Role of Language in Emotions and Bias: A Cognitive Linguistic Perspective of Affective Political Media in the US

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Abstract: In today's digital era, where emotions are central to journalism and information disseminates rapidly, the role of language in transmitting emotions, stereotypes, and biases has become a subject of debate and study. The use of language in news media can be argued, as it may prioritize sensationalism over accuracy to tap into people's feelings under new business models and the attention economy. While journalism ethics aim to minimize bias, journalism consistently incorporates emotions to captivate the audience and create an "experience of involvement". This is significant because language, consumed from diverse media news channels, is integral to cognition. Research in cognitive linguistics demonstrates that human beings view the world in metaphoric terms, and language defines and constrains communication, thinking, and sense-making. This article explores linguistic mechanisms such as metaphors of "flood" and "aliens", agenda setting, selectivity, framing, and expectancy bias, through which emotions, perspectives, and affectivity are sustained and propagated in political news reporting. It considers the impact of stereotypes and biases, particularly in the media portrayal of undocumented immigrants and different framings in the description of the War in Gaza. The article highlights that language is seldom neutral and is intertwined with motives, emphasizing the importance of understanding the persuasive power of words. In conclusion, this paper reveals the role of language in shaping perceptions of message receivers and contributes to enhancing linguistic justice, informing more ethical approaches to journalism and media production. It emphasizes the need for an editorially conscious and intelligent use of language to create engaging, empathetic content.

Keywords: Affective Political Journalism, Language Bias, Stereotypes, Cognitive Linguistics, Emotions

1. Introduction

In the era of digitalization and the evolution of a more rapid, networked media landscape, emotions and affectivity are central to the future of journalism. Nevertheless, its role becomes arguable as it may present itself as the drive for sensationalism and bias, using exciting framing and language at the expense of accuracy, in order to tap into people's feelings. This is especially salient to new business models like subscriptions and memberships and under proliferation of news media in diversified channels with increased ease of creating and sharing media [1]. The speed at which information travels in today's media ecosystem is unprecedented, enabling instant sharing and dissemination of

information flow. Such a fast-paced environment both has positive and negative implications, as it also entails the risk of misinformation and the challenge of verifying fake and biased news [1].

Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira introduced the concept of "affective news" to illustrate how news, opinions, and emotions become inseparable in the context of a political crisis, while studying the extraordinary news atmosphere during the Egyptian uprising in 2011, and as Charlie Beckett describes leveraging emotional resonance in news media, it is "a method for injecting some warm blood into the lifeless body of 'rational' factual reporting" [1, 2]. While journalism ethics have tended to stay subjective and involve as less as bias as possible, Peters emphasized that journalism has consistently incorporated emotions by aiming to captivate the audience through the creation of an "experience of involvement". This is achieved by employing familiar storytelling techniques that revolve around the portrayal of protagonists and antagonists [3].

When professionals aim to make impartial claims about "truth" in their reporting, the language used would certainly reflect the emotions and intentions of the journalist, transmitting certain emotions, perspectives, and biases to the reader. This is shown in Karin Wahl-Jorgensen's book, where she states that emotions are inherently relational, arising from people's relationships with society and the underlying institutions that support it [4]. This means authors would expect certain emotions from the readers, and readers would be capable of parsing socially indexed cues in language while they interact with texts.

The foundation behind the transmission of emotions generated with simple texts is that language acts as an instrument for social influence, shaping social realities, identities, stereotypes, and biases. It is inherently persuasive, selecting and abstracting information, as Jacobs and Burke showed, and is predictive in nature, sermonizing about reality through its structure of connecting action (verb) to an object, as Weaver indicated [5, 6]. People adeptly produce and interpret socially indexed cues in language, and how people speak and perceive impacts our thinking and cognition [7].

