, NATO, and with lesser powers, Moscow wants everyone to acknowledge that Russia has the right to block steps that it does not like [in the Middle East]. (Brookings, 2016)

Brookings (2016) re-introduces the Russian role in the Middle East as a *fait accompli* while they want all international powers to recognize the Russians' inherent right in deciding the future of the Middle East. Brookings applies the strategy of using the verb 'acknowledge', a factive verb that establishes unchallenged facts realized in the claim that immediately follows, i.e., Russia always claims to be entitled to have such a legitimate 'right' to interfere in the affairs of the Middle East, and now it seeks its due recognition from other international superpowers. The factivity employed here reproduces the Russians as a country that has a self-proclaimed political privilege over the other political powers. The Russians hurry to challenge the peacebuilding processes and 'block' planned 'steps' only because they do not 'like' those steps. This portrays Russia as an irrational power that carelessly reacts to sensitive political calculations instead of carefully reconsidering those steps and then requesting modifications or negotiating changes. Without considering the political consequence or other perspectives, Russia halts the structured efforts to stabilize the region.

To maintain this "grievance" narrative, AQ [al-Qaeda] knows that the innate supremacist and violent aspects of *sharia*—for example ISIS' destruction of churches and subjugation of "infidel" Christian minorities—need to be curtailed or hidden from the Western world. (Hoover, 2016a)

The alleged Islamic grievance would be compromised if the brutality of the Islamic law (Sharia) is not carefully mitigated or even concealed from the world (Hoover, 2016b). This policy analysis indicates that it is simply a fact that the 'violent aspects' of Islamic Sharia command Muslims to 'subjugate' all of those who are either not Muslims or oppose the Islamic teachings. This is actualized in the deceptive potential of the factive verb 'know', i.e., it is infallibly *known* that Islamic Sharia permits and even induces extreme violence based on religious affiliations. What makes this example more deceitful is that this 'fact' is re-originated to come from the most anti-west Islamist terrorist group of al-Qaeda. According to Hoover, al-Qaeda is well aware of those explicit instructions in the Islamic Sharia that stipulate strict adherence of the aggressive teachings

against 'Christian minorities'. Hoover argues that to 'maintain' the necessary narrative, Muslims need to meticulously suppress the 'supremacist' and 'violent' nature of their Islamic law, otherwise the true essence of Islam would be flagrantly exposed.

*Implicature: Fabrication*

For the past several years, the PA has sought to use the U.N. and other international organizations to bolster its unilateral statehood claims absent a negotiated peace with Israel. Specifically, the Palestinians applied for and won full membership in the U.N. Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) over U.S. objections in October 2011. (The Heritage Foundation, 2015)

According to The Heritage Foundation (2015), by winning membership in UNESCO, the Palestinian Authority acted unilaterally and purposely bypassed the only way to resolve the conflict: the so-called two-state solution. Heritage violates the Quality maxim as it provides neither well-founded nor legally justified reasons behind America's refusal of Palestine's full membership in UNESCO. Otherwise, and if it were illegitimate, Palestine's request to join a U.N. organization would have been revoked in the first place. The implicatures on which Heritage bases this argument are twofold. First, the U.S. decides whether or not Palestine acts or can be a recognized state and thus by an extension such U.N. membership requests are only approved by the U.S. provided that they threaten the delegitimization of independence of Israel. Second, it is an ideological polarization that features the U.S. and Israelis as responsibly advocating peace-making on one hand, and, the Palestinians as imprudent who politically exploit the U.N. organizations on the other hand.

And an IS-centric policy is likely self-defeating because Iran's sectarian-driven policies run the risk of alienating Sunnis and recreating the conditions that produced IS in the first place. (The Washington Institute, 2017)

The narrative of Iran's responsibility for creating ISIS is omnipresent in the discourse of conservative think tanks. An American foreign policy to defeat ISIS is not reasonable as long as Iran continues to follow sectarian policies which have created ISIS 'in the first place' (The Washington Institute, 2017). In this excerpt, the fabricated implicature confirms that any set policies to defeat ISIS is valueless and will inevitably be 'self-defeating'. The implicature further conveys that if such a policy were to exist, it may well ignore the very existence of Iran as the original reason behind the formation of ISIS. The Washington Institute therefore conveys that it is of great necessity to fight Iran *instead of* ISIS since it is the sectarian policies of Iran—no matter whether or not those policies are truly sectarian—that directly paved the way for ISIS to emerge. The Washington Institute violates the Quality maxim, i.e., not offering explicit statements that provide clear evidence about how the Iranians' policies, the claim goes, allegedly pushed 'Sunnis' who felt 'alienated' which ultimately brought ISIS to existence.

