



## A Critical Discourse Analysis of the U.S.- Canada Tariffs' News Narrative: Affiliation or Patriotism?

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### ABSTRACT

This study critically analyzes the discursive representations of the 2025 U.S.-Canada tariffs crisis in two American news outlets, namely: MSNBC and Fox News. It aims to investigate three reports from each outlet to shed on how their narratives represents the 2025 tariffs crisis with Canada. That is, it attempts to figure out whether the narrative of each outlet favors national loyalty or the contrasting ideological affiliation. In order to achieve its aim, the research relies on Fairclough's (1995) Three-Dimensional Approach for the qualitative analysis, and Halliday's (1994) Transitivity Framework for the quantitative analysis in examining the selected data. The results suggest that the narrative of each channel shows a clear division. That is, MSNBC adopts a critical narrative toward economic and experts' analyses to undermine the act, and Fox News stresses national security and sovereignty, largely echoing the narrative of the state. This divide contributes to the framing of media as mostly partisan, wherein ideological affiliation overrules unified patriotic stances.

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Vinay and Darbelnet: direct and adaptive techniques

## تحليل خطاب نقدي للسرد الإخباري حول الرسوم الجمركية بين الولايات المتحدة وكندا: الانتماء الأيديولوجي أم الوطنية؟

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### المُستخلص

تقوم هذه الدراسة بتحليل التمثيلات الخطابية لأزمة الرسوم الجمركية بين الولايات المتحدة وكندا لعام بصورة ناقدة في وسائلتي إعلاميتين أمريكيتين، وهما: (MSNBC) و (Fox News). وتهدف الدراسة إلى تحليل ثلاثة تقارير من كل وسيلة إعلامية لتسليط الضوء على كيفية تمثيل خطاب كل منهما للأزمة الجمركية مع كندا في سنة 2025. إذ تحاول الدراسة استجلاء ما إذا كان خطاب كل وسيلة إعلامية يميل إلى الولاء الوطني أم إلى الانتماء الأيديولوجي المتناقض للقناتين. ولتحقيق هذا الهدف، يعتمد البحث على منهج الأبعاد الثلاثة لفيركلاف (1995) للتحليل النوعي، وإطار العمليات التحويلية لهالدي (1994) في التحليل الكمي للبيانات المختارة. وتشير النتائج إلى أن خطاب كل قناة يُظهر انقساماً واضحاً؛ حيث تتبنى (MSNBC) خطاباً نقدياً يستند إلى التحليلات الاقتصادية وآراء الخبراء للتقليل من شأن قانون التعرفة الجمركية، بينما تؤكد (Fox News) على الأمن القومي والسيادة، مكررة إلى حد كبير خطاب الدولة. ويساهم هذا الانقسام في تصوير الإعلام على أنه متحيز في الغالب ويطغى فيه الانتماء الأيديولوجي على المواقف الوطنية الموحدة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** تحليل الخطاب النقدي، الولايات المتحدة، كندا، التعريفات الجمركية، التوتر، الإعلام والايديولوجيا

### 1. Introduction

The seemingly stable relationship between the U.S. and Canada has gone through various phases to reach its current status. The geopolitical and other tensions have consistently caused the relationship to fluctuate. One of these is the recent dispute over the tariffs imposed by Trump in 2025 on trade with Canada. It received a significant criticism in the media, shaping the public conception of the two states.

A significant number of studies have been conducted on this topic. For instance, Dai (2025) conducted a study titled: “*Critical Discourse Analysis of News Reports on the New Round of the US-China Tariff War from the Perspective of Proximization Theory*”. Using data from the media of each side, he aimed at revealing how their narrative legitimized the actions of their designated state, and delegitimized that of their foe. Dai adopted a “comparative perspective” through which he concluded that the Chinese mainstream mainly critiqued the legitimacy of the U.S. policies and their negative impact on the global economy, whereas the American’s portrayed China “as a direct threat, emphasizing China’s economic harm to the US and the potential security crisis”. Therefore, the study emphasized the role discourse played in shaping public opinion and power dynamics in politics.