The representation of any subject through language not only frames but also changes comprehension. It could be trivializing, criminalizing, or generating empathy, guided by semantics and linguistic mechanisms like agenda-setting, selective information, metaphors, and framing. A particular representation through language also encourages specific responses because language is integral to cognition, influencing thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors, and ultimately consolidating into social norms and culture. This concept can be traced back to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which posits that language provides the lens through which we interpret the world. Persistent language use by one group to characterize another can lead to misconceptions and perpetuate prejudice if the voice of the other group is suppressed or denied, solidifying into stigma, particularly for minorities such as immigrants, races, and genders [7].

Previous research has addressed the historical context of stereotypes or anti-sentiments against certain groups, focusing particularly on the adverse effects of discriminatory language at the group level. Yet, a crucial gap persists in people's understanding: the underlying sociolinguistic and cognitive linguistic mechanisms of language that facilitate, sustain and propagate these stigmas and biases have not been thoroughly investigated.

This gap in the literature overlooks the potential of foundational linguistic insights to enhance the understanding of good or bad emotions and sentiments of the masses against a particular group provoked by news media, as they are becoming increasingly significant in people's daily lives and information digestion. Another aim is to better assist linguistic justice. This paper discusses the mechanisms and effect of language as a maintainer of prejudicial norms; it wishes to offer a more robust framework for understanding language's role in such transmission of emotions, affectivity, perspective, bias, and discriminations in news media with the literature review, with two case studies analyzed.

2.   Literature Review

2.1.   Cognitive Bias: Framing Effect and Selectivity

When mainstream journalism aims to report facts, decisions regarding the selection of events are made while attempting to conform to collective professional codes. However, these selections are to a great extent subjective because, once again, journalism is "made by people for the people" and influenced by identity, culture, and personal values [1].

A framing effect in psychology refers to the phenomenon where people's responses to a decision are influenced by how it is presented or "framed". Frames work by selecting a certain group of information for a single event since there are so many facets of an event that cannot be incorporated into a single expression. Frames achieve their effects by emphasizing either the positive (gain) or negative (loss) aspects. This bias shows that the same information, when framed differently, can alter people's reactions. The way information is worded has a greater impact on an individual's choice than the content itself, demonstrating the cognitive bias of the framing effect. The framing of an issue, whether it emphasizes gains or losses, significantly influences decision-making. The analysis of such framing effects is an empirical area of study that tries to understand the link between language use (how it is framed) and how it influences our thoughts, including attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors [8].

Barsalou posited that frames serve as the fundamental format for concepts in cognitive processes, a proposition that became known as the Frame Hypothesis that within human cognition, frames offer the basic means of representing information [8]. He substantiated this assertion with empirical evidence and incorporated it into a comprehensive theory of cognition. The frame-based approach subsequently evolved into his theories of perceptual symbol systems and situated simulation, which explain how conceptual representations are firmly grounded in perception and experiential factors [3, 8].

2.2.   No Neutral Language: Language as Sermonic and with Motives

Language is inherently intertwined with motives and is seldom neutral. This is evident in Kenneth Burke's work as he went beyond the mechanics of persuasion to explore the underlying motivations that drive us in persuasive discourse [5]. Burke and Jacobs recognized that different motives have the power to shape rhetorical appeals, leading them to redefine persuasion as a process of identification or "consubstantiation." To effectively persuade others, one must carefully select the appropriate appeal and establish a sense of identification with the audience [5]. This concept of identification, similar to Aristotle's notion of seeking the means of persuasion, emphasizes the importance of understanding and connecting with the motives of the audience. Language usage is not simply a means of conveying information but involves transformative or substitutional moves, even in less overt situations. By comprehending the motives behind language, one can better navigate the persuasive power of words [5].

2.3.   Metaphors

A great starting point to understanding how language conceptualizes the mass's cognition is to comprehend the metaphors employed in languages. Metaphor is a poetically or rhetorically ambitious use of words, a figurative as opposed to literal use. Considering it as a single figure of speech is not sufficient, as it has provoked much more philosophical discussions than mere rhetoric. This involves a comparison of one thing to another, often unrelated. The primary subject can be enriched by newly introducing a second subject or vehicle. For example, portraying immigrants as "water" or a "flood" is an example of its application to political discourse. This helps map a complex idea of immigration to more concrete domains [9].

