

Social Actor Representations in the International Conflict Discourse between Trump and Zelensky

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how the media construct social actor representations in the international conflict discourse between US President, Donald Trump, and Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, during their tense meeting at the White House in February 2025. Employing Theo van Leeuwen's (2013) Social Actor Representation model within the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, the study examines six selected news texts from Al-Ghad and BBC News Arabic. Using a qualitative approach and interactive model analysis by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), this research identifies key strategies of inclusion and exclusion used by each media outlet to position the two political figures. The findings reveal contrasting ideological patterns: Al-Ghad activates Trump as a dominant figure while marginalizing Zelensky through passivation and negative categorization; conversely, BBC News Arabic emphasizes Zelensky's agency while softening Trump's image through passivation and nominalization. This study contributes to media discourse analysis by highlighting how ideological orientations influence the representation of global political actors and shape public perception. It also underlines the role of linguistic strategies in reproducing power relations in international conflict narratives.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, social actor representation, van Leeuwen, Zelensky-Trump

INTRODUCTION

On February 28, 2025, the international community was shocked by an unusual diplomatic incident between Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, and US President, Donald Trump. The meeting, which took place at the White House, was marked by high tension and even led to a verbal altercation described by several media outlets as a 'diplomatic spat'. During the meeting, Trump urged Zelensky to immediately agree to a ceasefire agreement with Russia and consider ceding part of the territory as peaceful compromise. Not only that, Trump also made harsh accusations, calling Zelensky a 'dictator without elections', referring to the fact that Ukraine has not held general elections due to the ongoing war. Zelensky firmly rejected the pressure, emphasizing that peace cannot be achieved as long as Russian military aggression continues without explicit security guarantees for Ukraine. The meeting, which was initially expected to produce strategic measures, ended without agreement and led to the cancellation of several plans, including cooperation on the shipment of rare earth metals from Ukraine to the United States (CNN Indonesia 2025).

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has been ongoing since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, which led to both countries becoming independent entities. Although bilateral relations progressed smoothly, various conflicts emerged, particularly territorial disputes. Tensions escalated into armed conflict in the Crimea and Donbas regions, drawing global attention, including that of the United States. Since 2015, the United States has been a third party in mediation efforts and has supported Ukraine in its conflict with Russia (Salsabila and Ribawati 2024). The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has been ongoing

since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, which led to both countries becoming independent entities. Although bilateral relations progressed smoothly, various conflicts emerged over time, particularly territorial disputes. Tensions escalated into armed conflict in the Crimea and Donbas regions, drawing global attention, including that of the United States. Since 2015, the United States has been a third party in mediation efforts and has supported Ukraine in its conflict with Russia (Ramadhan and Permadi 2023).

Media platforms are central in shaping public opinion and perceptions of strategic issues in the spotlight. In the information and communication landscape, the media occupies a significant and influential position (Aprilia and Hidayatullah 2024). However, it is important to understand that how the media conveys information about this conflict is not always neutral. The media has the power to frame events in a certain way that can influence readers' perceptions. The media can frame news and information so that readers understand events from a perspective shaped by the (Zawawi et al. 2024). Therefore, this study is important to examine how social actors are represented in the coverage of the Zelensky-Trump conflict and who is marginalized in the discourse.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is an appropriate tool for examining media discourse in greater depth. CDA is a multidisciplinary approach that views language not merely as a communication tool but as a social practice that reflects and reproduces societal power relations and ideologies (Wodak and Fairclough 2001). This approach is used to uncover a discourse's hidden meanings, dominance, and interests. In line with this, Eriyanto (2009) explains that CDA reads texts by considering their social and political contexts to understand how power and ideology work.

One of the approaches in CDA is Social Actor Representation Theory developed by Theo van Leeuwen's. This theory focuses on how individuals or groups are depicted (represented) in a text. Van Leeuwen states that language not only describes reality but also shapes that reality through specific representational strategies. In the media context, this includes who is shown, how they are depicted, and who is hidden or not shown (van Leeuwen 2013). This theory is generally divided into two main strategies: exclusion and inclusion. Exclusion is a strategy to eliminate the presence of social actors in discourse, while inclusion is a strategy to highlight the presence of social actors in discourse (Rilma, Syahrul, and Gani 2019).

Exclusionary strategies in discourse are realized through various means aimed at obscuring or eliminating social actors from the text. One such form is passivization, which involves using passive sentences that omit the subject or agent of the action, thereby focusing the reader's attention solely on the action or its consequences. Additionally, nominalization is employed by converting verbs into nouns, thereby obscuring the agent of the action. Another strategy is clause substitution, which involves restructuring sentences by replacing the subject with a clause, thereby concealing the actual social actors involved in a particular action.

Furthermore, according to Gusti, Setiawati, and Warsiman (2024), exclusion strategies in the representation of social actors involve various techniques such as differentiation, undifferentiation, objectivation, and abstraction, all of which serve to obscure the presence or role of the leading actor within the discourse. Categorization and nominalization are employed to depict actors through specific labels or nominal forms, while identification introduces additional information in subordinate clauses to maintain the ambiguity of the actor's role. Determination and indetermination highlight either the explicitness or anonymity of the actor,

whereas assimilation and individualization, association, and disassociation regulate the actor's connection to particular social groups.