Another study by Zhou (2020) tackled the Sino-U.S. trade war (“*A Critical Discourse Analysis of News Reports on Sino-US Trade War in The New York Times*”). In this study, discourse is investigated for its importance in carrying ideological and social values, specifically regarding the U.S.-China conflict in the New York Times. Zhou collected (20) reports from the newspaper, published between 2018 and 2019, and studied how they reflected this crisis. He conceded that the lexical selection, clause selection and agency were not random, but intended to demonize China as “an unfavorable country”. At the same time, the reports were constructed to show America’s advocacy of force and political hegemony.

This study fills a gap in the literature via analyzing the news reports about this matter in two famous American media outlets: MSNBC and Fox News. These two media outlets are known for their different ideological sides: the former being left-wing liberal and the latter right-wing conservative. The aim of the current paper is to show how each channel's ideological stance is manifested through its narrative framing. That is, the current paper raises the main question: do the selected reports of each outlet adhere to a narrative that encourages their biased affiliations or calls for unity? To that end, the following sub-questions are raised:

1. What does the textual, discursive and contextual analyses of the two channels' reports reveal about their stance?
2. Do the seemingly ideologically contradicting media outlets structure their narrative to reflect unity for the sake of patriotism?

## 2. Overview of CDA

Although the name suggests some relevance to Discourse Analysis, CDA differs in terms of its means and aims. It is a 'constitutive problem-oriented, interdisciplinary' method that, via linguistic analysis, investigates the complicated social phenomena. These social phenomena can only be scrutinized by multidisciplinary and multi-methodical approaches such as CDA (Wodak and Meyer, 2008, p. 2).

Thus, the 1970s meetings of scholars of discourse analysis led to the emergence of three distinct approaches of what later became Critical Discourse Analysis. They are Fairclough's *Three-Dimensional Approach*, van Dijk's *Socio-Cognitive Approach* and Wodak's *Discourse-Historical Method*, among others (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). As such they converged and diverged in some points of the topic, yet eventually they had their designated focus.

Fairclough (1995) aligns CDA along a continuum of interests with mild significance, such as the relation between language and society, to major political power relations. He signifies its goal as to make clear the vague relations of 'causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations, and processes' as mediated by associations of power and the struggles it presents (p. 134-5).

Following his path, Wodak (1995: 204) regards CDA as an analytical tool that targets matters like power, control, discrimination, and dominance. She (1997) also adds that this same focus (what happens between language and the society) reflects the essence of its importance. Moreover, van Dijk (1998), through CDA, seeks to reveal the mechanisms of the elite groups that enable them to exploit and take advantage of the public. Their collaboration (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997) produced a number of principles that CDA scholars should bear in mind throughout their analysis, as follows:

1. CDA focuses on social problems.
2. DA interprets and explains the analyzed issues.
3. Ideological implications are imbedded in discourse.
4. Discourse is one type of social behavior.
5. Discourse is connected to history.
6. Discourse organizes communities and opinions.
7. Power relations relate to discourse.
8. The relation between society and text is mediated, not direct.

Consequently, two main elements are found in CDA, and these are the workings of ideology and power in society, coupled with the role of language in revealing, contributing to and maintaining those mechanisms (Breez, 2011).

### **3. Power and Ideology in News Discourse**

*Power* and *ideology* have been discussed by the pioneers of the field in line with their designated theories. According to Fairclough (1995) these two concepts are the goals that CDA attempt to dig out when conducting an analysis of discourse so as to discover the relation between texts and social processes. Hence, Thomas (2004) highlights language as the primary tool of power that can manipulate obligation into conformity. This is why CDA does not consider power as coercive in- and by-itself, it rather conceives it as a factor of imposing certain ideologies (Wodak, 2001).