3. Case Studies

3.1. Story of Mexican Immigrant

The first surge of Mexican immigration to the US occurred in the early 20th century, between 1910 and 1930, due to the Mexican Revolution and a strong US economy. They make up the largest share of the undocumented immigrant population in the US. Different media framed Mexican illegal immigrants differently. For example, in a case study, Parker J. did on how Fox News framed an identical story differently for two different audiences. Fox Latino framed their headline as "In Rare Move, University Grants $22K Scholarship to Undocumented Student," while Fox News wrote three concise and straightforward words, "Money for Illegal." [10]. As shown before, different framings encourage different responses and emotions for people who consume them. De Vreese conducted a study on the influence of news frames on public opinion and found that they have a significant impact [11]. The study revealed that participants were only able to alter the effects of framing when they were conscious of its presence. De Vreese concluded that the media possess the power to shape public opinion by employing frames that highlight specific facts or values within a story [11].

In another survey, Domke, McCoy, and Torres found that news stories framed with "material values" (economics and tangible resources) prompted participants to heavily consider racial and ethnic issues, while stories framed with "ethical values" (human rights and personal responsibility) did not [12]. For example, when participants read a "material" story about Hispanics, immigration issues were taken into account. The authors concluded that media framing significantly influences the application of racial prejudices and stereotypes by consumers.

In addition, a study by Aday distinguished between advocacy frames, which are one-sided and solution-oriented, and objectivist frames, which present a balanced approach [13]. The findings demonstrated that advocacy frames not only favor the addressed issue but also effectively influence media consumers to align their judgments with the opinions embedded in the stories. In contrast, objectivist frames did not produce this effect [13, 14]. Hence, it is arguable that public opinion is very susceptible to news framing, bringing complicated racial implications for Mexican immigrants. This then implies stigmatization and marginalization of certain groups. In addition, such sensational descriptions aimed to provoke different responses from people escalate political polarization between the Republicans and Democrats as people tend to digest information that reconfirms their existing views [15]. This also gives rise to a self-fulfilling cycle of anti-immigrant sentiment, as Linguistic Expectancy Bias has shown. This bias refers to the tendency to interpret ambiguous information in a way that aligns with one's existing stereotypes and expectations, and such stereotypes or sentiments are often maintained and perpetuated in daily conversations.

Besides framing, metaphoric language is also pervasive in such political discourse to shape the story of immigration. A growing body of research in cognitive linguistics demonstrates that human beings view the world in metaphoric terms. That is, in attempts to understand new concepts, people borrow from existing ideas. Today's immigration metaphors often signify a loss of security and cultural hegemony, while not often emphasizing economic contributions and social belonging. Salient exemplar metaphors refer to immigration as water, aliens, or floods [9]. This critically constructs the stories and laws about immigrants. In such a metaphoric war, Supreme Court Justices become soldiers who must protect citizens against the impending alien offensive. They themselves employ many metaphoric terms to illustrate a nation at risk. They describe the law as needing to "combat" (a metaphor) the employment of illegal "aliens." Keith Cunningham argued that the larger cognitive frame structuring these might be portrayed as "immigration is a losing battle" and "illegal aliens are entering the country like an avalanche." How these important figures are thinking metaphorically not only changes their perceptions but also affects how information is disseminated to the public [9]. How people think metaphorically affects how people talk about problems and solutions, and Keith

Cunningham argued that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy that our conceptual domains get more and more associated with a small number of connections the more people use, disseminate, and repackage certain metaphors [9]. Each conceptual frame employed, like wetbacks, and aliens, then creates a version of reality that emphasizes a particular side of immigrants, such as invasion, and illegality, and conceals others such as belonging, diversity, and personhood.

