

FRAMING THE ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT IN MEDIA HEADLINES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF WESTERN AND EASTERN PERSPECTIVES USING APPRAISAL AND TRANSITIVITY FRAMEWORKS

Marya Sarwar^a, Dr. Hafiz Muhammad Qasim^b

^a PhD Scholar, Department of Applied Linguistics, Government College University Faisalabad, 38000, Pakistan

^a Lecturer in English, Department of English, University of Okara, Okara, 56300, Pakistan

^b Assistant Professor, Department of Applied Linguistics, Government College University, Faisalabad, 38000, Pakistan

* Correspondence: muhammadqasim@gcuf.edu.pk

Abstract

Media headlines serve as powerful discursive tools that shape public perceptions of global conflicts. In the case of the Israel–Palestine conflict, divergent ideological narratives across Western and Eastern media often reflect distinct geopolitical alignments and cultural sympathies. This study investigates how headlines from selected Western and Eastern newspapers linguistically construct the conflict through Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics (Transitivity) and Martin and White’s Appraisal Theory. A total of 600 headlines were analyzed using the UAM Corpus Tool, drawn from six newspapers—three Western (*The Times*, *New York Times*, *Frankfurter Rundschau*) and three Eastern (*Arab News*, *Dawn*, *Tehran Times*). The analysis focused on process types, participant roles, and attitudinal resources including affect, judgment, and appreciation.

Findings show that Western headlines predominantly employed material and verbal processes to assign agency to Israeli actors, using intensified judgmental language and mono-glossic engagement that privileged institutional voices. In contrast, Eastern headlines favored relational and existential processes that highlighted Palestinian suffering and moral framing, supported by higher lexical density (a greater ratio of content words to function words) and more academic vocabulary, alongside hetero-glossic engagement. These results reveal that headlines construct conflict ideologically through distinct linguistic strategies aligned with regional worldviews. The study underscores the role of language in reproducing geopolitical bias and aims to contribute to critical discourse scholarship and awareness of media framing practices.

Keywords: Israel – Palestine conflict; Affect; Judgment; Appreciation; Geo-political Alignments.

1. Introduction

The ideological construction of conflict through media discourse has been a central concern in discourse studies, particularly where language functions as a tool for shaping and managing public opinion (Gill & Azhar, 2018). In the context of the Israel–Palestine conflict, the framing of news headlines plays a significant role in influencing perceptions of legitimacy, victimhood, and aggression. This study applies Halliday’s (1970, 2000) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)—specifically Transitivity—and the Appraisal model by Martin and White (2005) to examine how headlines from Western and Eastern newspapers linguistically construe political positions and ideological stances.

Prior research has shown that Western media coverage often emphasizes Israeli lives and security concerns, presenting Israeli leaders and armed forces as reasonable actors responding to threats (Bhowmik & Fisher, 2023; Ozohu-Suleiman, 2014). In contrast, media outlets from the Eastern bloc, such as Al Jazeera, tend to highlight Palestinian suffering and resistance, focusing on civilian casualties and the historical

context of displacement (Elmasry et al., 2013). Such contrasting framing shapes audiences' perceptions by privileging certain narratives while marginalizing others, thereby constructing the conflict through selective reporting aligned with broader geopolitical alliances.

The political contexts in which these media operate further reinforce these patterns. Western media outlets often reflect their governments' foreign policy positions, amplifying selective reporting that aligns with strategic partnerships—for example, the United States' alignment with Israel (Bhowmik & Fisher, 2023). Conversely, Eastern media may cater to audiences more sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, thus emphasizing humanitarian and sovereignty dimensions (Elmasry et al., 2013).

In the digital age, social media has amplified these dynamics by driving demand for sensational or clickbait headlines that can distort understanding and spread unverified narratives (Rashid, 2021; Groves, 2017). Both Western and Eastern outlets can deploy such strategies, further complicating the audience's ability to access balanced reporting and deepening existing biases (Wanda et al., 2021; Zahoor & Sadiq, 2021).