According to Van Dijk (1995, p. 21) ideology is a “specific basic framework of social cognition with specific social structures and specific cognitive and social functions”. He argues that ideologies are mainly conveyed in discourse, communication and non-verbal interaction such as semiotic messages (images, movies, etc.). This puts ideology in a position where it serves as a medium between cognitive representations and social groups. Although media reporting is assumed to be neutral, CDA scholars beg to differ. Fairclough (1995) insists that CDA’s sole aim is to reveal how texts imbed and reproduce power and ideology that conform with that media’s orientation. Eventually, those texts lead to the formation of an identity or multiple identities Al-Husseini’s (2024)

### **4. The Tariffs Crises**

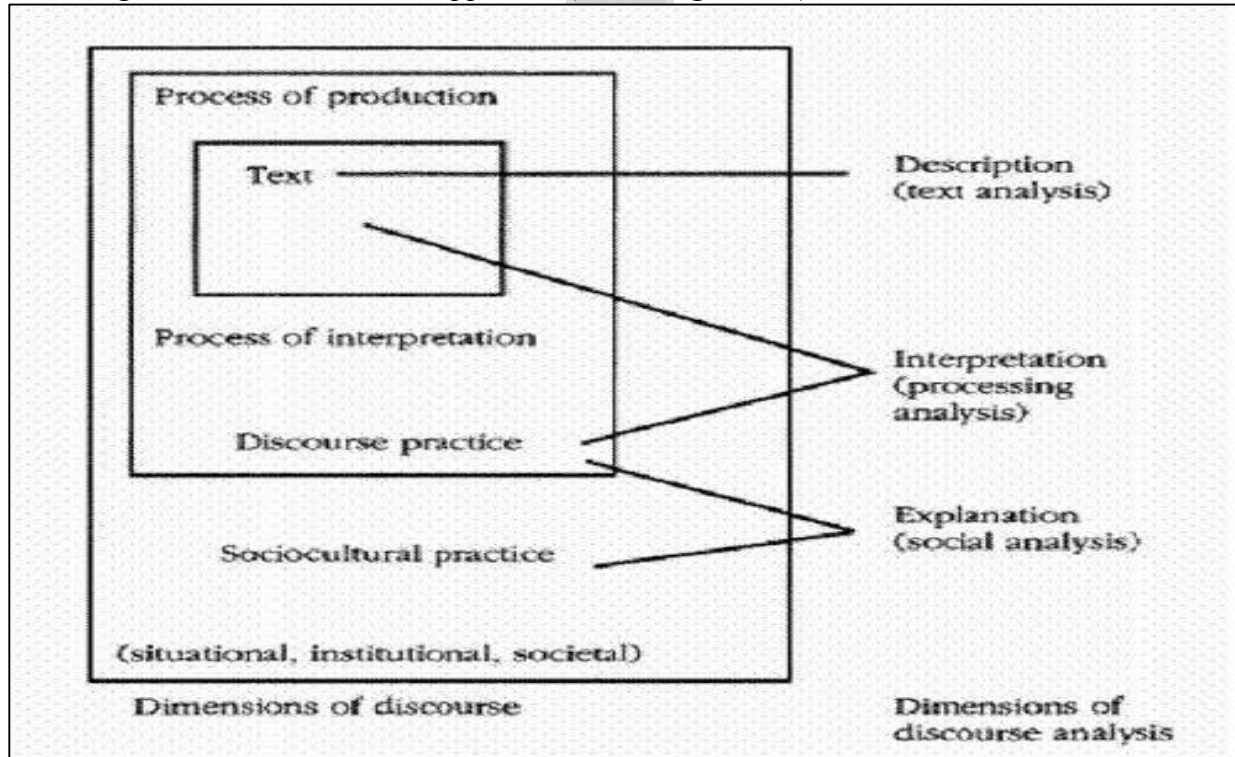
The crisis between the U.S. and Canada is not new. It has been an on-and-of relationship for a long period of time in the history of these two- and other- countries. According to Shamim (2025), Trump was not the first president to wage a tariff war, he was simply following the footsteps of his predecessors. In this case, Trump’s justification was that he targeted countries that did not do enough in order to stop the flow of immigrants and drugs.

Other historical crises include the “1930 The Smoot-Hawley Tariffs” which were aimed at reducing the competition with the American farmers. Also, in the 1960s, there was the chicken crisis with Europe during the World War II. Another war with Canada was about lumber in 1982 when the U.S. “battled Canada over softwood lumber”. In 2018, Trump imposed tariffs on solar panels which mainly come from China (Shamim, 2025).

