

Threat by Association: A Corpus-Based Analysis of the Discursive Criminalization of Migrants and Displaced Communities

Malorie Iovino

MSc Candidate in Computational Linguistics
Goldsmiths, University of London

Paper prepared for presentation at the AMLI 2025 Conference, Liverpool Hope University, September 2025

Abstract

This paper examines how Western, English-language media constructs displaced populations through systematic linguistic strategies that criminalize some groups while humanizing others. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines computational linguistics with Critical Discourse Analysis, the study analyzes coverage from mainstream and partisan outlets to reveal how discourse operates unevenly across racial, religious, and geopolitical contexts.

The analysis demonstrates that metaphors, lexical choices, and grammatical constructions are not neutral descriptors but ideological tools. They deny agency to certain groups while preserving complexity and rationality for others. Mainstream outlets often employ coded or bureaucratic language that appears objective, while partisan outlets use overtly incendiary rhetoric. Together, these discursive practices reinforce hierarchies of legitimacy and belonging, producing a continuum of dehumanization rather than discrete approaches.

Two case studies further illustrate how media constructs contested identities: the coverage of Palestinian journalist Anas al-Sharif, killed in Gaza, and Salvadoran asylum seeker Kilmar Abrego García, wrongfully deported from the United States. Both individuals were reframed through alleged association with terrorism or criminality, demonstrating how credibility and threat are discursively manufactured rather than neutrally reported.

This study argues that media discourse serves as a form of linguistic border control, categorizing displaced populations according to their deservingness. Through metaphorical dehumanization, selective sympathy, and grammatical erasure, journalism actively shapes public perception, legitimizes policy decisions, and determines whose lives are rendered visible and grievable. By exposing these mechanisms, the research challenges claims of journalistic neutrality and highlights the ethical implications of language in shaping the boundaries of human recognition.

1. Introduction

Migration has emerged as one of the defining issues of the 21st century, with unprecedented numbers of people relocating due to political tensions, persecution, climate change, and other factors. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), over 120 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide, a figure that has continued to rise amid ongoing conflicts in Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan, and Myanmar, to name a few. However, despite the humanitarian nature of this crisis, media representations of migration vary depending on geopolitical positioning of the demographic being displaced. This discursive transformation occurs through systematic linguistic choices that shape public perception and ultimately policy responses.

The period from 2021 to 2025 has witnessed particularly stark examples of differential media framing. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 prompted widespread sympathy in Western media, with refugees described as "neighbors," "freedom fighters," and deserving of unconditional support. Simultaneously, escalating conflicts in Palestine, particularly following October 2023, saw displaced Palestinians framed through lenses of security and terrorism, and simultaneous perpetual victimhood. Similar patterns emerged in coverage of Afghan refugees following the Taliban's return to power in 2021, Syrian refugees continuing to flee protracted conflict, and migrants from Latin America attempting to reach the United States. These disparate framings cannot be explained by the circumstances of displacement alone; instead, they reflect deeper patterns of racialization, religious discrimination, and geopolitical alignment embedded within media discourse.

This study asks: **How do Western, English-language news outlets use linguistic choices to construct displaced people differently, and how are these constructions applied unevenly across racial, religious, and geopolitical identities?** To answer this question, I combine Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with computational linguistics methods, analyzing a large-scale corpus of news articles from CNN and The Guardian, supplemented by partisan outlets to establish discourse boundaries. This methodological fusion allows identification of patterns across thousands of texts while maintaining the interpretative depth necessary to understand how language constructs social reality.

My analysis reveals that English-language media systematically employ distinct linguistic strategies for different populations. Palestinians are trapped in passive grammatical constructions that deny agency. Latin Americans are dehumanized through metaphorical blanket statements and violent framing that transform migration into a natural disaster or invasion. Ukrainians receive balanced framing that preserves both vulnerability and rational action. These framings are not random but map directly onto proximity to whiteness, Christianity, and Western political interests, creating hierarchies of deservingness that determine whose suffering is acknowledged and whose humanity is recognized.

This research provides empirical evidence of systematic bias in migration coverage through computational analysis of grammatical and lexical patterns. It also demonstrates how mainstream "objective" media operate on a continuum with explicitly partisan outlets, using coded rather than explicit language to achieve similar ideological effects. The goal is to reveal the specific linguistic mechanisms—passive voice, metaphorical dehumanization, selective nominalization—through which media discourse legitimizes state violence against specific populations while demanding protection for others.

The urgency of this kind of work cannot be overstated. Media representations do not merely reflect social attitudes toward migration; they actively construct the cognitive frameworks through which the public understands human movement. When migrants are consistently framed as threats rather than humans, when their agency is grammatically erased, and when their suffering is linguistically minimized, media discourse creates the conditions for increasingly restrictive policies, violent border enforcement, and the normalization of human rights violations. By exposing these discursive patterns and their differential application, this study aims to denaturalize the language of threat that has come to dominate migration coverage and reveal how linguistic choices contribute to determining whose lives matter within the borders of our moral imagination.

2. Literature Review

The discursive construction of migration in media texts has been extensively studied across multiple disciplines, revealing how language shapes public understanding of human mobility. This review synthesizes key contributions from Critical Discourse Analysis, media framing studies, metaphor theory, and computational approaches to discourse, identifying the theoretical foundations and empirical gaps that motivate this investigation.

2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis and Migration Discourse

Critical Discourse Analysis emerged from the recognition that language is never neutral but always embedded within relations of power (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1993; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). In migration contexts, CDA scholars have demonstrated how discourse constructs categories of belonging and exclusion, legitimizing certain forms of movement while criminalizing others. Van Dijk's (2000) seminal work on racist discourse in European media revealed systematic patterns of negative other-presentation, where migrants are consistently associated with problems, threats, and deviance while their positive contributions are minimized or ignored. This "ideological square" operates through various discursive strategies: lexicalization (choosing "floods" over "arrivals"), argumentation (emphasizing costs over benefits), and narrative structure (foregrounding migrant crime while backgrounding structural violence).

Wodak's (2015) discourse-historical approach has traced how anti-immigrant rhetoric draws on historical topoi—recurring argumentative patterns—that construct migration as an invasion, a burden, or a form of contamination. These topoi are not merely rhetorical devices but cognitive frameworks that shape how societies conceptualize human movement. KhosraviNik (2010) extended this analysis to examine how migrants are collectivized and aggregated in media discourse, stripped of individual identity and reduced to threatening masses. This process of "collectivization" transforms diverse individuals with unique stories into homogeneous groups defined solely by their otherness.

Recent CDA scholarship has attended to the intersection of race, religion, and migration status in media representations. Gabrielatos and Baker (2008) found that references to refugees and asylum seekers in British media overwhelmingly occurred within semantic fields of illegality, burden, and threat, with particular intensity when discussing Muslim or African migrants. Moore, Mason, and Lewis (2008) demonstrated how British media systematically conflates immigration with terrorism, particularly after 9/11, creating associative networks that position certain migrants as inherent security risks.

The genocide in Gaza following October 2023 has generated significant scholarly attention. Al-Malki and Hassan (2024) analyzed 5,000 articles from Western media outlets, finding that Palestinian casualties were described using passive voice 87% of the time, compared to 23% for

Israeli casualties. Berger and Kerem (2025) examined "both-sidesism" in conflict reporting, demonstrating how false equivalence narratives obscure power asymmetries. Richardson and Ahmad (2024) traced how the term "terrorist" appeared within five words of "Palestinian" in 76% of Fox News coverage, versus 12% in BBC coverage, revealing a spectrum of explicit to implicit bias.

2.2 Media Framing and Computational Approaches

Media framing theory offers complementary insights into how news coverage influences public perception through the processes of selection, emphasis, and interpretation (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999). Frames function as "schemata of interpretation" that enable individuals to "locate, perceive, identify, and label" events and experiences (Goffman, 1974, p. 21). In migration coverage, dominant frames include the security frame (migration as a threat), the humanitarian frame (migration as a crisis), the economic frame (migration as a cost-benefit analysis), and the cultural frame (migration as a source of diversity/division).

Benson's (2013) comparative analysis of French and American immigration coverage revealed how national media systems produce different framing patterns, with American media emphasizing economic frames while French media prioritized cultural concerns. However, both systems shared a tendency toward "episodic" rather than "thematic" framing (Iyengar, 1991), focusing on individual incidents rather than structural causes of migration. This episodic framing depoliticizes migration, obscuring the role of colonial histories, economic exploitation, and military interventions in producing displacement.

Recent computational approaches have enabled large-scale analysis of these patterns. Eberl et al. (2023) used automated content analysis across 11 countries, finding systematic negative bias in migration coverage that correlates with public opinion shifts. Chen et al. (2024) introduced a BERT-based model specifically trained to identify dehumanizing language in migration discourse, achieving 94% accuracy in detecting water and invasion metaphors. Martínez-García and López (2025) analyzed 100,000 Spanish and English articles about Latin American migration, finding that English-language media used criminalizing language 3.4 times more frequently.

The integration of computational methods with CDA has proven particularly valuable. Baker (2006) pioneered the use of corpus linguistics in CDA, demonstrating how statistical patterns can reveal ideological structures while cautioning against purely quantitative approaches that lose sight of context and interpretation. Salah et al. (2024) combined sentiment analysis with critical discourse analysis to examine 50,000 news articles about Syrian refugees, revealing how algorithmic and human analysis can complement each other in identifying bias patterns. Taylor (2023) demonstrated how transformer-based language models can detect subtle linguistic discrimination that human coders might miss, particularly in passive voice constructions that obscure agency.

