

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF CHILD TRAFFICKING IN ARABIC NGO REPORTS

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Abstract

The child trafficking phenomenon has emerged as an umbrella term for slavery-like practices such as; children forced labour and forced sexual exploitation of children. In this regard, this study intends to investigate Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) reports on forced child labour through child trafficking (CT). This study aims to explore the functional descriptions of the reports' language on CT and to uncover the ideology of social power inequality causes. To achieve the aims, an eclectic modal is adopted Fairclough's (1992, 1995, 2001) three-dimensional framework for the analysis of the linguistic devices to examine social power ideology in NGOs reports on CT. The study is conducted through the qualitative method approach in reports representing CT in Arab region presented by the Yemeni Organization for Combating Human Trafficking (YOCHT) and Iraqi Observatory for Victims of Human Trafficking (IOVHT). By integrating Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) tools—including transitivity, modality, thematic structure, conjunctions, and reference chains

The study comes up with these conclusions:

- (i) The analysis illustrates how language foregrounds structural power imbalances by constructing children as vulnerable victims while positioning traffickers as dominant agents.
- (ii) The discourse reveals the systemic exploitation of children in forced labor, thereby reinforcing social and cultural ideologies.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, child trafficking, forced labour, ideology, social power inequality.

المخلص

برزت ظاهرة "الاتجار بالأطفال" كمصطلح شامل للممارسات الشبيهة بالعبودية مثل؛ العمل القسري للأطفال والاستغلال الجنسي القسري للأطفال. وفي هذا الصدد، تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى التحقيق في تقارير المنظمات غير الحكومية حول العمل القسري للأطفال من خلال الاتجار بالأطفال. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف الأوصاف الوظيفية للغة التقارير حول الاتجار بالأطفال وكشف أيديولوجية أسباب عدم المساواة في القوة الاجتماعية. ولتحقيق الأهداف، تم اعتماد نموذج انتقائي لإطار عمل فيركلوف ثلاثي الأبعاد (1992، 1995، 2001) لتحليل الأجهزة اللغوية لفحص أيديولوجية القوة الاجتماعية في تقارير المنظمات غير الحكومية حول الاتجار بالأطفال. أجريت الدراسة من خلال نهج الطريقة النوعية. في التقارير التي تمثل ظاهرة الاتجار بالأطفال في المنطقة العربية والتي قدمتها المنظمة اليمنية لمكافحة الاتجار بالبشر (YOCHT) والمرصد العراقي لضحايا الاتجار بالبشر (IOVHT). من خلال دمج أدوات اللغويات الوظيفية النظامية (SFL) - بما في ذلك التعدية، والنمطية، والبنية الموضوعية، وحروف العطف. توصلت الدراسة إلى الاستنتاجات التالية:

- (أ) يوضح التحليل كيف تُبرز اللغة اختلالات القوة الهيكلية من خلال تصوير الأطفال كضحايا ضعفاء، بينما تُصوّر المتاجرين كعملاء مهينين.
- (ب) يكشف الخطاب عن الاستغلال المنهجي للأطفال في العمل القسري، مما يعزز أيديولوجيات الاجتماعية والثقافية.

1. Introduction

Children who have been trafficked face numerous dangers, including violence, exploitative wages, excessively long working hours, and inhumane working environments. Such conditions grossly violate children's rights and pose severe threats to their health and development. The Human Trafficking Palermo Protocol (2000) defines child trafficking in Article 3(a) as:

"The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the

consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation” (International Conference of Labour Statisticians, 2008).

