4-1-2003

Trickster's Mask

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Trickster's Mask:
Representations of Aggressive Actions
of the Israelis and Palestinians in Editorial Coverage

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Throughout 2001, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, punctuated by gestures of peace and acts of violence, continued in its cycle of promise and disappointment. It was a year of changes in the Israeli and American administrations, as well as a call for a change in the Palestinian administration. It was a year which saw American involvement wax and wane and wax again. Although to no avail, U.S. President Bill Clinton strove to facilitate a lasting peace in the closing days of his presidency. Incoming President George W. Bush, stepping back in the initial months of his presidency from such intense American involvement in the region, retracted Clinton's final peace plan. Soon, however, Bush realized the need to send a special envoy, General Anthony Zinni to the region in an attempt to support the diplomatic work of C.I.A. Director George Tenet to implement the Mitchell recommendations for peace. Despite Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's peace efforts, he was defeated in the February Israeli elections. He lost to the hard-liner Ariel Sharon, whose march across the contested Temple Mount in Jerusalem in September of 2000, sparked the round of violence that continues until today. The year saw the declaration and breaking of cease-fires, leading to Israeli calls for the rejection of Yasir Arafat as a peace partner. Arafat's popularity also declined amongst his constituents while that of Palestinian militant groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad rose dramatically. Throughout 2001, these groups engaged the Israeli military in a violent dance characterized by a steady stream of military incursions into Palestinian Territory and suicide bombers into Israeli territory.

This essay focuses on the manifestations of Trickster's work in the media representation of these acts of aggression which have made up this dance. As Stockall (p. 1) reminds us, "Trickster is semiosis." Therefore, one way to probe Trickster activity in the peace process is to examine how acts of Israeli and Palestinian aggression are semiotically constructed in the media representation of this reality. What language is used to represent this contested reality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Ng and Bradac offer that "the availability of different linguistic forms for representing reality provides language users with tools for deleting or stressing particular aspects of reality" (144). For this essay, then, the

starting point is determining which verbal signs are used to represent the reality of the conflict. In the representation of aggressive actions by both parties, what is deleted or what is stressed in the presentation of the conflict's narrative? Are acts of aggression represented by the same signs for each side? Is the killing of a Palestinian by an Israeli signified by the same signs that the killing of an Israeli by a Palestinian is, or are they represented by different signs? In order to discern answers to these questions, I have examined the construction of the Israeli-Palestinian narrative within the 2001 editorials in the *New York Times* which focus on the conflict. (See Appendix A for a list of these editorials).

Methodology

Why choose editorials to explore the representation of this conflict? I chose this genre because the editorials purpose is to trick the sails of public opinion by changing the direction of readers' opinions. At least theoretically, then, the editorial should be fruitful ground for Trickster activity. Also, Trickster, who can and often does create chaos from order, also creates order from chaos, transforming the "meaningless into the meaningful" (Jung p. 256). Editorials are often an attempt at sorting the details of a complex situation into a meaningful framework in order to persuade readers to support a particular view, actor, or policy. When covering a conflict situation, editors, acting in their Trickster capacity, must determine how they are going to represent the acts of aggression each party takes against the other. Because in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict these acts seem to be a consistent roadblock to peace, it is important to determine what patterns of representation the editors are creating from the chaos to track how Trickster may be afoot in these patterns.

To decipher these patterns, I read a series of twenty-one editorials to track the signs signifying the aggressive actions of both parties. After identifying these signs, I examined them for linguistic activity, such as mitigation or masking strategies, characteristic of Trickster. Masking proved to be at play throughout the series. According to Ng and Bradac, "masking can be thought of as the rendering of reality so as to make it appear different from the 'actual' way of the world. Masking does not withhold true information or present false information as if true, rather it presents true information in an incomplete or partial way under the cover of one of more literary masks. The formation of a literary mask consists of, first, the concoction of special phrases and expressions…The act of concoction also involves the removal of cues that may otherwise encourage a more critical reading of the masked reality… The third feature, which may be thought of as a consequence of the second feature, is the reduced level of cognitive activity in comprehending the presented reality" (Ng and Bradac 145). Because of this strategic maneuvering of information, masking is a prime Trickster method, one by which s/he may tell the truth, yet still guide the editorial readers in a direction s/he wishes them to go.

