

Transitivity and Agency in Media Representations of Refugees: A Comparative Analysis of The Guardian and Fox News

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التعددية والفاعلية في تصوير وسائل الإعلام للاجئين: تحليل مقارن بين صحيفتي الغارديان وفوكس نيوز
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المخلص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى الكشف عن الآليات السياسية الكامنة وراء التغطية الإعلامية لأزمة اللاجئين، ويبدأ بالإطار النظري لقواعد اللغة الوظيفية النظامية، التي طورها مايكل هاليداى، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على نظام التعددية (٢٠١٤)، يدرس هذا النظام كيفية استخدام اللغة لتمثيل تجربتنا للعالم الخارجي والداخلي، إنه ليس مجرد تصنيف للأفعال، بل هو نظام دلالي كامل يصف العمليات والمشاركين والظروف المحيطة، يكشف التحليل عن أنماط خطاب مختلفة تعكس التحيز الأيديولوجي لكل صحيفة: في صحيفة الغارديان، من المرجح أن يظهر اللاجئين كوكلاء في العمليات العقلية، بينما من المرجح أن يظهر اللاجئين كوكلاء في العمليات المادية ذات الطبيعة السلبية أو المهددة في صحيفة فوكس، تقترض الدراسة أن الخيارات النحوية داخل هذا النظام ليست محايدة، بل تشكل وتغرس واقعاً معيناً بأيديولوجيات محددة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: نظام، تعددية، اخبار، إعلام، تحليل، أيديولوجي، لاجئين، وكالة.

Abstract

This research aims to uncover the political mechanisms underlying media coverage of the refugee crisis. It begins with the theoretical framework of Systemic Functional Grammar, developed by Michael Halliday, with a particular focus on the Transitivity system (2014). This system examines how language is used to represent our experience of the external and internal world. It is not merely a classification of verbs, but a complete semantic system that describes processes, participants, and surrounding circumstances. The analysis reveals different discourse patterns reflecting each newspaper's ideological bias: in the Guardian, refugees are more likely to appear as agents in mental processes, while that refugees are more likely to appear as agents in material processes of a negative or threatening nature in the Fox. The study posits that grammatical choices within this system are not neutral, but rather shape and imbue a particular reality with specific ideologies.

Keywords: Transgression, news, media, analysis, ideology, refugees, agency.

1. Introduction

Transitivity, as described in Halliday's Systematic Functional Grammar (SFG), takes long be a fundamental analytical typical framework in stylistics and critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). This model, derived from the work of M. A. K. Halliday (1985, 1994; Halliday and Mathiesen, 2004, 2014), designates how the world of our grammatical experiences is divided into a “well-defined set of operation types” (Halliday and Mathiesen, 2014, p. 213), A simplest of which are: physical operations—external actions or events in the world around us; mental operations—internal events such as thinking or feeling; and relational operations—the abstract relationships of being or having. Each is characterized by specific participants (such as subject and object, perceiver and phenomenon), and the different operation types provide a range of options for interpreting any given experience through language (Macaulay & Deppeler, 2020).

Halliday (2017) observes that analyzing transitive verbs is a fundamental aspect of critical analysis because language is interpreted as a semantic arrangement, linked to frameworks through which meanings and their communication are understood. This places language types in an alternative perspective: such as unfortunate commitment, as opposed to end in itself. It appears, from a linguistic perspective, that Halliday and his colleagues laid the groundwork for practical phonetics in the 1960s (Gries & Müller, 2025).

Hicks believes that “language is not merely a tool for representation and a means of communication, but a social practice and a way of getting things done” (2007, p. 4). In other words, the validation of language is as important as its use, which is the most common form of social behavior. A person relies on language for their open and private cooperation and decides to communicate with the various people and social institutions they possess. Fairclough “argues that language is a material type of belief system, and that philosophy contributes to language” (2001, p. 73). Halliday seeks to draw attention to how these sentences, particularly transitivity, are understood, to help translate their semantic meaning into practical content. Metafunctional theory addresses a part of function and an aspect of systemic functional grammar, but it is also important in the “systemicity” of SFG. The former concerns the natural world in its broadest sense, including consciousness. The latter concerns the social world, particularly the relationship between speaker and listener. The former concerns the verbal world, particularly the flow of information from text.