Commercial trafficking of children, whether internal to countries or across national borders, is closely linked to dynamics of supply and demand. The demand for under-aged cheap labour—both boys and girls—together with the high profitability of illegal or criminal activities, are among the primary driving forces. In some cases, traffickers abduct or manipulate children, forcing them into captive labour and subsequently selling them to employers. In other instances, parents themselves may consent to, or even facilitate, the process, often due to extreme poverty, inability to provide basic needs, or the necessity of repaying debts. Younger trafficked children are particularly vulnerable, as they are entirely dependent on their employers and often lack the capacity to escape or resist mistreatment (Walk Free & IOM, 2022). According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2021), an estimated 1.2 million children under the age of 18 are trafficked each year into exploitative labour. Gender plays a critical role in determining the type of exploitation: girls are disproportionately trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation and domestic labour, while boys are frequently forced into agricultural work, armed conflict, and various service industries (p.11).

Beyond the social and economic dimensions of child trafficking, language itself plays a powerful role in shaping perceptions of this phenomenon. As Fairclough (1992) argue, “language connects with the social through being the primary domain of ideology, and through being both a site of, and a stake in, struggles for power”. CDA seeks to uncover such hidden ideologies in discourse, which influence people’s beliefs and contribute to the reproduction—or contestation—of social realities. It focuses on the broader discourse context, beyond the level of grammatical structures, to examine how social actors are represented and how power asymmetries are discursively reinforced or challenged (p. 15). Texts produced by NGOs are often ideologically loaded, implicitly legitimating and disseminating particular worldviews and power relations. To address these concerns, the following research questions guide the analysis:

1. How are discursive strategies (e.g., transitivity, modality, reference) employed to represent power relations between children and traffickers?
2. How are social ideologies (e.g., cross-border trafficking control, social inequality) reinforced through discourse?

2. Child Trafficking in Arab region

Despite considerable advances in enacting anti-trafficking legislation, a growing number of children in the Arab region remain at risk of trafficking and exploitative labour. Countries in the region function as origin, transit, or destination points for trafficked children, presenting a significant challenge to regional and international anti-trafficking efforts. Several factors exacerbate children’s vulnerability in the region; demographic, cultural, and socio-economic characteristics, coupled with large populations of displaced children, heighten the risk of trafficking and sexual exploitation among children fleeing conflict zones. Incidences of child sex tourism have been documented in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. In the Arab region, the term ‘child trafficking’ encompasses a broad range of forced labour types (Save the Children, 2018), including the following:

1. **Slavery-Like Labour:** Children are often kidnapped or coerced into performing manual or domestic labour akin to slavery. This includes cleaning, cooking, and other servant-like duties. Many are forced to operate dangerous machinery or work in factories and retail for minimal or no pay. In Egypt, female domestic child-labourers, in particular, are frequently subjected to physical, psychological, or sexual abuse, often with no means of escaping their employer.
2. **Child Soldiers:** In conflict-affected areas, children—both boys and girls—are illegally recruited to serve as armed soldiers (as in Yemen). They may be forced to fight on the frontlines, act as lookouts, or participate in other life-threatening roles. While many are kidnapped, some voluntarily join armed groups in an attempt to increase their survival chances in war-torn regions.

3. Illicit Activities: Trafficked children are also coerced into activities such as domestic work, begging, informal retail, or drug trafficking. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), nearly one in ten reported trafficking cases involves children forced to beg, and approximately one in twenty involves trafficking for illicit activities in Egypt and Lebanon.

3. Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a methodological approach that seeks to describe, interpret, and explain the relationship between the form and function of language within social contexts. CDA is also a means of influencing social change by addressing issues such as power, gender, and racism (Reisigl & Wodak, 2000). Fairclough (1989) situates ideology within relations of power and inequality, arguing that ideologies are instrumental in maintaining social domination. He contends that ideology “invests language in producing or interpreting a text” (p. 74). Van Dijk (2004) describes ideology as “the foundation of the social representations shared by a social group.” Ideologies are closely tied to social groups, classes, castes, or communities, representing their fundamental interests and serving as an interface between cognitive representations and societal positions. They influence individual discourse and broader social practices (p.17). Fairclough (1995) emphasizes that the primary aim of CDA is to reveal the linkages between discursive practices and wider social and cultural structures. In this context, CDA examines how language both reflects and reproduces social power, explaining how power abuse is enacted, legitimized, and maintained through texts and talk. Power relations are socially constructed, and language functions as a central instrument of social control (p. 73). Linguistic features, including transitivity and modality, serve as mechanisms through which discourse reflects social agency and the exercise of power (Kress, 1985: p. 84).

