Language, Deviance, and Media: The Discursive Construction of Enemies in Contemporary Conflict Reporting

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Abstract
The paper explores the issue of language in the social construction of deviance in media reporting on contemporary war and armed conflict. Basing the study on the humanities tradition, critical discourse analysis, literary and rhetorical theory, cultural studies, and ethics of representation assist the analysis of the influence of media narratives on the perceptions of conflict. Based on a sample size of 420 media texts concerning four major conflict zones since 2019, namely, the Tigray war in northern Ethiopia, the Russia-Ukraine war, and continuing phases of the Syrian civil war, and the Israeli and Palestinian conflict, the study uncovers five discursive patterns that are intertwined, where language creates ontological differences between actors. These trends demonstrate the systematic dehumanization and positioning of enemy actors as ontological others, as well as the fact that legitimate actors are also dehumanized and treated as 'othering.' The ontological othering is the first pattern that entails dehumanizing of the enemies. The second is 'threat inflation,' which involves the use of hyperbolic and apocalyptic words to overestimate danger. All the patterns are illustrated using headlines, speech on the radio, political speech, and social media, proving that media language is not a neutral thing. Rather, it is a discourse with moral overtones that shapes the understanding of the mourned, chastised, or recalled violent one. The article speaks to ethical issues of conflict journalism, literary practices of war reporting, and the significance of critical media literacy in the interpretations of these constructed narratives.

Keywords: Language; Construction of deviance; Media warfare; Conflict discourse; Framing;

Introduction

As Russian forces assembled on the borders of Ukraine in January 2022, Western media resorted to a notably martial language before the first shell was thrown. There were articles that talked of Putin threatening European civilisation, his army as a killing machine, and Ukraine being the border of democracy (Person & McFaul, 2022; Snyder, 2022). In comparison, the news on the concurrent humanitarian disaster in Tigray was headlined in bureaucratic, distancing language. An estimated half a million people had already died there in a conflict marked by mass atrocity. The headlines used terms such as 'humanitarian crisis,' 'clashes,' and 'instability.' (Amnesty International, 2022; Plaut, 2023). There was no European civilisation in danger. The comparison was not accidental. It was a linguistic one; it was a consequential one.

The first casualty of war is always language and the first weapon of war (Rogers, 2023). The language used to define violence has dictated how viewers perceive who is the attacker and who is the victim, and whose deaths count as narrative power. This has been true since the naming of violence in the propaganda pamphlets of the First World War, since the incitements of the Rwandan genocide on the radio, since the Gulf War's clinically coined concepts of aggressor and victim, and since the statistics and deaths of the latter in the Gaza conflict. As the novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) has described it, 'The single story forms stereotypes, and the issue of stereotypes is not that they are false, but that they are incomplete.' Perhaps the most significant single-story practitioner in the world is media language in conflict.

This article offers a humanities-based approach to the linguistic construction of deviance in conflict media, drawing on close reading and rhetorical sensitivity from literary research. It also draws on the critical and ethical sensibility of cultural theory, together with the structural sensitivity of critical discourse analysis. Instead of viewing language as a vessel of ready-made meaning, we view it as the location where meaning is made. That meaning is not only moral, defining who is to be punished and who is to be spared, but also defines what is right. This distinction is basic to both linguistics and literary theory and is the methodological basis of the subsequent analysis (Fairclough, 2003; Williams, 1977).

The article concentrates on four conflict areas: the Tigray War (2020–2022), the Russia-Ukraine war (2022–present), the later phase of the Syrian civil war (2019-2022), and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict (especially 2023). Between them, these conflicts have produced some of the most instructive and impactful acts of media language in the modern world. Such conflicts are not analysed as individual phenomena but as examples of a common discursive logic, a global media grammar of war where deviance is ascribed, humanity is unevenly distributed, and some stories are visible and others are systematically repressed. Section 2 develops the theoretical framework, Section 3 outlines the methodology, and Section 4 presents and analyses five discourse patterns drawn from documented media examples from around the globe. Section 5 discusses the ethical implications, and Section 6 concludes the paper.

Theoretical Framework: Naming, Power, and the Grammar of Enmity

This theoretical framework examines how naming shapes power and constructs enmity. It explores how language defines identities, draws boundaries, and influences relations between groups.

