



FRAMING WAR THROUGH WORDS: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE RUSSIA–UKRAINE CONFLICT IN *THE NEW YORK TIMES*

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Abstract

This study investigates how *The New York Times* discursively constructs the Russia-Ukraine conflict through textual strategies that shape public perception and ideological framing. Employing Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, the research analyzes 25 articles published in 2022, focusing on vocabulary choices, grammatical structures, modality, presupposition, omission, and repetition. The findings reveal a consistent pattern of lexical polarization, such as the use of "invasion," "liberation," and "resistance" that portrays Russia as the primary aggressor and Ukraine as the legitimate defender. Grammatical features like passivization and nominalization serve to obscure agency, while evaluative language and modality guide moral judgments and assumptions. The study highlights the role of media in constructing ideological narratives and underscores the significance of linguistic choices in shaping audience attitudes toward geopolitical events. Ultimately, this research contributes to broader discussions on media discourse, ideology, and the power of language in global conflict representation.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, ideology, media framing, Russia–Ukraine conflict

INTRODUCTION

The Russia-Ukraine conflict, which escalated into full-scale war in 2022, has attracted widespread global attention not only for its devastating humanitarian impact but also for the narratives surrounding it. In the digital era, news media serve not just as information providers but also as powerful actors in constructing reality. One of the most prominent global news outlets, *The New York Times*, plays a central role in shaping international discourse. This study seeks to critically examine how this media outlet represents the conflict linguistically and how such representation contributes to the construction of ideological meaning.

Mass media can shape public understanding through language that is far from neutral. According to scholars such as Gitlin (2003) and Hall (1990), media function as ideological institutions that reflect and reproduce societal power structures. Through selective reporting and framing, news organizations can emphasize or downplay certain aspects of an event, influencing how audiences perceive it. In the case of the Russia-Ukraine war, *The New York Times* presents a specific version of the conflict that may align with Western political interests, which warrants critical scrutiny.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a robust methodological framework for exploring the power relations embedded in language. Norman Fairclough's model of CDA is particularly useful as it highlights the interrelationship between text, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice. However, this study will focus primarily on the textual dimension, which includes vocabulary, grammar, modality, and other linguistic features that subtly shape meaning. By analyzing these elements in the coverage of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, we can uncover the ideological undertones of the reporting.

While previous studies have explored media representations of political conflicts, relatively few have examined how *The New York Times* specifically constructs the Russia-Ukraine war through its language. Moreover, many existing studies do not focus on the micro-level linguistic strategies that contribute to the broader ideological framing. This study addresses this gap by conducting a detailed textual analysis of selected news articles, thereby offering new insights into the media's role in international conflict discourse.

The guiding research question for this study is: How does *The New York Times* represent the conflict between Russia and Ukraine? The objective is to examine the linguistic strategies used to construct narratives around the war and assess how these narratives influence public perception and ideological alignment. Through this analysis, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay between language, media, and power in the context of geopolitical conflict.

METHOD

Critical Discourse Analysis is an interdisciplinary approach to studying discourse, which views language as a form of social practice. Fairclough (1995) conceptualizes discourse as a mode of action and representation that both reflects and shapes social structures. His three-dimensional model consists of textual analysis, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice. The focus of this study is on the textual level, which involves examining vocabulary, grammar, modality, presupposition, and other textual features.

Media texts are often ideologically loaded. According to Van Dijk (2009), the structure and choice of words in media discourse can influence how readers perceive social actors and events. This is particularly relevant in war reporting, where language not only informs but also mobilizes opinions and justifies actions. Paltridge (2006) asserts that discourse is instrumental in constructing social reality, particularly when it comes to political and international issues.

Previous studies have demonstrated the value of CDA in analyzing media texts. Kolmogorova and Gornostaeva (2019) explored how Ukrainian political situations were framed in Russian media, revealing dominant narratives of nationalism and identity politics. Brusylovska (2020) examined how political elites in Russia and Ukraine use language to construct divergent narratives about the conflict. Similarly, Mäenpää (2022) identified Eurocentrism and othering in media coverage of Ukrainian refugees. These studies underscore the role of language in shaping conflict narratives but leave room for further investigation into Western media, particularly *The New York Times*.