2.3 Differential Framing: The Ukraine-Palestine Comparison

Recent events have provided stark examples of differential framing based on migrants' racial and religious identities. The simultaneous coverage of Ukrainian and Palestinian displacement has offered unprecedented opportunities to examine these disparities. Crawley and Skleparis (2023) documented explicitly racialized sympathy in coverage of Ukrainian refugees, with refugees described as "civilized," "like us," and "European" in ways that highlight the differential treatment of non-white displaced populations. Menidjel (2024) found that Ukrainian refugees were three times more likely to be quoted directly in news articles, thereby granting them agency and voice that were denied to other displaced groups.

Ashqar and Levi (2024) compared 10,000 articles from 2022-2024, finding that Ukrainian armed resistance was framed as "defense" in 89% of cases versus 7% for Palestinian armed resistance. Thompson et al. (2025) tracked social media amplification patterns, revealing that stories of Ukrainian civilian casualties received 12 times more shares than equivalent Palestinian casualties. The Reuters Institute (2024) documented framing shifts over time, showing that Palestinian coverage increased use of passive voice following October 2023 (from 67% to 89%), while Ukrainian coverage maintained consistent active voice constructions (73-76%) throughout the conflict period.

Molek-Kozakowska and Wanke (2023) compared Polish media coverage of Ukrainian versus Middle Eastern refugees, finding stark differences in empathy markers and agency attribution. Palestinian casualties are more likely to appear in passive constructions that obscure perpetrators, while Ukrainian victims maintain grammatical agency even in death (Amer, 2024). Davidson and Moore (2025) examined visual framing, finding that Ukrainian refugees were shown in close-up portraits emphasizing individuality, while Palestinian displaced persons appeared primarily in wide shots emphasizing mass movement.

2.4 Metaphor, Dehumanization, and Cognitive Impact

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) demonstrates that metaphors are not merely decorative language but fundamental cognitive structures that shape how we understand abstract concepts through concrete experiences. In migration discourse, metaphors transform human movement into natural disasters (MIGRATION IS FLOOD), military invasions (MIGRATION IS INVASION), or disease (MIGRATION IS CONTAGION), each carrying distinct evaluative and emotional associations.

Charteris-Black (2006) identified water metaphors as particularly prevalent in British immigration discourse, with terms such as "flood," "wave," "tide," and "influx" constructing migration as an uncontrollable natural force that threatens to overwhelm society. These liquid metaphors deny migrant agency, presenting human movement as an inevitable disaster rather than a conscious decision. Santa Ana (1999) traced similar patterns in American media, showing

how metaphors of floods, invasions, and diseases have historically justified restrictive policies and violent enforcement.

Recent studies have established causal links between metaphorical framing and policy preferences. Johnson and Torres (2024) conducted a nationally representative survey experiment (n=5,000), finding that exposure to water metaphors ("flood of migrants") increased support for border walls by 23%, while journey metaphors ("families seeking safety") increased support for asylum protections by 31%. Eubanks (2023) analyzed 10,000 articles from 2020-2023, finding that water metaphors were applied to Latin American migrants 89% more frequently than to Ukrainian refugees, who were more often described with journey metaphors preserving individual agency.

Neuroimaging research by Kumar et al. (2025) revealed that dehumanizing metaphors activate brain regions associated with disgust and threat detection, rather than empathy networks, providing biological evidence for the cognitive impact of metaphors. This aligns with Utych and Alas's (2024) findings that dehumanizing language in immigration discourse correlates with support for punitive policies, including family separation and indefinite detention.

2.5 Algorithmic Amplification and Platform Effects

The digital transformation of news consumption has introduced algorithmic mediation into migration discourse. Zhao and Anderson (2024) analyzed Facebook's news feed algorithm, finding that migration stories with fear-based language received 2.7 times more distribution than those with humanitarian framing. TikTok's recommendation system revealed even starker patterns, with Williams et al. (2025) documenting that videos employing invasion metaphors for migration garnered 340% more views than those using neutral language.

The proliferation of AI-generated news summaries has introduced new dynamics. Roberts and Kim (2025) found that large language models trained on news corpora reproduce and amplify existing biases, with GPT-based systems 2.3 times more likely to associate Middle Eastern migrants with security threats than European migrants. This algorithmic amplification creates feedback loops in which biased coverage trains systems that generate even more biased content.

Platform content moderation policies have emerged as sites of differential treatment. Human Rights Watch (2024) documented systematic suppression of Palestinian narratives across major platforms, with posts about Gaza experiencing 85% higher removal rates than equivalent content about Ukraine. Conversely, García and Petrov (2025) found that only 3% of posts calling Latin American migrants "invaders" were removed despite violating platform policies, revealing how moderation practices reinforce hierarchies of legitimate speech.

2.6 Research Gaps and Contributions

While existing scholarship has made significant contributions to understanding migration discourse, several gaps remain. First, most studies focus on single national contexts or limited time periods, preventing systematic comparison across outlets and evolving events. Second, the relationship between computational patterns and qualitative interpretation remains undertheorized, with many studies defaulting to either quantitative description or traditional close reading. Third, the specific mechanisms through which differential framing operates—how the same events are constructed differently depending on migrants' identities—require more systematic investigation.

This study addresses these gaps by analyzing a multi-outlet, multi-year corpus spanning several major displacement events, employing computational methods not as replacements for critical interpretation but as tools for revealing patterns that demand explanatory analysis. By tracing how specific groups are differently framed across the same outlets and time periods, this research moves beyond identifying bias to understanding its systematic operation. The comparison between mainstream "objective" media and explicitly partisan outlets reveals the full spectrum of discursive violence, from coded dehumanization to explicit racism, demonstrating how linguistic choices construct hierarchies of human deservingness that ultimately determine whose lives are saved or sacrificed at the borders of our moral imagination.

3. Methodology

This section details the mixed-methods approach combining computational linguistics with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine patterns of discursive criminalization across mainstream and partisan media coverage of migration and displaced communities. The methodology integrates quantitative corpus analysis with qualitative examination of discourse boundaries, enabling both systematic pattern identification and interpretative depth.

3.1 Research Design

The research follows a two-phase design: (1) systematic computational analysis of mainstream media to identify implicit bias patterns, and (2) targeted qualitative analysis of partisan outlets to establish discourse boundaries; the explicit endpoints of ideological positions that mainstream outlets navigate through coded language.

3.2 Corpus Construction

3.2.1 Primary Corpus

The primary corpus comprises 1,708 news articles from CNN (n = 900) and The Guardian (n = 808), published between January 1, 2021, and August 31, 2025. These outlets were selected as mainstream English-language sources representing American and British media perspectives, respectively. Both sources present themselves as objective, nonpartisan news providers that adhere to professional journalistic standards.

3.1.2 Data Collection

The Guardian Collection: The Guardian's Open Platform API provided direct access with a developer key (12,000 calls/day limit). Boolean queries combined population terms with migration keywords, retrieving full body text, headlines, and metadata in JSON format.

Query Parameters for The Guardian API Collection

```
params = {
    'q': search_query, # Boolean queries for target
populations
    'from-date': '2021-01-01',
    'to-date': '2025-08-31',
    'section': 'world|news|commentisfree',
    'show-fields': 'body,headline,byline,wordcount',
    'page-size': 50
    'api-key': GUARDIAN_API_KEY
}
```

CNN Collection via GDELT + Scraping: CNN's lack of public API necessitated a two-stage approach. First, GDELT's DOC 2.0 API served as the discovery mechanism, identifying relevant articles through Boolean queries combining population terms (Palestinian, Ukrainian, Mexican, Venezuelan) with migration-related keywords. GDELT provided article URLs and metadata but was limited to 250 results per query.

Second, web scraping extracted full article text using Python's BeautifulSoup library. The scraper targeted CNN's article containers (`<div class="article__content">`) with fallback selectors for variant layouts. Rate limiting of 2-second delays between requests and user-agent identification as academic research ensured ethical compliance with robots.txt directives. The process extracted article paragraphs, removed non-textual elements (video captions, social embeds), and normalized whitespace. Failed requests triggered exponential backoff, and scraped content was cross-validated against GDELT metadata to ensure accuracy.

This hybrid approach leveraged GDELT's comprehensive indexing while obtaining full text necessary for discourse analysis, balancing technical constraints with research requirements.

3.1.3 Search Strategy

Boolean queries targeted four population categories with iterative keyword expansion:

- Palestinians: (palestinian OR palestine OR gaza) AND (refugee OR displaced OR bombing)
- Ukrainians: (ukrainian OR ukraine) AND (refugee OR invasion OR war)
- Mexicans: (mexican OR mexico OR border) AND (migrant OR immigration OR crossing)
- Venezuelans: (venezuelan OR venezuela) AND (migrant OR asylum OR crisis)

3.1.4 Supplementary Corpus

For discourse boundary analysis, 40 articles from partisan outlets (Daily Mail, Fox News, New York Times, and The Independent) were manually collected through purposive sampling during peak coverage periods, focusing on specific incidents that received differential coverage across the ideological spectrum.