In contrast, inclusion strategies are used to feature social actors explicitly in the text. These strategies play an important ideological role, as the presence or involvement of actors in discourse can indicate a form of partisanship, identity reinforcement, or legitimization of certain parties (Sobari, Abdurrokhman, and Sadiyah 2018). The media shapes public perceptions of an event by displaying or concealing actors through these strategies. As stated by Rilma, Syahrul, and Gani (2019), Van Leeuwen's theory can be used to identify how social actors are presented, concealed, or marginalized in texts, as well as how the media shapes social reality through the process of representation.

Based on this theoretical framework, this study analyzes how exclusionary and inclusive strategies are used in media coverage of the meeting between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and US President Donald Trump. This study also reveals how the representation of social actors in the news can influence the formation of public opinion in framing the meaning of events and reflects the hidden power relations in media narratives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on media discourse highlights the role of representation strategies in shaping public perception of the Trump–Zelensky political conflict. The emphasis is placed on how the media highlights or downplays certain aspects and how the constructed perspectives can influence readers' ideological interpretations (Ilmi and Zawawi 2024). In this context, the previous studies using Theo Van Leeuwen's social actor representation approach have shown how media constructions influence perceptions of the conflict between Ukraine, Russia, and the United States as parties involved. These studies form an important foundation for developing this research's theoretical and methodological understanding, which will be further elaborated in the following section on previous studies.

Aprilia and Hidayatullah (2024) conducted a critical discourse analysis of three Arab online media outlets (Al Arabiya, Al Jazeera, and Okaz) regarding the suicide bombing in Astana Anyar, Bandung, using van Leeuwen's social actor representation theory. This study aims to reveal exclusion strategies, such as passivation and concealment of perpetrators, and inclusion strategies, such as objectification–abstraction, categorization, individualization, and association. The results show that all three media outlets tend to highlight the government in a positive light while obscuring the identities of the perpetrators, thereby shaping a biased public perception of terrorism and reinforcing the dominance of institutional discourse.

Next, Gusti, Setiawati, and Warsiman (2024) conducted a critical discourse analysis of Kompas.com's coverage of the Indonesian national football team to examine the construction of national identity through inclusion and exclusion strategies. The study identified exclusion strategies such as passivation and nominalization, while inclusion strategies included differentiation–undifferentiation, objectivation–abstraction, categorization, identification, individualization, and association. The findings suggest that the media discourse shapes public perception by constructing the team's image, generating social expectations, highlighting discrepancies between media representation and on-field reality, and influencing public response, perception, and engagement with national football.

Furthermore, Purwanto and Dewanti (2024) critically examined the role of media in shaping women's positions through their representation in news texts, focusing on whether women are portrayed equitably or marginalized. The study

found that women are frequently depicted as active subjects with significant influence rather than passive objects. Exclusion strategies such as passivation and nominalization were employed to obscure actors, while clause substitution was used to condense information. Inclusion strategies such as nomination–categorization and nomination–identification were prevalent, whereas association–dissociation appeared less frequently.

Based on the previous studies, this research has similarities and differences. The similarity lies in the use of Theo Van Leeuwen's theoretical model, while the difference lies in the focus of the discussion. The feud between Trump and Zelensky, which emerged due to their meeting at the White House last February, has not been analyzed using van Leeuwen's critical discourse analysis model. The study of this event is relevant because it can provide an understanding of how the media shapes public perception of global geopolitical issues. In addition, this research has the potential to reveal the representation of the benefits, controversies, and challenges inherent in this event. Thus, this study fills a gap in the existing literature and offers a new contribution to understanding the construction of media discourse on international political dynamics.

Van Leeuwen Concept of Social Actor Representation

According to van Leeuwen (2008) in the social actor representation theory model, two main strategies are used to shape how social actors are portrayed in texts, namely exclusion and inclusion strategies. The exclusion strategy relates to how social actors are removed or obscured from discourse, so their existence or involvement is not explicitly apparent. Exclusion is carried out through two main techniques, namely suppression and passivation.

Meanwhile, inclusion strategies relate to how social actors are included in discourse in various ways that emphasize or obscure their identities, roles, and relationships with one another. Inclusion techniques include individualization, association, identification, categorization, differentiation/indifference, and objectification/abstraction. Using these strategies, the media or text producers can shape specific images of groups or individuals, reinforce ideologies, and maintain or challenge existing power structures. The following are details of the components of social actor representation that researchers use to analyze the data, which is presented in tabular form for ease of understanding.

Table 1: The Concept of Social Actor Representation by van Leeuwen (2008)

Representation Strategy	Component	Interpretation
Activation	Actors as active participants	Presenting social actors as parties who act directly and dominantly in an event.
Passivation	Actors as objects/victims	Social actors are placed as action recipients, rendering their role passive or marginalized.
Nomination	Mentioning names/titles	Identify specific social actors by name, title, or position that affirms their identity and social position.
Categorization	Social grouping	Classifying social actors into social, moral, or national categories gives them a specific ideological meaning.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design with a critical discourse analysis approach based on van Leeuwen (2008) framework. According to Sugiyono

(2010), qualitative research is used to investigate, describe, explain, and discover the qualities or characteristics of a particular social phenomenon. This approach was chosen because it is relevant for uncovering the broader context and meaning behind how the media conveys information through language. Critical discourse analysis allows researchers to examine how the media highlights and constructs various perceptions of events Sulistio, Rasyid, and Anwar (2022).

