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EX-MUSLIMS' DIGITAL DISSENT: A CASE FOR MULTIMODAL CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND ENUNCIATIVE PRAGMATICS

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ABSTRACT

This article argues for the use of multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) combined with enunciative pragmatics (EP) to study how ex-Muslims articulate critiques of Islam/isms on platform X. It answers in what ways does the combination of MCDA and EP offers a robust approach for analysing ex-Muslims' discourse, and how it can be operationalised in practice. Unlike prior studies centered on personal narratives or sociological implications, our approach highlights the multimodal and performative nature of online apostate discourse. Drawing on Fairclough, Kress, and Van Leeuwen, MCDA enables analysis of textual, visual, structural, and practical features of tweets, revealing how meaning is produced, critique staged, and power claimed in the digital public sphere. Coupled with EP (Charaudeau), this framework examines how subjectivity, performativity, and positioning are strategically deployed. We contend that this approach illuminates the complex interplay between discourse, ideology, and power among apostates, a dimension still underexplored in current scholarship.

KEYWORDS

Ex-Muslims • Apostate • CDA • Multimodality • Enunciative Pragmatics

INTRODUCTION

This article argues for the relevance of multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA), complemented by enunciative pragmatics (EP), as an effective methodological framework for examining how self-identified ex-Muslims and/or apostates express their critical views on Islam/isms on the platform X (formerly Twitter). It seeks to address the following research question: In what ways does the combination of MCDA and EP offers a robust approach for analysing ex-Muslims discourse, and how can it be operationalised in practice?

Our interest in this subject of ex-Muslims stems from the recent observation of an emerging online epiphenomenon. “Before the emergence of the Internet, apostates have been living their lives in fear and discretion, keeping their apostasy mostly to themselves”. However, “the SNS (social networking site) has helped them to come out by allowing them to voice out their feelings, ideas, and philosophy” (Mohamad et al., 2018, p. 226). Similarly, “these days, the rise in apostasy declarations far exceeds the number of cases that were made publicly known years ago” (Mohamad et al., 2017, p. 98). This observation is further supported by Sahad, Abdullah, and Abdullah: “The cases of Muslim converts who decided to leave the religion of Islam are reported as increasing tremendously” (2013, p. 220).

The growing digital presence of these individuals engaging in critique of their former religion, represents a relatively recent and under-researched phenomenon within media studies. Their voices are emerging in an online public sphere already marked by intense political, cultural, and ideological contestation around Islam/isms. Investigating these discourses is important not only because they provide insight into a form of post-religious subjectivity, but also because they contribute to broader debates on Islam, freedom of conscience and expression, and the visibility of ex-Muslims.

Despite the growing interest in apostasy from Islam as a sociocultural phenomenon, existing literature, as seen in the literature review below, offers limited methodological reflection on how to systematically study the discourse of ex-Muslims in digital environments. Most studies focus on personal narratives, sociological and legal outcomes, leaving a gap in tools for analysing the critical, multimodal and pragmatic dimensions of this discourse. This paper addresses that gap by proposing and justifying a combined methodological framework: MCDA coupled with EP.

This combination will help shed light on the diverse ways in which ex-Muslims construct, negotiate, and perform their relationship to Islam/isms and apostasy on X. Their discourses range from analytical deconstruction of Islamic dogma to emotionally charged testimonials, often intertwined with humour, provocation, or political commentary. This com-

plexity demands an approach capable of attending to the multiple semiotic layers through which meaning is produced online.

Broadly speaking, our extensive research recognises apostates from Islam as a diverse rather than uniform group. In fact, one of the central interests of the study lies in the observation that not all apostates expose themselves online and identify as ex-Muslims and even fewer engage in militant discourse. Most of them remain low-profile and disengaged from public debate altogether. This distinction is critical as it focuses on an epiphenomenon that is developing outside the mainstream media. Furthermore, this research focuses on ordinary individuals, not historically and mainstream media renown figures of apostasy and/or critics of Islam, such as Ibn Warraq, Brother Rachid, Wafa Sultan, Hamed Abdel-Samad or Ayaan Hirsi Ali. The outcome of the broader research will highlight the diversity within this 'community' under study, by bringing to light the different ways of criticising their former religion and the different ideologies that are articulated in their discourse.

Given the sensitivity of the topic, we wish to clarify that this research does not seek to pass normative judgments on the content of these discourses. Rather, it aims to critically examine how a marginalised and often stigmatised group seeks to gain discursive visibility and legitimacy within a public sphere characterised by ongoing controversies over Islam, secularism, and religious freedom.

CONTEXTUAL OVERVIEW

Defining apostasy anachronistically in Islam is not a simple matter, since it depends on the notion of religion, which itself has been perceived differently throughout history (Nongbri, 2013). This different perception of religion implies a different understanding of the term apostasy. For the sake of concision, in this article, we will approach apostasy as a 'simple' abandonment of religion. Newby (2002) defines: "An apostate is (...) one who denies Islam in either speech or action (...)" (p. 158). Leaving Islam is not merely a decision but a deeply transformative and often traumatic journey of self-questioning (Cottee, 2015, p. 8). Apostasy remains a taboo subject in Islam, unsettling even moderate Muslims, as it is perceived not only as a critique of the faith but as an attack on their identity (Cottee, 2015, p. 11).