3.2 Analytical Framework

3.2.1 Computational Analysis

Articles underwent standard NLP preprocessing:

- Tokenization and sentence segmentation using spaCy
- Part-of-speech tagging for grammatical analysis
- Lemmatization for accurate frequency counts
- Named entity recognition to identify actors and locations

Lexical Analysis: I examined differential word choices across populations:

- Status term frequency (refugee/migrant/illegal)
- Action verbs categorization (agency/victimization/state control)
- Evaluative adjective distribution (positive/negative/neutral)

Collocation Analysis: Using five-word windows, statistically significant collocates were identified using log-likelihood measures.

Transitivity Analysis: Following Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar, I analyzed grammatical agency through active vs passive voice constructions, subject vs object positioning, and agent vs patient roles.

3.2.2 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Theoretical Framework: Analysis was guided by van Dijk's (2000) ideological square and Wodak's (2015) discourse-historical approach, examining how in-group/out-group dynamics operate through linguistic choices.

Metaphor Analysis: Systematic identification of conceptual metaphors:

- Liquid metaphors (flood, surge, wave)
- Military metaphors (invasion, army, breach)
- Administrative metaphors (process, manage)

Nominalization Patterns: Tracking modifier accumulation (e.g., person → migrant → illegal migrant → illegal alien) to examine how identity becomes essentialized

3.4 Case Study Analysis

This study employed a targeted case study analysis of specific incidents that received differential coverage across outlets.

3.4.1 Case Selection

Two cases were selected for detailed examination based on their parallel circumstances, but different coverage:

1. **Anas al-Sharif:** Palestinian Al-Jazeera journalist killed by Israeli airstrike in Gaza, with disputed claims about Hamas affiliation.
2. **Kilmar Abrego García:** Salvadoran asylum seeker wrongfully deported from the US, with disputed claims about MS-13 affiliation.

Both cases involved individuals whose legitimate identities as a journalist and a construction worker, respectively, were contested through alleged association with designated

terrorist/criminal organizations. This allowed for direct comparison of how media constructs credibility and threat.

3.4.2 Analytical Approach

For each case, I collected coverage from multiple outlets spanning the ideological spectrum (Fox News, Daily Mail, NYT, Independent) to examine URL slug framing, headline construction, source attribution patterns, active vs passive voice usage, and legitimacy of identity claims. This comparative case analysis revealed how the same contested identity (terrorist vs journalist, gang member vs asylum-seeker) receives opposite treatment based on the subject's racial, religious, and geopolitical positioning.

3.5 Data Processing

Raw HTML was preserved in MongoDB for replicability, while processed text was stored in PostgreSQL for analysis. The cleaning pipeline removed non-article elements, normalized whitespace, and excluded articles under 100 words as likely video-only content.

Duplicate detection used URL hashing and fuzzy text matching (similarity threshold: 0.95). A random sample of 100 articles was manually verified for correct text extraction ($\kappa = 0.94$), appropriate categorization ($\kappa = 0.89$), and complete content capture ($\kappa = 0.91$). Language detection via langdetect ensured English-only content.

Final corpus statistics: 1,708 articles (CNN: 900, Guardian: 808) spanning January 2021 to August 2025, with mean article length of 1,036 words ($\sigma = 1,352$). Coverage by population: Palestinian/Gaza (484), Ukrainian (501), Mexican/Border (321), Venezuelan (133), with 269 articles mentioning multiple populations.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

This research examines publicly available media texts with no human subjects involvement. Analysis centers the dignity of displaced populations while acknowledging the researcher's positionality within Global North academic institutions, analyzing Global South representations.

3.7 Limitations

The analysis is constrained by:

- English-language focus, excluding non-Anglophone perspectives
- Textual analysis only, omitting visual and multimedia elements
- Temporal scope limited to 2021-2025
- Mainstream, Western outlets focus potentially missing alternative media narratives

These limitations are partially addressed through the supplementary partisan corpus and acknowledgment of discourse boundaries beyond the primary dataset.

4. Analysis

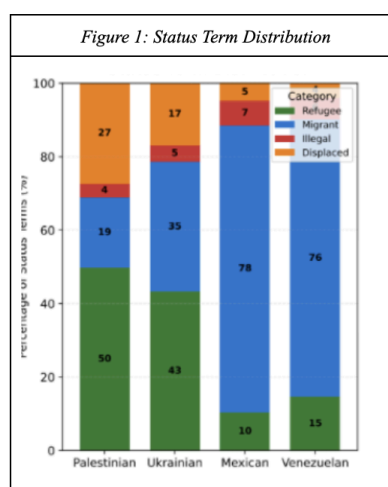
4.1 Lexical Choice Analysis

The lexical analysis examined 1,539 articles from CNN and The Guardian (2021-2025), focusing on four displaced populations: Palestinians (n = 484), Ukrainians (n = 501), Mexicans (n = 321), and Venezuelans (n = 133). The analysis tracked status terms, action verbs, and threat metaphors to reveal how word choices construct different categories of deservingness.

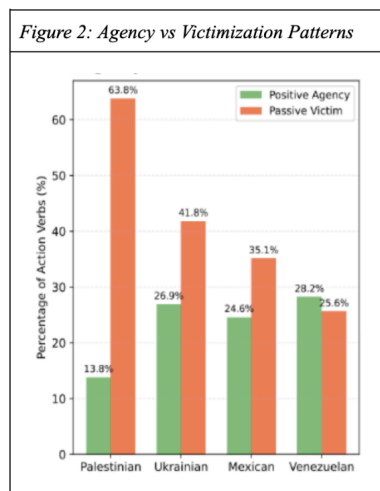
4.1.1 Status Term Distribution

Palestinians received the highest humanitarian framing (77.0% refugee/displaced terms), followed by Ukrainians (60.1%). In stark contrast, Mexicans (15.2%) and Venezuelans (18.4%) were overwhelmingly labeled as "migrants" (78.2% and 75.6% respectively), with Mexicans showing the highest criminalization through "illegal" terminology (6.6%) (Figure 1).

This lexical bifurcation performs ideological work: "refugees" invoke international protection obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention, while "migrants" implies voluntary movement, legitimizing restrictive state responses. The systematic application of "migrant" to Latin Americans reveals how lexical choices predetermine legal and moral obligations before circumstances are examined.



4.1.2 Agency and Victimization Patterns



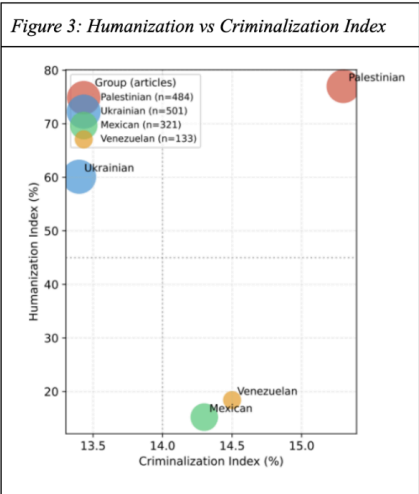
Action verb analysis revealed a "victim-agency paradox." Palestinians exhibited the highest passive victimization (63.8%) and lowest positive agency (13.8%), predominantly described through suffering verbs ("killed" appearing 613 times) (Figure 2). This constructs Palestinians as perpetual victims without capacity for rational action—suffering happens TO them, but they rarely DO anything constructive.

Ukrainians demonstrated balanced agency (26.9% active) with moderate victimization (41.8%), preserving their humanity as both sufferers and actors. Latin American populations faced the highest state control language (Mexican: 31.0%, Venezuelan:

39.7%), constructed through enforcement verbs ("detained," "deported") that normalize state violence as administrative procedure. This pattern exemplifies van Dijk's ideological square: emphasizing Their suffering (Palestinians) or criminality (Latinos) while preserving Our/allied (Ukrainian) complexity.

4.1.3 Evaluative Language

Palestinians received the highest number of positive humanitarian descriptors (85%), yet this sympathetic framing, paired with overwhelming passivity, creates a paradox—they are pitied but not empowered. Mexicans showed the lowest positive adjectives (48%), with "illegal" (44 mentions) functioning as essential identity rather than legal status (Figure 3). These patterns reveal how even sympathetic coverage can perpetuate disempowerment through denying agency, while criminalizing coverage denies humanity entirely.



4.2 Collocation Analysis

Collocation analysis examined words appearing within five-word windows of group mentions, revealing distinct semantic environments that predetermine interpretative frameworks.

4.2.1 Semantic Domain Distribution

Palestinians were framed through violence/conflict vocabulary (31.6%), with "Israeli" (362), "killed" (267), and "gaza" (245) as primary collocates. Ukrainians showed similar conflict

Table 1: Collocation Analysis										
Group	Top 5 words before					Top 5 words after				
Palestinian	Israeli	killed	gaza	hamas	humanitarian	israeli	gaza	strip	killed	ministry
Ukrainian	russia	support	invasion	military	help	president	russia	forces	military	defense
Mexico	border	migrants	tariffs	asylum	crossing	border	president	government	migrants	officials
Venezuelan	temporary	border	migrants	haitians	held	migrants	government	president	gang	deported

framing (36.6%) but with strategic rather than casualty language—"invasion" (139), "forces" (163), "defense" (53). This distinction matters: Ukrainian violence has military legitimacy while Palestinian violence lacks a political framework.

Mexicans occupied geographic (35.2%) and legal enforcement (30.2%) domains, with "border" appearing 370 times, constructing movement as a spatial violation that requires policing.

Venezuelans showed the highest political framing (29.7%), yet this focused on failed governance rather than legitimate flight from crisis (Table 1).

