Semantic Framing and Audience Response: A Theoretical Study of the Cognitive and Affective Dimensions of News Language

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ABSTRACT

News discourse does not merely communicate information about events; it constructs particular ways of understanding and evaluating them through linguistic choices. Among these choices, lexical selection is especially significant because words that refer to the same event or social actor may differ in their connotative, evaluative, and affective meanings. This paper examines the relationship between semantic framing and audience response, with particular attention to the cognitive and affective dimensions through which news language may shape the interpretation of mediated events. Drawing on theories of lexical semantics, evaluative and affective meaning, media framing, discourse and ideology, the study develops a theoretical account of how lexical choices can function as interpretive cues for audiences. It argues that semantic framing operates through two interconnected pathways: a cognitive pathway, through which lexical choices contribute to categorization, attribution, perceptions of legitimacy, responsibility and threat; and an affective pathway, through which connotative and evaluative meanings may evoke emotions such as fear, sympathy, anger, hostility or admiration. The paper further emphasizes that these cognitive and affective responses are not mechanically determined by particular words, but are mediated by audiences' prior knowledge, cultural contexts, ideological orientations and experiences. By bringing semantic theory into dialogue with media-framing and audience-interpretation perspectives, the paper proposes a conceptual framework linking lexical choice, semantic evaluation, cognitive processing, affective response, and audience interpretation. The study thus contributes to a more integrated understanding of how seemingly small linguistic choices in news discourse can participate in the construction and reception of media frames.

Keywords: Semantic framing; lexical choice; news discourse; audience response; cognitive processing; affective meaning; evaluative meaning; media framing.

INTRODUCTION

The technological revolution of the late twentieth century brought about a radical transformation in the print media, particularly newspapers. This led to a substantial increase in their number and a fundamental change in their social role. This period was characterized by rapid technological developments, lower production costs, and increasingly diverse content, bringing newspapers and the news environment closer to people's everyday lives. In this context, Campbell, Martin, and Fabos explain that developments in printing and newspaper distribution made newspapers more widely available and increased their circulation during the twentieth century, enabling them to become central instruments of public debate and democratic participation.[1]

As a result, the newspaper ceased to be merely a medium for transmitting news and became a platform for managing social and political dialogue, shaping public opinion, and providing citizens with opportunities to

[1] Campbell, R., Martin, C. R., & Fabos, B. (2008). Media & Culture: An Introduction to Mass Communication (5th ed.). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, pp. 152–155.

express their positions and criticisms. This strengthened its role as one of the principal media that helped consolidate the values of democratic participation in modern societies.

Although previous studies have extensively examined media framing, lexical selection, and audience interpretation, these dimensions have often been discussed from relatively separate theoretical perspectives. The present study seeks to bridge this gap by integrating lexical-semantic analysis with the cognitive and affective dimensions of audience response. Its principal contribution lies in proposing a conceptual framework that explains how lexical choices, through their connotative, evaluative, and affective meanings, may contribute to semantic framing and subsequently influence audience interpretation. Unlike approaches that primarily focus on the construction of media frames, this study extends the discussion to the processes through which audiences cognitively and emotionally engage with such frames. In doing so, it offers an integrated theoretical perspective on the relationship between linguistic choices, media framing, and audience response.

Theoretical Background

The proposed Semantic Framing–Audience Response Model draws upon several complementary theoretical perspectives to explain the relationship between linguistic choices in news discourse and audience interpretation. Its initial dimension is grounded in lexical semantics, which examines how lexical selection contributes to the construction of meaning. This is followed by Geoffrey Leech's theory of meaning[2], particularly its treatment of connotative, social, and affective dimensions, which helps explain the evaluative and emotional associations conveyed through language. The framing dimension is based on Robert Entman's conceptualisation of framing[3] as the selection and salience of particular aspects of perceived reality.[4] Teun A. van Dijk's sociocognitive approach[5] provides the foundation for understanding how discourse interacts with social cognition, mental models, knowledge, and ideological structures in the process of cognitive interpretation.

The audience-oriented dimensions of the model are informed by Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model and Robin Nabi's research on emotion and framing. Hall's framework[6] explains how audiences may interpret media messages through dominant, negotiated, or oppositional positions, emphasising the role of audience backgrounds and interpretative frameworks in the construction of meaning. Nabi's research[7] provides a basis for understanding how emotional dimensions of media messages may influence affective responses and subsequent audience engagement. By integrating these perspectives, the proposed model establishes a theoretical connection between lexical choice, connotative and evaluative meaning, semantic framing, cognitive and affective processing, and audience interpretation. Rather than treating these processes as independent phenomena, the model conceptualises them as interconnected dimensions through which news language may shape audience understanding and response.

