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**Political and ideological tensions in Israel: a critical language  
analysis of news reporting of the 2014 Gaza war**

التصدعات الفكرية والسياسية في اسرائيل: تحليل لغوي نقدي للخطاب الاعلامي الاسرائيلي  
خلال حرب غزة 2014

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**Abstract**

It is widely accepted that the struggle over media representation within the Palestinian-Israeli struggle is no less important than the struggle on the ground (Wolfsfeld, 1997). Although the role of the media in this struggle has been a focal interest for researchers, the vast majority of studies are based on content analyses (see Kempf & Shinar, 2014). They mostly adopt top-down approaches with macro-level tools of analysis which lead to a dichotomous positive 'Self' and negative 'Other' representation. This study, in contrast, is a qualitative language-based analysis of three Israeli online newspapers during the 2014 Gaza war. The study analyses a limited number of news articles from newspapers that are indicative of the Israeli media landscape. The choice of these outlets is intended to present a range of possible views from the right, centre, and left. The study adds to the effort which approaches media discourse to detect fissures and dissonances rather than identifying stabilities and symmetries. To achieve its aims, the study adopts Critical Discourse Analysis as a general framework and takes account of transitivity (Halliday, 1985; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), the social actor model (van Leeuwen, 2008) and referential strategies (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009) to conduct its bottom-up analysis. The results of this study reveal that marginal ideologies at both ends of the ideological

spectrum in Israel compete with a hegemonic Zionist discourse. More interestingly, the study reveals some discursive differences between the hegemonic ideology on the one hand and the marginal ideologies on the other. While the former depends on common public knowledge, thus backgrounding much contextual information, the latter mainly function via the extensive contextualization of events.

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis, Israeli Media, Ideology, Gaza War.

### ملخص

لا يقل الصراع على التمثيل الاعلامي في الاعلام الفلسطيني والاسرائيلي أهمية عن الصراع على الارض (ولف سفد، 1997). وعلى الرغم من الاهتمام البحثي بموضوع الصراع على الاعلام، الا أن معظم الدراسات قدمت تحليل محتوى (انظر مثلاً كيمب وشينار، 2014) يتجاهل كثيراً من التفاصيل والاختلافات الدقيقة والمهمة. غالباً ما توظف هذه الدراسات منهجيات تحليلية تبدأ من التركيب الاجتماعي والسياسي نزولاً نحو النص، والتي تقود الى نتائج متوقعة تتمثل في صورة الأنا الايجابية والآخر السلبية. وعليه، تقدم هذه الدراسة تحليلاً لغوياً نقدياً لثلاث صحف الكترونية اسرائيلية خلال الحرب على غزة عام 2014، وهي هارتس، ويديعوت احرونوت، وجيروزاليم بوست. تقوم الدراسة بتحليل مقالات اخبارية من هذه المنصات الاعلامية التي تمثل المشهد الاعلامي في اسرائيل. وبالتالي، تقدم الدراسة اضافة جديدة للمجهود البحثي الذي يركز على الاختلافات والتشقات في التمثيل بدل طرح السؤال التقليدي الذي يبحث عن التشابهات. ولتحقيق اهدافها، توظف هذه الدراسة التحليل النقدي للخطاب كإطار نظري عام، كما تستخدم أدوات تحليلية على مستوى الجملة للحصول على تحليل دقيق يبدأ من النص صعوداً الى المركبات السياسية والاجتماعية. تظهر نتائج هذه الدراسة بأن الايديولوجيات الفرعية في المجتمع الاسرائيلي (ما بعد الصهيونية والصهيونية الجديدة) تنافس الايديولوجيا الصهيونية المهيمنة. كما تظهر الدراسة بأن كل من هذه الايديولوجيات تستخدم استراتيجيات خطابية مختلفة حسب موقعها على الخريطة السياسية في اسرائيل.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التحليل النقدي للخطاب، الاعلام الاسرائيلي، الايديوجيا، حرب غزة.

### Introduction

The role of the Israeli media in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been investigated in different fields of study. The vast majority of the research that dealt with this issue focuses on how different political and media discourses line up with the dominant political institution to produce nationally-based representation of actions and actors (Dajani, 2003;

Daraghmeh, 2003; Dor, 2004, 2015). However, with the growing tendency in critical discourse studies that focuses on irregularities and tensions in representation (see Kelsey, 2014; Macgilchrist, 2014), there is a need to focus on internal conflicts within Israeli society to unveil latent political and ideological conflicts that direct the struggle and form part of its future practices. This study, therefore, is a critical language analysis that aims at providing new insights about the way political and ideological conflicts in Israel are covertly articulated via news discourse. The choice of journalism to identify ideological tensions is based on the assumption that journalism, under the disguise of objective reporting of reality, constructs perspectivized world views, thus having a role in reproducing ideologies that regulate social actors' knowledge and attitudes towards actors' and actions (Fowler, 1991).