This study addresses the following objectives: (1) to examine how transitivity choices in Western and Eastern headlines assign agency and represent conflict participants; (2) to analyze the evaluative stance embedded through appraisal resources—affect, judgment, and appreciation; and (3) to compare ideological framing patterns across these media blocs.

Examining these variations in framing and representation helps reveal how media discourse shapes public understanding and policy responses. As the primary conduit of information, news media significantly influence how conflicts are perceived and discussed. Research has demonstrated that coverage by outlets like CNN can reinforce pro-Israel perspectives, while Middle Eastern channels such as Al Jazeera emphasize Palestinian victimhood and resistance (Bhowmik & Fisher, 2023; Rashid, 2021).

Headlines, in particular, are critical entry points for audiences, framing narratives that shape initial interpretations of complex events (Russell, 2023). Sensational or ambiguous headlines can distort readers' perceptions, fuel misinformation, and erode trust in journalism, especially when amplified through algorithm-driven social media feeds that create echo chambers (Wanda et al., 2021; Zahoor & Sadiq, 2021).

This study employs a qualitative, corpus-based approach, analyzing 600 headlines from six international newspapers using Halliday's transitivity system and Martin and White's Appraisal framework, operationalized via the UAM Corpus Tool. By doing so, it aims to uncover the ideological patterns embedded in media discourse and contribute to a deeper understanding of how linguistic choices in headlines reproduce and circulate geopolitical biases.

Here the manuscript is introduced. The section headings and subheadings are arranged by numbers. Leave a clear line between sections or subsections.

2. Literature Review

Studying how media write about Israel and Palestine shows that headlines are used to express particular ideological perspectives, not only to summarize events. Because each source highlights different stories, people and politicians react differently to issues. Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya which are often described as Eastern media, concentrate on the hardships faced by Palestinians in their reporting. During the Operation Cast Lead on Gaza in 2008-2009, Al Jazeera showed images of people and damaged buildings, making it clear that the conflict was having serious problems for regular people and might need attention from the rest of the world.

On the other hand, CNN and The New York Times inside the West usually present the issue through an Israeli security perspective. These headlines criticize Israel less and support Israel's defense of what they consider terrorism, by depicting Israel's military efforts as coming after attacks by Hamas. How the media represents these events, instead of choosing one label or the other, proves it impacts how the public views the war. As a result such films strengthen diplomatic friendships and cultural bonds, but also cover up problems arising from occupation or relocation.

The idea behind these debates comes from framing theory which claims that media both inform and affect the meaning of the facts it shares. Lecheler and Vreese stress that choosing which events to present in the news can change how people feel and think about right and wrong. As an illustration, news that stresses violent events could spark anger, but stories put forward about suffering civilians can encourage readers to feel empathy and wish for answers. As pointed out by Ojala and Pantti (2017), most of the time, media outlets put forth opinions from elites that sway public discussion and devalue other voices that could object to those views.

Here, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and its transitivity system (six functions: material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal and existential) are used to analyze these ideological ideas. Analysis of transitivity reveals the pattern of tasks and roles assigned to varied actors in headlines. An example is how using material processes in headlines minimizes the effect on who is involved, whereas relational processes emphasize the condition or place affected.

In conflict reporting, material processes stand out, as they relate to instances of attack or defense. The way these processes work helps to decide who gets labeled as an actor and who as a victim. Fatinova (2024) points out that the experiences of suffering and emotions among Palestinians are often shown using both relational and mental considerations in Eastern media stories. In this case, speech-based expressions are used to give statements a moral meaning and reveal who has power in media communication.

Along with transitivity, Appraisal Theory proposed by Martin and White (2005) sorts' language with subjective meaning into three groups called Affect, Judgment and Appreciation. This approach helps us see how headlines create feelings and judgments for the reader. Affect includes emotional reactions too; those words in headlines, for example, create feelings of sympathy in the reader. Judging Israeli attacks as defensive but labeling Palestinian resistance as terrorism is a way to put across moral opinions. Appreciation looks at things or events and changes how readers think about them by adding certain descriptions.