Apostasy from Islam is not a contemporary phenomenon. Unlike historical knowledge which sheds light on the challenges of separating historical facts, legends and sacred tradition (Chabbi, 1996), Islamic tradition report that apostasy existed since the early days of Islam, with numerous cases recorded during the Prophet Muhammad's lifetime (Alalwani, 2011). Historically, apostasy, blasphemy or the critique of Islam have been

viewed as heretical and diversly punishable and, in some countries such as Afghanistan, Iran, Malaysia, Maldives and Saudi Arabia, punishable by death sentences (Heaton, 2016; Virgili, 2015). Consequently, individuals renouncing their Islamic faith have often been silenced and compelled into clandestinity for their own safety not only in Muslim countries but also in the West and internationally as those accused of blasphemy against Islam can also be subjected to threats, violence, or executions (Marshall & Shea, 2011). Very few former Muslims claim their apostasy or their *murtad*¹ status (Heaton, 2016), some live their apostasy secretly and others are denounced apostates even though they don't present themselves as is.

In recent years, global ex-Muslim organisations have emerged to support individuals who leave Islam, offering community, advocacy, and safe spaces for discussion. The Central Council of Ex-Muslims, founded in Germany in 2007 by Mina Ahadi, played a pivotal role in establishing similar groups worldwide, including in the UK, North America, France, and the MENA region. These movements have gained momentum, leading to the establishment of two key commemorative days: "Apostasy Day" on August 22, which coincides with the UN's International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief, and "Blasphemy Day" on September 30, marking the 2005 publication of the controversial *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons of Prophet Muhammad. These events advocate for the rights of apostates and the abolition of apostasy laws, emphasising freedom of thought and expression as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The interventions of public figures who identify as apostates or critics of Islam have provoked significant backlash within both religious and secular communities, with defenders of Islam framing these critiques as Islamophobic or politically aligned with far-right ideologies. This discursive tension highlights a broader struggle over the boundaries of acceptable criticism, the ownership of religious narratives, and the role of apostates' discourse in contemporary debates on freedom of religion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section we will see how the discourses of apostates or ex-Muslims have been studied so far. Despite a prolific academic literature on Islamic apostates, the topic remains sociologically marginal (Cottee, 2015, p. 1). The lack of sociological research may stem from sensitivities surrounding Islam and the fear of accusations of Islamophobia or association with far-

1 In Arabic: One who turns back. Gordon Darnell Newby, *A Concise Encyclopedia of Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002).

right ideologies (Cottee, 2015, p. 2). To cite a few, existing studies focus on the process of leaving Islam, (Barbour, 1994; Bharat & Ford, 2022; Cottee, 2015; Pauha & Aghaee, 2018; Streib et al., 2009; Vliek, 2019, 2021). The studies generally shed light on their life trajectories, how they navigate their apostasy within Muslim or western societies (Bentabet, 2020; Eller & Khazaal, 2024 ; Meral, 2008), the practical, social and legal repercussions on their lives (Schirrmacher, 2009, 2016; Virgili, 2015), as well as the process of conversion and deconversion (Gooren, 2010; Khalil & Bilici, 2007; Van Nieuwkerk, 2018) and statistical attempts to understand the phenomenon such as the Ex-Muslims of North America (2021) apostate report. Also, some media are interested in the case of ex-Muslims, and a scientific perspective has been provided on the media that report cases of apostasy (Mohamad et al., 2017).

Some innovative studies in online spaces include an analysis of digital activism among a transnational Arab community of ex-Muslims (Khazaal, 2017) and the impact of cyber-apostasy on Islam and interfaith relations (Pulcini, 2017). Nevertheless, few research, mostly in Malaysian context seem to have examined the online discourse of apostates such as analysis of social media speech acts, Facebook status updates, YouTube narratives and blog rhetoric (Bharat, 2022; Hashmi et al., 2022; Mohamad et al., 2018; Rashid & Mohamad, 2019). "The use of speech acts on social media is still not widely explored especially in the context of an apostate" (Mohamad et al., 2018, p: 226).

One of the studies, Hashmi, Ab Rashid, and Munir (2021), analysed 368 posts by 14 Malaysian ex-Muslims, thought the framework of the (TAP) Toulmin argument pattern (1958, 2003) and Erduran, Simon and Osborne (2004) argument-level scheme, concluding that most arguments against Islam lacked depth. However, they claim funding from by the Ministry of Higher Education of Malaysia, an Islamic country that criminalise alleged blasphemy to religion, religious figures, beliefs, or principles (Hashmi et al., 2021). Another study, Rashid et al. (2018), examined the Facebook timeline of a Malaysian female apostate granted asylum in the U.S. due to death threats. Through thematic analysis of 4,000 posts, researchers found that her discourse portrayed Islam as coercive and discriminatory, reflecting common atheist and Islamophobic arguments. However, the study's methodological limitations and its questionable recommendations - describing apostates as haters, encouraging religious leaders to prevent apostasy and put apostates back on the right path - suggest influence from the Malaysia Ministry of Higher Education's funding, and its presentation at a conference in Tehran, Iran being a country where blasphemy thus indirectly apostasy, are criminalised and can lead to death.

How MCDA coupled with EP be of added value?

While none of the analytical methods of the above research suggested the use of critical discourse analysis (CDA), multimodality and EP, we argue that this hybrid method provides a systematic framework to explore not just the why and what of apostate discourse, but the how: how meaning is shaped by the interplay of text, image, hashtags, emojis, and layout in digital platforms such as X.