The data consist of news articles published by two international media outlets, Al-Ghad and BBC News Arabic, collected between February and March 2025. These outlets were purposively selected because Al-Ghad often portrays Trump as an active individual actor, while BBC News Arabic tends to present him in more passive or nominalized forms. A total of six news articles were chosen that specifically discussed the Trump–Zelensky conflict, covering its causes, issues, impacts, and intensity. Data collection was carried out through the documentation method by gathering texts from the official websites of both media. To ensure data validity, the reports were cross-checked between the two outlets and compared with other international coverage.

Data analysis combined two methodological frameworks. First, the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), which consists of three stages: (1) data reduction, by selecting and simplifying relevant materials; (2) data display, through coding tables; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification. Second, van Leeuwen (2008) social actor representation theory was applied as an analytical lens. The coding process followed three systematic steps: (1) reading the news texts to identify sentences or expressions referring to Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky; (2) assigning each expression a code based on van Leeuwen's categories, such as activation (ACT), passivation (PAS), nomination (NOM), and categorization (CAT), and (3) organizing the coded excerpts into a table to enable cross-media comparison. This procedure ensured transparency, consistency, and reliability in tracing how linguistic choices shaped the representation of Trump and Zelensky in the selected articles.

RESULTS The analyzed data consist of news articles about the Trump-Zelensky meeting, taken from two international outlets: Al-Ghad and BBC News Arabic

In CNN's reporting, President Donald Trump is frequently represented through passivization, for example in passive sentences that reduce the focus on his direct actions. Trump is also represented through nominalization, where actions are transformed into nouns, thereby obscuring the actor responsible. In contrast, President Volodymyr Zelensky is more often represented through individualization, as he is explicitly mentioned by name and title and is associated with specific political actions or groups (CNN Indonesia 2019).

In Al-Ghad's reporting, Donald Trump is frequently represented as an individual and active actor, as indicated by the explicit mention of his name and his actions as the subject of active sentences. Meanwhile, Volodymyr Zelensky is often represented through suppression, namely the removal or reduction of information about his role and actions, and through differentiation/indifference, where he is not given a specific identity or is described in a generalized way (Al-Ghad 2025b).

From this analysis, media outlets with different orientations use different social representation techniques in their reporting, directly influencing how the social actors Trump and Zelensky are positioned. CNN positioned Zelensky as the dominant protagonist and Trump as a passive figure, while Al-Ghad reversed these positions by highlighting Trump and marginalizing Zelensky. This shows how media ideology influences social construction in international news reporting

through specific representation techniques (Miles, Huberman, and Saldana 2014; Theo van Leeuwen 2008).

Data Findings The analysis applies van Leeuwen (2008) framework of social actor representation. The results are drawn from six Arabic-language news articles and are presented in narrative descriptions supported by tables and original quotations.

To ensure clarity and systematic presentation, the findings are illustrated not only through narrative descriptions but also by means of tables. The use of tables is essential in critical discourse analysis because it allows the representation of data excerpts, coding, and interpretation in a structured format. Each table contains original Arabic quotations alongside their assigned categories and analytical assessments, making it possible to trace how particular linguistic choices are linked to specific forms of social actor representation. In addition, tables provide transparency in the coding process, demonstrate consistency between data and interpretation, and enable comparative analysis across the two media outlets. This combination of narrative explanation and tabular display strengthens the reliability of the findings while making the complex discursive patterns more accessible to readers.

All the cases of activation, passivation, nomination, and categorization can be found both in al-Ghad and BBC News Arabic news texts. Data tabulation and analyses are presented below.

Al-Ghad Table 2 shows three data of news texts in Al-Ghad which indicate activation toward the US President, Donald Trump.

Table 2: Activation to Trump

Data	Assessment
قال ترامب لزيلينسكي: أنتم تقامرون بإشغال حرب عالمية ثالثة.. إما أن تيرموا اتفاقاً أو أننا سنبتعد (Trump said to Zelensky: You are gambling with starting World War III... Either you make a deal, or we will walk away.)	Trump is portrayed as an active player who takes action and controls the conflict situation.
ردّ عليه ترامب بالقول: ليست لديك أوراق اللعب الآن... أنت تقامر بإشغال حرب عالمية ثالثة (Trump responded to him by saying: You have no cards to play now... You are gambling with starting World War III.)	Trump appeared as a dominant figure with a threatening tone and set the tone for the dialogue. It indicates high activation.
قال ترامب: في عهد بايدن، أخذ أموالاً من هذا البلد كما يأخذ الحلوى من طف. قال ترامب أيضاً إنه لا يشعر بالامتنان من جانب زيلينسكي الرئيس الأميركي طرد نظيره الأوكراني من البيت الأبيض (Trump said: Under Biden, he took money from this country like taking candy from a baby." Trump also said he doesn't feel any gratitude from Zelensky. The American president expelled his Ukrainian counterpart from the White House.)	Trump as an active, dominant actor, decision maker, strong statement maker, and situation controller.

Meanwhile, three data regarding passivation to Zelensky can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3: Passivation to Zelensky

Data	Assessment
"تصريحاته تفتقر بشدة إلى الاحترام" اتهمه فانس بالقيام بجولات دعائية ("His statements are severely lacking in respect," Vance accused him of conducting publicity tours.)	Zelensky is portrayed as the object of criticized actions and is not given the space to defend himself.
اتهم نائب الرئيس الأميركي زيلينسكي بـ'التقليل من احترامه' للأميركيين (The US Vice President accused Zelensky of 'disrespecting' the American people.)	Zelensky received accusations and criticism and was passive in conflict situations.
وصف ترامب زيلينسكي بأنه لا يشعر بالامتنان وقال إن زيلينسكي أظهر عدم احترام للولايات المتحدة وحاول زيلينسكي الجدل وقاطع محاوريه باستمرار (Trump described Zelensky as ungrateful and said that Zelensky showed disrespect toward the United States. Zelensky tried to argue and continuously interrupted his interlocutors.)	As the criticized and passive party, Zelensky became the object of action with no room for defense.

