

# Transitivity Analysis of Air-bombing Attacks on Gaza Newspaper Headlines

Asst. lect. Shameem N. Alsalami  
University of Kufa - Faculty of Arts  
[Shameemn.alsalami@uokufa.edu.iq](mailto:Shameemn.alsalami@uokufa.edu.iq)

تحليل الانتقاء اللغوي في عناوين الصحف الاجنبية عن  
العدوان الاسرائيلي في غزة

م.م شميم ناظم رحيم  
جامعة الكوفة - كلية الاداب

## Abstract:

This study is intended to analyse newspaper headlines tackling the Israeli attacks on Gaza in Palestine. For this purpose, the study adopts Haliday's transitivity system, introduced within his seminal work Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) in an attempt to investigate the way the under-investigation incidents are portrayed via news headlines.

The main question pursued in this work is how newspapers editors and news writers construct an image of a certain event through the various selections from the linguistic repertoire, specifically, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. To find an answer to this question the study adopted the framework of transitivity analysis within a descriptive approach to identify ideational meanings realized by grammatical selections. The to-be-analysed data related to the above mentioned events are selected from the news headlines published in the Independent and the New York Times during the period of attacks starting from 13-17 May, 2021. Ten newspaper headlines are selected

## الملخص:

تتبنى هذه الدراسة مفهوم الانتقائية في نظرية هاليداي لظهور طريقة عرض المعلومات المطروحة في العناوين الصحفية في الصحف الاجنبية وخصوصا ما يتعلق بموضوع الهجمات الاخيرة على غزة من قبل القوات الاسرائيلية في فلسطين. تسعى هذه الدراسة لظهور طرق تمثيل الخبر في الصحف الاجنبية بما يتعلق بالصراع الفلسطيني-الاسرائيلي. المعلومات التي تم تحليلها بهذه الدراسة تم جمعها من عناوين صحيفة نيويورك تايمز المنشورة في الفترة من ١٣ الى ١٧ ايار لعام ٢٠٢١ وهي فترة الهجمات على غزة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** النحو الوظيفي التنظيمي, الانتقاء اللغوي, هاليداي, العناوين الصحفية, الهجمات على غزة, العدوان الاسرائيلي.

from each newspaper. The selected headlines were examined then segmented into clauses to make it possible to identify the type of processes, participants, and circumstances involved. Finally, conclusions were set forward based on the mentioned analysis. The genre of newspaper headlines were chosen as it is narrative-based genre and applicable to the notion of transitivity. The analysis revealed that material and relational processes were dominant denoting that the process is mainly focusing on actions and events. The results, reached within this work, revealed that the linguistic selections made to construct the headlined depicting the events in concern were made in a way that gives a negative impression to the reader and depicts a negative image of the Israeli forces. The selected linguistic features reflect the writers perspective towards the events under investigation and this may influence the readers perspective.

**Keywords:** Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), Transitivity System, Process, Newspaper

Headlines, Gaza Attacks, Israeli  
aggressin.

## 1. Introduction

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the most persistent conflicts in the world. The Israeli side has occupied the West Bank and the Gaza Strip since 1967. Many attempts for reconcile have been made by different parties to reach a peace agreement but in vain. The only temporary solution was to make a two-state solution, yet, the attacks by the military Israeli forces continued till the last events which took place in May 2021 which was preceded with protests by the Palestinians who objected to the constant invasion and occupation of more lands from the Palestinian territory that escalated later into a military collision.

The world news agencies and newspapers tackled the incident under different headlines. Newspapers have a powerful role of influencing the opinions of the public and hence its role should not be underestimated. Language is a means not only for conversing over life matters but also for conveying messages, connotative and denotative ones. Halliday (1985) views language as a system of meanings mapped onto forms via which those meanings can be realized. This leads us to the question of how those meanings are constructed.

Halliday's SFG can be viewed as an approach to understanding written texts which are composites for meaning making through two levels including the level of words and the meanings that they express and the underlying level of rules of grammar and the meaning they denote. So language is seen as a system of systems from which a language user can make different selections leading each time to different messages interpreted in different ways (Van Dijk, 2006).

Fairclough (1989) views language as a social behaviour upon which the human interactions are based determining the interrelations among people. Fairclough (2001) also points out that language is a material form of ideology which contributes to the creation and the recreation of reality

affecting relations and views to the world. Meaning that language is not just a means of representation but also a reason for social change.

Fowler (1986) makes a link between discourse and ideology in a more obvious way as he defines discourse as a socially and institutionally emerging ideology encoded by language viewing discourse and the use of language as a way by which ideologies are molded and manifested making it deeply entrenched in everyday discourse. They become received as common sense assumptions about life, the way it is and the way it should be.