Evidently, this is known to be a technique that enabled any government in the White House to coerce other governments into following the orders.

### **5. Methodology**

The data of the study consists of three reports from each media outlet. They are retrieved from the websites of each channel. The Criteria of their selection is their timing: the first three reports after the announcement of the tariffs on Feb 1<sup>st</sup>, 2025. MSNBC and Fox News are selected due to their different ideological stances and their high view rates within the U.S. They are known to have contradicting orientations: the former is liberal and the latter conservative. A qualitative and quantitative method of analysis is adopted to analyze the data. Qualitatively, Fairclough’s (1995) *Three-Dimensional Approach* is adapted to account for the textual, discursive and contextual aspects in the selected data.

**Figure 1***Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Approach (Fairclough, 1995)*

As shown in the figure above, there are three interrelated processes of analysis in Fairclough's theory (1995), as follows:

1. The element of analysis (the text).
2. The mode of production (spoken, written, etc.).
3. The socio-historical context that surrounds these processes.

In line with these three dimensions, the current research adapts three levels of analysis, namely:

1. Textual analysis: at this level, the lexical items used in the selected data are analyzed for any negative connotations.
2. Discursive analysis:
3. Contextual analysis

Quantitatively, Halliday's (1994) Transitivity Analysis is used to check for the frequency of the mostly used process(es) and their designation in data. Halliday's processes are:

1. Material Processes. Material processes refer to the aspects of actual happening, changing, and doing.
2. Mental Processes. Mental processes include the aspects of seeing, feeling, or thinking.
3. Relational Processes. Relational processes refer to the existence of a relation between the participants and their attributes.
4. Behavioral Processes. The behavioral processes comprise the act of, for example, smiling, laughing or singing.
5. Verbal Processes. Verbal processes represent the verbal actions, like, promising, warning, talking, etc.
6. Existential Processes. In existential processes the relation is merely that of being in a certain place.

## 6. Analysis and Discussion

This section analyzes the selected reports from the two selected outlets according to the adapted model.

### 6.1 Analysis of MSNBC Reports

#### A. Textual Analysis

The channels adhere to a cynical and critical discourse when it comes to reporting on the tariffs, referencing Trump's decisions as making a "laughingstock of America", "betrayal, and framing his decision as a "weird online tantrum" that has no "no plan" and that it is the "dumbest trade war in history." What such adjectival references denote is creating a negative mental image in the viewers, hence contributing to the overall ideological effort of this outlet. This is also fortified by the use of metaphors, such as "Trumpian noise", "All theatre" and "Presidential fixation", which imply the use of straw man fallacy- attacking the person, not the idea. Moreover, the strong and assertive modals used throughout the report convey the seriousness of the situation, implementing fear and caution to the audience ("The research suggests it's you" [the consumer] who pays").

#### B. Discursive Analysis

The production and its interrelation with other texts are another tool that this outlet uses in order to appropriately frame its negative presentation of Trump. For, the frequent reference to the opinions of economists and economic studies, as well as the use of opinions by people who are seen as liberal-leaning and citing opinion polls ("A new Quinnipiac poll finds that more voters (48%) believe tariffs will hurt the economy, than the 42% that think they'll help.") all serve that purpose. Eventually, the selected reports view the tariffs as both politically and economically harmful, unnecessary and are not based on sane reasons ("Trump claims the exporter pays the tariff... this argument is both empirically unfounded and... weird."). To add to the already-established structure, MSNBC also reflects on data and expert opinions on the topic, as in:

- "A widely cited study from the Peterson Institute predicts that Trump's most sweeping plans would cost households an average of \$2,600."
- "My own estimate is that 25% tariffs on all imports out of Canada and Mexico and 10% on China would cost the average household \$1,500-\$2,000."
- "Even the price of dryers, which weren't tariffed but are often sold with washers, also rose!"
- "The biggest U.S. producer of aluminum, Alcoa, asked for (and received) an exemption from the tariff."

Hence, adding legitimacy to their negative portrayal of the other.

