Research Paper

The Mediated Construal of Action and Actor in the Representation of Starvation in Gaza: A Cognitive Critical Discourse Inquiry

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Abstract

This study investigates the representation of starvation in Gaza across two leading Arab media outlets, Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, through the lens of Cognitive Critical Discourse Analysis (Hart, 2014). Focusing on agency attribution, role allocation, and event construal, the analysis reveals how media discourse shapes public perceptions of responsibility and crisis. Findings demonstrate that Al-Jazeera denaturalizes starvation by foregrounding Israel's agency and situating the crisis within a conflictual space open to contestation and alternative narratives. Conversely, Al-Arabiya depicts the issue by naturalizing starvation as a self-propelling humanitarian catastrophe, thereby suppressing antagonism and foreclosing discursive plurality. These divergent discursive trajectories illustrate how discursive stratifies such as denaturalization and naturalization are enacted in media discourse and highlight the ideological orientations of representing humanitarian crises. The study contributes to scholarship on mediated representations, and Critical Discourse Studies by foregrounding the role of event construal in mediating political action and public consent.
Keywords: Starvation; Event Construal; Agency Allocation; Arab Media Outlet; Denaturalization; Naturalization

1. Introduction

A huge part of political communication today is carried out through media. Media is not just a passive observer of political events, rather it is an inevitable element of political communication itself (Combei & Reggi, 2023). It plays a central role in shaping public understanding of a given issue, often functioning as the main space where political meanings are produced, negotiated, and circulated (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Media holds this importance because it can generate consensus among the public without the need for force or coercion. In other words, much of what we know, feel, and judge about political and humanitarian crises comes from what media outlets choose to broadcast and how they choose to represent it. For example, media tells us who is guilty and who is innocent, who deserves punishment and who deserves empathy. But more than that, media does not only *reflect* political dynamics but it can actively mobilize the public to either reinforce dominant political systems or to stand against them (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

It goes without saying that these representations are never neutral. They follow ideological logics and political-strategic considerations. Altering the way an event is framed, choosing to highlight one angle over another, or deciding who is named and who is silenced—these are all decisions that carry ideological weight (Hart, 2011; 2013). Representation, thus, itself becomes a political act, shaped by who controls the narrative, what interests are being served, and what ideological lens is being applied (Moscovici, 2000). This political characteristic complements with ideological functioning in media portrayals of events and involved actors, thus giving shape to the perceptions of the audience about the event.

In this connection, this paper aims to examine how the humanitarian crisis of starvation and food insecurity in Gaza has been represented in two of the most influential Arab news agencies: Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya. Specifically, it explores how these media outlets construct different narratives around the Gaza food crisis and what ideologies are at

work behind those constructions. The paper is grounded in the key principles of Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) and draws particularly on Cognitive Critical Discourse Analysis (CCDA) as proposed by Hart (2014), which focuses on how discourse shapes and is shaped by underlying cognitive models. Through this theoretical and analytical lens, the analysis explores how the starvation crisis in Gaza is framed as an action, who is made visible, who is held responsible, and how different actors and institutions are positioned in relation to the crisis.

This study draws on a corpus of 150 headlines and lead paragraphs from Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya. By comparing these two sources, the research aims to uncover how technologies of power and ideological positioning influence the representation of human suffering and the actors who have brought this dire situation into existence. In doing so, it highlights how mediated narratives do not just describe crises, but rather they play a role in constructing public perception and collective understanding of what is happening, why it is happening, and who is to blame.

2. Cognitive Critical Discourse Analysis

Theories of Cognitive Linguistics have extensively been adopted in CDS. This incorporation has now constituted a well-established terrain for scholarship in CDS (Hart, 2014). This is largely due to the theoretical strength of cognitive linguistics in analysing ideology (Dirven et al., 2012). The explorations ideological patterns in text and conceptualisation lies at the crux of cognitive linguistic approach to CDS (Hart, 2011). However, what makes the incorporation of cognitive linguistics and CDS possible is that ideology functions at two intertwined terrains: conscious and unconscious (Pires de Oliveira, 2001). Perspective, thus, is the common thread that runs through these two aspects and is called upon to structure our conceptualisations of the world (Dirven, et al., 2012). Cognitive linguistics is basically concerned with conceptualisation which the key claim of the cognitive linguistics for CDS is that the structuring of the categories within language and cognition — such as space and time, situations and events, actins, motions, force and causation — subsume construal (Hart, 2011). According to Langacker (1991), construal provides alternative conceptualisations of the same phenomenon in many different ways. However, key to the construal is that the alternative language structures impose particular conceptualisations on the scene at hand. This explains why cognitive linguistics is basically concerned with conceptualisation which is defined as "a dynamic online cognitive process through which meaning is constructed" (Hart, 2011, p. 271).