In addition, two data of news texts representing nomination to both parties is illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4: Nomination

Data	Assessment
"الرئيس الأميركي دونالد ترامب" "الرئيس زيلينسكي" (US President Donald Trump; President Zelensky)	Names and titles are mentioned nominatively to show personalization.
"الرئيس الأوكراني فولوديمير زيلينسكي" "الرئيس الأميركي دونالد ترامب" "نائب الرئيس الأميركي جيه دي فانس" (Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, US President Donald Trump, US Vice President JD Vance)	Individualization and official status are evident when names are mentioned.

Lastly, the data showing case of categorization toward Zelensky can be viewed in Table 5.

Table 5: Categorization to Zelensky

Data	Assessment
تصريحاته تفتقر بشدة إلى الاحترام (His remarks are deeply disrespectful.)	Zelensky is implicitly categorized as disrespectful.
اتهمه فانس بالقيام بجولات دعائية (Vance accused him of conducting publicity tours.)	Zelensky was negatively socially labeled as a propagandist.
وصف زيلينسكي بأنه "لا يشعر بالامتنان" و "أظهر عدم احترام" (He characterized Zelensky as 'ungrateful' and claimed he had 'shown disrespect')	Negative social labels affirm an inferior and problematic image without defense.

**BBC News
Arabic**

On the other hand, the data of activation, passivation, nomination, and categorization on BBC News Arabic can be seen in the following tables.

In Table 6, there are two data of Trump activation.

Table 6: Activation to Trump

Data	Assessment
<p>• في عهد بايدن، أخذ أموالاً من هذا البلد كما يأخذ الحلوى من طفل • ترامب قال إنه لا يشعر بالامتنان من زيلينسكي • الرئيس الأمريكي طرد نظيره الأوكراني من البيت الأبيض</p> <p>Under Biden's administration, he took money from this country like taking candy from a baby. Trump said he doesn't feel any gratitude from Zelensky. The US President kicked his Ukrainian counterpart out of the White House.</p>	Trump is portrayed as an active, dominant actor who controls the situation
<p>• نشب مشادة كلامية أمام الصحفيين بين الرئيس الأمريكي دونالد ترامب ونائبه جي دي فانس • ... صرّح ترامب للصحفيين بعد ذلك، قائلاً • ...اتهمه نائب الرئيس الأمريكي جي دي فانس بعدم الامتنان</p> <p>A verbal altercation broke out in front of reporters between U.S. President Donald Trump and his Vice President, J.D. Vance... Trump later made a statement to reporters, saying... U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance accused him of being ungrateful.</p>	Trump and Vance played the leading roles in the verbal conflict, demonstrating their positions of power and control.

In addition, two data representing passivation of Zelensky is displayed in Table 7.

Table 7: Passivation to Zelensky

Data	Assesment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • وصف ترامب زيلينسكي بأنه لا يشعر بالامتنان • وقال إن زيلينسكي أظهر عدم احترام للولايات المتحدة • وحاول زيلينسكي الجدل وقاطع محاوريه باستمرار <p>Trump described Zelensky as ungrateful. He said that Zelensky showed disrespect toward the United States. Zelensky tried to argue and repeatedly interrupted his interlocutors.</p>	Zelensky is positioned as the criticized party, discursively passive, with little room for defense.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • طُلب من زيلينسكي مغادرة البيت الأبيض • اتهمه نائب الرئيس الأمريكي جي دي فانس بعدم الامتنان • الرئيس الأوكراني وُضع في موقف مستحيل <p>Zelensky was asked to leave the White House. US Vice President JD Vance accused him of being ungrateful.</p>	Zelensky is represented as the object of other actors' actions, not in control of the narrative, in a position of pressure.

Meanwhile, a datum showing nomination can be examined in Table 8.

Table 8: Nomination

Data	Assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • الرئيس الأميركي • دونالد ترامب • الرئيس الأوكراني • فولوديمير زيلينسكي • نائبه جي دي فانس <p>The U.S. President /The American President. Donald Trump. The Ukrainian President. Volodymyr Zelensky. His Vice President, JD Vance.</p>	Names and titles are mentioned in detail, reinforcing social actors' personal identities and official positions.

Lastly, one datum representing categorization can be seen in Table 9.

Table 9: Categorization

Data	Assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • وصف زيلينسكي بأنه 'لا يشعر بالامتنان' و 'أظهر عدم احترام' • اتهمه ... بعدم الامتنان • شعرنا بشعور قوي بالظلم ... نحن الأمة التي تعرضت للهجوم • لم نتوقع هذا المستوى من العدوانية تجاه رئيسنا <p>He described Zelensky as 'ungrateful' and said he 'showed disrespect'. ... accused him of being ungrateful. We felt a strong sense of injustice... we are the nation that was attacked. We did not expect this level of hostility toward our president.</p>	Zelensky is a symbol of an evil character and a victim who gets sympathy from the Ukrainian side.