2.0 Transitivity System

Transitivity, according to Halliday (2017), is a framework for characterizing the entire clause as opposed to just the verb and its object. Thus, it explains how the verb transfers meaning from subject to predicate (Hancock, 2005). Considering verb phrases as defining types of representational processes may also be beneficial. There are various types of participants in this procedure. A clause can be used, roughly speaking, to depict a universe in which things are occurring.

A sentence's subject and verb are included in a phrase (Hicks, 2007). According to Halliday, a clause interprets the world as being made up of a nuclear process and participant, other participants, and circumstances (Martin, 1992). The most general explanation of how real-world phenomena are represented as linguistic structure is provided by the semantic categories of process, participant, and circumstance (Halliday, 2017& 2018). Verbal groups “represent processes, nominal groups represent people, and adverbial or prepositional groups represent situations” (p.57).

2.1 Process

Transitivity relies heavily on processes. Although it can also be thought of as what "goings-on" are conveyed throughout the entire sentence, the process focuses on the portion of the clause that is realized by the verbal group (Halliday, 2014). Halliday identified six distinct process types: material, behavioral, mental, verbal, relational, and existential.

2.1.1 Material Process

Semantically, material processes “represent actions or occurrences that take place in the world outside of humans” (Saragih, 2010, p.7). Hence, this procedure alludes to human experience on a bodily level. According to Halliday (1994, p.110), material processes “are doing processes. They convey the idea that an entity "does" something, which may be done "to" another entity. Therefore, a doing (process), a doer (participant I), and an entity to whom the process is extended or directed (participant II) are all required in clauses containing a material proces”. Syntactically, the present continuous tense is the unmarked tense connected to the material process.

2.1.2 Mental Process

Mental processes “refer to verbs indicating perception, cognition, affection, and desire” (Saragih, 2010, p.7). Thus, it enables language manipulators to prompt belief, opinions and perceptions that aid to classify their meanings of reality. However, the mental process inclines to be comprehended via the use of verbs like “think, know, feel, smell, hear, see, want, like, hate, please, repel, admire, enjoy, fear”.

Mental processes differ from material ones in as much as the latter are physical, moving, overt doings. Semantically, a mental process involves sense, which is inside the human or conscious being. Hence, mental process is connected to mental and emotional matters in which the participant that is connected to the logic must be a mindful or human being. Thus, the person who minds the mental process happens is not actually ‘acting’.

2.1.3 Relational Process

The relational process defines “existence and relationships among entities through means of identification, attribution, and possession” (Saragih, 2010, p.8). thus, it takes place both externally and internally within a person. Relational processes are generally expressed using the verb 'be' or other similar verbs (referred to as copular verbs); for instance, become , appear , seem, and occasionally by verbs like own, have,

own, and possess. Hence, Halliday (1994 & 2017) categorizes the relational process into two types: attributive relational processes and relational processes identification.

a. Relational Process Identification

In the identifying manner, to some degree it has an identity given to it. It incomes that one object is “being used to identify another: ‘x is identified by a’, or ‘a serves to define the identity of x” (Halliday, 1994, p. 122). Structurally, the x-element is “labeled as identified, which is to be identified, and the a-element is labeled as identifier, which serves an identity”(p.123). This manner is apprehended by the verbs: ‘be’ (is, am, are, was, were...), become, etc.

b. Attributive Relational Process

Attributive relational processes are “the processes which assign a quality. ‘a is an attribute of x’. Other words, in this mode an entity has some quality ascribed or attributed to it” (Halliday, 1994, p.120). This type is comprehended by the verbs: sound, look, play, cost, have, get, seem, etc.