Construal operations are indexed in texted and invited in text-consumers to create ideological cognitive representations realising discursive strategies (Hart, 2011, p. 271). What makes these construal operations crucial for CDS is that they realise alternative ideological discursive strategies as the construals they produce encode a particular representation of reality (Hart, 2014).

Different construal operations have been at the crux of several CDS analytical frameworks and approaches. More prominently, Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) have provided a theoretical framework for critical metaphor studies (Charteris-Black, 2004; Musolff, 2012). Dirven et al. (2012) maintains that conceptual metaphor theory plays a pivotal role in cognitive linguistic research on ideology mainly because it is one of the effective tools of conceptualisation. The importance of exploring metaphorical conceptualisations in CDS is that metaphors enable social subjects to access various evaluative positions to interpret the world differently (Taylor, 2018) and achieve framing effects in de-legitimising social political actions and situations (Hart, 2010, 2014). The critical metaphor studies have been applied to numerous domains in different contexts. For instance, Basarati & Kazemian (in press) explores how metaphorical conceptualisations in Iran's political discourse affect the public's perception of their identity and agency regarding the ideologically imbued state policies. Kazemian and Hatamzadeh (2025) examine the conceptualisation of COVID-19 through the framework of visual metaphor, contribute to advancing theoretical discussions on visual metaphor. Bogetic (2024) holds that the construction of collective memories regarding traumatic events such as Covid-19 through metaphorical conceptualisation of the event affect metaphor entailments that lie at the heart of social subjects' understanding of a conflictual situation. In this connection, examining the both English and Persian discourses during the COVID-19 pandemic, Kazemian and Hatamzade (2022a) maintain that the use of war metaphors in Persian discourses such as *encountering virus is war* and *virus is enemy* are the reminiscent of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), serving as influential devices to activate cooperation in practicing protective measures against the threat.

Another construal system is *perspective* which underlies positioning strategies, conceptualising where and how entities are situated with respect to the deictic centre or the position of other entities (Chilton, 2004). This construal operation is central to proximisation theory and Deictic Space Theory (Chilton, 2004; 2014). Prxomisiation is a "discursive strategy of presenting physically and temporally distant events and affairs as increasingly and negatively consequential to the speaker and her addressee" (Cap, 2013, p. 97). As Cap (2006; 2013) notes, proximisation theory is associated with public and political communications that are seeking to solicit legitimisation for certain measures. This critical discourse approach has been adopted widely in different domains such as politics and state interventionist discourses (Basarati & Zohrabi, 2024; Basarati, 2022; Cap, 2013), threat communication (Basarati & Rezaei, 2019; Basarati & Bharti, in press; Ozyumenko & Larina, 2021; Sancho, 2018; Weiss, 2017), anti-immigration discourse (Cap, 2018; 2017), health discourse (Li & Gong, 2022), environmental and climate change discourse (Mando & Stack, 2019). Different studies have adopted proximisation theory to unravel how political speakers employ threat-generating rhetoric to manufacture consent and persuade the public

to lend their legitimation to state policies. To this end, Azam (2024) explored various pragmatic-rhetoric devices of the Pakistani prime minister's victory speech. Hamed (2021) also examined the children e-books during COVID-19 pandemic to illustrate various proximisation strategies employed to construct fear and threat. Similar trend is also pursued using conceptual metaphor analysis, exploring how metaphorical conceptualisations in media discourses shape audiences' perception of illnesses or any health issues (See Hatamzade & Kazemian, 2021; Kazemian & Hatamzedeh, 2022).

Several other construal operations have been proposed and different labels applied. Hart (2011) proposed Force-Dynamic Theory (Talmy, 1988; 2000) to show how his concept-structuring system operates ideologically in discourse on immigration. He shows that force-interactive patterns are prompted by elements in texts /discourses on immigration constructing repeated representations and process of entrenchment that come to construct the discourses of immigration (Hart, 2011).

Table 1- **Construal operations and discursive strategies** (Hart, 2011, p. 272)

Strategy	Process	Attention	Comparison	Perspective
Identification/ Framing	Construal operation	Profile/Backgrounding		
		Metonymy		
		Scalar adjustment		
			Categorisation	
			Metaphor	
Positioning				Deixis
				Modality

Moreover, as table 1 indicates, Hart (2014) proposes four types of discursive strategies, namely structural configuration, framing, identification and positioning that are various construal operations involved in realising these strategies. Identification strategies concern which social actors are represented. This concerns the construction of their roles and the degree of salience (Croft & Cruse, 2004). Framing strategies concern how an entity, action, event, process or relation, through categorisation and metaphor, is attributed particular evaluative qualities or structural properties (Croft & Cruse, 2004). Positioning strategies can be deictic, epistemic or deontic, and concern the positioning of social actors or events in relation to another entity (Chilton, 2004; Cap, 2014). These key construal operations are in effect in structuring the mental spaces of the audience by utilising construal operations in discursive representations of actors and events.