### ***Framework and methods of analysis***

This study adopts critical discourse analysis (CDA) as its general framework. It attempts to find the correlation between media discourse and the wider socio-political context in Israel. This is meant to bring into consciousness the (conflicting) world views that motivate the different *realities* constructed in a number of Israeli newspapers about the 2014 Gaza War.

To achieve its objectives, this study is designed in a way that brings together the discursive functions of different linguistic choices to see whether different *stories* arise in the Israeli newspapers while reporting a very sensitive socio-political event, and what ideologies motivate and are reproduced by these differences in representation. The study adds to the effort which approaches media discourse to detect fissures and dissonances, rather than identifying stabilities and symmetries, which is a crucial step in developing methodologies that investigate latent ideological tensions in news reporting.

In a highly sensitive and controversial context, such as the Gaza war(s), every linguistic choice is made to fit the news outlets' vigilant political and ideological objectives. Therefore, this study employs three clause-level discursive features to analyse the representation of *Actions*



### *Criteria for data selection*

The 2014 Gaza War lasted for 51 days. Hundreds of news reports were produced by each news outlet's English website to cover the war's rapidly unfolding events. For an in-depth qualitative analysis, the study chooses to focus on a key event in the war: the ground invasion of Shejayyah neighbourhood on 20 July 2014. The study is interested in investigating how the Israeli newspapers, *Haaretz*, *Ynet*, and *Jerusalem Post*, differ in their representations of this major event. It does not matter whether the news articles from each news outlet are representative of its general tendency or not. The concern of this study is with how each outlet deals with this event and the war in general, in light of its complicated military, political and human realities. The ground invasion was a very controversial event and linguistic choices are believed to be deeply entrenched within the political and ideological objectives of both newspapers and news websites. The focus on a limited number of articles relating to one specific event enables me to examine how – analytically independent – micro-linguistic choices package different aspects of the same social reality.

I choose to analyse 12 news articles from each news outlet taken from the first three days of the ground invasion: 20–22 July 2014. The choice of articles is based on their chronological appearance in the newspapers, so the first four articles are chosen from each day. The articles should be directly related to the events of the war. Other articles that deal with the war indirectly, such as international reactions and demonstrations in some Arab and Western countries, are excluded.

### **Analysis and discussion**

As mentioned earlier, this study is interested in investigating the micro-linguistic choices of three Israeli newspapers, *Haaretz*, *Jerusalem Post* (*JP*) and *Yediot Aharonot* (*Ynet*), and the discursive functions of these choices and their political and ideological relevance. Emphasis is put on the differences between these newspapers in order to identify how they compete in the political and ideological context of Israel.

For the sake of a smoother and engaging presentation of the study, I start with the salient macro-strategies in order to highlight the differences



individuals to a whole group” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001a, p. 109). *Ynet* refers explicitly to *Hamas* as a doer of the action and uses the verbal complex *starts rocketing* that suggests a sequential order of events: *Hamas* starts its violent actions, then *Israel* reacts. *JP*, on the other hand, focalizes the danger of *Hamas*’s actions by substituting the actors with the instrument *rockets*. The present continuous verbal group *are attacking* emphasizes the immediacy and urgency of the action, and thus legitimizes the *Israeli* reaction.

*JP* uses further grammatical constructions that associate the collective *Israelis* with danger. First, the newspaper includes transitive and intransitive material processes in which *Israeli* civilians are the Agent. The processes are mostly involuntary and describe the displacement of actors due to military action.

(3) [*JP*] Residents of the council’s 15 kibbutzim and 13 moshavim {Agent} are facing {Material Process} different levels of danger {Goal} based on their location {Circumstance}.

(4) [*JP*] As much as 75% of the residents {Agent} have relocated {Material Process} to areas farther from the Gaza Strip and the rockets, mortars, and tunnel threat {Circumstance}.

In example (3), the Circumstance *based on their location* associates proximity to the Gaza Strip with danger; the closer civilians are to Gaza, the more danger they face. This function is also served in example (4). The place *Gaza Strip* is grammatically equivalent to *rockets*, *mortars* and *tunnel threat*, assuming the same functional role of these semantically different references. Moreover, the use of the spatializing metonymy *Gaza Strip* to refer to Palestinians confers the alleged threat of one group of social actors onto collective Gazans. Representing the Strip as a monolithic threatening entity, while referring at the same time to smaller *Israeli* towns and cities, obfuscates the fact that the Gaza Strip is only 1.7 per cent of *Israel*’s size (based on *Israel*’s borders before the 1967 War).