The data presented in the tables indicate that Trump is consistently represented as an active and dominant actor, often controlling the course of events and framing the dialogue, while Zelensky tends to appear in passive positions as the object of criticism or accusation. This contrast suggests a discursive imbalance in the portrayal of both leaders, reinforcing Trump's authority and diminishing Zelensky's agency. Such a pattern demonstrates how linguistic strategies such as activation, passivation, and categorization are employed to construct unequal power relations within the media discourse.

To illustrate the distribution of social actor representation strategies identified in BBC News Arabic and Al-Ghad's coverage, the findings are visualized in a pie chart (Figure 1). The chart presents the percentage of strategies attributed to Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky.

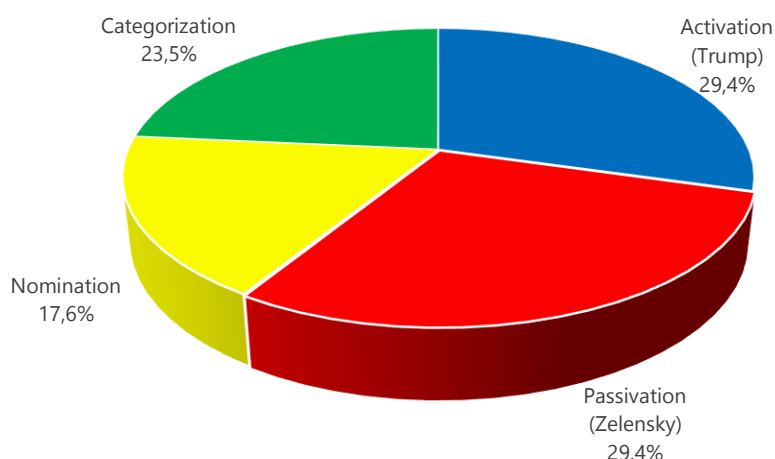


Figure: The Proportion of the Representation Strategies

As shown in Figure, the activation of Trump and passivation of Zelensky account for the largest portions, each at 29.4%. Meanwhile, categorization of Zelensky appears at 23.5%, and nominalization accounts for 17.6%. These findings indicate that both media outlets emphasize Trump's active role, while Zelensky is often portrayed through passivation or generalization, leading to an imbalanced construction of the political discourse.

Discussions As can be viewed in the findings, in both media, Al-Ghad and BBC News Arabic, all the four representation strategies—activation, passivation, nomination, and categorization—are visible. The following are the analyses of some of the selected data.

Activation In Al-Ghad's report, Donald Trump is consistently represented as a social actor who acts actively in the discourse structure through activation strategies. Based on the activation category in van Leeuwen's theory, Trump is represented as an active and dominant social actor through active verb forms such as *قال*, *رد*, and *طرد*. According to van Leeuwen (2008), activation refers to representing social actors as actors' actions, either directly or indirectly. This strategy shapes Trump's image as a figure who controls the discourse, determines the direction of negotiations, and asserts a position of power in bilateral interactions. It is evident in the following news text.

قال ترامب لزيلينسكي: أنتم تقامرون بإشعال حرب عالمية ثالثة.. إما أن تبرموا اتفاقاً أو أننا سنبتعد

(Trump told Zelensky: You are gambling with triggering World War Three... Either you make a deal or we will walk away.)

(Al-Ghad 2025a)

The excerpt published by Al-Ghad News presents Trump's statement to Zelensky: "You are gambling with triggering World War Three... Either you make a deal or we will walk away". The Arabic structure *قال ترامب* (Trump said) explicitly positions Trump as the dominant actor who controls the speech act, while Zelensky is depicted merely as a passive recipient of the utterance. The lexical choice *تقامرون* (to gamble) not only constructs Zelensky as irrational and reckless but also reinforces the image of Ukraine's political decisions as highly risky. Within van Leeuwen (2008) framework, this strategy represents a form of activation with Trump appearing as the fully agentive subject and passivation with Zelensky reduced to an object of discourse.

These findings resonate with Amer Khaled Ahmad's study on the framing of the Russia–Ukraine war in three Jordanian online news outlets, including Al-Ghad. Ahmad (2025) observes that although Russia and Ukraine are both acknowledged as active actors, the structural positioning of sources tends to situate Ukraine as an object of reporting rather than as an initiating subject. In other words, Al-Ghad News continues this pattern of subordinating representation by emphasizing Trump's dominance while portraying Zelensky as weak and irrational. This pattern cannot be separated from the geopolitical orientation of Arab media, which often situates Ukraine as dependent on external pressures, whether from Russia or the United States.

Thus, it can be concluded that Al-Ghad News does not merely report Trump's statement but simultaneously constructs an ideological narrative for Arab audiences. The representation of Zelensky as a subordinate actor illustrates how Arab media, particularly Al-Ghad, contribute to reproducing the image of Ukraine as fragile and lacking political autonomy within the global arena.

On the other hand, the activation in BBC News Arabic can be examined in the text below.

نشوب مشادة كلامية أمام الصحفيين بين الرئيس الأمريكي دونالد ترامب ونائبه جي دي فانس...

(An argument broke out in front of reporters between US President Donald Trump and his deputy JD Vance...)

(BBC News Arabic 2025)

The excerpt published by BBC News Arabic reads: "An argument broke out in front of reporters between US President Donald Trump and his deputy JD Vance...". The sentence structure does not employ direct speech verbs such as *قال* (said) or *صرح* (stated), yet it still activates both figures Trump and Vance as subjects equally engaged in verbal conflict. This representation thus introduces a form of "double activation," in which internal dynamics among American political elites are foregrounded. From van Leeuwen (2008) perspective, this strategy demonstrates simultaneous activation, whereby two social actors are depicted as equal agents within a discursive event. Unlike news reports that tend to position one actor as dominant and the other as subordinate, this excerpt emphasizes the relatively balanced status of Trump and Vance in the context of political dispute.

