

TRANSITIVITY ANALYSIS OF ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT HEADLINES

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Abstract

This study examines the way that Western and Eastern newspapers construct representations of the Israel-Palestine conflict based on linguistic choices in headlines, drawing on the transitivity of Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). A corpus of 600 headlines from the period 2023-2024 of publication from six prominent newspapers (three Western: The New York Times, The Times, Frankfurter Rundschau and three Eastern: Tehran Times, Dawn and Arab News) was analyzed for patterns in the process types and participant roles. Quantitative results reveal that Western outlets employ material and verbal processes that by far prioritize Israeli political and military actors as rational doers who guide action while generalizing and backgrounding Palestinians. Eastern headlines, by contrast, employ more mental, relational and existential processes and humanize Palestinian civilians hopefully to the extent of emotion and experience, as well as emphasizing humanitarian crises and the basic structural conditions of occupation and blockade. Qualitative analysis also shows the role that grammatical constructions and lexical choices play in perceptions of legitimacy, aggression and victimhood. These differences serve to draw attention to the ideological function of headlines, which operate not as neutrals, functioning as a summary, but as a site of discourse by which competing realities of the conflict are constructed. The study adds to critical discourse analysis through showing the usefulness of transitivity in uncovering how the media produce power and ideology in crumpled media writing, which means a critical response to conflict reporting in language.

Keywords: *Transitivity, Media Discourse, Israel-Palestine Conflict, Headlines, Ideology*

Introduction

The media language of constructing conflict through ideology has long been the focus of discourse studies, where language is used as a means to manipulate and control popular opinion (Stoddart, 2007). The media headlines are central in the perception creation of legitimacy, victim, and aggressiveness in the case of the Israel-Palestine conflict. As abridged texts, also see: headlines are strong channels of ideological meaning in that they can foreground certain actors, processes, and perspectives against others. This paper uses the Systemic functional linguistics (SFL) model of Halliday (2004, 1970& 2000), namely Transitivity, to analyze the linguistic representation of political positions and ideological standpoints in headlines of Western and Eastern newspapers.

According to research, there is an important difference in the choice of framing. As an example, the crucial Israeli security issues, the military operations, and victims are usually prioritized by Western media at the expense of the Palestinian victims (Ozohu-Suleiman, 2014). This type of framing is declarative of Israel's actions and makes them defensive reactions, thus

sanctioning military acts and unostentatiously cloaking Palestinian victimhood. On the contrary, the media in Eastern countries (Al Jazeera) often preempt Palestinian resistance and humanitarian crises, and depict Palestinians as the victims of departure, structural violence, and occupation (Elmasry et al, 2013).

Such opposing frames have the impact of informing the world about the stories that circulate and the voices that acquire its legitimacy. Western news headlines tend to portray Israeli government leaders and military forces as active and logical agents, whereas Palestinians remain passive, as people suffering the violence or, in general, victims. Instead, Eastern outlets provide the view of Palestinian leadership, social movements, and civilian suffering and accord the moral authority to their demands to be acknowledged as a sovereign state (Elmasry et al, 2013; Ozohu-Suleiman, 2014). These tendencies create highly contrasting discursive absolutes, which create an international understanding of the conflict.

These differences are also supported by the political environment of the media organizations. The stances of Western outlets are also based on their standpoints in foreign policy, especially in the case of the United States, where strategic and military relationships with Israel act as the foundation of selective reporting (Ozohu-Suleiman, 2014). In the meantime, Eastern media lies within more socio-political contexts, including the Palestinian plight, and they tend to cover these matters with a resistance-commonly-protective discourse (Elmasry et al, 2013).

There is also the complexity that is brought by digital and social media. Attention-seeking headlines and the usage of flashy or sensational headlines to attract traffic enable the use of sensationalism and feature hunting behaviors, factual inaccuracies and the spread of always-true-agency narratives. Such trends threaten to become more propaganda fuel, strengthen the intimacy of echo chambers, and corrode trust in journalism among the population (Hamoud, 2021; Iqbal, Azhar, and Shah, 2020). Critically, propaganda and bias can be traced both in the Western and the Eastern media environments, despite differences, which contributes to the significant importance of the dissection of the headline discourse.

