

## **A discourse study on newspaper coverage of politicians**

This study will be looking at how different newspapers discuss the politicians and political parties that they support and oppose by doing a textual analysis of the discourse and lexis used in four articles from two similar UK newspapers (*The Telegraph* and *The Guardian*). It is a relevant topic as newspapers are opinion leaders, and so the views of many people are shaped by what stories there are to read in them and how the topics in these stories are presented. This means if one popular newspaper discusses a certain topic in a negative way, it may mean that the readers are made to believe that this is the correct way to think about that specific topic and similar ones, and therefore reject any other opinions on it because what they have initially read has been interpreted as 'fact'. Of course, this relies heavily on the 'hypodermic needle' theory of the media, which claims audiences are passive and take in what the media feeds them without question. This theory, however, is now mostly seen as incorrect as audiences are now perceived to be 'active' in their media consumption, and are able to choose what media texts to consume, which (for instance, in this case) leads them to choose to consume a newspaper that reinforces their personal ideologies; it is unlikely that a person who is right-wing and supports the Conservative Party would actively seek out a left-wing paper's political articles and have the preferred reading of it (to agree with the views and opinions laid out in it). Conboy's book *The Language of News* perfectly summarises why it is important to analyse the language used in the news;

*"Language does not merely reflect the world as it is, it interprets, organises and classifies that world. It therefore embodies theories of how that*

*world is arranged from an ideological perspective (Fowler, 1987: 27). Understanding that helps us to become more active participants in the world.*

*The news, in both it's elite and popular forms, is extremely important in helping us to build up a normative view of the world and set parameters for how we interact with that world. This means that this language has an enormous influence.” (2007; 4)*

Discourse, according to Foucault, is all forms of communication and how they can change how topics are perceived by society; he thought language has the power to alter and reinforce dominant ideologies of society. Fairclough (2003; 129) summarises two aspects of discourse: how it “‘words’ or ‘lexicalizes’ the world in particular ways,” and also “how different discourses structure the world differently,” looking at “semantic relationships” between words and phrases. This investigation will be conducting a textual analysis on the lexis used in specific newspapers to study both how the discourse shaped the ideas and political agendas of the papers and vice versa. Though textual analysis may have some limitations as primary research in that it can only really show one person’s interpretations of a media text, it is the most sensible methodology to use for this topic as way to see how certain politicians are spoken about and whether the newspaper’s political agenda changes the language used – for instance, is ‘war discourse’ (specific phrases and lexes that relate to war and fighting) only used in right-wing newspaper articles about a politician or political party that they don’t support, or what sort of language is used to pit the parties on either side of the political spectrum against each other. This will be done by finding 3 themes on how the newspapers discuss politicians that they support

and oppose, and comparing similarities between the lexes used and analysing the semantics of these choices, as this can affect whether a specific reader would accept or reject what political agenda the newspaper is trying to persuade them to agree with.

This investigation will be looking at four newspaper articles; two each from *The Telegraph* and *The Guardian*. One from each paper will focus on David Cameron's re-election as Prime Minister of Great Britain, and the other on the implications of Jeremy Corbyn becoming the Labour Party leader. These will give a balanced view on how the left- and right-wing papers view the leading left- and right-wing politicians, meaning an equal analysis that remains as unbiased as possible. The articles to be referenced are as follows:

- A. 'David Cameron won the election with series of lies, says Yvette Cooper' – *The Guardian*, 06/08/15, N. Watt and F. Perraudin
- B. 'Election 2015: How David Cameron's Conservatives won' – *The Telegraph*, 08/05/15, S. Swinford
- C. 'Jeremy Corbyn's victory has already transformed politics' – *The Guardian*, 16/09/15, S. Milne
- D. 'Jeremy Corbyn must be stopped' – *The Telegraph*, 22/08/15, Telegraph View

For brevity's sake, these will be referred to by the letters in front of their titles, for instance; '*Article A claims Ed Miliband is a threat to the Union.*'

Most newspapers have an agenda when it comes to politics, either leaning towards the left or right of the spectrum. This means the way two similar newspapers talk about the same topic or person may be completely oppositional. This can clearly be seen in the daily broadsheets *The Telegraph*, a Conservative newspaper, and *The Guardian*, which supports Labour, in articles that discuss the British Prime Minister David Cameron and the new Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. Both newspapers use similar language when talking about the person or party they oppose – undermining their campaigns, leadership style, eligibility, and party – and the one they support – using language to ‘talk up’ the person and their party and policies. This is interesting to see as this seems to suggest a more ‘circular’ or ‘horseshoe-shaped’ political spectrum rather than a line with ‘left’ and ‘right’ being binary opposites; while the beliefs of the political parties and the views of their respective media outlets may be so, the methods of how they discuss what they are for and against is incredibly similar to each other.