Findings

In examining the series of editorials to explore Trickster's role in the representation of aggressive Palestinian and Israeli actions, a general pattern emerged for each group. Overall, the signs *violence* and *terrorism* were used to represent Palestinian actions, while the signs *military* and *restrictions* were used to represent Israeli actions. The following is a presentation of these findings succeeded by a discussion of the role of Trickster's masking activity in these representations.

Representations of Palestinian Aggressive Actions

Overall, representation of Palestinian aggression was generally performed by two signs, *violence* and *terrorist* (both in various nominal and adjectival forms). On initial review of the editorials, it appeared that *violence* also might be an Israeli representation, because both Israeli and Palestinian actors were often present in the sentences in which *violence* occurred. Of the fifty-two times *violence* occurred throughout the editorials, it most often collocated– 38 percent of the time– with both Israeli and Palestinian actors within the particular sentences in which it occurred. For example,

> "But if **Yasir Arafat**, **the Palestinian leader**, is willing to end the *violence*, he may find **Mr. Sharon** to be an unexpectedly pragmatic negotiating partner". (March 10, 2001).
> "**Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel** announced that if the **Palestinian leader**, **Yasir Arafat**, could deliver seven days without anti-Israeli *violence*, the clock would start on a six-week cooling-off period". (June 29, 2001).

Along with this Israeli-Palestinian combination *violence* also collocated with the following combinations: Palestinian-Israeli-American actors in 13 percent as well as Israeli only actors, Israeli-American actors or Palestinian-American actors in 4 percent of occurrences. It collocated with only Palestinian actors 23 percent of occurrences, while collocating with only in 6 percent. In the final 8 percent of the occurrences, none of these actors are present. (See Graphic One for samples).

These examples give the appearance that on the surface, the distribution of the sign *violence* most often occurs with multiple actors present, primarily Palestinian and Israeli ones. While that is accurate, these patterns only provide "relational location" information; they do not reveal that in seventy-seven percent of the occurrences, the

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Graphic One: Samples of Patterns of Actors

Palestinian-Israeli-American Actors: "It [the Mitchell recommendations] outlined steps both needed to take, including stronger Palestinian moves against violence and an end to all new Israeli settlement activity" (November 20, 2001).

Israeli-American Actors : "Mr. Sharon's actions have made it less likely that a reduction in violence will be negotiated any time soon and have strained relations between Israel and the United States ." (October 26, 2001).

Palestinian-American Actors : "[Arafat] must, as Washington demands, break up the terrorist organizations led by Hamas and Islamic Jihad by arresting leaders involved in planning violence and by seizing illegally held arms.   " (December 3, 2001).

responsibility for the violence was clearly designated as Palestinian. In an additional twenty-one percent, responsibility was ambiguous with the possibility of both Palestinian and Israelis being implicated. This raised the Palestinian responsibility, at least potentially, to a total of ninety-eight percent, leaving clear Israeli responsibility indicated two percent of the time. Thus, although on the surface, the sign *violence* collocates often with both Palestinian and Israeli actors, responsibility for the violence being wrought is clearly Palestinian. *Violence* is therefore a sign that represents Palestinian aggressive actions and only rarely Israeli ones.

Along with *violence,* the other sign that represents Palestinian aggressive actions is that of *terrorism. Terrorism* collocates with Palestinian actors/actions thirty-three times in the editorials, but never with Israeli actors/actions; thus, in this pattern, it represents only Palestinian aggressive actions, never Israeli ones For instance, in the March 14, 2001 editorial, the writers employ the sign three different times, in three different grammatical forms to categorize Palestinian activity. (See Graphic Two for samples).

