

# A Transitivity Analysis of Western and Middle Eastern Media Reporting on the Israel–Iran War

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## Abstract

*The wording employed in news reporting greatly shapes public opinion, especially regarding international disputes like the Israel–Iran war. Media organizations, influenced by their geopolitical ties, frequently present events through unique ideological perspectives. This raises issues regarding how news outlets from the West and the Middle East linguistically frame the same conflict through different grammatical selections. This study seeks to examine and contrast the transitivity structures used by Western and Middle Eastern media when reporting on the Israel–Iran war that took place in June 2025. Utilizing Halliday's transitivity framework from Systemic Functional Linguistics, the research employs a qualitative comparative approach to analyze two news articles—one sourced from POLITICO (Western) and the other from Al Jazeera (Middle Eastern). The results indicate that although both sources depend significantly on material processes to describe military activities, they differ in attributing agency, choosing participants, and highlighting verbal and relational processes. Al Jazeera often depicts Israel as the aggressor and emphasizes perspectives from the Global South, while POLITICO offers a more impartial portrayal that highlights diplomatic restraint. These findings imply that choices of transitivity in media texts are influenced by ideology, and this linguistic framing can greatly affect how audiences perceive global political events.*

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis, Israel–Iran War, Media Ideology, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Transitivity.

## Introduction

In today's world, language shapes the perception of events during international conflicts, particularly in news reporting. Media outlets use language to relay information, which also shapes reality (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 1998). In the case of sensitive conflicts like the constant friction between Israel and Iran, news reports become instrumental in justifying and suggesting moral judgments while also serving national interests (Fowler, 1991; Machin & Mayr, 2012). "The conflict has recently escalated into direct clashes between the two countries, drawing the attention of world leaders and international media" (Herszenhorn et al., 2025; Al Jazeera, 2025). Different versions accompany the information, highlighting different angles as per the stance of the media outlet.

This brings up the issue of the disparity of news coverage in different areas, particularly between the West and the Middle East. While reporting on certain events, the words used to describe who the protagonist is, what is emphasized, and whose perspective is included, differ greatly (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). These differences are noteworthy as they capture more essential and central political concepts and hierarchies in the power relations expressed in the language. For this reason, it is crucial to analyze the detailed grammatical structure of how these narratives are built, particularly focusing on the transitivity system in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL).

Recent studies have used transitivity analysis to explore ideology in news coverage. For example, Wang and Liu (2021) looked at how Chinese and Western media reported on the Hong Kong protests, finding clear differences in how actions and actors were described through material and relational processes. Abdullah and Saeed (2021) showed that Iraqi and Western media portrayed military actions in Mosul with varying levels of agency and responsibility, often using passive voice strategically. Sari and Setyowati (2020) studied online news in Indonesia and found that ideological views were reflected in the choice of transitivity patterns. Similarly, Nasrullah and Sari (2022) found significant differences between Western and Indonesian media in how COVID-19 vaccine policies were presented, especially through relational and verbal processes.

While these studies highlight the usefulness of transitivity analysis in uncovering ideological framing, few have compared Western and Middle Eastern news sources covering the same event. Most existing research focuses either on domestic political news or broad portrayals of regional conflicts, without looking closely at the highly charged reporting on the Israel–Iran confrontation. This study fills that gap by applying transitivity analysis to two news reports—one from POLITICO, a Western outlet, and one from Al Jazeera, a Middle Eastern outlet—both published in June 2025 about the same incident. The goal is to analyze and compare how each article uses transitivity structures to create meaning, assign agency, and express ideological positions. This comparative analysis offers deeper insight into how language functions ideologically in international media discourse.

