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Appraisal Analysis of Selected Media Reports on the War on Gaza

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the application of the appraisal theory, which is rooted in systemic functional linguistics (henceforth SFL), to analyse how media shape the way people perceive reports and news of the Gaza war. Through such an analysis, the paper aims at showing how language works as a tool to create stories that dramatically influence people's ideological perception. Lazarus' (1991) model of appraisal is adopted. The model has two levels of assessments: primary and secondary appraisal. The first looks at the immediate perception of events, while the second looks at the ability to respond to these events. The results indicate that drawn media reports chosen depend on cognitive appraisal processes that affect the perception of the public towards the issue being reported and how to react. These reports not only deal with the geopolitical threats incorporated into the war but also represent it as a danger and a problem. This representation of the war invokes negative emotions like anger and frustration.

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1. Introduction

As the conflict in Gaza rages unabated, now more than ever is the time to notice how language affects public opinion and attitude. Media reporting of the conflict reaches across all world media, arousing variously all manner of responses internationally (Fairclough, 1995) ^[3]. For such purposes, SFL-based theory of appraisal is used to draw conclusions about the language used in the selected data to describe the war. The research focuses on evaluative discourse and ideologies and emotions, i.e. paper's general objective. The research is concerned with use and choice of linguistic markers in media news in order to pass a judgment on events and issues. It also describes the impact of the evaluative language on public opinion.

Furthermore, this paper attempts to add to the global discourse on media representation of war. That is, how language accounts for and frames geopolitical issues. Through certain linguistic strategies, media create reports on the war that can escalate or de-escalate the perceived seriousness and emotional effect of the war. Such reports are not only made to be informative but also to impact public ideologies. How people perceive and react to the news of the war is influenced to a greater extent by media reports (Fairclough, 1995) ^[3].

2. Literature Review

2.1. Discourse Analysis and Media Representation

Methods suitable for such a purpose are largely within the field of discourse analysis, which is an important force in analyzing language as not only a reflection of but also a constitutive and supportive means of social power differentiations (Van Dijk, 1988) ^[9]. Media discourse shapes the ideologies of people in society worldwide, an interaction that is examined by multiple scholars of linguistics, including Fairclough and Van Dijk. According to Fairclough (1995, p. 4) ^[3], media discourse is characterized as a social practice closely tied to the power relations within society. As Fairclough (1995) ^[3] puts it, such a type of discourse not only shapes the terms of maintenance and change in society but also resists change and alters the social order.

Van Dijk (1988)^[9] discusses the structural composition of the media and how it is employed to reinforce social dominance, i.e., how some of the linguistic techniques employed in news reporting in the media are used to reinforce social inequality as well as social divisions. As Van Dijk (1988)^[9] puts it, media language is used purposefully in conflict to create perceptions and legitimize power dominance relationships, and programs aired by the media to portray events extend social orders (Van Dijk, 1988; Van Dijk, 1993).^[9, 10]

The significant contribution of discourse analysis in media studies is manifested in pinpointing the fine yet fundamental strategies through which mass media shape how people perceive and respond to events and stories of the war. Discourse analysts unveil unobserved power hierarchies by analysing the linguistic triggers and strategies utilised in media discourse, focusing on how language is carefully employed to shape social realities (Couldry, 2003)^[11]. Not only that, discourse analysis further enriches our insights of larger socio-political forces by emphasising the eminent role of media as both a reflection and a creator of societal power alternations (Reese et al., 2001)^[8].

2.2. Appraisal Theory

Richard Lazarus is considered one of the prominent scholars who developed and expanded the appraisal theory in 1991. He introduces a thorough biopsychological analytical framework to understand how individuals assess and react to environmental stimuli that influence their overall well-being. The concept of appraisal represents the core of this theory, which Lazarus (1991)^[6] defines as a cognitive process in which a participant decides whether or not a specific event within their environment is beneficial, detrimental, or drastically irrelevant to their personal interests. The appraisal process is, hence, divided into two sub-processes: primary and secondary appraisal. Primary appraisal focuses on the instant interpretation of an event as beneficial or insignificant. Secondary appraisal, on the other hand, involves evaluating the available resources to respond and deal with the potential threatening burdens (Lazarus, 1991)^[6].