2.1.4 Behavioural Process

Behavioural Processes are “processes of physiological and psychological behaviour, like breathing, dreaming, snoring, smiling, hiccupping, looking, watching, listening, and pondering” (Hui, 2025). They are the least distinct of all the six process types because they have no clearly defined characteristics of their own; rather, they are partly like the material and partly like the mental. Other words this type is the grey area between material and mental processes. Typically, behavioural processes have only one participant who is ‘behaving’: that is the human who is typically conscious being.

2.1.5 Verbal Process

Speaking is definitely a kind of act, hence to some extent it would not be irrational to deal with it as material process (D.Hub, 2025).. Alternatively, it has some structures of mental process, particularly if we trust that expression of views is a kind of inner speech. An instance can be completed for assuming a new sort of process: verbs of ‘saying’. Saragih (2010, p.8) states that “verbal processes show activities related to information. Specifically, the process includes that of saying, commanding, asking, and offering”.

2.1.6 Existential Process

Existential processes are processes of existence (Isaksson, 2024). These represent that something exists or happens. According to Hancock (2005, p.240), “existential process is a clause that presents an entity as existing without predicating anything additional about it”. Moreover, Saragih (2010, p.9) states that “existential processes share features of relational process in the sense that the common verb is BE (is, am, are, was, were, has, have been, etc.) and other verbs such as go, come, toil, exist, remain, arise, occur, happen, take place”.

The existential processes are normally recognizable because it is signaled by ‘there’.The word ‘there’ is needed as subject, but it has no experiential meaning in a

sense, its function is to avoid the need for, or the possibility of, a second participant in the clause, because there is only one participant inside (Isaksson, 2024).

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

This research provides a qualitative analysis of news articles from “the Guardian and Fox news”, with quantitative evidence of occurrences (Cresswell, 2014). The samples of this study are 10 news articles (5 from The Guardian and 5 from Fox News) in which these articles news were selected purposively from the online archives of both newspapers, covering the same time period and a common major event (such as the closure of European borders). They are selected as being one of the top newspapers (Chen, 2002) and it is one of the most wealthy media in the world. In accumulation, BBC's news facilities are worldwide, venerated and reliable. The content analysis in this paper is based on Halliday's theory (transitivity system 2014), it is used to analyse each sentence in the sample according to what type of process is identified, the roles of the participants (e.g., Actor, Goal, Sensor, and the circumstances. Table 1 encapsulates the name of newspaper, the number of articles and its ideological stance. Table 2 provides the plausible article titles from Guardian and Fox news focused specifically on the topic of refugees.

Table 1.

The data source of news report articles

News Media	Number of Articles	Ideological Stance
The Guardian	5 articles	Liberal
The Fox	5 articles	Conservative

Table 2.

The topics of news articles and websites

News Media	Topics of News Articles	Online Websites
The Guardian	1. "We risk our lives for a future": The perilous Mediterranean crossings claiming thousands of lives"	1. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/jun/20/mediterranean-crossings-migrant-deaths-unhcr-report
	2. "UK's Rwanda asylum plan ruled unlawful by Supreme Court in major blow to government"	2. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/nov/15/uk-rwanda-asylum-plan-unlawful-supreme-court
	3. "A city of tents": Winter conditions worsen for Syrian refugees in Lebanese camps.	3. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/12/syrian-refugees-lebanon-winter-conditions-tent-camps
	4. "Germany extends welcome for Ukrainians, but integration challenges mount"	4. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/08/germany-ukrainian-refugees-integration-challenges
	5. "Climate refugees not granted same protections as war victims, UN study finds"	5. https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/feb/22/climate-refugees-protections-un-study