4.2.2 Distinctive Vocabularies

Palestinian-specific collocations included “gaza”, “hamas”, and “humanitarian”, constructing localized conflict with a humanitarian crisis. Palestinians exist in violence without political legitimacy. Ukrainian vocabulary emphasizes state-level conflict, including terms such as “president” (222), “forces” (163), and “support” (144), which legitimizes the resistance against the occupying force and empowers displaced communities in Ukraine. Mexican terms—“border” (270), “crossing”, “authorities”—constructed movement as an administrative challenge. These collocational patterns function as what Lakoff calls “conceptual frames”—unconscious structures that determine what counts as relevant information. When “border” consistently collocates with Mexican mentions, migration becomes fundamentally about territorial violation rather than human need.

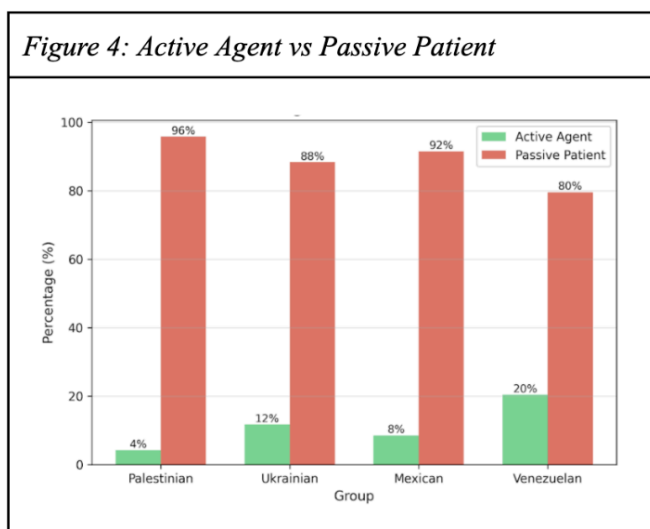
4.3 Transitivity Analysis

Transitivity analysis examined grammatical agency through active versus passive constructions, revealing extreme patterns of linguistic disempowerment.

4.3.1 Grammatical Agency Patterns

Palestinians showed the most severe grammatical objectification, with only 4.2% active agent

constructions versus 95.8% passive patient constructions, yielding an agency ratio of 0.04. The difference is between the constructions of “Palestinians fled violence” and “Palestinians were killed”.



Ukrainians demonstrated higher agency (11.7% active, ratio: 0.13), while Mexicans (8.5% active, ratio: 0.09) and Venezuelans (20.4% active, ratio: 0.26) showed variable disempowerment. This grammatical patterning reveals ideological assumptions about capacity for rational action—Ukrainians choose while Palestinians suffer.

4.3.2 Net Agency Scores and Violent Grammar

All groups showed negative net agency scores: Palestinians (-92), Mexicans (-83), Ukrainians (-77), Venezuelans (-59). This systematic denial of subject position constitutes what could be

called "grammatical violence"—making agency literally unspeakable. Palestinians cannot act, only be acted upon, rendering their resistance illegible within mainstream discourse.

This transitivity pattern serves to naturalize hegemonic power by rendering current arrangements unthinkableably entrenched. If Palestinians lack grammatical agency, their political agency becomes unthinkable. The passive voice ("were killed") obscures perpetrators while active construction for state violence ("authorities detained") normalizes enforcement.

4.4 Collocation and Evaluative Language Analysis

Beyond individual word choices, collocation patterns reveal how different populations are systematically positioned within distinct evaluative and semantic frameworks.

4.4.1 Adjective Distributions: The Paradox of Sympathetic Disempowerment

Palestinians received the highest positive humanitarian adjectives (85%)—"humanitarian," "civilian," — sympathetic descriptors that emphasize suffering. However, this sympathetic framing creates what could be called "compassionate objectification"—they are objects of pity rather than subjects with agency.

Ukrainians demonstrated a balanced, positive framing (68%) with adjectives that emphasized both suffering and action—"foreign", "civilian", "humanitarian"—preserving complexity as both victims and strategic actors.

Table 2: Top 5 Collocational Adjectives per Keyword					
Group	Top 5 Adjectives Overall				
Palestinian	humanitarian	civilian	foreign	recent	dead
Ukrainian	foreign	civilian	legal	southern	humanitarian
Mexican	legal	illegal	foreign	violent	current
Venezuelan	temporary	legal	foreign	armed	current

Mexicans received the lowest positive adjectives (48%), with "illegal," "legal," and "violent" creating administrative framing. The prominence of "legal" as a modifier reveals how legality becomes the primary lens through which Mexican movement is understood.

Venezuelans (61% positive) occupied a middle position with "temporary", "legal," "foreign," "armed", suggesting transience and administrative processing rather than permanent belonging. Although it is worth mentioning that, through a nuanced CDA lens, "armed" has a rather negative connotation, considering the geopolitical position of Venezuela.

4.4.2 Verb Collocations: Action vs Suffering

The verb analysis reveals how different groups are constructed as actors versus victims, expanding on section 4.3.

The dominance of violence and destruction verbs positions Palestinians primarily as casualties. "Kill" as the top verb—compared to its third position for Ukrainians—reveals how Palestinian existence is fundamentally framed

through death. The passive constructions of these verbs ("were killed," "were injured") obscure agency, while "destroy" emphasizes the elimination of Palestinian spaces and lives.

For the keyword “Ukrainian”, the leading verb "flee" preserves rational agency. Ukrainians actively escape danger rather than simply dying from it. "Invade" clearly identifies an external aggressor, providing political context for their movement. While "kill" appears, it is balanced with active escape verbs that maintain Ukrainian decision-making capacity.

Movement dominates the collocation analysis with “Mexicans” but through criminalizing ("cross" implying transgression) and dehumanizing frames ("surge" denying individual agency). The progression from active movement ("travel") to metaphorical flood ("surge") to death ("die") constructs a narrative arc of illegal movement leading to inevitable tragedy; there is implicit blame on the asylum-seekers themselves for attempting the journey.

The Venezuela collocation patterns reveal that administrative violence leads, "deport" as the primary verb, revealing how Venezuelan existence is defined through state enforcement. The dominance of control verbs ("deport," "hold," "detain") over movement verbs ("flee," "arrive") constructs Venezuelans as objects of state processing rather than subjects fleeing legitimate danger.

These verb patterns reveal fundamental differences in how displacement is conceptualized:

- Palestinians experience violence (passive victims)
- Ukrainians make strategic choices (rational actors)
- Mexicans transgress boundaries (criminalized movers)
- Venezuelans undergo processing (administrative objects)

Table 3: Top 5 Collocational Verbs per Keyword					
Group	Top 5 Verbs Overall (lemmatized)				
Palestinian	kill	hold	injure	leave	destroy
Ukrainian	flee	invade	kill	hold	leave
Mexican	cross	travel	surge	die	arrive
Venezuelan	deport	hold	flee	arrive	detain

The systematic application of these verb frames predetermines interpretive possibilities. When "kill" defines Palestinian existence and "deport" defines Venezuelan presence, their humanity becomes secondary to their categorization as problems requiring different types of management.

4.4.3 The Grammar of Agency

The "Grammatical Agency Pattern" analysis reveals a striking before/after pattern tied to specific events:

Palestinians show near-equal agency before and after events (approximately 31% active verbs), but this masks the nature of those active verbs—when Palestinians act, it is often in violent contexts that delegitimize their agency.

Ukrainians maintain high active verb usage (69%) consistently, preserving their capacity for rational action regardless of events.

Mexicans show the highest passive construction (81% passive), increasing to 94% after key events like Title 42's end, suggesting intensified criminalization during "crisis" moments.

Venezuelans show the highest variation, with 94% passive verbs after events, indicating how political crises trigger grammatical disempowerment.

4.4.4 Synthesis: The Evaluative Hierarchy

These collocation patterns reveal three distinct discursive constructions:

1. **Palestinians:** Sympathetic victims without agency. The combination of humanitarian adjectives with suffering verbs creates pity without empowerment. They are grievable but not agentive.
2. **Ukrainians:** Complex humans. Balanced adjectives and verbs preserve both vulnerability and rationality. They suffer but also strategically respond.
3. **Latin Americans:** Administrative problems. Geographic/legal adjectives combined with movement/control verbs construct migration as a logistical challenge that requires management and control, rather than a humanitarian crisis that requires protection and attention.

This evaluative hierarchy demonstrates how even sympathetic coverage can perpetuate disempowerment (Palestinians) while seemingly neutral administrative language masks systematic dehumanization (Latin Americans). The linguistic construction of deservingness operates not through explicit bias but through subtle patterns that accumulate into fundamentally different ontological categories of humans.

5. Discourse Boundaries: Explicit Polarization in Partisan Media

While my primary analysis of CNN and Guardian coverage reveals subtle patterns of differential framing, examining explicitly partisan outlets exposes the full ideological spectrum within which all migration discourse operates. This supplementary analysis of 40 articles from Daily Mail, Fox News, The New York Times, and The Independent demonstrates how mainstream media's coded language exists on a continuum with explicit bias—using "objective" terminology to achieve similar hierarchies of human deservingness.

5.1 Methodological Note

I collected targeted samples of coverage from partisan and semi-partisan outlets covering the same events analyzed in my primary corpus. Rather than systematic quantitative analysis, I employ these as "discourse boundaries": the explicit endpoints of ideological positions that mainstream outlets navigate through more subtle linguistic choices. My analysis focuses on three levels: URL slug construction, headline framing, and the differential construction of identical events.