News reports as a product of language being the main tool for creating them, contribute to the creation and sustaining of opinions of the public concerning the international community. The same opinions are created repeatedly and passed on to others until they become perceived as the default reality and would be taken for granted (Fowler, 1991).

The events in concern can be presented in different ways and viewed from different angles. Therefore, it is crucial to go through the headlines that tackled the concerned events and reveal the way the participants in that conflict are represented. Accordingly, this study aims to investigate the way those incidents and the involved parties are portrayed to the public through the use of language and the choices from the linguistic items adopting Halliday's transitivity system. Another aim is to reveal the implications underlying those selections.

## 2. Literature Review

SFG is concerned in studying language and the functions it is used for in social settings. SFG views grammar as a meaning-making resource and focuses on the interrelations between form and meaning within Halliday's metafunctions. Halliday views language as a system of systems with different choices presented by each system which the language user can choose from. Each time a different choice is made, a different message is created. The language is viewed as a complicated system of interrelated items with different paths. The language user has the choice to construct the intended message by selecting the most suitable items to the message.

One of those systems that a language user can select from is transitivity system which provides choices that can help depict the process, the event, the things denoted, and the participants in an event, answering the questions "what happened", who the participants are?, what the circumstances are? (Beard, 2000:30).

Fowler (1991) defines transitivity as "the foundation of representation: it is the way the clause is used to analyze events and situations as being of certain types" (p. 171). This makes transitivity system a flexible tool in the hand of the language user giving the ability to portray the same situation in different ways each time the view of the creator of the message differs. Meaning that, it is a powerful tool that can aid in indicating different ideological viewpoints. Halliday's (1973) and Yaghoobi (2009) transitivity analyses of media print are examples of how language patterns can convey the meaning and the ideology of a text.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

#### **3.1 Transitivity analysis**

SFG views language as a social semiotic. Language is used functionally, that is, what is said depends on what one needs to accomplish. It studies language as a resource of meaning that is situate in a context of situation. The focus is on the relation between the language and the context in which it is used. Within SFG three metafunctions where suggested, interpersonal, ideational, and textual. The focus in this study is on the ideational function indicating that the language is used to express, understand, and organize the perceptions to the world we live in. It denotes the way the experiences of the world are expressed by the user's selections from the language. The focus is on the content and the way the intended meaning is constructed. The ideational function comprises two systems, the transitivity system and the ergativity system. The transitivity system involves all the grammatical choices and their implications (Halliday, 1985).

Transitivity system is viewed as the basis for the semantic organization of experience involving participants functions and

experiential functions related to the clause structure. Transitivity is a property of the entire clause (Hopper and Thompson, 1980).

Halliday (1973) points out that transitivity system comprises three components: the process itself, that is what kind of process being described; participants, those involved in the process; and circumstances of the process specifying when, where, how and why a process took place. Halliday (1994) subdivides the process into six subtypes and several types of participants summarized in the Table below:

**Table 1: Process types, their meanings, and key participants (Halliday, 1994:143)**

Process type	Category meaning	Participants
<b>Material:</b> Action, Event	Doing, Happening- e.g. kick, run, paint, repair, send, burn,	Actor, Goal
<b>Behavioral</b>	Behaving	Behavior
<b>Mental:</b> Perception, Affection, Cognition	Sensing, Seeing , Feeling Thinking –e.g. see, hear, know	Sensor, Phenomenon
<b>Verbal</b>	Saying-e.g. say, tell, warn, argue, ask	Sayer, Target
<b>Relational:</b> Attribution , Identification	Being, Attributing, Identifying-e.g. be, have, become	Carrier, Attribute, Identified, Identifier, Token, Value
<b>Existential</b>	Existing	Existence

Circumstances represent the circumstantial information like time or space, reason, cause, manner and accompaniment. Circumstance is usually expressed by an adverbial located at the end of the clause and sometimes

at the beginning. There are nine suggested types of circumstance as showed in the Table below:

**Table 2: Types of Circumstances, Sub-categories and Probes (Martine et al. 1997:104).**

<b>Circumstance Type</b>	<b>Sub-category</b>	<b>Probe</b>	<b>Realization</b>
Extent	(i) Spatial distance (ii) Time duration	(i) how far? (ii) how long, at what intervals?	(i) a unit of measurement (of distance) (ii) a unit of measurement (of time)
Location	(i) Spatial Location (ii) Temporal Location	(i) where, at what point? (ii) when?	(i) in, down by, from (ii) in, after, before
Manner	(i) means (ii) quality (iii) comparison	(i) how, with what, by what means? (ii) how? how....-ly? (iii) what ... like?	(i) with, by (ii) -ly adverb (iii) what like or unlike
Cause	(i) reason or intention (behind an action) (ii) purpose (of the action taking	(i) why? (ii) what far/ what purpose? (iii) who? who for? or on whose behalf?	(i) because of, thanks to, for lack of (ii) for the better, in the hope of, for the



