



## WAR NARRATIVES IN METAPHORICAL FRAMING: AN ANALYSIS OF CONNOTATIVE MEANINGS IN CNN ARABIC NEWS HEADLINES ON THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to understand the meanings of words and phrases that carry connotative meanings and to identify the types of words or phrases used in CNN Arabic news headlines about the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The research method is qualitative with a descriptive-analytical approach. The data for this study includes all news headlines related to the Russia-Ukraine conflict under the world news section on the CNN Arabic website. The data source is the CNN Arabic website. The theory used for data analysis is the theory of denotative and connotative meanings proposed by Ahmad Mukhtar Umar in his book *'Ilmu al-Dilalah'*. The results of the study show that there are 33 CNN Arabic news headlines that contain connotative meanings. Among the 33 headlines, there are 22 types of word choices, phrases, and sentences used. 6 dictions contain metaphors of place names and geographical areas, 5 dictions contain metaphors of human body parts, 4 data metaphorical narratives containing expressive emotions, 4 data that figure situations in war, and 3 data that describe the form and condition of a character. This dominance emphasizes the media's goal to attract public attention with concrete narratives that are in line with the implications of this study for public awareness of metaphorical meanings.

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## INTRODUCTION

Mass media containing news holds a crucial position in shaping the readers' mindset, and this should not be underestimated. Not every sentence presented in the mass media can be interpreted literally, as each utterance often carries rhetorical elements, emotional nuances, and particular sentiments from the speaker or writer (Ma'arif & Widadt, 2023). As noted by Hariadi et al., the language used in news must be engaging and supported by appropriate word choices (Anggraeni & Hariadi, 2021). Connotative words are often used to increase readers' interest in a news story (Dia & Rosydah, 2021). Therefore, in addition to understanding utterances in their denotative sense, people must also be able to interpret them connotatively in order to avoid misinterpretation. Connotative meaning is the meaning that a word carries according to what is implied or suggested descriptively (Farid, 2017). According to Mukhtar Umar, this type of meaning is an extension of the basic or denotative meaning, and it does not have a fixed or universally encompassing definition. Instead, this meaning can change depending on culture, time, or the contextual information surrounding that meaning (Umar, 1998).

One influential media outlet, CNN Arabic, tends to carry connotative meanings in its headlines. Specifically, the news coverage of the Russia-Ukraine conflict between February and April 2022 featured connotative headlines. Therefore, the connotative meaning of CNN Arabic's headlines needs to be examined, as public misunderstanding of the narratives in these headlines could lead to ideological conflict in their opinions. Furthermore, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has had a massive impact on the entire global community. The Russia-Ukraine conflict began long ago, in 1991, when Ukraine sought independence and Russia established the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) (Syuryansyah & Berthanila, 2022). After the first conflict, another conflict erupted the following year, until in February 2022, war between the two countries erupted again (Saeri et al., 2023). From this conflict, news narratives emerged, and the world responded with various assumptions. Therefore, so that the discourse in this headline is not interpreted solely based on assumptions, it needs to be studied scientifically, especially in revealing the connotative meaning in semantic science.

Many studies have been conducted on the Ukraine-Russia conflict. A study by (Kareem, 2023) showed that the news website Rudaw and BBC Arabic used different framing methods in representing the conflict. The findings indicated that BBC Arabic was more biased towards Ukraine. Furthermore, research by Teniou et al., (2025) also showed differences in the framing of the Ukraine-Russia conflict between Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya. Teniou et al., (2025), described both as focusing more on political and military aspects, but differing in their emphasis on humanitarian and economic issues. Muwafi et al., (2024), highlighted differences in the use of language to construct different narratives in representing Ukraine and Russia. Their findings confirm that language is a powerful tool in framing the conflict for Arab audiences. Elareshi et al., (2025), on the other hand, demonstrated how images depicting war were chosen to reinforce each side's narrative in Arab media. In this case, the findings (Elareshi et al., 2025) show that the focus of the images that tend to be highlighted is related to the suffering of Ukrainian civilians.