This research builds on these insights by focusing on how *The New York Times* constructs the Russia-Ukraine conflict through textual strategies. By narrowing the scope to a specific media outlet and focusing exclusively on textual features, the study offers a detailed examination of how ideological meanings are embedded in language. This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach grounded in Norman Fairclough's model of Critical Discourse Analysis, focusing exclusively on the textual dimension. A total of 25 articles from *The New York Times* published in 2022 were selected for analysis. These articles were chosen based on their relevance to the Russia-Ukraine conflict and their prominence on the outlet's digital platform.

The analysis focuses on the linguistic features (Afrianto, 2018; Kuswoyo & Siregar, 2019.) like vocabulary and lexical choices, grammatical structures (including passivization and nominalization), modality (epistemic and deontic), presupposition and omission, and repetition. Data were collected from *The New York Times* official website. The articles were read closely, and relevant sentences or phrases were highlighted for analysis. Each datum was examined in context, with attention to how linguistic choices contributed to the overall framing of the conflict. The study is limited to textual analysis and does not cover discourse practices (Putra & Qodriani, 2017; Rido, 2020) or sociocultural practices (e.g., historical and institutional contexts). However, the findings offer valuable insights into the subtle ways language constructs meaning and ideology in media discourse.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis revealed that *The New York Times* employs a range of linguistic strategies that collectively construct a pro-Ukrainian, anti-Russian narrative of the conflict. Through carefully selected vocabulary, the newspaper frames Russia as the aggressor and Ukraine as the heroic defender. Grammatical structures such as passivization and nominalization are used to obscure agency and responsibility, influencing how blame is

assigned. Modality expresses varying degrees of certainty and moral obligation, guiding readers toward particular judgments and expectations. Presupposition embeds ideological assumptions within statements, while omission limits the contextual background necessary for a more nuanced understanding. Finally, repetition reinforces dominant frames and emotionally charged language, creating a consistent and persuasive discourse. These findings highlight how seemingly objective reporting can embed ideological positions that shape public perception and align with broader geopolitical narratives.

1. Vocabulary and Lexical Choice

Lexical choices are among the most direct and impactful ways in which media texts convey ideological positions. In *The New York Times'* coverage of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the language used is far from neutral; rather, it reflects a deliberate framing that casts Ukraine in a sympathetic light and Russia as the aggressor. Terms such as "invasion," "aggression," "liberated," and "resistance" are repeatedly used to characterize the events and actors involved in the conflict. The choice of the word "invasion" to describe Russia's military actions, for example, carries a strong negative connotation, implying illegality, brutality, and unilateral aggression. This contrasts sharply with alternative terms like "operation," which are sometimes used by Russian sources to downplay the nature of the military engagement.

Moreover, *The New York Times* frequently refers to Ukrainian military actions using valorizing terms such as "defense," "heroic," or "liberation." For instance, when Ukrainian forces retake a town, the action is framed as a "liberation," a term that implies moral righteousness and just cause. This type of lexical polarization establishes a dichotomy between good and evil, justice and injustice, and helps create a morally clear narrative that leaves little room for nuance or alternative interpretations. The recurring use of emotionally loaded vocabulary reinforces reader sympathies for Ukraine and aligns the reporting with dominant Western geopolitical perspectives.

Additionally, evaluative adjectives and nouns such as "brutal strikes," "unprovoked attack," or "resolute leadership" serve to amplify the emotional tone of the coverage. Such choices influence the reader's judgment, not just by describing events, but by prescribing how those events should be understood and reacted to (Suprayogi & Pranoto, 2020). In sum, vocabulary and lexical selection in *The New York Times* play a critical role in framing the Russia-Ukraine conflict, shaping not only the narrative but also the ideological position of its readership.

2. Grammatical Structures

Grammatical structures play a pivotal role in shaping the ideological framing of news texts, particularly through techniques such as passivization and nominalization. These linguistic tools affect how agency and responsibility are assigned or obscured in descriptions of events. In *The New York Times* coverage of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, passivization is frequently used to downplay the role of certain actors, especially in violent or destructive events. For example, a phrase like "a hospital was bombed" does not identify who acted, thus distancing the actor from the deed and softening the perception of accountability. When the agent is omitted, readers are left with an event that appears to occur without human intervention, thereby weakening the reader's ability to ascribe blame.