It is uniquely suited for this type of research for three main reasons. First, MCDA enables a systematic analysis of how text, image, layout, and intertextuality combine to produce discursive meaning. Second, it facilitates the identification of underlying ideologies, argumentation strategies, and truth claims. Third, when paired with EP, it allows us to explore the performativity of discourse; the ways in which ex-Muslims perform subjectivity and construct legitimacy. In highly visual and performative environments, apostates not only say something, they also show it, stage it, and frame it in specific ways. MCDA coupled with EP enables researchers to uncover elements that might be lost in monomodal textual analyses. To support our claim, examples will be drawn from a pool of 125 tweets from 3 profiles over the course of the month of October 2024. However, this paper does not offer analysis results and discussion but rather preliminary outcome.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

We adopt a qualitative approach to explore the deep meanings and multimodal complexity of critical discourses. Qualitative research allows for an in-depth understanding of content within its specific context, capturing multiple layers of meaning and underlying ideologies (Denzin, 2011). Many studies on apostates also use qualitative methods, particularly those based on interviews (e.g., Cottee, 2015; Vliek, 2019), yet, this method recognises an epistemological challenge: knowledge is context-dependent - shaped by social, cultural, religious, and digital frameworks - unlike the universality sought in quantitative approaches (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2021).

This study also follows an inductive approach with a grounded theory-inspired coding (Charmaz, 2006), meaning that it observes and explores the discourses without preconceived assumptions or hypothesis. Inductive methods, commonly used in qualitative research (Silverman, 2010), emphasise contextualisation and allow codes to emerge from the data itself. Unlike a deductive approach, which tests a pre-established hypothesis, inductive reasoning develops progressively, allowing 'theories' to be built directly from the data. Its flexibility enables adjustments based on emerging findings while striving to avoid biases commonly associated with assumptions on ex-Muslims. It is particularly relevant for exploring this un-

derstudied field, furthermore, it aligns with MCDA and EP, both of which stress the importance of contextualising data.

If we aim to understand how apostates discursively construct their relation to Islam via multimodal online means, we need to ask (1) how Islam/isms are represented in their discourses; (2) what arguments they use to delegitimise Islam/isms; and (3) what ideological convictions underpin their statements. MCDA and EP will allow us to answer these questions. When discussing 'representation', we adopt a constructivist perspective inspired by Stuart Hall. Constructivism asserts that social reality and knowledge are not objective, universal facts, but rather, they are constructed by individuals and groups (Hall, 1997). From this perspective, ex-Muslims create their own representations of Islam/isms through their multimodal discourse. The meaning they assign to their former religion and, consequently, to apostasy, is shaped by processes that reflect their subjectivities, interactions with their communities, and engagement with the wider world.

To understand the discourse of ex-Muslims, we opted for MCDA and EP after reviewing the variety of currents of thought and theoretical schools that constitute discourse studies, as described by Angermüller, Maingueneau, and Wodak (2014). We examined them through the prism of the sociology of knowledge which recognises the role of social actors in the production and circulation of knowledge while relying on methodological tools from qualitative research and grounded theory (Keller, 2007).

CDA provides a three-dimensional, methodical, and interdependent framework for multimodal textual analysis of meaning, discursive practices, and social practices (Fairclough, 1989, 1995). Upon further examination, CDA enables an understanding of the relationships between discourse and social elements such as power relations and social identities (Fairclough, 2012). From this perspective, social structures influence discourse and vice versa (Carranza, 1997), hence, a certain performativity of discourse.

“CDA aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power” (Fairclough, 1995, p.32).

Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2001) concept of multimodality serves as an analytical and interpretative framework to examine how meaning is constructed multimodally and how different semiotic modes (such as language, image, sound, body language, and others) interact in various forms of communication. The authors emphasise the importance of analysing

‘visual grammar’, which involves understanding how visual elements are used to convey a given meaning in a given context. They provide a set of tools to deconstruct and interpret these elements. In our research, multimodality is particularly relevant. The tweets under study often combine multiple semiotic modes. This framework allows us to examine how these different modes interact to represent Islam/isms. For instance, analysing visual choices, such as the use of specific symbols like alcohol or pork ham which are forbidden in Islam, and their interaction with linguistic elements can reveal discursive strategies used to construct critical representations, delegitimise certain aspects of religion and its application and valorise apostasy.

Furthermore, Kress and Van Leeuwen draw upon social semiotics, which explores how meaning is socially constructed and context dependent. This approach directly aligns with Fairclough’s and Charaudeau’s conception of discourse. The multimodal choices made by ex-Muslims allow us to deconstruct critical narratives and better understand how these discourses challenge or reproduce power dynamic and structures. Finally, Kress and Van Leeuwen’s (2020) approach adapts the concept of “metafunctions” (ideational, interpersonal, and textual) to analyse how meaning is created in multimodal texts. In our research, this includes examining the visual and textual resources of tweets to understand: (1) How critical ideas (ideational function) are developed. For example, a tweet highlighting a perceived contradiction between religious texts and a modern value.

Fig.1.1 🗨️ No compulsion in religion?

A famous verse in the Quran proclaims, ‘No compulsion in religion. For truth is clearly separated from error’ (2:256).

This verse is regularly quoted to promote the idea of an Islam that is tolerant of other religions. Yet it probably has nothing to do with religious freedom. (...) (Tweet screenshot, 21/10/2024)

Vivi-Apostat reposted
 @viviapostat · Oct 21
 Nulle contrainte en religion ?

Un célèbre verset du Coran proclame : "Nulle contrainte en religion. Car la vérité se sépare clairement de l'erreur" (2:256).

Ce verset est régulièrement cité pour promouvoir l'idée d'un islam tolérant envers les autres religions. Pourtant, il [Show more](#)

Lactance, <i>Institutions Divines</i>	Coran
« Où est la vérité ? Là où aucune contrainte ne peut peser sur la religion » (II, IV, 7)	« Nulle contrainte en religion. Car la vérité se sépare clairement de l'erreur » (2:256)

16 58 194 14K

(2) How tweets establish a relationship with their audiences (interpersonal and polyphonic functions). For example, by using Arabic words such as *haram* or *mashallah* or a sarcastic tone.