Graphic Two: Samples of *Terrorism* Signs in the March 14, 2001

"The threat of a **terrorist** attack has become an unsettling constant in Israeli life, one made all the more vexing because Palestinian bomb makers and carriers can often move freely through Israeli cities and towns. "

"Mr. Sharon argued that closing off Ramallah was justified to speed the capture of several **terrorists** still at large after other members of their cell had been caught plotting to blow up a car in Jerusalem, eight miles to the South. "

"Emergency security measures should be targeted as narrowly as possible against those persisting in **terrorism** and other armed violence. "

Representation of Israeli Aggressive Actions

The most common and dominant sign representing Israeli aggressive actions

within the series of editorials is that of *military* (functioning adjectivally and nominally). The pattern that emerges is one of a continuum of specificity– from general to specific– in the usage of the sign. It is used generally in phrases such as *military tactics*, *military response*, *military retaliation*, *military operations*. (See Graphic Three for samples).

Graphic Three: Samples of *Military* Signs

"Israel should also match any moves by Mr. Arafat to end the violence by ordering its own ***military*** to act with restraint " (March 10, 2001).

"This [Israeli Defense and Foreign Ministry input] will be particularly important on issues like ***military tactics*** against the Palestinians …" (February 27, 2001).

"Renewed confrontations would only invite a strong Israeli ***military response*** and create more suffering among Palestinian civilians " (March 10, 2001).

"But he [Yasir Arafat] acted only after worldwide revulsion at last Friday 's murderous suicide bombing and under the threat of Israeli ***military retaliation*** " (June 5, 2001).

"Despite a personal plea from President Bush to withdraw Israeli troops, Mr. Sharon continues these ***military operations*** , the broadest in the West Bank in nearly a decade " (October 26, 2001).

It is also used as a cover term to designate specific military activities such as sealing off cities through the use of trenches, roadblocks and tanks, the usage of missile strikes, or the reoccupation of towns to accomplish Israeli goals Other Israeli aggressive actions are represented as *restrictions* which also serves as a cover term for actions such as *border restrictions*, *withholding tax payments*, or *economic blockades*. (See Graphic Four for samples of specific military actions as well as various restrictions).

Graphic Four: Samples of *Military* Actions

Specific Military Actions

"Mr. Sharon's initial action in this regard, sealing off the Palestinian city of Ramallah , seemed unnecessarily severe. Israel moved abruptly Monday to ***use trenches, roadblocks and tanks to cut off travel*** from Ramallah to neighboring West Bank villages (March 14, 2001).

"Israel retaliated with ***missile strikes*** against Palestinian offices in Gaza City " (April

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17, 2001).

"Israel now cites that failure [to capture the Israeli Tourism Minister 's killer] as justification for partially *reoccupying a growing list of West Bank towns* that passed to Palestinian control under the Oslo agreements " (October 26, 2001).

Various Restrictions

"Once this happens [halt of violence against Israelis], Mr. Sharon is willing to ease the pressures Israel has imposed on the Palestinian economy, from *border restrictions to the withholding of tax payments* from Mr. Arafat's civil administration " (March 10, 2001).

"The first steps should include efforts by the Palestinian Authority to collect illegal guns and prevent terrorist attacks and moves by Israel to lift *economic blockades* of Palestinian areas " (June 25, 2001).

The purpose offered within these editorials for these military actions, general or specific, was consistently security:

Mr. Sharon and his ministers must protect Israel's *security* while looking for ways to renew the search for peace to which both Labor and Likud have made major contributions over the years (February 27, 2001).

> Mr. Sharon must make sure that any new military measures are designed to enhance *security* while leaving open the possibility of eventually resuming peace talks (December 3, 2001).

Keeping this purpose in mind, it is not surprising that another pattern which develops throughout these texts is one of 'defensive' signs including but not limited to *reaction, responding to provocations*, and *defensive actions*.

> In the face of such hostility and a series of terrorist attacks in recent days, Israel's *reaction* has been restrained (March 29, 2001);
> In both cases, Israel was *responding to provocations* (April 17, 2001);
> Strong Israeli *defensive actions* are justified (April 17, 2001).

