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Framing War Narratives Through Media Discourses: An Investigation into Iran- Israel Conflict through Eastern and American E-Newspapers Headlines

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Abstract
Media is most often considered as a distorting prism and it is believed that whatever appears in in media is never apolitical. This study critically analyses media representation of the Iran-Israel conflict through the headlines of two media out lets such as Al- Jazeera News (Middle Eastern) and Fox News (American) through the lens of Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics and CDA. The research looks at the types of processes, participants, and circumstantial elements applied, and how these linguistic choices highlight different ideological moves. A total of 100 headlines, 50 from each outlet, published around Iran's 14 April 2024 attack on Israel, have been collected and analysed through the lens of Critical discourse analysis (CDA). Material processes were leading in both sources' headlines, highlighting military incidents and actions. On the other hand, Fox News headlines recurrently positioned Western actors as active agents and Iran as the target, backing a narrative of justified retaliation and framing Iran as a destabilizing power. Verbal and relational processes further reinforced this stance by covering accusations, warnings, and judgments. However, Al Jazeera News features similar process types but presented more balanced participant roles, and permitting Iran to be an active voice rather than just being a target, by repeatedly framing incidents within geopolitical contexts. This study finds that regionally grounded narratives have been constructed and disseminated from both sides. Generally, the study reflects how language choices in news headlines construct ideological implications. While Fox News supports dominant Western stances, Al Jazeera provides a more contextualized perspective, reflecting diverse media ideologies. It contends that media discourses are one of the best sites for ideological investment keeping in view the vested interests of in group and out group.

Keywords: Transitivity Analysis, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Iran-Israel Conflict, Fox News, Al Jazeera, Media Discourse, Ideology, representation.

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1. Introduction

The relationship between language, media, and ideology has become one of the most significant areas of inquiry in contemporary discourse studies. Today, in a world of digital communication, news media don't just report, they are engaged in the creation of social reality in many ways through their linguistic practices. Each news report has its own point of view and it can be implicit in seemingly neutral grammatical structures. Different genres of News, particularly headlines, can be very persuasive as it gives readers their initial interpretation of an event before they read the whole story. Headlines are, therefore, not only a brief summary, but carefully formulated discursive products, which help to create public opinion, influence political attitudes and build up the ideological narratives. This can be particularly seen in times of international conflict when different media out lets of different countries may represent the same event differently.

In Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) studies, it is most often revealed that headlines in print media are very tactfully related to the construction and representation of the ideology keeping in view the target audience. With the expansion of electronic journalism, the power of the news headlines has been further enhanced. The e-news platforms offer real-time and continuous coverage since the information is available on websites, mobile applications, and social media, to millions of readers with in no time, unlike traditional ways of dissemination any ideology. It is pertinent to mention that Headlines have become more significant in influencing the public perception about political issues. Their brevity requires journalists to make deliberate linguistic choices regarding who is

portrayed as the actor, who becomes the affected participant, and which actions receive emphasis. As a result, headlines are considered powerful means of ideology propagation and can win the consent of a large number of readers about certain issues.

The recent conflict between Iran and Israel represents one of the most consequential geopolitical confrontations in the Middle East. Rooted in decades of political rivalry, ideological differences, regional power competition, and security concerns, tensions between the two states have evolved from indirect confrontation through proxy actors into periods of direct military engagement. The escalation attracted unprecedented international media attention because of its implications for regional stability, global security, energy markets, and international diplomacy. As international audiences depended largely on online news sources to understand rapidly unfolding developments, media organizations from different regions produced competing narratives regarding responsibility, legitimacy, retaliation, and victimhood. These contrasting narratives illustrate that news reporting is rarely neutral; rather, it reflects broader political, cultural, and institutional ideologies that influence journalistic discourse.