Fig.1.2 Who is the author of this image? 🤔
 'I wear the hijab so as not to arouse men'. (Tweet screenshot, 20/10/2024)



Fig.1.3 Victim of Islamophobia (a young, veiled woman² trapped by the show 'forbidden zone'), Victim of Islam. In response of 20 minutes: Life is becoming increasingly difficult for Muslims in Europe. (Tweet screenshot, 20-11-2024)

(3) How these discourses are organised to produce coherent communication (textual function). For instance, the use of hashtags to structure information or visual comparisons like “before/after” Islam or Islam vs Islamophobia.

It is thus both possible and relevant to articulate Fairclough’s CDA and Kress and Van Leeuwen’s multimodality to analyse the discourse of ex-Muslims. Ultimately, since discourses are vectors of ideologies, this method enables the revelation of implicit ideologies conveyed by these discourses, by identifying lexical, visual, and rhetorical choices that construct worldviews. For

2 Lilia Bouziane: law student invited to appear on television shows in France

example, in criticising Islamic tradition, tweets might express ideologies linked to secularism.



Fig.1.4 I'm a Muslim from Quebec. I am a fervent defender of secularism. I'm against the hijab. I don't want my daughter to be taught by a teacher who wears a hijab. (Tweet screenshot, 20-11-2024)



951 2K 10K 485K

To complete and refine this MCDA, EP deepens these analyses by examining the “grammar of meaning” and the performative dimensions - “speech acts,” argumentative and intentional aspects of discourse, as well as the pragmatic meaning tied to a given context (Charaudeau, 1992). Charaudeau’s enunciative pragmatics (1992) precisely emphasises the performative, interactive, and contextual dimensions of discourse. It enriches MCDA by allowing us to examine the intentions of the enunciators (ex-Muslims) and their relationship with their audience (followers) on X and sometimes beyond. In this context, the criticism expressed by ex-Muslims is not limited to informing but also aims to persuade, provoke, or mobilise, perhaps even to directly encourage apostasy. For example, a tweet exposing Muslims having doubts or who has apostatised after being convinced by an ex-Muslims’ discourse.



Fig.1.5 And it's always a pleasure for me to read the daily comments of those who ask themselves questions and even open their eyes to Islam with time, reflection, personal questioning, courage...

One of the pinned comments inside the tweet: I'm a bit ashamed today because I once insulted you in a comment Islam is a real fraud.

Underneath tweet: Converting to Islam: freedom of expression. Convincing people to leave Islam: racism and hatred. Absurd! (Tweet screenshot, 09-11-2024)

As Charaudeau highlights it, and as shown in the screenshot below, discourse is often polyphonic. The tweets regularly include quotations from the Quran, personal testimonies, or references to political discourse, each playing a role in the critical argumentation. For instance, an ex-Muslim might cite a Quranic verse to discredit the political positioning of a renowned figure.

Fig.1.6 Zineb El Rhazaoui last night: "The Palestinian resistance, today is October 7th, I hope that one day we will all celebrate this date as the day of Palestine's liberation."

This is nothing more and nothing less than an apology for terrorism!

(In the screenshot, in part: It was reported by Ibn Abbas that the Messenger of Allah said: "Whoever changes their religion, kill them.") (Tweet screenshot, 26/12/2024)



Enunciative pragmatics sheds light on the relationship between discursive actors: ex-Muslims and their audience. This allows for an exploration of

how ex-Muslims use discourse to assert themselves as contesting social actors while addressing diverse audiences promoting underlying or explicit ideological beliefs. For example, they may adjust their tone depending on whether they are addressing believers, sceptics, or militant atheists, shifting from seriousness to cynicism. (Also seen in Fig.1.2, and Fig.1.3).

Key Concepts

'Discourse', 'Critique', 'Ideology'

Inspired by Fairclough (2012), we view discourse as a practice aimed at producing and transmitting meaning and/or constructing the world through verbal and non-verbal means. In this framework, discourse is an essentially contextualised, metadiscursive, and sometimes a polyphonic practice, both socially constituted and socially constitutive, carrying one or more ideologies. This perspective directly applies to the critical discourse of ex-Muslims, who construct a contestatory worldview against their former religion while engaging with contemporary societal issues such as individual freedom and religious critique.

Thus, we align, at least in part, with the definition of discourse provided by Reisigl and Wodak, which states that discourse is closely linked to context, varies according to its thematic focus, and takes place within specific spheres of social life, such as culture or politics. In the case of ex-Muslims on X, their critical discourse intersects with issues related to religion, human rights, and western values. This transforms discourse producers into social discursive actors - a notion also found in Charaudeau's EP - who interact and argue to defend positions they perceive as true or morally just, both in reaction to their experiences and as an attempt to influence their audiences.

"(...) a cluster of context dependent practices that are situated within specific fields of social action socially constituted and socially constitutive; related to a macro-topic; linked to the argumentation about validity claims such as truth and normative validity, involving several social actors who have different points of view" (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 89, as cited in Angermuller et al., 2014).

Former Muslims, through their discourse, seek to influence society within a power dynamic, particularly by challenging the norms and beliefs associated with their former religion. Just as Charaudeau (1992) develops the notion of the 'speech act' and discourse performativity, Fairclough also considers discourse as an "active relationship to reality" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 41). In this sense, critical discourse also becomes political, with politics

defined by Charaudeau as: "A domain of social practice where symbolic power struggles take place for the conquest and management of power" (Charaudeau, 2005, p. 60). From a constructivist perspective, political discourse is not defined by its content or genre but by its ability to act upon reality within a specific communicative situation. This pragmatic approach highlights that discourse is not merely a vehicle for political ideas but a political action, where context and the intention of discursive actors play a central role in the politicisation of the message (Pirat, 2006, p. 196-197).