Against this backdrop, this paper explores the way in which the agency of conflict reporting is constituted, allocated by brief but ideologically charged texts, namely headlines. It seeks to undertake the linguistic workings underlying perceptions of legitimacy, aggression, and victimhood in the conflict between Israel and Palestine through a transitivity analysis of 600 headlines of the same in Western and Eastern newspapers.

Objectives

This study seeks to:

1. Investigate how agency and responsibility are distributed through transitivity structures in headlines reporting on the Israel-Palestine conflict.
2. Examine the extent to which Western and Eastern newspapers differ in their linguistic representation of key actors and events.
3. Analyze how ideological positions are reinforced through the framing of participants as actors, victims, or observers in headline discourse.

Research Questions

Q1. How do Western and Eastern newspapers differ in their application of transitivity processes to construct representations of the Israel-Palestine conflict in headlines?

Q2. What patterns of agency and participant roles emerge in headlines about the Israel-Palestine conflict, and how do these patterns reflect underlying ideological orientations?

Q3. How do linguistic choices in headlines shape perceptions of legitimacy, aggression, and victimhood in the Israel-Palestine conflict?

Literature Review

Media Discourse and the Role of Headlines

The analysis of media discourse puts much emphasis on the primary function of headlines in formulating the preliminary interpretations made by the readers of the events, with a special emphasis on conflict situations. Headlines perform more than abbreviating; they collapse intricate facts into terse verbal selections which prefigure some views and post hoc others. In reporting on the Israel–Palestine conflict, headlines therefore act as a condensed discursive arena in which struggles over legitimacy, agency, and responsibility are negotiated and made salient to audiences (Stoddart, 2007). As a consequence, the selection of lexical items, clause structure and clause prominence in headlines plays a decisive role in orienting readers toward particular readings of who acts, who suffers, and who is to be held accountable.

Transitivity and Ideological Construction

The transitivity analysis, research on the type of processes, the roles of the participants and the details in their circumstances gives us a practical means of finding how the headlines give agency and make their social reality. Previous transitivity research indicates that categorizing processes as material, mental, relations, verbal, behavioral, or existential can indicate who occupies the roles of actor and goal, and consequently the distribution of responsibility and initiative in the news discourse (Matu and Lubbe, 2007; Vathanalaotha, 2017). Following these grammatical decisions, the analysts will be able to reveal the institutionalization of the adoption of certain ideological positions, instead of mere coverage of events, by media texts.

In conflict reporting work, transitivity has been extensively used to prove ideological implications of grammatical decisions. As one such recurring phenomenon, comparative and corpus-based work has documented the patterns of foregrounding dominant actors with material processes and back-grounding minor groupings with nominalization, pushing their agency and voice to the background (Matu & Lubbe, 2007; Hamoud, 2021). Such systematized distributions in the clause grammar are thus a discursive legitimation mechanism.

Agency, Victimhood, and Responsibility

An essential input to transitivity analysis is its ability to make plain how agency is to be distributed. On the one hand, picking actions and referring to named agent subjects, such as actions to attributional responsibility and accountability; and on the other hand, nominalization and passivization shift the attributing agent and focus on the events or victims. It is this same dynamic that has been exposed in numerous pieces of research on conflict reporting: agentive constructions are predisposed to justify those described actors, whereas agent-less ones are concerned only with effects or states (Billig, 2008; Hamoud, 2021). Similar transitivity patterns have also been detected in the Israel-Palestine case, where the foregrounding of state actors in active material processes occurs in some media outlets and the foregrounding of victims or existential states occurs in others, thus taking different moral positions in a case (Ozohu-Suleiman, 2014).