These findings also resonate with Ahmad (2025) study on Arab media framing of the Russia–Ukraine war, which highlights a broader tendency among Arab outlets to construct conflict and tension as their primary frames. By underscoring the scene of *مشادة كلامية* (heated argument), BBC News Arabic reproduces a similar pattern foregrounding confrontation as both a dramatic narrative device and as a marker of internal legitimacy crisis.

In conclusion, BBC News Arabic does not merely report the fact of a dispute among American political elites but simultaneously constructs an image of fragility in US leadership cohesion. Such representation shapes Arab audiences'

perception of the United States, not as a fully unified actor in global affairs, but rather as one plagued by internal tensions.

Passivation

Beyond depicting Trump as an active and dominant figure, Al-Ghad systematically frames Zelensky as a social actor who is positioned passively, negatively, and without empathy. This discursive strategy reflects the use of passivation, namely the transformation of sentence structures from active into passive forms (Setyaningsih 2024). As emphasized by van Leeuwen (2013), passivation is a representational process in which social actors are constructed as recipients of actions, whether materially or socially. Such representation strategically positions the actor as weak, culpable, or politically marginalized. The following is the report indicating passivation from Al-Ghad News.

تصريحاته تفتقر بشدة إلى الاحترام

(His statement shows very little respect.)

(Al-Ghad 2025a)

In addition to portraying Trump as active and dominant, Al-Ghad news also systematically frames Zelensky in a passive and negative position. One example is evident in the quotation: "His statement shows very little respect". The sentence structure presents a form of impersonal passivation, in which the subject of the statement (Zelensky) is not explicitly mentioned yet remains the object of negative evaluation. According to van Leeuwen (2008) passivation is a strategy of representing social actors by positioning individuals as recipients of action whether materially or symbolically thus constructing them as weak, guilty, or politically powerless. This finding aligns with the argument of Wati, Rustono, and Mardikantoro (2023) who emphasize that passivation prevents social actors from appearing as agents, instead casting them as subjects of external judgment.

In the excerpt, the term تصريحاته (his statement) contains the pronominal suffix *-hu* 'his', which directly refers to Zelensky, even though his name is not explicitly written. Thus, Zelensky remains the center of criticism, albeit with his identity obscured through an impersonal objectivization. Furthermore, the use of the verb تفتقر (to lack/to be deficient in) constructs Zelensky as an unworthy figure lacking in dignity. This strategy of identity concealment through passivation softens the direct attack while nonetheless producing an image of Zelensky as ideologically weakened and subject to criticism.

This tendency is consistent with previous findings that Arab and Western media frequently construct Ukraine more as an object of reporting than as an active subject. For example, BBC Arabic frames Ukraine sympathetically as 'a victim of oppression', while Rudaw takes a more neutral stance Kareem (2023). Similar patterns are also observed in Western media analysis, which highlights humanitarian and military narratives rather than Ukraine's agency (Wozniak, Liu, and Lind 2024). Thus, both Western and Arab media display a shared tendency to position Ukraine and its leader in a subordinated role, rather than as equal actors in the international arena.

In conclusion, Al-Ghad News deliberately employs passivation strategies to delegitimize Zelensky. This representation illustrates how Arab media construct discourses that emphasize Ukraine's weakness through its president, who is not only positioned as passive but also associated with negative and undignified imagery.

Meanwhile, the case of passivation in BBC News Arabic can be exemplified as follow.

الرئيس الأوكراني وُضع في موقف مستحيل

(Ukraine's president placed in an impossible position.)

(BBC News Arabic 2025)

The quotation from BBC News Arabic states: "Ukraine's president was placed in an impossible position". This sentence illustrates the most extreme form of passivation: the use of the passive verb *وُضِعَ* (was placed) without reference to any actor completely strips Zelensky of agency. He is portrayed as the victim of invisible forces, situated in an unavoidable and impossible condition. Within van Leeuwen (2008; 2013) framework, such a strategy is not merely passivation but also part of the naturalization of domination, a representational practice in which power relations are framed as natural, inevitable, and beyond contestation.

The construction of Zelensky as a passive and powerless figure can be understood within a broader context. As noted by Widodo et al. (2025), the Russia-Ukraine conflict is saturated with violations of humanitarian law and has direct consequences for the civil rights of citizens. In this light, when Arab media depict Zelensky as a leader "placed in an impossible position," the narrative not only deprives him of personal agency but also symbolizes the collective condition of Ukraine a nation positioned more frequently as a victim than as an agent in control of events.

From a research perspective, this framing highlights how BBC News Arabic contributes to producing discourses that delegitimize Ukraine's political power. Extreme passivation through passive syntactic structures turns Zelensky into a symbol of powerlessness, while simultaneously reflecting how the conflict's reality is mediated and disseminated: Ukraine is represented less as a decision-maker and more as a nation subjected to oppression.