In the case of apostates, their critical discourse can be perceived as political. It is a performative practice aimed at deconstructing dominant representations while constructing new discursive and ideological identities. Fairclough (2003, p. 26, 2012, p. 11) articulates three key characteristics of discourse that describe how it operates within social life, as a "part of action": (1) Genres (ways of acting): These refer to specific ways of structuring and framing discourse, such as proselytism, critical testimonies, or advocacy for freedom of conscience, which apostates use to engage audiences on X. (2) Discourses (ways of representing): Apostates present specific representations of Islam, often criticising it as incompatible with certain universal values. These representations help to assess how similar aspects of the Muslim world are perceived differently based on adopted discursive positions. (3) Styles (ways of being): The discourse of apostates forms a way of constructing their critical identity, as ex-Muslims affirming an ideological and existential break with their former faith. These discursive styles include personal narratives and analyses, or forms of humour, sometimes even expressions of hate and anger.

Discourse, therefore, serves as a means of acting, representing, and constructing a particular ideological position. This dynamic fits within a contextual practice where discourse functions as both a tool for contestation and a means of legitimisation in the digital public sphere. The way this practice is understood and interpreted depends on three analytical elements: Production - the critical narratives of apostates; Form - the multimodal language within the context of X and Reception - how these discourses are perceived by audiences, for example, through retweets. These three dimensions interact with political and cultural concerns, generating a range of social effects (Fairclough, 2003, p. 11). In the case of apostates, the social impact of their discourse depends largely on their ability to legitimise themselves, mobilise compelling alternative narratives, reach diverse audiences, and respond to the resistance or contestation they encounter.

The discourses we study are generally produced directly online. Those digital discourses, also called by Paveau (2017) "native discourse", because they are born from and shaped by the digital medium itself, rather than

being transferred or adapted from traditional communication are a hybrid form of expression with a digital logic. They are characterised by elements of multimodality but also specific interaction dynamics inherent to digital platforms this is why they must be analysed within the context of the digital platform.

The critical discourses of apostates on X also share the specific characteristics identified by Paveau (2017, p. 28,29) which support the use of MCDA in our analysis: (1) Composite, mixing verbal language and technological elements as seen in all above multimodal examples. (2) Non-linear, with hyperlinks leading to external sources such as videos. For example, tweets by Oukacha announcing his latest radio show invitation or his latest YouTube video.

Fig.1.7 “Saying that ‘immigration is an opportunity’ and that anyone who disagrees is ‘xenophobic’ is a bit excessive and won’t help in understanding the real issue,” says Majid, a listener of #OMSLT with @CyrilHanouna on #Europe1. (Tweet screenshot, 03/10/2024)



Fig.1.8 My new video, “These Human Expressions Spoken by Allah in the Quran”, is now on YouTube! There are so many verses where this supposedly perfect god speaks as if he were in the place of his human prophet (and vice versa). (Tweet screenshot, 27/10/2024)

(3) Augmented by the conversational nature of the web, where discussions are enriched through replies, shares, and reactions, such as retweets or tweets commenting on a screenshot. (4) Relational, thanks to hashtags and mentions that connect their discourse to other spaces or conversations due to the web’s networked structure. (5) Investigable, as tweets are accessible

and collectable in “open access.” (6) Unpredictable, as they are influenced by platform algorithms, making some tweets go viral while others lead to account suspensions due to user reports. This is indeed the case for several apostate profiles on X. The evolving nature of platform X presents challenges, such as account deletion and the ephemeral life of tweets. Our method is designed to remain flexible, combining systematic archiving (screenshots, metadata) with interpretive rigour.

Critique

Critical discourse, however, is a specific form of discourse. We distinguish between two major conceptions of critique. The first, inherited from the Greek tradition, is based on deliberate action carried out by experts - ex-Muslims perceiving themselves as experts and legitimate voices mainly because, once, they were Muslims learning the sacred texts and living their life within Muslim tradition and society. They believe their critique involves a thoughtful judgment based on thorough analysis based on experience. This approach, often called ‘normative critique’, is inspired by the Platonic tradition. The second, a more modern perspective, considers critique as an integral part of civic life, open to everyone and promoting democratic participation without requiring any expertise - where the selected ex-Muslims are ordinary citizens that decided to promote their ideas. Despite their differences, these two perspectives overlap, making them potentially complementary (Danblon, 2012). We also perceive critique as a tool for social, cultural, religious, and political change, as it can highlight injustices, inequalities, contradictions, and even illogical reasoning. Zienkowski (2018) introduces the idea of critique as a form of public ‘metadiscourse’ that allows individuals to recognise, rearticulate, and/or reconfigure the logics and rationalities that lead to social suffering. For the studied apostates, critique serves as both an outlet for distress and a tool for seeking recognition of their suffering, aiming to challenge and change societal norms.

Through their critical discourse, ex-Muslims challenge other, more dominant discourses about Islam, which brings us closer to a Marxist perspective where the apostate’s discourse function as a counter-discourse that oppose more dominant narratives. Fundamentally, counter-discourse refers to any way of making sense of the ‘world’ that seeks to deconstruct an initial discourse through argumentation (or other discursive strategies) and/or to propose an alternative ideological narrative (Carbou, 2015; Plantin, 1996). Ex-Muslims attempt to frame their interpretation of prior discourses, temporarily fixing their own meaning. These discursive practices are therefore constitutive of social, and even political, identities and

play a crucial role in the (de)legitimisation and hegemonisation processes (Blommaert, 2005; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009).

Critique can also take the form of self-criticism or a form of ‘reflexivity’ as introduced by Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992) which involves self-observation and self-awareness for emancipatory purposes. In this sense, our studied population transitioned from being Muslims to ex-Muslims after what Mezirow’s (1991) call “transformative learning theory”, a meticulous questioning of their held beliefs and assumption. This process of self-critique, which takes time, could be considered a crucial element of the discourse.