The representation of social-political actors and events have always been at the core of CDS (van Leeuwen, 2008; KhosraviNik, 2010; Leipold & Winkel, 2017), as van Leeuwen (2008) places the question of "who did what to whom" the central question in CDS inquiries. The significance of actor and action analysis is mainly because ideological considerations and influence underpin various templates of conceptualisation and representation of agency and action as well as the adoption of alternative perspectives in depicting a scene- such as actor foregrounding/backgrounding a manipulation of event via nominalisation, abstraction, processualisation (van Leeuween, 2008). For instance, Hart (2013) points to ideological confrontations by presenting alternative conceptualisations of events and actors invoked in the online media reports of a political protest. Allami and Barzegar (2020) explore agency attribution in political discourses and state that political speakers allocate direct role to people in macro policy making process so as to portray a democratic image of their political systems. Rasti & Sahragard (2012) study the actor and event construal in the context of international confrontation around Iran's nuclear issue. Authors indicate that Iran's nuclear programme is delegitimised by framing it as a threat-generating event. Regarding the actors, Rasti and Sahragard (2012) indicate that while Iranian public are excluded from the representations, Israel is construed as an influential actor whose security is depicted as affected by Iran's nuclear programmes.

These studies represent a vast scholarly literature that account for the ideological discursive patterns in representing events and actors, called upon by construal operations in different contexts. However, despite this rich body of literature, there remains a pressing need to reflect on emerging socio-political and humanitarian events — particularly conflictual situations with catastrophic consequences, such as the starvation crisis in Gaza — where the involvement of various agents and the construal of the event are subject to ongoing negotiation. Placing emphasis upon events such as Gaza starvations is helpful in unravelling ideologised predispositions and patterns in alternative construal of event and involved actors.

To address these gaps, the study adopts Hart's (2014) cognitive critical discourse analysis, which offers a systematic means of examining event and actor construal through cognitive linguistic tools such as force-dynamic, transitively, figure-ground configuration, and deixis, thereby enabling a precise account of how diverse understanding of an

catastrophic event are discursively manipulated.

2.2. Cognitive Critical Discourse Analysis

This study draws on Hart's (2014) Cognitive Critical Discourse Analysis, which integrates cognitive linguistics into critical discourse work to reveal how meaning is construed in media texts. In this model, discourse is analysed through construal operations that determine how events, actors, and processes are represented. Central among these are:

Structural configuration, which concerns how events are grammatically built and roles distributed. This involves examining whether clauses are transitive or intransitive, whether they appear in active, middle, or passive voice, and how roles such as actor, patient, or beneficiary are allocated or suppressed.

Force dynamics, which conceptualises events in terms of agonists and antagonists, with relative strength, weaknesses, and outcomes determining how agency and responsibility are distributed (Talmy, 1988). This allows us to examine whether starvation is construed as the result of deliberate human agency or as an autonomous, self-propelling force.

Figure-ground organisation, which determines what is foregrounded as salient (e.g. casualties, humanitarian effects) and what is backgrounded or omitted (e.g. political agency, responsibility).

Viewing frame and scope, which relates to the proximity or distance of representation; whether events are depicted from a close-up perspective (emphasising victims and immediate suffering) or a wide-angle frame (including policy-level actions and systemic causes).

Applying these construal operations to the representation of starvation enables an examination of how media discourse depicts the crisis and the involved entities.

3. Methodology

This study applies a qualitative discourse analytical approach, grounded in the main tenets of CDS. It explores how two main Arab media outlets, Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya- represent the action and actors involved in the starvation and hunger crisis in Gaza.

3.1. Data

The data for the present study consists of 150 headlines and lead paragraphs (75 from Al-Jazeera and 75 from Al-Arabiya) published between 16 July 2025 and the time of data analysis. Data collection continued during the writing phase of the paper to ensure the recency and relevance of the material. The selected items for linguistic analysis in this paper represent various aspects of the starvation and hunger crisis in Gaza.

The choice of Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya stems from their status as two of the most influential pan-Arab satellite news networks with wide regional and international reach. Both are agenda setting outlets that play a crucial role in shaping Arab and global perceptions of Middle Eastern conflicts. Importantly, they represent contrasting editorial orientations: Al-Jazeera is often associate with a more critical stance towards Israel and Western policies, while Al-Arabiya is seen as closer to the political perspectives of Persian Gulf states, often adopting a more cautious or state-aligned discourse. Comparing these two outlets, therefore, provides a strategic lens to trace how divergent ideological positions materialise in discursive practices.

The focus on Arab world media more broadly reflects the need to analyse how the crisis of starvation in Gaza is framed within the cultural, linguistic, and political space of the Arab world. Rather than solely through Western media narratives which already dominate academic scholarship, Arab media discourses are not merely descriptive but actively participate in the politicisation and depoliticisation of the crisis, making them a critical site for examining the entanglement of representations, ideology and power in the region.

