

Language, Power, and Representation: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Modern Media Texts

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Abstract

Media texts do not merely report events; they actively construct the social reality audiences come to understand as given, shaping which actors are represented as agents or victims, which viewpoints are presented as neutral common sense, and which social groups are marked as other. This paper applies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how power and ideology are linguistically encoded in contemporary media texts, drawing on Fairclough's three-dimensional discourse model, van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to ideology in discourse, and the systemic-functional tools of transitivity and nominalization developed within critical linguistics. The study examines four linguistic mechanisms through which media discourse constructs and naturalizes power relations: lexical choice and overlexicalization in the labeling of social actors and events; transitivity patterns that assign or obscure agency, particularly in reporting on violence and conflict; nominalization and passivization that background responsible agents; and quotation and sourcing practices that hierarchize whose voice counts as authoritative. The review further engages Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model to situate textual production within a broader circuit of meaning-making that includes audience interpretation, and examines the discourse-historical approach's contribution to

analyzing recurring topoi in media representations of migration, race, and gender. A comparative methodology is described using systemic-functional linguistic coding of transitivity roles, corpus-assisted discourse analysis for identifying overlexicalization patterns at scale, and comparative headline analysis across ideologically differentiated outlets covering the same events. Reported findings indicate that agentless passive constructions and nominalization are disproportionately deployed in reporting on state or institutional violence relative to reporting on comparably scaled violence attributed to marginalized groups, and that lexical labeling choices, "riot" versus "uprising," "migrant" versus "refugee," measurably shape audience perception of legitimacy and threat. The paper concludes by discussing implications for media literacy education and the continued relevance of CDA as digital and algorithmically curated media reshape the circuit of encoding and decoding Hall originally theorized.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Media Discourse, Power, Representation, Ideology, Transitivity, Nominalization, Encoding/Decoding.

I. Introduction

Media texts occupy a uniquely consequential position in contemporary social life because they are, for the overwhelming majority of audiences, the primary channel through which knowledge of events beyond direct personal experience is constructed, meaning that the linguistic choices embedded in news reporting, broadcast commentary, and increasingly algorithmically distributed digital media do not merely convey information but actively shape the version of social reality audiences take to be factual and given [1]. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as developed by Fairclough, treats this constructive capacity of discourse as central to its analytic object, proposing that language use is a form of social practice that simultaneously reflects and reproduces existing power relations, and that ideological effects are achieved most powerfully not through explicit argument but through the naturalization of particular linguistic patterns that come to seem like neutral, common-sense description rather than an interested representation of events [2].

Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse, analyzing text, discursive practice, and sociocultural practice as interlocking analytic levels, has become the foundational methodological framework for applying CDA to media texts specifically, because it allows the analyst to move from close linguistic description of a specific news article or broadcast segment to the broader institutional and ideological conditions of its production and consumption [2], [3]. Complementing this framework, van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to CDA emphasizes that media power operates significantly through control of discourse access, determining which social actors are granted the authoritative voice of a quoted expert or eyewitness and which are relegated to the passive object position of being reported on rather than reported by, framing this differential access to voice as a fundamental mechanism through which media discourse reproduces existing social hierarchies [4].

The critical linguistics tradition associated with Fowler, and with Hodge and Kress, extended this project by developing specific systemic-functional linguistic tools for analyzing how grammar itself encodes ideology, most centrally through the analysis of transitivity, the grammatical system determining who is represented as the agent performing an action, who is represented as the affected participant, and whose involvement is obscured entirely through passive or nominalized constructions [5], [6]. Applied to news reporting on violence and

conflict, this framework has repeatedly demonstrated that the same underlying event can be linguistically encoded in starkly different ways depending on which social actor is assigned grammatical agency: a report that a "protester was shot" backgrounds the shooter's agency through passive construction, while a report that "police shot a protester" foregrounds it, and a report on "clashes" or "violence erupting" removes identifiable human agency altogether, distributing responsibility so diffusely that no party is held linguistically accountable [5].

Lexical choice constitutes a further, extensively documented mechanism of ideological encoding in media discourse. The selection of one label over a near-synonymous alternative, "terrorist" versus "militant," "riot" versus "uprising," "illegal immigrant" versus "undocumented migrant" versus "refugee," carries substantial evaluative freight that shapes audience perception of legitimacy, threat, and moral standing, even where the underlying factual content of the report is held constant [6]. Corpus-assisted discourse studies analyzing large news corpora have demonstrated that this lexical variation is not randomly distributed but correlates systematically with the ideological orientation of the reporting outlet and with the social identity of the actors being described, producing a pattern in which linguistically similar events receive markedly different lexical treatment depending on who is involved [7].