In contrast, *Haaretz* refers to specific actions and represents their direct effect on *Israeli* civilians. For instance, the process *was killed*





material processes that foreground the Israeli army and its agency over actions targeting Palestinian fighters.

(10) [*JP*] The IDF {Agent} has struck {Material Process} 2,600 Hamas and Islamic Jihad targets {Goal} since the start of Operation Protective Edge {Circumstance}.

(11) [*Ynet*] “We {Agent} hit {Material Process} the leadership of Hamas’ military wing {Goal}”.

Similar processes in *Ynet* foreground Israeli agency and represent the Palestinian fighters as submissive. For instance, the verbal group *caught* in example (15) represents the action as non-challenging and constructs the army as militarily superior to submissive fighters.

(12) [*Ynet*] “In the last day {Circumstance} we {Agent} caught {Material Process} 13 terrorists {Goal}”.

*JP* also includes processes that represent high-tech military equipment and its role in protecting Israeli soldiers and civilians. This is mainly realized by material processes with metonymical Agents, such as *the system* and *the Iron Dome system* in the following examples, in which the instrument replaces the actors.

(13) [*JP*] The system {Agent} successfully blocked {Material Process} an anti-tank missile {Goal}.

(14) [*JP*] At least two rockets {Goal} were shot down {Material Process} by the Iron Dome system {Agent} over metropolitan Tel Aviv {Circumstance}.

In the following example, the action of intercepting rockets is nominalized and represented by the Phenomenon *rocket interception*.

(15) [*JP*] Rocket interceptions {Phenomenon} were also heard {Mental Process} above Bat Yam, Holon, and Rishon Letzion {Circumstance}.



part of the reader because, as Chouliaraki (2006) explains, recipients of news feel powerless about misfortune to other actors when the doer of the action and their purposes are not clearly stated.

Similarly, *Haaretz* uses processes that background the agency and the intentionality of the forces regarding the actions. As the following examples show, some processes appear in passive constructions with Agent deletion, while others have nominalizations as Agent.

(17) [*Haaretz*] 436 Gazans {Goal} had been killed {Material Process} since the beginning of the operation {Circumstance}.

(18) [*Haaretz*] The strike {Agent} also wounded {Material Process} 25 people {Goal}.

The Goals of some of these processes provide further information about the victims. For instance, the Goal in example (49) is modified by the proper name *Ahmed Abu Sanima*, which highlights the experience of those actors and brings them closer to the reader.

(19) [*Haaretz*] The third and fourth (warning missiles) {Agent} hit {Material Process} the house of Ahmed Abu Sanima {Goal}.

Similarly, the Goal in the following example is referred to by the classification categorization *two men, their wives, and six children aged 9 months to 15 years*. It associates civilians with social classes that are clearly illegitimate targets, which highlights their innocence and vulnerability.

(20) [*Haaretz*] Two men, their wives, and six children aged 9 months to 15 years {Goal} were killed {Material Process}.

More surprisingly, *Haaretz* includes material processes in which Israeli forces are foregrounded as a doer.

(21) [*Haaretz*] The Israel Air force {Agent} killed {Material Process} 35 members of two Gaza families {Goal} in separate strikes {Circumstance}.



action. Only one process in *Ynet* refers to civilians. However, this reference is embedded in a coordinate clause and represented as unproblematic.

(24) [*Ynet*] [The IDF {Agent} bombed {Material Process} the house {Goal}] [in which he {Agent} was staying {Material Process}], [and his wife and son {Goal} were also killed {Material Process}].

While the intentional process *bombed* is active, the process that describes the killing of the wife and son is passive. The processes could have a different function if introduced, for instance, as *the IDF bombed the house in which he was staying and killed his wife and his son*, in which the processes are part of one clause instead of being realized in two clauses with different functions. Moreover, the relational identifying reference *his wife and son* identifies the victims in terms of their relationship to the legitimate target (a Hamas leader). This represents the victims as unavoidable collateral damage.

In addition, *Haaretz* includes mental processes that represent the inner world of the victims and expose their states of mind. For instance, the mental process below represents the confusion of the families in responding to the alleged warning missiles and their failure to act properly. It highlights further aspects of their suffering and associates them with weakness, innocence and victimhood.

(25) [*Haaretz*] None of the three families {Senser} knew {Mental Process} which of the families the missiles were meant to warn {Phenomenon}.