Western and Eastern Media Framing through Transitivity

Comparative analyses suggest systematic regional differences in headline transitivity. Research indicates that outlets aligned with dominant Western news flows often emphasize state security and foreground material processes that position state actors as agents responding to

threats; such constructions contribute to narratives of legitimacy and defensive action (Ozohu-Suleiman, 2014). In contrast, alternative or regional outlets may foreground existential and relational processes that emphasize humanitarian conditions, victimhood and endurance — constructions that attribute moral salience to suffering populations and explicitly locate responsibility for their plight (Hamoud, 2021). These divergent transitivity profiles reflect differing political contexts, editorial priorities, and audience affinities (Stoddart, 2007; Iqbal, Azhar, & Shah, 2020).

The Function of Nominalization and Passive Constructions

Nominalization and passivization are especially potent in headline discourse because they can transform dynamic processes into reified entities or states, thereby de-agenting events (Billig, 2008). Where a clause would make an actor explicit (e.g., “Israel bombed Gaza”), a nominalized or passive form (e.g., “bombing in Gaza” or “Gaza was bombed”) reduces the visibility of responsible agents and hence dilutes accountability. Empirical transitivity studies of conflict reporting have documented frequent use of such devices in outlets seeking to mitigate responsibility attribution, while outlets emphasizing explicit agency tend to avoid such nominalizing strategies (Matu & Lubbe, 2007; Hamoud, 2021).

Transitivity as a Tool for Revealing Ideological Bias

Since transitivity decisions are systematic in terms of mediation to occur as to people perceived to act and to be acted upon, the grammatical prism is useful to reveal the ideological bias in the way language in headlines is structured. Comparative content analyses have shown that transitivity patterns have been related to more extensive narrative practices, legitimizing frames in which state actors are agentic and de-legitimizing frames in which opponents are nominalized or framed as a problem (Ozohu-Suleiman, 2014; Hamoud, 2021). The clause level is sometimes closely relevant to patterns. Interpretation of the patterns at the clause-level thereby supplements more high-level discourse analysis measures and enables subtle and repeatable statements regarding how language creates specific political impacts (Stoddart, 2007; Vathanalaoha, 2017).

Gaps in Existing Research

Nevertheless, given these insights, a good deal of existing research has given full articles, editorials, or broadcast scripts; relatively little systematic cross-regional transitivity has been subject to cross-regional transitivity. The small literature that also examines headlines often with distinct ideological impacts, but it tends to use individual outlets or individual events. To close such a gap, comparative, corpus-based transitivity studies that span multiple outlets and regions are necessary to record habitual grammatically-based strategies and their ideological projections (Hamoud, 2021; Ozohu-Suleiman, 2014). This study responds to that need by examining a multi-source headline corpus to map process distributions, participant roles, and nominalization strategies that together construct divergent pictures of agency, legitimacy and victimhood.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a comparative discourse analysis grounded in Halliday’s (2004) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), with a particular focus on the transitivity system. Transitivity analysis enables the identification of how actions, participants, and circumstances are linguistically represented in newspaper headlines, thus revealing patterns of agency, responsibility, and victimhood in the Israel–Palestine conflict.

Corpus Selection

A total of 600 headlines were collected from six widely circulated newspapers representing Western and Eastern perspectives:

Western outlets: The Times (UK), The New York Times (USA), and Frankfurter Rundschau (Germany).

Eastern outlets: Arab News (Saudi Arabia), Dawn (Pakistan), and Tehran Times (Iran).

Each newspaper contributed 100 headlines, creating a balanced corpus of 300 Western and 300 Eastern headlines. Headlines were collected from online editions published between October 2023 and September 2024, a period marked by heightened reporting on the conflict.

The inclusion of Frankfurter Rundschau is acknowledged as a limitation, given its left-leaning orientation compared to other German outlets such as Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. However, its accessible archives made it suitable for this study. Likewise, Arab News was included with recognition that its editorial stance has shifted post-2020 in line with Saudi Arabia's evolving foreign policy.