Analyses based on real data confirm the role of these frameworks. El-Nashar and Nayef discover that how the news frames mosque attacks depends heavily on where the incident takes place. Al-haded et al. (2022) further argue that how Appraisal Theory's parts are expressed changes with culture and depends on the social and political landscape around the discussion.

In addition, words like "tragedy," "siege," or "terror" added to headlines aim to influence your feelings and strengthen certain opinions. Usually, Eastern media uses empathetic language to present Palestinians' situations, whereas Western media relies on talking about security issues to justify what Israel does. The way language is employed by the media can increase or decrease audience preconceptions and influence the ongoing arguments of international conflict.

Many previous uses of these theories show they can reveal bias. By doing transitivity analysis on post-9/11 news, Behnam and Khodadust (2010) found that

passivation can make it difficult to understand who is really responsible. Matu and Lubbe (2007) explained that specific types of processes are used by media to construct narratives, focusing on the relationship between language, ideology and power.

Consequently, through the use of both transitivity and appraisal analysis, this study examines how over 600 headlines from Western and Eastern sources represent the conflict between Israel and Palestine. They explain why media stories often support certain ideas about language which can control what people think and who holds power.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study employs an integrated theoretical framework combining Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Appraisal Theory to analyze the construal of the Israel-Palestine conflict in the headlines of Western and Eastern newspapers. These frameworks are chosen for being able to show how meaning, power and beliefs are presented through language in media.

The analysis relies on Systemic Functional Linguistics, created by M. A. K. Halliday, because it shows how language works to represent ideational, interpersonal and textual layers in society. With the transitivity system, we can see how participants, actions and conditions appear across different media texts. By describing things as “Israel launches airstrikes” or “Palestinians suffer under blockade,” the headlines make it clear who is in charge and who is suffering.

At the same time, the Appraisal Framework in SFL helps investigate the language of attitude by analyzing it through three subsystems: Affect, Judgment and Appreciation. As a result, the study can identify the processes by which attitudes, ethics and values develop. In fact, using words like “tragedy” and “terrorist attack,” rather than “defensive strike,” consistently conditions readers and boosts division among groups with specific beliefs.

CLT adds to our understanding of how psychological and cultural distance affects how audiences understand movies. Different parts of the media shape the way people view the war, depending on the geopolitical views of the region. Information in Western media often backs Israel, while Eastern media highlights the hardships and fights of Palestinians.

With these tools, we can examine in depth the role of culture, politics and ideology in headline language. This research illustrates the methods used in the media to describe the Israel-Palestine conflict and how such portrayals shape the world’s judgment and action.