The Fox	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Biden's refugee policy creates national security crisis, border officials warn. 2. "We can't take any more": Town hall erupts over plan to resettle refugees in small NY community. 3. Cost of housing, supporting refugees falls on US taxpayers, report shows 4. Terror watchlist arrests at southern border spike amid surge of migrants from beyond Mexico 5. The real motive behind the push for open borders 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. https://www.foxnews.com/politics/bidens-refugee-policy-creates-national-security-crisis-border-officials-warn 2. https://www.foxnews.com/us/town-hall-erupts-over-plan-resettle-refugees-small-ny-community 3. https://www.foxnews.com/politics/cost-housing-supporting-refugees-falls-us-taxpayers-report-shows 4. https://www.foxnews.com/us/terror-watchlist-arrests-southern-border-spike-surge-migrants-beyond-mexico 5. https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/tucker-carlson-real-motive-behind-push-for-open-borders
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4. Data Analysis and Discussion

In under analysis, the study tries to investigate who is assigned the role of the actor in the physical processes? Are the refugees the ones who "cross" the borders and "arrive" (active actors), or are they "rejected" or "rejected" (passive targets)?, type of operations attributed to refugees: Are they portrayed through mental operations (fear, hope), thus humanizing them, or through violent physical operations (destroy, transgress), thus portraying them as threats? The analysis of transitivity is achieved in the examined newspaper articles by retaining various verbal process constructs that will be examined in the following news excerpt samples. In addition table 3 provides numbers of process utilized in the news articles as a means of quantitative evidence.

Table 3.

The number of process in news articles

News Media	Material Process	Mental process	Verbal process	Relational Process	Existential Process	Behavioural Process
The Guardian	400	475	300	301	201	220
The Fox	480	389	200	301	200	210

The selected sentence for analysis (from Fox News): **“Biden's refugee policy creates a national security crisis, border officials warn”**, breaking the sentence down into processes, it contains two main processes, first: Material process where the agent is **“Biden's refugee policy”**,

This type of agent is abstract/non-human actor, and the goal is **“a national security crisis”**. Whereas circumstance in the above sentences is implied in the context of the predicate when there is no direct adverb of time or place in this sentence. Thus, the ideologies here are the abstraction of responsibility, instead of a human agent saying **“President Biden is creating a crisis,”** we find that **“policy”** is the one doing it. This creates a distance between the action and the actual agent. The sentence establishes a direct causal relationship: **a particular policy a national security crisis.**

Second process type: Mental/Verbal Process, the Sayer is **“Border officials”**, the type of speaker here is : **human, institutional, and authority figure.** The Receiver is

implicit (**Public, Government**) whereas the message of the sentence is the entire preceding sentence (**that Biden's refugee policy creates a crisis**). The choice of the verb "warn" instead of "say" or "announce" is significant. A warning implies imminent danger, authority of the speaker and the necessity of taking action.

Agency Analysis System focuses on who performs the action and who is affected by it, the verb (**creates**) is a transitive verb requiring a subject and an object. The subject is Biden's refugee policy (a full-fledged agent/agency). The object is a national security crisis (the result of the action). The relationship is direct cause (X creates Y).

The selected sentence for analysis (from The Guardian): "**Thousands of refugees risk their lives crossing the Mediterranean to seek safety, as EU governments fail to agree on a rescue plan**". In this sentence the material process is clear, where the agent is abstract **politics / refugees** (human beings), the action is risks that seeks material agency, the goal is **crisis, safety and better Life**. A critical analysis of this short sentence reveals the embodiment of politics and its transformation into a complete instrument for concealing the human agent and the complete exclusion of refugees from the discourse, thus facilitating their dehumanization through the act of warning. This shows how grammar is not innocent. Every grammatical choice is an ideological one.