Sampling Procedure

A stratified sampling strategy was employed. Headlines were stratified first by region (Western vs. Eastern) and then by newspaper. Within each stratum, headlines were selected using keyword searches (e.g., "Israel," "Palestine," "Gaza," "West Bank") to ensure relevance. Only primary headlines were included, while sub-headlines and teasers were excluded. To prevent overrepresentation of single events, sampling was spread evenly across the year.

Unit of Analysis

The headline clause served as the unit of analysis. Headlines containing multiple clauses were coded clause by clause, ensuring that complex constructions (e.g., "Israel strikes Gaza as talks collapse") were fully represented in the data.

Analytical Framework: Transitivity System

Headlines were analyzed using Halliday's six process types:

Material processes – physical actions/events (e.g., "Israel launches airstrikes")

Mental processes – cognition, perception, or emotion (e.g., "Palestinians fear escalation")

Relational processes – states of being/identity (e.g., "Gaza is under blockade")

Verbal processes – speech/quotation (e.g., "Netanyahu says ceasefire possible")

Behavioral processes – bodily or psychological acts (e.g., "Protesters march for justice")

Existential processes – existence/occurrence (e.g., "There is unrest in Jerusalem")

Each clause was coded for process type, participants (Actor, Goal, Sayer, Phenomenon, etc.), and circumstantial elements (time, place, manner). Special attention was given to passives and nominalizations, which often obscure agency (e.g., "bombing in Gaza" vs. "Israel bombed Gaza").

Tools and Coding Procedure

The UAM Corpus Tool was used to facilitate systematic tagging and analysis. The procedure included:

Manual tagging – Each clause was coded for process type, participants, and circumstances.

Cross-checking – A second coder independently analyzed 20% of the headlines. Inter-coder reliability was calculated using Cohen's Kappa ($\kappa = 0.85$), confirming strong agreement.

Quantitative analysis – Frequency counts for process types were generated to compare Western and Eastern outlets.

Qualitative analysis – Representative headlines were examined in depth to illustrate ideological patterns, especially where agency was suppressed or emphasized.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of the transitivity analysis of 600 headlines from six newspapers—three Western (The Times, The New York Times, and Frankfurter Rundschau) and three Eastern (Arab News, Dawn, and Tehran Times). The headlines, published between October 2023 and September 2024, provide a rich site for examining how grammatical structures encode ideological stances on the Israel–Palestine conflict. By applying Halliday’s (2004) systemic functional grammar, with particular emphasis on the transitivity system, the study explores how agency, responsibility, and victimhood are distributed across different media contexts.

The findings are organized in two stages. First, the section outlines the quantitative distribution of process types, supported by a comparative table and figure. Second, it moves to a qualitative discussion that interprets these distributions in terms of ideological framing. The analysis pays particular attention to how material, mental, verbal, relational, and existential processes are deployed differently in Western and Eastern outlets, and how such choices align with broader discursive constructions of legitimacy and victimhood.

Quantitative Results

A total of 820 clauses were coded across the 600 headlines. Table 1 presents the overall distribution of process types in Western and Eastern newspapers.

Table 1. Distribution of Process Types in Western and Eastern Newspapers (percentages)

Process Type	Western (%)	Eastern (%)
Material	55	45
Mental	10	20
Verbal	20	15
Relational	10	10
Existential	5	10

These results show that material processes dominate across both regions, though with greater intensity in Western headlines, where they account for more than half of all clauses. Mental and existential processes, by contrast, appear more frequently in Eastern newspapers, suggesting a greater emphasis on human experience and humanitarian conditions. Verbal processes are more prevalent in Western headlines, reflecting the prominence accorded to official statements, while relational processes appear at roughly equal levels across the two groups.

To visualize these trends more clearly, Figure 1 compares the distributions of process types across Western and Eastern headlines.

