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Evaluative Representations of the 2025 Global Sumud Flotilla in British Newspaper Editorials: A Critical Discourse Analysis Using Appraisal Theory

Dr. Sadia Siddiq^a, Huma Maheen^b, Afaq Zulfiqar^c

- a. Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities, COMSATS University Islamabad, Pakistan
- b. Research Scholar, Department of Humanities, COMSATS University Islamabad, Pakistan
- c. Research Scholar, Department of English, NUML University Islamabad, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The Global Sumud Flotilla interception raised a lot of editorial comment in the British media on the issue of access to humanitarian aid, international law, and state security in 2025. The aim of this study is to explore the ways in which two ideologically divergent British newspapers (The Guardian and The Daily Telegraph) created opposing representations of the interception using evaluative language. Martin and White (2005) proposed Appraisal Framework in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) interpretive framework was applied to analyse thirteen editorials from June to October 2025 under three Appraisal subsystems namely Attitude, Engagement and Graduation. The results show that The Guardian builds a humanitarian-solidarity discourse by using positive Judgement of activists, and foregrounding Affect related to Palestinian suffering, while giving Contractive heteroglossic attribution to institutional sources. The elements that construct a hegemonic-securitisation discourse are the Daily Telegraph's activists' negative Judgement and the monoglossic normalisation of Israeli security narratives and the upscaled criticism of the flotilla and downscaled humanitarian urgency. The study demonstrates that the three elements of Attitude, Engagement and Graduation are not acting in isolation, but as some sort of interlocking evaluative system, that produces mutually reinforcing ideological representations of the same political phenomenon.

1. Introduction

Media is an important factor in influencing public opinion in political conflicts, humanitarian crisis and international relations. It is not only that newspapers reflect events; they shape, select and interpret them, using language that emphasizes some actors, views and values and de-emphasizes others (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 1998). The editorial discourse is a particularly interesting area in which to look because editorials explicitly state institutional positions and attempt to influence readers' reading of the political events which are at stake (Richardson, 2007). The analysis of editorial discourse then provides a direct view of the connection between language, ideology and power in the current media of journalism. The Freedom Flotilla Coalition, a civilian maritime mission to bring humanitarian aid to Gaza and protest against restrictions on access, was intercepted by the Israeli navy in international waters in the 2025 Global Sumud Flotilla. The interception sparked a wide-ranging discussion in the UK media about the nature of humanitarian law, the state's sovereignty and the legitimacy of

* Correspondence to: Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities, COMSATS University, Islamabad, Pakistan
E-mail address: sadia_siddiq@comsats.edu.pk (S. Siddiq)



transnational solidarity activism. The Guardian and The Daily Telegraph have clearly different ideological stances in the British media a liberal, humanitarian and progressive stance on one hand, and a conservative, state-security and right-leaning stance on the other. Such conflicting positions offer a fruitful context for analyzing the linguistic reconstruction of the same documented event in terms of conflicting political realities, in the context of evaluative language. Previous research on the British and Western media's coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has examined the idea of 'framing' (Philo & Berry, 2004, 2011) and CDA (Said, 1997; Barkho, 2007) and found that the coverage is shaped by the institutional ideology and results in conflicting narratives about violence, victimhood, blame and political legitimacy. In recent years evaluative language has become one of the significant features that construct the ideology in the media texts (Martin, 2025; Sarwar & Qasim, 2025; Liu, 2024). However, no previous study has considered the three Appraisal subsystems (Attitude, Engagement and Graduation) as an interlocking system in the construction of competing ideological representations of the Sumud Flotilla interception in British editorial discourse. This study is filling this gap.