## Literature Review

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), developed by Halliday and later refined by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), sees language as a tool for creating meaning within social contexts. A key part of this theory is the transitivity system, which expresses experiences by showing actions, thoughts, and states through specific clause structures. In SFL, a clause is more than just a grammatical unit; it represents how experiences are shaped through the interaction of processes, participants, and circumstances (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

The transitivity system divides processes into six types: material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential. Material processes describe actions or events and usually involve an Actor and a Goal. Mental processes express thinking, sensing, or feeling and involve a Sensor and a Phenomenon. Relational processes deal with identification or description and often involve Carriers and Attributes or Tokens and Values. Behavioral processes show physiological or psychological behaviors; verbal processes represent communication acts; and existential processes indicate existence, often using the word "there" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). These categories are important for understanding how texts assign agency and responsibility.

In media, transitivity is very important since it determines how a certain reality is conveyed through language. Fairclough (1995) notes that news stories do not capture every detail as objective accounts; they emphasize particular actions, characters, or institutions that express the political or institutional view. What is more, the grammar of the sentence can include or exclude the responsibility, like in active and passive voice. It is clear that in the sentence "Israel launched an airstrike," Israel is the obvious actor. However, "An

airstrike was launched” does not mention the actor. Choices such as these are especially important in politically sensitive situations (Fowler, 1991).

The way transitivity is used in media reporting can influence how the public sees events by focusing on some participants while downplaying or ignoring others. Van Dijk (1998) points out that the media often use sentence structures to shape readers’ understanding according to a particular ideology. When one side is consistently shown as the agent of aggressive actions and the other as the passive victim, the media contribute to building a narrative of blame, justification, or victimhood.

Analyzing transitivity allows for a critical look at how language reflects power and ideological positions. In conflict reporting, who is shown acting, suffering, or speaking greatly affects how readers judge legitimacy, morality, and responsibility. Media may use material processes to highlight actions, verbal processes to show authority, or relational processes to define identity or status. Each choice shapes the way the story is framed (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

Because it reveals these ideologically charged language choices, the transitivity framework is well-suited to studying media coverage of the Israel–Iran conflict. By comparing how Western and Middle Eastern media describe the same events, this study seeks to show how transitivity structures are used to express different political meanings. The analysis looks at not just the types of processes but also how participants and sentence voice are used to fit each outlet’s regional or ideological viewpoint.

## Method

This study employs a qualitative comparative research design grounded in the transitivity framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics. The primary aim is to examine how transitivity structures are used in two news reports to construct ideological perspectives on the Israel–Iran conflict. The research focuses specifically on process types, participant roles, and the distribution of agency across clauses, allowing for an in-depth exploration of how language encodes political and ideological meaning.

The data for this study consist of two news articles published in June 2025. The first is a report by *POLITICO*, a Western outlet based in Europe, titled “*Deeply alarming’: World leaders urge restraint as Israel pummels Iran*” <https://share.google/gm0vA7JmAPHjzI8zC> (Politico, June 13<sup>th</sup> 2025). The second is an article by *Al Jazeera*, a major Middle Eastern media organization, titled “*World leaders weigh in on ‘alarming’ Israel–Iran strikes*” <https://share.google/PV6CiBo8Lxo9ZDdBa> (Al Jazeera, June 14<sup>th</sup> 2025). Both articles capture the global response to the same development: The intensifying military confrontations between Israel and Iran, as well as the reactions from other countries. The articles were chosen for this comparison because they address the same event, allowing for a thorough and timely comparison.

The first part of the analysis was to separate every article into independent clauses. Each clause was analyzed in terms of its transitivity features: processes (material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral, and existential), participants (Actor, Goal, Sensor), voice (active or passive), and circumstantial details, which include time, manner, and place. Attention was paid to the distribution of agency—how actions are attributed to particular actors, who perform actions and suffer actions, and how activeness or passiveness is concealed through the use of grammar.

The analysis was both interpretative and comparative. After annotating both articles, the patterns in process types and participant roles were compared to find similarities and differences in how the two sources portray the Israel–Iran conflict. For example, one key point was whether Israel or Iran appeared more often as the Actor in material processes, and whether certain actions were described in passive voice to hide agency. These language patterns were then linked to the possible ideological stances of the media outlets.

