

**PERSUASIVE AND MANIPULATIVE LANGUAGE IN POLITICAL WAR NEWS
HEADLINES: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE PERSPECTIVE**

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Abstract. Headlines carry a weight out of all proportion to their length: they are read first, remembered longest, and often stand in for the article beneath them. This study asks how persuasive and manipulative language works in political war news headlines, and where the line between the two actually falls. Working within critical discourse analysis, and drawing together Fairclough's three-dimensional model, van Dijk's ideological square, and Entman's framing theory, it examines the linguistic devices that allow a headline to carry an ideological charge while still reading as plain reporting. A recurring set of tools emerges: evaluative naming and labelling, euphemism and dysphemism, agent-deleting grammar such as passivization and nominalization, metaphor, and the pronouns and modal verbs that quietly mark an "us versus them" divide. What these devices share, and what makes them manipulative rather than merely persuasive, is that they pass off interpretive choices as neutral description, settling a conclusion in the reader's mind before the reader notices any choice was made. The article argues that the core problem is precisely this invisibility, sharpened by a methodological danger that discourse analysis may reproduce the very bias it sets out to expose. In response it proposes two remedies: critical language awareness for readers, and methodological triangulation, through corpus linguistics and reception testing, for analysts.

Keywords: persuasion; manipulation; war news headlines; critical discourse analysis; framing; ideological square

1. Introduction

Few textual units exert as much influence per word as the news headline. It is the part of a report most people read, frequently the only part they read, and the part they retain once the details have faded. In coverage of war and armed conflict that influence is magnified, because readers come to such news with heightened emotion and little time, and are therefore more willing to accept a compact, morally legible version of events. The headline supplies exactly that. The question taken up here is how the language of political war headlines persuades and, at times, manipulates, and how those two functions can be told apart.

The analytical starting point is framing. In Entman's now-standard formulation, to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, so as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, or treatment recommendation [1]. A headline is framing in its most condensed form. Because greater salience makes information more noticeable and more memorable, whatever a headline foregrounds tends to become the reader's takeaway, even when the report beneath it is more measured [1].

Persuasion and manipulation are related but not identical, and the distinction is one of degree rather than kind. In legitimate persuasion the audience is left free to weigh a message and reach its own judgement; manipulation, by contrast, works on people against their interests and without their full awareness, through dominance rather than reasoned appeal [2]. Persuasion leaves the reader's rational agency intact, whereas manipulation narrows or bypasses it, steering toward a conclusion while hiding the fact that any steering is going on. In war reporting the boundary between the two grows especially thin, since the emotional stakes are high and the audience is already inclined toward simple moral narratives.

The study of ideology in news language has a well-defined lineage. It began with the critical linguistics group at the University of East Anglia, whose members argued that grammatical form

itself encodes ideology and can obscure events in reporting [3], an insight Fowler later applied directly to the press and its headlines [4]. From this foundation grew critical discourse analysis, associated above all with Fairclough's three-dimensional model of text, discursive practice, and social practice [5]; with van Dijk's socio-cognitive account of news and his "ideological square" of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation [6, 7]; and with Wodak's discourse-historical approach to the "us versus them" constructions so typical of conflict discourse [8]. Alongside this, the framing tradition in political communication, developed by Entman and applied to news coverage of foreign policy and war [9], offered a complementary vocabulary. A substantial applied literature has since carried these frameworks to conflict headlines in particular, from coverage of the Iraq and Libya wars to comparative studies of national presses [10].

For all this work, the headline still deserves attention in its own right. It is the shortest, most-read, and most memorable unit of war reporting, and yet it is often treated as a mere doorway to the article rather than as a site of framing in itself. One question, too, continues to unsettle the field: if manipulation is what makes framing illegitimate, how can it be identified without the analyst simply reading in a preferred interpretation? This article therefore pursues three aims. The first is to identify the recurring linguistic devices through which war headlines persuade and manipulate. The second is to clarify what separates manipulation from legitimate persuasion in this setting. The third is to name the central problem the field faces and to set out a workable response to it.

2. Materials and Methods

The study is qualitative and interpretive, carried out within the framework of critical discourse analysis. Rather than treating a single large corpus statistically, it reads illustrative war-news headlines as representative types, so as to lay bare the linguistic mechanisms at work. The examples are drawn from English-language coverage of recent armed conflicts, and they are used to demonstrate patterns already documented across the empirical literature rather than to establish new frequencies.

Three complementary models are combined. Fairclough's three-dimensional framework supplies the overall procedure, moving the analysis from description of the text, through interpretation of how it is produced and received, to explanation of its social and ideological grounding [5, 11]. Van Dijk's ideological square provides the interpretive lens for polarization, drawing attention to how a text plays up positive information about the in-group and negative information about the out-group while playing down the reverse [7]. Entman's framing theory then ties these small, local choices to their larger effect on how a problem is defined and morally judged [1].

Within this framework, headlines are examined at four linguistic levels. At the lexical-semantic level, the analysis attends to naming and labelling, and to euphemism and dysphemism. At the syntactic level, it looks at transitivity, and in particular at passivization and nominalization, which decide whether agency is stated or suppressed. At the interpersonal level, it considers pronouns and modality, which position the reader and mark degrees of certainty. At the rhetorical level, it takes in metaphor, presupposition, and hyperbole. Each headline is read not only for what it says but for the choices it makes silently: what is selected, what is left out, and whose perspective is treated as the natural default.