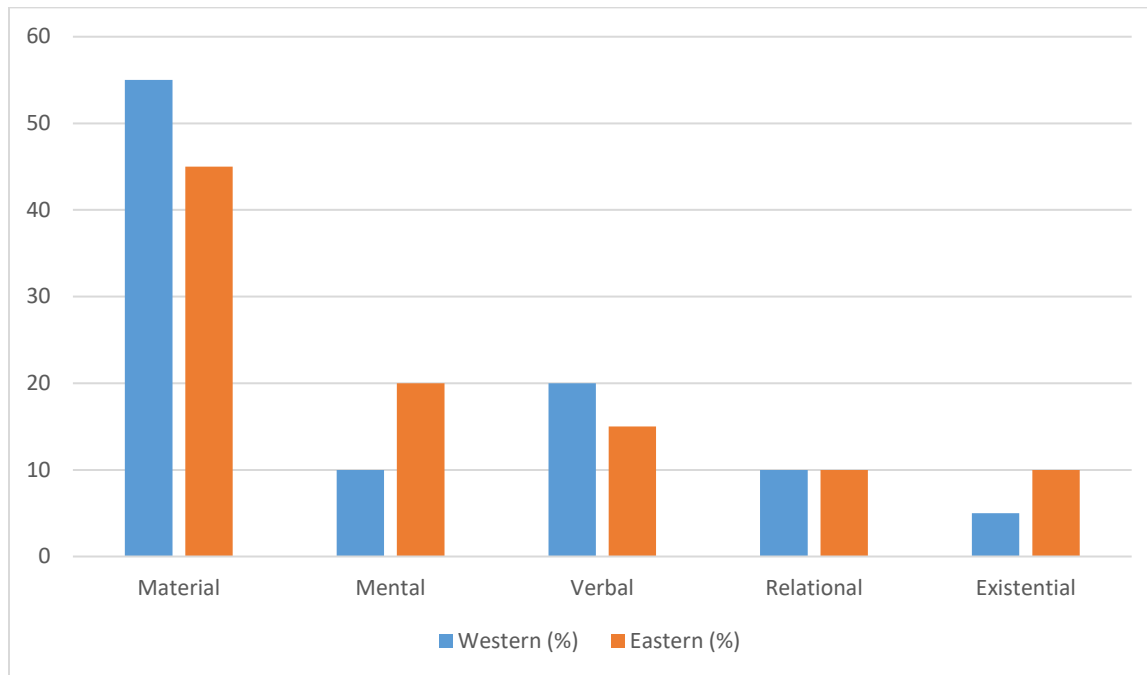


Figure 1. Distribution of Transitivity Process Types in Headlines

The chart demonstrates at a glance the asymmetries between regions. Western newspapers rely more heavily on material and verbal processes, whereas Eastern newspapers give greater attention to mental and existential processes. These contrasts already suggest differing ideological orientations: Western outlets foreground state action and official discourse, while Eastern outlets highlight lived experiences and humanitarian realities.

Qualitative Analysis of Transitivity Patterns

The quantitative results alone cannot capture the ideological nuances embedded in grammatical choices. For this reason, a qualitative examination of each process type was undertaken, focusing on how different newspapers use transitivity to construct the conflict.

Material processes were the most frequent across both regions, but their distribution of agency revealed striking asymmetries. Western newspapers consistently foregrounded Israel as the Actor, as in headlines such as “Israel launches new airstrikes” (The Times) or “IDF strikes Hamas targets” (New York Times). These clauses situate Israel as the primary agent, carrying out purposeful and often defensive actions. Palestinians, when present, were more likely to appear in Goal positions, as the recipients of Israeli action. This grammatical structure aligns with earlier findings by Ozohu-Suleiman (2014), who argued that Western media often normalize Israeli military responses by constructing them as defensive necessities. By contrast, Eastern newspapers redistributed agency more evenly. In headlines such as “Palestinians resist Israeli incursions” (Dawn) or “Civilians flee Gaza bombardment” (Tehran Times), Palestinians were represented as agents of resistance or survival. These headlines foreground Palestinian resilience, while casting Israel as the aggressor. In this way, material processes become a key site of ideological struggle, encoding divergent narratives of legitimacy and blame.