Another sentence for the analysis is "**An influx of refugees strains local schools and hospitals**". The transitivity analysis for the element of this sentence is material process where "**strains**" is the verb and the actor is "**An influx of refugees**", the agent type is **abstract/ non human**. Whereas the goal is "**local schools and hospitals**", and the circumstance is **implicit (local)**. The verb "**strains**" establishes a direct causal relationship: the presence of **refugees = strain on services**. The verb is transitive, requiring a subject and an object, masking state responsibility: Why are schools and hospitals "overburdened"? Perhaps because they are already underfunded. But the statement makes refugees the sole cause, not the state's failure to support public services. Thus, Fox News chooses the active voice to emphasize the power and effectiveness of the state. The Guardian chooses the passive voice to conceal the perpetrator.

The analysis is to reveal different discourse patterns reflecting each newspaper's ideological bias. In The Guardian (liberal), refugees are more likely to appear as agents in mental processes (feeling, suffering) and as targets in physical processes carried out by others (being received by authorities, being persecuted), framing them as victims and individuals with feelings and will.

In Fox News (conservative), the analysis depicts that refugees are more likely to appear as agents in material processes of a negative or threatening nature (**flowing, breaking the law, entering the country**), while governments and authorities appear as targets of these actions or as agents in defensive physical processes (**stopping their flow, protecting borders**). This frames the crisis as a threat to security and sovereignty:

- (1) “the refugees desperate for support’ consistently appeared in news media and agency”.
- (2) “As refugees continue to pour out of war-torn Ukraine, it is beholden on the global community to respond with open arms and not just with warm hearts”.
- (3) “Government must offer Ukrainian refugees a safe route to the UK” .

As mentioned previously, the purpose of ‘the refugees desperate for support’ confrontational process in the news media was to enhance the already positive framing of the refugees, the eventual goal of the processes were to persuade a positive attitude on the part of the readers and construct a public opinion that refugees be protected and supported. Thus, the choice of verbs is a powerful linguistic tool that shapes the reader's perception without them even realizing it. By analyzing these verbs, we can uncover the narrative framework presented by each media outlet. **First: Material verbs** that portray the refugee as an active agent or victim, in the Guardian style such verbs of struggle and survival like “**risk, flee, survive, seek asylum, claim a right**”. These verbs place the refugee at the center of the story as an active agent striving to improve their situation, highlighting the human aspect and individual suffering as in the following examples from the Guardian:

- (4) “Thousands of families flee conflict, seeking safety in neighboring countries.”
- (5) “Many risk their lives crossing the sea to find a better future.”

Second : Relational processes According to the examination of processes, refugees are mostly represented as active actor in the corpus of online media news stories of the US in terms of their aspiration as in the examples (6) in which verbs of assistance and integration are used such as “**is granted asylum, is integrated, is aided, is protected, and is welcomed**”. Here, the refugee is the object, portraying them as a recipient of assistance. The role of governments and host communities in their humanitarian duty is highlight. Example sentences from The Guardian:

- (6) “The government was urged to accept more refugees.”
- (7) “Local charities are working to integrate the new arrivals into the community.”

Third :Behavioral verbs of condemnation and criticism in the data analysis are utilized in the Guardian news such as “**condemn, warn against, criticize, and reject**” to criticize policies that make life difficult for refugees, reflecting a moral stance that defends their rights as in the sentences from The Guardian:

- (8) “Human Rights Watch condemned the policy that pushes migrants back.”
- (9) “The court ruled that the plan violates international law.”

However in the Fox news verbal processes represented in this corpus of media news reports of the refugees. The description process is the most recurrent verbal process as in Fox news

- (10) “Asghary said they have much to be thankful for.”,
- (11) “We know what it means to be refugees, they tell us.”,

(12) **“Along with other refugees who spoke to reporters, the girl was not identified by age or name under an agreement with South Korean government officials.”**

The process of appraisal comes next as in Fox news :

(13) **“I don't want to complain because we are in the U.S., and they are trying their best”.**