3.2. Analytical process

The analysis of the data began with systematic coding and thematisation of the collected headlines and lead paragraphs. Both components were examined closely to ensure analytical precision in identifying emerging themes. During this initial phase, three major representational themes were developed, each contributing to the construction of a distinct narrative of the starvation crisis in Gaza; starvation as Israeli-caused crisis; starvation as Israeli-exacerbated crisis; starvation as cause-free crisis.

To delve into how these representational themes led to politicisation and depoliticisation of the starvation, I recruited Hart's (2014) Cognitive Critical Discourse Analysis framework as it examines how meaning is construed in discourse through cognitive operations that shape the representation of events and actors. In this study, particular attention is given to force dynamics, figure-ground, and viewing frame. These operations allow the analysis to capture how starvation in Gaza is construed either as an apolitically driven act, through explicit agency attribution, or as a naturalised, autonomous crisis stripped of political responsibility.

4. Findings

The analysis of data indicates that the starvation and hunger crisis in Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya is represented primarily through various structural configurations in event construal and construction of agency and responsibilities implicated in bringing this condition into reality. Guided by broader strategic and macro policies and ideologies, both media outlets construct distinct narratives, framing the starvation, agents and political actors, and geopolitical context. Through these narratives and representational choices, this issue has no longer been treated solely as ethical or humanitarian concerns but has instead been absorbed into political and ideological labyrinths, where political intentions are prioritised.

The preliminary analysis of data suggests that construal operations — such as schematisation, categorisation, viewing frame, and point of view — have extensively underpinned the discursive construction of hunger and starvation in ways that align with their macro policies and ideological frameworks of the media outlets. To ensure rigor in providing precise accounts of discursive enactment of politicisation and depoliticisation, I systematically coded and thematised the data before proceeding with analysis. This allows for a close examination of the thematic categorisation related to the event construal and agent representation. In what follows, I shall examine the discursive strategies and construal operations recruited by both media outlets in representing hunger and starvation in Gaza.

4.1. Representation of starvation and hunger in Al-Jazeera

Al-Jazeera's portrayal of starvation and hunger in Gaza is layered and complex, involving distinct discursive strategies and construal operations. This diversity frames the starvation as a multi-dimensional political issue, shaped by the intricacies of intervention of different forces and factors and particular context in Palestine and Gaza. Aljazeera's representation of this humanitarian crisis is manufactured through a two-fold thematic viewpoint: The starvation as *an Israeli-caused and an Israeli-exacerbated crisis*. Through this thematic representation, the central focus is on the construction of Israel's role and agency in the materialisation of this condition, which becomes a primary locus for ideological contestations.

4.1.1. The starvation as an Israeli caused and exacerbated crisis

In representing Israel as an agent of causing and escalating the starvation in Gaza, the pertinent headlines and lead paragraphs perform complementary roles. As table (2) shows, while headlines navigate public attentions towards the starvation and hunger as a crisis *per se*, lead paragraphs construct Israel's role and agency differently in the emergence of this condition. Here, table (2) presents a sample of headlines and lead paragraphs portraying the starvation issue from varying viewing angles.

Table 2- Starvation as an Israeli caused and escalated crisis

No.	News Outlet	Date	Headline	Lead paragraph
1	Al-Jazeera	20-07-2025	Dozens of Palestinians killed seeking food as Gaza starves	Dozens of Palestinians have been killed while trying to get food from aid sites run by the notorious US-backed Gaza Humanitarian Foundation. As Israel starves Palestinians, the Arabic hashtag 'Gaza is dying of hunger' is trending, with thousands trying to raise awareness of their plight.
2	Al-Jazeera	22-07-2025	No food, no aid: hunger is killing people in Gaza	Israel's blockade has plunged Gaza into an increasingly dire malnutrition crisis. As hunger spreads across the Strip, children are dying from malnutrition, aid workers are collapsing, and hospitals are overwhelmed.
3	Al-Jazeera	24-07-2025	How Israel pushed Gaza to breaking point, 'starving, alone, and hunted'	Through its unrelenting war on Gaza, Israel has killed over 59,000 Palestinians, injured 143,000 others, and pushed hundreds of thousands into forced starvation caused by its blockade on the enclave and its militarised distribution system.
4	Al-Jazeera	26-07-2025	'Israeli attacks, forced starvation kill more than 70 Palestinians in Gaza	The Israeli military has killed dozens of people in Gaza as the starvation crisis in the territory deepens amid an international outcry, with more Palestinians dying of malnutrition.