4. Methodology

4.1 Data Collection

The analysis of the extracts has been conducted through qualitative research, which tackles text-based data. These textual data may include interview observation notes, diary entries, or media reports. The sample was collected from the official websites of NGO reports in the Arab region (in Iraq and Yemen), covering the years 2019 and 2020.

4.2 Adopted Model of the Analysis

The analysis of the selected data was carried out using an eclectic model, including Fairclough's (1992, 1995, 2001) theoretical framework, relying on Halliday's (1985, 1994, 2004) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) tactics to examine the linguistic features.

4.3 Data Analysis

The data analysis is conducted in three stages. The first, the description stage, involves textual analysis; it is useful to draw on Halliday's (SFL) tools: transitivity, modality, thematic structure, conjunctions and reference.. The second, the interpretation stage, focuses on the production, distribution, and consumption of the text. It examines how the text is shaped by intertextuality (how it draws on other texts) and interdiscursivity (how it mixes different discourse and to understand how texts are interpreted and how they circulate within society. The final stage, the explanation stage, aims to present discourse as part of a wider social process. The focus is on the wider social and cultural context, and analyzing how discourse relates to power relations, ideology, and social structures (Fairclough, 1989, p. 163).

5. Analysis of Reports

1. Analysis of Report (1) " المرصد العراقي لضحايا الاتجار بالبشر "

Iraqi Observatory for Victims of Human Trafficking (IOVHT) / 2019- p.4/ periodic report/ Baghdad / Iraq .

وفقاً للتقرير الصادر عن المرصد العراقي لضحايا الاتجار بالبشر (IOVHT)، تم توثيق ما لا يقل عن سبع وعشرين شبكة اتجار بالبشر داخل العراق. ويبرز التقرير أن معظم هذه الشبكات مترابطة فيما بينها، وتتركز أنشطتها في محافظات أربيل ودهوك وكركوك، حيث تقوم باستدراج المراهقين والأطفال المشردين واستغلالهم في أنشطة متعددة غير مشروعة. وتشمل هذه الأنشطة التسول المنظم،

والاسترقاق المنزلي، وتهريب المخدرات، والاتجار الجنسي. وتشير الأدلة الواردة في التقرير إلى أن الجماعات الإجرامية لا تكتفي باستغلال الأطفال بشكل مباشر، بل تلجأ أيضًا إلى أساليب مختلفة مثل اختطافهم أو "تأجيرهم"، مع توفير بعض الاحتياجات الأساسية لهم بهدف ضمان السيطرة عليهم، في حين تُدار العمليات من وراء الكواليس عبر شبكات منظمة. وتؤكد المعطيات أن هذه المافيات تتحكم في أنشطة المتسولين، الأمر الذي يحول الشوارع العامة إلى فضاءات منظمة للاتجار بالبشر والاستغلال الممنهج. كما يخلص التقرير إلى أن العراق يُعد في الوقت ذاته بلدًا مصدرًا ووجهة للنساء والأطفال الذين يقعون ضحايا للاتجار الجنسي والعمل القسري. ومنذ عام 2014، قام مقاتلو تنظيم داعش باختطاف واحتجاز آلاف الأطفال المنتمين إلى الأقلية الإيزيدية، حيث استمر التنظيم في بيعهم ونقلهم إلى مقاتليه في العراق وسوريا. وقد خضع هؤلاء الضحايا لممارسات وحشية تمثلت في الاستعباد الجنسي، والعمل القسري، بالإضافة إلى تجنيدهم قسراً في النزاعات المسلحة.