Finally, it is important to distinguish between “emic” (or “phonemic”) and “etic” (or “phonetic”) discourse, a conceptual distinction originally made by Pike (1967). In modern qualitative research, an emic perspective focuses on the viewpoints of participants, whereas an etic perspective focuses on the observations of researchers (Markee, 2012). In our specific case: Any critical discourse from ex-Muslims will be considered emic and our critique of ex-Muslim discourse will be considered etic. This distinction helps clarify different perspectives and interpretations of key and sensitive terms, such as Islam and Islamisms as viewed by the researcher versus how these concepts are understood by discursive actors.

Ideology

We agree with Freedman’s (2003) point of view which sees ideology as a political phenomenon; a set of political ideas, beliefs, and opinions that are communicable and influential. He separates main ideologies with those who are more open to cooperation and pluralism like liberalism and socialism and those who do not, like fascism and communism. From the perspective of critical discourse analysis (CDA), Fairclough (1995) sees ideology as embedded in discourse, shaping and reinforcing power structures. He argues that some discourses become “naturalised”, appearing as self-evident truths, which conceals their ideological roots and sustains existing power dynamics.

Indeed, the notion of truth is central to the discourse of ex-Muslims. The Quran, as a form of divine knowledge, is relatively closed and difficult for humans to challenge. It is presented as an absolute truth because it is uncreated. Yet, this is precisely what ex-Muslims criticise, as they deconstruct this knowledge to expose and confront its errors and contradictions. Through their discourse, they construct their own truth. Charaudeau (2005) speaks of an ‘imaginary of truth’ or a ‘sociodiscursive imaginary’. What he means by ‘imaginary’ is not the absence of reality, but rather an image of reality imbued with the meaning that apostates give it through their relationship to the world and to others - in other words, through con-

text and experience (p. 158). Charaudeau distinguishes between “knowledge-based truths” (verifiable facts) from “belief-based truths” (values and convictions) that contributes to the construction of the “truth imaginaries” (Pirat, 2006). Ideology is seen as a tool that create a “truth effect,” making opinions appear unquestionable and legitimising political actions.

Apostasy from Islam could, in this context, potentially be regarded as an ideology in its own right - a question we intend to explore further. For now, however, we will focus our efforts on the notion of the “imaginary of truth.” While this concept can become problematic when it is essentialised or presented as universal (Charaudeau, 2005, p. 159), it remains fundamentally reflective and subjective, aligning closely with the processes observed in the critical discourse of ex-Muslims. The “imaginary of truth” employs ideologies as tools for constructing reality, enabling a more nuanced exploration of discourse.

RESEARCH DESIGN & DATA

Our investigation is characterised by a non-intrusive and non-participatory approach, avoiding direct interaction with the profiles. The content we have selected is freely accessible since the observed spaces do not require a prior friend request. We therefore adopt the status of observer with our personal X account, renouncing our anonymity. However, we chose to follow the analysed profiles, and most of them followed us back, which means they became aware of our online presence. The main language is French, but “code-switching”³ (Poplack, 2001) or “code change” on a multilingual platform such as X, pushes us to consider Arabic and English, when necessary.

To identify ex-Muslim profiles on the X platform, we began by examining profiles of former Muslims already known through our previous research dating back to 2015 on counter-discourses to ISIS propaganda. These initial profiles were selected because they publicly presented themselves as ex-Muslims and/or apostates. Starting from there, we were able to expand our field to similar profiles. We examined the profiles of the followers and the accounts they followed, one by one. Everyone who identified as an ex-Muslim or apostate was selected, regardless of the language used, provided it was one we understood. For each selected person, we undertook the same approach to enlarge the circle of profiles. Similarly, we observed the profiles of people who wrote comments and selected those

3 “Code-switching (CS) refers to the mixing, by bilinguals (or multilinguals), of two or more languages in discourse, often with no change of interlocutor or topic. Such mixing may take place at any level of linguistic structure, but its occurrence within the confines of a single sentence (...).” Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/285248787_Code_Switching_Linguistic [last accessed, 19 Decembre 2024].

who presented themselves as ex-Muslims. On the other hand, we used the search bar by entering various keywords and hashtags related to the subject (*#ExMuslims*, *#ExMusulman*, *#Apostat*, *#Apostasie*) to find new associated profiles. We also referred to the suggestions of the algorithms which suggested similar profiles to those we were looking for. Not all profiles are created by a single person; some of the accounts are reportedly run by a group of former Muslims such as, for example, the 'Collectif d'Apostats'. At this stage, we are continuing our monitoring to find new profiles.

For this article, we focus on a one-month period on a reduced sample of three profiles of individuals with a number of 125 tweets. The first, Samrah Atika, is a woman who was born a Muslim (33 tweets), the second, Majid Oukacha, is a man who was born a Muslim (23 tweets), and the third is Vivi-Apostat, a young man who converted to the religion of Islam, then radicalised, then de-converted and is identifying himself today as ex-Muslim (69 tweets).

The selection of the three profiles was guided by their prominence and sustained activity within the French-speaking ex-Muslim digital sphere. These accounts were chosen not only for their large follower base and high engagement, but also for their diversity in terms of gender, rhetorical style and background experience. This allows for a more representative and comparative insight into the plurality of discourses within the apostate community.

Since we started keeping track of these accounts, every month of the year has been interesting to analyse. The month of October 2024 was chosen as a strategic temporal window for data collection due to a timeframe contemporary with the time we were developing this article showing a will to stay up to date. From a methodological standpoint, the focus on this single month enables an exploratory thematic analysis that remains manageable in scope, while offering sufficient data density to generate examples to support our proposed method.

