



Dr.Ali Hussein Abdulameer
ali.h.abdulameer@uokerbala.edu.iq

Mr.Haidar Salah Abdulhussein
haider.salih@uokerbala.edu.iq

Constructing Reality: A Critical Stylistic Analysis of Selected War Reporting

Abstract in English

This study critically examines how the world's top news agencies construct their war narratives with specific linguistic patterns. Drawing on Lesley Jeffries' (2010) Critical Stylistic model of ten instruments, the study analyses war reports from three top sources: BBC, CBC, and Reuters. The background of the study lies in the recognition that news texts are never neutral. They often reflect institutional values and reproduce broader power relations. The paper aims to identify how lexical items, representations of actions, and depictions of key participants contribute to ideological positioning in war discourse. A qualitative textual analysis is employed to investigate selected news reports on the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The findings highlight that the Russia-Ukraine war is framed in different ways. These differences reflect the distinct editorial stances of each news outlet. The study concludes that war reporting is not a transparent record of events. It is an ideologically charged practice that requires critical reading. The paper underlines the importance of media literacy as a means of questioning how news discourse contributes to the shaping of public opinion.

Paper Info

Keywords

news agencies, war narrative, Lesley Jeffries' (2010) ten tools, Critical Stylistics, ideology

1. INTRODUCTION

The language employed in war reporting plays a vital role in shaping how conflicts are perceived by the public. News discourse goes simply beyond transmitting facts. It actively constructs versions of reality that influence both national and international audiences (Fairclough, 1995). Through strategic choices, media outlets are capable of highlighting certain elements of a conflict while minimizing or omitting others. This power of language allows news organizations to frame narratives that align with particular ideological or political interests (van Dijk, 2008).

This study investigates how three major news agencies (i.e. BBC, CBC, and Reuters) construct their reports about the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The analysis aims to uncover the ideological patterns embedded within the linguistic structures of selected war-related reports. These aims could be fulfilled by employing Lesley Jeffries' (2010) model of Critical Stylistics. Particular attention is given to the portrayal of key actors, the representation of war events, and the underlying political stances inferred through language.

1.1 Research Problem

The following are the two problems of the study:

1. How do news agencies construct war realities through linguistic choices?
2. What ideological patterns emerge in the selected reporting?

1.2 Objectives

1. To apply Jeffries' ten tools of Critical Stylistics to discover how lexical and grammatical choices shape war narratives.
2. To examine how linguistic structures create meaning bias and ideological positioning.
3. To compare and contrast war narratives from different media outlets.

1.3 Research Questions

1. How do lexical and grammatical choices shape war narratives?
2. What ideologies are embedded in war discourse?
3. How do different media sources construct conflicting realities of war?

1.4 Methodology Overview

This research adopts a qualitative approach which is supported by critical textual analysis. Three war-related reports covering the Russia-Ukraine conflict were selected from the BBC, CBC, and Reuters. The analysis applies Lesley Jeffries' (2010) ten tools of Critical Stylistics. It focuses on linguistic strategies that reveal ideological underpinnings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in Critical Stylistics (Jeffries, 2010). This framework offers a systematic model for examining how linguistic choices construct ideological meaning in text. It extends Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) by systematically analyzing how language structures shape meaning in media discourse. It builds on Van Dijk's (2008) perspective that news is not neutral but reflects power dynamics.

2.2 Relevant Studies

Several prior studies have addressed how language shapes public understanding of war. Entman (2004), in his work *Media Bias in War Reporting*, emphasizes that media outlets often construct conflict narratives based on national political interests.

Hodge and Kress (1993), in their study *Linguistic Framing*, show how word choice, such as labelling groups as “terrorists” versus “freedom fighters” can alter public perception of the same actors. Richardson's (2007) in his *Comparative Analysis of War Narratives* investigates discrepancies. He shows how Western and non-Western media frame conflicts, such as the Iraq War and the early stages of the Ukraine conflict. These works provide valuable theoretical grounding for the present study.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Approach

This study utilizes Critical Stylistics to analyze war-related news reports from three major international news outlets. A qualitative approach guides the analysis with a focus on linguistic and ideological framing.