Numerous studies on Arab media coverage of the Ukraine-Russia conflict demonstrate how news framing influences public perception of the war. Musa (2023) study identified that Arab media in the Gulf selectively chose and ignored certain topics in their reporting to shape narratives that emphasized geopolitics over humanitarian issues. Fahim (2025) examined biases in reporting created by Arab media to influence

public opinion. Arab media even linked the conflict to the regional context of the Middle East (Ziani, 2024). Similarly, research by Sulzhytski et al., (2024) used semantic network analysis to evaluate interconnected terms and concepts in reporting on the Russia-Ukraine conflict and found that semantic networks revealed differences in the representation of actors, events, and roles in media narratives. Similarly, Verbytska, (2024) study also used a semantic perspective to uncover the relationships between key terms that shape the representation of war news, thereby enriching understanding of how conflict is linguistically constructed by the media.

The linguistic narratives in CNN Arabic news headlines related to international conflicts have also been studied by Rizova & Panayotova (2021). In this case, they revealed a comparison of the framing of headlines by Al Jazeera, BBC, and CNN regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They found significant differences in how the three networks structured online news headlines and supporting images in English. Another study of CNN Arabic news coverage was conducted by Janabi (2020), who found CNN Arabic framing in the Iraq issue. He revealed that political framing was the most dominant, particularly in the subcategory of parliamentary legislation. The second most common framing was security, with ISIS being the most frequently placed subcategory in the headlines and news content. Furthermore, Kasma et al., (2021) in their study revealed that CNN Arabic headlines posted on Facebook tended to use figurative language with five types of language and three types of meaning.

Based on the above studies, we can identify a tendency towards news reporting that uncovers framing, convention, and tendentiousness. However, those that uncover news narratives related to the Ukraine-Russia conflict from a semantic perspective are scarce. Those that have been found tend to explore language strategies. This contrasts with the current study, which emphasizes the exploration of meaning, specifically connotative meaning. In this case, each news headline used in the research data will identify the connotative meaning of the denotative image by focusing on the types of words and phrases used. Those that examine the meaning of figurative language tend to describe and elaborate on the types rather than emphasizing the comprehensive meaning of each word form used. Therefore, from a theoretical perspective, this research is expected to contribute novelty to semantic studies, particularly the exploration of connotative and denotative meanings that examine news narratives, especially headlines. From a practical perspective, this research can serve as a reference and guide for the public in interpreting news language more intensively and sensitively to connotative contexts.

## **METHOD**

This research is classified as a descriptive qualitative design, because this study requires a deeper study of the meaning of the news headlines studied. It is grouped into qualitative research because it questions meaning more than data frequency. The data taken are news headlines from the online media CNN Arabic. These news headlines specifically cover the news about the Russia-Ukraine conflict in the theme column *العالم*, within the posting period from February 24, 2022, to April 5, 2022. The source of the data for this study was taken from CNN Arabic, which is part of the CNN news network from an Arabic perspective. CNN Arabic was chosen as the data source for this study because the news headlines on this news platform use many connotative meanings in them, making it very suitable and supporting this research. The data in the form of news headlines themed Russia-Ukraine conflict was chosen because the conflict between the

two countries has a significant impact on other countries, so research on headlines, especially in identifying connotative meanings from a semantic perspective, needs to be studied to avoid misunderstandings for news readers regarding this conflict.

The data collection technique used in this research is the observation method (*metode simak*), which involves observing the use of language, both spoken and written, followed by the documentation method (Mahsun, 2017). The documentation method refers to collecting data in the form of images, sketches, or photos from past events (Sugiyono, 2008). The steps for data collection are as follows: *First*, observing and reading CNN Arabic online news headlines about the Russia-Ukraine conflict under the “World” (العالم) section, within the publication range from February 24, 2022, to April 5, 2022. *Second*, documenting the headlines that meet the criteria as research data. The data analysis technique used in this study involves several steps: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions.

## RESULT

Based on the time frame from February 24, 2022, to April 5, 2022, there were 33 news headlines that contained linguistic narratives that require connotative interpretation. Of the 33 articles found, there were 22 different words/phrases that needed their connotative meanings identified, as they contained metaphorical narratives. These metaphorical words, phrases, and sentences were identified through diction related to place names and geographical regions, actions relevant to the context of war, expressive emotional language, descriptions of parts of the human body, and the characterization or situations of figures depicted in the headlines.