In table (1), headline (1) employs a range of representational strategies which align with Hart's (2014) framework for construal operations in media discourse. The opening clause "Dozens of Palestinians killed" instantiates agent omission through passive voice, thereby backgrounding the human agency responsible for killings. This omission directs cognitive salience away from the perpetrator and onto the Palestinian victims, who are construed as force recipients in a unidirectional transactive action schema (Talmy, 2000; Hart, 2014). The syntactic removal of the force source invites the reader to conceptualise the deaths as outcomes rather than as the result of deliberate human agency. However, in this headline, the circumstantial phrase "seeking food" shifts the construal from one of pure passivity to a goal-oriented schema, in which Palestinians are represented as active agents, striving for survival. This broadens the viewing frame and frames the killing as occurring within a larger deprivation context. The final clause "as Gaza starves", in this connection, operates as circumstantial grounding for the event. In terms of figure-ground alignment, the death is foregrounded as the figure while starvation is backgrounded as contextual ground. This reflects Hart's (2014) observation that in headline information structure, new information tends to occupy the figure position.

The lead paragraph in (1) also begins with a similar agent-suppressing passive ("have been killed") but partially restores agency through the prepositional phrase "by the notorious US-backed Gaza Humanitarian Foundation". This introduces mediated and agency, which is retrievable only through inferential relations, and a causal chain in which US involvement is backgrounded but recoverable. The clause "As Israel starves Palestinians", then explicitly attributes direct agency to Israel, shifting the construal to an asymmetric force-dynamic relationship in which Israel is the antagonist exerting physical and existential force on Palestinians, the agonists (see Kazemian et al., 2022).

The closing reference to the trending hashtag "Gaza is dying of hunger" reframes the narrative into a reciprocal force-dynamic schema: Israel applies physical deprivation as force, while Arab social media users engage in symbolic counterforce via awareness raising. This creates a dual conflict space — one physical, one discursive — revealing the interaction between material violence and mediated resistance in the cognitive model of the event.

Headline (2), unlike (1), provides the audience with a close shot of circumstance in Gaza by foregrounding starvation and hapless situation using the circumstantial phrases "no food, no aid". In Hart's (2014) terms, these operate as grounding information that primes the mental space with a context of acute deprivation before the main process is introduced. This construction places the audience immediately inside a deprivation schema that frames all subsequent information.

Within this context, the core clause "hunger is killing people in Gaza" construes hunger — a consequence of human agency — as the direct force source in an asymmetrical force-dynamic schema. Here, the human agency responsible for producing hunger is suppressed through de-agentivisation and reification (van Leeuwen, 2008); hunger is conceptualised as an autonomous agent, effectively backgrounding the political and structural causes. This shifts the construal from a politically accountable causation model to one resembling naturalised threat model, where the cause appears inherent to the situation rather than imposed.

The lead paragraph in (2), in contract, makes Israel's agency linguistically recoverable in the opening sentence: "Israel's blockade has plunged Gaza into an increasingly dire malnutrition crisis." the causative construction (has plunged) situates Israel's blockade as the initiating force, or an onset causation (Talmy, 2000), in a unidirectional transactive action schema, where Gaza is the patient undergoing the change of state. However, this construal still positions Israel's role at a policy level rather than depicting it as a direct, continuous actor in the act of starvation. The agency is mediated through policy repercussion rather than represented as ongoing physical enforcement. Subsequent clause ("As hunger spreads...children are dying...hospitals are overwhelmed...") revert to hunger-as-agent constructions, again foregrounding the proximal, abstract agent (hunger) while backgrounding the distal, concrete agent (Israel).

The oscillation between proximal autonomous agents and distal policy agents (Israel's blockade) reflects a shifting perspective-taking strategy: while the text occasionally recenters political agency, it also frequently returns to a naturalised construal in which starvation is portrayed as a self-propelling force.

Headline (3) assigns direct, proximal agency to Israel through the active, causative verb "pushed". Framed as the presupposition within a content question structure, Israel's agency is taken for granted rather than argued for, signaling it as a given fact in the mental model of event. The causative construction situates Israel as the force source driving Gaza towards a critical state schema defined by the triad "starving, alone, and hunted". This adjectival cluster compresses humanitarian deprivation, isolation, and targeted violence into a single construal, producing a high-intensity force-dynamic configuration in which Israel exerts continuous pressure across multiple domains.

Likewise, the lead paragraph elaborates on this direct agency. It opens with an instrumental clause ("Through its unrelenting war on Gaza"), which functions as a circumstantial ground situating the cause of the humanitarian crisis in Israel's military campaign. This is followed by a sequence of transactive action clauses (has killed...", "injured...", "pushed..." into forced starvation") that sustain Israel's role as primary antagonist in a unidirectional force-dynamic schema. Importantly, the clause ("pushed hundreds of thousands into forced starvation") frames starvation not as a natural or autonomous process but as the direct result of deliberate, human-imposed force.

Unlike earlier examples where Israel's involvement was mediated through policy terms, here the text integrates both the policy cause and its operational mechanisms within the same construal: "caused by its blockage on the enclave and its militarised distribution system". This addition widens the viewing frame, revealing the procedural nature of the policy and its active enforcement. This reflects a construal in which the distal policy and the proximal operational force are co-present in the discourse space, maintaining Israel's agency across both abstract and concrete levels.