1.1. Problem Statement

Although there is a vast amount of CDA work addressing the British media's depiction of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there is still a gap between the use of appraisal-based discourse analysis and the analysis of editorial content of humanitarian flotilla missions. Previous studies have focused on news reporting and/or overall framing, with only a few focusing on the linguistic resources mobilized to generate evaluative meanings in editorial writing. Furthermore, past studies based on the appraisal approach have generally concentrated on the three dimensions (Attitude, Engagement, Graduation) as analytical categories instead of as a connected evaluation system that would offer more analytical power to the framework. As of yet, the Sumud Flotilla interception in 2025 has not been discussed in any systematic manner in the British editorial sphere. The only previous study of the media coverage of Sumud Flotilla is one by Arafat (2025) on Al Jazeera and The New York Times, which does not include coverage from British newspapers. This gap makes it difficult to examine the media's role in the production of humanitarian activism and state security in contemporary conflict reporting and to examine the ideological role of evaluative language in editorial discourse by media literacy teachers, journalists and critical readers.

1.2. Aim

This research is designed to closely analyse the use of evaluative language in the editorial discourse of The Guardian and The Daily Telegraph to create competing ideologies of the interception of the Global Sumud Flotilla in 2025 in terms of Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal Framework, with a particular focus on how the three Appraisal subsystems work together as an interlocking evaluative system.

1.3. Research Objectives

- To explore how Attitude resources (Affect, Judgement and Appreciation) are deployed in The Guardian and The Daily Telegraph to make evaluations of the flotilla interception.
- To analyse the role of Engagement resources in representing each newspaper in relation to other voices and perspectives on the event.
- Assessing the amount of evaluative meanings in the newspapers' editorial coverage by applying the Graduation resources.
- To determine the ideological representations that can be detected in the multi-layered and interwoven usage of Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation in the two newspapers.

1.4. Research Questions

- **RQ1.** How do Attitude's resources work in The Guardian and The Daily Telegraph to create contrasting assessments of the interception of the Sumud Flotilla in 2025?
- **RQ2.** What are the differing viewpoints and voices in the newspapers that are representing in the engagement?
- **RQ3.** How do the resources of Graduation help or hinder the evaluative meanings that are developed in the editorial coverage of each newspaper?
- **RQ4.** In the three combined (Attitude, Engagement and Graduation) are there any ideological representations in the two newspapers?

2. Methodology

The research design employed in this study is Qualitative Interpretative research design which is suitable for the purpose of Critical Discourse Analysis and Appraisal Framework. The qualitative approach is suitable since the aim of the research is not to statistically determine the linguistic features of the interception of the flotilla, but to interpret the evaluative patterns and their ideological functions in the socio-political context of the flotilla interception. The study is based on an interpretivist

paradigm which assumes that meanings are socially constructed and that discourse is an important part of the production of social and political realities. The corpus comprises thirteen editorials from The Guardian (8) and The Daily Telegraph (5) from June to October 2025. These two newspapers were deliberately chosen as they have opposite ideologies in the quality press in Britain. Editorials were considered if they dealt with the Sumud Flotilla interception as the main topic of the article and were published in the editorial section of the newspaper. The details of the corpus are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Corpus composition

Newspaper	Editorial Orientation	No. of Editorials	Period Covered
The Guardian	Liberal / humanitarian / progressive	8	June–October 2025
The Daily Telegraph	Conservative / security-centred / right-leaning	5	June–October 2025
Total		13	June–October 2025

Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal Framework is the key analysis tool, which explores evaluation of people, actions and events through the subsystems of Attitude (affect, judgement, appreciation), Engagement (monoglossic assertion to heteroglossic acknowledgement) and Graduation (scaling of evaluative force through force and focus). The analytical framework is summarised in table 2.

Table 2: Analytical framework

Appraisal System	Subsystems	Analytical Focus
Attitude	Affect; Judgement (propriety, veracity, capacity, tenacity); Appreciation	Evaluation of activists, Palestinian civilians, Israeli state, and the flotilla mission
Engagement	Monoglossic; Heteroglossic (expansive / contractive); Attribution; Distancing	How competing voices are endorsed, marginalised, or positioned as authoritative
Graduation	Force (upscaling / downscaling); Focus (sharpening / softening)	How evaluative intensity is amplified or reduced to reinforce ideological positions

The analytical process was divided into four stages: (1) multiple close readings of all the editorials to identify evaluative themes that are repeated in newspapers; (2) identification and coding of instances of Attitude, Engagement and Graduation; (3) examination of the evaluative patterns in the newspapers; and (4) interpretation of the interaction among the three Appraisal systems in producing the ideological representation in the newspapers. The analysis focuses on recurring patterns and not on one-off occurrences, with results not being statistically generalisable beyond the thirteen-editorial corpus.