2. Literature Review

Mass media have played a key part in the production, reproduction, and distribution of ideologies and cultural knowledge (Gitlin, 1980; Hall, 1990; Poole, 2002). News media perform a central function in producing and then upholding a particular discourse that affects our daily life and creates an environment where we make our perceptions about ourselves and the world around us. A discourse is a set of successive statements that offers a language to situate a specific form of knowledge about a topic (Hall, 1992). Within a particular discourse when statements are made about a specific theme, the discourse helps to construct the theme in a specific way limiting any other possible ways to construct it. A

discourse is not a static entity, rather, in interaction with other discourses, produces webs of discoursal realities.

One of the most comprehensive approaches to the analysis of media discourses is Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach by M.A.K Halliday (2004). According to him the language is said to have three meta functions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The ideational meta function is about the way language represents experience and reality; the interpersonal meta function is about the interpersonal relationship between speaker and audience; and the textual meta function is about the ways in which information is organized into coherent discourse. The transitivity system is a very powerful analytical tool within the ideational meta function describing the way actions, events, participants and circumstances are linguistically represented.

Halliday (2004) maintains that transitivity analysis can play in CDA based methodological lens. Transitivity does not just examine word meanings, but also the grammatical decisions that shape who do what and who is affected, as well as who is central and who is peripheral. For example, passive constructions can mask responsibility for the action, and nominalization can mask the agency behind the action. Likewise, choosing specific processes can be used to show political leaders as decision makers, civilians as victims, or military events as a natural occurrence instead of a decision. These grammatical decisions have a strong impact on the audience's interpretation of the text without stating an opinion on the text's ideology.

2.1. Work already Done

This section provides a critical review of the available body of knowledge in the similar domain. This has been done to justify gap for the present study.

Seo (2013) investigated the media representation of the Libyan civil war of (2011). The media representation patterns were critically examined using

Halliday's transitivity analysis framework. The various national newspapers' ideologically driven moves were analyzed to find out underlying ideology. It finds that media representation of any issue is never politics free. Afsheen and Umrani (2021) conducted a critical examination of the discursive techniques and ideological frameworks employed by Pakistani print media to portray the CPEC's economic phenomenon. The data was analyzed by using CDA framework. The study finds that media is highly polarized in representing the subject mentioned issue. Sajid. A (2012) found out that print media discourses are one of the best sites for ideological investment. The data for the study was collected from the newspapers of Pakistan and the west about the representation of Islam and Muslims. It illustrated that highly politicized language is used in western print media to represent Islam and Muslims negatively.

Mohammed Al- Badawi and Ibrahim Al Najjar (2021) in their study investigated the style of reporting in the political news headlines. They collected the data from the headlines of two Western news agencies, the websites of the BBC and CNN that address the issue of the 2019 Christchurch Mosque Massacre in New Zealand. The study demonstrates the manner in which a reader can comprehend the event by paying attention to the author's use of linguistic and stylistic moves.

Akinmusuyi (2023) illustrated that how violence (gender-based) is represented in Nigerian media. The SFL technique by Halliday was used to analyse the data. The study analysed 40 headlines from "*The Punch* and *Nigerian Tribune"* through both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The study found that women are deliberately marginalized by the use of politically coined language. Besides, it illustrates that the use of gendered language is prominent

phenomenon of media language. It is done to reap the vested interests of dominant group.

2.2. Significance of the Study

The study is also important because it takes a comparative approach by including headlines of Middle Eastern and American electronic news organizations. Comparative discourse studies offer insights into the manner in which different political, cultural and ideological settings influence the linguistic representation. While both media systems cover the same international events, they often tell different stories in ways that vary with respect to agency, the focus on particular actors, and the choice of process types. These differences are not coincidental, but are instead tied to the institutional ideologies, national interests, editorial policies and sociopolitical contexts. This study aims to systematically compare and reveal such patterns of ideologies and to understand how they are linguistically manifested in news headlines.