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, first articulated in his 1973 essay on television discourse, provides a crucial complementary framework for situating this textual analysis within a broader circuit of meaning-making, proposing that media producers encode messages according to their institutional position and ideological framework, but that audiences do not passively absorb this encoded meaning; they decode it through their own cultural and social frameworks, producing dominant readings that accept the text's preferred meaning, negotiated readings that partially accept and partially contest it, or oppositional readings that reject the encoded meaning outright [8]. This model is essential to CDA's application to media texts because it prevents the analysis from assuming a simple, deterministic relationship between encoded textual ideology and audience belief, while still insisting that the encoding process itself, the subject of CDA's primary analytic attention, structures the range of readings a text makes available in the first place [8].

The discourse-historical approach, developed by Reisigl and Wodak, extends CDA's analytic reach by examining recurring topoi, conventionalized argumentative patterns, that recur across media discourse on specific social groups over time, demonstrating that contemporary media representations of migration, race, and gender frequently draw on argumentative structures with identifiable historical genealogies, such as the topos of burden, which frames a group's presence as a strain on public resources, or the topos of threat, which frames a group's presence as endangering security or cultural cohesion [9]. This historically grounded approach demonstrates that individual media texts do not construct ideological representation from nothing but activate and reproduce discursive patterns with substantial historical depth, a finding with direct relevance for understanding why certain representational patterns recur so persistently across seemingly unrelated news cycles and outlets [9].

This paper synthesizes these theoretical and methodological strands, Fairclough's three-dimensional model, van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, critical linguistics' transitivity and nominalization analysis, Hall's encoding/decoding circuit, and the discourse-historical approach's topos analysis, to provide an integrated Critical Discourse Analysis of how language, power, and representation interact in contemporary media texts.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the linguistic mechanisms, lexical choice, transitivity, and nominalization, through which power and agency are encoded in media reporting.
2. To analyze how sourcing and quotation practices hierarchize whose voice is granted discursive authority in media texts.
3. To evaluate Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model as a framework situating textual analysis within a broader circuit of media meaning-making.
4. To assess the discourse-historical approach's contribution to identifying recurring topoi in media representation of migration, race, and gender.
5. To compare reported linguistic patterns across ideologically differentiated media coverage of comparable events.

II. Literature Review

2.1 Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model and Discourse as Social Practice

Fairclough's foundational contribution to CDA rests on the proposition that discourse operates simultaneously at three analytically distinguishable but interlocking levels: as text, the concrete linguistic object available for close analysis; as discursive practice, the processes of production, distribution, and consumption through which that text is generated and circulated; and as sociocultural practice, the broader social, institutional, and historical conditions that both shape and are reproduced by the discourse [2], [3]. Applied to media texts, this model directs analytic attention beyond the surface content of a news article to the institutional practices, editorial gatekeeping, source selection, deadline pressure, that shape its production, and further to the broader ideological function the resulting text serves in naturalizing particular power relations as common sense rather than as a contested, interested representation [2].

2.2 Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Approach and Discourse Access

Van Dijk's complementary socio-cognitive framework for CDA emphasizes that media power is exercised significantly through control of discourse access, determining which social actors are granted the position of quoted authority, expert commentator, or firsthand witness, and which are relegated to being discussed in the third person as objects of reporting rather than sources of it [4]. This framework identifies a systematic pattern in which elite social actors, government officials, corporate spokespeople, credentialed experts, are disproportionately granted direct quotation and interpretive framing authority, while marginalized or non-elite social actors are more frequently paraphrased, described rather than quoted, or entirely absent from the text's sourcing structure, a pattern van Dijk argues functions as a discursive mechanism reproducing existing social power hierarchies independent of any single journalist's individual intent [4].

2.3 Transitivity and the Grammatical Encoding of Agency

Critical linguistics, developed by Fowler and by Hodge and Kress, extended CDA's toolkit with systemic-functional grammatical analysis, most centrally the analysis of transitivity, the grammatical system through which a clause assigns the roles of actor, affected participant, and circumstance to the entities it describes [5]. Applied to news reporting on violence, this analysis

has repeatedly demonstrated that agentive constructions ("police shot the protester") foreground responsibility, passive constructions with an omitted agent ("the protester was shot") background it, and nominalized or intransitive constructions ("violence erupted," "clashes occurred") remove identifiable human agency from the clause altogether, distributing responsibility so diffusely across an impersonal event that no specific actor bears linguistic accountability for the outcome described [5], [6]. This grammatical flexibility means that reports describing materially identical events can construct starkly different impressions of causal responsibility purely through transitivity choice, independent of any difference in the underlying facts being reported.

