

LINGUISTIC MEANS OF REALIZING PROPAGANDA STRATEGIES IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH MEDIA DISCOURSE

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Summary

The article examines the linguistic means of realizing propaganda strategies in contemporary English-language media discourse, focusing on news coverage by Fox News and The New York Times between 2020 and 2024. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of critical discourse analysis and linguistic stylistics, the study explores how lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic features serve to encode ideological bias and persuasive intent. The research identifies several dominant mechanisms of propaganda realization, including evaluative lexis, metaphorical and symbolic framing, manipulation of agency, and the strategic use of modality. Comparative analysis reveals that Fox News employs emotionally charged and moralizing language to construct narratives of national defense and cultural threat, whereas The New York Times relies on analytical and reform-oriented discourse emphasizing rational inquiry and democratic values. These findings support the view that propaganda in modern journalism operates less through overt manipulation than through the subtle normalization of ideological perspectives. The study underscores the importance of linguistic awareness and critical media literacy in identifying the hidden persuasive strategies that shape public understanding of political and social reality.

Key words: ideological framing, evaluative language, critical discourse analysis, persuasion techniques, media bias, rhetorical strategies, linguistic manipulation.

DOI <https://doi.org/10.23856/7413>

1. Introduction

In the era of global information flows and mediated communication, media discourse functions as a dominant platform for shaping public opinion and constructing ideological realities. According to Fairclough (1995), media discourse is not a neutral reflection of social events but a “site of ideological production,” where linguistic choices encode specific power relations and values. Similarly, van Dijk (1998) emphasizes that media texts represent “discursive practices” through which social cognition is influenced and collective beliefs are formed. Thus, media discourse encompasses a complex interaction of textual, contextual, and sociocognitive dimensions, reflecting both communicative practices and underlying ideological intentions.

Within this framework, propaganda is understood as a strategic and systematic attempt to influence attitudes and behaviors through selective communication. Jowett and O'Donnell (2019: 7) define propaganda as “the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.” Lasswell's (1927: 627) classical definition – “the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols” – remains relevant, highlighting the linguistic and semiotic mechanisms that sustain persuasive influence. Contemporary scholarship (Ellul, 1973; Bernays, 1928; Chilton, 2004) extends this view, stressing that propaganda functions not only in overtly political contexts but also in subtle, routine representations of reality across media platforms.

The aim of this article is to analyze the linguistic means through which propaganda strategies are realized in contemporary media discourse, with particular attention to the contrastive representation of political and social events in Fox News and The New York Times. By examining lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic devices, the study seeks to uncover how evaluative language, framing, and argumentation patterns contribute to the construction of ideological bias and persuasion.

The specific objectives are:

1) To classify and analyze lexical, syntactic, and rhetorical devices used to convey ideological bias.

2) To compare the linguistic representation of key political and social issues in two ideologically opposed media outlets.

3) To interpret the persuasive and manipulative functions of these linguistic strategies within the framework of propaganda theory.

The analysis employs the tools of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and linguistic stylistics. A comparative textual analysis is conducted on selected news articles and editorials published between 2020 and 2024, focusing on topics such as elections, immigration, and public health policy. Linguistic data are examined in terms of lexical evaluation, syntactic agency, modality, and metaphorical framing, with attention to their pragmatic and ideological implications.

By uncovering the subtle linguistic mechanisms that underpin propaganda in ostensibly neutral reporting, the study aims to contribute to the broader understanding of media discourse as a powerful instrument of ideological influence in contemporary society.

2. Media Discourse as an Object of Linguistic Analysis

Media discourse represents a multifaceted communicative domain situated at the intersection of language, ideology, and power. It encompasses both spoken and written modes of communication disseminated through mass media, including news reports, editorials, interviews, and opinion pieces. Fairclough (1995) defines media discourse as a “socially situated form of language use,” which not only transmits information but also constructs social identities and relations. Similarly, Fowler (1991) argues that media texts are inherently selective, reflecting institutional and ideological frameworks rather than objective reality.

From a discourse-analytic perspective, media communication can be viewed as a site of ideological struggle, where competing interpretations of social events are negotiated and legitimated through linguistic means (van Dijk, 1998). In this sense, language operates as a tool of representation, framing particular actors and events in ways that support or challenge

dominant ideologies. The process of framing – that is, selecting and emphasizing certain aspects of perceived reality (Entman, 1993) – is central to the construction of meaning in media texts. Thus, the analysis of media discourse necessarily entails an exploration of linguistic patterns that contribute to evaluative stance, emotional appeal, and the manipulation of reader perception.

3. Propaganda as a Communicative Strategy

The concept of propaganda has evolved from its early political and wartime associations to encompass a wide range of persuasive and manipulative communicative practices. Lasswell (1927: 627) provided one of the earliest systematic definitions, describing propaganda as “the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols.” Later, Ellul (1973) extended this view, distinguishing between political propaganda, which is overt and institutionally organized, and sociological propaganda, which subtly embeds ideology into everyday communication and cultural expression.

