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Narrative framing of Western media headlines on the 2023 Palestinian-Israeli conflict

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Abstract
In conflicts marked by asymmetrical power and contested legitimacy, news headlines are not neutral labels of events; they are condensed discursive sites through which media institutions can shape public understanding, sympathy and accountability. The study examines Western media reporting on the 2023 Palestinian–Israeli conflict (RPIC). It aims to reveal the linguistic and narrative strategies that are employed in media discourse to influence public understanding of the conflict. It analyzes 97 news headlines published between October 7, 2023, and February 2025 in seven major Western outlets (The Guardian, Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, The New York Post, The Washington Post, CNN, and Reuters). Two theoretical frameworks were adopted for the purpose of this study: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Narrative Framing Theory. The data analysis revealed that the examined Western media frequently employ certain discursive and narrative strategies, such as the obscuring of agency, lexical choices, narrative depersonalization, sentimentalization through the emphasis on familial roles, and emotional framing. It was also found that the use of such strategies may align with certain dominant political narratives by highlighting Israeli suffering and minimizing Palestinian suffering. The study concludes that some Western news headlines do not always describe the conflict objectively; rather, they construct certain ideological and political narratives that directly affect international understanding of the conflict. Thus, the study recommends that media discourse be critically scrutinized to identify and challenge potentially nonobjective journalistic practices. The findings contribute to CDA and narrative-framing research by showing how headline-level linguistic choices can produce unequal hierarchies of visibility, empathy, and accountability in conflict reporting.
Keywords: *media discourse, news headlines, Palestinian-Israeli conflict, ideology, critical discourse analysis, narrative framing*

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Нарративное фреймирование заголовков западных СМИ о палестино-израильском конфликте 2023 года

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Аннотация
В конфликтах, характеризующихся асимметрией сил и оспариваемой легитимностью, новостные заголовки представляют собой не нейтральные обозначения событий, а концентрированные дискурсивные пространства, посредством которых медиаинституты могут формировать общественное понимание, вызывать сочувствие и определять представления об ответственности. В исследовании рассматривается освещение западными СМИ палестино-израильского конфликта 2023 года (RPIC). Его цель заключается в выявлении лингвистических и нарративных стратегий, используемых в медиадискурсе для воздействия на общественное понимание конфликта. В исследовании анализируются 97 новостных заголовков, опубликованных в период с 7 октября 2023 года по февраль 2025 года в шести ведущих западных СМИ (*The Guardian*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *CNN* и *Reuters*). В качестве теоретической основы исследования были использованы два подхода: критический дискурс-анализ (CDA) и теория нарративного фрейминга. Анализ данных показал, что западные СМИ часто применяют определённые дискурсивные и нарративные стратегии, включая сокрытие агента действия, выбор лексических средств, нарративную деперсонализацию, сентиментализацию посредством акцентирования семейных ролей и эмоциональное фреймирование. Также было установлено, что использование подобных стратегий может согласовываться с определёнными доминирующими политическими нарративами посредством подчёркивания страданий израильтян и минимизации страданий палестинцев. Результаты позволяют сделать вывод, что некоторые заголовки западных СМИ не всегда объективно описывают конфликт; скорее, они конструируют определённые идеологические и политические нарративы, которые непосредственно влияют на понимание конфликта международной аудиторией. В связи с этим исследование рекомендует подвергать медиадискурс критическому анализу с целью выявления и оспаривания потенциально необъективных журналистских практик. Полученные результаты вносят вклад в исследования в области критического дискурс-анализа и нарративного фрейминга, демонстрируя, каким образом языковые средства, используемые на уровне заголовков, могут формировать неравные иерархии видимости, эмпатии и ответственности при освещении конфликтов.
Ключевые слова: *медиадискурс, новостные заголовки, палестино-израильский конфликт, идеология, критический дискурс-анализ, нарративное фреймирование*

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1. Introduction

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is one of the longest-running conflicts in recent history. This conflict began almost eight decades ago and remains unresolved. Moreover, the conflict occupies a prominent position in national, regional, and international media discourse. It attracts considerable attention from individuals and governments all over the world (Nazir & Haroon 2024: 452).

The present study examines news headlines published by Western media outlets during the recent phase of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (hereafter RPIC), which began on October 7, 2023. Specifically, this study investigates the role that the language used by Western media outlets plays in supporting particular political and ideological agendas. Previous research has argued that Western media outlets produce and distribute highly politicized content that often presents "imbalanced narratives" aligned with dominant political narratives about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (Kareem & Najm 2024: 213). The study examines whether news headlines published by Western media outlets reflect implicit agendas intended to influence international perceptions of the conflict. This is achieved by investigating the linguistic, lexical, and structural features of these headlines, as well as the overt and covert framing of specific events associated with the RPIC.

The objectives of the study are as follows: (i) to examine the discursive and narrative-framing strategies used by Western media outlets in headlines about the RPIC, with particular attention to how linguistic choices and structural patterns contribute to different interpretations of the conflict; (ii) to identify the aspects of the RPIC that are emphasized or de-emphasized in Western media headlines from a narrative-framing perspective and to determine how these strategies may reinforce dominant political narratives; and (iii) to identify implicit ideological biases in Western media headlines by examining their linguistic, structural, and narrative features.