Discussion

The degree of masking within these texts is gauged by 'showing which of the essential dimensions of communication have been omitted from the presented reality' within these editorials (Ng and Bradac 151-2). These essential dimensions include: the editorial writers or senders of the message, the readers or receivers of the message, the content of the editorial message, and the context of the editorial

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message. Within the presented data, the essential dimensions most involved with masking are the content and context of the editorials. With regard to content, masking is at work in the form of generalizations which "are nonfocused formulations of reality brought about when writers (and speakers) use nonspecific words without supplying definite referential indices" (Ng and Bradac 159). With regard to context, masking is at work through the absence of contextual material.

Content

The editorial staff's usage of generalized signs/cover terms such as *violence* and *military* present a nonspecific picture of reality through which a predominantly negative view of one group, the Palestinians, is created via negative connotations of the signs associated with it, while a predominantly positive view of the other group, the Israelis, is created via positive connotations of the signs associated with it. Thus, on the one hand, the Palestinians are cast as the aggressors in the conflict due to their association with the signs *violence* and *terrorist*, while on the other hand, the Israelis are cast as the victims of Palestinian aggression due to their association with signs such as *military*, *retaliation*, and *security*. These generalizations serve as the special phrases through which cues are removed that might lead to a more critical reading of the masked reality (Ng and Bradac 145). The writers usually do not offer cues which may contradict or jeopardize the consistent casting pattern created throughout a series of editorials. This consistent repetition is worthy of note because of the cumulative effect media coverage has on readers. As Fairclough reminds us,

> [a] single text on its own is quite insignificant: the effects of media
> power are cumulative, working through the repetition of particular ways
> of handling causality and agency, particular ways of positioning the
> reader, and so forth (p. 74).

Readers of these editorials have grown to expect the Palestinians and Israelis to be cast in particular ways; and the editorial staff does not abuse these expectations.

Nevertheless within these generalized masking activities of the editorial staff in their Trickster-esque role of persuading readers, Trickster, himself, often engages in some semantic play through an unexpected collocation or through some latent semantic content. As stated previously, *violence* appeared fifty-two total times in this series of editorials. In fifty-one of these occurrences, it collocated predominantly with Palestinian actors or combinations of actors. However, upon examination, we notice that in one of these occurrences, Israeli action is not designated as *military* or even as *defensive* but, surprisingly, as *violence*:

> Mr. Sharon, who cut short a visit to the United States to respond to the
> bombings, will be under considerable pressure to escalate the *violence*
> (December 3, 2001).

The violence to be escalated is *Israeli violence*, not Palestinian, even though this is inconsistent with the casting of Israelis as victims. Thus, despite the editorial staff

consistent vigilance over the sign *violence*, Trickster subtly managed to complicate the Israeli image.

This also happens through the occasional appearance of signs such as *revolt*, or *uprising*. For example,

Yasir Arafat unwisely spurned Mr. Barak's proposals and then encouraged a Palestinian **uprising** against Israel. That **revolt** doomed Mr. Barak's peace policy and assured Mr. Sharon's electoral triumph" (February 7, 2001).

The appearance of such signs within these editorials in which the Palestinians are cast as the aggressors begs the questions: what are they rising up against? What are they revolting against? Latent within the semantic content of each of these signs, *uprising* and *revolt*, is the idea that in order to revolt or to rise up, one must do so AGAINST something or someone. Someone or something such as an occupying army, for instance. Thus, even though the Palestinians are cast as the aggressors via the signs *violence* and *terrorist*, the signs *uprising* and *revolt* indicate that they are responding to a situation, not initiating one. They indicate that the Palestinians are victims of something so difficult that they find it necessary to engage in an uprising or a revolt. So, despite the editorial care with which the writers cast the opposing parties, sometimes Trickster still manages to deconstruct the binary opposition to reveal a more complex situation. This splintering of the binary prompts a rather peculiar Trickster-esque question: Can an occupying force be a victim or hostage to those whom it occupies? Ironically, the answer appears to be yes and no. Yes, in that the activities of the occupied, of those who live in the refugee camps, dominate Israeli governmental and military activity to the extent that other state needs may not be addressed or addressed fully. But, certainly, no, in that the Palestinians do not have the fire power or personnel that the Israeli government and military has at its disposal to occupy Palestinian Territory.