3.2. Depiction of War in Gaza

The manifestation of nuanced language in war discourse is of great importance. In the pre-digital era, traditional mass media (radio, television, and newspapers) were utilized as tools of propaganda during times of war. The involvement of these media outlets in the First and Second World Wars demonstrates their role in shaping narratives. Even in the Second Gulf War, CNN's live coverage earned it the moniker "Air war" as it directly broadcasted the war events to viewers' homes. Functioning as weapons in warfare, mass media framed information to rally support and generate sympathy for the forces, ideologies, or parties they endorsed. In international conflicts, mass media often claim impartiality while maintaining an underlying ideological stance [16].

Here, this paper will study two frames employed by two polarized news sources on a recent identical event—the end of the truce in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on Dec. 1, 2023. Palestinian Chronicle, a pro-Palestine news site, described "Dozens Killed, Injured in Israeli Raids after Truce Expires", while The Times of Israel wrote "Truce fell apart after Hamas refused to release more female Israeli hostages" in their headlines [17, 18]. The phrase in Palestine Chronicle, "fell apart," creates contrast with the neutral word "expires" in the Time of Israel. The first implies a sudden and disorderly breakdown, suggesting a lack of control or predictability in the truce ending, conveying a sense of chaos. Later it wrote Hamas refused to release suggesting the intentional decision by Hamas to withhold release, framing them as the active party in the truce breakdown with the agency and placing responsibility on Palestine. Conversely, "expires" implies inevitability and a natural culmination of the truce. This framing then suggests a more passive and perhaps expected progression. Palestine Chronicle also selects to focus on the severity of human lives impacted by highlighting "killed, injured" people, under "Israeli raids". On the other hand, the incorporation of "female Israeli hostages" in the Times of Israel adds an emotional element that provokes empathy as well. Inside the pro-Israeli article, it writes "Israel would agree to a pause". The choice of the word "pause" tends to convey a sense of reasonability, rationality, and a controlled approach on Israel's part. It downplays the severity of the military actions.

4.   Conclusion and Implication: Role of Language in Emotions, Biases, and Cognition

Based on the discussion of the previous two case studies and the literature review, one can conclude that language serves as a social cue that embodies an individual's perceptions of reality. Message receivers promptly identify the social cues embedded in the language and adopt a similar frame and perspective in understanding the situation. In the two case studies, each agent revealed a particular perspective on immigration and the Gaza War through their metaphoric framing. While they may consider the language they use as culturally and linguistically appropriate and neutral, their conceptual frames created a version of reality that highlighted certain features of immigration or the Gaza War while omitting others. If employed regularly, such inferences perpetuate a certain perspective or bias against a particular group or event, implying the potential for restricting linguistic justice, fair outcomes, and stigmatization of certain groups.

The implication of such mechanisms of bias, stereotypes, or particular perspective transmission in media in the current digital age can be pivotal in warning people about their daily consumption of news media. People realize that language and cognition are intimately related, and language defines

what one thinks, communicates, and how one interprets communication in affective news if media aims to provoke certain affectivity or emotions from the readers. This implies the need for people to have a balanced digest of opinions, meaning becoming high information seekers and considering multiple perspectives and sources before forming conclusions.

The current era of digitalization actually equips people with greater power to do so, as the channels, forms, and contents of information transmission greatly diversify, and the manageability of one issuing news becomes easier. It is harder for one source to designate priorities and set agendas.

Emotions are central to the future of journalism and mass media. Emotions provoked through language serve multiple purposes, such as inspiration, creation, style, appeal, and resonance or impact. It is not simply an add-on marketing tool or a superficial way to gain attention. However, opportunities for more efficient, interesting, and pertinent journalism are created when one uses language to use emotions as a crucial component in the production and consumption of news in a morally, politically, and editorially aware and intelligent manner. After understanding the relationship between language used and emotions and bias, more ethical codes for creating news journalism would need to be updated and revised in future years, as the current age of digitalization becomes more dynamic, shaping or redefining the classic idea of journalistic objectivity to avoid sensationalism and create a more engaging and empathetic context.

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