### Place Names and Geographical Regions

In news coverage related to the Ukraine-Russia conflict, there are word choices used by CNN Arabic to describe a form and condition using place names and geographical regions. Among them are the words “the West” (الغرب), “no-fly zone” (حظر طيران), “Pentagon” (البتاغون), “White House” (البيت الأبيض), and “the world” (العالم).

#### Data 1. Place Names And Geographical Regions

مستشار الرئيس الأوكرين لـ CNN: هذا ما نحتاجه من الغرب اليوم  
بسبب أوكرانيا.. أردوغان يوجه انتقادات للغرب والناو: اکتفوا بتقديم النصائح  
مسؤول غريب لـ CNN القوات الروسية متأخرة كثيرا عن جدوها الزمني في أوكرانيا  
أسبوع على الغزو.. مسؤولون غربيون يكشفون CNN حجم خسائر القوات الروسية والأوكرانية

*Ukrainian President's Advisor to CNN: This is what we need from the West today  
Due to Ukraine... Erdogan criticizes the West and NATO: Stop just giving advice  
Strange official to CNN: Russian forces are far behind their timeline in Ukraine  
A week after the invasion... Western officials reveal to CNN the scale of Russian  
and Ukrainian forces' losses*

The word with a connotative meaning in the headline above is “الغرب” (the West). The denotative meaning of “الغرب” refers to one of the cardinal directions, opposite of the East. However, considering the context of the sentence, “الغرب” here refers to the Western

world, which includes countries located in Europe, the Americas, and Australia. This term is often associated with countries that are predominantly white. Therefore, not only the countries in the Western world are included, but also Israel, Australia, Turkey, and New Zealand are considered part of the West. In this context, the term “the West” or “Western world” does not have a geographical connotation but rather a political connotation, referring to Western countries and NATO member states that support Ukraine in its conflict with Russia.

#### Data 2. Place Names And Geographical Regions

البيت الأبيض يرد على طلب زيلينسكي بفرض منطقة حظر طيران في أوكرانيا

*The White House responds to Zelensky's request to impose a no-fly zone in Ukraine.*

“حظر” is the object of the verb, and it is in the form of a *mashdar* (verbal noun). Its denotative meaning is to prohibit or prevent something. The word “طيران” is a *mudhaf ilaih* and also a *mashdar*, denoting a physical entity that moves in the air using wings. Together, it denotes the concept of a no-fly zone. However, when interpreted connotatively, this term does not include everything that flies but rather carries the connotative meaning of the airspace boundary for aircraft, regulated by laws set by a particular country or region. In this case, the flying object in the denotative sense refers to an airplane. Only airplanes are the focus in this connotative interpretation, as in this context, an airplane is the object regulated by the no-fly zone. These regulations are usually implemented to maintain the security of airspace and prevent conflicts between countries. Furthermore, this restriction can be applied during certain situations, such as war or when a country faces external threats. Therefore, although any flying object could physically be in the air, it is only airplanes that are subject to this regulation

#### Expressive Emotional

##### Data 3. Expressive Emotional

الرئيس الأوكراني يحذر الغرب: الحرب ستطرق أبوابكم إن لم تساعدونا

*The Ukrainian President warns the West: The war will knock on your doors if you do not help us*

The headline above falls under a title that contains a connotative meaning, as it includes several words that cannot be directly explained or understood by their basic meanings. One of these is the word “الغرب” as previously discussed. Additionally, there is the phrase “ستطرق أبوابكم”. The literal meaning of “ستطرق أبوابكم” is “will knock on your doors.” However, considering the context of the sentence, connotatively, this phrase means that something (in this case, war or threat) will soon arrive or attack their territory and lives if no action is taken. This expression is used to convey a warning or threat, suggesting that the consequences will soon be felt in more distant places if this conflict is not addressed. In the overall context, the Ukrainian President is warning Western countries that if they do not provide the necessary assistance, the ongoing war in Ukraine could spread and threaten their territories. The implication is that the inability or unwillingness of Western countries to support Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression

could risk expanding the impact of the conflict, ultimately threatening the stability and security of the Western countries themselves.