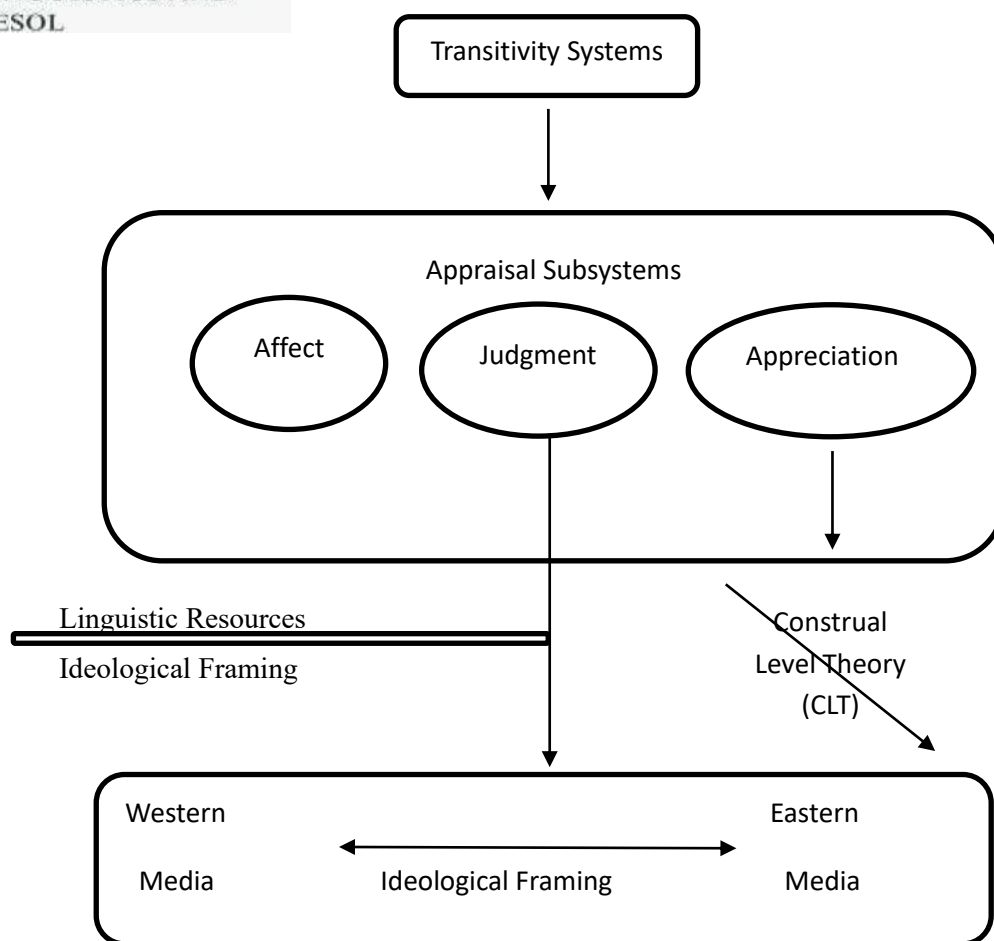


Figure 1: Diagram for Theoretical Framework

4. Methodology

Instead of quantitative study, this work uses SFL and Appraisal Theory to review and understand the different ideologies in media headlines covering the Israel-Palestine dispute. The methodology uses the concept of transitivity (Halliday, 2004) and the Appraisal approach (Martin & White, 2005) to examine how agency, responsibility and stance are expressed in news headlines.

4.1 Corpus Selection

There are 600 headlines in the dataset obtained from six newspapers, 3 from Western nations and 3 from Eastern regions. These newspapers are available in the West through The New York Times, The Times (UK) and Frankfurter Rundschau; in the East, you can find them at Tehran Times, Dawn and Arab News. Such outlets were chosen because they are well known, have global reach and pay regular attention to the Israel-Palestine conflict. The research uses data from 2018 to 2023 to show a detailed representation of current debates arising from intense episodes in the conflict.

The headlines were collected from the official websites and digital archives of the selected newspapers using keyword searches including "Israel," "Palestine," "Gaza," "Hammas," and "IDF." Only those headlines that directly pertain to the Israel-Palestine conflict were included, with opinion pieces and editorials excluded to maintain a focus on news reportage.

4.2 Analytical Framework

The headlines were subjected to manual linguistic analysis using two complementary lenses:

Transitivity Analysis – Each headline was examined for process types (material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral, and existential), participant roles (actor, goal, sayer, sensor, etc.), and the representation of agency and victimhood. This analysis aimed to reveal how the newspapers construct actions, assign responsibility, and position social actors within the discourse.

Appraisal Analysis – The headlines were also analyzed for attitudinal positioning through the three subsystems of the Appraisal model:

- Affect (emotional responses),
- Judgment (moral evaluations of people's behavior),
- Appreciation (evaluations of events or objects).

The intersection of these two frameworks enabled a comprehensive view of both the ideational and interpersonal meanings encoded in the texts, aligning with Halliday's metafunctional theory.