For media, the Lazarus appraisal theory is applied to observe how people think as they decode media messages and emotionally appraise them. With such analysis tool, it becomes easy to ask oneself what people noticed in the news and how people began to classify media information as ideologized threats or objective incidents. It further describes how these different orientations influence persons, both affectively and cognitively. His theory, Lazarus (1991)^[6], agrees and elaborates on our knowledge of the psychological processes of media use and the subtlety of cognitive-behavioural exchange at work in streams of action in the media. Media institutions employ evaluative language to help control people so that they will be emotionally affected and respond.

Thus, appraisal theory is applied to discern the type of linguistic patterns employed in evaluative language. It's a leap to conclude putting things into perspective the immense contribution of appraisal theory to media studies. Apart from this, the theory provides an integrated explanation of the functioning of messages in the media and their impact on the public's beliefs paint a deeper picture of thinking-environment-language relation (Wolfsfeld, 1997)^[11].

Some other scholars have turned to Appraisal Theory, and all of them contributed towards building the theory. Martin and

White (2005)^[7] provide richly descriptive account of how language enacts judgments, feelings, attitudes and judgments in an attempt to elicit readers' responses for various texts, e.g., media texts. Their theory unpacks the history and resources on which language is built as a way of making sense of how we live and make sense of the world.

In this sense, and as Martin and White (2005)^[7] point out, language can be classified into at least three domains: affect, which involves emotional responses; judgment, which involves logical evaluation of behavior; and appreciation, which involves evaluating the value of events. Such domains help in examining language in media discourse, which is capable of explicating emotion states, directing moral perception, and changing the way the audience views a sense of significance.

2.3 Media Representation of Conflicts

People's thoughts and emotions about conflicts are heavily guided by how media outlets portray the conflicts, which can be escalated or resolved depending on the ideologies adopted by a specific media channel (Entman, 1993)^[2]. By way of explanation, Wolfsfeld (1997)^[11], underscores the role of media reports in political events and wars. The political interests adopted by specific media channels decide the desirable kinds of news perspectives and ideologies and, therefore, influence the news media that covers and participates in these conflicts. Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2010)^[5] introduce the term "diffused war" in their study of how media represents wars. They explore how modern media outlets and platforms sway how a conflict is perceived and experienced by the audience. This analysis proves how media reports have an immense influence on public perceptions of wars (Galtung & Ruge, 1965)^[4].

3. Methodology

This paper adopts Lazarus' (1991)^[6] Appraisal model for the analysis. This theory provides an analytical framework for understanding the cognitive processes that influence emotional and behavioural responses to stimuli that are significant to individuals. Below is a thorough description of each element of the model, also illustrated in Fig. (1).

1. **Situation (Event/Stressor):** This is the primary interaction with an external or internal event that causes stress. The situation serves as the initial reference point for evaluation and is critical because it establishes the framework within which cognitive assessments are performed. An event that has the potential to disrupt a person's psychological balance, such as receiving bad news or facing a major life challenge.



Fig 1: The Adopted Model of Appraisal Analysis (Lazarus, 1991) ^[6]

2. **Appraisal:** This is the process of determining the importance or value of an event. Appraisal is broken down into smaller categories or subdivisions.

- **Personal Significance of the Event/Stressor:** This involves determining the extent to which the event is relevant and influential to personal goals, values, or overall well-being. The subjective interpretation of an event is influenced by an individual's personal desires and goals.
- **The first stage of appraisal,** where the focus is on whether the event is threatening, ministering (harms, challenges), or beneficial (benign). This first categorization is crucial because it dictates the direction that the subsequent emotional response will take.
- **Secondary Appraisal:** This involves assessment of availability and ability to cope/control the after-effects of the event. Evaluating our available resources, options, and likelihood of outcomes.