#### Data 4. Expressive Emotional

صافرات إنذار في كييف والحكومية تطلب من السكان النزول إلى الملاجئ

*Air raid sirens in Kyiv, and the government urges residents to take shelter*

The word with a connotative meaning in the headline above is “تطلب”, as it cannot be understood directly. The word “تطلب” is in the form of a *fi'il mudhari* (present tense verb) and is a *tarkib isnadi* (syntactic construction) from a *jumlah fi'liyah* (verbal sentence). Denotatively, it means an effort to find and take something. The headline states that “the siren asks the citizens,” while a siren cannot literally ask citizens to leave. Therefore, within the context, the word “تطلب” here means to signal or warn the citizens to take shelter. The use of this word also portrays the siren as a communication tool that sends out warnings. Furthermore, the use of this word adds a dramatic effect, as it depicts the siren as if it plays an active role in protecting the citizens. Overall, the connotation of “تطلب” strengthens the urgency of the warning, making it more pressing and meaningful.

#### Actions Relevant to the Situation of Warfare

There are several word choices in the CNN Arabic headline related to the Russia-Ukraine conflict that demonstrate metaphorical diction related to actions in the context of warfare. These actions do not carry a denotative meaning. Instead, they contain connotative meanings that need to be more explicitly uncovered. Among them are the words “downfall” (إسقاط), “step” (خطوة), “advance” or “forward movement” (تقدم), and “laying down arms” (نلقي السلاح).

#### Data 5. Actions Relevant to the Situation of Warfare

مسؤول في الناتو لجن: روسيا تبطئ تقدمها في أوكرانيا بهدف التفاوض

*A NATO Official to CNN: Russia is Slowing Its Advance in Ukraine to Negotiate*

The word with a connotative meaning is the term “تقدم”, which functions as a *maful bih* and is a *tarkib isnadi* from a *jumlah fi'liyah*. Denotatively, “تقدم” refers to forward movement. However, the connotative meaning of “تقدم” is forward movement that signifies an attack or military maneuver. Therefore, the overall connotative meaning is that Russia is slowing down its military advance in Ukraine with the goal of facilitating further negotiations or diplomacy. The term “تقدم” carries a meaning beyond just physical movement, as in this context, it refers to strategic progress in warfare. This forward movement does not only indicate the distance covered but also encompasses deeper military intentions, such as controlling territory or achieving specific tactical objectives. In this case, Russia is slowing its troops' advance to allow space for diplomatic processes or negotiations, aiming towards an agreement or conflict resolution. This step reflects a strategy to maintain positions while opening up opportunities for broader dialogue, rather than merely continuing military aggression.

#### Data 6. Actions Relevant to the Situation of Warfare

يلفي للرئيس الأوكراني في شوارع كييف: لن نلقي السلاح

*Ukrainian President in the Streets of Kyiv: We Will Not Lay Down Our Arms*

“نلقي السلاح” has the form of a *tarkib isnadi* from a *jumlah fi'liyah* and denotatively means “to lay down arms.” However, in its connotative meaning, the phrase does not refer to physically placing weapons on the ground, floor, or earth. Instead, “laying down arms” here carries the connotative meaning of surrender and ceasing to resist the Russian forces. The term “السلاح” in this context has a deeper meaning than just physically laying down weapons. Denotatively, “السلاح” refers to weapons or instruments of combat, which can be understood as objects used in warfare. However, in its connotative sense, laying down arms is not just a physical act, but a symbol of surrender or cessation of resistance. This phrase indicates that the party involved will no longer continue the conflict, surrendering to the situation, and ceasing efforts to fight, in this case, against Russian forces. It suggests that this action is more related to a political or military decision to stop fighting, rather than just a physical act of placing weapons down.

#### Human Body Parts

There are four words that use metaphors derived from parts of the human body found in the headlines. These include “bleeding” (دموية), “heart” (قلب), “lungs” (الرئتين), “tongue” (لسان), and “arm” (ذراع).