4.3 Data Coding and Analysis Procedure

The data were coded using an iterative thematic strategy, supported by textual annotation. Headlines were grouped based on the newspaper source, and then coded for:

- Dominant process types and their associated participants
- Presence and type of attitudinal markers
- Patterns of ideological alignment (pro-Israeli, pro-Palestinian, neutral)

Coding reliability was ensured through repeated reviews and cross-validation with theoretical definitions from Halliday (2004) and Martin & White (2005). To strengthen validity and minimize researcher bias, a second independent coder annotated a 15% sample of the dataset. Inter-coder reliability was measured using Cohen's Kappa, yielding values of $\kappa = 0.82$ for transitivity coding and $\kappa = 0.78$ for appraisal features, indicating substantial to near-perfect agreement. Sample headlines were selected for detailed illustration, focusing on instances that typify broader ideological or grammatical trends.

5. Results

5.1 Transitivity Analysis

The transitivity analysis was conducted using Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) model via the UAM Corpus Tool. Headlines from six newspapers—three Western (The Times, New York Times, and Frankfurter Rundschau) and three Eastern (Arab News, Dawn and Tehran Times)—were tagged and analyzed across five transitivity process types: material, mental, verbal, relational, and existential. The analysis aimed to determine how these newspapers represent the Israel-Palestine conflict through language by examining how processes and participants are constructed and distributed. Subjective positivity and strength scores were computed using the UAM Corpus Tool's integrated sentiment module, which quantifies emotional valence based on pre-tagged lexical items and their polarity weights on a scale from -1 (highly negative) to +1 (highly positive).

Material processes, which represent overt motor activities or incidents (e.g., "attack", "defend", "bomb"), were most frequently observed in Western news headlines. This shows a focus on agency—who performs actions—and these were often realized through language that portrayed Israeli actions as responsive or defensive in nature. The Western headlines frequently constructed actors such as the Israeli military or government as initiators of actions, thereby implicitly framing them with agency and control. This distribution pattern was evident in the high number of segments found in Western

headlines (1,843), each averaging 13.08 words with a lexical density of 68.83%. These findings suggest a preference in Western news for short, segmented headlines that highlight dynamic, action-oriented processes.

Conversely, Eastern newspapers employed more existential and relational processes. Existential processes ("there is", "exist") often appeared in the context of portraying Palestinian suffering or humanitarian crises, focusing on the presence of suffering, crisis, or oppression. Relational processes (such as "is", "becomes") were also prevalent, contributing to the construction of identities and moral positioning of various actors, for example labelling Palestinians as "victims" or "freedom fighters", and in some cases, Israel as an "aggressor" or "occupier". The Eastern headlines showed fewer total segments (1,451), but these segments were longer on average (19.93 words) and exhibited higher lexical density (77.73%), suggesting a more detailed and elaborative style.

Additionally, Eastern headlines featured greater use of academic vocabulary (3.27% compared to 2.58% in Western news), indicative of a more formal or scholarly discourse structure. The academic rareness score, however, was slightly higher in Western headlines (5.265), suggesting that while less frequent, the academic vocabulary used in Western news was more specialized or rare.

The subjectivity analysis also supports the notion of stylistic difference. Western headlines exhibited slightly more negative sentiment (subjective positivity: -0.414 vs. -0.36) and were more emotionally charged, with a higher subjective strength score (0.408 vs. 0.322). This suggests that Western headlines were more evaluative and opinionated, aligning with a more assertive reporting style.

Figure 1 below presents a bar chart comparing the distribution of major process types (material, relational, existential, etc.) across Western and Eastern headlines, highlighting the dominance of material processes in Western media and relational/existential in Eastern media.