Modern interpretations view propaganda as a discursive strategy that exploits linguistic and cognitive mechanisms to shape perception and belief. Jowett and O'Donnell (2019) emphasize intentionality, systematicity, and the use of persuasive symbols as key features of propaganda. Chilton (2004) further situates propaganda within the broader framework of political discourse, highlighting its reliance on rhetorical and cognitive strategies such as metaphor, deixis, presupposition, and modality.

In the context of media communication, propaganda manifests not only through overt persuasive techniques but also through lexical choice, thematic emphasis, and syntactic framing that subtly direct interpretation. For instance, the use of evaluative adjectives (*radical, progressive, patriotic*), nominalizations that obscure agency (*mistakes were made*), or metaphorical framing (*war on truth, battle for democracy*) exemplifies how linguistic structures contribute to ideological manipulation.

A substantial body of research has examined the relationship between media language and ideological control. Thus, van Dijk's (1991, 1998) socio-cognitive model emphasizes how media discourse influences public knowledge structures by reinforcing group polarization and ideological schemata. Fairclough's (1992, 1995) critical discourse analysis (CDA) provides a methodological framework for exploring how linguistic forms express social power and dominance. Wodak's (2001) discourse-historical approach (DHA) integrates linguistic, historical, and sociopolitical contexts, demonstrating how discursive strategies construct national, ethnic, or political identities.

Scholars have also focused on the linguistic markers of bias in specific media outlets. For example, Bednarek and Caple (2017) identify evaluative and affective patterns that create “news values,” while Richardson (2007) shows how grammatical and lexical features serve ideological purposes in newspaper discourse. Within the U.S. media landscape, comparative analyses (Bhatia, 2006; Cotter, 2010) reveal that outlets such as Fox News and The New York Times employ distinct linguistic strategies reflecting conservative and liberal ideological orientations, respectively.

4. Linguistic Tools of Persuasive Media Communication

4.1. Lexical Evaluation and Ideological Polarization

Lexical choice constitutes the most immediate indicator of ideological stance in media texts. It carries evaluative and emotional potential that guides the reader toward a preferred interpretation. As van Dijk (1998) observes, ideological discourse performs positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation by means of evaluative lexis, metaphoric intensification, and categorical labeling.

Consider the headline:

“The radical left’s war on American values: What’s really at stake” (Fox News, 2022, November 8).

The evaluative epithet radical and the militarized metaphor war create an antagonistic frame that positions liberal actors as existential threats. The noun phrase American values evokes shared cultural identity, appealing to the reader’s sense of patriotism. The ideological implication, following Fowler (1991), is a moral polarization between the in-group (defenders of national integrity) and the out-group (destructive radicals).

By contrast, The New York Times frames political conflict in analytic and civic terms:

“Democracy tested: Voters confront misinformation and division” (The New York Times, 2022, November 9).

The lexical field (democracy, voters, misinformation, division) constructs an institutional rather than moral frame. The noun misinformation presupposes epistemic rationality and the citizen’s capacity for judgment. The lexical tone is cautionary rather than accusatory, characteristic of what Bednarek & Caple (2017) identify as the rational-evaluative register of liberal media.

Both examples reveal the evaluative asymmetry through which ideological discourse encodes propaganda: Fox News relies on emotionally saturated, polarizing vocabulary, whereas The New York Times employs cognitively oriented, legitimacy-seeking lexis.

4.2. Metaphorical and Symbolic Framing

Metaphor operates as a cognitive and ideological device that shapes public understanding by mapping abstract social concepts onto concrete experiential domains (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Charteris-Black, 2011).

In Fox News coverage of immigration “Biden’s border crisis worsens as administration ignores calls for reform” (Fox News, 2023, March 14), the dominant metaphor is CRISIS AS DISASTER. The lexical cluster (crisis, worsens, ignores) constructs an unfolding emergency, thereby legitimizing a call for decisive action. The metaphorical construction evokes fear and urgency, activating a protectionist frame congruent with conservative ideology.

Conversely, The New York Times employs POLITICS AS JOURNEY metaphors, as in “How immigration policy divides Washington again” (The New York Times, 2023, March 15). The headline conceptualizes policy debate as cyclical movement (divides ... again), implying persistence of systemic obstacles rather than immediate danger. Such metaphorical framing positions the reader as an informed observer invited to reflect, not to mobilize emotionally.

Following Chilton (2004), metaphorical framing here functions as an ideological gatekeeper: Fox News constructs threat and moral urgency; The New York Times foregrounds process and deliberation.

4.3. Syntactic Structuring and Agency Manipulation

Syntactic structures determine how responsibility and causality are distributed in discourse. The manipulation of agency – through active or passive voice, nominalization, and topicalization – constitutes a core linguistic strategy of propaganda (*van Leeuwen, 1996*).

In Fox News reporting on policy outcomes, the passive construction “mistakes were made in policy communication” (Fox News, 2023, *March 14*) removes the human agent and dilutes accountability. This syntactic erasure aligns with ideological mitigation of the in-group’s responsibility. In contrast, when addressing liberal actors, Fox News frequently resorts to agentive syntax: “Democrats pushed divisive measures through Congress” (Fox News, 2023, *March 14*). The active verb pushed implies coercion and ideological aggressiveness, thereby framing Democratic policymakers as the source of social tension.