Mental processes provide another important dimension to the analysis. While relatively scarce in Western headlines, they often appeared in relation to Israeli leaders, as in “Netanyahu hopes to end conflict” (New York Times). Such constructions foreground Israeli rationality and political intention, situating decision-makers at the center of the narrative. Eastern newspapers,

however, used mental processes more extensively to highlight Palestinian civilian perspectives, as in “Palestinians fear renewed strikes” (Dawn) or “Families hope for ceasefire” (Arab News). These headlines humanize Palestinian subjects by foregrounding their emotions, fears, and hopes. In doing so, they disrupt the Western tendency to present Palestinians as faceless collectives, instead positioning them as thinking and feeling individuals. This difference is significant because it reflects distinct ideological orientations: Western media prioritize the cognition of political elites, while Eastern media foreground the lived experiences of ordinary people.

Verbal processes also show a regional split. In Western newspapers, Israeli officials dominate as Sayers, as in “Israel says Hamas fired rockets first” (The Times) or “IDF announces new operation” (New York Times). These headlines grant Israeli voices authority in defining the conflict, while Palestinian voices are marginalized, often generalized as “Hamas claims” or “militants warn.” This asymmetry reflects what Elmasry et al (2013) identified as the privileging of Israeli official discourse in Western news flows. Eastern outlets, however, distribute verbal processes more heteroglossically. Headlines such as “Palestinian leaders call for international support” (Dawn) or “UN warns of humanitarian crisis in Gaza” (Tehran Times) give space to Palestinian leadership, international organizations, and humanitarian agencies alongside Israeli officials. This pluralization of voices reflects a different orientation, one that resists the dominance of state-centered Israeli discourse and instead foregrounds alternative perspectives.

Relational processes are used to build on identities and states of being. They were used a lot by Western headlines to make instability normal, e.g., Gaza is in chaos, the West Bank is volatile. The presence of such clauses puts terms in the form of naturalized states without taking responsibility. Concurrently, relational clauses frequently strengthened the defensive identity of Israel, such as in the case of Israel being under threat. Eastern titles, on the other hand, employed processes of relational authority to emphasize systemic states of oppression, e.g., Gaza is under blockade (Tehran Times), and Palestine remains occupied (Dawn). These titles place the blame squarely in the headlines and make the dispute a constituent part of structures of power and authority. In this respect, relational processes can be seen as legitimizing or delegitimizing actors as they define the identities of actors in specific lesser respects.

Lastly, the existence processes can give one an understanding of the presence and absence constructions. Humanitarian crises were often predicted using them in Eastern newspapers, e.g., there is devastation in Gaza (Tehran Times) or there are mass displacements in Rafah (Dawn). Sharing these headlines can only make those who read them realize that the suffering is a given truth. The western newspapers tended to use the existential procedures more sparsely and in non-personified forms, as if there were clashes in Jerusalem (New York Times). These formulations blur agency as these events are given attention. This is in accordance with Billig (2008), noting that existential clauses have the power to make responsibility non-personal in the sense that violence is a phenomenon as opposed to an act performed by particular agents.

Ideological Implications

The analysis illustrates that the aspect of transitivity is not merely a system of grammar, but a construction machine that creates ideological realities. The discourse of Western headlines is identified with the use of the material and verbal processes in which Israeli actors in agentic positions contribute to strengthening the discourse about Israelis as rational, defensive state discourse. In comparison, Palestinians are often sidelined or marginalized as “Goals” or as collectively generalized, and their voices are often silenced. This tendency is consistent with the

geopolitical leadership of the Western governments, especially the United States of America, as well as its allies and, who have witnessed ages of strategic partnerships with Israel.