2.3. Significance of Headlines

Ogilvy (2013) asserts that headlines are best site for ideological investment and are considered as one of the most important genres of newspapers as they can capture the attention of specific readership easily to provide them an overview of the social construction of ideology in a desired manner. Headlines play an important role in orienting the readers' interpretation of a particular event. Ungrammaticality is a prominent feature of newspapers' headlines. They capture a story in the fewest possible words. Abastado (1980) argues that headlines encapsulate not only the content but the orientation of the story as well.

2.4. Significance of Critical Discourse Analysis

Fairclough & Wodak (1997) regard language as a social practice. According to them, discourse is language in action in society. Describing discourse as a social practice implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and

the situation(s), institution(s), and social structure(s), which frame it: the discursive event is shaped by them, but it also shapes them. That is, discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned. CDA, is an ideological post-mortem of language to explore the deeper meanings embedded in different layers of language. Moreover, it can also reveal biases of news reporter/controlling ideological group to maintain power and to construct reality in a desired manner. Fairclough (2015) argues that there is power within and behind print media discourses. It helps in creating subjects qualitatively and quantitatively.

2.5. Research Questions

1) What types of transitivity choices (process, participants, and circumstances) are employed by American and Middle Eastern e-news outlets in their coverage of the Iran-Israel conflict?
2) How are different ideologies constructed and propagated through the use of transitivity choices to represent same event differently?

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The research is primarily qualitative in nature as it is in-depth ideological analysis of the newspaper headlines by using Halliday's model of SFL related to the Iran-Israel conflict. The focus is on understanding how process types, participants, and circumstances reflect ideological stances and construct narratives Us and Them. The CDA lens along with SFL has been used to analyse the collected data from the mentioned news sources.

3.2. Data Collection

The data for the present study has been collected from the headlines of American and Middle Eastern e-news sources covering the Iran-Israel conflict. The study focuses on the headlines related to the first ever attack on Israel by Iran on 14 April

2024 right after a Hamas attack against Israel on 7 October 2023. The following sources have been utilized for data collection.

- **American outlet**: Fox News
- **Middle Eastern outlet**: Al Jazeera

3.3. Data Sample

The data employed in the current research is 69 Fox News headlines and 59 Aljazeera headlines retrieved through official web pages of websites. The selected headlines from both the mentioned sources have analysed by applying CDA and SFL theories to lay bare underlying ideology about the mentioned conflict. The equal number of headlines from both the news sources have been analysed. It was done to find out the deliberate use of transitivity choices made in headlines of selected sources mentioned. The following linguistic moves were focused during the analysis such as:

Types of Process: The kind of process (e.g., material, mental, relational) which is represented in the headline.

3.4. Participants

The actors, objectives or the participants involved in the process.

Circumstances: The situational information (e.g., time, location, cause) that was demonstrated in the headline. Besides, the quantification of data has also been done to support qualitative findings.

3.5. Theoretical Framework

Systemic Functional Grammar act as the guide of this work. In order to decipher the ideologies conveyed in the discourse patterns in news employed by the two media outlets, this framework offers specific theoretical constructions. Transitivity is the primary theoretical construct utilized for data analysis. A systemic functional grammar developed by Halliday provides the

theoretical foundation for this concept.

3.6. Halliday's SFL theory as Framework for Analysis

According to Halliday (1985), language has three main meta-functions: the textual, the interpersonal, and the ideational. The grammatical structures that make up a message are the focus of the first function. It emphasizes how language is interpreted as well as the structure and organization of the text. Textual meaning, according to Halliday (1994), is an interpretation of the clause in its role as a message. The second meta-function is concerned with how language is used to conduct social relations and serve as a bridge. "Interpersonal meaning is an interpretation of the clause in its function as an exchange,". Halliday (1994) opines that the connection between interaction and semantic structuring is explained by the interpersonal meta-function. Social ties and interaction are facilitated by language. The third is ideational meta- function, or transitivity.