The Social Action of Language: Linguistics to Humanities: This article is rooted in the theoretical tradition that language is not a passive reflection of the world but rather organises it. The linguist Ferdinand de Saussure introduced the concept that the meaning of language is relational and differential, not intrinsic (Saussure, 1916/1983). He did so through the distinction between the system of language (langue) and the social use of language (parole). When applied to conflict media, this implies that the term 'terrorist' is not used to denote a predetermined type of individual. Rather, it is used through its contrast with a variety of different terms, freedom fighter, militant, guerrilla, and resistance, and through the social and political contexts in which it is used. 'Moral judgement' is the name of the act of violence, and the act of violence may be called by a different name.

This linguistic understanding is enhanced by the notion advanced by Raymond Williams (1977). Williams identifies the use of words as the location of the historical struggle over meanings. Their present-day usage obscures the ideological struggles that have defined them. Words such as 'terrorist,' 'extremist,' 'radical,' 'brutal,' and 'regime' carry decades of disputed use in the vocabulary of modern conflict journalism. The way Williams tracks the use of keywords in historical contexts cannot be ignored. It helps explain why 'regime change' is a clinical term when used against the enemy and a sinister one when suggested by the enemy, and why 'precision strike' is a bureaucratic term while 'bomb' is an emotive term.

The systematic analytical framework is offered by critical discourse analysis. This framework was developed by Norman Fairclough (2003), and Teun van Dijk (2015). CDA asserts that discourse is not only language but also social practice. Discourse both constitutes and is constituted by social institutions, power relationships, and ideological formations in which it takes place. In conflict environments, this entails that the language of a BBC correspondent is not merely reportage. It is also an instantiation of geopolitical point of view, editorial structure, and institutional belonging that have certain power implications.

Social Construction of Deviance: Becker, Hall and the Media Labelling Power: A second theoretical pillar is offered by the sociological tradition of deviance studies. The general thesis of Howard Becker's *Outsiders* (1963) is that it is not the act of deviance that makes people deviant.

Rather, it is the outcome of a process of labelling. The deviant is one to whom the label of deviance has been effectively applied, and deviant behaviour is behaviour to which that label has been effectively applied. Becker shows interest in moral entrepreneurs, who advocate the labelling of certain behaviours as deviant. This interest prefigures the contribution made by media organisations and state mouthpieces in the labelling of deviance in wartime.

In their seminal work titled, Policing the Crisis, Stuart Hall et al. (1978) extended this model. They used it to analyse the ways that the media create moral panics of racialised deviance. Their idea of the primary definer is critical. When state officials, military spokespersons, and institutional authorities are provided with some privileged access to media, they dictate the conditions under which the events are interpreted later. Secondary voices, voices of the affected communities, non-state actors, and dissenting analysts, are either pushed aside or left to negotiate within the pre-existing frame. The Western state or its military coalition is almost always the major determiner of conflict coverage, and the deviance being determined is always the deviance of its opponents.

The material impacts of this labelling process are far-reaching. In the post-9/11 period, Al-Qaeda and its affiliates were designated as a terrorist organisation rather than an insurgent or political one. This designation facilitated the suspension of the Geneva Convention at Guantanamo Bay, the rendition of detainees without trial, and the invasion of two sovereign states (Jackson, 2005). Language, in this case, was not just figurative; it was legal and deadly. As Judith Butler (2009) notes in Frames of War, the determination of whose life becomes grievable and whose does not is made prior to any war being fought. That determination occurs in the representational practices that media produce and reproduce.

Dehumanisation, Metaphor, and the Literary Imagination of the Enemy: The humanities introduce a new element into the study of dehumanising language in conflict: a meticulous focus on metaphor, plot, and the literary imagination of hostility. In their work, *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) prove that conceptual metaphors are not decorative devices but basic thought strategies. These strategies guide our way of reasoning and behaving in the world. The idea WAR IS HUNTING is realised in phrases like 'hunting down,' 'flushing out,' and 'killing.' By making the enemy prey and the military a predator, the metaphor presents the military as engaged in a natural activity. The metaphor justifies violence by making it instinctual and not political.