In sum, *Haaretz* and *Ynet* are distinguished from *JP* by referring to the effects of the military action on Palestinian civilians. However, *Ynet* does not include representations that influence the legitimacy of the war and a positive image of military action in terms of solving the ‘security’ threats. This is realized by keeping a considerable distance from the victims and backgrounding the Israeli intentionality over the actions. In contrast, *Haaretz* includes processes that highlight important contextual information about the victims. It also includes some processes that subtly foreground the intention of the Israeli forces in targeting civilians, which may give the audience solid reasons to stand against the war.



classifies who is a ‘good’ citizen (Gavriely-Nuri, 2010; Israeli & Roseman-Stollman, 2015; Klein, 1999).

More ideologically, *JP* includes processes that conceptually shift negative actions into positive practices. In the following process, the undesirable action of *killing*, in which soldiers are the Goal, is substituted by the desirable action of *sacrificing* in which the soldiers are the Agent. The voluntary process *made* and the positive Scope *the ultimate sacrifice* background the undesirable consequences of the action and construct, instead, a socially appreciated act of heroism.

(28) [*JP*] “They {Agent} made {Material Process} the ultimate sacrifice {Scope}”.

*Soldiers are successful civilians.*

A more ideological aspect of representation in *JP* and *Ynet* represents killed soldiers as successful civilians. The representation backgrounds all undesirable events associated with soldiers’ death and constructs an image of successful, lively and loved young people. Since representations are part of war reporting, they are not completely dissociated from the military role of soldiers. Rather, they establish a contingent relationship between militarism and social success. This is first realized by material processes in which soldiers are doers of domestic civilian actions. These processes are mostly reported from ordinary people and describe actions of physical or academic success. For instance, the processes below represent a killed soldier as an *athlete* and a *student*, respectively.

(29) [*JP*] He {Agent} won {Material Process} a national championship {Goal} as the captain of KiryatTivon {Circumstance}.

(30) [*Ynet*] He {Agent} graduated {Material Process} from Herzog high school {Circumstance}.

Second, *JP* and *Ynet* use attributive and identifying relational processes that characterize and identify killed soldiers with positive attributes and social roles. The majority of attributive relational processes are intensive; they characterize soldiers by using adjectival and nominal





(36) [*JP*] Carmeli {Token/ Identified} was {Identifying Relational Process} the son of Israeli parents, Alon and Dalya {Value/ Identifier}.

(37) [*Ynet*] “You {Token/ Identifier} are {Identifying Relational Process} our hero {Value/ Identifier}”.

Value participants in these processes background the military context and exclude the undesirable image of soldiers as receivers of military action. More importantly, relational processes reflect representational ambivalences due to incorporating tough and soft elements in representing killed soldiers. They represent soldiers as *boys* and *sons*, who are presumably vulnerable social actors, and as *heroes*.

Researchers have suggested different explanations for these ambivalences. For instance, Klein (1999) believes that there is a tension between the growing role of parenting in the military in Israel on the one hand, and Zionist culture that creates pressure for heroism on the other. He argues that Israeli journalism discourse draws on ideological narratives but at the same time adapts to new social values. Similarly, Israeli and Rosman-Stollman (2015) attribute the combination of soft and tough elements to universal changes in the perception of masculinity and militarism. The authors argue that tough elements prevail in high-level intensity conflicts such as the 2014 Gaza War, whereas soft elements prevail in low-level intensity conflicts such as the 1982 Lebanon War. However, Israeli and Stollman (2015) do not link these external factors to the dynamics of ideology or the political orientations of the different media outlets they investigate. They do not examine any potential differences between newspapers, nor do they subdivide soldiers into fine categorizations (e.g. killed vs working soldier) to see if each sub-group is represented differently.

This study, in contrast, shows that combining soft and tough elements in a *hero* image appears only in *JP* and *Ynet* in their representations of killed soldiers. Their representations invoke the image of the mythical new Israeli Jew who is best incarnated by the Israeli soldier (Israeli & Rosman-Stollman, 2015), which normalizes the soldiers' suffering in order maintain public consent for further wars (Almog, 2000; Gavriely-Nuri,



the soldier with other family members, meaning that his role is not only military but also social and shared by other social actors. The process highlights the civilian role of killed soldiers and subtly contextualizes his death, constructing a contingent relationship between success in civilian life and service in the Israeli army.

(40) [*JP*] The Carmelis {Agent} helped turn {Material Process} the small town {Goal} into a tight-knit community {Resultative Attribute}.

Unlike *JP* and *Ynet*, very rarely does *Haaretz* quote ordinary people's characterizations of soldiers. As the following macro-strategy shows, almost all processes are confined to the military context and do not have any positive or evaluative characterization.