On her X profile, Samrah Atika, of Moroccan origin, presents herself as an apostate and ex-Muslim, an activist for the right to apostasy in Islam. She puts forward her French and Amazigh identity. With Waleed Al-Husseini, she is the co-founder of the Council of Ex-Muslims of France. Samrah defines herself as a survivor of Islamism. She campaigns against the wearing of the Islamic veil. She has chosen to disclose her identity and face and is subject to death threats. Her appearance on X dates back to 2011; however,

she lost her accounts twice due to people reporting it to the platform X⁴ and is now on her third.

On his X profile, Majid Oukacha who has also chosen to disclose his identity and show his face despite the death threats, presents himself as an ex-Muslim, writer, and YouTuber. He has managed to preserve his X account since 2015. He has a YouTube channel with 191 videos as of January 7, 2025, which he publicises on X. Of Algerian origin, and after apostatising around the age of eighteen, Oukacha has written and published several books. He describes himself as one of the first ex-Muslims to have openly criticised Islam on social media.

ViVi-Apostat is a 'native' Frenchman from a non-religious family, who converted to Islam around the age of fifteen, during the period of the ISIS caliphate, then radicalised and was imprisoned by the French state; he subsequently deconverted⁵. Vivi-Apostat has already disclosed his real name and has been the victim, on his X profile, of death threats and "doxing," a public and intentional disclosure on the Internet of personal information about a person by a third party, with the aim of humiliating, threatening, intimidating, or punishing the identified person (Douglas, 2016). He positions himself as an ex-Muslim and critic of Islam. Vivi-Apostat explains that he portrays 'authentic Islam.' He generally focuses on current events related to Islam.

DATA COLLECTION AND CHALLENGE:

To examine the constructed rhetoric on X, we suggest using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. Since Elon Musk's takeover, it has become impossible to directly download tweets into the software. In this context, and to maintain the overall look of the tweet, we follow these steps: (1) Data collection, which involves taking full screenshots of tweets, renaming them, and categorising them based on profile names and months of publication. (2) Entering screenshots into NVivo and separately copy-pasting the text of the tweet into the created file. (3) Categorising tweets as either tweets or retweets, the latter emphasises the polyphony of discourse. And then steps 4 and 5 overlap: (4) Coding with NVIVO: the code being: "a word or a short phrase that symbolically assigns a summarising, salient, essential, and/or evocative attribute to a portion of textual or visual data" (Saldaña, 2012, p. 3) and (5) the three-dimensional analysis.

4 Meaning that users notified the platform's moderation team that her account has potentially violated the platform's rules or terms of service. This could lead to warning the user, temporarily suspending the account, or permanently banning it depending on the severity of the violation.

5 ViVi l'Apostat. (2024, May 31). *L'Apostasie en Islam, c'est mon histoire* [Conference]. Café Laique, Brussels.

Therefore, rather than analysing the tweets solely as text-based content, we consider their multimodal nature to take a critical look at the entire production. The implementation and spatialisation (design layout of the text, emojis, hashtags etc.) gives full meaning to a tweet. This is precisely why, we have made the labour-intensive and time-consuming choice to collect our corpus through screenshots, capturing tweets in their entirety rather than separating text from other modes. Modes being “semiotic resources which allow the simultaneous realisation of discourses and types of (inter) action” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001, p.21).



... *Fig.1.7 My testimony as a former Muslim: Radicalised by Sunni Islam, I eventually broke through denial and recognised the danger of this ideology. Leaving this religion saved my life. Video. (From Islam to apostasy: The journey of a French former Muslim convert). (Tweet screenshot, 20/11/2024)*

For instance, in the above tweet, we code the text, the emojis and the image. We also watch the video in order to add notes to our coding - that will be of use during the analysis step.

Non-Anonymisation of Profiles in Our Study

Anonymising profiles in scientific research raises debates about data confidentiality and integrity. However, within the framework of our scientific research, we argue that it is crucial not to anonymise the studied profiles for several reasons. The profiles we have selected on X are public, and their content is accessible to all users. By using public data, we are already respecting the parameters chosen by users for sharing their infor-

mation. Many users have already opted for anonymity by using symbolic profile pictures and pseudonyms which carry specific meanings such as for example: *Muse ExMus*, *Super Kâfir*, *Mourta'd*, *L'Apostat Kafir*, *Ibliss*, *Mohamed AgNostic*... Their real identity is thus protected by their own choice to remain masked, making further anonymisation redundant and potentially diminishing the significance of the pseudonyms and symbols they use. Some users, despite the risks involved, choose to disclose their real identity by using their actual names and displaying their faces. This rather courageous decision is particularly exceptional and reveals a strong willingness to express themselves openly. Ignoring or anonymising these public identities would mean erasing an essential part of the significance of their bold stance. Moreover, the identity of users plays a key role in our analysis. The diversity of identity exposure, whether through anonymity, meaningful pseudonyms, or real names, adds depth and richness to our research. By preserving these identities, we ensure a more precise and faithful analysis that reflects the reality of the platform. Also, the systematic anonymisation of profiles could be perceived as invalidating the personal choices and political stance of users regarding their visibility and representation online. Respecting each user's decision about how they present their identity on X is essential to maintaining the integrity and authenticity of their choice and our study. As Khazaal, (2017) explains, "names in digital space have become keenly political, because proclaiming the stigma of leaving religion online may be the only public act of religious defiance Arabs can perform safely, given the serious threats apostates faced in Arab communities" (p. 271). Anonymising these names would be camouflaging their political stances. Finally, we don't pretend that our article will have any more undesirable impact and visibility over these individuals than their own public tweets.