The text uses material processes "استدراج المراهقين والأطفال المشردين واستغلالهم" (luring and exploiting adolescents and homeless children) and "اختطاف واحتجاز آلاف الأطفال" (kidnapping and detaining thousands of children) to foreground the actions of traffickers and ISIS as dominant Actors. The traffickers are consistently presented as the active participants, using verbs like 'استدرج' (lure), 'استغل' (exploit), 'اختطف' (kidnap), 'بيع' (sell), and 'تحكم' (control). These action processes highlight the agency and power of the criminal networks. In contrast, the children are positioned as passive participants or 'Goals' of these actions, 'يُستغلون' (are exploited) and 'يُخضعون' (are subjected). For example, the phrase 'الاستعباد الجنسي' (sexual slavery) attributes the action of enslavement to a generalized force, while the children are the ones experiencing the effect. Relational processes: "تتحكم في أنشطة المتسولين" (control the activities of beggars) constructs traffickers as authoritative. And mental processes: "تُبرز" (highlights), "تؤكد" (confirms) emphasizes evidence and perception, giving credibility to claims.

The text uses declarative statements to present the information as factual and authoritative. The phrases 'يبرز التقرير' (the report highlights) and 'تؤكد المعطيات' (the data confirms) increase the text's credibility and assert the institutional power of the IOVHT as a source of reliable information. Modality verbs like "تؤكد" (confirms) and "يُعد" (is considered) indicate certainty, reinforcing the factuality of exploitation and trafficking. Epistemic modality appears in "لا نكتفي" (do not limit themselves), suggesting deliberate, ongoing control by criminal networks. The report's high certainty language asserts the reality of the exploitation clearly, reinforcing the seriousness of the issue.

The text consistently positions the traffickers and criminal networks at the beginning of sentences and clauses, making them the theme. This places the emphasis on their actions and control. For example, "...الجماعات الإجرامية لا تكتفي باستغلال الأطفال" (criminal groups aren't content with exploiting children...). Themes begin with "وفقاً للتقرير" (According to the report), "ويُبرز التقرير" (The report highlights) frames discourse as authoritative and evidence-based. This creates a reference chain that continually links power and action to these groups. The children, on the other hand, are often introduced later in the sentence, reinforcing their subordinate role as the objects of exploitation. Frequent references to "الأطفال" (children), "المراهقين" (adolescents), and "ضحايا" (victims) constructs them as a vulnerable group. References to criminal groups and ISIS highlight organized, systemic power structures. Additive conjunctions: "بالإضافة إلى" (in addition to), "وأيضاً" (also) accumulate the forms of exploitation, emphasizing severity. Contrastive: "لا نكتفي... بل تلجأ أيضاً" (do not limit themselves... but also resort to) stresses the multiplicity of coercive strategies.

At the interpretation level, intertextuality is explicit in the text, since it is a report within the discourse of humanitarian and human rights reporting. It adopts a formal tone, the use of statistics "ما لا يقل عن سبع وعشرين شبكة" (at least 27 networks) focuses on documentation and evidence. The mention of ISIS and the Yazidi minority also brings in the broader discourse of conflict and terrorism, showing how trafficking is intertwined with other forms of oppression. On the other hand, phrases like "شبكات" (networks) and "مافيا" (mafias) portray trafficking as a sophisticated and organized system rather than just focusing on individual perpetrators.

At the explanation level, the text reveals criminal networks hold that structural dominance, controlling resources and operations "تتحكم في أنشطة المتسولين" (controls the activities of beggars). The text shows how this dominance is mediated by institutions and social conditions. The text also underscores how victims like the Yazidi children were not just victims of individual acts but of an

ideologically driven process of enslavement by a terrorist organization. By explicitly naming the victims "المراهقين والأطفال" (adolescents and children); "الأقلية الإيزيدية" (the Yazidi minority), the text gives them a voice and acknowledges their suffering. This analysis reflects the deep-seated social power inequalities that define the issue of child trafficking. Children, especially displaced or minority (e.g., Yazidi) groups, are positioned at the intersection of vulnerability, gender, and ethnicity, highlighting social and political marginalization.