Literary critics have followed dehumanising metaphors over the longue durée of war texts. Examples include the Homeric metaphor of the warrior as a wolf, the Nazi metaphor of the Jewish as an Untermensch (under-person), and the Rwandan radio broadcasts of the Tutsi as inyenzi (cockroaches). Across these cases, the dehumanisation of the enemy as an animal has been a precondition of organised mass violence (Hatzfeld, 2005; Musolff, 2006). Compared to literary and cultural analysis, sociological descriptions seem to lack an interest in the aesthetic and emotional texture of these metaphors. That texture involves how they enlist the reader's imagination, mobilise affect, and render certain responses to seem not only possible but natural or even enjoyable. The hunt is thrilling, the surgical strike is sanitary, and the cancer has to be removed; these metaphors are not merely descriptive but prescriptive.

Orientalism by Edward Said, published in 1978, cannot be overlooked in the context of the civilisational aspect of dehumanising the conflict. Said showed that the Orient was not a discovered reality. It was a discursive creation in which the West defined itself as rational, modern, and legitimate. This definition stood in contrast to a created other that was irrational, violent, and essentially deviant. This Orientalist model finds its way to the representation of African, Middle Eastern, and non-Western conflicts by contemporary conflict media. In that representation, the violence of non-Western actors is primordial and cultural and religious, while the violence of Western actors is strategic and unfortunate and is ultimately in the service of order (Al-Hejin, 2015).

Framing Theory, Moral Panics and the Architecture of Outrage: A third conceptual framework has been offered by Robert Entman (1993) in framing theory. Entman defines framing as the process of choosing and putting into prominence the specifics of the perceived reality. This process advances problem definitions, causal explanations, moral judgements, and treatment suggestions. In conflict journalism, frames are the scaffolding on which events are given meaning. For example, a rocket attack can be framed as an act of war or an act of terror, and a massacre can be framed as an atrocity or collateral damage. Such framing not only shapes how audiences interpret the event but also what they think should be done about it.

The idea of moral panic, introduced by Stanley Cohen (1972), is also applicable here. Cohen demonstrated how media reporting can exaggerate the perceived size and danger of a social phenomenon. This exaggeration can go well beyond what the evidence justifies. As a result, a popular reaction of unreasonable panic can occur, along with the justification of interventions that are themselves harmful. Moral panics concerning terrorism, migration, and Islamic extremism have influenced both the language and policy of the media in the modern conflict environment. They do so by systematically misconstruing the magnitude and nature of threats and by justifying extraordinary state violence (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017).

Methodology

Close Reading in the Archive of Conflict

The research is based on a corpus of 420 texts written between 2019 and 2024. These texts include print-based journalism, broadcast transcripts, political speeches, and social media. The corpus was designed to reflect a variety of geopolitical stances. Its sources comprise The New York Times, The Guardian, BBC News Online, Al Jazeera English, The Daily Nation (Kenya), Deutsche Welle, and the South China Morning Post. It also includes a sample of broadcast transcripts from CNN, BBC World Service, France 24, and Al Jazeera television. Social media content was drawn from institutionally and journalistically verified accounts on Twitter/X and Facebook, and the corpus contains about 290,000 words overall.

The analytical approach is intentionally pluralistic. It integrates the rigour of the structural approach of corpus-assisted discourse studies with the interpretive approach of close reading, rhetorical analysis, and cultural criticism. This pluralism is deliberate: the article is written not only for discourse analysts but also for humanities scholars. These scholars consider close reading of particular texts, a headline, a speech, or a tweet, to be the main unit of critical inquiry. The results in Section 4 are structured in line with this, based on definite, reported, titled illustrations by actual media reporting. Where passages are quoted, the original language has been retained, and the commentary is analytical and follows the type of careful interpretive argument of literary and rhetorical criticism.

The authors are conscious of their positionalities. We are authors based in Nigeria, Lebanon, and Germany, respectively. Our views are influenced by closeness to colonial media heritage, the portrayal of Middle East conflicts, and European discourse. These standpoints both empower and limit the analysis. We have indicated at all points where our readings can be disagreed with. We have also tried to read between geopolitical lines with a steady pressure of criticism.

Discussion: Five Patterns in the Language of Deviance

Ontological Othering: Making the Enemy Inhuman: Our five patterns are most fundamentally ontological in nature. They involve the linguistic representation of classified enemies as not simply antagonistic. Such enemies are depicted as different in nature from that with which we, as media viewers, are encouraged to identify. That object of identification is the normative human subject. 'Ontological othering' is not the fact that the enemy is wrong or dangerous but, rather, by metaphor, epithet, or grammatical exclusion, the enemy is not a full human being. When the enemy is not a complete human being, the restraints that ordinarily check violence against people are lifted.