	place) (iii) behalf/entity on whose behalf action is undertaken		purpose of, for the sake of (iii) on behalf of
Accompaniment	(i) comitative (ii) additive	(i) who with/what with? (ii) who else/what else?	(i) with/without (ii) instead of, besides, as well as
Matter	No sub- category	what about?	about, concerning, with reference to, as far
Role	(i) guise (ii) product	(i) what as? (ii) what into?	(i) as (ii) into
Contingency	(i) condition (ii) concession (iii) default	(i) under what condition? (ii) despite what? (iii) lacking what?	(i) in the event of, without (ii) in spite of (iii) in the absence of
Angle	No sub- category	says who?	According to

## 4. Research Method

### 4.1 Research Design

In this effort a descriptive method is used to tackle the concerned problem. This research is based on the purpose of describing the process types in Transitivity Systems which are used in the newspaper headlines on the terrorist attack in Gaza and to determine the function of the verbal clauses used in the headlines.

### 4.2 Source of Data

The data used in the analysis are taken from the Independent newspaper and The *New York Times* newspaper published from 13 to 17<sup>th</sup> May, 2021. The headlines collected concerned the incidents under investigation that is of the territory-allocation conflict between the two struggling parties in Palestine, the Israelis and the Palestinians. The study selected ten headlines from each newspaper.

## 5. Data Analysis

The analysis aims at investigating transitivity structure in the newspapers headlines that shed light on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over the raped territories by the Israeli army, specifically, the Independent and the New York Times. The analysis is based on Halliday's transitivity system. The analysis is divided into two parts, each one concerning the headlines of one of the chosen newspapers.

### 5.1 The Analysis of the Independent Newspaper Headlines

#### H1: A Week of Death and Destruction

A Week	of Death and Destruction	Actor
Circumstance	Process	

In this headline the writer presented a brief idea of the whole situation by presenting only a noun phrase to sum the whole incident giving rise to the horrific image that depicts the attack. The lexical choices are strikingly attention getters being related to notions of death and destruction. The

writer, for the sake of brevity chose to trigger the image in the heads of the readers leaving them to do the rest by triggering their imagination.

**H2:** How the Israeli-Palestinian violence has unfolded.

the Israeli-Palestinian	Violence	has unfolded
Actor	Process	circumstance

In this headline, the editor of the news chose to sum up the news by a question about what happened. This is not intended as a question, rather it is a way of attracting the attention of the readers to what the article is about. The lexical choices does the whole work here, the word "violence" indicates that the attack was vicious and unjustified. The writer implicitly indicates that the doer of the action is the Israeli side since he chose to put them in the first position in the hyphenated term " Israeli-Palestinian".

**H3:** Smoke rises from Gaza after Israel airstrikes kill at least 42 people

Smoke	Rises	From Gaza	After Israel.....
Actor	Material Process	circumstance	circumstance

In this headline the actor is the smoke, it is used in an active voice structure to give the word "smoke" significance and also to highlight the horrific image of the whole event as it arouses a scene of fire and buildings being burned in the minds of the readers. " from Gaza" is a circumstance denoting location as representing the place where the attacks have been taken place. The other circumstance used in this headline is "after Israel airstrikes kill at least 42 people" indicates a temporal location. Within the circumstance there is another process that can be analysed as follows:

Israel airstrikes	Kill	at least 42 people
Agent	Material Process	Patient

The active voice is used to highlight the doer of the action. The verb being used denotes a material process, and the verb chosen is used explicitly without any mitigation, it portrays the striking sense of killing overtly. The number of kills is stated in the patient part and described them as people not soldiers to reveal that the attack was on civilians which shows the

negative attitude of the writer in relation to the attacks. The attitude is not stated explicitly but is left to the reader to arrive at as the headline is read.

## 5.2 The Analysis of NY Times Headlines:

The second news outlet that the study tackled its headlines concerning the concerned incident is the NY Times. Four of its headlines have been chosen for analysis, and as follows:

**H1:** Israel Intensifies Air Strikes on Gaza as Diplomatic Efforts for Cease Fire Gain Momentum.

Israel	Intensifies	Air Strikes	on Gaza	As diplomatic ...
Actor	Material process	Goal	Circumstance	circumstance

In this headline an active voice structure is used to retain focus on the doer of the attacks, that is, Israel. This indicates that there is an implicit attitude to condemn the Israeli side for the attacks and to show that Gaza is being attacked in an unjustified act. The lexical choice of the verb "intensifies" denotes that the air strikes are increasing rather than decreasing in spite of the many calls for ending the attacks. This makes the attitude against Israel even stronger for ignoring the world's call for peace.