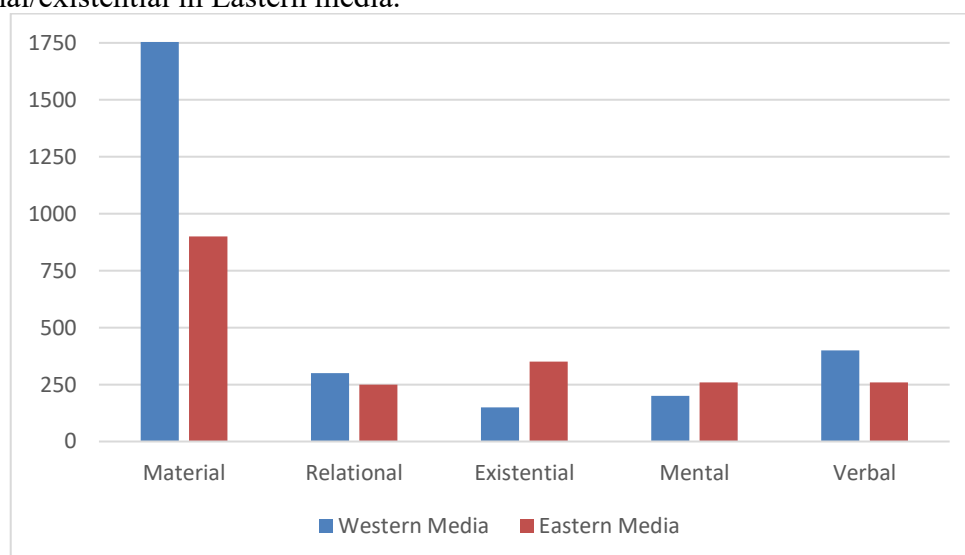


Figure 2: Distribution of Transitivity process in Western and Eastern Media Headlines

5.2 Appraisal Analysis

Using Martin and White's approach, we checked for attitudinal resources in the headlines, including affect, judgment and appreciation. From the data, it became clear that there were very different viewpoints in both East and West about the conflict and its participants.

Headlines from Western sources frequently opted for more noticeably subjective vocabulary, mostly in passing judgment. Often, journalists described Palestinian actions as "brave" or "corrupt", usually using such descriptions in a critical way. Affect was there, but judgments appear to be much more common in decisions.

There was a greater proportion of feeling and fondness in the Eastern articles. Reuters often told the story of the conflict from the view of civilian Palestinians, stressing the wrongdoing of Israel's responses during the war. Expressions like "worry", "anger" or "struggle" were included to generate understanding for the Palestinian issue. As a result, Palestinians are presented more favorably in relation to their morals and feelings than before.

When looking at engagement which means how different voices are represented, Western headlines usually adopted a mono-glossic style. Because it comes from a single voice, the discourse usually uses spoken language and tends to report what officials or the military state (for instance: "The Prime Minister announced...", "The military said..."). With this approach, the one official stance becomes much more powerful and other opinions are ignored.

Media from the East tended to use hetero-glossic communication which brings together several points of view. Such references cover the international community, witnesses from the local area and those who critique the conflict. The use of material, mental, verbal and relational transitivity processes was nearly equal in hetero-glossic interaction. A story is shaped by the input of different guides which results in more conversation and ideas in the media it represents.

In stories about graduation, Western news used verbal intensification more often. Many times, "strong condemnation" and "blunt warning" could be found, increasing the level of seriousness in the message. Even though it occurred, material intensification was not as prominent. Yet, Eastern papers mainly resorted to existential and quantitative ways of showing the extent of the damage or losses faced by those affected. Phrases like "crisis" and "thousands are displaced" helped to emphasize the seriousness of the situation, but not the strength of people's comments.

Figure 3 illustrates a comparative visualization of appraisal resource types (affect, judgment, appreciation) found across both media categories. The graph highlights the Western media's preference for judgment, while Eastern sources showed higher frequencies of affect and appreciation.