Nominalization, turning actions into abstract nouns, is another grammatical device that contributes to the depersonalization of events. Instead of stating "Russia invaded Ukraine," articles may refer to "the invasion of Ukraine," transforming the act into a static noun phrase that deflects attention from the actor. This grammatical abstraction strips the action of immediacy and emotional weight, reducing the perceived intensity of the event. Similarly, phrases such as "the destruction of infrastructure" or "the escalation of violence" use nominal forms to discuss outcomes without necessarily pointing to the initiators.

These structural choices are not ideologically neutral. They can subtly influence readers' perceptions by foregrounding or backgrounding certain elements of a sentence. Active constructions that name agents like "Russian forces bombed a school" have a very different ideological effect compared to their passive or nominalized counterparts. The frequent use of passive and nominal structures in *The New York Times* reporting often aligns with a broader narrative that either implicitly criticizes or protects certain actors depending on the geopolitical stance of the report. In sum, the grammatical presentation of information plays a key role in managing reader interpretation and shaping the perceived morality of the conflict.

3. Modality

Modality, which refers to the expression of attitudes, judgments, or degrees of certainty in language, is a significant tool in shaping the interpretation of events within media discourse. In the context of *The New York Times'* reporting on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, modality is employed to convey not only factual information but also evaluative stances and predictive assessments that guide the reader's perception of urgency, moral stance, and political alignment.

Two types of modality are most relevant in this analysis: epistemic and deontic. Epistemic modality deals with degrees of certainty and knowledge, expressing what is possible, probable, or certain, while deontic modality relates to obligation, necessity, and permission. In many articles analyzed, epistemic modals such as "might," "could," "may," and "likely" are used to signal uncertainty or forecast possible developments. For instance, headlines and lead sentences often include phrases like "Russia might launch a new offensive" or "the situation could escalate," which not only project potential outcomes but also sustain a sense of anticipation and threat. This choice of language shapes the way readers interpret the evolving nature of the conflict, preparing them for continued volatility and justifying ongoing coverage and concern.

Deontic modality appears in expressions of necessity and moral obligation, such as "must respond," "should act," or "needs to intervene," especially concerning Western governments and NATO. These modals function persuasively, urging specific political or military actions. For example, articles might assert that "The West must maintain unity against Russian aggression," implying an ethical imperative and legitimizing continued support for Ukraine. Through such linguistic constructions, *The New York Times* communicates not just what is happening, but what should happen, thus blurring the line between reporting and advocacy.

In addition to modal verbs, modal adverbs like "undoubtedly," "possibly," and "inevitably" reinforce the speaker's stance. These adverbs can intensify or weaken claims, depending on their usage. For instance, "The Russian military is undoubtedly committing war crimes" suggests a high level of certainty and moral judgment, while "Ukraine is possibly planning a counter-offensive" maintains ambiguity and neutrality.

These modality choices collectively contribute to the construction of authority and credibility in news reporting. By carefully modulating certainty and obligation, *The New York Times* guides reader interpretation, subtly framing how events are understood and what responses are deemed appropriate. As such, modality is not a neutral linguistic feature but a potent discursive tool for shaping ideological perspectives within journalistic texts.

4. Presupposition and Omission

Presupposition and omission are two subtle but powerful strategies in media discourse that shape how readers perceive events by determining what is taken for granted and what is left unsaid. In *The New York Times'* coverage of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, presuppositions are frequently embedded within headlines and lead paragraphs, steering readers toward certain interpretations without overt argumentation. For example, phrases like "Since Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine began..." presuppose both the timeline and the moral nature of the event. This assumes that the invasion was not only initiated by Russia but also lacking in justification, an assertion that becomes part of the background knowledge for the reader, not something to be questioned.

Presuppositions are also evident in articles referring to Ukraine's "right to defend its sovereignty," or "Western unity against aggression." These expressions implicitly assume the legitimacy of Ukraine's actions and the moral clarity of Western involvement, while framing Russia's actions as violations of international norms. Such linguistic constructions eliminate the need for explicit justification and make ideological stances appear as self-evident truths. By embedding these assumptions within syntactic structures, the media effectively bypasses reader scrutiny and naturalizes its perspectives.