Headline (4) construes an event within a unidirectional transactive force-dynamic schema. Strikingly, the two nominalised elements — "Israeli attacks" and "forced starvation" — are co-positioned as objectivated force sources (van Leeuwen, 2008), each functioning as an autonomous antagonist. This grammatical configuration serves any causal link between military attacks and starvation, treating them as parallel but independent events. While "Israeli attacks" retains an implicit trace of human agency, "forced starvation" is fully de-agentivised, omitting the human actors who impose it. This construal diminishes the perception of Israel's active role in starvation process and, unlike earlier examples where causality was foregrounded, it shifts the cognitive model towards event naturalisation for the famine component.

In the last lead paragraph, Israel's agency is reintroduced explicitly in the opening clause: "The Israeli military has killed dozens of people in Gaza." This maintains a proximal agency construal for the killings. However, the starvation crisis is relegated to an adverbial clause ("as the starvation crisis...deepens"), functioning as circumstantial ground rather than figure. In this secondary role, "starvation crisis" is presented as a self-propelling process, aggravating the humanitarian situation without attribution to an initiating human force. This mirrors the autonomous agent construal noted in earlier examples of hunger-as-agent, which effectively shifts moral accountability away from political actors. The final clause ("with more Palestinians dying of malnutrition") sustains this abstraction, further reinforcing starvation as an internal, ongoing process rather than the deliberate outcome of external agency.

The overall effect is a split agency model: proximal agency for acts of killing and zero agency for starvation. This creates a fragmented force-dynamic representation, in which different forms of violence are cognitively processed under separate causal schemas.

4.2. Representation of starvation and hunger in Al-Arabiya

Unlike Al-Jazeera, the discursive strategies and representational techniques employed in Al-Arabiya's rhetoric attempt to make a homogenised narrative of starvation dominant in the public opinion. This political-discursive action is extensively delivered through systematic dismissal of agency and involved actors. Besides, the starvation crisis appears as a cause-free, self-propelling, and natural catastrophic event; an autonomous process unfolding independently of deliberate human action. This is achieved through discursive de-agentivisaion and naturalisation, often realised by objectivisation and reification. In the following, by utilising cognitive linguistic toolkit, I shall illumine how Al-Arabiya headlines and lead paragraphs contribute to manufacturing narrative and discursive unanimity surrounding the starvation crisis.

Table 3- The representation of cause-free crisis

No.	News Outlet	Date	Headline	Lead paragraph
1	Al-Arabiya	25-07-2025	Five children starved to death at a Gaza hospital and emaciated babies are pouring in	Five starving children at a Gaza City hospital were wasting away, and nothing the doctors tried was working. The basic treatments for malnourishment that could save them had run out under Israel's blockade. The alternatives were ineffective.
2	Al-Arabiya	29-07-2025	More aid needed to tackle famine-like conditions in Gaza, WFP says	A long-term steady supply of aid is needed to counter the worsening hunger crisis in Gaza, UN agencies said on Monday after mounting pressure prompted Israel to ease restrictions in the Palestinian enclave.
3	Al-Arabiya	29-07-2025	Gaza death toll hits 60,000 as global monitor demands action to avert famine	A worst-case scenario of famine is unfolding in Gaza and immediate action is needed to avoid widespread death, a hunger monitor warned on Tuesday, as the number of Palestinians reported killed in the conflict crossed the 60,000 threshold.
4	Al-Arabiya	30-07-2025	Why there hasn't been a formal declaration of famine in Gaza	A long-term steady supply of aid is needed to counter the worsening hunger crisis in Gaza, UN agencies said on Monday after mounting pressure prompted Israel to ease restrictions in the Palestinian enclave.

Headline (1) construes the event through an intransitive construction ("starved to death") in which starvation functions as the proximal antagonist in the force-dynamic schema, afflicting the five Gazan children. The coordinated clause "emaciated babies are pouring in" sustains the humanitarian scene by foregrounding the influx of victims, while omitting any human force source responsible for the deprivation. In terms of figure–ground alignment, the figure is the visible suffering ("deaths", "emaciation"), while the political or military causality is relegated to the background — absent from the immediate construal space.

In the same vein, the lead paragraph in (1) objectivises the starvation process through the adjectival phrase "Five starving children", reducing an ongoing deprivation process to a static descriptive quality. This aligns with reification and de-agentivisation, shifting the representation from dynamic political act to humanitarian condition. The next shift in terminology, from "starvation" to "malnourishment", further mitigates the severity of the crisis through lexical softening, while introducing a medical discourse space via "treatment". This reframing moves the force-dynamic structure away from antagonistic human agency toward a curative intervention schema, where the primary action is "saving" rather than "preventing deprivation." Israel's blockade appears only as a distal antagonist, narrowly linked to the lack of treatment rather than to starvation itself. The result is a split force dynamic: proximal force (starvation) as naturalised, distal force (Israel) as policy-limited, with humanitarian suffering kept firmly in the foreground and political agency in the background.