While the study is limited to examining only two articles, it offers a detailed and focused comparison of transitivity structures. Future research could include more sources and look at changes in transitivity patterns over time. Still, this small project provides useful insights into how media from different geopolitical areas create meaning through grammar and reveals the ideological messages embedded in language.

## Findings and Discussion

An analysis of transitivity brought about using Al Jazeera and POLITICO articles showcases important contrasts regarding action framing, participant characterization, and ideological positioning. These differences are evident in how processes are used, agency is assigned, and verbal and relational clauses are framed. Even though both articles portray the Israeli and Iranian military conflict that erupted in June 2025, the way they chose to linguistically construct the event reflects their different geopolitical and ideological contexts.

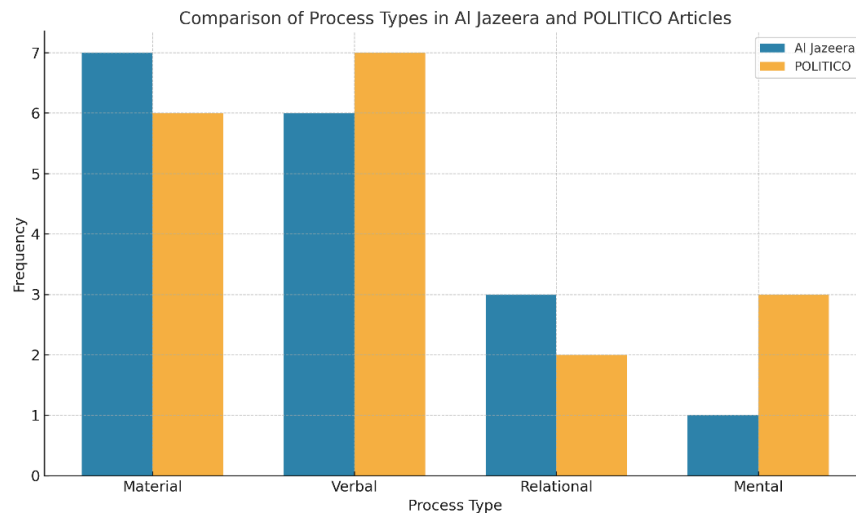
As is usually applies to conflict reporting, both articles center on material processes, including attacks, strikes, and retaliation, as they describe action. However, the distribution of agency shifts. Al Jazeera foregrounds Israel as the principal actor in material processes, frequently casting it as the aggressor targeting military and nuclear facilities. Clauses such as “the Israeli army targeted more than 200 sites” clearly place Israel in the role of Actor. Iran, on the other hand, is most often portrayed as the passive recipient of action. POLITICO, however, assigns greater balance in attribution of material actions to both parties. Israel is recognized as the initiator of the strikes (“Israel targeted Iran with deadly strikes”) and, alongside that, Iran’s retaliation is also mentioned directly (“Iran launched a swarm of more than 100 drones”). This constructs a balance of symmetry in the narrative of conflict and response.

Verbal processes are utilized thoroughly in both articles, albeit for different rhetorical purposes. Al Jazeera’s article frequently ascribes verbal clauses to leaders from the Global South and non-Western nations, including Turkish President Erdogan, Qatari Emir Al Thani, and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. Such voices often criticize Israeli actions and advocate for diplomatic resolutions, thus aligning the narrative with Iran’s sovereignty and regional defense rights. Erdogan’s address, blaming Israel for “dragging the region into fire” highlights the portrayal of Israel as a destabilizing force. At the same time, POLITICO favors verbal actions from Western leaders and global organizations such as NATO, the European Commission, and the United Nations. The language is more diplomatically calibrated, highlighting moderation and equilibrium. Quotes from Trump, von der Leyen, and Macron consistently depict both parties as requiring de-escalation, while Israel’s actions are presented within a narrative of self-defense and urgency.

Relational processes, which aim to attribute qualities or conditions of existence, also expose ideological differences. Al Jazeera employs relational clauses to depict Israel as a local danger, frequently through reported speech, such as Erdogan’s assertion that Israel is “the principal threat to stability.” These assignments depict Israel as the destabilizing element in the Middle East. Conversely, POLITICO employs relational processes to characterize Iran’s nuclear program as “a significant issue,” reinforcing a standard Western security narrative that portrays Iran as a potential danger needing containment. This subtle difference in relational meaning illustrates how each outlet formulates distinct moral assessments via grammar.