#### C. Contextual Analysis

At this point, it becomes clear that MSNBC adopts a neoliberal orientation that calls for multilateral agreement, institutional expertise and free trade. Therefore, it presents itself via a counter-populist kind of discourse that aims to warn the public against irrationality and abuse of power. All of which fall under the ideological affiliation of the channel- the liberal/democratic ideology.

### 6.2 Analysis of Fox News Reports

#### A. Textual Analysis

The analysis of the selected reports reveals that Fox News' discourse tends to be of a nationalistic, official tone. This is exemplified through the channels focus on the "fabric of society" which it deems as being endangered by the "illegal aliens". The channel also does so by aligning its discourse with that of the president, quoting his narrative ("We need to protect Americans, and it is my duty as President to ensure the safety of all.", "Canada has been very abusive of the United States for many years.", "Canada should become our Cherished 51st State... AND NO TARIFFS!")

#### B. Discursive Analysis

Fox News' narrative seems to lean towards a straight style of reporting that limits the chance of editing and relies heavily on the official statements of the authority (The White House and Trump)

and framing that as a national threat (“response to an 'extraordinary threat'... constitutes a national emergency.”). In its discourse, Fox News represents Trump as a needed, strong leader that will lead American back to its prime time. With that, Fox News does not refer to any economic studies, perspectives that are critical to the narrative of the White house or expert opinion.

### C. Contextual Analysis

In its reporting, Fox News, seems to adhere to the power of the statement of the authority which supports an economic nationalism and law and order populism. It does so by echoing Trump’s narrative on self-reliance and sovereignty (“we don’t need anything they have”). In terms of the consequences of the tariffs, Fox News avoids discussing or downplays the impact that may result from these imposed tariffs on consumers. That said, the channel seems to amplify the executive power and focus on the internal and external threats, which aligns directly with the narrative of the government; hence, the ideology of the conservative Republican party.

The following is a quantitative analysis conducted via investigating (5) clauses from the *first three paragraphs* of each report. These paragraphs are considered the most important ones when it comes to presenting the overall macro proposition of the entire report, and van Dijk (2015) refers to them as the *Lead*. These clauses are analyzed according to Halliday’s (1994) Transitivity Analysis, in terms of Material (doing/action), Mental (sensing/thinking/feeling), Relational (being/having), Verbal (saying), Behavioral (physiological acts), Existential (indicating existence). After that, the frequency of each process per source is counted and the findings are explained.

**Table 1**

*Transitivity Analysis of MSNBC Reports.*

S.	Clause	Report	Process Type
1	“President Donald Trump on Saturday signed new tariffs on exports from Canada, Mexico and China.”	MSNBC Report 1	Material
2	“President Donald Trump is expected to announce new tariffs on three of our biggest trading partners: 25% on all imports from Canada and Mexico and 10% on China.”	MSNBC Report 1	Mental
3	“The exact timeline for implementation is up in the air.”	MSNBC Report 1	Relational
4	“But if — or when — they go into effect, what will that mean for you?”	MSNBC Report 1	Material/ Mental
5	“... any article about tariffs should start with the basic facts of the case.”	MSNBC Report 1	Material
6	“The Trump administration on Monday agreed to a one-month delay of a proposed 25% tariff on all goods coming into the country from Mexico”	MSNBC Report 2	Material
7	“after Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum agreed to send 10,000 troops to her country's northern border to fight drug trafficking and illegal immigration.”	MSNBC Report 2	Material

8	“In a country as large as the United States, it’s rare when a national election is decided by a single issue.”	MSNBC Report 2	Relational
9	“There are simply too many constituencies with too many varying interests and priorities.”	MSNBC Report 2	Existential
10	“But in the 2024 presidential race, there’s ample evidence suggesting the price of living was foremost on the minds of many voters.”	MSNBC Report 2	Mental
11	“On Thursday, President Donald Trump issued a new executive memo calling for “fair and reciprocal” trade tariffs on all major U.S. trading partners”	MSNBC Report 3	Material
12	“Trump says the United States, the world’s largest economy, is being “unfairly” taken advantage of by “both friend and foe.””	MSNBC Report 3	Verbal
13	“In a lengthy post Saturday on his Truth Social platform, Trump defended his plan.”	MSNBC Report 3	Verbal
14	“Trump has instructed his top advisers to put forward new tariff levels for America’s trading partners across the globe.”	MSNBC Report 3	Material
15	“The new levels will target trading practices that the Trump administration deems unfair.”	MSNBC Report 3	Material

The following table concludes the frequency count of each process in MSNBC’s reports, their percentages and the clauses they are used in from the table above.