#### Data 7. Human Body Parts

مع استعداد كييف للأسوأ.. مراسل CNN ينقل المشهد من قلب المدينة

رئيس أوكرانيا: الدفاع عن كييف أولويتنا.. هي قلبنا ويجب أن يتواصل النبض

*As Kyiv Prepares for the Worst... CNN Correspondent Reports from the Heart of the City*

*Ukrainian President: Defending Kyiv is Our Priority... It is Our Heart, and Its Pulse Must Continue*

The word “قلب” has the form of *isim jamid* with a denotative meaning of redirecting something from its path. Generally, the word “قلب” fundamentally refers to the human organ located in the chest cavity, functioning as the center of blood circulation. However, in its connotative meaning, according to the context of the headline, the word “قلب” actually signifies the center or the heart of the city. Therefore, it can be concluded that the meaning of “قلب” in the headline does not refer to a body part, but rather to the central part of Kyiv, as described in data 7. Connotatively, the word “قلب” in this context refers to a highly important or vital position, representing the core of a region or nation. Using the term “قلب” to describe Kyiv indicates that the city is the heart of Ukraine’s struggle or defense in the ongoing conflict. Thus, the meaning of “قلب” here is not just a physical center, but also a symbol of courage, resilience, and national identity. The city center of Kyiv plays a strategic role, connecting many crucial aspects in the nation’s efforts to withstand the threats it faces.

## Data 8. Human Body Parts

بيرقدار.. قصة طائرة تركيا المسيرة ذراع أوكرانيا في مواجهة القوات الروسية

*Berkdar: The Story of Turkey's Drone, Ukraine's Arm in Facing Russian Forces*

“ذراع” if interpreted denotatively with the preceding or following sentence, refers to the arm. Literally, the arm is the part of the body between the elbow and the middle of the arm. However, if we look at its connotative meaning, it represents an instrument used to perform an action. In the headline, the meaning of “ذراع” is an instrument used to monitor Ukraine’s fight against Russian forces. In contemporary culture, such monitoring instruments are typically drones, as depicted in the news visuals. More specifically, in this context, “ذراع” refers to the power or resources used to achieve strategic objectives. Thus, this term not only describes a physical arm but also symbolizes the role technology plays in modern warfare. Therefore, the drones used by Ukraine to confront Russian forces serve as a representation of the “arm” used to monitor and control the situation on the battlefield.

## Characterization

There are several word choices used by CNN Arabic in the headlines related to the Russia-Ukraine conflict that depict the situation of characters or actors portrayed. These include the following diction: “crazy situation” (جنوني), “the disregarded person” (منبوذا), and “the innocent person” (الأبرياء).

## Data 9. Characterization

رئيس أوكرانيا السابق لجنن: ما يفعله بوتين في بلادنا جنوني وكارثي

*Former Ukrainian President to CNN: what Putin is doing in our country is crazy and catastrophic.*

“جنوني” has the form of a *mashdar* and is a *tarkib bayani* (explanatory construction). The denotative meaning of the word “جنوني” is “crazy,” referring to something irrational or unreasonable, typically used to describe behavior or actions that are illogical or extreme. Interpreted denotatively, we can see that the use of the word “جنوني” should not be taken literally, as it would be implausible for someone who is mentally unstable to be a president. Therefore, the appropriate connotative meaning in this headline, and the purpose of using the word “جنوني” here, is to define a verb related to anger, an outburst of rage, and uncontrollable attacks. Just as a mad person loses control over their thoughts, the use of “جنوني” in this context aims to describe excessive and uncontrolled actions, representing a form of behavior that is extremely extreme. This reinforces the impression that the actions occurring go far beyond the limits of rationality and are unpredictable. Thus, the meaning of this headline aptly conveys the former Ukrainian president’s feelings toward the out-of-control actions taken by President Putin.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that in CNN Arabic’s coverage of the Ukraine-Russia conflict, the dominant word choices were place names, geographic regions, and human body parts. This is due to the media’s need to convey a strong and easily understood message to audiences by using concrete, physical elements (Chowdhury,