The study adopts two theoretical frameworks to achieve these objectives: Critical Discourse Analysis (hereafter CDA) and Narrative Framing Analysis. It draws on the work of prominent scholars in these fields, including Fairclough (1992, 1995a, 1995b), van Dijk (1995, 1997, 2012, 2015) and Baker (2006, 2007). Specifically, the study investigates a range of discursive and narrative-framing strategies employed by Western media outlets, including lexical selectivity, selective grammatical constructions and appropriation of textual material, naming and labeling, frame polarization, sentimentalized narratives, and gender-coded framing, among others. The analysis examines how these strategies may reinforce particular ideological and political agendas, contribute to partial or biased representations of events, and shape audience perceptions.

The CDA framework provides tools for examining how media discourse reflects and supports dominant ideologies and narratives (Fairclough 1995a). Moreover, Narrative Framing Theories (Bruner 1991, Baker 2006) help explain how public narratives are constructed, shaped, and circulated. Building on these theoretical frameworks, the study seeks to identify implicit ideological positions concerning the RPIC by examining the strategies used in news headlines published by Western media outlets.

International media are both "influential" and "pervasive", and they have become one of the most important forces shaping modern societies (van Dijk 1997: 187). Media institutions may rival traditional religious, political, and social institutions in their ability to shape public discourse and perceptions. News reports and headlines constitute important sources of information; however, they are often produced in accordance with political agendas and the ideological interests of media owners. According to Fairclough (1995b: 200), political institutions frequently invest in media organizations and use them as tools to influence public opinion and reinforce dominant narratives. Media outlets may sometimes downplay certain political groups and reduce their influence while giving more visibility to others (ibid.).

Accordingly, the neutrality of media outlets may be called into question when they report on political conflicts. van Dijk's (2012: 34) notion of the "ideological square" is based on the dichotomy between "us" vs. "them". From this perspective, Western media outlets may construct narratives that favor one side of the conflict over the other. The assumed objectivity of Western media may be further questioned when their narratives align with the political positions of their respective governments, potentially resulting in biased representation of reality (see also Al-Dala'ien et al. 2023).

Western media reports on the RPIC may illustrate examples of this lack of objectivity. The discursive and narrative-framing strategies employed in these reports may contribute to biased representations of the conflict-related events (Kareem & Najm 2024). Such political and ideological bias may be attributed to several factors. For example, the political alliances between Western governments and Israel may influence the construction of narratives about Palestinians and Israelis. The owners of media outlets may also influence the content of news reports. Furthermore, ideological frameworks rooted in historical representations of the Middle East may contribute to emphasizing dominant Western perspectives (Said 1981). Together, these factors may contribute to the systematic framing of the conflict in ways that shape public perceptions. Therefore, given the influence of media discourse on international relations and humanitarian responses, the role of Western media in shaping international audiences' understanding of recent developments in the RPIC warrants critical examination.

The present study examines the linguistic, structural, and narrative strategies through which Western media headlines frame the recent phase of the RPIC. More specifically, it analyzes how lexical choices, grammatical patterns, agency

attribution, naming practices, and narrative-framing devices contribute to particular representations of the conflict. By combining Critical Discourse Analysis with Narrative Framing Theory, the study investigates how headline-level language can shape public understanding, distribute sympathy unevenly, and position social actors within broader ideological narratives. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

(1) What discursive and narrative-framing strategies do Western media outlets employ in headlines about the RPIC?

(2) Which narratives are emphasized or downplayed in Western media headlines about the RPIC, and how may these framing strategies reinforce dominant political narratives?

(3) Do the linguistic, structural, and narrative features of the headlines suggest implicit ideological positioning, and how might such positioning shape the international perception of the conflict?

2. Ideologies of the Western media landscape

The ideological framework of Western media is influenced by a preexisting set of political and cultural ideologies. One prevailing ideological tendency is Western media's emphasis on the dichotomy between democracy and authoritarianism in its description of international conflicts. According to McTigue (2011), the RPIC is framed in Western media through this tendency. The RPIC is usually presented within a democracy vs. non-democracy framework. Western media usually presents Israel as an example of democracy in the Middle East. This presentation, of course, aligns with broader international narratives about Israel. By contrast, Western media often presents Palestinian political groups as radicals or authoritarians. According to Buoncompagni (2024), Western media usually depicts Israel as a victim and justifies its military actions by referring to its democratic values and the threats it faces from others; thus, Western media frequently adopts the Israeli perspective when covering the conflict.

Another major principle associated with Western media is a commitment to impartiality. Impartiality refers to the objective representation of events. However, this Western impartiality can be challenged by the selective framing that Western media uses when reporting on Israeli and Palestinian casualties. Western media usually describes Israeli casualties using emotional language; by contrast, Western media often downplays and neglects Palestinian casualties (Kareem & Najm 2024: 213). Along the same lines, Buoncompagni (2024) argues that Israeli victims are covered in detail in Western media, whereas Palestinian casualties are usually underrepresented. Such biased reporting indicates that Western media has a tendency to represent Palestinian actors in a negative way and to represent Israelis in terms associated with Western democratic values (Philo et al. 2019). In fact, these journalistic practices raise questions about the objectivity of Western media.