2. Analysis of Report (2); " المنظمة اليمنية لمكافحة الاتجار بالبشر "

The Yemeni Organization for Combating Human Trafficking (YOCHT) / 2020- p.2/ periodic report/ Yemen

تشير بيانات المنظمة اليمنية لمكافحة الاتجار بالبشر (YOCHT) إلى أنَّ ظاهرة تهريب الأطفال من اليمن إلى دول الخليج تمثل إحدى أخطر قضايا الاتجار بالبشر في المنطقة. إذ يتم الاتجار سنوياً بعشرات الآلاف من الأطفال اليمنيين، حيث يتم استغلالهم في أنشطة متعددة مثل: البيع المتجول والتسول في المملكة العربية السعودية، والعمل في المزارع أو رعي المواشي، إضافةً إلى استخدامهم كفرسان للجمال في دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة. كما يستغل بعض هؤلاء الأطفال في أنشطة غير مشروعة تشمل السرقات والدعارة والممارسات المنحرفة. وتقيد الإحصاءات الرسمية بأن عدد الأطفال اليمنيين الذين تم تهريبهم إلى المملكة العربية السعودية خلال عام 2003 قد بلغ نحو 3,500 طفل. كما تشير بيانات وزارة الداخلية اليمنية (2003) إلى أن الغالبية العظمى من هؤلاء الأطفال تتراوح أعمارهم بين 6 و12 عاماً، حيث يشكل الذكور منهم حوالي 85% مقابل 15% من الإناث، وغالبيتهم ينحدرون من ثلاث من أفقر المحافظات اليمنية القريبة من الحدود السعودية، وهي: حجة، الحديدة، والمحويت. وعلى صعيد آخر، سجّلت التقارير أن عدد الأطفال الذين تمت إعادتهم إلى اليمن عبر معبر حرض الحدودي قد بلغ 9,765 طفلاً في عام 2007، حيث شكّل الذكور نسبة 96% مقابل 4% من الإناث. وتشير الدراسات الميدانية إلى أن معظم هؤلاء الأطفال المُعادين إلى اليمن ينتهي بهم الأمر بالعمل في الشوارع، الأمر الذي يُفاقم أوضاعهم الاجتماعية والاقتصادية الهشة، ويجعلهم عرضةً لمزيد من أشكال الاستغلال.

The text uses material transitivity processes such as "يتم الاتجار بعشرات الآلاف من الأطفال اليمنيين" (tens of thousands of Yemeni children are trafficked), "يتم استغلالهم في أنشطة متعددة" (they are exploited in multiple activities). The traffickers are represented as the active Actors through verbs like 'تهريب' (smuggling) and 'الاتجار' (trafficking). This highlights the agency and power of the traffickers. In contrast, the children are the objects of these actions, 'يتم استغلالهم' (they are exploited) and "يُستغل بعض هؤلاء الأطفال" (some of these children are exploited). The children are positioned as passive participants, acted upon by a powerful, organized force. The text also employs relational processes to classify the children, such as "يتراوح أعمارهم بين 6 و12 عاماً" (their ages range from 6 to 12 years) and "يُنحدرون من ثلاث من أفقر المحافظات" (they come from three of the poorest governorates). And mental processes: "تشير بيانات المنظمة" (the data indicates), "تقيد الإحصاءات الرسمية" (official statistics indicate) to convey authority and credibility. These classifications frame the children's identity in relation to their vulnerability and poverty.