3. **Emotion:** The feelings that arise during the evaluation process. Lazarus (1991) ^[6] identifies a variety of emotions that can be divided into different categories:

- **Positive Emotions:** Examples include happiness and pride, which are typically triggered by evaluations of positive outcomes or achievements.
- **Negative Emotions:** This includes anger and guilt. Anger is typically triggered by perceptions of injustice or barriers imposed by others, whereas guilt can be triggered by actions or intentions that contradict one's moral principles or cause harm to others.

4. **Action:** The behavioural responses that follow the evaluation of emotions and thoughts. Actions can be divided into general categories:

- **Approach:** Behavioural responses characterised by actively engaging with or confronting the stressor, usually prompted by assessments that view the situation as manageable or worthy of overcoming.
- **Withdrawal:** Responses that involve actively avoiding or creating distance from the source of stress, typically due to perceiving the situation as threatening or overwhelming and a lack of adequate coping mechanisms.

4. Data Analysis

According to the adopted model, this study qualitatively analyses two randomly selected BBC media reports, focusing on their coverage of the War on Gaza during a critical period of conflict—particularly reports on the Israel-Gaza ceasefire proposal. The full reports are provided with links to the originals found on the BBC website. The analysis presents a summary of each report. The reports are chosen based on their relevance to the coverage of the conflict.

Text (1):

Title: “Israel-Gaza war: Hamas responds to ceasefire offer with 135-day truce plan”

7 February 2024

By Ido Vock & Lyse Doucet, BBC News

Full text: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68225663>

Summary: Hamas has drafted a 135-day ceasefire plan in exchange for hostages and to withdraw Israeli forces in response to an Israeli-backed ceasefire. These stages include ceasefires and prisoner exchanges, followed by a complete withdrawal and increased medical and food supplies to Gaza. Describing the proposal as “highly ambitious,” the United States has been noncommittal, insisting on the necessity of a vision for long-lasting peace. Underlying the ongoing efforts to negotiate an end to the fighting, a previous truce saw massive exchanges of prisoners.

1. Situation: Event or Stressor:

- **Event/Stressor:** The report refers to a multi-layered geopolitical event in which Hamas offers a ceasefire following a conflict with Israel. It features certain requirements, together with the ability to imagine a sequence of prisoner exchanges for hostages, terms for troop withdrawals, and reconstruction. It is a stressor at the national, but more so at the regional and international levels due to its impact on peace, security, and humanitarian conditions.

2. Appraisal:

- **Personal Importance of the Situation/Event:** The ceasefire initiative impacts various parties: Israel and Hamas; the hostages and prisoners; international mediators; and the world observing the process.
- **Primary Appraisal:** This includes establishing if the truce is threatening, challenging, or beneficial.

Threat: Escalation of conflict and the collapse of the ceasefire could lead to higher levels of violence and instability

Challenge: Bringing a halt to fighting would require meeting a myriad of political demands and addressing grievances that reach deep into history.

A successful ceasefire will bring peace and great humanitarian aid to Gaza.

- **Secondary Appraisal:** This appraisal concerns the degree of controllability and the resources available to deal with the stressor.

Option to Play a Role: International mediators (for example, Qatar and Egypt), as well as world powers, will still be able to shape realities through diplomacy.

Chance of desired outcome: Unclear, facilitated by insufficient global leaders' reactions and the extent of the demands.

3. Emotion:

- **Positive Emotions:** The general tenor of the report is very cautious and negative.
- **Happiness:** Not directly relevant because the report speaks of cautious optimism about the potential for progress.

There is no pride in the text.

- **Negative Emotions:** This is a more frequent occurrence given the context and implications.
- The runner-up, the nationalists, are also likely to feel the anger, as continuous conflicts and frustrations will also appear for them due to the earlier failed negotiations.
- **Guilt:** Not stated but implied, especially with 9,000 dead and 223 hostages.

Action:

- **Approach:** The report recommends diplomatic negotiation and engagement with the proposal, regardless of scepticism.
- **Withdrawal:** Negotiations may be abandoned if they are deemed unrealistic or if preliminary conditions are not met.