3. Analysis

3.1. Attitude Resources: Constructing Moral Legitimacy and Responsibility

The two newspapers have the biggest differences in ideology on the Attitude system. In each of the three areas (Affect, Judgement, Appreciation), the newspapers have conflicting moral frameworks to evaluate the same actors and events. Activists are always seen as morally legitimate humanitarians, and associated with ideas of solidarity, responsibility and principled action, within the Judgement of propriety framework. Governments that are seen as not meeting the needs of civilians are judged negatively on Judgement of capacity and propriety one editorial called the Government's "passive uselessness" to be "the active complicity of the perpetrators," which equates inaction with complicity, and validates humanitarian action as a proper response. Palestinian civilian suffering is foregrounded through Affect: civilian deaths, hunger and displacement are repeatedly referred to, creating an emotional immediacy of the situation, and making the flotilla appear as a proportionate moral response. The flotilla mission is viewed as positive at the level of Appreciation and is deemed to be purposeful, essential and of international significance. The other moral edifice is constructed by the Daily Telegraph. Activists are evaluated by negative Judgement of propriety and do not appear to be humanitarian actors but rather politically-motivated actors. The episode of the flotilla as a ship of fools is inscribed with negative Judgement of veracity, which questions the participants' judgement and the veracity of the mission. Activists are further defined as having "narcissism" and "pathological self-regard" unwarranted Judgement of propriety, which de-legitimises motivation without taking into account documented actions. The use of the word affect is quite weak; civilian suffering (when mentioned at all) is considered in the political-security prism, not in the human rights one. In the eyes of the flotilla, the act of the flotilla at the level of Appreciation is perceived as symbolic, performative and a theatrical act, but not a real humanitarian act.

3.2. Engagement Resources: Positioning Competing Voices and Perspectives

The second ideological difference is in the way the two newspapers assert the authority and credibility of the voices they quote in opposing ways, as in the case of the Engagement system. The most prevalent type of contractive heteroglossic attribution is the Guardian's Engagement strategy. The evaluative statements it makes are based on the written statements of international legal bodies, UN officials, humanitarian bodies and even Israeli government officials. They are not separated from the text and they give an epistemic authority in the evaluative frame of the newspaper. In the case of the UN commission's report on genocide, or Finance Minister Smotrich himself reporting that aid was minimal because he did not want to risk himself to international law, there is no need for The Guardian to make the statement editorially; it's made as a given, as a finding of authority. Israeli government claims, however, are framed in critical attribution frames and/or in the context of contradictory evidence, and are therefore contested. The Daily Telegraph says it the other way round! The Israeli security and governmental narratives are presented monoglossically that is, without any questioning, without any qualification of the facts. The newspaper didn't use quotation marks or distancing to refer to the Israeli government's terms: it didn't use "selfie yacht" or "celebrities" but only "yacht" or "celebrities". Humanitarian claims and international legal evaluations are framed in a sceptical framing, ironic register or dismissive attribution, making them appear as untrustworthy or biased. The two newspapers have editorially conflicting uses of the same lexical items: The Guardian uses scare quotes to signal rejection; The Daily Telegraph doesn't, and signals endorsement. What the Engagement effect is, is that the sum of the newspapers is a complete map of who's who and what's what, which is unique for each newspaper. To reinforce and diminish the evaluative power. The Graduation system is used to elucidate the newspapers' selected evaluative realities and how other realities are being muted. The Guardian's most prominent application of Graduation through Force is in the area of humanitarian crisis indicators: casualty figures, HNAs, and reports of civilian suffering are scaled up, repeated, and intensified; and humanitarian claims are made measurable, documented, and moral realities. The international involvement in the flotilla is also heightened, further enhancing its credibility as an international response. The adjectives used in Focus attenuation are a down-scaling of governmental inaction, and the others (tepid, lethargic) have an attenuating effect on the perceived strength of the governmental responses, reinforcing the negative judgement of capacity set up in the Attitude analysis. Other areas are highlighted in The Daily Telegraph's Graduation. Emphatic and satirical register and hyperbole are used to increase the negative evaluation of the activists, e.g., in Force's Narcissus knows no bounds, hyperbole is used to exaggerate the negative evaluation in comparison to simple evaluation. The exact numerical quantification of the Israeli humanitarian effort, coupled with the use of intensifying adjectives, makes Israel's human effort look greater than it really is: an astonishing 2,170,822 meals delivered, and the UN's criticism of the same foundation and Smotrich's admission of the intentional limitation of aid, both reported in the same reporting period, are omitted. In a security context, Palestinian need is also diminished in terms of language that is hedged, weakened and demoralizing. How Attitude, Engagement and Graduation Co-Produce Ideological Discourse: The Interlocking System. The most important analytical result is that Attitude, Engagement and Graduation are not independent, but dependent subsystems, that build upon and reinforce one another and, thus, form a coherent and self-reinforcing ideological position. The Guardian complements the Engagement strategy with the endorse humanitarian/institutional voices without distancing and the positive Attitude towards activists by using the humanitarian crisis indicators upscaling of the Graduation strategy. The position is based on Attitude (showed in Engagement), and is important in the present (Graduation). Monoglossic Engagement in the Daily Telegraph, which confirms the Israeli security narrative as authoritative, reinforces negative evaluations of activists, while upscaling evaluations of humanitarianism, normalises Israeli security narratives. The lesson here is that the use of distancing devices in the language of the Israeli government would undermine the overall ideological position: If The Daily Telegraph started to use distancing devices for the language of the Israeli government then the coherence of its hegemonic-securitisation discourse would be lost. The interlocking is not an incidental but it constitutes.