The most well-documented example is the Rwandan genocide of 1994. During the weeks prior to and during the genocide, Radio Mille Collines frequently called Tutsi inyenzi (cockroaches) and inzoka (snakes). The accounts provided by the perpetrators in A Time for Machetes by Jean Hatzfeld (2005) reveal how this radio language influenced the cognitive framing of the killing. They also reveal the tone of the emotion experienced: it was hygienic, necessary, and satisfying to kill cockroaches. According to Philip Gourevitch (1998), the radio metaphors did not come spontaneously as folk idioms but were the product of a planned, concerted effort in which language served as incitement as well as teaching. The moral of the current analysis is that dehumanising conflict media metaphor is never a mere figurative thing; it is functional.

In more mediated, deniable, yet structurally analogous forms, ontological othering is reproduced in contemporary conflict journalism. During the peak of ISIS/Daesh control over territory in Syria and Iraq (2014-2018), biological and pathological metaphors flooded Western media. The Washington Post termed ISIS a cancer spreading throughout the region. The Times of London ran a headline: 'Surgically Remove the IS Tumour.' In September 2014, when he announced that the group would be subject to air attacks, Barack Obama referred to them as a cancer with no immediate remedy. The oncological metaphor, ISIS as cancer in the body politic, constructs a political movement, however brutal, as a basically non-political, biological anomaly. As such, the movement does not need to be engaged with but must be extirpated. This metaphor excludes any political, historical, or social reason as a possible cause of the group's appearance. It places military intervention as the sole possible answer. It implicitly justifies not only the murder of the fighters but also the whole social organism in which it is alleged to be located.

Objectification of the civilian population during conflicts in Africa and the Middle East presents another aspect of ontological othering. In reporting on the Tigray War, populations were regularly framed logistically and demographically. By the most conservative estimates, between 300,000 and 500,000 civilians died in that conflict between 2020 and 2022. Such framing included categories like displaced persons, population flows, food-insecure communities, and affected areas. This contrasts with the treatment of Ukrainian civilian suffering. In that case, people are given names and photos. They are lamented as subjects whose biographical humanity is of the fullest humanity. Quoting Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, Okpeicha and Kpavode (2026) observe that the world has resolved that African suffering is a number, not a narrative. This is an instance of ontological othering within the news genre, and the very structural choice not to individualise or humanise African victims is already a dehumanisation.

(b) Threat Inflation: The Grammar of Apocalypse: The second pattern is threat inflation, which refers to the systematic use of hyperbolic, maximally threatening language. This language exaggerates the perceived magnitude, imminence, and civilisational importance of threats. At the same time, threats of similar or even greater objective seriousness are described in more measured or bureaucratic terms. Cohen (1972) identified this linguistic process as central to moral panic. Ultimately, threat inflation creates the impression that a specific threat is new, existential, and requires extraordinary treatment.

The most persistent recent instance of threat inflation in Western media is the coverage of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Within days of the invasion, the language of civilisational disaster was regularly mobilised. This language included phrases such as 'the greatest threat to European security since the Second World War.' It also included 'the end of the post-Cold War order' and 'the barbarism returned to Europe.' These frames were not unfounded, since the invasion was a significant breach of international law and a humanitarian crisis of significant proportions. Yet they were calibrated to a Euro-American scale of importance. That scale had hitherto been conspicuously missing in reporting of similar or even larger disasters in Africa and the Middle East. The expression 'This is not a country we are accustomed to seeing this in' was uttered live in the first days of the invasion by foreign correspondent Charlie D'Agata of CBS

News. It became infamous precisely because it explicitly stated the racial and civilisational hierarchy implicit in threat inflation. That hierarchy holds that the same thing is more threatening, more unprecedented, and more grievous when it applies to people like us (Plaut, 2023).

The difference between the reports of the Tigray conflict is educative. In November 2020, Ethiopian federal troops and Eritrean soldiers entered Tigray and were reported to perpetrate mass atrocities, such as sexual violence as a weapon of war. At that time, the prevailing discourse in international media was one of tolerable regional unrest. Coverage evoked fear rather than outrage, framed the situation as a humanitarian crisis rather than an existential threat, and placed it on an Africa page rather than a front-page story. The Africa correspondent of the BBC observed the asymmetry in editorial weighting of the two conflicts within the BBC (Gardner, 2022). In this sense, threat inflation is not merely a linguistic but also a geopolitical performance: it allocates the world's attention and moral concern along already existing lines of proximity, interest, and racial hierarchy.