Headline (2) foregrounds the solution frame ("more aid needed") rather than the cause, immediately situating the crisis within a humanitarian intervention schema rather than a conflict schema. The antagonist in the force-dynamic configuration is the "famine-like conditions", a hedged and mitigated description that downscales the severity of the crisis. This lexical mitigation naturalises the event, making it appear less urgent as a politically caused catastrophe and more as a difficult but manageable humanitarian situation. The figure–ground alignment here privileges the requirement for aid (figure) while pushing the political origins of deprivation into the ground.

The lead paragraph in (2) continues this pattern, describing a "hunger crisis" in purely situational terms, with no explicit actor assigned. The only human agency appears in the final clause ("after mounting pressure prompted Israel to ease restrictions") where Israel is represented not as the initiator of deprivation but as a reactive force responding to external pressure. In the force-dynamic schema, Israel's role is shifted from antagonist to a pressured actor who performs an easing action, effectively softening accountability. This maintains a cause-free framing: the suffering is foregrounded, the agent is backgrounded, and the dominant reading position is humanitarian rather than political.

Similar rhetorical moves can be persistently found in the next examples. The headline (3) is framed around quantification ("death toll hits 60,000"), which foregrounds the outcome of violence rather than its cause. This is an instance of agent omission: the transactive force that led to the deaths is backgrounded, while the event ("death toll") is objectivised as the grammatical subject. Thus, the process of killing is construed as an intransitive process—a state that has "hit" a numerical threshold—rather than a transactive action carried out by an identifiable agent. From a force-dynamic perspective, the deaths appear as the product of an autonomous process, without attribution to a human force source.

The second clause shifts the focus to an external institutional actor ("global monitor"), which is granted agency in the form of demand-making ("demands action"). This creates a figure-ground reversal: the humanitarian monitor is foregrounded as the actor, while the deaths themselves serve as circumstantial context. The long shot viewing frame thus displaces responsibility from that enacting violence to those monitoring and responding.

The lead paragraph (3) sustains this self-propelling crisis construal: famine is construed as an autonomous process "unfolding" rather than a consequence of deliberate policies. This is a case of objectivation and reification, through which famine is animated as a force source in its own right. The modality "immediate action is needed" invokes a deontic necessity schema, foregrounding humanitarian urgency while masking political agency.

The institutional actor, "a hunger monitor," again occupies the role of active agent. In figure-ground terms, the monitor's voice (warning) is foregrounded, while Israel's role is completely backgrounded. At the same time, the phrase "Palestinians reported killed in the conflict" represents deaths through nominalisation and a reporting frame. The source of killing remains backgrounded; "conflict" functions as a distal agent, a de-agentivised label that naturalises the violence.

Thus said, in force-dynamic terms, two competing construals emerge:

- Autonomous processes (famine "unfolding," death toll "crossing thresholds") act as force sources without human agents.
- Institutional intervention (monitor warning, demand for action) provides the counterforce.

The headline (40 is framed as a content question, which foregrounds the absence of a declaration ("there hasn't been a formal declaration") rather than the famine itself. This construal redirects attention from the event (starvation and deaths) to the administrative act of naming it as famine. In figure–ground terms, the humanitarian crisis is backgrounded as context, while the procedural action of formal recognition is foregrounded as figure.

From a force-dynamic perspective, no human agent is assigned responsibility for either the famine or the lack of

declaration. Instead, the non-event ("hasn't been declared") is construed as a self-standing state of affairs, a cause-free construal.

In the lead paragraph (4), the institutional authority (the unnamed organisation) is foregrounded as the force source responsible for speech acts (reporting, predicting). The famine itself is represented as a self-propelling event ("is currently playing out"), again with no direct human agency behind it. In figure–ground organisation, institutional discourse is figure, while starvation is ground.

The second clause ("It predicted widespread death without immediate action") frames death as a hypothetical inevitability rather than the outcome of identifiable political actions. The only force dynamic introduced is conditional ("without immediate action"), which generalises responsibility without specifying who should act.

5. Discussion

This section discusses how the micro-analysis of media representation of starvation in Gaza inform about the agency attribution, role allocation, and event construal. As shown in the previous section, the two leading Arab media outlets—Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya—are positioned at distinct representational poles. Al-Jazeera endeavours to construct agency and allocate responsibility to identifiable actors, while Al-Arabiya moves towards agentless constructions that promote a cause-free picture of the crisis. Put differently, agency and event construal in this study unfold along a continuum, with the extremes comprising full agency allocation on one side and agentless representation on the other, while mediated agency lies in between. Al-Jazeera's discourse oscillates between the full and mediated positions, whereas Al-Arabiya consistently situates its depictions at the agentless end. These rhetorical and discursive moves can be interpreted as political actions in themselves, leading to the opposing processes of de-naturalisation and naturalisation, respectively.