**H2:** "Afraid of the Night": Gazans Tell of Constant Air Strikes and Power Cuts".

Afraid of the night	Gazans	Tell	Constant Air Strikes.....
circumstance	patient	process	Cause

This headline is initiated with the phrase "afraid of the night" it is preposed for its importance as it represents the feelings and horror the Gazans are going through. This foregrounding attracts the attention of the reader to the situation of the people being attacked and triggers the imagination of the readers of the scene of the attacked people which arouses feelings against those attacks. The lexical choice of the word "constant" shows that the strikes are continuing even at night.

**H3: Tens of Thousands Displaced in Gaza amid Fighting**

Tens of Thousands	Displaced	in Gaza	amid Fighting
Participants	Material verb	circumstance	Circumstance

The passive voice structure is used in this headline to foreground the goal that is the people in Gaza and the material verb displaced arouses in the mind of the reader the scene of people being homeless and living on the street. The circumstance used here denotes the location of the displaced people "in Gaza" and the other circumstance denotes the temporal location. In the previous headlines, the actor denoted is only one. The whole incident is guided by one side that is of the Israeli one, but here the word fighting denotes that there is a fight between two parties. This implicitly refers to the backfiring happening by the Gazan side.

**H4: Dozens Shot by Israel Forces**

Dozens	Shot	by Israel Forces
Patient	Material verb	Cause

In this headline the patient is foregrounded by preposing the patient to focus attention on the victims of the attacks as being more important than the actor of the process. Also, the patient is focused on to arouse the feelings of the readers. The circumstance here is a cause of the process that is the Israeli forces being the attacker.

**5.3 Results and Discussion**

News can be viewed as the most powerful tool in contemporary society since it has the confidant of the public as a way of receiving the most reliable and accurate information taking place in the world. The news headlines provide a brief idea of what the article would be about, that is why they are given great importance as they can decide whether the article is selected to be read or simply skipped.

After probing into the linguistic selections made by the news writers, in the two selected newspapers, in terms of the news headlines

tackling the attacks on Gaza that took place recently by the Israeli forces resulting in hundreds of casualties and material destruction, the study revealed that both newspapers selected active and passive voice structures depending on which lexical item bears the most semantic content that may attract the attention.

Through the analysis of the selections made by the writers, there has been a sensationalized description used to portray events. It is obvious that they chose mostly the components of the message that convey a negative image of the Israeli forces. The Israeli forces are denoted using terms that depict them as violent, killers, or attackers. The dominant material process related to the actions of Israeli forces are related to killing, attacking, destroying, burning, and displacing people from their homes. On the contrary, the Gazan people are represented as victims who are left vulnerable, displaced, and hopeless.

## Conclusions

The study set forth two questions to be answered, one is related to the linguistics selections made by the editors of the selected newspapers in terms of depicting the conflicting parties in concern.

After analysing the selected headlines, it is revealed that material and relational processes are dominant denoting that the process is mainly focusing on actions of doing and events of happening leading to a heavy focus on the incident itself rather than the circumstances.

The results also revealed that the linguistic selections made to construct the headlines depicting the events in concern were made in a way that gives a negative impression to the reader and depicts a negative image of the Israeli forces which may influence the readers perspective.

The second aim of the study concerns the implications of the linguistics choices. It is revealed that the incidents are portrayed in a way to imply that the attacks are aggressive, hostile, unacceptable, and that the Gazan people are victims that are in need of urgent interventions that might help seize the attack. It also implies a rejection on the part of the newspapers.

**References:**

- Beard, A. (2000). *The Language of Politics*. London: Routledge.
- Cottle, S. (2000). *Ethnic Minorities and the Media: Changing cultural boundaries*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and Power*. New York: Longman Group UK Limited.
- Fairclough, N. (2001). *Language and Power*. London: Longman.
- Fowler, R. (1986). *Linguistic Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fowler, R. (1991). *Language in the news: Discourse and ideology in the press*. London: Routledge.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1973). *Explorations in the Functions of Language*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1978). *Language as a Social Semiotic*. London: Arnold.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1981). *Explorations in the Function of Language*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1985). *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (1st ed.). London: Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1994). *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (2nd ed.). London: Edward Arnold.
- Hartley, J. (1982). *Understanding News*. London: Routledge.
- Herman, E., & Chomsky, N. (2002). *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon.
- Poole, E. (2002). *Reporting Islam: Media Representations of British Muslims*. London: I. B. Tauris.
- Reah, D. (1998). *The Language of Newspapers*. London: Routledge.
- Richardson, J. E. (2007). *Analyzing Newspapers: An Approach from Critical Discourse Analysis*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Van Dijk, T. (2006). Ideology and discourse analysis. *Journal of Political Ideologies* 11(2): 115–40.
- Yaghoobi, M. (2009). A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Selected Iranian and American Printed Media on the representation of Hizbullah-Isreal War. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 21.