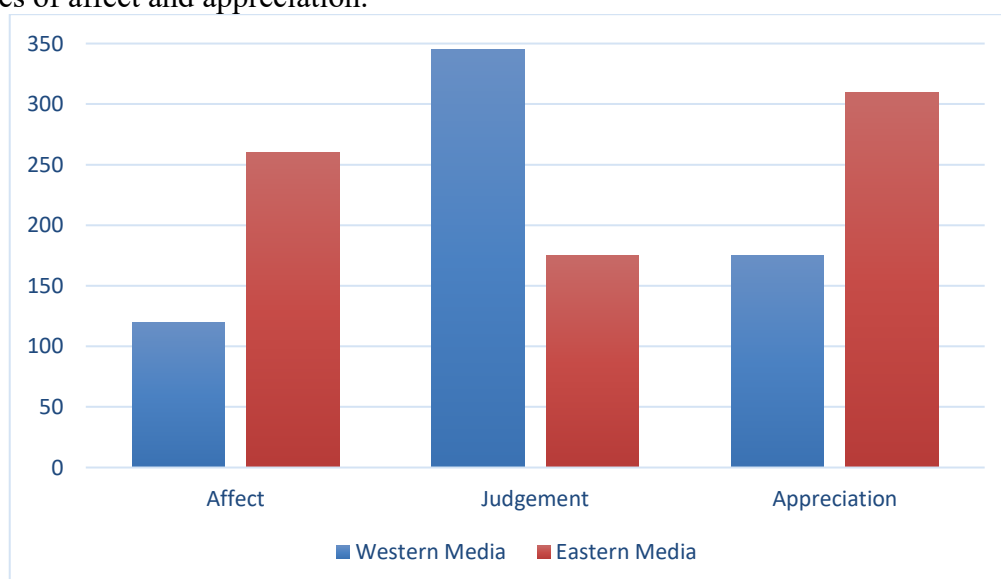


Figure 3: Distribution of Appraisal Resources in Western and Eastern Media Headlines
5.3 Summary of Quantitative Metrics

The quantitative results derived from the UAM tool underscore the systemic differences in linguistic strategies:

Table 1.Summary of Quantitative Results

Metric	Western Media	Eastern Media
Lexical Density	68.83%	77.73%
Subjective Positivity	-0.414	-0.36
Academic Word Use	2.58%	3.27%
1st Person Reference	0.87%	0.62%
Existential Processes	High (assertion of state)	High (affect framing)
Verbal Processes	Highest in engagement	Balanced across appraisal functions

In sum, Western media employed transitivity and appraisal strategies that lean toward a subjective, agent-focused narrative, often privileging Israeli actions and voices. Eastern media adopted a denser, more academic, and multi-voiced approach that foregrounds existential states, relational dynamics, and affective portrayals, particularly with regard to Palestinian suffering and international perspectives.

6. Discussion

By analyzing newspaper headlines from Western and Eastern outlets through Systemic Functional Linguistics and Appraisal Theory, this study shows how headlines construct differing narratives that align with regional ideological positions. Through transitivity and appraisal resources, headlines shape how readers perceive conflict participants, agency, and legitimacy.

1. Agency and Bias in Transitivity Patterns

The transitivity analysis highlights how agency is differently distributed. Western newspapers predominantly rely on material and verbal processes that foreground Israeli political and military actors as principal agents, often portraying their actions as defensive or reactive. This pattern can normalize certain security discourses and justify Israeli operations as protective measures.

In contrast, Eastern newspapers frequently employ relational and existential processes that foreground the enduring impact on Palestinian civilians. Such constructions often depict Palestinians more as recipients of action than as active agents, thereby emphasizing suffering and victimhood. However, these headlines also position Palestinian resistance as an ongoing struggle, granting it moral framing that shifts the focus from purely material clashes to humanitarian consequences.

2. Evaluation and Emotional Framing through Appraisal

The appraisal analysis reveals distinct evaluative patterns. Western headlines often employ judgment resources that portray Palestinians in negative or risk-laden terms, while affect is used more subtly to frame Israeli actions as justified or necessary. This evaluative stance can reinforce dominant geopolitical narratives that prioritize state security.

By contrast, Eastern headlines use affective and judgment resources to humanize Palestinian actors, often framing them as victims deserving sympathy and support. The language of grief, outrage, and resistance works to mobilize readers' emotional alignment. Furthermore, the broader use of heteroglossic engagement—featuring statements from diverse actors such as human rights groups—contrasts with the mono-glossic reporting style more common in Western headlines, which often rely heavily on official Israeli sources.

3. Narrative Intensity and Graduation

Graduation strategies also differ. Western headlines tend to intensify the authority of statements through evaluative modifiers and emphatic verbal phrases, heightening perceived stakes without always elaborating on contextual details. Meanwhile, Eastern headlines often reinforce urgency by including numerical details or existential scaling, giving the appearance of factual objectivity even when evaluative framing is embedded.