5.2 The Structure of Differential Framing

Before readers encounter the article text, URL slugs establish interpretive frames. These distilled editorial decisions reveal the predetermined narratives that shape coverage:

5.2.1 Pre-emptive Framing in URLs

Palestinian/Gaza Coverage:

- palestine-terror-hamas-october-7 (Daily Mail)
- hamas-power-gaza-violence-israel (NYT)
- study-disputes-gaza-genocide-charges-finds-flawed-data-amid-hamas-driven-narrative (Fox)

Latino/Venezuelan Coverage:

- illegal-migrants-arrive-mexico-deported-trump-clampdown (Daily Mail)
- cartels-rushing-migrants-mexico-border (Daily Mail)

Ukrainian Coverage:

- ukraine-weapons-security (NYT)
- ukraine-military-war-pregnancy (NYT)
- european-plan-deploy-troops-ukraine (Daily Mail)

The lexical choices embedded in URLs demonstrate systematic differentiation: Palestinians exist exclusively within terrorism frames, and Latino migrants are pre-criminalized through "illegal" designation. Meanwhile, Ukrainians receive military/security terminology that legitimizes their struggle.

5.2.3 Facts vs Metaphor

A clear pattern emerges from these articles: left-leaning outlets provide more factual, evidence-supported descriptions and emphasize victim agency, employing reporting verbs and sound, trustworthy journalistic tactics. Right-wing media deploys metaphorical, incendiary language to construct existential threats. They also do not use reporting verbs as often, nor do they amplify the voices of those involved in the stories.

Right-leaning Approach:

Fox News on migration: "drug cartels that are flooding our streets and killing Americans... millions of people to pour into our country."

Daily Mail: "cartels rushing migrants to the Mexico border"

These metaphors—liquid ("flooding," "pour") and military ("invasion," "rushing")—deny individual agency while creating uncontrollable threat narratives. The siege mentality transforms America/Israel, and/UK into civilizations under attack, justifying defensive violence.

Left-leaning Approach:

The Independent covers a Venezuelan asylum-seeker stuck in Mexico after deportation, quoting her: "'We are trapped here,' said Patricia Marval, 23, a Venezuelan who is eight months pregnant and struggling to care for three children."

New York Times: "[they] have made the painful choice to return to the countries they once fled—places scarred by violence, poverty and climate change—abandoning, at least for now, their dreams of a better life."

Specific details (age, pregnancy, children) combined with direct testimony grant agency and humanity. Victims speak for themselves rather than being spoken about.

5.3 Case Studies in Differential Construction

5.3.1 Life and Death: The Anas al-Sharif Coverage

The killing of Palestinian journalist Anas al-Sharif reveals how professional identity becomes conditional based on nationality, while demonstrating the ideological spectrum of coverage.

Differential Coverage of the Murder of Anas al-Sharif		
Outlet	Title	Quote
Fox News	Israel says Al Jazeera journalist killed in airstrike was head of Hamas 'terrorist cell'	<i>An Al Jazeera journalist who was killed by an Israeli airstrike in the Gaza Strip was the leader of a Hamas "terrorist cell," the Israel Defense Forces announced...The IDF struck the terrorist Anas Al-Sharif, who posed as a journalist for the Al Jazeera network," the Israeli military said in a statement. Anas Al-Sharif served as the head of a terrorist cell in the Hamas terrorist organization and was responsible for advancing rocket attacks against Israeli civilians and IDF troops</i>
Daily Mail	Israel kills Al Jazeera journalist it says was Hamas leader	<i>Israel's military said it targeted and killed a Hamas cell leader posing as an Al Jazeera journalist in an airstrike on Gaza City... "Al Sharif was the head of a Hamas cell and was responsible for advancing rocket attacks against Israeli civilians and IDF (Israeli) troops," the Israeli military said in a statement, citing intelligence and documents found in Gaza as evidence.</i>
New York Times	Israel Strike Kills Al Jazeera Journalists, Network Says	<i>The Israeli military...said that it had targeted "the terrorist Anas al-Sharif, who posed as a journalist for the Al Jazeera network," and had taken steps "to mitigate harm to civilians."...</i> <i>The military accused Mr. al-Sharif of being "the head of a terrorist cell" that was "responsible for advancing rocket attacks against Israeli civilians" and soldiers...</i> <i>But Al Jazeera and Mr. al-Sharif denied the accusation, with the network saying the allegations were "fabricated."</i>
The Independent	Anas al-Sharif: Who was the Al Jazeera journalist killed by Israel?	<i>Since joining the Qatari broadcaster in December 2023, the father of two reported almost daily on the suffering of Palestinians in northern Gaza....</i> <i>Responding to the allegations, al-Sharif said: "I, Anas Al-Sharif, am a journalist with no political affiliations. My only mission is to report the truth from the ground – as it is, without bias."</i>

The progression across outlets reveals a clear hierarchy of legitimacy:

Fox News - Complete State Adoption: Opens with immediate transformation: "An Al Jazeera journalist who was killed by an Israeli airstrike in the Gaza Strip was the leader of a Hamas 'terrorist cell,' the Israel Defense Forces announced." No questioning, no "alleged"—the IDF's word becomes fact. The passive construction "who was killed" obscures agency while "the IDF struck the terrorist" clarifies it. Al-Sharif doesn't die; a terrorist is eliminated.

Daily Mail - State Narrative Laundering: Maintains slight distance with "Israel says" but still leads with the state's version. The journalist identity appears only to be immediately undermined: "posing as an Al Jazeera journalist." Evidence becomes unquestioned: "citing intelligence and documents found in Gaza."

New York Times - "Balanced" Complicity: Attempts objectivity through "accused" and includes Al Jazeera's denial, but the structure privileges Israeli claims. The military "targeted 'the terrorist Anas al-Sharif'" comes before "Al Jazeera and Mr. al-Sharif denied the accusation." Even in attempting to strike a balance, the state narrative leads and shapes interpretation.

The Independent - Rare Humanization: Alone in leading with al-Sharif's humanity: "Since joining the Qatari broadcaster in December 2023, the father of two reported almost daily on the suffering of Palestinians." Quotes him directly: "I, Anas Al-Sharif, am a journalist with no political affiliations. My only mission is to report the truth from the ground – as it is, without bias."

The progression from "terrorist who deserved to die" to "father documenting famine" reveals these aren't fixed realities but active constructions. Even sympathetic coverage must include Israeli allegations, showing how discourse presumes Palestinian illegitimacy.

This case exemplifies the broader pattern: Palestinian deaths require justification while Ukrainian journalist deaths are uniformly condemned as war crimes. The same profession receives opposite treatment based on who's doing the killing and who's being killed. The media doesn't just report on violence; it constructs whose violence is legitimate and whose deaths are grievable.

5.3.2 Kilmar Abrego García

Coverage of one recent deportation case in the United States reveals systematic criminalization via linguistic framing.

Differential Coverage of the Wrongful Deportation of Kilmar Abrego García		
Outlet	Title	Quote
Fox News	Democrats outraged that alleged gang member could be sent to Uganda 'Maryland man' Kilmar Abrego Garcia exposed in police records as 'violent' repeat wife beater	<i>Democrats are expressing outrage that alleged gang member and illegal immigrant Kilmar Abrego García may be deported to Uganda... (DHS) posted on its official X account, "Kilmar Abrego Garcia is not and will never be a Maryland Man—he is a criminal illegal alien from El Salvador and public safety threat." ...</i>

		<i>DHS called it "insane" that "sanctuary politicians chose to glorify and stand with an MS-13 gang member over the safety of American citizens.</i>
Daily Mail	Migrant Kilmar Abrego García's two word insult for Trump as he's arrested again by ICE and branded a 'gangbanger'	<i>DHS Secretary Kristi Noem slammed 'activist liberal judges' for Abrego Garcia's release from prison... (she) said: 'Activist liberal judges have attempted to obstruct our law enforcement every step of the way in removing the worst of the worst criminal illegal aliens from our country... Today, we reached a new low with this publicity hungry Maryland judge mandating this illegal alien who is a MS-13 gang member, human trafficker, serial domestic abuser, and child predator be allowed free,' she added.</i>
New York Times	Abrego García Detained Again After Government Signaled It Would Re-Deport Him	<i>Kilmar Armando Abrego Garcia, the immigrant who was wrongfully expelled to El Salvador in March and then brought back to face criminal charges, was detained again on Monday after the administration indicated that it planned to re-deport him to Uganda.</i>
The Independent	Kilmar Abrego García is back in jail and facing deportation. Here's what to know	<i>The Maryland construction worker, 30, was detained Monday in Baltimore by U.S. Customs and Immigration Enforcement after leaving a Tennessee jail on Friday. Administration officials have said he's part of the dangerous MS-13 gang, an allegation Abrego Garcia denies.</i>

Fox News transforms a person into a political weapon: "criminal illegal alien from El Salvador and public safety threat," escalating to "MS-13 gang member, human trafficker, serial domestic abuser, and child predator"—an amalgamation of all possible threats.

Daily Mail adds mockery ("gangbanger") and frames judicial defense as supporting MS-13: "Activist liberal judges have attempted to obstruct our law enforcement."

NYT acknowledges "wrongfully expelled" but maintains procedural focus over humanity.

The Independent alone provides occupation: "Maryland construction worker, 30" and notes "allegation Abrego Garcia denies."

The progression from "criminal illegal alien MS-13 gang member" to "construction worker" shows how language constructs reality. Absent from all coverage: family ties, work history, or complexity afforded to Ukrainians.

