

Lexical Ambiguity and Ideology in Political Discourse: A Qualitative Analysis of Selected News Stories Covering Conflicts in the Middle East

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates how global and regional news organizations, particularly BBC, Al Jazeera, Arab News, and Gulf News, use lexical choices to construct ideological representations of Middle East political events. Anchored in Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and van Dijk's ideological square and ideological strategies, this proposal examines lexical patterns such as nomination, predication, evaluative adjectives, metaphors, and strategic labelling that foreground or background specific actors, actions, and interpretations. A qualitative approach of analysis will focus on a corpus of political news articles published between 2023–2025 involving Gaza conflict, diplomacy, and geopolitical tensions in the Middle East. The proposal aims to identify systematic ideological tendencies across Western, pan-Arab, and Gulf outlets, revealing how news language shapes our political perceptions and stances.

1. Introduction:

Lexical choices in political news are not often neutral, as they carry ideological tendencies and stances that affect our understanding of events and conflicts. In the coverage of Middle East conflicts and politics, some ambiguous or intentionally obscured lexical items (such as *militant groups or terrorists versus resistance fighters*; elimination or targeted killing versus assassination) allow media outlets to present multiple interpretations, which aims at encoding or hiding their ideological positions.

This research investigates how the English websites of BBC, Reuters, Al Jazeera English, Arab News, and Gulf News employ such lexical ambiguity to construct ideological meanings and stances that are related political events and conflicts in the Middle East. The theoretical framework of this research combines both: Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse analysis and van Dijk's ideological square and ideological strategies, focusing on how discourse creates group polarization and political and ideological stances.

This research aims to provide a qualitative critical analysis of how ambiguous wording forms ideological narratives across the selected Western and regional English-language news websites.

2. Research Questions

1. How do selected news outlets use lexically ambiguous items and expressions in reporting Middle East political conflicts?
2. How do these ambiguous items contribute to making ideological meanings and stances when interpreted through van Dijk's ideological square?
3. How do Fairclough's three levels of analysis reveal the social and political functions of such lexical choices?

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

According to Fairclough (1989), "Ideologies are closely linked to language because using language is the commonest form of social behaviour, and the form of social behaviour where we rely most on 'common-sense' assumptions" (p. 2).

Fairclough (1989) believes that ideology constitutes a representation of an "imaginary relation of individuals to the real condition of existence" (p. 10). He conceptualizes discourse through three interlinked dimensions:

Textual analysis: which includes lexical choice, metaphor, modality, presupposition, and cohesive devices.

Discursive practice: which includes production, distribution, and consumption of news stories; an intertextuality of the discourse.

Social practice: which gives a broader ideological, political, and social contexts that shape the discourse.

Lexical ambiguity is treated here as a textual phenomenon where its ideological effects appear through the discursive practices as presented by the selected news outlets.

Furthermore, metaphors are used for conceptual framing (such as in "wave of violence," "explosion of tensions," and "peace talks collapse"). In addition, the agency patterns are essential to understand who is granted agency and who is portrayed as passive (for example, "airstrikes hit Gaza" versus "the Israeli army launches airstrikes on Gaza").

3.2 van Dijk's Ideological Square

This research explores the positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation as employed by van Dijk's Ideological Square (1998). His approach of ideological analysis includes other suggested ideological tools, such as categorization, comparison, repetition, disclaimer, hyperbole, generalization, lexicalization, numbers game, and national self-glorification, among others.

Van Dijk (1998) argues that ideology is reproduced by: emphasizing our good actions and their bad actions; while downplaying our bad actions, and their good actions.

In news discourse, ideological work is often done outstandingly through lexical choices that allow multiple readings depending on the audience background knowledge and beliefs. There are some relevant ideological strategies suggested by van Dijk (1998): Positive self-presentation / negative other-presentation, Nomination and categorization, victimization vs. threat construction, lexicalization (choosing ideologically marked terms), mitigation and vagueness. Our focus on lexical ambiguity is aligned closely with these strategies.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Discourse, ideology, and news media

Fairclough (1995) explains that news language naturalizes ideological positions through routine linguistic selections, especially lexical choices that appear neutral but are ideologically loaded.