Such choices shape perceptions of the conflict's scale and urgency differently, highlighting how linguistic intensification or mitigation influences audience interpretations.

4. Objectivity and Subjectivity in Representation

While headlines are typically assumed to convey factual information, this analysis shows that Western headlines exhibit more overt subjective and evaluative elements, including frequent personal references and strong attitudinal language. By contrast, Eastern headlines display higher lexical density and a more formal register, suggesting a more detached style. However, this apparent objectivity is itself an ideological strategy: it conveys moral stances indirectly through careful lexical selection and framing of participants and processes.

This reinforces prior findings by Chen (2007) and Rashid (2021), who note that linguistic structure and evaluative language work together to construct and circulate ideological positions. The combined transitivity and appraisal analysis here extends this insight by showing how grammatical and evaluative choices co-construct narratives that resonate with specific regional worldviews.

Despite offering valuable insight, this study has limitations. Focusing solely on headlines excludes the wider discursive context—such as full news reports, visuals, or editorials—which could enrich the analysis. Furthermore, analyzing prominent newspapers may not fully capture alternative or marginalized voices within each media bloc. Future studies could incorporate social media discourse and lesser-known regional outlets to broaden the scope and deepen the findings.

7. Conclusion

This study applied Halliday's transitivity framework and Martin and White's appraisal model to a corpus of 600 headlines covering the Israel–Palestine conflict. The analysis demonstrates that media headlines do more than report events—they also subtly frame conflicts through the grammatical assignment of agency, evaluative language, and discursive strategies that align with regional ideological contexts.

In general, Western headlines tended to foreground Israeli agency, often justifying actions through defensive narratives and mono-glossic reporting that limits alternative perspectives. Eastern headlines, meanwhile, emphasized the human costs of conflict for Palestinians and constructed resistance within a broader moral and humanitarian discourse, using more heteroglossic engagement to present multiple viewpoints.

These patterns echo earlier research by Elmasry et al. (2013), Bhowmik & Fisher (2023), and Chen (2007), and reinforce Fairclough's (1995) argument that language is a

vehicle for maintaining power relations. By integrating transitivity and appraisal, this study shows how headlines help reproduce ideological bias in subtle ways that may go unnoticed by audiences.

These findings highlight the value of critical media literacy and suggest practical implications for media educators, journalists, and curriculum designers. Training readers to recognize evaluative and grammatical patterns can help audiences critically engage with headlines and resist unexamined ideological influence. Integrating SFL-based tools such as the UAM Corpus Tool into journalism and communication studies can equip future professionals with practical skills to detect and address hidden bias in media discourse.

Ultimately, this study contributes to ongoing discussions about how language shapes public understandings of conflict and demonstrates the benefit of a combined transitivity and appraisal approach for examining media representation. Future research should expand this framework to other conflicts and media contexts to better understand how linguistic choices continue to shape global narratives.

8. Future Recommendations

Although this research is very useful in explaining how news articles form the conflict, there is potential to broaden the study. The analysis could be improved if full news articles, commentary pieces and image-based materials were added. One way to approach the issue is to increase the data's range to add local and independent news sources that may express ideas not considered in mainstream news. Third, I suggest that researchers can explore transitivity and appraisal in chatters' narratives, by analyzing different social media platforms (e.g., Twitter and Facebook). An analysis that looks at changes in framing as time goes by, with a focus on how it shifts during important conflict moments, could teach us much about evolving media thoughts and feelings of the public. They can improve critical discourse studies and help people become better at reading political information in various environments.

In future studies involving larger datasets, natural language processing (NLP) tools such as spaCy, NLTK, or the UAM Corpus Tool's automated tagging features could significantly support scalable linguistic analysis. Moreover, interdisciplinary collaboration with political science scholars or conflict analysts may deepen contextual understanding and enhance the interpretive power of linguistic findings, especially when dealing with policy-driven narratives or historical frames.

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