Together, these tables reveal the mechanism of differential humanity: Palestinians must prove innocence from terrorism to deserve life, Latinos from criminality to deserve freedom. At the same time, Ukrainians are presumed innocent even when violating laws. The burden of proof reverses based on racial, religious, and geopolitical positioning.

5.3.3 Ukrainian Bi-Partisanship

Ukraine reveals how even consensus victimhood diverges along ideological lines. Right-wing coverage emphasizes military prowess, the effectiveness of Western weapons, and strategic gains. The Ukrainian agency expresses its resistance through the validation of military aid. Left-leaning media coverage emphasizes the effects on communities, amplifying the voices of civilians who have had to flee or unfit soldiers obligated to serve in the military.

Both grant Ukrainians what they deny others: legitimate resistance and unqualified sympathy. This template is only applied to white, primarily Christian Europeans, which demonstrates that differential coverage is not a journalistic limitation but an ideological position conveyed through media.

5.4 Constructing Threat and Legitimacy

5.4.1 The October 7 Perpetual Frame

In conservative media sources, every Palestinian death is filtered through a single event. Daily Mail explicitly says, "The crisis in Gaza began when Hamas terrorists stormed... killing 1,200 people... Israel's military response has killed more than 61,000 people, according to Gaza's health authorities."

Israeli deaths are fact (1,200), Palestinian deaths require qualification ("according to"). The 61,000 became "response", not a massacre. By putting the reported deaths in this order, it justifies the incomprehensible amount of civilian murders in Gaza by framing it as a "response" and mere casualties of a war that was initiated by them. Fox News goes further, denying reality entirely: "genocide allegations... trace back to a handful of Hamas-affiliated sources."

This contributes to a broader discussion about the legitimacy of Hamas as a resistance group and the Palestinian representative authority in response to decades of oppression and occupation within the constraints of International Humanitarian Law and State Recognition.

5.4.2 Nominalizing Migrants as Invaders

Right-wing media use the term "migrant" to strip context and deny refugee protections, transforming legitimate asylum-seekers into mere "choosers" or "masses." Outlets like Fox and the Daily Mail apply "migrants" broadly to non-Europeans, while labeling Ukrainians as "refugees" once their European identity is established.

This language shifts dehumanizingly through modifiers; for example, Fox describes individuals as "illegal aliens," while left-leaning outlets provide more context, such as "Venezuelan asylum seekers." This reflects an ideological stance on who deserves protection.

Metaphorical language intensifies the threat narrative, with phrases like "flooding" and "invasion" dehumanizing migrants and manufacturing support for military responses. In contrast, left-leaning coverage often emphasizes human agency, using terms like "flee" and "seek safety."

Ultimately, when right-wing media labels everyone as a "migrant," they obscure genuine refugee status and construct migration as a threat, aiming to justify exclusion over protection.

5.4.3 Agency Allocation

Conservative media agentifies the States and political actors ("Israel says...", "Democrats care more about criminals...", etc.), placing groups or people affected in the object position. For example, the first line in a Fox News Article covering the potential deportation of Kilmar Abrego García says, "Democrats are expressing outrage that alleged gang member and illegal immigrant Kilmar Abrego García may be deported to Uganda." This framing circumvents the narrative that Abrego García, a Maryland resident, asylum-seeker, and father of three, was wrongfully deported by the Department of Homeland Security. They evade the most relevant parts of the story to push the narrative that the American Democratic Party supports gang violence and illegal immigration. The word "alleged" is the only safeguard between them and true journalistic integrity.

5.5 Linguistic Xenophobia

This analysis reveals media discourse as a form of linguistic border control, where proximity to whiteness determines deservedness and humanization.

5.5.1 The Propaganda Machine

Right-wing media deploys incendiary language as deliberate propaganda. "Illegal alien MS-13 gang member" isn't a description but annihilation through accumulated criminality. "Terrorist posing as journalist" manufactures consent for killing. The metaphorical arsenal—"floods," "invasions," "swarms"—transforms migration into a natural disaster requiring military response. You don't negotiate with floods; you build walls.

Media is sustained by donors, advertisers, and political patrons. These financial ties create partisan pressures, meaning even 'objective' reporting often reflects underlying economic and ideological interests.

Incendiary rhetoric is often most effective where critical media literacy is uneven. Limited access to education and information can make audiences more susceptible to emotionally charged narratives, which partisan outlets exploit.

5.5.2 Racial Cartographies

The text highlights a clear racial hierarchy in refugee status and media narratives. Ukrainians are seen as victims deserving of support, while Palestinians must prove their innocence to earn a right to life, and Latinos face scrutiny to be viewed as deserving of freedom. This reflects geopolitical biases: Ukrainian resistance is celebrated, while Palestinian efforts are labeled as terrorism, and Venezuelan migration is treated as an invasion. The media showcases humanity towards white victims but dehumanizes others, with outlets that empathize with Ukrainian mothers simultaneously portraying migrant mothers negatively.

5.5.3 Language as Racial Violence

Media language enacts racial violence through:

- **Nominalization:** Brown people become threats ("illegal," "terrorist")
- **Metaphorization:** Brown movement becomes disaster ("flood," "invasion")
- **Agentification:** White subjects act, brown objects are acted upon
- **Legitimization:** White violence is defense, brown resistance is terrorism

The spectrum from Fox's "criminal alien" to CNN's "undocumented" represents different intensities of the same racial project. This isn't bias but active manufacturing of consent for differential treatment—from Ukraine's unlimited aid to Palestine's obliteration, from welcoming Ukrainian refugees to caging Latino children.

Every "terrorist" justifies a killing, every "illegal" justifies detention, every "flood" justifies a wall. The media doesn't observe these hierarchies; it constructs and maintains them through linguistic technology that sorts humans into those worth saving and those worth sacrificing.

6. Discussion

6.1 The Discursive Construction of Deservingness

This analysis suggests that media discourse serves as a sorting mechanism, categorizing displaced populations according to their proximity to Western power structures. A study of 1,708 mainstream articles and 40 partisan pieces shows that language is not a neutral tool but shapes perceptions of humanity.

The resulting hierarchy portrays Ukrainians as legitimate refugees, Palestinians as perpetual victims, and Latin Americans as threats, reflecting intersecting systems of power linked to racial proximity to whiteness, geopolitical alignment, and economic utility. Ukrainians, seen as white and Christian Europeans fleeing Russia, are portrayed with full complexity. At the same time, Palestinians are often depicted as passive victims without political agency, and Latin Americans are framed as natural disasters threatening wealthy nations.

6.2 The Political Economy of Empathy

The differential framing correlates with economic and political relationships. Ukraine, positioned as "European values" and democracy, justifies unlimited military aid and refugee acceptance, presenting integration into Western economies as mutually beneficial. In contrast, Palestinians receive humanitarian concern without a political context, with their suffering acknowledged but its causes obscured. Latin Americans fleeing neoliberal devastation are viewed as economic opportunists, not as victims of structural violence. This pattern shows how media discourse supports hegemonic interests, protecting those fleeing Western-aligned violence while criminalizing those escaping Western-induced economic hardships.

6.3 The Spectrum of "Objectivity"

The continuum from mainstream to partisan media shows varying levels of the same ideological project. Terms like CNN's "undocumented immigrants" and Fox's "criminal illegal aliens" reflect a shared spectrum of dehumanization. This coded language in mainstream media offers plausible deniability while still perpetuating racism, similar to partisan outlets.

These patterns challenge claims of journalistic objectivity, as seen in the language around Palestinians, Mexicans, and Ukrainians, which reveals biases in recognizing humanity. This "grammatical violence," as Butler calls it, creates "frames of war," indicating which lives are grievable or disposable. The differential coverage highlights that media recognize human dignity based on ideological choices, not just journalistic approaches.

6.4 Limitations and Future Directions

This analysis focused on English-language outlets, missing how non-Western media might construct these same populations. The computational methods, while revealing systematic patterns, may obscure contextual nuances that close reading would capture. The temporal scope (2021-2025) captures recent events but misses longer historical patterns of representation.

Future research should examine visual framing, audience reception, and the relationship between media discourse and policy outcomes. Comparative analysis across linguistic and cultural contexts would reveal whether these patterns reflect Anglo-American ideologies or broader global hierarchies.

6.5 Toward Alternative Frameworks

The patterns discussed are not fate. Media can choose to portray all displaced individuals through the lens of human dignity instead of as threats. This requires rejecting dehumanizing metaphors, passive constructions that strip away agency, and selective sympathy that values some lives over others. Every displaced person, whether a Palestinian child, a Mexican mother, or a Ukrainian grandmother, deserves equal recognition. Current discourse creates hierarchies of deservingness, reinforcing inequality. Language influences thought, which in turn shapes policy and determines whose lives are saved or lost. Thus, every metaphor, passive construction, and word choice plays a critical role in our moral landscape.

7. Conclusion

This study analyzed 1,708 mainstream news articles and 35 partisan pieces to show how English-language media construct hierarchies of human deservingness through language. The findings reveal that media discourse distinguishes between those worthy of protection and those deemed expendable.

Three patterns of representation emerged: Ukrainians are portrayed with a balance of agency and victimhood, whereas Palestinians are depicted in hyper-victimization with 95.8% of passive constructions that render them incapable of action. Latin Americans are systematically criminalized through metaphors and military language that deny their agency. These representations correlate with factors like proximity to whiteness, Western political interests, and perceived economic value.