**Table 2**  
*Frequency Count of MSNBC’s Reports’ Processes.*

PROCESS TYPE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE	CLAUSE USED
<b>MATERIAL</b>	8	53.3%	1,4,5,6,7,11,14,15
<b>MENTAL</b>	3	20%	2,4,10
<b>RELATIONAL</b>	2	13.3%	3,8
<b>VERBAL</b>	2	13.3%	12,13
<b>EXISTENTIAL</b>	1	6.6%	9

The numbers in the above table clearly indicate MSNBC's reliance on the material processes more than half of the total processes count (53.3%), reflecting its stance on the tariffs issue- caring about how it is conducted. The Mental process comes next accounting for (20%) of usage to indicate the channel's view of what would be the anticipated consequences, thus shaping the viewers' perception. Both Relational and Verbal occur equally (13.3%) in MSNBC's reports in which the first is used to indirectly refer to Trump's statements whereas the latter attributes statuses what is being discussed. Finally, Existential processes is used only once to contextualize the issue in terms of interests and priorities.

Table 3 below illustrates the quantitative analysis of Fox News' reports. In it, the selected clauses, the report they are extracted from, and the type of process contained in it.

**Table 3**

*Transitivity Analysis of Fox News' Reports.*

S.	CLAUSE	REPORT	PROCESS TYPE
1	"The Trump administration announced on Saturday that it is imposing tariffs through its new International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA)."	Fox News Report 1	Verbal
2	"President Donald Trump signed an executive order authorizing the tariffs Saturday..."	Fox News Report 1	Material
3	"Energy resources from Canada will have a lower 10% tariff, according to the White House."	Fox News Report 1	Relational
4	"the Trump administration said the legislation is a response ..."	Fox News Report 1	Verbal
5	"That constitutes a national emergency."	Fox News Report 1	Relational
6	"President Donald Trump defended his recent tariffs against Canada, Mexico and China.."	Fox News Report 2	Verbal
7	"And hinted that the European Union may suffer a similar fate."	Fox News Report 2	Verbal
8	"The [...] will go into effect Tuesday."	Fox News Report 2	Material
9	"Under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA), a 25% additional tariff will be levied on imports from Canada and Mexico,"	Fox News Report 2	Material
10	"Trump said that the tariffs stem from an "extraordinary threat posed by illegal aliens and drugs"	Fox News Report 2	Verbal

11	“President Donald Trump repeated his suggestion that Canada become the 51st on Sunday,	Fox News Report 3	Verbal
12	“noting that it would not be subjected to his incoming tariffs should the country join the U.S.”	Fox News Report 3	Verbal
13	"We pay hundreds of Billions of Dollars to SUBSIDIZE Canada. Why? There is no reason," Trump wrote on TRUTH Social.”	Fox News Report 3	Material
14	"We don't need anything they have.”	Fox News Report 3	Mental
15	“We have unlimited Energy”	Fox News Report 3	Relational

The following table enumerates the frequency count of each process in Fox News' reports, their percentages and the clauses they are used in from the table above.