Another Trickster-esque question which emerges from the splintering of this casting pattern is: If Israel is indeed a victim, who only responds militarily to defend its national security, then why is the death toll so much higher for Palestinians than Israelis throughout this period of the conflict? According to Human Rights Watch,

[m]any civilians were among the over seven hundred Palestinians and over two hundred Israelis who, by November 2001, had been killed in the violence that followed the eruption of clashes between Israelis and Palestinians in September 2000. In addition, some 16,000 Palestinians and some 1,700 Israelis were injured in the violence (2002).

Despite the disparity in the number of casualties, the editorials mention Israeli deaths three times more often than they do Palestinian ones. Oddly, when they do mention Palestinian casualties, the writers fail to indicate Israeli responsibility for these deaths. In the texts, Palestinian-caused Israeli casualties are explicitly mentioned at least six times. Generally, they are presented as having resulted from a terrorist action such as a suicide bomber or sniper fire. For example,

"Even for a country that has suffered as many suicide bomb attacks as Israel,

the horror that unfolded outside a Tel Aviv discotheque last Friday night was
shocking. A powerful explosive device packed with nails and bullets tore
through a crowd of innocent young people, fatally injuring 20, most of them
teenagers whose families had immigrated from the former Soviet Union
(June 5, 2001).
"Yesterday an Israeli settler was killed by gunfire in the West Bank" (June
29, 2001).

This is accurate information. However, it is not enough information. As
mentioned earlier in this essay, one of the characteristics of masking is the offering o
"true information in an incomplete or partial way" (Ng and Bradac 145). The
editorial does not offer any information as to why someone would commit suicide
and murder by blowing themselves up outside an Israeli nightclub, why a settler was
killed – or, for that matter, what an 'Israeli settler' is.

While the editorial writers do not offer reasons as to why a Palestinian might
want to be a suicide bomber, they do offer two commentaries on Palestinian
casualties in the 2001 series of editorials. In the first instance, ironically, Palestinian
leaders – not Israeli leaders – are blamed for Palestinian deaths:

"Some Palestinians are beginning to question the confrontational strategy
pursued by their leaders, which has so far led to the loss of nearly 400
Palestinian lives and drained some $2 billion from the Palestinian
economy" (March 14, 2001).

Palestinian leaders, due to their confrontational strategy, are responsible for the death
of their own people, not the Israelis who killed them! In the second instance, the
usage of the passive voice in the sentence masks responsibility for the killing of a
militant leader in Nablus:

"But the fragility of the cease-fire was underscored yesterday when a
Palestinian militant leader in Nablus was killed in an explosion" (June
25, 2001).

By using the passive voice structure, the writers can include the accurate
 information that a Palestinian leader was killed while not mentioning by whom he
was killed or what type of explosion killed him. The failure to provide an active
subject or the specific cause of death in this sentence serves as an example of the
removal of cues that might encourage a more critical reading of the text (Ng and
Bradac 145). For instance if the sentence had read "…when the Israeli military killed
a Palestinian militant leader in Nablus by a missile attack" agency would no longer be
masked in the sentence. However, such a sentence would not be consistent with the
casting of Israelis as acting only defensively. Also, the writers include the adjective
militant to describe the Palestinian leader, but not his name. As a sign functioning
within this semiotic system of editorials *militant* is consistent with the
characterization of Palestinians as violent terrorists. By including this adjective, the
writers justify the leader's death for readers who might be quizzical enough to ask
about who killed this Palestinian. By not including his name, he remains an
undifferentiated violent terrorist, and not an individual human being.