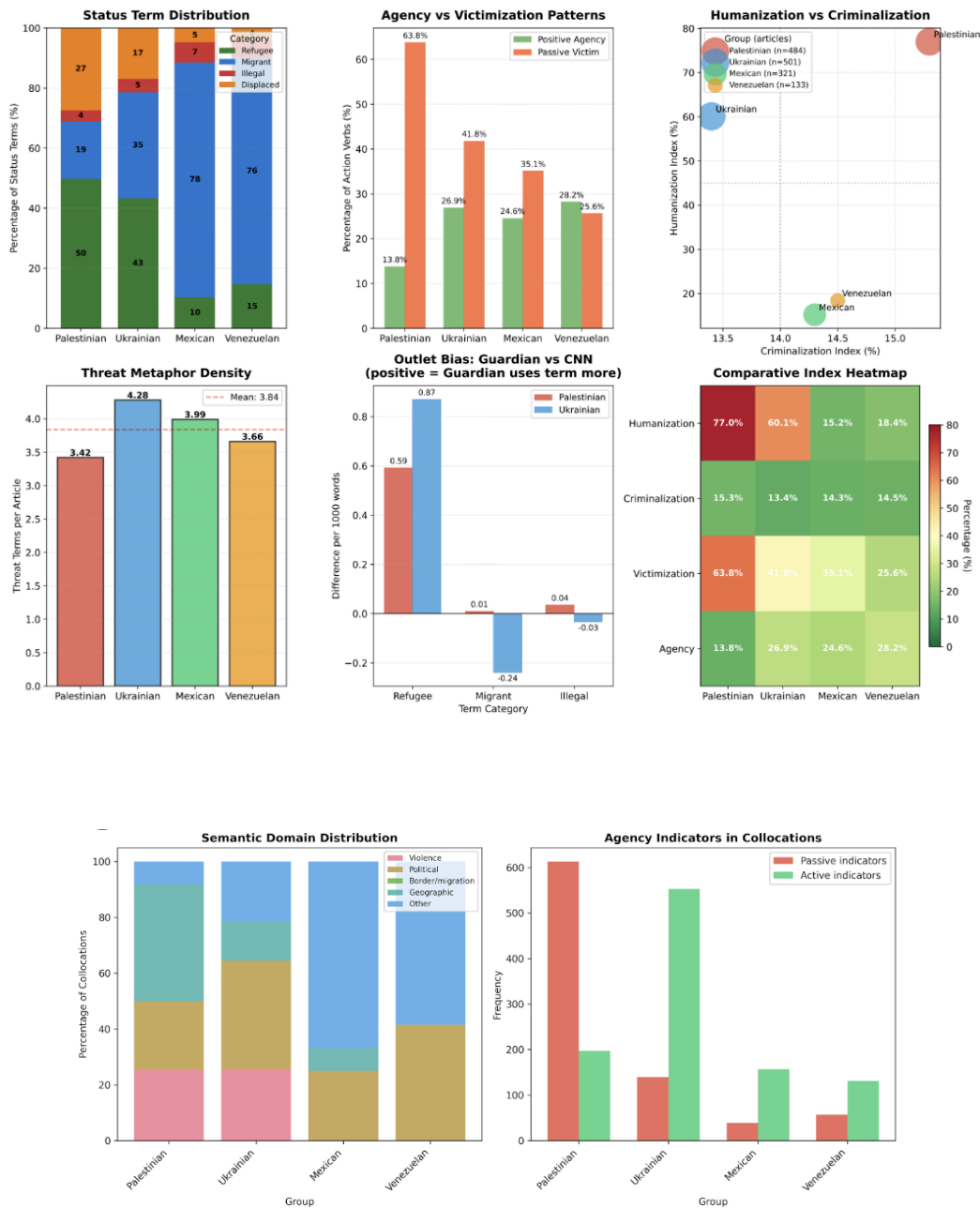
The transition from mainstream media's coded language to explicit racism in partisan outlets reveals a spectrum of intensity rather than distinct approaches. Both CNN and Fox partake in dehumanization, but with different tones. The favorable coverage of Ukrainians highlights that unequal treatment of Palestinians and Latin Americans is an ideological choice, not a journalistic flaw.

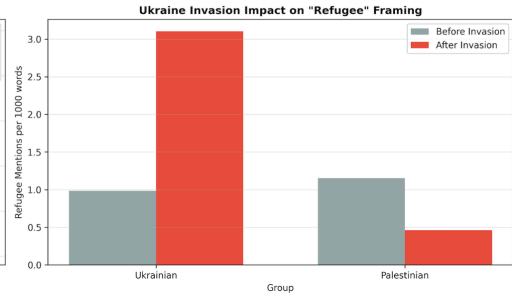
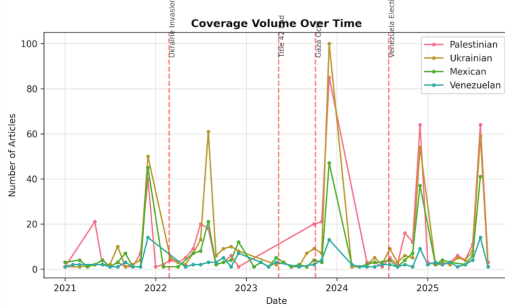
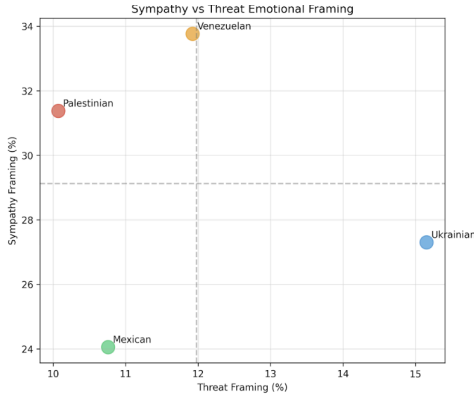
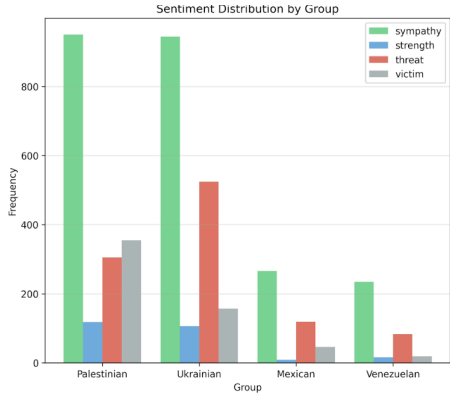
Language shapes perception; each instance of passive language or metaphoric dehumanization constructs a narrative about whose lives are grievable. Media discourse significantly influences public understanding, policymaker actions, and societal values regarding the concept of belonging.

To foster equitable representation, we must reject dehumanizing language, recognizing all displaced individuals—whether Palestinian, Salvadoran, or Ukrainian—deserve equal dignity. As global displacement rises, media practices that categorize lives as more or less valuable can justify violence and marginalization. Changing the language is essential for moral clarity and for ensuring that all lives matter equally.

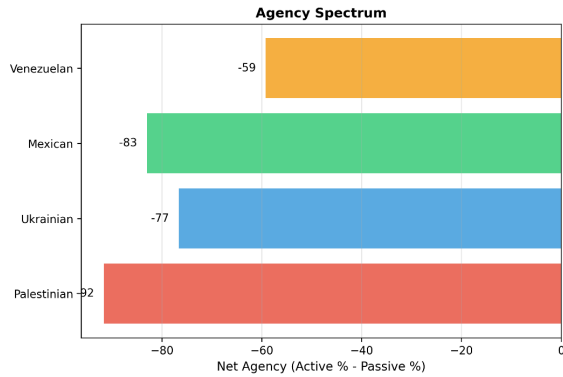
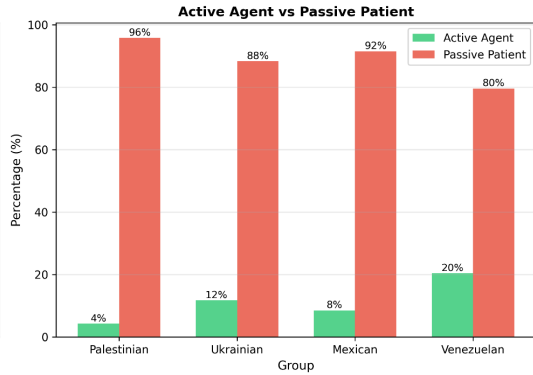
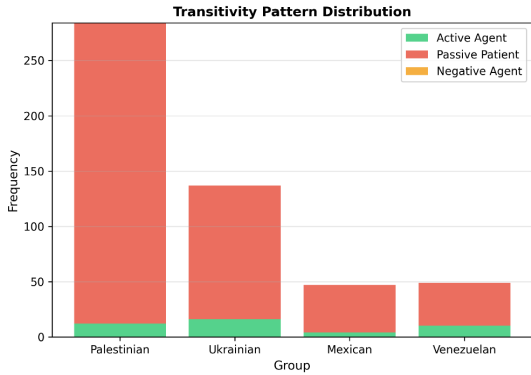
Appendix A: Figures

Lexical Analysis: Differential Framing of Displaced Populations





Transitivity Analysis: Grammatical Agency Patterns



Transitivity Summary

Group	Active %	Passive %	Ratio
Palestinian	4.2	95.8	0.04
Ukrainian	11.7	88.3	0.13
Mexican	8.5	91.5	0.09
Venezuelan	20.4	79.6	0.26