1) Transitivity Reflects Subjectivity: Transitivity choices define how events, participants, and circumstances are represented. For example, the selection of processes (e.g., material, mental, verbal) highlights certain actions or mental states over others. This emphasis reflects ideological stances.
2) Participants Highlight Agency and Responsibility: The actors (who does what) and goals (to whom/what actions are done) highlight responsibility or victimhood. Omitting or backgrounding certain participants can obscure accountability.
3) Circumstances Provide Context or Justification: Circumstantial elements (e.g., cause, manner, location) frame events in a way that supports specific narratives or ideologies. By including or eliminating certain circumstantial details, media outlets can shape how readers interpret

events.

4) Ideologies Influence Representation: By repeatedly preferring certain processes, participants, or circumstances, a specific worldview is subtly communicated to the audience.

The data for the present study has been analysed at the above-mentioned levels to locate implicit and explicit ideologies embedded in the headlines.

Keeping in view the above discussion about the theoretical aspects of the study, it can be said that language is essential to the understanding, interpretation, and memory of political conflict. Although news titles are short, they offer a powerful means of communication by setting the context for how readers see international events. Journalists create specific images of politicians, apportion blame, and shape the public interpretation by making certain grammatical decisions. Such linguistic patterns can be effectively analyzed using Halliday's transitivity system, which can also reveal the underlying ideological assumption of the language used in media discourse.

4. Data Analysis

Tehran says UN Security Council should have condemned Israel's deadly air raid on Iranian consulate in Damascus.

Clause	**Process Type**	**Participants**	**Circumstance**
Tehran says	Verbal	Tehran: Sayer UN Security Council should have condemned Israel's deadly air raid... : Verbiage	--
UN Security Council should have condemned	Material	UN Security Council: Actor	on Iranian consulate in Damascus:

Israel's deadly air raid on Iranian consulate in Damascus.		Israel's deadly air raid :Goal	Circumstance of location

Halliday (2004) argues that different linguistic moves are used in media discourses to convey underlined ideology more comprehensively. He argues that media discourses are never neutral rather highly polarized. Different linguistic spins (transitivity devices) are more often implied to represent self positively and vice versa. Similarly, it is obvious from the analysis of the above-mentioned headlines from the lens the transitivity devices (SFL) that an attempt has been made to condemn Israel's attack on Iranian's consulate in Damascus.

The transitivity analysis in systemic functional linguistics (SFL) has been used in the headline under analysis to find out experiential meaning as realized in the choice of processes, the configuration of participants and circumstantial processes. It is obvious from the mentioned headline that the principal clause is a verbal process, realized by a finite verb, in this case "says", where Tehran is the subject of the verbal process, and the following projected clause is the Verbiage. The whole proposition is presented as an act of diplomatic assertion, giving agency to the Iranian capital and presenting the rest of the content as reported, rather than asserted by the news voice.

The process discussed in the above-mentioned headline condemned the act that has taken place and demand justice from the UN Security Council which functions as the Sayer. As for as, The Goal of this process is concerned, it has been achieved through the material process of destructive impact of Israel in the form of her deadly air attack. Here, Israel has been represented as an Actor and the air attack is taken as the Process, and the Iranian consulate in Damascus can be taken the Goal of the material action. The spatial setting and the qualitative evaluation

of force are intensified by circumstantial elements of the place Damascus and situation manner "deadly". Here, the use of linguistic technique, place as the state metaphor, has been implied. It is used to convey the feelings of collectivity. The headline under analysis implies the feelings of disliking which have prevailed among the Iranian people, as the result of inhuman activity by Israel forces. Moreover, the use of expression " should have condemn" also connotes degree of disliking from Iranian side and implied negative representation of Israeli forces. This is how the concept of positive self (Iran) representation and negative representation of others (Israel) has been played up.