One such similarity is that both newspapers use ‘war discourse’ to pit the two parties against each other. This is typical of articles discussing politics, which is “often represented as merely a clash of personalities.” (Conboy, 2007; 31) Article B discusses the Conservative’s attempts to “drown out Labour’s key messages” was their “main line of attack,” and article C uses similar language in regards to the Tories’ “legal assault on trade unions... it’s an attack clearly aimed at destroying the labour movement as an effective political and industrial force.” The use of such language emphasizes that the two parties are working to overcome each other and gain leverage in a metaphorical political

battleground (gain support from the public and become more popular) to eventually win (become the Prime Minister and the majority party in Parliament). This confrontational language makes the topic seem much more intense and therefore entertaining to readers, which benefits the newspapers as businesses since they are more likely to sell more copies and in turn make more money. This links to Lewis' theory behind the prevalence of crime news in papers (2013; 113); "As newspapers became more profit-oriented businesses... the genre of crime news flourished" because it "proved a highly disposable form of entertainment."

The dramatisation of political news makes it much more accessible for a wider general audience that doesn't have much of an interest in politics as a topic, but will read an article if it seems 'juicy' and 'fun'. In this sense the news becomes almost 'disposable,' as it becomes "a place where things just happen, one after the other, with little sense of broader social context or responsibility." This is primarily seen in tabloid newspapers; broadsheets such as *The Telegraph* and *The Guardian* do this less as they present news in a more 'thematic' way by having sections dedicated to certain topics (for instance, both *The Telegraph* and *The Guardian* have a 'politics' section in their papers) which allows readers to easily find articles on subjects they are interested in; it also "tends to root issues more clearly in a context which enables discussion of causes and solutions," (Lewis, 2013; 112) which makes it useful in a way that allows better passage of knowledge and growth of ideas, as well as being easier to navigate for individuals. Because of this popularity, "conflict between people, political parties or nations is a staple of news," (Bell, 1991; 156) as

evidenced by the large number of articles on such topics and thus the need for specific sections such as the 'politics' section for ease of navigation.

Further similarities in the language used by left- and right-wing newspapers regardless of their political leanings lie in how they undermine their opponent. All four articles have at least a small section that attempt to weaken the campaign, reputation or popularity of the leader they do not support, primarily in articles A and D which were primarily written to do exactly this, though even the articles that are aimed at promoting the party and leader they support do so partly by pulling their opposition down. Articles C and D both use the term "absurd" when referring to the policies of the party they are against, suggesting that they are ridiculous and thus not feasible, making the party itself appear less sensible and 'rightful'. Other words and phrases undermine the campaigns of their opposition; article B says the Labour party was "floundering as it tried to respond" to whether it would make a deal with the Scottish National Party, and that "for weeks, Ed Miliband tried to duck the question of whether he was prepared to do a deal, claiming that he was instead focused on securing a majority." The use of the words 'floundering,' 'tried,' and 'claiming' all make what Miliband was doing seem feeble and uncertain, in turn suggesting that he is unsuitable to be Prime Minister as he is unable to make a solid decision and see it through. Article C, on the other hand, undermines the Conservative/right-wing press' attempts of discrediting Corbyn by making their claims that he and his supporters are "deranged terrorist sympathisers" who pose a "threat to the security of the country and every family in the land" by calling their claims "bloodcurdling," using hyperbole to suggest the Tories and their supporting

press are being over the top and again making them seem unsuitable to lead the country as they appear to be jumping to conclusions and exaggerative rather than rational and reasonable. As Conboy states, “the news media are demonstrably strong on holding individual politicians and political parties in general to account for their actions and decisions,” (2007; 25) which is clear in articles A and B. Article A is claiming Cameron had “ripped up 9 major pre-election promises” and thus “lied to the electorate,” clearly pointing fingers and attempting to get a response from Cameron, the Conservative party and/or its press to answer how they can justify this. In article B, Swinford states that the Tory’s pre-election message on the economy was “they [Labour] are the party that crashed the economy; we are the ones with the long-term economic plan” (the subtext here being that this will allow them to stimulate the economy so it will grow, thus reversing what Labour apparently did to damage it). Again, this point fingers but is more rhetorical as it doesn’t expect a response as such from the Labour party, but states it as a fact, making it appear indisputable that the economic downfall in 2007/8 was indeed Labour’s fault. It also makes the Conservative Party seem stronger, as they paint themselves as the ‘heroes’ that will ‘save the day’ by bringing the country out of the recession and back into times of prosperity for all.