Omission, on the other hand, functions by what is not said. In many articles, there is minimal reference to NATO's eastward expansion or the complex geopolitical context that preceded the war. The absence of such background information simplifies the narrative, reducing the conflict to a binary of aggressor and victim. This selective presentation of facts limits the reader's ability to form a nuanced understanding of the situation, steering interpretation toward a pre-constructed moral framing. Furthermore, the omission of dissenting voices

or alternative expert opinion, particularly those that critique Western responses or advocate diplomatic engagement, enforces a singular ideological perspective. By silencing these counter-narratives, the media fosters a sense of unanimity and urgency that justifies continued support for military and economic intervention (Samanik & Lianasari, 2016).

Together, presupposition and omission guide the reader's perception by establishing unquestioned assumptions and omitting critical context. These strategies, while often invisible to the casual reader, are instrumental in shaping public discourse and aligning it with dominant political ideologies. Recognizing these techniques is essential for fostering critical media literacy and understanding the mechanisms through which language constructs social reality.

5. Repetition

Repetition is a rhetorical device frequently employed in media discourse to reinforce specific frames, values, and ideologies. In *The New York Times*' coverage of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the deliberate recurrence of particular terms and phrases serves to shape reader perception by embedding certain viewpoints as dominant or unquestionable. Repeated references to "Russian aggression," "Ukrainian resistance," and "Western support" construct a consistent ideological narrative that simplifies complex events into digestible moral binaries.

The constant reiteration of emotionally charged vocabulary such as "brutal assault," "devastation," "unprovoked attack," or "heroic defense" not only intensifies the emotional weight of the conflict but also conditions the reader to associate specific actors with fixed moral roles. Russia is persistently framed through negative descriptors, while Ukraine is portrayed with words that evoke sympathy, resilience, and legitimacy. This repetition does not merely inform the reader; it constructs an affective atmosphere that encourages alignment with a particular worldview. Moreover, repetition reinforces the credibility of certain narratives through familiarity. As readers encounter the same terms across multiple articles, these phrases begin to seem natural and universally accepted. For example, the repeated emphasis on "international condemnation" of Russia subtly conveys the idea of global consensus, even if dissenting perspectives exist but are underrepresented. Similarly, the recurrence of phrases like "defending democracy" and "standing with Ukraine" invokes shared values among Western audiences, strengthening emotional and political solidarity.

Ultimately, repetition in media discourse functions as a powerful mechanism for ideological reinforcement. By strategically echoing specific language across reports, *The New York Times* shapes a coherent and emotionally compelling narrative that guides public interpretation and aligns with dominant geopolitical interests.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how *The New York Times* constructs the Russia-Ukraine conflict through linguistic strategies that reflect and reinforce ideological perspectives. Using Norman Fairclough's framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the research focused on the textual dimension, analyzing vocabulary, grammatical structures, modality, presupposition, omission, and repetition in 25 news articles published in 2022. The findings reveal a pattern of discourse that consistently frames Russia as the aggressor and Ukraine as the righteous defender, aligning the narrative with dominant Western ideologies and geopolitical interests.

Through lexical choices, emotionally charged words such as "invasion," "aggression," and "liberation" serve to establish a clear moral dichotomy. Grammatical structures like passivization and nominalization obscure agency and reduce accountability, subtly influencing how blame and responsibility are distributed. Modality functions to express judgment and forecast outcomes, positioning certain responses as morally necessary or politically inevitable. Presupposition embeds ideological assumptions into the fabric of the text, while omission of alternative perspectives narrows the scope of understanding and simplifies the conflict into a binary frame. Finally, repetition reinforces key narratives, normalizing them through their constant recurrence. These findings underscore the critical role that language plays in shaping media discourse and public perception. Far from being neutral conveyors of information, news texts are ideological artifacts that guide how audiences understand, react to, and align with global events. Recognizing the linguistic strategies embedded in such texts allows readers to become more discerning consumers of news and more critically aware of the power dynamics at play in international reporting.

Future research could extend this analysis by comparing representations of the conflict across different media outlets, languages, or cultural contexts. Additionally, incorporating Fairclough's discourse and sociocultural dimensions would deepen the understanding of how such texts are produced, circulated, and consumed within broader institutional and historical frameworks. In an era of information saturation and global crises, such critical awareness is more important than ever.

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