Recent studies have further examined the relationship between linguistic choices, news framing, and audience responses. Koivunen et al.[8] demonstrate how lexical and grammatical features contribute to affective meaning-making in news journalism. Tosik[9] connects cognitive-linguistic strategies and news framing with the construction of audience perceptions. Marttila and Koivula[10] highlight the mediating role of emotional responses

[2] Leech, Geoffrey N. Semantics: The Study of Meaning. 2nd ed., Penguin Books, 1981.
[3] Entman, Robert M. "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm." Journal of Communication, vol. 43, no. 4, 1993.
[4] Ibid.
[5] van Dijk, Teun A. "Discourse Semantics and Ideology." Discourse & Society, vol. 6, no. 2, 1995.
[6] Hall, Stuart. "Encoding/Decoding." Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–79, edited by Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis, Hutchinson, 1980, pp. 128–138.
[7] Nabi, Robin L. "Exploring the Framing Effects of Emotion: Do Discrete Emotions Differentially Influence Information Accessibility, Information Seeking, and Policy Preference?" Communication Research, vol. 30, no. 2, 2003, pp. 224–247.
[8] Koivunen, Anu, et al. "Emotive, Evaluative, Epistemic: A Linguistic Analysis of Affectivity in News Journalism." Journalism, vol. 22, no. 5, 2021,
[9] Tosik, Monika. "On Infosuasion, News Framing and Proximization: Integrating a Cognitive Perspective and Corpus Analysis." Beyond Philology, no. 21.1, 2024
[10] Marttila, Eetu, and Aki Koivula. "Framing, Emotions, and Morality: Understanding Media Influence on Moral Attitudes towards the Unvaccinated during COVID-19." The Social Science Journal, vol. 62, no. 2, 2025,

in the relationship between news framing and moral attitudes. Similarly, Tohidi, Haider, and Watts[11] demonstrate how selective presentation and variations in news tone can influence policy views and emotional responses. However, Berka[12] cautions that framing effects do not necessarily translate into measurable changes in public attitudes across complex media environments. Collectively, these studies reinforce the significance of linguistic, cognitive, and affective dimensions in understanding news framing. Building on these contributions, the present study integrates these dimensions into a unified conceptual model connecting lexical choice, semantic framing, cognitive and affective processing, and audience interpretation.

1. Cognitive Dimensions of Audience Interpretation

The cognitive dimension of audience response concerns the ways in which linguistic choices in news discourse contribute to categorizing events and actors, organizing information, and understanding and interpreting it. News does not present reality in a wholly unselective form. Rather, it foregrounds certain aspects of an event and offers recipients interpretive cues that help them understand the participants, causes, consequences, and significance of that event. This accords with the concept of media framing, which Entman connects to the selection of certain aspects of perceived reality and their prominence within a communicative text.[13] From a semantic perspective, lexical choices constitute an important part of this process because different expressions may evoke different mental associations and conceptions, even when their referential meanings are similar.

Categorization is one of the most important cognitive mechanisms through which the effect of lexical choice on audience interpretation can be understood. Recipients rely on linguistic and conceptual categories to organize complex social information. Consequently, the label used by discourse for a particular actor may affect the category through which that actor is understood. Expressions such as “fighter,” “armed person,” “rebel,” and “terrorist” are not merely descriptive alternatives; each may evoke a different conceptual frame associated with legitimacy, violence, intention, and threat. Lexical choice can therefore provide recipients with a cognitive shortcut for interpreting complex or unfamiliar events. This intersects with van Dijk’s cognitive perspective, which links discourse comprehension to the mental models people construct to represent events and experiences. He also argues that ideological representations may be reflected in discourse at several levels, including vocabulary and meaning.[14]

A related issue is the attribution of responsibility and causality. News language may foreground some participants as agents while reducing the prominence of others or obscuring their roles. For example, the sentences “The police killed three protesters” and “Three protesters were killed during the clashes” provide different cognitive cues to the recipient, although they refer to a similar event. In the first sentence, the police are explicitly identified as the direct agent; the second focuses on the deaths occurring during the clashes without foregrounding the agent in the same way. Linguistic choices, including lexical and syntactic choices, can therefore affect the construction of causal relationships and the attribution of responsibility in the recipient’s mind. This matters for framing because representing an event in a particular way may make one causal explanation more salient than alternative explanations.