Operationalisation of the Method and Analytical Potentials

As detailed earlier, this study proposes a hybrid methodological framework combining Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA (1989, 1995), Kress and van Leeuwen's multimodal semiotics (1996, 2001), and Charaudeau's theory of enunciative pragmatics (2005). This integrative approach allows for a layered analysis that captures the complexity of meaning-making in ex-Muslims' discourse. The NVIVO coding will operate across three interrelated levels of analysis: (1) Micro-level: Textual analysis of multimodal tweets. At this level, close reading is applied to the content to uncover the processes of meaning-making. The analysis focuses on the "grammar of meaning" and "visual grammar," attending to non-verbal and paraverbal elements, polysemy, polyphony, intertextual references,

and metadiscursive features. Special attention is paid to how visual and textual components interact to construct representations, arguments and attitudes.

(2) Meso-level: Discursive Practices. This dimension examines the production, distribution, and reception of multimodal discourse. The goal is to analyse how tweets are crafted, circulated, and interpreted within the digital media ecosystem. We explore discursive strategies, selection of information, communicative intentions, emotional framing, and identity construction (both personal and collective). This level also foregrounds the performativity of apostate's discourse and their ideological positioning, shedding light on how discourses are shaped by and, in turn, shape social practices.

(3) Macro-level: Social Practices. At the macro-level, the analysis situates apostate discourse within its wider sociopolitical and cultural context. It considers how such discourse interacts with existing social structures and power relations. Key elements include mapping influence (whether reinforcing or challenging dominant structures), interpreting the discursive negotiation of legitimacy, and uncovering what Charaudeau terms the "imaginary of truth" i.e., the representation of certain beliefs as indubitable or self-evident. This level enables a critical understanding of how ex-Muslims' discourse contribute to reshaping debates around religion and freedom of expression.

The codes are then classified into three categories to answer the study research questions. The first category is that of multimodal representations of Islam/isms, the second is that of arguments that discredit the religion and the third is that of underlying ideologies. Analysis of these 3 categories will bring out themes and concepts for understanding the critical discourse of ex-Muslims.

Exploratory analysis

The exploratory analysis of the tweets of Atika, Oukacha and Vivi-Apostat reveals diverse yet converging forms of online activism among ex-Muslims. Despite distinct life trajectories, styles and rhetorical strategies, all three profiles demonstrate a sustained critique of Islamism and Islam and advocacy for secularism and recognition of apostate's rights. Their discourses range from personal and emotional testimonies to pragmatic and intellectual deconstruction as well as provocative language, reflecting a heterogeneous but thematically coherent opposition to Islamic dogma, gender-based oppression and leftist political ambivalence. They contribute to the digital visibility of ex-Muslims, engaging in a discourse that emphasises both individual emancipation and collective resistance.

We conclude cautiously with the early stages of potential concepts on the general critical discourse of ex-Muslims on X. Firstly, (1) the concept of '*DIY ideology*'⁶ emerges. While studying the discourse of extremists, Brace, Baele, & Ging (2023) talk about an ideological construction that they present as a 'composite ideology', a "mixed, unclear, unstable (MUU) ideology profile." Ex-Muslims as well seem to construct an ideology whose crafting is adjusted according to their overall condition. Their experiences are diverse, complex, and hyper-subjective. It would be difficult to assert that there is one single ideology that unites them all apart from the act of apostasy. However, among the militant population we are studying, many of them share a system of common ideas such as the rejection of religious dogma, the search for truth and meaning, and the desire for freedom of thought and expression leading to a certain form of democracy, nationalism and liberalism. That said they have their own "Truth imaginary" narrative. Apostasy from Islam could be seen as an ideological construct unique to ex-Muslims which could be termed *Ex-Muslimism*, *Apostasism*, or *De-Islamism*. These ideological discourses also have wider implications, notably (2) with the newly proposed notion of *Metareligion*, that we envision inspired by the notion of metapolitics defined as a cultural strategy aimed at influencing mindsets, ideas, and norms without directly engaging in institutional politics or as a clash between different political modes and models (Zienkowski, 2017). Here, Metareligion, would refer to online critical and performative discourses aiming to influence the relationship with religion, particularly Islam, while revisiting its philosophical, dogmatic, cultic and cultural foundations without necessarily going through Islamic religious channels. (3) In this case, we cannot overlook the role of the platform X, which ex-Muslims may perceive as a form of democratic playground and a tool for freedom of expression. This perception is based on the possibility of using anonymity to protect one's identity, the universal nature of the platform, and the instant access to a wide audience. While this platform can lead to polarising discourse, it fosters a democratic dynamic where everyone can, in theory, express themselves and engage in critique. All this leads us, inevitably, to the ultimate concept of (4) *Inverted Proselytism*. We understand that through their critical discourse on X, ex-Muslims may be promoting a form of thinking that encourages some Muslims to question and abandon Islam, thereby actively contributing to the transformation of Islamic beliefs leading somehow to apostasy. This could be perceived as an action to counter the Islamic online proselytism (Kholili, Izudin, & Hakim, 2024 ; Raya, 2025 ; Thoyib, 2024). Finally, (5) in ex-Muslim discourse, the

6 Do it yourself

distinction between Islam and Islamism is often blurred or no longer recognised. In their view, Islam is fundamentally synonymous with Islamism. Hence, we propose the term 'Islam(ism)' instead of Islam/ism to encapsulate this concept in a single word.

CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates the value of combining MCDA with EP to study how ex-Muslims articulate critique on X. This method provides a layered toolkit for analysing multimodal discourses in online environments. By examining textual, visual, and performative layers of meaning, this approach reveals apostates' strategic communicative choices and ideological complexity.

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