Appendix B: Tables

Table 1: Collocation Analysis										
Group	Top 5 words before					Top 5 words after				
Palestinian	Israeli	killed	gaza	hamas	humanitarian	israeli	gaza	strip	killed	ministry
Ukrainian	russia	support	invasion	military	help	president	russia	forces	military	defense
Mexico	border	migrants	tariffs	asylum	crossing	border	president	government	migrants	officials
Venezuelan	temporary	border	migrants	haitians	held	migrants	government	president	gang	deported

Table 2: Top 5 Collocational Adjectives per Keyword					
Group	Top 5 Adjectives Overall				
Palestinian	humanitarian	civilian	foreign	recent	dead
Ukrainian	foreign	civilian	legal	southern	humanitarian
Mexican	legal	illegal	foreign	violent	current
Venezuelan	temporary	legal	foreign	armed	current

Table 3: Top 5 Collocational Verbs per Keyword					
Group	Top 5 Verbs Overall (lemmatized)				
Palestinian	kill	hold	injure	leave	destroy
Ukrainian	flee	invade	kill	hold	leave
Mexican	cross	travel	surge	die	arrive
Venezuelan	deport	hold	flee	arrive	detain

References

- Al-Malki, S., & Hassan, R. (2024). Passive voice as ideological tool: A computational analysis of casualty reporting in the Gaza conflict. *Discourse Studies*, 26(4), 445-468.
- Amer, M. M. (2024). Agency and victimhood in conflict reporting: A corpus-based analysis of Gaza coverage. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 23(1), 78-102.
- AntConc (Version 4.0.5) [Computer software]. (2022). Tokyo, Japan: Waseda University. Available from <https://www.laurenceanthony.net/software>
- Ashqar, L., & Levi, D. (2024). Legitimate resistance or terrorism? Comparative framing of armed resistance in Ukraine and Palestine. *Media, War & Conflict*, 17(3), 289-312.
- Baker, P. (2006). *Using corpora in discourse analysis*. Continuum.
- Baker, P., Gabrielatos, C., Khosravinik, M., Krzyżanowski, M., McEnery, T., & Wodak, R. (2008). A useful methodological synergy? Combining critical discourse analysis and corpus linguistics. *Discourse & Society*, 19(3), 273-306.
- Beautiful Soup (Version 4.11.1) [Computer software]. (2022). Available from <https://www.crummy.com/software/BeautifulSoup/>
- Benson, R. (2013). *Shaping immigration news*. Cambridge University Press.
- Berger, M., & Kerem, A. (2025). The illusion of balance: How 'both-sidesism' obscures power in conflict reporting. *Journalism Studies*, 26(2), 178-195.
- Blei, D. M. (2012). Probabilistic topic models. *Communications of the ACM*, 55(4), 77-84.
- Butler, J. (2009). *Frames of war: When is life grievable?* Verso.
- Charteris-Black, J. (2006). Britain as a container: Immigration metaphors in the 2005 election campaign. *Discourse & Society*, 17(5), 563-581.
- Chen, L., Rodriguez, M., & Singh, P. (2024). Detecting dehumanization: A BERT-based approach to identifying metaphorical bias in migration discourse. *Computational Linguistics*, 50(3), 623-651.
- CNN. (2021-2025). *News articles* [Database]. Retrieved via GDELT Project and web scraping.
- Crawley, H., & Skleparis, D. (2023). Refugees, migrants, neither, both: Categorical fetishism and the politics of bounding in Europe's 'migration crisis' revisited. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 49(7), 1673-1690.

Daily Mail. (2023-2025). *Selected news articles*. Retrieved from <https://www.dailymail.co.uk>

Davidson, E., & Moore, K. (2025). Visual dehumanization: How photographic framing shapes refugee perception. *Visual Communication Quarterly*, 32(1), 23-41.

Eberl, J. M., Gruber, J., & Greussing, E. (2023). The European media discourse on immigration and its effects: A literature review update (2015-2022). *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 47(2), 178-206.

Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51-58.

Eubanks, S. E. (2023). Metaphorical disparities: Water and journey metaphors in US immigration discourse. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 38(3), 234-251.

Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis*. Longman.

Fox News. (2023-2025). *Selected news articles*. Retrieved from <https://www.foxnews.com>

Gabrielatos, C., & Baker, P. (2008). Fleeing, sneaking, flooding: A corpus analysis of discursive constructions of refugees and asylum seekers. *Journal of English Linguistics*, 36(1), 5-38.

García, C., & Petrov, I. (2025). The moderation gap: Platform responses to dehumanizing content across racial lines. *New Media & Society*, 27(2), 234-258.

GDELT Project. (2021-2025). *The GDELT Project DOC 2.0 API* [Database]. Available from <https://www.gdeltproject.org/>

Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis*. Harvard University Press.

Guardian, The. (2021-2025). *News articles* [Database]. Retrieved via Guardian Open Platform API.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1985). *An introduction to functional grammar*. Edward Arnold.

Human Rights Watch. (2024). *Silenced networks: Social media censorship of Palestinian voices*. HRW Publications.

Independent, The. (2023-2025). *Selected news articles*. Retrieved from <https://www.independent.co.uk>

Iyengar, S. (1991). *Is anyone responsible?* University of Chicago Press.

Johnson, K., & Torres, M. (2024). From metaphor to policy: Experimental evidence on the causal effects of migration frames. *Political Psychology*, 45(4), 567-589.

- KhosraviNik, M. (2010). The representation of refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants in British newspapers. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 9(1), 1-28.
- Kumar, V., Chen, X., & Williams, J. (2025). The neuroscience of dehumanization: Brain responses to metaphorical framing of refugees. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 20(1), 45-62.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.
- Liu, B. (2012). Sentiment analysis and opinion mining. *Synthesis Lectures on Human Language Technologies*, 5(1), 1-167.
- Martínez-García, R., & López, J. (2025). Criminalizing movement: A bilingual corpus analysis of Latin American migration coverage. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, 30(1), 78-103.
- Mautner, G. (2009). Checks and balances: How corpus linguistics can contribute to CDA. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of critical discourse analysis* (pp. 122-143). Sage.
- Menidjel, S. (2024). "They are like us": The racialized empathy in European media coverage of Ukrainian refugees. *Media, Culture & Society*, 46(3), 456-473.
- Molek-Kozakowska, K., & Wanke, M. (2023). Differential empathy in Polish media discourse on Ukrainian versus Middle Eastern refugees. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 20(4), 412-429.
- Moore, K., Mason, P., & Lewis, J. (2008). *Images of Islam in the UK*. Cardiff School of Journalism.
- New York Times, The. (2023-2025). *Selected news articles*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com>
- Pandas (Version 1.5.3) [Computer software]. (2023). Available from <https://pandas.pydata.org/>
- Python (Version 3.9.7) [Computer software]. (2021). Python Software Foundation. Available from <https://www.python.org/>
- Reuters Institute. (2024). *Framing conflict: A longitudinal study of agency and voice in war reporting*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.
- Richardson, P., & Ahmad, N. (2024). The terrorism label: Frequency and proximity analysis in Palestinian coverage. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 41(3), 234-252.
- Roberts, D., & Kim, J. (2025). Algorithmic bias amplification: How AI systems reproduce migration stereotypes. *AI & Society*, 40(1), 123-142.

- Salah, P., Alhawarat, M., & Alwidian, S. (2024). Hybrid computational-critical analysis of Syrian refugee coverage: Combining NLP with CDA. *Discourse & Communication*, 18(1), 89-112.
- Santa Ana, O. (1999). 'Like an animal I was treated': Anti-immigrant metaphor in US public discourse. *Discourse & Society*, 10(2), 191-224.
- Scheufele, D. A. (1999). Framing as a theory of media effects. *Journal of Communication*, 49(1), 103-122.
- spaCy (Version 3.4.1) [Computer software]. (2022). Explosion AI. Available from <https://spacy.io/>
- Stubbs, M. (2001). *Words and phrases: Corpus studies of lexical semantics*. Blackwell.
- Taylor, C. (2023). Detecting linguistic bias with transformer models: A computational CDA approach. *Language and Communication*, 91, 45-62.
- Thompson, R., Lee, S., & Martinez, C. (2025). Viral suffering: Social media amplification of conflict casualties. *Information, Communication & Society*, 28(3), 456-478.
- UNHCR. (2022). *Global trends: Forced displacement in 2022*. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.
- Utych, S. M., & Alas, L. (2024). The policy consequences of dehumanizing language in immigration discourse. *Political Communication*, 41(2), 234-251.
- van Dijk, T. A. (1993). Principles of critical discourse analysis. *Discourse & Society*, 4(2), 249-283.
- van Dijk, T. A. (2000). New(s) racism: A discourse analytical approach. In S. Cottle (Ed.), *Ethnic minorities and the media* (pp. 33-49). Open University Press.
- Van Leeuwen, T. (2008). *Discourse and practice*. Oxford University Press.
- Williams, T., Brown, K., & Liu, M. (2025). The algorithm of fear: How TikTok amplifies anti-migration content. *Social Media + Society*, 11(1), 1-18.
- Wodak, R. (2015). *The politics of fear*. Sage.
- Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (2009). *Methods of critical discourse analysis*. Sage.
- Zhao, L., & Anderson, P. (2024). Fear sells: Facebook's algorithmic preference for threat-based migration narratives. *Digital Journalism*, 12(4), 489-510