This is one way in which *The Telegraph* endorses the party and politician it supports, something that is also done by *The Guardian*, by putting them and their achievements as Members of Parliament and party leaders on a pedestal. This is mostly seen in articles B and C, which are designed to promote Cameron and Corbyn respectively, and discuss how ‘fantastic’ the leader they support is

and how 'amazing' their victory was. Article B states that the Tory campaign before the 2015 general election was "disciplined, focused, and ruthless" which is what made their campaign "effective" compared to the campaigns of Labour and other parties. It also discusses previous Tory achievements since they were initially elected in the 2015 general elections; "Britain has enjoyed the fastest rate of growth in the G7 group of developed countries with record numbers of jobs," using proof of a good 'track record' to persuade the reader that their re-election was deserved and is what's best for the country. Article C says Corbyn "pulled off the most extraordinary democratic leadership victory," using hyperbole ('extraordinary') to make it seem like nothing like this has happened before and it's 'history in the making,' which statistically may be true, but is made more exciting than the topic of politics would usually be to the average reader; it also serves to reinforce that it is in fact an important event that affects everyone in the country. The way the article describes Corbyn as the underdog, calling him a "100-1 outsider" that started from "backbench obscurity" makes his feat of "winning more than a quarter of a million votes, nearly 60% of the total, beating Tony Blair's 57%" seem even more unprecedented and therefore impressive and noteworthy.

In conclusion, the two newspapers cover the topic of politics in almost identical ways regardless of which specific party it is that they are for and against. Hyperbole is used fairly freely – though according to Claridge (2011; 266) only 13% of hyperbole is found in political newspaper articles compared to 37% in social and cultural reporting and 25.5% in sports news – both to promote the party the paper supports and undermine the one it opposes; this links to the



dramatisation of political news stories and the use of war discourse to make the articles more entertaining and thus sell more, allowing the newspaper to flourish as a business rather than being solely about bringing current and important news stories to the public's attention. This textual analysis of the discourse in four newspaper articles from two papers that are politically opposite but otherwise very similar has shown exactly how the horseshoe political spectrum theory can be applied to the news, as well as highlighted key ways in which the papers talk about serious topics. However, this research is by no means complete, and could be expanded upon to look for similarities and differences between the same papers on other topics that they may disagree on due to fundamental differences in their political agendas; recent events such as the migration crisis as well as other 'hard' news topics may yield very interesting results showing just how similarly or differently the left- and right-wings of the political spectrum see topics, and how this is spoken about in papers to persuade people to agree to their point of view.

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## **Articles**

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## Ethics Form

	Yes	No
Does the study involve participants age 16 or over who are unable to give informed consent? (eg people with learning disabilities: see Mental Capacity Act 2005).		X
Does the research involve other vulnerable groups: children, those with cognitive impairment, etc?		X
Will the study require the identification of participants, or the disclosure of information which will make it easy to identify them?		X
Will the study require the co-operation of a gatekeeper for initial access to the groups or individuals to be recruited? (eg students at a school?)		X
Will it be necessary for participants to take part in the study without their knowledge and consent at the time? (eg covert observation of people in non-public places)?		X
Will the study involve discussion of sensitive topics (eg sexual activity, drug use)?		X
Will the research involve administrative or secure data that requires permission from the appropriate authorities before use?		X
Is there a possibility that the safety of the researcher may be in question (eg in international research)?		X
Does the research involve members of the public in a research capacity (participant research)?		X
Will the research take place outside the UK?		X
Will the research involve respondents to the internet or other visual/vocal methods where respondents may be identified?		X
Will research involve the sharing of data or confidential information beyond the initial consent given?		X
Will financial inducements (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time) be offered to participants?		X