Semantic framing is also connected to the construction and denial of legitimacy. Describing someone as a “freedom fighter” or “resistance fighter” differs semantically and evaluatively from describing that person as a “terrorist.” The former expressions may evoke ideas of resistance, struggle, and political legitimacy, whereas the term “terrorist” foregrounds violence, threat, and illegitimacy. Lexical choice thus affects not only how an actor is identified, but also how their actions are understood and whether those actions are viewed as legitimate or illegitimate. This is related to van Dijk’s analysis of ideological discourse, particularly the idea that discourse constructs positive representations of the in-group and negative representations of the out-group.[15]

[11] Tohidi, Amir, Samar Haider, and Duncan J. Watts. “Rethinking News Framing with Large Language Models.” Scientific Reports, vol. 15, 2025, article 45592
[12] Berka, Nicolai. “The Impact of Media Framing in Complex Information Environments.” Political Communication, vol. 42, no. 5, 2025,
[13] Entman, Robert M. “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm.” Journal of Communication, vol. 43, no. 4, 1993.
[14] van Dijk, Teun A. “Discourse Semantics and Ideology.” Discourse & Society, vol. 6, no. 2, 1995.
[15] van Dijk, Teun A. Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach. SAGE Publications, 1998.

Another cognitive outcome is threat perception. Certain lexical choices may evoke mental associations with danger and insecurity. This idea receives clear empirical support from the study by Nosek, Moore, and Dunn, which showed that subtle linguistic differences in news coverage can affect whether audiences interpret violent acts as terrorism or patriotism.[5] The study found that particular patterns of word use contributed to cognitive schemas that subsequently affected participants' attitudes and memories of violent events. This is especially important for semantic framing because it suggests that differences in linguistic representation may extend beyond the immediate interpretation of a news item and influence later cognitive processes.[16]

2. Affective Dimensions of Audience Response

Whereas the cognitive dimension concerns how audiences understand a news item, categorize its elements, and interpret the relationships among its participants, the affective dimension concerns the feelings and emotional attitudes that discourse evokes toward the people, events, and issues it presents. This is especially important in semantic framing because words do not carry descriptive meaning alone; they may also contain evaluative and affective associations that help shape the recipient's emotional stance. This function is evident in words that go beyond reference to express an attitude or evaluation. Choosing words such as "victim," "innocent," "heroic," "brutal," and "terrorist" does more than identify a person or event: it adds an evaluative charge that may evoke sympathy, fear, anger, admiration, or rejection. Lexical choice in news discourse can therefore perform an affective function alongside its descriptive function.

This relationship becomes clearer when expressions with similar referential meanings but different evaluative and affective associations are compared, such as "fighter," "resistance fighter," "armed person," and "terrorist." In some contexts, "resistance fighter" may be associated with struggle and legitimacy, while "terrorist" evokes violence, threat, and illegitimacy. Lexical choice can thus help determine not only how an actor is categorized but also the emotional stance adopted toward that actor. The affective dimension is also related to evaluative meaning, since some expressions contain an implicit or explicit judgment about an event or actor. For example, "the killing of civilians" differs from "the killing of innocent civilians," because the addition of "innocent" provides a moral evaluation of the victims and may intensify sympathy for them. Similarly, describing an event as an "attack" differs from describing it as a "brutal attack": the adjective adds an evaluative judgment that may intensify a negative response toward the actor.

Nabi argues that emotions play a framing role in public issues by making certain information more accessible and thereby influencing subsequent decision-making. The findings of the study indicate that fear and anger can have different effects on the accessibility of information, the search for desired information, and policy preferences, although these effects may depend on the formation of cognitive schemas.[17]

3. Differences among Audiences in Interpreting Semantic Frames

When studying the relationship between semantic framing and audience response, it is important to avoid treating the relationship between a word and a response as mechanical—for example, assuming that "a particular word inevitably produces a particular response." Recipients do not receive news discourse independently of their existing knowledge, experiences, and attitudes. Rather, they interpret it through different cognitive, cultural, and ideological frames. The same lexical choice may therefore lead to different interpretations or emotional responses among different recipients. This accords with Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, which does not assume that the meaning produced by the communicator will be identical to the meaning constructed by the audience. Instead, it allows for dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings.[18]

[16] Dunn, Elizabeth W., Moriah Moore, and Brian A. Nosek. "The War of the Words: How Linguistic Differences in Reporting Shape Perceptions of Terrorism." Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy, vol. 5, no. 1, 2005.