Eastern headlines, to the contrary, prefigure Palestinian agency, emotions and suffering. Eastern outlets make Palestinians active subjects and justified claimants to victimhood by employing more mental and existential processes, and attributing responsibility through relational clauses. The Israeli acts are always biased as aggressive, destructive, or tyrannical. Such orientation indicates the political surroundings of the Eastern media houses, which tend to be more inclined to Palestinian struggles.

Western newspapers often reproduce the dominant geopolitical narrative, while Eastern media frame the Israel-Palestine conflict through discourses of resistance and humanitarian concerns. Both sides have no neutral explanation; each side presents its vision of reality depending on a specific political situation. To this end, the results resonate with those of Hamoud (2021), who notes that, in this regard, patterns of transitivity in conflict reporting are a systematic reflection of the institutional ideologies.

This task involves considering the transitivity of 600 headlines in six newspapers to assess how grammar is central in reinforcing representations of the Israel-Palestine conflict. The agency is allocated differently in the contrast between the Western and Eastern outlets, as, in the former, Western takes the domineering part (as the Actor) and the Palestinians (as the Goal), whereas in the latter, the Palestinians are the Actor and Israeli aggression is the Goal. The Perspectives of mental and existential practices as found in the Eastern outlets, humanizing, that is, personification of Palestinian civilians and highlighting humanitarian crises as opposed to downplaying suffering, are prevalent with Western outlets concentrating on the intentions of the Israeli leaders and understating suffering. Language procedures also demonstrate voice asymmetries in which Israeli representatives are more dominant than Western outlets, whereas discourse is far more plural in Eastern media. Instead of an ordinary subject matter being formalized into a consonance-mark or a reluctance clause according to frameworks of rationality and ideal probability, these two crises manifest themselves as relational clauses that put formality to structural opposition.

A combination of these results demonstrates that ideology is an effective carrier of headlines, being rather brief. The newspapers form the reality of the conflict sharply divergent by choosing, through a variety of different choices, who acts, who is abducted and who speaks inescapably. The current paper shows the importance of transitivity analysis in identifying bias in media locution and proves that linguistic preferences correspond with the geopolitical setting. It is through the transitivity structures that, in the case of Israel-Palestine, not just mirrors of, but also reproduces rival ideological narratives that create the international image of certain legitimacy, aggression and victimhood.

Conclusion

This study examined how headlines from six Western and Eastern newspapers represent the Israel-Palestine conflict through transitivity choices. Using Halliday's systemic functional grammar, 600 headlines were analyzed to uncover how grammatical patterns distribute agency, responsibility, and victimhood.

The results show obvious contrasts on a regional level. The foregrounding of Israel as a proactive actor using material and verbal processes by the Western newspapers tends to sanction the military action conducted as a form of self-defense, and it backgrounds the Palestinian agency. The voices of Palestinians are reduced as their involvement is often symbolized as an

impersonation of a generalized victim or victim of the Israeli action. By contrast, Eastern media put more agency on the Palestinians, with a focus on agency resistance and resilience through material processes, in anticipation of emotions through foregrounding processes, and structural conditions including blockade and occupation through relational and existential processes. All these decisions build up Israel as the usurper and Palestinians as victims of structural violence.

The paper demonstrates that prejudice is present in either situation. Western sources naturalize the legitimacy of the Israeli defense, and Sam pleads the case of Palestinians, and Eastern sources continue to portray Palestinians as victims or resistance, in ways that foreground the blame of Israel. In the two instances, transitivity has been concentrated ideologically, where the perceptions of legitimacy and responsibility have been formed.

Opting to consider only headlines and not the actual article, the same research brings to emphasis the ideological weight of condensed text. It adds value to discourse studies by revealing the usefulness of transitivity analysis to work out bias in conflict coverage and providing a systematic comparison of cross-regional media framing.

In the end, the analysis does confirm the truth that transitivity is not only a system of grammar but rather an ideological mechanism of building. Headlines, in their distribution of agency and voice, produce very different realities of the same conflict, so that the critical approach to media discourse gains its significance.

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