Within Fairclough's model, lexical choices are part of textual analysis but must be interpreted with reference to institutional routines (discursive practice) and geopolitical ideologies (social practice). This means that a label such as "militant," "resistance fighter," or "terrorist" must be understood in relation to a media outlet's editorial mission, its national context, and global power relations.

Van Dijk (1998) demonstrates how media discourse structures public cognition by foregrounding or mitigating actors' responsibilities through strategic lexicalization. He approaches ideology from a cognitive and sociopolitical perspective. He defines ideology as "the shared system of ideas that enables groups to organize and justify their social practices." Media discourse, therefore, is a site where ideological polarizations (us versus them) are constructed and reproduced. His ideological square and strategies uncover encoded ideologies in discourse. In addition, Richardson (2007) emphasizes how subtle wording, especially in international conflict reporting creates ideological alignments.

4.2 Lexical ambiguity in political reporting

Ambiguous lexical items (such as *terrorist*, *militant*, *security*, *airstrike*) carry multiple potential interpretations depending on their context. Furthermore, in conflict reporting, terms like *clashes*, *unrest*, or *incursion* obscure agency and responsibility (Fowler, 1991). In addition Ambiguity often functions to legitimize certain political actors or soften portrayals of violence (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

4.3 Middle East media discourse

Nomination, Labeling, and Categorization: The act of naming is one of the most ideologically consequential decisions in news writing. Research shows that labels for political or armed groups differ significantly depending on a media outlet's ideological alignment. For example, Western outlets often prefer terms like "militants," "extremists," or "terrorists". On the other hand, some Middle East outlets may prefer using terms like "resistance fighters," "armed groups," or "occupation forces". The choice between such labels frames the legitimacy, moral status, and political rights of the actors involved.

Studies on Western new coverage (Said, 1978) show that lexical choices often reinforce Orientalist frames. Comparative studies (such as El-Nawawy & Powers, 2009) demonstrate systematic differences

between Western and Arab English-language media, particularly around terms like *resistance*, *martyr*, *terror*, and *occupation*. In addition, Gulf-based outlets (Arab News, Gulf News) often emphasize stability and regional security, using lexical ambiguity to maintain balanced diplomatic narratives.

5. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine how major international and Middle Eastern news outlets, mainly BBC, Al Jazeera, Arab News, and Gulf News, construct competing ideological representations of key Middle East political conflicts. The focus is on lexical choice and semantic framing as indicators of ideological positioning, as informed by Fairclough's three-dimensional model (textual analysis, discursive practice, social practice) and van Dijk's ideological square and ideological strategies.

CDA is chosen because it foregrounds concepts such as power, ideology, and discourse, and because both Fairclough's and van Dijk's models explicitly address how language contributes to constructing political realities, particularly in the polarized discursive space of Middle East geopolitics.

5.1 Corpus Construction: A qualitative analysis sample from:

- BBC
- Reuters
- Al Jazeera English
- Arab News (Saudi Arabia)
- Gulf News (UAE)

5.2 Analytical procedure

For each article, the researcher will identify ambiguous lexical items, analyze how lexical ambiguity affects representation of events, apply van Dijk's ideological square to determine ideological stances and positionings, and apply Fairclough's three-level analysis of textual, discursive and socio-cultural functions of the selected examples of news stories.

6. Sample Analysis

6.1 From BBC:

“The Israeli military has carried out airstrikes on targets belonging to the Palestinian militant group Hamas in southern Lebanon and the Gaza Strip. The Israeli military said the attacks were a response to a barrage of 34 rockets fired from Lebanon into northern Israel on Thursday, which it blamed on Hamas”.

In this selected example, lexical ambiguity can be identified in the following lexical items: “militant” is an ambiguous meaning between terrorists and resistance fighters, while “air strikes” indicates a neutral term for lethal military actions that often kill armed groups as well as civilians, children, and women. The word “targets” implies that they are precise and legitimate positions, without giving attention to the fact that the location of these positions usually lead to the killing of other non-military people, which is an illegitimate killing, and very often negates the preciseness of such strikes.