Nomination

According to van Leeuwen (2008), nomination is a strategy for representing social actors by mentioning personal names, titles, or a combination of both. Nomination is a representation strategy that mentions social actors directly based on individual identities, such as socio-cultural background, ownership through nouns, or distinctive physical characteristics (Fadhilah, Anshori, and Nurhadi 2024). The media use this form to determine how social actors are identified and positioned in the discourse. The choice of nomination form is not neutral; it can create an impression of authority, familiarity, or even pseudo-objectivity. In the framework of social actor representation, according to van Leeuwen, accolades refer to how social actors are mentioned through proper names or official positions, which is different from categorization using general social labels. Nomination indicates a form of individualization that gives actors a specific identity and personalization, making their presence feel more real and significant in discourse.

In Al-Ghad news, the nomination strategy is used selectively to shape the identities of Trump and Zelensky and supporting actors such as JD Vance. The following text illustrates the case.

نائب الرئيس الأميركي جيه دي فانس

(Vice President of the United States, JD Vance)

(Al-Ghad 2025a)

In Al-Ghad's coverage, political actors are represented through varying strategies of formal nomination. For instance, JD Vance is referred to with his official title, nationality, and full name: نائب الرئيس الأميركي جيه دي فانس. Such references, according to van Leeuwen (2008), constitute a form of formal nomination that not only identifies but also symbolically legitimizes an actor by emphasizing his institutional status. This finding resonates with Eriyanto (2009), who argues that naming strategies in the media are inherently ideological because they can either strengthen or weaken the image of a figure. In this sense, Al-Ghad symbolically

positions Vance almost on the same hierarchical level as Trump, since both are consistently given full recognition through formal nomination.

By contrast, Zelensky does not always receive the same treatment; he is often referred to in a more neutral or passive manner, which renders his symbolic legitimacy comparatively weaker. This difference in representation indicates that Al-Ghad constructs a political hierarchy through nomination strategies, where American actors appear dominant as symbols of global power, while Zelensky is positioned more subordinately. In other words, nomination strategies in Al-Ghad are not merely technical devices but also ideological tools, deployed to construct power relations that emphasize the dominance of certain actors within the discourse of international conflict.

Nomination also occurs in BBC News Arabic. It is evident in the following text.

نائبه جي دي فانس

(His deputy, JD Vance)
(BBC News Arabic 2025)

This quotation employs the strategy of personal nomination by mentioning both an official title نائبه (his deputy) and an individual's name (جي دي فانس). The use of the possessive pronoun ٤ in *na'ibuhu* (his deputy) indicates that Vance's identity is discursively tied to Trump, positioning his existence within a hierarchical relation. Vance is not merely represented as a state official but discursively constructed as the 'extension' of Trump's political persona.

This strategy underscores two important points. First, Vance is granted symbolic recognition as a significant actor because he is referred to both personally and functionally, rather than simply as 'vice president' without a name. Second, the use of possessive form creates the impression that Vance's legitimacy is entirely dependent on Trump. In this way, BBC News Arabic constructs a narrative in which, although Vance actively participates in political discourse, his authority remains derivative rather than independent.

Such a representation reflects a broader framing pattern in political media discourse, where secondary actors are symbolically subordinated to central figures of power. Previous studies have shown that personal nomination often serves as a tool of symbolic association and legitimation in media texts. For instance, van Leeuwen (2008) notes that nomination strategies can reinforce hierarchical relationships in discourse. More recently, research by Widodo et al. (2025) demonstrates how Indonesian media frequently employ personal nomination to attach political figures to dominant leaders, thereby reducing their perceived autonomy.

The implication is clear: BBC News Arabic's representation strengthens a symbolic hierarchy in which Trump remains positioned at the apex of discourse, while Vance is discursively framed as an extension of Trump's political identity.

Categorization Within the social actor representation theory framework developed by van Leeuwen, the categorization strategy refers to how the media groups individuals into specific categories based on social identity, roles, positions, or moral values. Categorization is a representation strategy that presents social actors based on common identities through nouns, such as job names (formal, semiformal, informal), numbers or letters, and specific honorary titles or ranks. Instead of naming actors individually or personally, the media represents them through ideologically charged social labels. This categorization can frame a person in a collective or symbolic identity that directs the audience's perception of who they are and how they should be understood (Fadhilah, Anshori, and Nurhadi 2024).

Categorization in media texts can be done based on the social function a person performs (for example, as a leader, critic, or victim), through formal identities such as position or status (for example, president, soldier, or diplomat), or through moral assessments inherent in the character's nature and attitude (for example arrogant, weak, or manipulative). This strategy effectively shapes an image because it can instill specific associations in the social actor in question, both positively and negatively.

The following is an excerpt from Al-Ghad news indicating categorization.

اتهمه فانس بالقيام بجولات دعائية

(Vance accused him of going on a propaganda tour.)

(Al-Ghad 2025c)

This excerpt illustrates the use of the categorization strategy in the representation of social actors. Zelensky is positioned negatively through the label جولات دعائية (propaganda tour). Such a designation is not merely a description of activity but an ideological attribution that adds the meaning that his actions are manipulative, self-serving, and diplomatically insincere.

Van Leeuwen (2008) argues that such forms of categorization are never neutral, as they function to place actors within a particular moral frame. Rather than being understood as a legitimate act of diplomacy, Zelensky's activities are constructed as propaganda actions laden with personal interests and symbolic exploitation. In this way, the media frame not only what Zelensky does but also why he does it: for personal political gain rather than for collective solutions.

The representational effect is a shift in Zelensky's position from victim of conflict to opportunistic actor who exploits his nation's suffering for political legitimacy. Through this act of categorization, Al-Ghad subtly erodes audience sympathy for Zelensky, portraying his actions as impure and driven by hidden agendas.