**Table 4**

*Frequency Count of Fox News' Reports' Processes.*

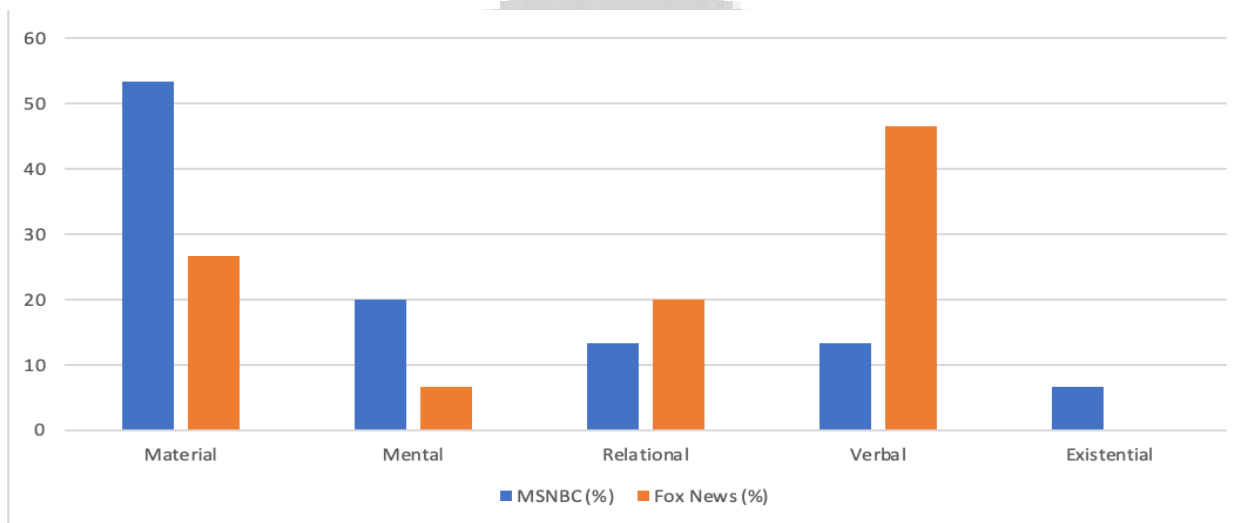
PROCESS TYPE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE	CLAUSE USED
VERBAL	7	46.6%	1,4,6,7,10,11,12
MATERIAL	4	26.6%	2,8,9,13
RELATIONAL	3	20%	3,5,15
MENTAL	1	6.6%	14

As the table of the total number of the processes used in Fox News' reports clears out, the channel seems to be adamant on reporting the president's announcements about his tariffs, dominating almost half of the total number of processes analyzed with the Verbal process (46.6%). Next comes the Material process which also accounts for the tariffs decision made by Trump with (26.6%) at the time. In the third place is the Relational process (20%) which is used to describe the context surrounding Trump's decision. Finally, the Mental is used only once (6.6%) to refer to Trump's statement about not needing Canada.

The following graph compares the percentages of processes use in the selected reports of both channels.

**Figure 1**

*Percentage of Processes Used in MSNBC's and Fox News' Reports.*



As the graph shows, MSNBC leans heavily on the Material framing, whereas Fox News utilizes the Verbal process. This is driven by the intentions of the two channels, where the former focuses on factual events, while the latter incorporates the saying and stating. MSNBC employs more Mental processes than Fox News, using them to highlight anticipated consequences. Relational processes are used almost equally by both channels to make attributions to their respective contexts. Finally, the existential process is exploited by MSNBC to mostly refer to contextualizing factors.

## 8. Conclusion

It is safe to conclude that the two channels implement their respective ideological affiliations in reporting on the issue under scrutiny- the U.S.-Canada Tariffs. MSNBC presents a critical, sarcastic and cynical perspective. Its unwavering drive to rely on economic expertise serves the purpose of interpreting Trump's decision as negative to the American layman viewer. On the other hand, Fox News, in its formal nationalistic and repetitive discourse - which is often quoted from the state- makes the channel seem biased toward the conservative (ruling) ideology. Hence, it is mostly in favor of the tariffs act.

The quantitative transitivity analysis confirms the findings in the critical qualitative analysis, where the material process is used by MSNBC to portray the acts of the authority negatively, whereas the verbal process is used by Fox News to reflect its quoting and reliance on that authority (positively). After all, bias towards ideological orientations, in the selected channels, was more powerful than their patriotic voice. This led to a narrative that does not seek to objectively evaluate the decision, but to demonize or glorify the *decision maker*, not the *decision* itself, regardless of the actual damage or benefit therein.

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