*Implicature: Equivocation*

This history is worth reviewing, for all these mistakes, these failures of imagination, these indulgences of naïve idealism, these sacrifices of our security and interests to political

advantage, all comprise the “everything” that 9/11 was supposed to “change.” (Hoover, 2016a)

Hoover (2016a) refers to the informing 'history' of terrorism in Islam, encourages the audiences to comprehend Islam through the 'mistakes', 'failures', 'naïve idealism' of the Democrats politicians who show unaccepted tolerance towards the violent nature of Islam, and reminds its audiences of the 'sacrifices' made meanwhile. While Hoover fails to provide clear statements regarding the nature of that 'history', the maxim of manner is violated by presenting a series of ambiguous phrases such as 'these mistakes', 'these failures', 'these indulgences of naïve idealism', and 'these sacrifices'. This excerpt is another example of double-layered ideological polarization. On the one side, it polarizes Us (the victimized American society) versus Them (the terrorist Muslims). On the other side, it promotes a negative political adversary between Republicans (defenders of the American society) and Demarcates (indifferent to the safety of the Americans).

As was the case during the Cold War, Russia depends on a certain amount of conflict, but it also counts on that conflict not boiling over. (Brookings, 2017)

Brookings (2017) develops a negative perception of Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East while the Russians find the conflict in the Middle East a necessity achieve their political objectives. Brookings suggests two deceptively interrelated political states of affairs in this excerpt. For reintroducing the role of Russia in the Middle East as detrimental, Brookings implicates that the Russians wittingly initiate and control conflict so it remains at a 'certain amount' and not 'boiling over'. However, the claim 'Russia depends on a certain amount of conflict' is vague where a reference to the 'amount' is loosely made as if there exist quantifiable measurements of 'conflict' that enable the Russian to set up a conflict degree to be involved in a 'conflict not boiling' beyond uncontrollable degrees. Therefore, Brookings violates the Manner maxim by providing no explicit statements on *how, when, or why* Russia would invest in and benefit from the turmoil of the Middle East.

*Speech acts: Representatives*

Erdogan is weaker, Netanyahu (if reelected) will be stronger, and the Syria crisis has underscored the common dangers Turkey and Israel face. It is time to try. (The Washington Institute, 2017)

The policy analysis from which this excerpt is taken attempts to bring back to life the Turkey-Israel political relations claiming that there exist several common factors that motivate such a relationship from the U.S. perspective (The Washington Institute, 2017). This excerpt shows the strategy of drawing on the representative speech act of ‘Syria crisis has underscored’ for a stronger mediation of the Syrian conflict as the political situation which Turkey and Israel have to confront together. The Washington Institute utilizes the speech act to provide a deceptive *description* of the premises of this anticipated relation, i.e., the ‘dangers’ Turkey and Israel have in common are far greater than the disagreements they hold against each other. This further informs the performative interpretation of the speech act: *this is to establish that* Turkey and Israel share a seriously promising political relationship due to the challenges they both face in Syria.

The Palestinians’ “all or nothing” negotiating stance has left them with nothing that gives hope for a better future. (The Heritage Foundation, 2020)

The Heritage Foundation (2020) calls for a more flexible ‘stance’ on the part of the Palestinians since they have not been realistic in their political endeavors with Israel which thus dismisses their ‘hope’ for ‘a better future’. Heritage develops the representative speech act of ‘has left them...’ to bring about the *conclusion* that it is the Palestinians who raise the negotiations bar so high and hold unnegotiable positions. Also, the conclusive speech act is employed to accentuate the irrationality of the Palestinians and the severe lack of political prudence they should enjoy to secure a more prosperous future. The performative interpretation encodes a polarizing facet: *this is to conclude that* the Palestinians are not realistic in their demands and hereby have no hope to fulfill their future, while the Israelis are more serious to have fruitful negotiations and are indeed offering peace agreements.