Mental processes that indicate perception or emotion are more prevalent in POLITICO’s article. Leaders like Trump and European officials are portrayed as worried, informed, and prudent. For instance, “Trump stated he was conscious...” and “European officials worried about instability...” serve to position the West as logical and accountable players. In Al Jazeera’s article, cognitive aspects are less emphasized and highlight Iran’s willingness to defend or respond, with expressions such as “Pezeshkian warned of a stronger reaction” stressing national honor and independence.

A comparative frequency chart was created (refer to Figure 1) to demonstrate how each news outlet allocated transitivity process types, complementing the linguistic analysis. The chart indicates that, although both articles extensively use material processes to illustrate military activities, Al Jazeera highlights verbal and relational processes that emphasize diplomatic criticism and ideological position. In contrast, POLITICO employs more cognitive processes, depicting Western actors as thoughtful, logical observers reacting to the circumstances.



**Figure 1 :** Comparison of Process Types in Al Jazeera and POLITICO News Reports on the Israel–Iran Conflict (June, 2025)

This bar chart illustrates the occurrence of different transitivity process types (Material, Verbal, Relational, and Mental) found in the Al Jazeera and POLITICO articles. The information shows variations in the linguistic framing of the event by each outlet, with Al Jazeera highlighting diplomatic denunciation and national sovereignty, whereas POLITICO prioritizes worldwide apprehension and Western diplomatic reactions.

In general, the transitivity selections found in each article demonstrate different ideological positions. Al Jazeera’s report portrays Israel as the aggressor, amplifies the voices of leaders denouncing Israeli actions, and highlights Iranian sovereignty. POLITICO recognizes Israeli military actions but presents a more balanced, security-focused narrative that underscores Western diplomatic worries and portrays Iran’s nuclear capability as a danger. The existence of both agency distribution and participant selection in transitivity patterns reinforces this understanding.

These results demonstrate that transitivity goes beyond being just a grammatical framework; it serves as a significant instrument by which media organizations shape social and political reality. Regarding the Israel–Iran conflict, media from the Middle East and the West not only present differing facts; they also linguistically influence the audience’s perception of agency, accountability, and legitimacy via the grammatical arrangement of actions and actors.

## Conclusion

This research analyzed and contrasted the transitivity structures in two news articles from Western and Middle Eastern outlets—POLITICO and Al Jazeera, respectively—reporting on the Israel–Iran conflict in June 2025. Through the lens of Systemic Functional Linguistics, particularly the transitivity system, the analysis showed that both sources primarily utilized material processes to depict military activities. Nonetheless, the allocation of agency and the employment of various process types like verbal, relational, and mental processes indicated notable ideological disparities.

Al Jazeera repeatedly framed Israel as the main aggressor, highlighting verbal actions from Global South leaders who denounced Israeli behaviors and advocated for the safeguarding of Iranian sovereignty. Relational clauses were employed to identify Israel as a destabilizing influence in the area. In comparison, POLITICO offered a more equitable portrayal of influence between Israel and Iran, portraying Iran’s nuclear initiative as a security threat. The Western piece emphasized verbal and cognitive methods used by Western leaders, underscoring diplomatic priorities, logic, and the aim of reducing tensions.

These results highlight the ideological nature of news discourse, where grammatical structures function as influential means of influencing public opinion. The comparison shows that although they report on the same events, media organizations vary in their assignment of agency, framing of conflict, and the way they use language to create meaning. This research enhances our comprehension of how systemic linguistic analysis, especially transitivity, reveals the nuanced ways media discourse reflects geopolitical positions and ideological perspectives.

Future studies might build on this research by including a more extensive collection of news articles from various time periods and locations, or by examining how transitivity relates to other discourse characteristics like modality and evaluation.

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