2.4 Lexical Choice, Overlexicalization, and Labeling

Beyond grammatical structure, the specific lexical items selected to label social actors and events carry substantial evaluative and ideological weight. The choice between near-synonymous labels, "terrorist" versus "militant" versus "freedom fighter," "riot" versus "uprising" versus "unrest," "illegal immigrant" versus "undocumented migrant" versus "refugee," encodes differing implicit judgments of legitimacy, agency, and moral standing even where the denoted referent is held constant [6]. Corpus-assisted discourse studies analyzing large-scale news corpora have demonstrated that this lexical variation correlates systematically with both the ideological orientation of the reporting outlet and the social identity of the actors being described, a pattern of overlexicalization, an unusually dense cluster of near-synonymous terms applied to a particular social group or phenomenon, that critical linguistics identifies as a marker of ideological preoccupation, since a domain of experience that is linguistically neutral or unremarkable to a given discourse community typically does not generate such a dense proliferation of evaluatively loaded near-synonyms [6], [7].

2.5 Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model and the Circuit of Meaning

Stuart Hall's 1973 essay on encoding and decoding in television discourse provides an essential complementary framework situating CDA's textual analysis within a broader circuit of meaning-making, proposing that media producers encode a preferred meaning into a text according to their institutional position and professional ideology, but that this encoded meaning does not straightforwardly determine audience belief [8]. Instead, Hall proposed that audiences decode media texts through one of three broad positions: a dominant reading, in which the audience accepts the text's preferred, encoded meaning at face value; a negotiated reading, in which the audience partially accepts the encoded framework while contesting or modifying specific elements based on their own social position and experience; and an oppositional reading, in which the audience recognizes the encoded preferred meaning but consciously reads against it, rejecting the framework the text attempts to establish [8]. This model has proven foundational to media and cultural studies precisely because it preserves CDA's core insight that textual encoding is ideologically patterned and analytically significant, while avoiding the deterministic assumption that audiences simply absorb whatever ideological position a text encodes.

2.6 The Discourse-Historical Approach and Recurring Topoi

The discourse-historical approach, developed principally by Reisigl and Wodak, extends CDA's analytic framework by situating individual media texts within a longer historical genealogy of recurring argumentative patterns, or topoi, that structure how particular social

groups are represented across successive news cycles and even across decades [9]. This approach has identified several topoi that recur with notable consistency across media discourse on migration and minority groups, including the topos of burden, which frames a group's presence primarily in terms of strain on public resources, and the topos of threat, which frames a group's presence as endangering security, employment, or cultural cohesion, demonstrating that contemporary media representations frequently activate historically established argumentative structures rather than constructing entirely novel framings for each new event [9]. This historical grounding provides an explanation for the striking consistency of certain representational patterns across seemingly unrelated news contexts and outlets, since the discourse-historical approach identifies these patterns as durable cultural-argumentative resources that journalists and audiences alike draw upon, often without conscious awareness of the pattern's historical genealogy.

2.7 Research Gap

While transitivity analysis, lexical/overlexicalization study, encoding/decoding theory, and the discourse-historical approach have each been extensively applied individually to media discourse, relatively few studies integrate all four analytic layers, grammatical, lexical, reception-theoretic, and historical-argumentative, within a single comparative framework applied to the same set of contemporary media texts [2]–[9]. Furthermore, most existing CDA research on media representation predates or only partially accounts for the algorithmically curated, platform-mediated media environment characteristic of contemporary digital news consumption, in which Hall's original encoding/decoding circuit is further complicated by automated content ranking and personalized distribution occurring between the moment of textual encoding and the moment of audience decoding [8]. This study addresses these gaps by synthesizing evidence across all four analytic layers within an integrated framework and by explicitly considering the implications of digital, algorithmically mediated distribution for the continued applicability of Hall's circuit model.

III. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and comparative discourse-analytic research design, synthesizing findings from systemic-functional linguistic analysis, corpus-assisted discourse studies, and discourse-historical research on media representation. The approach consolidates reported linguistic patterns across these methodological traditions to identify consistent mechanisms of power and ideology construction in contemporary media texts.

3.2 Conceptual Framework

The framework applied in this review models media discourse's construction of power and representation as operating across four interacting analytic layers: (1) lexical choice and overlexicalization in labeling social actors and events; (2) transitivity and grammatical agency assignment, determining who is linguistically foregrounded or backgrounded as responsible for reported actions; (3) sourcing and quotation hierarchy, determining whose voice is granted direct, authoritative representation within the text; and (4) topos activation, situating individual textual choices within recurring, historically grounded argumentative patterns. Hall's

encoding/decoding model is applied as an overarching framework situating the analysis of these four textual layers within the broader circuit of media production and audience reception.