A third major ideology that characterizes Western media is the belief in pluralism. Nevertheless, some studies show that Western media does not cover the

Palestinian-Israeli conflict equally; instead, Western media favors dominant narratives about the conflict (Nazir & Haroon 2024). This practice indeed contradicts the major principles of pluralism. According to Kareem & Najm (2024), Western media emphasizes certain voices and silences others, thereby participating in shaping and circulating a particular political and ideological discourse. Western media affects the public perception of the conflict by privileging the more powerful side and marginalizing the less powerful one. This contradicts the common claims of political diversity and reflects a gap between such claims and the actual practices of Western media (i.e., the ideological engagement Western media embeds in its reporting). The ideological messages embedded in Western media's reporting often reflect broader Western hegemonic ideologies and beliefs (Buoncompagni 2024).

Finally, press freedom can be considered another crucial aspect of Western media. Press freedom guarantees the unrestricted flow of information. However, it seems that this freedom can be affected by certain economic, political, and ideological factors. For example, media ownership, governmental influence, and geopolitical interests may contribute to biased reporting on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Western media organizations might manipulate representations of events associated with conflicts in the Middle East, which raises questions about the independence of Western press (Al-Sarraj & Lubbad 2018).

The dominant ideologies explored above play a crucial role in shaping the way in which international conflicts are generally represented in Western media. This representation is usually achieved through the systematic use of specific discursive and narrative-framing strategies. In fact, the use of such strategies can jeopardize journalistic objectivity. As we will see in the analysis section of this study, Western media outlets employ various discursive and narrative-framing strategies in their reporting on the RPIC, which may indicate the presence of implicit ideological biases. Among these strategies are the selective appropriation of textual material, selective language use, content and narrative-framing, the omission of certain actors, naming and labeling, the obscuring or maintenance agency, and the manipulation or reinforcement of accountability. (These strategies are examined in detail in Sections 5.1–5.3)

These strategies may reflect the strategic nature of news construction, promote certain political or ideological agendas and may result in a distorted representation of the conflict. By emphasizing certain events and actors while marginalizing others, Western media may influence international perceptions of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (Buoncompagni 2024).

This study questions these dominant ideologies of Western media — the democracy-authoritarianism dichotomy, impartiality, pluralism, and press freedom and examines the construction of implicit ideological biases in Western media headlines. It also aims to connect these ideological patterns to the broader political contexts of the conflict. The interrelation among narrative-framing, power, and ideology may influence the way in which international audiences perceive the conflict. The next section discusses CDA and Narrative Framing Theory, the two theoretical frameworks underpinning the proposed analysis.

3. Theoretical and conceptual framework

3.1. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Discourse analysis in general examines how language is structured and how language functions in communication. Specifically, discourse analysis focuses on how meaning is constructed and interpreted in different contexts. Linguistic features such as grammar, vocabulary, and coherence are central to discourse analysis.

Traditional discourse analysis often explores the relationship between language and social interaction but does not necessarily deal with wider sociopolitical issues connected to power and ideology. By contrast, CDA examines how language functions within institutional and political contexts to either expose or hide social inequalities. It views both spoken and written language not merely as a means of communication but as a social act deeply connected to the structures, institutions, and contexts in which it is used (Fairclough 1995b: 258). In this dynamic relationship, discourse contributes to shaping social realities, and to reinforcing or challenging existing power structures.

On that basis, CDA is most accurately described as a problem-oriented, interdisciplinary research framework that is widely adopted in the study of contemporary political communication (Sengul 2025). CDA is a form of critical social analysis and can be defined as "discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social-abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context" (van Dijk 2015: 466).

According to Fairclough (1995b) and van Dijk (2012), CDA highlights the relationships among ideology, power, and language, thereby helping to show how communication can support existing inequalities or challenge them. van Dijk (1997) explains that CDA aims to uncover how specific political and cultural contexts shape these factors and to show how language is used to support or challenge dominant narratives. Similarly, Fairclough (1992: 135) maintains that CDA seeks to systematically examine the often-hidden connections between two interrelated factors: language use and the broader social and cultural structures in which it occurs.

Another dimension of CDA is its examination of how language is employed to strengthen certain ideologies, power relations, and institutional agendas within different types of discourse. It examines the discursive reproduction of "power abuse and nonegalitarian structures" (Sengul 2025), and aims "to expose strategies that appear normal or neutral on the surface, but which may in fact be ideological" (Machin & Mayr 2012: 5). Therefore, questioning notions of neutrality and objectivity is fundamental to the principles of CDA.

This study adopts CDA to challenge assumptions of objectivity and neutrality in reporting on conflicts. Journalistic practices may be influenced by media owners, who can shape how news is produced and circulated. Furthermore, conflict

reporting may be influenced by political interests. Consequently, media outlets may construct conflicts in a way that supports certain ideologies; therefore, the objectivity of their reporting and their assumed impartiality may be questioned. The analysis of Western media's objectivity and neutrality is consistent with the broader principles of CDA, which examines not only how language is used to shape narratives but also how media discourse serves the interests of dominant groups.

The present study examines how language is employed in reporting on the RPIC to serve the interests of dominant groups. According to Wodak (2011: 35), "language is not powerful in itself; it becomes powerful through the use that powerful individuals make of it". The study examines how Western news headlines are constructed to influence readers' understanding of certain aspects of the conflict. The inclusion and exclusion of specific voices and actors in news headlines about the conflict are also examined to show the impact of such strategies on perceptions of the conflict. As Van Leeuwen (1996: 38) argues, this selective representation is sometimes intentional and may be influenced by news writers' or media owners' positionality toward the narratives being reported to the public. The presence of such interventions in discourse can contribute to the emergence of implicit ideologies, including media discourse.