Context

Within the course of these editorials, the writers tend to offer only surface reasons as to why a Palestinian might become a militant leader involved in violent terrorist activities. Unlike the consistent presentation of Israeli security as reason for Israeli military action, the editorials do not consistently offer reasons as to why Palestinians would engage in violence or terrorism. In two of the year's early editorials, the three main points of contention in the conflict— Palestinian refugees in the diaspora, Jewish settlements in Palestinian Territory, and the status of Jerusalem— are mentioned with regard to President Clinton's final attempt at attaining peace (January 4 and March 10, 2001). However, an explanation as to why these three issues are contentious is not offered in any of the editorials. There is no supporting information as to why there are refugees and refugee camps or why there are Jewish settlers living in Palestinian Territory.

Early in the year, after the election of Ariel Sharon, the writers do indicate that an action of his initiated Palestinian violence:

> [Sharon's] staged walk across Jerusalem's bitterly contested Temple Mount lighted the spark for more than four months of Palestinian violence" (February 7, 2001).

However, the writers do not offer a reason as to why Ariel Sharon would stage a walk across this site and why it would have the power to light a spark of violence. Perhaps, if the writers did provide this information, the occasional appearance of those signs *uprising* and *revolt* would seem more consistent with the overall narrative. Nevertheless, because so little context of the violence— in progress since the 1948 founding of Israel— is provided, it appears that Palestinian actions are disjointed and irrational acts as opposed to ongoing responses to that founding fifty-four years ago.

Conclusions

In this essay, I have attempted to decipher, in a series of editorials, intentional Trickster activity in the representation of Israeli and Palestinian aggressive actions. The editorial writers performed this intentional tricking primarily through the masking device of generalization. Through the deployment of generalizations such as *violence* and *military*, the writers crafted a narrative of the peace process— or lack thereof— in which the Palestinians are consistently cast as the aggressors, while the Israelis are consistently cast as the victims. The use of this casting process via generalization facilitated the omission of context and content cues— such as the reporting of Palestinian casualties or the offering of reasons why Palestinians might engage in terrorist activities— which would have encouraged a more critical reading of the series.

However, even though overall the narrative is consistently sustained throughout the series, Trickster occasionally sneaks into play within these texts, resulting in unintentional tricking. This unintentional tricking is manifested in the direct connection of Israel to violence, despite its predominant connection with Palestinians. It is also manifested in the subtle reminder of the latent semantic content in *uprising* and *revolt*.

An awareness of unintentional as well as intentional Trickster activity has the potential to aid us in becoming more critical readers and participants in processes of peace. Clearly this is a necessary goal for those concerned with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly after the horror of the siege of Bethlehem in the spring of 2002. Such a tragedy as that siege seems to be the type of calamity Jung alludes to when he contends that

> If, at the end of the trickster myth, the savior is hinted at, this comforting premonition or hope means that some calamity or other has happened and been consciously understood. Only out of disaster can the longing for the savior arise– in other words, the recognition and unavoidable integration of the shadow creates such a harrowing situation that nobody but a savior can undo the tangled web of fate (p. 271).

Let us hope that Jung is correct and that the siege of Bethlehem is a harbinger of the end of the Trickster myth in this conflict– and that the Israeli and Palestinian people, themselves, emerge as saviors.

Appendix A

Editorials from the *New York Times*

Palestinian-Israeli Conflict 2001

January 4	"Negotiating Against the Clock
February 7	"A New Leader for Israel"
February 10	"Starting Fresh in the Middle East"
February 27	"Israel's Unity Government"
February 28	"General Powell in the Middle East"
March 10	"Mr. Sharon's New Course"
March 14	"Barricading Ramallah"
March 29	"Arab League Belligerence"
April 17	"Israeli Airstrikes in Lebanon"
May 5	"Revolt at the U.N."

May 22	"The American Mideast Initiative"
June 5	"Fragile Cease-Fire in the Mideast"
June 14	"The Mideast Negotiations"
June 25	"The White House and the Mideast"
June 29	"Restarting the Mideast Peace Clock"
August 8	"Mr. Arafat's Role"
October 26	"New Battles on the West Bank"
November 20	"Pressing for a Mideast Cease-Fire"
December 3	"Rising Violence in the Mideast"
December 4	"Yasir Arafat's Last Chance"
December 7	"Striking Back at Hamas"

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