In Al-Jazeera's portrayal, starvation in Gaza is framed through diverse discursive strategies that produce a polycentric construction of agency. Two interrelated themes dominate this discourse. First, Israel is represented as an immediate actor whose agency serves both humanitarian and political functions: headlines frequently constrict the viewing frame to highlight the victims and consequences of starvation, while lead paragraphs attribute direct responsibility to Israel's military actions or policies. This duality is evident in examples such as headlines and leads 1 and 3, where differing representational strategies ultimately converge to highlight Israel's involvement. Second, event construal in Al-Jazeera often foregrounds context, impacts, and casualties rather than agency itself. However, once role allocation is introduced, the construal shifts into a transactive frame in which Israel is recoverable as the causal source. In examples 2 and 4, for instance, Israel's role is backgrounded yet remains implicit at the polity level, suggesting systematic responsibility even when it is not explicitly foregrounded.

The dynamicity of these representations—moving between explicit attribution, mediated responsibility, and contextualisation—creates a polyphonic discourse space. Within this space, starvation is not presented as a closed narrative but as a contested issue that invites negotiation around agency, consequences, casualties, and policies. This multiplicity generates antagonism in Mouffe's sense, as competing perspectives emerge to attract public attention and shape hegemonic and de-naturalised narratives.

By contrast, Al-Arabiya constructs starvation as a naturalised, self-standing catastrophe devoid of any human involvement. Agency is systematically silenced, and the crisis is depicted as an autonomous process—an illness, a famine, or a "hunger crisis"—that simply afflicts Gaza. This reification and objectification of the crisis remove political and state actors from the frame, reducing starvation to a mono-dimensional humanitarian disaster. Such construals in Mouffe's (2005) terms, suppress antagonism and foreclose the possibility of alternative interpretations. By representing starvation as an unnegotiable, naturally occurring phenomenon, Al-Arabiya sutures the space of difference and reinforces a homogenised narrative that resists contestation.

The consequences of this naturalisation are not limited to narrative homogenisation. Drawing on Rancière (1999), such discursive silencing denies victims (plebians as in Rancière) political voice to articulate their suffering as a matter of injustice. When starvation is naturalised as catastrophe, the affected subjects are positioned as passive sufferers rather than as agents with claims against political structures. Their potential to disrupt dominant narratives is muted, ensuring the hegemony of discourse.

The divergence between Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya thus illustrates two competing modes of Arab media discourse on Gaza. Al-Jazeera situates starvation within a conflictual field where responsibility and accountability are openly contested, thereby amplifying antagonism and sustaining discursive plurality. Al-Arabiya, in contrast, the crisis is depicted through naturalisation and agent suppression, producing a narrative that frames starvation as an unavoidable humanitarian affliction rather than a politically driven outcome. This polarity highlights how Arab media do not simply report events but actively participate in shaping their political meaning and preferred ideology: either opening space for alternative voices and contestation or foreclosing such possibilities through homogenisation. The findings therefore underscore the role of media discourse as a site of political struggle, where denaturalization and homogenisation are enacted as political actions through linguistic and representational choices that ultimately shape public perceptions of justice, responsibility, and humanitarian crisis.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined how two leading Arab media outlets, Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, discursively represent starvation in Gaza, focusing on the attribution of agency, role allocation, and event construal. The analysis, conducted through Hart's (2014) Cognitive Critical Discourse Analysis, has shown that the representation of starvation is not a mere matter of reporting humanitarian facts but rather a deeply political act shaped through rhetorical and cognitive strategies.

The findings reveal a sharp divergence in the representational trajectories of the two outlets. Al-Jazeera's discourse de-naturalizes starvation by foregrounding Israel's agency and embedding the crisis within a conflictual field where multiple layers of causality, responsibility, and consequences are brought into negotiation. This discursive strategy sustains antagonism and renders the narrative open to alternative voices and contestation. In contrast, Al-Arabiya homogenizes the crisis through de-agentivisation, naturalisation, and framing starvation as a self-propelling humanitarian catastrophe. This rhetorical choice sutures antagonism and forecloses discursive plurality, aligning the crisis with a homogenized humanitarian script in which structural and political responsibilities are silenced.

Theoretically, the study advances the existing literature on event construal by showing how these processes can be observed in media discourse through the micro-mechanisms of agency construction and event construal. It demonstrates that media discourse itself is a site of political struggle, where linguistic and cognitive strategies either enable or suppress the emergence of antagonistic contestation. Methodologically, it underscores the utility of cognitive approaches in CDS for uncovering how subtle rhetorical and representational strategies contribute to larger ideological projects.

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