3.2. Narrative Framing Theory

According to Baker (2006: 9), narratives are "public and personal 'stories' that we subscribe to and that guide our behavior. They are the stories we tell ourselves, not just those we explicitly tell other people, about the world(s) in which we live." To connect this definition to the present study, it can be argued that these stories can guide the perceptions of, for instance, news headline writers or the organizations for which they work, inform their decisions, and provide them with narratives through which to understand the complex realities they encounter.

Western media headlines about the RPIC can function as tools for constructing narratives that selectively emphasize or de-emphasize events related to the conflict according to the dominant ideological and geopolitical interests. Later sections examine how the narratives embedded in some Western news headlines may support specific viewpoints. For example, they represent one side of the conflict as a victim and the other as an attacker; they show sympathy for one side of the conflict and attribute responsibility to the other. These journalistic practices may impact the way in which international readers react to the conflict.

To understand both the implicit ideological biases embedded in Western media narratives and their effects on international perceptions of the conflict, it is necessary to identify the discursive and narrative mechanisms employed in writing news headlines. The narrative-framing analysis conducted in this study focuses on the way in which dominant public narratives may influence the linguistic choices of news writers. It also focuses on the ways in which these linguistic choices can function as tools for constructing reality rather than simply representing it.

Moreover, this study draws on the concept of framing, which is widely used in sociology and communication studies. In the field of sociology, the notion of framing is viewed as a "central organizing idea" that guides us in making sense of relevant events (Gamson & Modigliani 1989: 3). Along the same lines, Snow (2011: 235) defines framing as "interpretive structures that render events and occurrences subjectively meaningful". In the field of communication studies, the notion of framing is viewed as "organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world."

Frames are perceived by Baker (2006: 167) as "structures of anticipation, strategic moves that are consciously initiated in order to present a narrative in a certain light", while framing is perceived as "an active strategy that implies agency and by means of which we consciously participate in the construction of reality" (ibid.: 106). She explains that framing entails "setting up structures of anticipation that guide people's interpretation of events, usually as a direct challenge to dominant interpretations of the same events in a given society" (Baker 2007: 156).

Given the frequent use of the term "*narrative framing"* in the present study, it is essential to distinguish between "*framing"* and "*narrative"* for the sake of conceptual clarity. Framing is the systematic selection of certain aspects of a narrative with the ultimate goal of shaping public perception. Since framing can determine how a particular narrative is structured and interpreted, it is considered a process that involves agency. By contrast, narrative is the broader story, or sequence of events, that is being communicated. This broader story can be communicated in media discourse or in other forms of communication.

Narratives provide the content, whereas framing determines how this content is presented and understood. In other words, framing strategies function as interpretive tools that are embedded within a particular news headline. They shape the ways in which information is processed and understood, thereby influencing audience perceptions. They guide the audience's focus by determining which aspects of the story that are emphasized, neglected, or omitted. Framing employs specific linguistic choices and imagery, which can evoke emotions. It can also support specific ideologies and shape public opinion about controversial issues.

A well-known framing strategy is the use of the passive voice. This framing strategy can hide agency and reduce the accountability of certain actors in a conflict. Sentimentalized framing is another important framing strategy that is widely employed in media discourse. In this strategy, personal tragedies related to familial roles are highlighted in order to increase sympathy for one group and minimize the perceived suffering of another.

N*aming and labeling can be considered another* framing strategy used in media discourse. Baker (2006: 122) views this strategy as "any discursive process that involves using a lexical item, term, or phrase to identify a person, place, group, event, or any other key element in a narrative". Media outlets can influence public perception through naming and labeling. This is usually done by associating

positive, negative, or neutral connotations with particular actors or events. In fact, this may reveal implicit ideological positionings.

Framing serves as a tool of ideological positioning by emphasizing, weakening, or modifying certain narratives conveyed through news headlines. Salience is one of the main features of framing. According to Entman (1993: 53), salience is a strategy of "making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences".

Ewick and Silbey (1995: 199) argue that framing has "significant subversive or transformative potential" in the sense that it is not a neutral aspect of media reporting. Rather, it has the power to support or disrupt dominant discourses by presenting alternative viewpoints. Framing can legitimize or delegitimize political actors. This underscores the significant role that media can play in shaping public discourse, especially in the coverage of geopolitical conflicts; framing strategies can determine how events are perceived at the international level.

CDA and Narrative Framing Theory are usually used separately; however, this study applies them together to deepen the analysis of implicit ideologies embedded in Western news headlines. CDA is concerned with the ways in which linguistic choices can reflect power relations and ideological agendas. By contrast, Narrative Framing Theory is concerned with the ways in which broader public stories can legitimize certain ideological perspectives. Using the two frameworks allows the study to extend the analysis beyond micro-level linguistic choices. This blended approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of how news headlines shape perceptions and convey implicit ideologies.

4. Data and methodology

This study adopts a three-stage approach: (1) the purposive collection of 97 news headlines from seven major Western outlets, (2) a detailed linguistic examination of lexical, syntactic, and rhetorical features of these headlines, and (3) the interpretation of these findings within broader sociopolitical narratives using both CDA and Narrative Framing Theory. This three-stage approach moves the analysis from micro-level linguistic features to macro-level ideological interpretations.