"World leaders collectively condemn Iran's 'reckless' attack against Israel: 'We support Israel'"

Clause	**Process Type**	**Participants**	**Circumstance**
World leaders collectively condemn	**Mental**	**Senser:** world leader	**Phenomenon:** Iran's 'reckless' attack
Iran's 'reckless' attack against Israel	**Material**	**Actor:** Iran	**Goal:** Israel
'We support Israel'	**Verbal**	**Sayer:** world leader	**Verbiage:** 'We support Israel'

Halliday (2004) maintains that media discourses act a insidious weapon to disseminate desired version of reality to the target audience. They are very instrumental in making things common sense and to hegemonize the minds of target leadership. To achieve this end, different linguistics techniques are implied in the headlines as they are meant for maximum people. Similarly, it is obvious from the headline (Fox News) under analysis that Israel's act has been represented positively and vice versa.

This headline becomes experiential meaning through a dominant verb, leaving the agency of collective institutions in the evaluative judgment at the center. The use of finite verb "condemn" is a verbal process of denunciation, and the circumstantial Adjunct that intensifies a unified institutional voice as encoded by the World leaders. As far as, the use of transitivity device, goal, is concerned, it is obvious that of this verbal process has been achieved through the nominal group Iran's 'reckless' attack against Israel which in turn includes a material process of aggressive action. As an embedded material process, Iran is an Actor; the attack is a process, and Israel is a Goal; the use of adjective "reckless" is an attitudinal evaluation that shadows the material action with moral censure before it is verbally condemned.

Fairclough (2015) illustrated that politics is done through media discourses likewise, he beliefs that the use of pronoun is never neutral. It is obvious from the above-mentioned headline, the use of first-person pronoun "We" connotes collectivity, unity and the concept of power. It may be taken as metaphorical representation of Pro-American countries. Iran has been represented negatively. The use of transitivity devices in the form of loaded lexical items such as 'condemn, reckless, and attack' connotes negative and hostile attitude of Iran in general, and the Muslim world in particular. This is how, the headline under analysis affirms Fairclough (2015) stance that headlines are coined very tactfully to represented the in and out-group respectively.

Netanyahu says 9 chilling words as Iran's president vows to completely destroy Israel

Clause	**Process Type**	**Participants**	**Circumstance**

Netanyahu says 9 chilling words	**Verbal**	Netanyahu: **Sayer** 9 chilling words: **Verbiage**	--
words as Iran's president vows	**Verbal**	Iran's president: **Sayer** to completely destroy Israel: **Verbiage**	--
to completely destroy Israel (embedded clause)	**Material (embedded)**	Iran's president (implied) : **Actor** Israel: **Goal**	--

Halliday (2004) beliefs that whatever appears in media is seldom neutral and the underlined ideology is disseminated by implying different linguistics and meta-linguistics techniques. Most often, it is observed that meanings have to be inferred as media discourses are layered. Similarly, it is obvious that the headline under analysis contains denotative and connotative meaning. It can be inferred that the headline under analysis embodies competing discourses in the form of opposing statements from the heads of two countries I.e., Israel and Iran. Dijk (2016) opines that number game techniques is most often used in political discourse to make a statement more authentic rather than tentative, similarly, here it has been used in the form of "9 chilling words", the use of 09 instead of nine is ideological. Is implies that Israel's ideology is very much focused and calculated where its war with Iran is concerned. On the other hand, it is equally obvious that Iran's ideological perspective (stand) is equally is defined and clear. The verb "vows" used by Iran's president connotes intensity of feelings of the person using the verb.

It connotes that the president of Iran takes the war against Israel as holy war as is implied by the connotations and denotations of the word "vows". the overall impression which emerges from the analysis of the headlines under analysis is that it is ideologically loaded. Besides, the use of person as state metaphor is quite ideological here, in the headline under analysis, Netanyahu and Iran's president are representatives of their respective states. This is how it is inferred that media discourses are never neutral rather the most often competing in nature.