3.3 Data Sources

The literature synthesized in this review draws on foundational Critical Discourse Analysis texts by Fairclough and van Dijk; critical linguistics texts by Fowler and by Hodge and Kress addressing transitivity and grammatical ideology; corpus-assisted discourse studies analyzing large-scale news corpora for lexical and overlexicalization patterns; Stuart Hall's foundational encoding/decoding essay and subsequent reception theory scholarship; and discourse-historical approach research by Reisigl and Wodak addressing topos analysis in media representations of migration, race, and gender.

3.4 Analytical Framework

Reviewed studies and illustrative textual examples were organized according to the four-layer framework described in Section 3.2. For each analytic layer, findings were classified by media domain (conflict/violence reporting, migration/minority group reporting, political reporting) and by comparative outlet orientation where available, enabling systematic comparison of how lexical, grammatical, sourcing, and topos-level choices vary across ideologically differentiated coverage of comparable events.

3.5 Evaluation Criteria

Comparative evaluation in this review uses categories standard in discourse-analytic and critical linguistics research: **transitivity pattern** (agentive, passive-agentless, or nominalized/intransitive construction applied to a given reported action), **lexical/overlexicalization density** (relative frequency and evaluative loading of near-synonymous labels applied to a given social actor or event type), **sourcing hierarchy** (relative frequency of direct quotation versus paraphrase or absence across social actor categories), and **topos type** (the specific recurring argumentative pattern, e.g., burden, threat, activated in a given representation), used to assess how power and ideology are differentially encoded across the media texts and domains reviewed.

IV. Results and Discussion

4.1 Comparative Linguistic Mechanisms Across Media Reporting Domains

Table I summarizes representative patterns in how the four analytic layers described in Section 3.2 manifest across three commonly studied media reporting domains: conflict/violence coverage, migration/minority group coverage, and political reporting.

Table I. Linguistic mechanisms of power and representation across media reporting domains

Reporting domain	Typical transitivity pattern	Lexical/overlexicalization pattern	Sourcing hierarchy pattern	Domina nt topos (where	Sour ce

				applicable)	
State/institutional violence reporting	Passive/agentless or nominalized ("clashes erupted")	Comparatively neutral labeling of state actors	Official/institutional sources granted direct quotation	Not typically topos-driven	[5], [6]
Non-state/marginalized-group violence reporting	Agentive, actor-foregrounding ("rioters attacked")	Denser overlexicalization, more evaluatively loaded labels	Non-elite actors more often paraphrased than quoted	Topos of threat frequently activated	[4]–[7], [9]
Migration coverage	Variable; often agentless in describing systemic causes	High overlexicalization density across outlets ("migrant"/"refugee"/"illegal")	Migrant voices comparatively underrepresented as direct sources	Topos of burden and topos of threat both frequently activated	[6], [7], [9]
Political reporting (elite actors)	Agentive when favorable, passive when unfavorable, outlet-dependent	Lexical choice tracks outlet ideological alignment	High direct-quotation access for elite political sources across outlets	Variable, outlet-dependent	[4], [7]

4.2 Discussion

The comparative pattern evident in Table I demonstrates a consistent asymmetry running through every reporting domain reviewed: grammatical, lexical, and sourcing choices systematically favor the framing interests of institutionally powerful actors, whether state security forces, established political figures, or the reporting outlet's own ideological alignment, while systematically disadvantaging non-elite and marginalized social actors along each of the three textual dimensions simultaneously [4]–[7]. This convergence across dimensions is analytically significant because it indicates that these are not independent or coincidental patterns but a mutually reinforcing discursive system: an actor who is granted

agentive, active-voice construction and direct quotation access in one moment of coverage is simultaneously positioned, through that same convergence, as a more credible, more central, and more legitimate participant in the reported event than an actor who is passivized, denied direct quotation, and represented through a denser field of evaluatively loaded lexical labels [5], [6], [9]. The discourse-historical evidence on recurring topoi further indicates that this asymmetry is not newly constructed with each reporting cycle but draws on argumentative patterns with substantial historical depth, helping to explain why representational asymmetries in migration and minority-group coverage in particular show such marked consistency across outlets, time periods, and even national media contexts that might otherwise be expected to differ considerably [9].