2025; Nagy-béni, 2025). Place names and geographic regions, such as “the West” or “Pentagon,” provide readers with a clearer context regarding the role and location of the conflict and the strategic actors involved. Meanwhile, the use of human body metaphors, such as “the heart of Kyiv,” can evoke emotional feelings in readers, emphasizing the city’s resilience and vitality in the face of threats. The human body metaphor provides depth in depicting the physical and psychological impacts of war on humans (Rana et al., 2024). This strategy reflects how journalists combine concrete geographic context with physical symbols to strengthen war narratives and support readers’ understanding of the scale of the conflict. Similar studies (Putri, 2023; Kang, 2024) show that the choice of terms like this is not only informative, but also influences the structure of meaning built in conflict discourse.

The results of this study align with the study of Obaidullah & Shaikh (2024), who examined corpus linguistics on conflict, and their findings indicate that connotations in war-related media often involve geographic and physical elements to create a stronger narrative. Sawi & Alaa (2023) also highlighted the explicit and concrete use of news narratives through dysphemism strategies to negatively portray the negative image of certain groups in war. Similarly, Kang (2024) highlighted how Arab media utilizes physical elements in the form of war narrative framing and emotional elements in the form of humanist narrative framing to create public sentiment. Therefore, this is relevant to the conclusion presented by Vilkova et al. (2021) that metaphors serve not only to convey emotional expressions but also to strengthen narratives and create greater persuasive power in shaping public opinion. Metaphors are used to provide depth to political discourse, emphasize actors’ positions in conflict, and magnify psychological effects on audiences (Fathurrohim et al., 2025).

The choice of words that require connotative meaning is necessary because literal language is often unable to reflect the emotional complexity and social views of the public towards multidimensional conflicts such as the Ukraine-Russia war (Elnahal, 2025). The public tends to interpret this conflict through the emotional and moral frameworks that already exist in their culture and collective experiences, so that metaphorical terms become a tool of meaning that is strongly attached to reception (Putra & Gulö, 2025). Research by Iqbal & Farukh (2025) also emphasizes that metaphorical framing not only increases emotional resonance but also emphasizes the position of actors in the conflict so that it will stimulate who is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. This is the goal of the media to gain support, similar to CNN Arabic in this study which tends to feature political subjects such as Putin, the President of Ukraine, and other politicians. Furthermore, a corpus study of metaphors of the Russia-Ukraine conflict confirms that metaphorical concepts influence readers’ mental representations of the dynamics of war and the positions of international actors (Pawliszko, 2023; Petiy, 2023). Thus, the connotative choice through metaphors or strong rhetorical strategies also strengthens the public’s emotional attachment and understanding of the Ukraine-Russia conflict.

Theoretically, this research has contributed to the understanding and development of connotative metaphors in news narratives. Practically, these findings are useful for journalists and critical readers in choosing words more wisely when reporting on conflict, taking into account its emotional impact on the audience. For the wider public, this research demonstrates the importance of media literacy in recognizing how the media shapes narratives through word choice, which can influence their understanding of war. Therefore, this research has broad implications, both in academic, practical, and social contexts. This contribution enriches the study of the influence of media in shaping

public opinion, particularly in the context of international conflict. Overall, these findings broaden the academic discourse on the relationship between language, media, and war.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the study above, it can be concluded that the headlines in CNN Arabic's coverage of the Russia-Ukraine conflict contain word choices, phrases, and sentences that carry connotative meanings. Among the diction used, there are references to place names and geographical regions, actions related to the war situation, expressive emotions during wartime, metaphors representing parts of the human body, and character portrayal through forms and situations. The most dominant findings are diction related to place names and geographical regions, as well as the use of words from parts of the human body. This indicates that physical elements tend to serve as the most common medium for linguistic analogies used by text producers. Furthermore, the use of place names and geographical regions, as well as parts of the human body, provides a more concrete and easily understood depiction for readers, thereby enhancing the emotional impact and understanding of the situation being portrayed. However, the study has limitations as it focuses only on CNN Arabic's coverage, thus it does not represent the full perspective of other media outlets. Therefore, future research is recommended to compare connotations in coverage related to this conflict across various international media to obtain a broader and more comprehensive understanding.

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