The researchers collected news headlines from seven major Western media outlets during several periods of the RPIC. These media outlets are *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, *The New York Post*, *CNN*, and *Reuters*. The collected data for this study consisted of 97 news headlines published between October 7, 2023, and February 2025 by these seven major Western media outlets. These seven Western outlets were chosen for this study because of their international influence and broad readership.

The news headlines were directly retrieved from the official websites of these media outlets through a systematic keyword search. We used different search terms such as "Gaza", "Israel", "Palestine", "Hamas", etc. We applied these search terms across the seven outlets. However, extensive collection of headlines was not our

goal. Rather, we applied purposive sampling as analytical depth was our priority. Our goal was to gather a corpus of headlines rich in framing, lexical and rhetorical features to present a qualitative analysis of the headlines. This sampling technique is a common practice in Critical Discourse Analysis studies (cf. Fairclough, 1995a).

Two criteria were adopted for including the headlines in our corpus: (i) The headline must directly reference the Israeli-Palestinian conflict after the events of October 7, 2023. All the headlines that addressed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict before this date were excluded. (ii) The headline must appear on the breaking-news section of the outlet. Opinion and editorial sections were excluded in order to avoid supposedly objective news framing. Furthermore, headlines that duplicate coverage of the same event on the same day and those that lack necessary contextual specificity were excluded.

The corpus consisted of 97 headlines posted in seven media outlets: The Guardian (n = 11), The Washington Post (n = 23), Los Angeles Times (n = 19), The New York Times (n = 27), CNN (n = 9), The New York Post (n = 7), and Reuters (n = 3).

The date October 7, 2023 represents the starting point of the latest conflict, which was immediately followed by a flow in Western media coverage. Extending the data collection to February 2025 was intended to investigate narrative framing during different phases of the conflict (e.g., ceasefire negotiations, shifts in international diplomatic engagement, etc.). Without extending the period of data collection, the analysis of framing strategies would be confined to the immediate aftermath of October 7. In other words, the time span of the headlines was chosen to capture the framing of news headlines across different stages of the RPIC, not only during the immediate aftermath of October 7, 2023.

A blended approach that employs CDA and Narrative Framing Theory was adopted for data analysis. The CDA component involved a detailed linguistic analysis of the collected news headlines in terms of their lexical choices, grammatical structures, and rhetorical features. The headlines were then interpreted and contextualized to reveal how language can shape and reflect broader ideological agendas.

Following Fairclough (1995a), we divided the analysis into three phases: description, interpretation, and explanation. In the description phase, we carried out a linguistic analysis of the collected news headlines to identify the lexical choices and grammatical structures employed in them. We then moved to the interpretation phase, in which we examined the relationship between the linguistic features of the headlines and broader discursive techniques such as patterns of agency, exclusion, and inclusion. In the explanation phase, we analyzed selected headlines in their respective political and ideological contexts.

In the narrative-framing component, the focus was on the different narrative-framing strategies that are employed in the Western headlines that may shape public perception by emphasizing or minimizing particular aspects of the conflict. These

strategies include the selective appropriation of textual material, naming and labeling, sentimentalization, and lexical selectivity.

Combining CDA and Narrative Framing Theory may help to identify implicit ideological biases in Western media coverage of the RPIC. The textual and contextual analyses of news headlines may also help to identify ideological positioning in representation of various conflict-related events.

5. Results

Media can be influential in terms of shaping public opinion (cf. Larina, Ozyumenko & Ponton 2019, Mujagić 2024, Ponton, Ozyumenko & Larina 2025). The data analysis showed that the language used in news headlines is crucial to shaping public perceptions of the RPIC. This influence was achieved through several discursive and narrative strategies including framing of agents, actions, and narratives. These discursive and narrative strategies are discussed in the subsequent subsections. (For more on the potential influence of crisis-driven framing on public perception, see Atmawijaya 2025, Ozyumenko & Larina 2021.)

5.1. Obscuring agency: Manipulation of accountability

The data analysis revealed that Western outlets frequently obscured agency and manipulated accountability when reporting Palestinian casualties. It was found that the obscuring of agency and manipulation of accountability were achieved through passive constructions and agentless structures. In fact, these strategies may minimize the visibility of actors responsible for violence and portray intentional military actions as if they were neutral events. The following headlines illustrate this journalistic practice:

(1) Hundreds Killed in Explosion at Gaza Hospital. (*New York Times,* October 18, 2023)
(2) At Least 24 Killed in Strike on Gaza School Run by the U.N. (*New York Times,* November 19, 2023)
(3) In Gazan Neighborhood Hit by Airstrikes, Death and Despair Reign. (*New York Times,* November 1, 2023)

The headlines above describe the situation in Gaza without attributing actions to specific agents. Lexical selectivity together with the employment of certain linguistic structures (e.g., the omission of agents and the use of passive constructions) serves to obscure agency and manipulate accountability**.** The use of passive constructions and vague phrasing is indicative of an active discursive strategy that de-emphasizes accountability. The omission of agents is consistent with van Dijk's (2012: 34) notion of the 'ideological square' in which actions of in-group members (i.e., Israel in this case) are omitted, whereas those of out-group members (i.e., Palestinians in this case) are emphasized. This contrast becomes more apparent in the latter headlines, in which Palestinian actions are clearly emphasized.