4. Findings

Based on the analysis, four main results are obtained, each of which is related to the four research questions, as summarized below, and accompanied by tables.

4.1. Finding 1 – Attitude: Two Opposing Moral Frameworks (RQ1)

The Guardian and The Daily Telegraph have different moral systems. The Guardian and The Daily Telegraph have different moral systems programmed into them. The Guardian deems activists to be "legitimate humanitarian agents," prioritizes Palestinian suffering as a "moral emergency" and extols the flotilla as an "international response that is necessary. The Daily Telegraph validates activists without any proof in character attack, de-civilises civilian suffering and de-values the flotilla as a performative devoid of humanitarian content.

Table 3: Selected Attitude instances

Evaluative Text	Newspaper	Attitude Subtype	Ideological Function
"passively useless"; "aids and abets the perpetrators"	The Guardian	Judgement: propriety (negative, inscribed)	Frames government inaction as moral complicity; legitimises flotilla
Repeated references to civilian deaths, famine, displacement	The Guardian	Affect (foregrounded)	Constructs humanitarian crisis as immediate and morally urgent
Flotilla: "essential", "morally driven", "globally significant"	The Guardian	Appreciation (positive)	Builds flotilla legitimacy as a meaningful international response
"ship of fools"	The Daily Telegraph	Judgement: veracity (negative, inscribed)	Delegitimises participants and mission simultaneously
"narcissism"; "pathological self-regard"	The Daily Telegraph	Judgement: propriety (negative, unsubstantiated)	Attacks activists' character without engaging documented actions
"theatrical gesture"; "political performance"	The Daily Telegraph	Appreciation (negative)	Denies the mission's humanitarian substance

4.2. Finding 2: Engagement – Opposed Voice Authority Structures (RQ2)

The two newspapers create alternative power structures. The Guardian legitimises the humanitarian and institutional voices as authoritative through the contractive heteroglossic attribution, and separates itself from the claims of Israel from the government. The Daily Telegraph's monoglossic Engagement treats Israeli security narratives as fact, and casts scepticism on the humanitarian ones.