Al-Jazeerah News Headlines

H1. "**Iran claims to follow drone launch at Israel with ballistic missile barrage"**

Clause	**Process Type**	**Participants**	**Circumstance**
Iran claims	Verbal	**Sayer**: Iran	(Circumstance not explicitly stated)
to follow drone launch at Israel	Material	**Actor:** (Iran, implied)	Goal: drone launch at Israel
with ballistic missile barrage	Material	**Actor**: (Iran, implied)	Goal: ballistic missile barrage

Content Analysis

The following section reproduces the frequency of occurrence of various linguistic moves employed in the selected data for the mentioned time span. It has been done to support qualitative findings quantitatively and vice versa.

Process Type	**Al-Jazeerah News**	**Fox News**
Material	52	54

Relational	19	15
Verbal	27	29
Mental	11	09
Behavioral	01	01
Existential	01	01

This section contains a detailed comparative analysis of Al Jazeera and Fox News headlines on the Israel-Iran combat via Halliday's SFL framework. It reviews participants, process types, and circumstances to uncover embedded narratives and ideologies. Each research question is addressed in a systematic and clear manner to expose how these linguistic choices generate stances.

The analysis demonstrates that Material processes take over in both Fox News (54) and Al Jazeera (52) headlines. These processes highlight events and actions, classically involving an Actor and a Goal, enlightening the action driven nature of combat reportage. Headlines including "Iran launches drone strike on Israel" and "Israel responds with airstrikes" prove this pattern. While both highlight war, Fox News' minor numerical lead proposes a more militarized setting, often describing Iran as the initiator of attacks.

Al Jazeera, on the other hand, unveils a bit higher use of Relational processes which are used to detect or explain participants, rather than describe actions. This offers that Al Jazeera uses more interpretative or descriptive language, possibly to foregrounds actors and incidents. For instance, a headline including "Iran describes Israeli regime as illegitimate" is a relational clause giving attributes or individuality, unveiling a tendency to direct evaluative stances or ideological labels potentially supporting Iranian or Arab dogmas that challenge the legality of Israel.

Verbal processes indicating statements, declarations, or warnings are common in both sources, 29 in Fox News and 27 in Al Jazeera. This shows the importance of attribution and reported discourse, generally from martial or official sources. However, a bit higher use in Fox News may expose its effort to foreground answerability or justification, merely from Israeli or U.S. executives.

The Mental processes, 11 were unveiled in Al Jazeera and 9 in Fox News which include sentiment, perception, cognition, or such as, "hopefulness" "believe or "terror". Al Jazeera's rationally higher use here could validates a focus on inside states or civilizing perspectives, probably of regional inhabitants or actors. For instance, if Al Jazeera utilizes headlines like "Palestinians fear wider war," this articulates its psychological imprint, thus slightly alluring emotional engagement and empathy. Fox News, in comparison, may incorporate mental processes to change views, e.g. "U.S. believes Iran is behind the strike," presenting a strategic or intelligence focused positioning.

Mutually they incorporate very slight use of Behavioral and Existential processes (1 each), which is normal in news headlines, as these processes are less appropriate to the fact concentrated, dense nature of headline text.

Al Jazeera and Fox News give an image of clashing narratives in their reportage of the Iran-Israel combat, unveiled in their linguistic choices. The implication of participants, process types, and circumstances is attentive, altering ideologies that support each outlet's political and regional associations.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The study was undertaken to decode news headlines of two media outlets namely, Al-Jazzerah News and Fox News about the representation of Iran-Israel conflict. The data for the present study was collected from the mentioned sources and integrated research modal has been implied to analyse the data. The findings of the study reveal that the headlines are tactfully coined as they represent a detailed

story through minimum use of words. Here, in the present study, it is observed that media discourses are competing in nature and they reflect the socio-political tendencies prevailing in a particular context (Iran and Israel). the study finds that same event finds different representation across different media groups. The headlines of Pro-Iran media group (Al-Jazeerah News) represents Iran positively and Israel negatively. Whereas the headlines which appeared in Pro-Israel news outlet (Fox News) support dominant Western stance towards Iran-Israel conflict. The study reflects how language choices in news headlines construct and disseminate different ideologies by implying different linguistics techniques very tactfully.

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