The omission of agency through passivization may have been used to frame "airstrikes" as naturally occurring phenomena rather than as the result of intentional actions. This strategic framing depersonalizes violence and downplays the severity of Israeli actions. van Dijk (1995: 24) argues that "agency of ingroup members who engage in negative actions will be syntactically played down by the use of passive sentences and their role may be wholly dissimulated by agentless passives or nominalizations". Van Dijk (2012: 41) elaborates that sentence syntax exhibits a wide range of potential structures that might be used "to emphasize or de-emphasize meaning". Among these structural forms are topicalization, passivization, nominalization, and clefting (ibid.: 42; for more on some of these syntactic structures, see Sahawneh & Al-Daher 2025). In fact, Western media outlets employ passive constructions in the above headlines to remove direct attribution of responsibility; these constructions also frame the airstrikes as neutral events and detache them from the context of an ongoing military intervention.

From a narrative-framing analysis perspective, the first two headlines refer to Gazan casualties as mere numbers, without using, for example, the word "*civilians"* unlike similar references to Israeli casualties (see below). Israeli casualties in similar contexts are labeled as "*civilians"* in other headlines discussed below. This lexical manipulation may reflect ideological biases. By framing people of Gaza as mere numbers rather than as civilians, these narratives may downplay their suffering. This, in turn, reduces the emotional and moral weight of their victimhood.

The omission of agents and the systematic use of passive constructions in the above headlines are examples of inclusion and/or exclusion (Baker 2006). Excluding Israeli military involvement and framing Gazans as recipients of airstrikes create an unbalanced representation of the conflict. Fairclough (1995a: 135) argues that media discourse can obscure causal relations to sustain hegemony and reinforce ideological structures that determine how conflicts are represented and understood. This dichotomous representation of the two sides of the conflict suggests that Western media can play an influential role in shaping and legitimizing ideological narratives about the RPIC.

5.2. Obscuring agency: From true theme to an unstated agent

It was also found that Western media systematically used linguistic structures that employ active constructions but shift the focus from the true theme to an unstated agent in order to obscure agency. This journalistic behavior is consistently attested in the collected data and may reflect a deliberate discursive strategy that shapes readers' perceptions of conflict-related events. The following are illustrative examples:

(4) Gaza residents face food and water shortages as they flee south. (*The Washington Post*, October 15, 2023)
(5) As Gaza Residents Suffer, Guilt and Fear Stalk Their Families Abroad. (*The New York Times*, November 23, 2023)

(6) With communications battered, Gaza residents struggle to stay in touch with the outside world and one another. (*The New York Times*, October 19, 2023)

The headlines above reflect a discursive shift from the true theme to an unstated agent in the sense that agency is reassigned from the actual agents of military action to "Gaza residents". Out-group members (i.e., Gaza residents in this case) are framed as active subjects who "face", "suffer", and "struggle". This suggests that the media discourse implicitly aligns with broader geopolitical narratives that usually represent the conflict zones in the Middle East as inherently unstable instead of highlighting the role of the military intervention by in-group actors. Put differently, presenting the RPIC as a natural phenomenon aligns with the general Western discourse that often portrays the conflict as a "centuries-old conflict" rather than a well-established geopolitical struggle shaped by factors such as occupation, territorial disputes, and settlement expansion (Buoncompagni 2024).

This shift from the true theme to an unstated agent may reveal implicit ideologies in the narratives of Western media about the RPIC. The discursive choices shape the narratives of the RPIC and may serve ideological legitimation. The above examples show how the true theme **(**i.e., Israeli airstrikes on Gaza) is reframed to give the impression that the situation in Gaza is an ordinary or neutral event, and it is not an intentional military action carried out by a particular agent. This shift depersonalizes the existing violence and reduces accountability; it also minimizes the actual actions that are taking place on the ground. Positioning "Gaza residents" to be the grammatical subject of the headline may be misleading. This journalistic practice may reflect an implicit ideological position in Western media discourse, namely, ambiguity in presenting the actions of an allied state, which may distance that state from direct accountability.

The above headlines also employ some framing strategies that may shape a particular understanding of the RPIC. In the previous subsection showed that agency was omitted from the headlines through the use of passive constructions. However, headlines above do not employ the passive voice. Rather, they make use of the active voice but involve a rhetorical shift. For example, the above headlines frame residents of Gaza as ordinary individuals who face various difficulties, which may obscure true agency and conceal the actual role of the actors who are responsible for these problems. Accordingly, Western media discourse, while preserving the impression of active agency within the narrative, may neutralizes responsibility. The neutralization of narratives by focusing on the events themselves rather than on the actors responsible for them may function as a potentially misleading framing strategy. Adopting this framing strategy may normalize violence as a neutral event rather than presenting it as an intentional action.

In addition, the above headlines make use of the word '*residents'* instead of '*civilians'* to refer to Palestinians. As shown below, the label "*civilians"* is used to refer to Israeli individuals in similar contexts. According to Zabadi (2023: 263), this represents lexical selectivity that reflects ideological biases "whose cumulative

effect feeds into mainstream narratives". The use of the lexical item "*residents"* to refer to Palestinians is an example of a naming-and-labeling framing strategy. This strategy frames the people of Gaza as generic inhabitants rather than as vulnerable civilians. This, in turn, may downplay their suffering and reduce the emotional and ethical importance of their victimhood. The use of the lexical item "*residents"* in the Palestinian context carries the semantic implicature that Palestinians in Gaza are mere occupants of a particular geographical area. The lexical item "residents" lacks the emotive connotation that the lexical item "*civilians"*. This lexical selectivity may reflect a discourse that accords greater importance to Israeli casualties than to Palestinian ones.