The text employs a high degree of certainty through the use of statistical data and references to official sources and the use of verbs like "تشير" (indicates), "تقيد" (reports) in phrases like "تشير بيانات المنظمة" (the organization's data indicates), "تقيد الإحصاءات الرسمية" (official statistics state), and "تشير الدراسات الميدانية" (field studies indicate) present the information as authoritative and factual. Modality also appears subtly in statements about social outcomes in "ينتهي بهم الأمر بالعمل في الشوارع" which highlights probability rather than absolute outcome. The text also establishes a clear reference chain for the victims, using frequent references to "الأطفال" (children), "اليمنيين" (Yemeni children), and "المعادين" (returned children) constructs a homogeneous group of victims, emphasizing vulnerability and uniform victimhood. The text also uses conjunctions like "إضافةً إلى" (in addition to) and "كما" (also) to list the various forms of exploitation, emphasizing the widespread and multifaceted nature of the issue. Conjunctions such as "وعلى صعيد آخر" (on the other hand) link different types of exploitation and chronological data, creating cohesive narrative flow. References to data sources "المنظمة اليمنية" "وزارة الداخلية اليمنية" and "لمكافحة الاتجار بالبشر" add legitimacy and authority. Themes focus on institutional reports and statistics: "تشير بيانات المنظمة اليمنية لمكافحة الاتجار بالبشر" → positions discourse as evidence-based and describes forms of exploitation (street vending, camel racing, farm work, begging, illegal activities), and concludes with consequences (vulnerability upon return). This progression helps the reader understand both scope and impact of the issue.

At the discursive level, the use of intertextuality places the text within the discourse of human rights reporting and institutional data collection. The text is a report that draws upon multiple sources, including the 'بيانات المنظمة' (organization's data), 'الإحصاءات الرسمية' (official statistics), and 'بيانات وزارة الداخلية اليمنية' (Yemeni Ministry of Interior data). By referencing these sources, the text legitimizes its claims and positions itself as a credible source of information. On the other hand, the text frames child trafficking as a regional, institutionalized phenomenon rather than isolated incidents. It highlights the connection between Yemen and other Gulf countries ('من اليمن إلى دول الخليج' - from Yemen to Gulf countries) and the different forms of exploitation ('البيع المتجول والتسول... العمل في المزارع... فرسان للجمال... السرقات والدعارة'). This discursive practice positions readers to recognize children as vulnerable victims, while highlighting the role of traffickers, border regions, and socio-economic inequalities in perpetuating exploitation.

At the explanation level and social context, the traffickers hold structural dominance over the powerless children, exploiting their vulnerability, which is rooted in social and economic conditions ('أفقر المحافظات اليمنية' - poorest Yemeni governorates). The discourse represents children as victims, reinforcing humanitarian and social ideologies, while statistical data adds legitimacy to claims of systematic exploitation. The text's primary social function is to document and raise awareness about a grave human rights violation. The mention of returned children ending up 'بالعمل في الشوارع' (working in the streets) and becoming "عرضة لمزيد من أشكال الاستغلال" (vulnerable to further exploitation) highlights a vicious cycle of vulnerability, underscoring the failure of existing social support systems to break this cycle. The text aims to highlight the scale of the problem and the institutional failure to protect these children.

6. Conclusions

The analysis of the two texts through Fairclough's CDA and SFL tools demonstrates that language plays a central role in reproducing and legitimizing power imbalances in the discourse on child labour and trafficking.

1. transitivity choices positioned children predominantly as passive victims, subjected to the material processes of trafficking, exploitation, and abduction, while traffickers were constructed as powerful agents. Thematic structures reinforced this hierarchy by placing institutions in the theme position while relegating children's suffering to the rheme, effectively silencing their voices. In addition, the use of high-certainty modality underscored the discourse's claim to truth, while conjunctions created an accumulative listing of abuses, which intensified the portrayal of systematic and pervasive exploitation.

2. CDA demonstrates that the text linguistically and ideologically constructs children as vulnerable victims of trafficking and forced labour, while traffickers and ISIS are framed as powerful, organized agents. Through transitivity, modality, thematic structuring, and reference chains, the discourse emphasizes systemic exploitation and structural violence, reinforcing humanitarian ideologies and advocating for protection of children within conflict and post-conflict contexts.

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