Text (2):

Title: "Israel-Gaza war: Latest ceasefire talks not very promising - Qatar"

18 February 2024

By James Gregory, BBC News

Full text: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68326788>

Summary: The cease-fire negotiations between Israel and Hamas are reportedly stalling, according to Prime Minister of Qatar Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani. Senior officials from the US, Israel, Egypt, and Qatar are currently holding talks, but a number of complications—especially those concerning humanitarian matters—keep hope for a positive outcome low. The "delusional" demands of Hamas for a hostage exchange, the total withdrawal of Israeli forces, and a structured 135-day ceasefire have been rejected by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Despite strong domestic and international pressure to prevent the conflict from getting worse and to protect civilians, Netanyahu is still getting ready for a possible ground invasion in Rafah. Even as the humanitarian situation in Gaza worsens, the impasse persists and both sides continue to point the finger at one another for it.

1. Situation: Event or Stressor:

- The current cease-fire negotiations between Israel and Hamas, which are being facilitated by Qatar, are considered inadequate. This important international gathering entails crucial conversations meant to stop more bloodshed and find a solution to a convoluted political and humanitarian issue.

2. Appraisal:

- **Personal Significance of the Event/Stressor:** The discussions are deeply personal and important for all parties involved, including Hamas and Israel, the mediator, Qatar, and the affected civilian populations in

Gaza and the surrounding areas. Their safety, political stability, and chances for long-term peace are directly affected by the outcome of these negotiations.

- **Primary Appraisal:** Thousands of civilians' personal safety as well as regional stability are seriously threatened by the ongoing conflict and the futile peace negotiations.
- **Secondary Appraisal:** The parties involved evaluate what diplomatic, military, and humanitarian resources are available, as well as what strategies may result in a cessation of hostilities, in light of available resources and potential coping mechanisms. An assessment of Qatar's diplomatic clout and capacity to mediate a settlement informs the country's role as mediator.

3. Emotion:

- **Positive:** Since the conversations are not going well, there isn't much room for positive feelings in the current scenario.
- **Negative:** Due to the ongoing violence and stalled negotiations, all parties are probably frustrated and angry. The humanitarian situation is likely to cause concern and sadness for both civilians and foreign observers.
- **Anger:** Both parties express their anger at one another for the talks' lack of progress.
- **Guilt:** International mediators and other parties who feel their efforts and past actions have not been sufficient to end the conflict or protect civilians may feel guilty.

4. Action:

- **Approach:** The parties involved—including the mediators—continue to negotiate in spite of the gloomy prognosis. This shows an action where they are attempting to solve the problem despite the difficulties.
- **Withdrawal:** Israel's readiness to conduct a ground invasion implies that there is a chance of a military escalation in the event that negotiations completely collapse.

5. Results and Discussion

After analysing the selected media reports, depending on the adopted model, the paper has arrived at the following results:

1. It is found that the primary stressor is the cease-fire negotiations between the two sides, which involves serious issues like prisoner exchanges, military forces withdrawals, and humanitarian assistance.
2. Regarding the secondary appraisal, the need for international mediation as a decisive asset is highlighted taking into consideration the unpredictable outcomes.
3. The clear absence of positive emotions highlights the tragic situation and the lack of progress in finding a solution. On the contrary, the reactions are negative and stirred by rage and anxiety over the bloodshed that is still occurring, as well as the dilemma of peace negotiations. The appraisal, therefore, recommends for both approach and withdrawal strategies.

6. Conclusion

This paper investigates two selected media reports of the ongoing Israel-Gaza war depending on the appraisal framework formed by Lazarus (1991) ^[6]. The paper aims at highlighting the significant role of language in media and

how its impact is evident on shaping public opinions and emotions. By reviewing the literature on the topic in question, the paper attempts to emphasise the methods in which media discourse formulate audience opinion by conveying evaluative meanings through specific linguistic choices that support certain overt and covert ideologies. Media reports of the war are carefully written either to escalate or resolve the perceived emotional effect. The practical analysis of the data yields several results, the most important of which is that the primary stressor is the negotiation to cease fire that involves polarising matters like hostage exchanges and Israeli troop withdrawal.

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