5.3. Maintaining agency: Reinforcement of accountability

The data analysis also revealed that Western outlets selectively maintained agency and reinforced accountability when reporting Israeli casualties through the use of sympathetic lexical items that emphasize Israeli victimhood. The following headlines illustrate this journalistic practice:

(7) As Gaza War Enters New Phase, Israel Faces Pressure Over Civilian Deaths. (*The New York Times*, November 3, 2023)
(8) Israel is considering a deal for Hamas to release all civilian hostages in Gaza, officials say. (*The New York Times*, November 10, 2023)
(9) Scenes from a massacre: Inside an Israeli town destroyed by Hamas. (*The Washington Post*, October 10, 2023)
(10) Israel 'at war' after unprecedented assault by Hamas militants from Gaza. (*The Washington Post*, October 7, 2023)

In contrast to the headlines discussed in the previous subsection, which portray the people of Gaza as "*residents"*, the above headlines portray Israelis as "*civilians*". The choice of "civilians" is another example of "lexical selectivity" (Zabadi 2022, 2023). This contrast is not merely a linguistic choice; rather, it has significant ideological implications. For example, it emphasizes Israeli individuals through the choice of sympathetic terminology and the attribution of civilian status. In addition to this framing strategy, the above headlines employ clear language and explicitly identify the agents involved in the reported actions. Nevertheless, the headlines discussed in the previous two subsections showed that Palestinian casualties did not receive similar descriptions, which may reduce their visibility in public discourse.

From a CDA perspective, the civilians-residents dichotomy echoes the self/other, we/they, and us/them dichotomies in Western media discourse. In these dichotomies, one group is humanized and depicted as deserving of sympathy, whereas the other is dehumanized and presented as a threat. Specifically, Western media frames Israeli people as an innocent and vulnerable group, whereas Palestinians are represented as a homogeneous group whose victimhood is rarely emphasized.

This framing strategy is known as frame polarization**.** It refers to the ideological division between the two sides of the conflict. This strategy is employed in the above headlines in a way that creates an ideological division. For example, Gazans are represented as a threat, whereas Israel is presented as the defender or victim. Put differently, the discourse in the above headlines is polarized, and the "us vs. them" and "we vs. they" dichotomies are reinforced. The above headlines connect Gazans with violence and present Israel as the in-group under attack. According to van Dijk (2012: 64), "when the Others tend to be represented in negative terms, and especially when they are associated with threats, then the ingroup needs to be represented as a victim of such a threat". van Dijk (2012: 13) refers to this kind of polarization as "in-group-out-group polarization".

In-group–out-group polarization refers to the discursive strategies employed by media discourse to create an ideological division between the two sides of the conflict. Building on van Dijk's ideological square, Western media headlines treat Israelis as in-group members and represent them positively. For example, Israelis are labeled as "civilians". By contrast, Western headlines present Palestinians as out-group members and label them as "residents". This polarization is not only descriptive; rather, it functions ideologically to maintain hierarchies of empathy and ethical worth in Western news headlines.

5.4. Narrative sentimentalization through familial roles

The results also showed that Western media outlets used sentimental framing in their coverage of events surrounding the RPIC, potentially influencing audience perceptions. Narrative sentimentalization is a discursive strategy involving the use of sentimental elements in news headlines to preserve and strengthen emotional engagement with the intended narratives. This discursive practice is frequently attested in the collected data and may reflect an attempt to influence readers' views of the conflict. This strategy is illustrated in the following news headlines:

(11) Israeli dad of three, believed to be hostage in Gaza, confirmed dead. (*The New York Post*, May 3, 2024)
(12) Hamas to release Israeli father amid 'grave concerns' for wife and children. (*The Guardian*, January 21, 2025)
(13) Moms of freed young Israeli hostages detail what their daughters endured as Hamas captives. (*CNN*, February 13, 2025)

The above headlines employ the narrative sentimentalization strategy through references to Israeli familial roles. The headlines include emotional familial markers such as "*dad of three*", "*mom*", "*wife*", "*infant*", "*children*", "*son*", and "*daughter*". The use of such emotional familial terms can create affective engagement and sympathy. According to van Dijk (2012: 59), in-group members can be "empathetically described in emotional terms". The narratives in the above headlines are personalized to evoke emotional responses from readers, potentially presenting one group as more deserving of sympathy than the other.

By contrast, such sentimentalized framing is less evident in Western headlines that describe Palestinians. This may reflect an implicit bias in acknowledging victimhood. Israeli losses are presented through a highly sentimentalized language, while Palestinian losses may not receive comparable treatment. Accordingly, such headlines may contribute to a dichotomy between worthy and unworthy victims. In the next subsection, the analysis shows how the sentimentalization of narratives can be further reinforced through gender-coded framing (i.e., through the role of "*girlfriend*").