3.2 Data Collection

Three news articles covering the Ukraine-Russia conflict were selected randomly, namely:

1. **BBC News:** “*Putin sets out conditions for Ukraine ceasefire.*” (<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cp8l00l4rejo>)
2. **CBC News:** “*Putin backs Trump's push for Ukraine ceasefire in principle, but says ‘there are issues’ to discuss with U.S.*” (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/russia-ukraine-war-putin-visits-kursk-trump-envoy-ceasefire-talks-moscow/>)
3. **Reuters:** “*Putin says Ukrainians face choice of ‘surrender or die’ as Russia tightens squeeze in Kursk.*” (<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-says-its-forces-will-soon-retake-all-kursk-ukrainian-troops-2025-03-13/>)

3.3 Analytical Framework: Jeffries'(2010) Tools of Critical Stylistics

Each article was analyzed based on the most commonly used tools of Jeffries, namely:

1. Naming and describing actors.

2. Representing actions/events.
3. Equating and contrasting perspectives.
4. Prioritizing certain details.
5. Implying and assuming unstated meanings.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Naming and Describing

News outlets use specific noun phrases and modifiers to label key actors in ways that signal ideological stance, as in the following sections:

BBC describes Putin as setting “conditions for Ukraine ceasefire”, implying a position of control or authority. The phrase “Mr. Putin said his troops would stop fighting” frames him as the ultimate decision-maker. And it implicitly legitimizes his role in resolving the conflict.

CBC takes a slightly more diplomatic stance. It states that “Putin backs Trump’s push for Ukraine ceasefire in principle”, which portrays Putin as cooperative (at least on the surface) without labelling him as hostile or aggressive.

Reuters uses stark, forceful language. It quotes Putin directly “The enemy must either surrender or die.” This highly emotive phrase positions Putin as authoritarian and militaristic, while implicitly depicting Ukraine as the aggressor.

4.2 Representing Actions/ Events/ States

This tool examines how actions are verbalized to reflect agency, responsibility, or intent.

BBC uses the phrase, “Putin said Russia’s troops would stop fighting if Ukraine agreed to withdraw”, which frames Russia as reactive rather than aggressive. Ukraine is assigned the active role in “withdrawing,” subtly shifting responsibility for ongoing violence onto Ukraine.

CBC uses more neutral or vague constructions like: “Putin said he would be willing to discuss a ceasefire.” The modal verb “*would be willing*” softens his stance. Besides, it portrays him as diplomatically engaged without firm commitment.

Reuters, in contrast, emphasizes direct aggression: “Russia is tightening its squeeze on Ukrainian forces.” The metaphorical phrase “tightening its squeeze” anthropomorphizes Russia as a predatory force that aggressively asserts dominance on the battlefield.

4.3 Equating and Contrasting

This tool reveals ideological stance through comparison and juxtaposition.

BBC contrasts Ukraine’s diplomacy with Russia’s rigidity: “President Volodymyr Zelensky...has repeatedly said Ukraine will not give up territory.” This line places

Ukraine in a morally firm position while juxtaposing it with Russia’s demands. Moreover, it frames the latter as inflexible.

CBC introduces contrast indirectly by reporting: “Trump’s aide met with Putin to discuss peace, but Putin emphasized unresolved issues.” The juxtaposition of “discuss peace” and “unresolved issues” subtly questions Putin’s sincerity.

Reuters draws historical parallels to reinforce contrast, as in this quote: “Russia compared Ukraine’s actions in Kursk to Nazi Germany.” This stark comparison aligns Ukraine with historical villainy and it deepens the ideological divide.

4.4 Prioritizing

Foregrounding and backgrounding different elements shape what the reader perceives as most important.

BBC foregrounds political diplomacy: “Mr Putin said he would order a ceasefire if Ukraine began withdrawing troops from four regions Russia claims to have annexed.” The condition is placed prominently, guiding readers to interpret peace as conditional on Ukrainian compliance.

CBC foregrounds U.S. involvement, but not Ukraine’s agency: “Putin said he appreciated Trump’s efforts but noted ‘there are still issues’.” Trump’s role is central, which shifts attention away from the actual Ukrainian stake in the conflict.

Reuters prioritizes battlefield outcomes: “Russian forces have advanced on multiple fronts,” placing military success over diplomatic options. This positions Russia as dominant and Ukraine as struggling.

4.5 Implying and Assuming

Writers imply meanings through presuppositions and suggestive phrasing.

BBC implies that Russia’s conditions are delaying peace: “There was no immediate response from Ukraine.” This passive phrasing shifts urgency onto Ukraine while subtly legitimizing Russia’s demands.