The effect of threat inflation was similar in the Syrian civil war, though it operated in different ways. ISIS-related coverage, as noted above, was regularly apocalyptic. By contrast, the barrel bombings of civilian quarters by the Assad government received much smaller coverage. These bombings were recorded by the UN as long-standing and part of a system of war crimes. That coverage was also much more time-constrained. When The Guardian published its story on the Douma chemical attack of 2018, the linguistic register changed to the clinical and disputed. It used terms such as alleged attack, disputed evidence, and conflicting accounts. It is interesting to note that these qualifications are suitable when dealing with facts that are genuinely disputed. However, they are not applied in coverage of atrocities committed by actors whose deviant status has already been determined. Threat inflation will inevitably be accompanied by the potential for deflation of the violence attributed to those whose legitimacy is assumed.

Lexical Asymmetry: Calling Violence by Other Names: The third and most widely reported pattern is lexical asymmetry. It uses qualitatively distinct vocabulary to label functionally identical acts of violence based on who is performing them. The linguistic performance of this double standard is called 'lexical asymmetry.' That is, the same deed is called a 'massacre' when it is done by our enemies and an 'operation' when it is done by our allies. This tendency was already reported in the pioneering work of the Glasgow University Media Group on industrial conflict (1982), and it is one of the strongest pieces of evidence of the critical linguistics of war continuing over decades and across conflict zones.

The word 'terrorist' is the paradigm case. In the present corpus, the term is used only when referring to non-state actors. It is used by far most often when it comes to actors in a Muslim-majority context across all seven newspaper sources. None of the 420 texts studied speak of any state actor as a terrorist, no matter how well-documented its violence is. When the Israeli army kills people in Gaza, the usual lingo is 'airstrike,' 'operation,' 'targeted killing,' or 'strike on Hamas infrastructure.' Whenever Hamas kills Israeli citizens, the language used is 'terrorist attack,' 'massacre,' 'slaughter,' and 'atrocity.' Both groups of killings concern the intentional or careless killing of civilians. Both have been reported by international human rights organisations to be in breach of international humanitarian law. Naming, however, is the attribution of moral status prior to any research being done (Philo & Berry, 2011).

This imbalance is not just semantic. It also has legal and material implications. The label 'terrorist' provokes a certain legal and political order. Under that order, suspects may be held in custody without any charges. Their assets may be frozen, and organisations may be listed. States may also resort to self-defence provisions of international law to legitimise the use of force. The term 'state military actor,' in turn, refers to the regime of international humanitarian law. That regime provides more procedural protection and imposes a much greater burden of proof before acting. In this respect, the linguistic alternatives

of using 'terrorist' and 'soldier' are a choice between various legal worlds. The systematic distribution of these terms by the media along geopolitical lines is not the reporting of facts but the reproduction of a juridico-political world (Jackson, 2005).

The Syrian civil war offers excellent illustrations of lexical asymmetry in a multifaceted, multipolar conflict. Initially, coverage consistently used terms such as activists, fighters, the opposition, or the Free Syrian Army for rebel groups opposing Assad. This language gave those groups political legitimacy. As the conflict changed and jihadist groups took centre stage, the words used changed drastically to militants, extremists, and terrorists. Government forces, in turn, were always referred to as the Syrian army or regime forces. The latter term, 'regime forces,' was used with overtones of illegitimacy, yet never of terror. Russian airstrikes in favour of Assad were reported by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria as intentionally destroying hospitals, markets, and civilian infrastructure. In mainstream Western media, these strikes were termed 'Russian military actions,' 'airstrikes,' or 'bombardment,' but never 'terrorism.' Amnesty International reports detailing these attacks used the language of war crimes. That language was not common in the mainstream media (Amnesty International, 2020).

The Tigray war presents possibly the most obvious instance of lexical asymmetry in African responses. The UN Human Rights Office recorded Ethiopian and Eritrean troops engaging in mass rape, ethnic cleansing, and the systematic destruction of healthcare facilities. Such actions in Europe would be characterised using the most moral language available (UN Human Rights Office, 2022). In the corpus, they are characterised as atrocities, abuses, and violations. These are heinous terms. However, they are significantly less loaded than comparable actions in European or Israeli/Palestinian settings. The TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front), in its turn, is consistently referred to as a 'rebel group' or a 'designated terrorist organisation.' This occurs in the press that diligently reproduces the legal designation placed on it by the Ethiopian government, a party to the conflict (Plaut, 2023).