5.5. Gender-coded framing

The sentimentalization of narratives discussed above is further strengthened through the use of gender-coded framing. It was found that some news headlines use the role of "*girlfriend*" to evoke emotional responses. Such gender-coded language may frame the conflict by shifting attention from the major political factors underlying emotional losses. Consider the following example:

(14) I'm doing all I can: the young Israeli determined to free his captured girlfriend from Gaza. (*The Guardian*, October 21, 2023)

The above narrative is sentimental, as it employs gender-coded framing. The use of the relational label "*girlfriend"* strengthens emotional engagement with the headline. Headline writers may give a sympathetic dimension to the conflict by invoking romantic relationships**.** In addition to triggering sympathy, this framing strategy may present Israeli losses as more important than those other groups. The use of a romantic-partner archetype draws on universal emotional experiences; this, in turn, will lead audiences to sympathize more strongly with this narrative than with narratives about other victims who are described using different frames. According to Lazar's (2007) feminist approach to CDA, the headline may shift readers' attention from the political causes of the conflict to its personal and emotional dimensions. However, the absence of similar sentimental representations of Palestinian losses may indicate an unequal distribution of sympathy.

It is worth mentioning here that the analysis presented in this section is based on only one headline. No other examples of this category were identified in the dataset. Due to this evidential limitation, it is considered exploratory rather than a recurring pattern in the corpus.

It remains to be said that "narrative sentimentalization" is used as an analytical label for emphasizing familial/personal relations in emotional framing. In addition, "gender-coded relational framing" represents a descriptive application of the relational label "girlfriend". Although they both have traces in the existing feminist discourse traditions, our contribution lies in their identification as framing strategies in such a political context using CDA.

6. Discussion

The above examples show that some headlines in Western media employ different discursive and narrative strategies in order to construct certain narratives

about the RPIC. For example, it was found that some Western media headlines systematically emphasize Israeli individuals and victimhood through personalization and the use of emotional language. By contrast, some Western headlines frequently minimize Palestinian suffering through depersonalization. Moreover, such headlines were found to obscure Israeli military agency, which may shape international understanding of the conflict. The frequent use of such discursive strategies supports the CDA claim that media discourse can reflect the interests of dominant ideologies.

Moreover, the examined Western media were found to use different narrative-framing strategies to influence the international perceptions of the RPIC. Sentimentalization and labeling are among these narrative strategies. For example, some of the analyzed Western headlines used sentimental language to report on Israeli familial suffering and labeled Palestinian casualties as "residents" instead of "civilians", thereby potentially creating a hierarchy of empathy that favors one side of the conflict over the other.

An important implication of the study is that micro-level linguistic choices in news headlines, such as the choice between "civilians" and "residents" or the emphasis on or minimization of familial relations, can contribute to shaping international interpretations of sympathy and responsibility.

The data analysis highlights the importance of interdisciplinary approaches (i.e., combining CDA and narrative-framing) to fully understand the ways in which ideological messages are shaped and circulated in media discourse. CDA addresses the structural and linguistic aspects of news headlines, whereas narrative framing examines the ways in which these micro-level linguistic choices are presented to support dominant ideologies. Adopting the two frameworks helps explain how news headlines, despite their conciseness, can serve as powerful tools for shaping the international discourse about political conflicts.

7. Conclusion

This study investigated the implicit ideological biases in seven Western media's presentation of the RPIC. The findings revealed that the examined Western media use different discursive and narrative strategies to influence perceptions of the conflict. For example, it was found that the omission of agency and the use of passive constructions in news headlines can serve to obscure a*gency and manipulate accountability,* especially in representations of Israeli military actions. Moreover, it was found that agency can also be obscured through the shift from the true theme to an unstated agent. The data analysis also uncovered the maintenance of a*gency and the reinforcement of accountability* when reporting on Hamas military actions.

The study adopted the term *"frame polarization"* from CDA *and applied it to the headlines under investigation*. The study also introduced the concept of *narrative sentimentalization* and discussed how the examined Western media construct emotional narratives by emphasizing familial losses on the Israeli side

while omitting parallel descriptions of Palestinian losses. Finally, the study introduced the concept of gender-coded framing, which is a framing strategy employed in Western media through sentimentalized references to romantic-partner roles intended to evoke emotional responses.

This study demonstrates that media discourse both shapes and reflects ideological narratives and thus contributes to the literature on CDA and Narrative Framing Theory. Combining CDA and Narrative Framing Theory enhances our understanding of how selective linguistic choices convey ideological positioning. The findings of the study reveal several strategies employed in the examined Western media discourse to convey implicit ideological positions and biases pertaining to the RPIC. Future research can further investigate media discourse to examine claims of objectivity in the coverage of other conflict zones.

Credit Authorship Contribution Statement

Zeyad Al-Daher: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing — original draft, Writing — review and editing, Project administration. **Mohammad Zabadi:** Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing — original draft, Writing — review and editing. **Marwan Jarrah:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing — review and editing, Supervision.

Note

1. This study is purely academic in nature and does not support any particular political position or ideology regarding any political conflict. The authors do not endorse any racist, ethnic, political, social, ideological, or sexist views or stereotypes that might appear in any of the news headlines examined here. The analysis presented in this study is strictly limited to the linguistic and narrative features found in the examined Western media headlines. The sole purpose of this study is to examine discursive strategies through the frameworks of Critical Discourse Analysis and Narrative Framing Theory. Any reference to bias within the headlines pertains exclusively to the media texts under examination and should not be interpreted as reflecting the authors' personal beliefs or affiliations. This study aims only to contribute to the scholarly understanding of language use in media and its potential effects on public perceptions. Furthermore, it should be made clear that the findings of this study are attributed specifically to the seven media outlets and the 97 headlines analyzed rather than to Western media as a whole.

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