CBC implies U.S. influence over the conflict: “Putin’s comments came after Trump’s envoy visited Moscow.” The cause-and-effect relationship is assumed without being stated outright which suggests the U.S. holds leverage.

Reuters implies that Ukrainian defeat is imminent: “Ukrainians face a choice: surrender or die.” The binary framing removes nuance and enforces a sense of hopelessness; therefore, resistance is futile.

Figure 1

The Critical Stylistics’ Tools and Their Representations in the Three Media Sources

Stylistic Tool	BBC	CBC	Reuters
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Naming and Describing	Putin described as <i>manipulative</i> ; Ukraine as <i>willing to negotiate</i> .	Putin shown as hesitant, but not explicitly negative.	Uses direct speech from Putin; portrays Ukraine as the invader of Kursk.
Representing Actions	Focuses on Russia delaying peace talks.	Emphasizes ceasefire negotiations, downplays military aspects.	Highlights Russian military gains and Ukraine's losses.
Equating and Contrasting	Contrasts Ukraine's <i>clear plan</i> with Putin's <i>obstruction</i> .	Contrasts Trump's peace push with Putin's skepticism.	Compares Kursk to historical invasions, linking Ukraine to Nazi Germany.
Prioritizing	Foregrounds political arguments.	Foregrounds U.S.-Russia diplomatic tensions.	Foregrounds military victories and territorial control.
Implying and Assuming	Implies Russia is playing for time, not serious about peace.	Implies Trump is the key decision-maker for peace.	Implies Ukraine is losing and must surrender.

5. Conclusions

This study aims to examine the war reports from three world news agencies: the BBC, CBC, and Reuters. It concentrates on how these reports are framed linguistically and also investigates how they display ideological bias.

The study adopted Lesley Jeffries' Critical Stylistics. It revealed that word choice and grammar are powerful tools. These tools play a key role in shaping popular perceptions of war. The study shows that the language used is characterized by aggressive phrasing. It frequently employs passive constructions. It is also rich in metaphorical expressions. These linguistic choices influence the interpreter's perception of events.

Moreover, the study determines that every media channel framed various facets of the Russia-Ukraine war. Consequently, these various facets build up different realities. BBC framed Russia as the greatest obstacle to peace. CBC framed the U.S. as likely to act as a broker of peace, but at the expense of neglecting Ukrainian agency. Reuters featured military updates, presenting Ukraine as inferior militarily. These editorial decisions were not coincidental. Actually, these decisions were consistent with broader ideological beliefs embedded in the discourse of every news channel.

Ultimately, the study verifies the hypothesis that news language is not neutral. Information reporting does not simply report, it produces versions of the real.

Recognizing these linguistic features is essential. It helps develop critically media-literate individuals. It is equally important to understand how global conflicts are constructed for different audiences.

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Abstract in Arabic

تستخدم هذه الدراسة التحليل النقدي للكشف عن كيفية بناء وكالات الأنباء العالمية الكبرى رواياتها الحربية باستخدام أنماط لغوية محددة. وبالاستناد إلى نموذج ليزلي جيفريز (2010) للأسلوبية النقدية المكون من عشر أدوات، تحلل الدراسة تقارير حربية من ثلاثة مصادر رئيسية: بي بي سي، وسي بي سي، ورويترز. وتستند الدراسة إلى أن إدراك النصوص الإخبارية لا تتسم بالحياد، بل غالباً ما تعكس القيم المؤسسية وتعيد إنتاج علاقات القوة الأوسع. وتهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى تحديد كيفية مساهمة المفردات، وتصوير الأحداث، وتصوير المشاركين الرئيسيين في تحديد الموقف الأيديولوجي في الخطاب الحربي. ويُستخدم تحليل نصي نوعي لدراسة تقارير إخبارية مختارة حول الصراع الروسي الأوكراني. وتُبرز النتائج أن الحرب الروسية الأوكرانية تُؤطر بطرق مختلفة، تعكس هذه الاختلافات المواقف التحريرية المتباينة لكل وسيلة إعلامية. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن التغطية الإخبارية للحرب ليست سجلاً شفافاً للأحداث، بل هي ممارسة مشحونة أيديولوجياً تتطلب قراءة نقدية. تؤكد الورقة البحثية على أهمية التنقيف الإعلامي كوسيلة للتساؤل عن كيفية مساهمة الخطاب الإخباري في تشكيل الرأي العام.