[17] • Nabi, Robin L. "Exploring the Framing Effects of Emotion: Do Discrete Emotions Differentially Influence Information Accessibility, Information Seeking, and Policy Preference?" Communication Research, vol. 30, no. 2, 2003, pp. 224–247.

[18] Hall, Stuart. "Encoding/Decoding." Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–79, edited by Stuart Hall et al., Hutchinson, 1980, pp. 128–138.

3.1. Prior Knowledge and Familiarity with the Event

Prior knowledge is one of the principal factors in interpreting news messages. When recipients have substantial knowledge of a particular event or issue, they compare the linguistic choices in a news item with their existing information and mental representations. A reader who knows the history of a particular political conflict may recognize that describing a group as "freedom fighters" rather than "terrorists" is not simply a linguistic difference, but may convey a particular position toward that group. Familiarity with an event also plays an important role: repeated exposure to an issue may lead audiences to develop a stable cognitive frame, so that new lexical choices are not understood independently of that frame. Framing studies have indicated that the effects of media frames may vary according to individual values, political awareness, and knowledge of the subject.[19]

3.2. Cultural Background

Cultural background also affects the associations that a word evokes in a recipient. Connotative and affective meanings do not arise from the lexical structure alone; they are also shaped by the social, cultural, and historical uses of words. The same word may therefore carry different meanings for different cultural groups. This factor is particularly important in news concerning religion, migration, political and national conflicts, and social identity, since some words are connected to long histories of ideas and attitudes within communities.

3.3. Political and Ideological Orientation

Political and ideological orientation is among the factors that most strongly influence the interpretation of media frames, particularly in controversial issues. A recipient may accept the description of a group as a "resistance movement" if they regard it as struggling for a legitimate cause, whereas another recipient may view the same expression as an attempt to justify violence and prefer the labels "armed group" or "terrorist organization." Hall's model is relevant here: audiences may recognize the preferred meaning offered by discourse, yet negotiate with or reject it on the basis of their social and ideological positions. Framing studies also suggest that individual values and political awareness can moderate the effects of media frames on audiences.[20]

3.4. Personal Experience

Personal experience may influence both cognitive interpretation and emotional response. People who have had direct experiences of war, displacement, political violence, or migration may associate certain words with memories and personal experiences that are not shared by recipients who have not undergone those experiences. For example, the word "refugee" may be merely a demographic category for one reader, while for someone who has experienced displacement it may evoke memories and feelings associated with loss, fear, and insecurity. The meaning constructed by a recipient therefore cannot be separated from their social and personal experience.

3.5. Media Literacy

Media literacy affects audiences' ability to recognize how news messages are constructed. A recipient with a high level of media literacy may be more likely to notice that lexical choices are not always neutral, and that using "the regime" instead of "the government," or "terrorist" instead of "armed person," may carry evaluative or ideological implications.

3.6. Trust in the News Source

Trust in a news source is another factor that may affect audience acceptance of semantic framing. A recipient may be more willing to accept a particular description when it comes from a news organization they trust, whereas they may interpret the same language as political or ideological bias when they do not trust the source. The identity and credibility of the source thus become part of the process through which a media frame is

[19] Aarøe, Lene. "Investigating Frame Strength: The Case of Episodic and Thematic Frames." Political Communication, vol. 28, no. 2, 2011, pp. 207–226.
[20] Ibid.

received. The same word may not perform the same persuasive or interpretive function when used by different sources or when audiences differ in the level of trust they place in those sources.

CONCLUSION

The preceding discussion demonstrates that news language does not merely transmit information; it also contributes to constructing meaning and guiding the interpretation of events and actors. Lexical choice is a key entry point into semantic framing because words carry connotative, evaluative, and affective meanings that can influence how audiences process information. On this basis, the study proposes the Semantic Framing–Audience Response Model, which links lexical choice, semantic framing, cognitive and affective processing, and the audience's interpretation and evaluation of an event.

The model does not assume a uniform or deterministic response. Interpretation is influenced by prior knowledge, cultural background, ideological orientations, personal experience, media literacy, and trust in the source. The model therefore views semantic framing as guiding the possibilities for interpretation and response, rather than imposing a single meaning on audiences. In this way, it seeks to provide an integrated account of the relationship between semantics, media framing, cognitive and affective processing, and the construction of meaning by audiences.

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