As for van Dijk’s ideological square, the selected paragraph highlights their bad actions through “rockets”, while “airstrikes” mitigates our bad actions through such a technical terminology. There is a clear avoidance of attributing civilian casualties, which is in the interest of a particular side of the conflict.

When it comes to Fairclough’s approach of analysis, it can be noticed that selected text shows hedging and evidentiality through the items “officials said”. There is also a discursive practice in the BBC convention of neutrality through using such ambiguous lexicons mentioned above. In addition, the social and cultural perspective is noticed in the geopolitical influence such lexical choices.

6.2 From Al Jazeera English:

“Residents described the raid as part of ongoing resistance against occupation.”

Ambiguity of lexical choices: the lexical item “resistance” here indicates a legitimizing struggle for freedom, which in turn responds to the rejected nomination of just “militants, armed group, or terrorist group). In addition, “occupation” indicates another political position in the conflict, and therefore it is used to legitimize the action against those who “occupy” the land. As for the ideological square, the selected example here emphasizes “their bad actions” (as occupation forces), and highlights “our good actions” (as resistance fighters).

As for Fairclough, the textual perspective in this example shows an attribution to “residents” in a way that emphasizes “the owners of the land” and increases their authenticity. Furthermore, the discursive practice

here presents the AJ media outlet as promoting a community-centred narrative of this prolonged conflict in the Middle East.

6.3 From *Arab News*

“Both sides reaffirmed their shared commitment to peace and stability in the region...”

The quote is from a news story about an official meeting between the Saudi foreign minister and his Pakistani counterpart. There is lexical ambiguity in this sentence that promotes and mitigates the discourse through focusing on the neutral position seeking to achieve “peace and stability”. These lexical choices in particular reflects the general political position of the country (Saudi Arabia) towards the conflict.

As for the ideological square analysis, the lexical choices in the sentence enhances “our good actions”, of the wise leadership working toward achieving stability of the region.

6.4 From *Gulf News*:

Two years after the war ignited by Hamas’s October 7, 2023, attack, Gaza lies in ruins and hope strains under relentless conflict. Over 67,000 Palestinians have been killed, many buried beneath rubble or still missing, while more than 417,000 have been internally displaced. Israel, too, counts nearly 1,700 dead, including soldiers, and 48 hostages remain in Gaza.

The selected sample is the lead summary of a news story about the conflict in Gaza after the ceasefire of October, 2025. The ambiguity of the lexicon “the war ignited” reflects blaming and holding Hamas the only responsible side of the war. Gaza “lies in ruins” obscures the actor through passivation, and the reason behind the intended actions. Also the lexical items of “over 67,000 Palestinians have been killed...” shows a passive voice technique that aims to intentionally overlooks the actors, and chooses not to blame them for that huge number of killed people.

As for the ideological square, lexicons in “ignited by Hamas’s October 7” indicates “their bad actions”, and ignoring the “bad actions” of the other side of the conflict shown in the huge number of killed people.

As for Fairclough’s approach of analysis, the textual function here indicates a heavy use of modality and nominalization, which highlight the ideological positioning against a particular side of the conflict. The discursive practice here is that of showing the authenticity through the use of official numbers those who were killed and displaced from both sides. As for the Sociocultural perspective, the selected news story

highlights the UAE state narrative criticizing all Palestinian armed groups in Gaza while prioritizing its own interests as one of the main political players in the ME region.

7. Findings

- Western outlets likely use neutral-seeming terms that obscure agency through passivization and technical vocabulary.
- Arab regional outlets use terms aligned with national narratives (e.g., *stability*, *peace*, *solidarity*).
- Al Jazeera English foregrounds local voices and uses ideologically charged terms (such as resistance groups, *occupation*, and *siege*).
- Lexical ambiguity is a tool used for: Legitimization, delegitimization, attribution, mitigation, and constructing ideologies and identities

These differences reflect how ideological positionings can be encoded through the different news stories linguistic choices.

8. Conclusion

Using Fairclough and van Dijk reveals that lexical ambiguity is not accidental—it is a core mechanism through which news outlets produce ideological meaning. By combining textual analysis with sociocultural interpretation, the study demonstrates how the English-language media landscape constructs competing political realities of Middle Eastern conflicts.

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