These findings resonate with the study of Widodo et al. (2025), which shows that in discourses on the Russia–Ukraine conflict, media often frame Ukraine in a subordinated position, bound by the narratives of other parties. This framing frequently generates stereotypes of Ukraine as a country acting out of compulsion or opportunism in its political strategies. In other words, the label 'propaganda tour' in Al-Ghad reinforces global representational patterns that tend to construct Zelensky not as an independent leader but as an actor whose actions are consistently tied to hidden interests.

Categorization also applies in BBC news text as can be seen in below.

شعرنا بشعور قوي بالظلم ... نحن الأمة التي تعرضت للهجوم

(We feel a strong sense of injustice ... we are a nation under attack.)

(BBC News Arabic 2025)

The BBC News Arabic quotation states: شعرنا بشعور قوي بالظلم ... نحن الأمة التي تعرضت للهجوم (We feel a strong sense of injustice... we are a nation under attack.) This statement explicitly demonstrates a collective claim through the use of the plural pronoun 'we' (شعرنا) and the phrase 'a nation under attack' (نحن الأمة التي). From a discourse perspective, the text highlights that the speaking actor is not an individual but a collective subject positioned as a victim. More broadly, this reflects who is speaking (a collective actor), what is being claimed (experiencing injustice and attack), how it is articulated (through emotional and moral language), and why it is conveyed (to gain moral legitimacy before the international audience).

Within van Leeuwen (2008) framework of social actor representation, this quotation exemplifies the strategies of collectivization and categorization. Group

identity is discursively shaped as a legitimized victim, while the opposing party is implicitly positioned as the perpetrator of injustice. Such a strategy does not merely convey information but constructs a moral stance within the conflict narrative. By presenting “we” as a suffering nation, the media produces a binding moral effect whereby the opponent is framed as unjust or aggressive.

This finding aligns with previous studies showing that Western media often employ victimization framing in covering the Russia–Ukraine war. Hermilania (2024) for example, demonstrates that BBC Arabic emphasized civilian suffering and heroic depictions of Ukrainians, while consistently portraying Russia as the aggressor. Similarly, Hanley, Kumar, and Durumeric (2023) reveal through quantitative analysis that Western outlets prioritized humanitarian and military narratives, reinforcing Ukraine’s position as a morally legitimate victim.

In a regional context, BBC News Arabic appears to adopt a comparable strategy, though with a distinct emphasis: rather than highlighting individual experiences of victimhood, it constructs collective suffering as the source of moral legitimacy. This framing not only mirrors broader global patterns but also indicates that both Western and Arab media position Ukraine and its leadership within a subordinate role in international discourse.

In conclusion, BBC News Arabic does not simply report an emotional expression of a group but strategically frames the conflict as a moral struggle. By claiming the position of a victim, the discourse legitimizes political actions taken while simultaneously obscuring the opponent’s stance by labeling it unjust or aggressive.

CONCLUSION

This research applies Theo van Leeuwen's critical discourse analysis model to examine the representation of actors in two media, namely Al-Ghad and BBC News Arabic, which discuss the conflict between Trump and Zelensky in the United States White House. The analysis shows that there are significant differences between the two media in representing actors and marginalizing one of them.

Al-Ghad consistently frames Zelensky as inferior and problematic through a social actor representation strategy that accentuates activation toward Trump and passivation towards Zelensky. Trump is actively presented as dominant, threatening, and decision-making, while Zelensky is represented as losing control, being humiliated, or being placed at a disadvantage. In addition, nominations are used to assert the authority of American figures by formally mentioning titles and positions, reinforcing the impression of a hierarchy of power. The media also used categorization to portray Zelensky as ungrateful, manipulative, and lacking respect for symbols of other countries. Al-Ghad subtly shapes a discourse in which Zelensky is marginalized through language that implies moral and political failure, in contrast to BBC News Arabic, which emphasizes internal conflict and emotional responses to Zelensky.

In contrast to Al-Ghad, BBC News Arabic emphasizes emotional and symbolic representations in framing Zelensky, focusing on categorization and passivity strategies that position him as aggressive, ungrateful, and violating diplomatic norms. Through the use of phrases such as *مستوى من العدوانية* (level of aggressiveness) and accusations of ingratitude towards the United States, BBC News Arabic constructed an image of Zelensky as disappointing allies and acting disproportionately towards American leaders. Passivity emerges when Zelensky is portrayed as being placed in a position of powerlessness or pressure, such as when asked to leave the White House or when he is in an ‘impossible position’. Although it does not emphasize Trump's dominance as much as Al-Ghad, BBC

News Arabic frames the conflict personally and symbolically, reinforcing the narrative of Zelensky's alienation and incongruity in the context of international political relations. This representation shows a more subtle approach while still marginalizing the leading social actors through emotional language, symbolic values, and expressions of tension.

This study reveals that the representation of actors in each media conveys information from the point of view of events and society and shapes various readers' perceptions through word choices in responding to and forming new information related to the Trump and Zelensky feud. In addition, the representation of actors in the media can also determine the marginalized party, which ultimately influences readers' opinions and views of the social actors presented by the media.

However, this study has some limitations, such as the scope of Data's analysis being limited to two media and a specific time period and using only a few analysis strategies. To broaden the scope, future research should include more diverse data sources and media and a more extended period to gain a deeper understanding over time. In addition, collaboration with perception analysis and understanding the writing in the media studied can also help identify the media's pro and contra tendencies towards social actors in a particular news event.

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