Table 4: Selected Engagement instances

Evaluative Text / Strategy	Newspaper	Engagement Type	Ideological Function
UN commission "declared" genocide; Smotrich admits limiting aid	The Guardian	Contractive heteroglossic (pronouncement via attribution)	Closes dialogic space toward critical position via institutional authority
Israeli claims in critical or juxtaposed attribution frames	The Guardian	Heteroglossic (distancing)	Positions Israeli government claims as contestable
"selfie yacht"; "celebrities" no distancing devices	The Daily Telegraph	Monoglossic (unmarked adoption of state lexis)	Presents Israeli government framing as neutral factual description
Activist claims in sceptical register or ironic framing	The Daily Telegraph	Heteroglossic (contractive dismiss)	Positions humanitarian voices as unreliable or politically motivated

The third finding of the study is that graduating is an amplification of competing realities (RQ3). There are many different versions of the truth in all newspapers and downplays the other version in Graduation. The Guardian upscales humanitarian crisis indicators, and international solidarity; The Daily Telegraph upscales negative activist evaluations, and Israeli humanitarian capacity. They both quantify, intensify and repeat; they both evaluate different aspects of the event; and so have differing impressions of what is important about the same event.

Table 5: Selected Graduation instances

Evaluative Text	Newspaper	Graduation Type	Ideological Function
Casualty figures, quantified humanitarian need, repeated civilian suffering	The Guardian	Force: upscaling	Amplifies humanitarian crisis into documented, urgent reality
"dozens of countries", "multiple vessels" participating	The Guardian	Force: upscaling	Reinforces flotilla as major international response
"tepid"; "lethargic"; "passive" (governmental responses)	The Guardian	Force: downscaling	Attenuates state responsiveness; reinforces negative capacity Judgement
"narcissism knows no bounds"	The Daily Telegraph	Force: upscaling (hyperbole + intensifier)	Amplifies negative Judgement of activists beyond simple assertion
"an astonishing 2,170,822 meals"	The Daily Telegraph	Force: upscaling (quantification + intensifier)	Amplifies Israeli humanitarian capacity; contradicting evidence omitted
Palestinian suffering in hedged, attenuated language	The Daily Telegraph	Force: downscaling	Reduces moral urgency of humanitarian need within security frame

The Interlocking System: Two Competing Ideological Discourses (RQ4) is a finding that is not yet published. The two newspapers use three different frameworks: Attitude, Engagement and Graduation, and produce two different and coherent discourses: humanitarian-solidarity discourse in *The Guardian*, and hegemonic-securitisation discourse in *The Daily Telegraph*. These are not the other newspapers' interpretation of the first, but rather other realities, which have been constructed and read by each newspaper, and in which the evaluation of the facts is not a political judgement, but rather a natural reading. A full comparison of the two is presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Comparative summary Interlocking Appraisal systems and ideological discourse types

Appraisal System	The Guardian	The Daily Telegraph
Attitude Judgement	Activists: positive (legitimate humanitarian agents). Governments: negative (morally complicit in inaction)	Activists: negative (political performers). Israeli state: implicitly legitimate security actor
Attitude Affect	Palestinian suffering: foregrounded, emotionally urgent, repeatedly quantified	Palestinian suffering: marginalised within political-security frame
Attitude Appreciation	Flotilla: positive (essential, morally necessary, globally significant)	Flotilla: negative (symbolic, theatrical, without humanitarian substance)
Engagement	Contractive heteroglossic attribution to institutional / humanitarian sources; Israeli claims critically distanced	Monoglossic normalisation of Israeli security narratives; humanitarian claims sceptically framed or dismissed
Graduation	Upscaling: humanitarian crisis, civilian suffering, international participation. Downscaling: state responsiveness	Upscaling: negative activist evaluation, Israeli humanitarian capacity. Downscaling: Palestinian need, humanitarian urgency
Ideological Discourse Produced	HUMANITARIAN-SOLIDARITY DISCOURSE	HEGEMONIC-SECURITISATION DISCOURSE

The finding is based on the research of Martin and White (2005) who demonstrated that the three Appraisal systems are co-present in editorial texts as well as mutually reinforcing, in a structured and analysable way. It also builds on the findings of the previous CDA studies on British media discourses of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Philo & Berry 2004; 2011; Barkho 2007) which showed that the differences in the positioning of ideologies identified in news discourse are also evident in editorial discourse and that these differences are linguistically reinforced through the interplay of evaluative resources.

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