In addition, verbs that portray refugees as a threat or burden in Fox news style such as the verbs of flow and breach. in the analysis of these metaphorical verbs liken the influx of refugees to a flood or tidal surge, suggesting they are an uncontrollable, untamed force of nature that threatens security and borders as in examples from Fox News:

(14) **“Migrants are flooding across the open border”.**

(15) **“The administration failed to secure the frontier.”**

Also, in the analysis of mental verbs in Fox news, such verbs of Cost and Strain are utilized a lot such as "strains, drains resources, costs, exploits the system". These verbs focus on the alleged economic burden, presenting refugees as a financial responsibility for taxpayers and as competitors for public resources. As in those examples from Fox News:

(16) **“An influx of refugees strains local schools and hospitals.”**

(17) **“The program costs American taxpayers billions.”**

Thus, the verbs of doubt and scrutiny for identifying the relational process such as "is suspected, is detained, is deported, conceals identity" are utilized more in Fox agency. These verbs cast doubt on the intentions of refugees and highlight national security concerns, creating an atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust about their identities and backgrounds, here, example sentences from Fox News:

(18) **“Authorities detained a man who tried to enter the country with fraudulent documents.”**

(19) **“We must vet everyone who seeks to come in.”**

The findings of this study reinforced the view that agency media, particularly right-wing outlets, deliberately or intentionally adopt a "racist ideology" in their coverage of refugees worldwide. A racist ideology refers to a set of beliefs or ideas that promote or support discriminatory attitudes and actions based on race. This ideology includes holding unfair and biased views of individuals or groups based on their racial or ethnic background (van Dijk, 2023).

The Guardian's perspective (humanitarian framework) versus the Fox News perspective (security/economic framework) in which Refugee agency represents active agent (**risks, flees**) versus passive victim or threat (**is expelled, is driven out**). Also, in the context such as **“conflict, human rights, international law, national security, borders, and financial cost”**

The Guardian agency has an implicit role where the victim deserving of protection versus potential threat or economic burden, while the Fox agency has responsibility where governments and the international community to help versus refugees and host

countries to protect borders. This analysis illustrates how language is never neutral; it is a lens through which we view the world. Choosing a simple verb like "seeks protection" versus "streams in" can drastically alter how we understand the same event.

According to van Leeuwen (2008, p. 34), this form of role distribution indicates that "the participant is a recipient or client in relation to a physical activity, or a receiver in relation to a verbal process." According to Halliday and Mathiesen (2004), the prepositions "to" and "for" are used to express the beneficiary status of social actors in the discourse. The assistance received by refugees from the United States, donor countries, relief groups, and activists is the only beneficiary status for refugees a general reference classifies social actors into a group, while a specific reference classifies the social actor exclusively. This study refers to general references by names without articles, while proper nouns refer to specific references. General references without articles are used more frequently in online news reports from host countries than specific general references. After analyzing the data, refugees were portrayed as victims in need of protection.

5. Conclusion

The study confirms that rigorous grammatical analysis using an experimental system provides concrete evidence of how language indirectly shapes audience perceptions. Grammatical choices will not be mere stylistic errors, but rather effective ideological tools. The study recommends the development of critical linguistic awareness among news readers, and this methodology can also serve as a valuable tool for deeper critical analysis of media discourse in other fields. Fox News chooses the active voice to emphasize the power and effectiveness of the state. The Guardian chooses the passive voice to conceal the perpetrator.

The study has limited scope, which only looks at the major news media in Britain, restricts how far the results can be applied. The chronological span of the study may not fully account for the dynamic character of media portrayals, while the sample size and selection may not comprehensively represent the spectrum of discourse variety. Language barriers also made it difficult to incorporate non-English language media, which may have led to the exclusion of important viewpoints. It is possible that the study did not fully investigate every contextual factor influencing media coverage. Hence, upcoming research projects may use cross-national contrasts, longitudinal studies, mixed-methods methods, polyglot analysis, viewers reaction studies, strategy impact calculations, inquiries into media possession and reporting administration.

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