### ***The war has negative consequences for Israel***

In a stark contrast to *JP* and *Ynet*, *Haaretz* does not have macro-strategies that normalize the war. On the contrary, the newspaper includes a counter macro-strategy that highlights the negative consequences of military action for Israeli soldiers. To a lesser degree, some representations in this strategy are also found in *Ynet*. This adds to previous findings that *Ynet* has the most representational ambivalences that may reflect ideological uncertainties.

### ***Palestinian fighters act on Israeli soldiers***

This aspect of representation is context-bound and represents soldiers as variably affected by the military action. Undesirable consequences are foregrounded, either by representing a challenging military context or by representing resultative attributes on the part of soldiers. *Ynet* and *Haaretz* represent the hardships encountered by Israeli soldiers in the first days of the ground invasion by using relational processes. For instance, the Attribute *involved in massive fighting* in the following example provides contextual information about the Carrier *the Ergoz unit*. The challenging context is inferred from the adjective *massive*.

(41) [*Ynet*] The Ergoz unit {Carrier} was involved {Attributive Relational Process} in massive fighting {Attribute}.



They use neutral references as they are used by Palestinians, *Hamas' military wing (the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades)*, and foreground Palestinian fighters as the doer of the action to the Israeli soldier. This is one of the most disturbing images for the Israeli public that the army and politicians had tried to avoid. For instance, a process reported in *Haaretz* shows how an Israeli official backgrounds much of the undesirable event. He employs a relational process that backgrounds the doer of the action and hedges its undesirable consequence by using the Attribute *missing* instead of *captured*.

(47) [*Haaretz*] [The army {Sayer} also declared {Verbal Process}] [that the seventh soldier, identified as Sgt. OronShaul, {Carrier} is {Attributive Relational Process} “missing” {Attribute}].

*Haaretz* and *Ynet* also include frequent processes that represent specific events in which soldiers are killed. The majority of these processes are passive constructions. For instance, the following processes foreground the Goal and highlight the results of the action, while the doer is activated in subsequent processes.

(48) [*Haaretz*] [Four {Goal} were killed {Material Process} by terrorists {Agent}] [who {Agent} infiltrated {Material Process} Israel {Goal} from Gaza {Circumstance} through a tunnel {Circumstance}].

(49) [*Ynet*] [He {Goal} was killed {Material Process} in the incident {Circumstance} Monday morning {Circumstance}] [in which {Circumstance} terrorists {Agent} infiltrated {Material Process} Israel {Goal}].

This is a roundabout representation of actions. A more direct representation, for instance, would be *terrorists infiltrated through a tunnel and killed the soldier(s)*. Nonetheless, the link between killing soldiers and infiltrating through tunnels can still be recovered. Although the processes do not negate the possibility that the tunnels are used for other purposes, it is important to notice how they represent what actually happened. In contrast, as the first macro-strategy above shows, *JP* includes external realities that represent tunnels as merely targeting civilians.



global level by establishing a close relationship between Judaism and Zionist nationalism; Jewish people around the world validate their true Jewishness by 'returning' to the land of Israel. It is important to notice here that these representations were quite detached from the context of the war. They primarily relied on out-of-context narratives that assumed shared knowledge amongst the readers.

*Haaretz*, in contrast, seemed to stand at the other end of the ideological spectrum. Its reporting expresses the uncertainties and fissures of a marginal discourse that has an ambivalent relationship with the main stream ideology. It is consistent with the Israeli official discourse which does not articulate any political rights of Palestinians. Nonetheless, the newspaper gave a much more moderate representation of the war that articulated some basic human rights of the Palestinian people. It is important to reiterate that these representations did not denounce Israeli actions. In other words, *Haaretz* did not explicitly problematize Israeli responsibility for these actions. Rather it explicated in some detail contextual information about Palestinian civilians and the devastating circumstances under which they lived. This built into a humanizing discourse that associated Palestinian civilians with victimhood, without emphasizing the agency of the Israeli army. Another prevailing discursive feature in *Haaretz* highlighted the negative consequences of the war for Israel, especially by referring to killed and wounded Israeli soldiers. *Haaretz* deviated from sociocultural narratives that represent soldiers as heroes. Instead, it maintained a context-bound representation that foregrounded their suffering.

This study, as such, provides further evidence on the correlation between news reporting and the ideological and political dynamics in Israel. As much as (critical) discourse analysts are concerned, the insights about the ideological and political tensions that appear in news reporting give credit to the tendency to study socio-political phenomena from a language point of view.



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