3. Results

Across the material, a consistent repertoire of devices comes into view. Naming and labelling proved the most visible resource. The choice among "militants," "fighters," "insurgents," "rebels," and "terrorists" for the same actors is a political decision dressed up as a neutral act of reference; each term passes a verdict on legitimacy, and the selection quietly hands out sympathy to one side and

condemnation to the other [4]. Working alongside it, euphemism launders the in-group's own violence, through expressions such as "collateral damage," "neutralized," "operation," and "surgical strike," while dysphemism sharpens the out-group's equivalent acts, so that identical events take on opposite moral colouring.

At the syntactic level, agency turned out to be the decisive variable. Passive constructions and nominalizations routinely erase the actor: a headline reporting that civilians "were killed," or that "clashes left dozens dead," records a death while quietly withholding responsibility for it [5]. The grammatical disappearance of the agent is no stylistic accident; it protects one party by lifting it out of the sentence, and it does so beneath the level at which most readers consciously notice the gap.

Metaphor added a further layer. By recasting a complex political conflict as a simple, familiar drama, of disease, flood, hunting, or moral crusade, it draws its persuasive force precisely from feeling like description rather than argument [12]. Pronouns and modality complete the pattern: the inclusive "we" folds the reader into a national in-group, and high-modality verbs project certainty onto claims that are in fact contestable.

Taken together, these devices realize van Dijk's ideological square with striking regularity. The in-group is cast, again and again, as protector, victim, or moral saviour; the out-group as aggressor or threat; and the two are held apart by the accumulated weight of naming, agency, metaphor, and pronoun [7]. The polarization that results reads as reporting but works as alignment.

4. Discussion

What makes this repertoire manipulative rather than merely persuasive is that its choices masquerade as neutral reporting. A reader can recognize an opinion and argue back at it; a headline hands over its framing as fact. A partisan name for one side, a passive construction that hides a killer, a euphemism that launders violence: each of these is absorbed as description rather than weighed as argument. The harm is not that readers are told outright falsehoods, which is comparatively rare, but that they are handed a ready-made conclusion without ever realizing that a choice was made on their behalf [1, 2]. In wartime this is only intensified by emotional urgency and by the speed and volume of digital and social-media circulation, which leave little room for the slow, critical reading that would bring the framing to light.

Beneath this societal problem lies a methodological one, and it is the sharpest internal criticism the field faces. Critical discourse analysis has been charged with subjectivity and circularity, with finding precisely the ideology it set out to find, choosing the headlines and readings that confirm a prior stance while presenting interpretation as objective discovery [13]. If the instrument used to expose bias is itself biased, its verdicts lose their force. Any credible account of manipulation in headlines must therefore concede that the analyst, too, stands inside ideology rather than above it.

The response proposed here works on both fronts at once. Against the societal problem, the durable remedy is critical language awareness: building into education and media literacy the habit of reading a headline as something constructed, and asking who chose these words, what was left out, and whose interests the framing serves, so that readers become critical decoders rather than passive consumers [14]. Against the methodological problem, the strongest corrective is triangulation: setting the close qualitative reading of critical discourse analysis alongside corpus linguistics, so that claims about "loaded" or "recurring" language rest on countable patterns across large bodies of headlines rather than on a convenient handful of examples [15]. Reader-reception studies, which test whether audiences actually read headlines the way the analyst predicts, close the loop by holding interpretation to evidence.

Two limitations should be acknowledged. The analysis is illustrative rather than corpus-based, so its examples show how the devices work without measuring how often they occur; and its scope is confined to English-language headlines, leaving open whether the same patterns hold across other

languages and press cultures. Both limitations point straight toward the methodological programme recommended above, and neither disturbs the qualitative claim that the devices operate as described.

5. Conclusion

Political war headlines do a great deal of work in very little space. This article has shown how they persuade and, at times, manipulate: through the names they assign to combatants, the agency their grammar conceals, the metaphors that turn conflict into familiar drama, and the pronouns and modal verbs that draw a line between "us" and "them." The thread running through all of these devices is that they offer an interpretation as though it were a simple description, so that the reader reaches a conclusion without noticing that anyone led them there. This is what separates manipulation from ordinary persuasion, and it is also what makes it so hard to resist.

Two problems follow, and they are best kept in view together. For the reader, the danger is that manipulative framing is most invisible exactly when it is most effective, and the conditions of wartime reporting, its urgency, its speed, its sheer volume online, leave little room to notice it. For the analyst, the danger is that the very tools used to expose bias can carry it back in, whenever a preferred reading is mistaken for an objective finding. The two remedies proposed here answer these problems in kind: critical language awareness equips readers to treat a headline as something built rather than simply given, while methodological triangulation, corpus evidence and reader-reception testing set beside close reading, disciplines the analyst's interpretation against measurable patterns and real audiences.

Neither remedy dissolves the problem entirely, and neither is meant to. Language in the news will always carry a perspective, and headlines will always compress. The realistic aim is not the neutral headline, which cannot exist, but the more literate reader and the more accountable analysis. Future work could test the devices catalogued here against large multilingual corpora, and could extend the analysis from the printed headline to the push notification, the social-media caption, and the algorithmically ranked feed, where the same persuasive machinery now runs at still greater speed and scale.

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