(d) The Grammar of Impunity: Passivity and the Denial of Responsibility: The fourth pattern is at the grammatical, not the vocabulary, level. It involves the systematic construction of passive voice. This deprives an account of state violence of agency. It thus deprives the precondition of accountability. Roger Fowler and others first systematically studied this pattern in *Language and Control* (1979), and it is one of the most consistently recorded characteristics of mainstream conflict journalism.

The point is beautifully straightforward. The sentence 'Israeli forces killed fourteen civilians in an airstrike on a residential building in Gaza City on 5 October 2023' attributes the act to an agent. By contrast, 'fourteen civilians killed in an airstrike in Gaza City on 5 October 2023' eliminates that agent. The phrase 'the death of fourteen civilians in an airstrike in Gaza City' clouds agency even further by using an intransitive verb that implies death rather than killing. Every step along this grammatical continuum removes another stratum of moral and legal imputation. Using the passive form is not grammatically incorrect. But its systematic application, particularly when referring to a specific actor such as a state or an ally, or in media address, and alongside prevalent active constructions used for non-state or adversarial violence, functions as an ideological pattern that can operate below the level of conscious rhetorical choice (Fowler, 1991; van Dijk, 2015).

Certain corpus examples are eloquent. When the US drone strike that killed Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad in January 2020 was reported, *The New York Times* first ran the headline 'Airstrike Kills Iran Master of Chaos'; here the grammatical subject, or agent, is the airstrike, and the United States is not present. The same event was covered by *The Economist*, which claimed Soleimani was killed by an American drone strike, a construction that at least refers to the means but not to the decision-maker. CNN, in turn, published an article stating that Trump ordered the killing, making the human actor explicit. The cross-outlet difference is itself instructive: the extent of agentive attribution is associated with editorial

readiness to delegate political and moral responsibility.

The use of agentless passives is rampant in reports of atrocities in the case of the Tigray conflict. On the linguistic level, a Human Rights Watch report (2021), an advocacy journalism document, is characterised by the usage of active constructions: Eritrean soldiers executed civilians, Ethiopian federal forces burnt homes, and soldiers raped women. When this evidence was picked up in mainstream news regimes, it was systematically rendered in a passive or nominalised form. Thus, civilians were killed, sexual violence was reported, homes were destroyed, and reports of killings emerged. That is not a journalistic tradition of neutrality; it is a grammatical blotting out of those who do it, rendering accountability journalism structurally impossible (Fowler, 1991).

Passive voice effects are enhanced by the phenomenon of bureaucratic nominalisation. A nominalisation of forced displacement is the term 'collateral damage'; although it entered the popular discourse during the war in Vietnam and was institutionalised during the Gulf War (MacArthur, 1992), it is the nominalisation of the term 'we killed civilians.' 'Enhanced interrogation' nominalises torture, the nominalisation of bombing is 'kinetic activity,' and the nominalisation of killing is through the 'neutralisation of threats.' Every nominalisation, every human act, where there are human agent and a human victim, is turned into an administrative process, a characteristic of the landscape of war, as opposed to a decision made by morally responsible individuals. The analysis of the banality of evil by Hannah Arendt (1963), of how bureaucratic language allowed the perpetrators to imagine themselves as administrators and not killers, has its modern-day reflection in the Pentagon briefings and statements of the foreign ministry that are reproduced and commented on by the mainstream media.

Temporal Compression and History Erasure: The fifth pattern is not a matter of vocabulary and grammar. It concerns the time architecture of news narrative. This involves the systematic compression of historical time. Such compression frames present events as resulting from the actions of named deviant actors. It overlooks the causal chains of colonial violence, resource usage, arms trade, and previous military interventions. Those chains created the conditions under which conflict occurred. Temporal compression is a characteristic of news discourse, yet its implications in conflict situations are deeply political. By selecting a point of departure for the narrative, a journalist implicitly lays the blame.