Hall's encoding/decoding model adds a crucial qualification to this picture, however: the consistent textual asymmetries documented across the four analytic layers describe the encoded preferred meaning a media text makes available, not a determined audience response [8]. The model's insistence that audiences may produce negotiated or oppositional readings means that CDA's textual findings, however consistent, should not be interpreted as direct evidence of audience belief formation without complementary reception-oriented research. This qualification carries particular contemporary weight given the shift toward algorithmically curated digital media distribution, since the circuit Hall originally theorized as running directly from institutional encoding to audience decoding is now further mediated by platform-level content ranking and personalization systems that determine which encoded texts reach which audiences in the first place, a layer of mediation largely absent from the broadcast-era media environment in which Hall's original model was formulated [8]. This suggests that contemporary CDA of digital media texts must increasingly account for this additional algorithmic mediation layer as a further site of ideological and power-laden selection operating between the moment of journalistic encoding and the moment of audience decoding.

V. Challenges in Analyzing Power and Representation in Media Discourse

Several challenges constrain further progress in this field. Establishing a rigorous, non-arbitrary baseline for comparing lexical and transitivity choices across reporting on genuinely comparable events remains methodologically difficult, since apparent asymmetries in coverage of two events could in principle reflect genuine underlying factual differences rather than purely discursive bias, requiring careful case selection and, where possible, corpus-scale comparison across many instances rather than isolated textual pairs. The relationship between documented textual encoding patterns and actual audience belief formation remains empirically underdetermined by textual analysis alone, since Hall's model explicitly allows for negotiated and oppositional readings that CDA's close textual methods cannot directly observe without complementary audience reception research. The increasing algorithmic mediation of digital news distribution introduces a further analytic layer, personalized ranking and recommendation systems, that complicates the applicability of encoding/decoding models developed for a broadcast-era media environment with a comparatively unified, undifferentiated audience. Cross-linguistic and cross-cultural generalization of findings remains limited, since the large majority of foundational CDA and critical linguistics research on media discourse has been conducted on English-language, Western media contexts, leaving open questions about how the specific linguistic mechanisms identified, transitivity, overlexicalization, translate to typologically different languages and differently structured media systems. Finally, the historical depth claimed by discourse-historical topos analysis,

while empirically well-supported for some topoi such as the topos of threat, requires continued extension to a broader range of social groups and national media contexts to establish the full generality of the approach's claims.

VI. Conclusion

This paper has examined how language, power, and representation interact in contemporary media texts through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis, drawing on Fairclough's three-dimensional discourse model, van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework, critical linguistics' transitivity and lexical analysis, Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, and the discourse-historical approach's topos analysis. The evidence reviewed demonstrates a consistent, mutually reinforcing pattern across grammatical, lexical, and sourcing dimensions of media discourse: institutionally powerful actors are disproportionately granted agentive grammatical construction, comparatively neutral lexical labeling, and direct quotation access, while marginalized and non-elite social actors are disproportionately passivized, subjected to denser and more evaluatively loaded lexical labeling, and denied comparable sourcing authority. These textual asymmetries are further shown to draw on historically established argumentative topoi rather than being newly invented with each reporting cycle, helping explain their notable consistency across outlets and time periods. At the same time, Hall's encoding/decoding model appropriately qualifies these textual findings by insisting that audiences are not passive recipients of encoded meaning but active interpreters capable of negotiated or oppositional readings, a qualification of continued and arguably increasing relevance as algorithmically mediated digital distribution introduces a further layer of selection between journalistic encoding and audience decoding. Together, these findings affirm CDA's continued relevance as an analytic framework for understanding how language does not merely describe but actively constructs the power relations and social hierarchies audiences come to experience as given.

VII. Future Work

Future research should prioritize large-scale, corpus-assisted comparative studies systematically pairing coverage of closely matched events across ideologically differentiated outlets, strengthening the empirical basis for claims about lexical and transitivity asymmetry beyond illustrative case comparison. Further work is needed to extend discourse-historical topos analysis to a broader range of social groups, national contexts, and non-English media systems, testing the generality of topoi such as burden and threat beyond the predominantly Western contexts in which they have been most thoroughly documented. Continued research should integrate CDA's textual methods with empirical audience reception studies, directly testing the distribution of dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings Hall's model predicts, rather than inferring audience impact from textual analysis alone. Research should also develop analytic frameworks explicitly incorporating the algorithmic mediation layer characteristic of contemporary digital news distribution, extending Hall's encoding/decoding circuit to account for platform-level content ranking and personalization as an additional site of power-laden selection. Finally, future work should translate CDA's findings on media power and representation into practical media literacy curricula, equipping audiences with the analytic tools to recognize transitivity, lexical, and sourcing asymmetries in their own everyday media consumption.

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