The New York Times reverses the pattern. In the article “Trump intensified the political divide” (The New York Times, 2023, *March 15*), agency is overtly attributed, emphasizing personal accountability moral responsibility. Yet, in discussions of systemic inequality – “Inequalities were reinforced by decades of policy inertia” (The New York Times, 2023, *March 16*) – the passive voice abstracts the actor, diffusing blame and depersonalizing causation. Such syntactic alternation reflects Fairclough’s (1995) observation that linguistic choice is ideologically motivated by institutional alignment and audience expectations: conservative media often conceal in-group agency, while liberal outlets obscure structural responsibility.

4.4. Modality, Evidentiality, and Persuasive Force

Modality indexes degrees of certainty and authority, thus contributing to the persuasive or manipulative dimension of discourse (*Halliday, 1994*). Fox News often employs deontic modality to evoke moral imperative and mobilize emotional response. For example, in an opinion piece titled “Leaders must protect our borders before it’s too late” (Fox News, 2023, *April 4*), the modal *must* asserts necessity, while the apocalyptic clause before it’s too late heightens emotional intensity. The lexical combination frames immigration as an urgent national crisis and constructs a moral binary between action and failure. The function, as Jowett and O’Donnell (2019) note, is to transform subjective opinion into perceived moral truth.

In contrast, The New York Times typically relies on epistemic modality, emphasizing analytical caution and institutional rationality. In an article titled “Experts suggest the data may indicate a gradual shift in voter priorities” (The New York Times, 2023, *April 5*), the modals *may* and the reporting verb suggest signal interpretive distance and scholarly ethos. Such expressions build an image of professional credibility and intellectual restraint. Yet, as Fowler (1991) observes, even hedged modality can perform a persuasive function by legitimizing authority and marginalizing emotionally grounded alternatives.

Thus, while Fox News uses modality to command and mobilize, The New York Times employs it to legitimize and rationalize. Both forms of certainty – moral and epistemic – sustain ideological persuasion through linguistic framing and stance-taking.

4.5 Pragmatic and Rhetorical Strategies

Beyond the grammatical level, propaganda is reinforced through pragmatic operations such as presupposition, repetition, and rhetorical contrast. These mechanisms activate ideological assumptions before conscious interpretation occurs.

Presupposition structures ideological inference in news framing. For instance, Fox News asserts, “Even liberal elites now admit the border crisis is real” (Fox News, 2023, *May 7*) – presupposing that liberal groups previously denied an evident truth. Conversely, The New York

Times employs a similar mechanism in “Once again, conservatives claim without evidence that fraud shaped the election outcome” (The New York Times, 2023, *May 8*) – presupposing habitual unreliability and recurring rhetorical patterns within conservative discourse.

Repetition of formulaic expressions – such as “border crisis,” “war on democracy,” “threat to freedom” – creates lexical cohesion and mnemonic salience, functioning as what Ellul (1973) defined as propagandistic conditioning. In Fox News, repeated invocation of “border crisis” amplifies a sense of emergency and moral duty, while The New York Times’ recurrent use of “war on democracy” dramatizes civic defense narratives.

Rhetorical contrast simplifies ideological positioning through moral binaries such as “freedom vs. control” (Fox News, 2023, *May 10*) or “truth vs. misinformation” (The New York Times, 2023, *May 9*). These juxtapositions reduce cognitive complexity while maximizing persuasive clarity, appealing to shared group values.

Taken together, these pragmatic strategies, combined with evaluative and syntactic devices, realize what van Dijk (1998) terms the discursive reproduction of ideology – a process through which linguistic form naturalizes sociopolitical hierarchies and consolidates group identity.

5. Conclusions

The present study has demonstrated that propaganda in contemporary media discourse is realized through a complex interplay of linguistic, rhetorical, and pragmatic mechanisms that construct and sustain ideological perspectives. Drawing on the frameworks of critical discourse analysis and linguistic stylistics, the research has shown that both Fox News and The New York Times employ language not merely as a vehicle of information, but as a strategic tool for influencing perception, guiding interpretation, and reinforcing specific worldviews.

The analysis identified several dominant linguistic means of propaganda realization: evaluative lexis, which emotionally polarizes discourse; metaphorical framing, which naturalizes ideological narratives; syntactic structuring and agency manipulation, which allocate responsibility and legitimacy; and modality, which establishes authority and epistemic stance. These elements function collectively to create coherent ideological frames – combative and moralizing in Fox News, analytical and reform-oriented in The New York Times.

Importantly, the findings highlight that propaganda in democratic media environments often operates through discursive subtlety rather than explicit indoctrination. Ideological influence is embedded in habitual linguistic patterns that appear objective but are, in fact, socially and politically motivated. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for fostering critical media literacy, enabling audiences to recognize linguistic bias and the symbolic construction of “truth” in the media.

Future research may expand the scope of analysis to multimodal dimensions – such as visual framing, prosody, and layout – or to cross-cultural comparisons, which would further illuminate how linguistic and semiotic means of persuasion operate across different media systems.

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