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict is the paradigmatic case. Reporting on exchanges of violence between Hamas and Israeli troops is always subject to a specific temporal grammar. Under this grammar, Hamas shoots rocket as an initiative event, and Israel retaliates as a reaction event. This is the frame that is replicated persistently in the Western press. It puts Palestinian violence as a non-reactionary source and Israeli military action as a proportional reaction. The frame blocks out the decades of occupation, siege, settlement growth, and structural dispossession that led up to any exchange of fire. In the case of the violence in May 2021, the original headline of the CNN report mentioned the violence of Gaza without any contextualisation about the preceding Sheikh Jarrah evictions. In the case of the Hamas attack in October 2023, historical background often ended at the past few weeks. A systematic analysis of television news reporting of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict in the UK by Philo and Berry (2011) revealed that less than ten per cent of the viewers interviewed could name the occupation as the backdrop of the conflict. This fact directly relates to the impact of temporal compression in the mainstream news.

Temporal compression in both directions is being used in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The use of temporal compression is also a disputed topic. The history pertinent to Western media coverage usually starts with the 2014 Euromaidan revolution and the annexation of Crimea. In that frame, Russia is the aggressor and Ukraine is the victim. Russian state media and sympathetic analysts extend the story further back to the post-Cold War eastward expansion by

NATO, the 2008 Bucharest Summit commitments, and the structural change of European security architecture. This makes the actions of Russia more of a reaction than an initiation. Neither frame is directly false, but both are selective. Selectivity is always political: the decision of when to begin the temporal narrative is always the decision of a political narrative. The history of the territories in question stretches over centuries of disputed sovereignty. Any assertive attempt to attribute historical blame must be approached with cautious attention to that history that the media frame the subjects of both parties prefer to offer.

The Tigray war shows the compression of time at the structural neglect level. The coverage that did appear in the international press often lacked the political and historical context of the conflict. That context included the history of TPLF domination of Ethiopian federal politics between 1991 and 2018. It also included the intricate nature of the rise of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to power and the fall of the ruling coalition. Another missing element was the long history of Eritrea-Ethiopia hostility that lent the conflict its regional character. In the absence of this background, the events seemed like unexpected, unexplainable bursts of violence. This validated viewers who had never known about it before, and it affirmed the Orientalist account of African political irrationality. Even the lack of any historical framing is a compression in time. This compression serves to make African conflict more naturalised as a condition rather than as a process with recognisable causes and culprits (Plaut, 2023).

Social media is compressing time to its logical extreme. The picture, a video fragment, and a two-hundred-character caption are the elements of conflict representation in the modern digital public space. Such images circulate out of context, whether they show a body, a building, or a face. They create what Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2010) refer to as 'connective memory.' Connective memory connects an image to an existing emotional structure that occupies the gap created by the lack of context. During the 2023–2024 Gaza war, posts of bombed-out buildings and wounded children were shared on social media sites. At the same time, other posts on social media sites showed prior conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq, usually out of context. Stripped of historical and political context, the visual grammar of destruction naturalised suffering as a characteristic of the region and of particular people. It did so instead of presenting that suffering as the result of choices by actors with interests.

Ethics of Representation and the Responsibilities of Language: The above five patterns are parts of a discourse of moral asymmetry. This discourse is a representational order. Within it, some actors are systematically constructed as deviant, inhuman, and beyond the pale of political engagement. Others, irrespective of reported behaviour, are constructed as legitimate, responsive, and essentially like us. This is not just an asymmetry of description but also an asymmetry of performance. It performs things in the world. It establishes symbolic prerequisites for the de facto withdrawal of legal protections and for the mobilisation of popular backing in favour of state violence. It influences the formation of mass opinion about the legitimacy of the use of military force. It shapes the allocation of humanitarian concern and the abandonment of humanitarian anonymity in response to populations (Butler, 2009).

In the case of the humanities, the defining question is more than analytical. It is more of an ethical question: what do the producers and consumers of these representations owe? According to the famous essay by George Orwell (1946), 'Politics and the English Language,' the corruption of language and the corruption of political thought go hand in hand. If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought. The prescription that Orwell offered was composed in the twilight of the Second World War and the then sprouting totalitarianism of the twentieth century. It called for concrete, specific, active, honest language as opposed to abstraction, euphemism, and passive constructions. This prescription is among the most succinct statements of journalistic and humanistic ethics to have ever been written. The trends that are observed in this article, in Orwellian terms, are not just bad writing but bad faith. These are the

rhetorical tools through which inconvenient truths are denied to the thinking masses.