All Sunni Islamic jihadi groups—Boko Haram, ISIS, Taliban, al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda, even Hamas—share the same motivations based on a literal and orthodox reading of Islamic history and doctrine. (Hoover, 2016a)

According to Hoover (2016a), all the ‘Sunni jihadi’ groups have in common the same theological foundation: the ‘history and doctrine’ of the Islamic faith. That violence and terrorism are the pure inheritance of the Islamic teachings are reinforced through the representative speech act that all of these violent groups ‘share the same motivation’. That is, this speech act is deployed to construct a deceptive *assertion* to convey that no matter where these groups are, they all stem from what ‘Islamic history and doctrine’ have always taught Muslims: the commitment to the religious bloodshed of jihad against other religions and minorities.

## Discussion

The analyses in this study has been an attempt to bridge the gap identified in the previous work in the realm of political deception. The above-mentioned studies failed to pay attention to the social and political contextual interpretations and consequently reflect no due consideration to the ideological motivations in the work of think tanks. The current study presents more comprehensive findings in terms of the political themes analyzed. The quantitative findings offer an overview of the abundance and frequency of the deployed pragmatic and argumentative deception strategies utilized in the think tanks’ products. The qualitative analyses present a closer look at the ideological motivations and put provide deconstructed analytical commentaries of why and how ideology is embedded in the work of think tanks. These analyses are deemed critical as they intend to raise the readers’ awareness of and redirect their attention to the surrounding socio-political realities reproduced deceptively via the powerful institutions of think tanks.

The research questions posed earlier are intended to shed more light on the findings. Firstly, to respond to the first research question (*what is the extension to which argumentative and pragmatic deception strategies are used in the conservative think tanks’ discourse to polarize the positive Us against the negative them?*), the argumentative and pragmatic deceptive discursive strategies are observed to have a moderate to high abundance in the work of American conservative think tanks. These strategies hold substantial importance in the discourse of ATTs in terms of the

political themes tackled. The Israeli-Palestinians conflict is recreated using the highest frequency of (57) strategies while the Russian role in the Middle East is reproduced through the second highest application of (53) strategies. Terrorism in Islam is observed to have the third-highest deployment of (49) strategies. Finally, the U.S. policy in the Middle East is re-presented through the least number of (40) strategies.

Secondly, the second research question (*what are the contextual interpretations that explicate why these strategies impose an ideological hegemony?*) is tackled in the light of the analyses above which attempt to lay out a contextualized interpretation of the embedded ideological polarity. The institutions of think tanks may seek to affect the mindset of lay audiences to change, re-present, and re-affirm their surrounding socio-political reality. This is done through communicating a positive presentation of the *Self* against a negative presentation of the *Other*. This polarization is achieved simultaneously at the pragmatic and argumentative levels. Moreover, think tanks may strive to produce, disseminate, and reinforce an ideological hegemony of preferred socio-political realities. To achieve this, think tanks deploy pragmatic and argumentative deception strategies. The above analysis reveals that lay audiences may be easily deceived when policy recommendations, for example, are disseminated, inculcated, and thus reproduced as naturalized/naturalizing *social practices*. This is especially likely when the think tanks' conservative products are reaffirmed in the media and, more recently, the widely spread social media platforms.

The study's findings may also create more informed educational curricula for teachers and students of media, and political science, as well as develop critical thinking skills of lay audiences towards generic discourses such as political commentaries and speeches, and religious sermons.

## Conclusion

This study is concerned with exposing the deception strategies prevalent in the discourse of conservative American think tanks that lead to (re)production of social and political realities. It attempted to fulfill this aim at two levels. First, deception is manufactured at the argumentative level where *examples* are used to invite the audiences to seriously (re)consider their surrounding socio-political reality in terms of how the proposed social and political claims have real-life examples. *Fallacies*, as the qualitative analysis shows above, are perfect argumentative spaces to communicate deceptive messages through manipulating the arguments' premises and the immediate deductive understandings of lay audiences. Unless it is deconstructed, a fallacious argument may well pass unnoticed and thus develops to be acceptable. Second, deception is also realized at the pragmatic level by implicitly and/or explicitly stating ideological polarization of a positive presentation of the *Self* of the conservative United States and its allies against a negative presentation of the *Other*, i.e., political rivals and enemies such as Russia and Islam. Ideological polarization is constructed as fabrications (violation of the Quality maxim), equivocations (violations of the Manner/Quantity maxims), existential, factive, and non-factive presuppositions, and finally representative speech acts.

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