The issue of journalism ethics cannot be discussed outside of one question. That question is whose lives and deaths can be subjected to the mourning of the people. Based on her argument, Judith Butler (2009) emphasises that the frames of war dictate the grievability of lives. These frames are the representational systems in which conflict is produced and rendered visible and intelligible. They determine whose deaths are tragedies and whose are acceptable costs. This helps explain the difference between two media responses. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there were weeks of continued European indignation and institutional reaction. According to media monitoring information, there were more than one million articles in the first month of media coverage. By contrast, reporting of the Tigray conflict was relatively subdued and intermittent, even though its death toll could be 10 times higher. This difference is not merely a factor of geopolitical propinquity. It is the work of representational structures that give varying value to human lives, and those structures are linguistic, preceding their being anything else (Adichie, 2009; Owuor, 2021).

This analysis should not be understood as implying that all conflicts should receive the same coverage. Nor should it be understood as implying that journalistic differences regarding various forms of violence are always invalid. Instead, it posits that the asymmetries recorded here are due to no principled distinction. Rather, they are due to blind repetition of the hierarchy in geopolitics. The tradition of the humanities has invaluable resources to diagnose and criticise such asymmetries. These resources lie in its close reading, historical contextualisation, and ethical reflection of representation. The model of peace journalism of Lynch and McGoldrick (2005) leads in the same direction. The critique of post-humanitarianism of Chouliaraki (2013) also leads in the same direction. The tradition of activist scholarship exemplified by the work of Chomsky, Said, and Philo and Berry lead in the same direction as well. That direction is towards a journalism and a media criticism that is responsible not only to facts but also to the entirety of human lives that these representations make visible or invisible.

In the case of media literacy, the implication is also very pressing. As Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) posit, modern-day information disorder is typified by misinformation, disinformation, and the artificial amplification of affectively charged content by an algorithm. Due to this information disorder, critical language awareness is more critical than ever. An education of media literacy should include students in the specific linguistic processes of deviance production. This education teaches students to be attentive to passive voice. It teaches them to question metaphor. It teaches them to find out what starting point in time has been selected and why. It teaches them to wonder whose voice is not being used in the conflict journalism. Such an education would enable citizens to respond to conflict journalism as an active participant rather than as a passive consumer.

Conclusion

The Moral Weight of Words

Wars are defended in language, and what is most important is that they are forgotten in language. Language is the cloth on which the enemies are embroidered. It is the tool with which certain deaths are turned into tragedies. It is also the tool with which certain deaths are turned into numbers. It is the engine whereby the unusual violence of states is made into a normal one. It is also the engine whereby the unusual violence of non-state actors is made into a monster. The article has identified five overlapping patterns of media language construction of deviance in modern conflict contexts. These patterns are ontological othering, threat inflation, lexical asymmetry, grammatical erasure, and temporal compression. The article has put each pattern into its context, citing particular and documented instances of the patterns in the Tigray War, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the Syrian civil war, and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

A humanities approach to this analysis is distinctive in its insistence on particularity. It focuses on the specific word, the specific headline, the specific metaphor, and the specific grammatical construction. Social science can

inform us that framing does have consequences. The humanities can inform us about how the framing is accomplished. For example, they show how the oncological metaphor enlists the imagination of the reader. They show how agentless passive sentences impose guilt on a population even before a court has sat. They show how the temporal moment of a news item locates guilt in advance of a court having sat. These are not just differences of an academic kind. These are the differences between the media criticism that explains the pattern and the one that arms readers to acknowledge this pattern and challenge it.

This article is not an appeal to disinterested journalism, nor to a journalism that is neither descriptive, explanatory, nor analytical. Instead, it lies in the honesty of its views and in its practice of its moral terms. It lies in the uniformity of its application rather than in the convenience of geopolitics. It lies in its identification of agents when agents exist, and in its offering of the historical context without which present events will be incoherent. It lies in its even distribution of its grief and indignation to all the lives of mankind, irrespective of geography, ethnicity, or religion. These are ultimately not journalistic but also humanistic demands. Every one of us dies, as Wole Soyinka (1996) wrote when the civil war in Nigeria was being fought, a death that is a human death. The language that we use to describe it should be worthy of that humanity. It is in this spirit that this article calls for a critical, ethical, and humane practice of conflict journalism, that is the one that treats language not as a neutral tool but as a moral act.

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