

# **“WHERE GOT I THAT TRUTH?” AN ANALYSIS OF EXTERNAL SOURCES IN ENGLISH AND PERSIAN NEWS REPORTS ON SYRIA**

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## **Abstract**

While there has been a plethora of inquiries into reported speech, a cross-linguistic analysis of the source segments in political news reports is still a rarity. This study aims at a three-fold investigation: first, tracking the frequency, transparency, and types of the sources; second, identifying the strategies employed to introduce these sources in text, and third, interrogating the contextual elements. To this end, a bottom-up analysis of 120 news reports from four quality newspapers (*Kayhan* and *Jomhuri-e Eslami* from Iran and *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* from the U.S.), mainly informed by van Leeuwen's (1996) model of social actors, was carried out. The findings suggest a heavy reliance of both sets of newspapers on external sources to fulfill their vested interests, although they varied significantly with respect to frequency, transparency, and type.

## **Keywords**

attribution, evidentiality, external source, political discourse, news report, reported speech

## **1 Introduction**

As an interdisciplinary field, political discourse studies embraces a wide range of topics employing linguistic tools to unveil hidden agendas and ideologies in the discourse. As such, news discourse is a representative example that lends itself well to political discourse analysis (van Dijk 1988, Richardson 2007, Talbot 2007, Fairclough & Fairclough 2013). Van Dijk (2000: 44) proposes four major principles in the expression of ideology in discourse: “Emphasize positive things about Us; Emphasize negative things about Them; De-emphasize negative things about Us; and De-emphasize positive things about Them”. News reports, as a significant sub-genre of news discourse, consist of two subcategories, namely ‘hard news’ and ‘soft news’, where the former is considered the primary arena for political discourses. White (2000: 101) defines hard news as “reports typically associated with eruptive violence, reversals of fortune, and socially significant breaches of the moral order” which are to be reported as objectively and factually as possible. In fact, objectivity in journalism has been regarded as an integral feature of news reports which is partly realized through the incorporation of reported speech (Waugh 1995, Calsamiglia & Ferrero 2003, Smirnova 2009)

and quotations (Gibson & Zillmann 1993, Jullian, 2011, Choi et al. 2012, Harry 2014). Besides, the type of embedding (direct or indirect) determines the share of responsibility between the writer and the original voice (Sanders 2010).

Although texts cannot be devoid of the voice of the author in its Bakhtinian sense (Hyland 2008), Bennett (2015: 5) argues that “objectivity is a linguistic construct, achieved by the systematic use of grammatical forms”. Besides, Caldas-Coulthard (2003) suggests journalists avail themselves of a range of tools to sound objective and naturalize and neutralize their positions. One of the most outstanding tools to employ is “the use of the voices of experts” which is “one of the legitimatory strategies frequently used in journalistic discourses” (Caldas-Coulthard 2003: 276). This reliance of the author on external voices has been called ‘evidentiality’ in some literature (Chafe 1986, Bednarek 2006b). This strategy is mainly operationalized via the use of hearsay evidentials (Chafe 1986, Bednarek 2006b) or attribution (Martin & White 2005, White 2012, Hasselgård 2021). These markers basically consist of a source segment and a reporting structure (Hyland 1999) or basis (Bednarek 2006a) which can take “a variety of grammatical forms, namely tenses, aspects, number, person and verbal voice” (Vogel 2012: 63). Hyland (2005) also subsumes evidentiality as a label for information source in his taxonomy of metadiscourse markers.

While there have been studies accommodating evidentiality in the area of political discourse (Chilton & Schäffner 2002, Chilton 2004, Jalilifar & Alavi-Nia 2012, Alavi-Nia & Jalilifar 2013), they have treated the issue as incidental and adjunct to their main focus of research. The literature on evidentiality with an emphasis on political discourse in the news is not ample either (Garretson & Ädel 2008, Hsieh 2008, Thomson et al. 2008, Reyes 2011). Nonetheless, some of the existing studies mainly focus on external sources (Thompson 1996, Denham 1997, Pak 2010, Lee 2017), their impact (Sundar 1998, Mahone 2014, Duncan et al. 2019), or specifically unnamed sources (Hale 1984, Stenvall 2008, Schubert 2015). To the best of our knowledge, the only study that employed a somewhat similar approach to our study in order to analyze source segments was Calsamiglia and Ferrero’s (2003) research on the role and position of scientific voices through reported speech in media. However, it was remarkably dissimilar in terms of context (mad cow disease) and aims. They analyzed “the identity of agents of reference chosen by journalists” and “the specific linguistic choices made in the pre-citation segment” for which they drew upon van Leeuwen’s (1996) framework of the representation of social actors in discourse (Calsamiglia & Ferrero 2003: 147).

Reported speech “can occur in up to 90% of the sentences of a newspaper article” (Bergler 2006: 11), to enhance the objectivity, neutrality, and credibility

of the report. Nevertheless, these citations can be, paradoxically, employed to camouflage subjectivity, bias, and imbalance. Therefore, to fill the gap in the literature and understand the way ‘objectivity’ is operationalized in hard news reports, a cross-linguistic study solely devoted to an in-depth analysis of source segments in hard news reporting seemed imperative. In so doing, this exploratory study, as part of a larger research study on evidentiality, aspires to investigate the external sources employed in political discourse revolving around the issue of diplomatic and proxy intervention in Syria (unpacked later) by comparing and contrasting a cross-linguistic context (American/English vs. Iranian/Persian). In addition, it also hopes to develop a taxonomy of the types of external sources and the strategies used to introduce them in the text, relative to the size and context of the corpus. To this end, this paper explores the transparency of the identity of the cited sources in the reports. Furthermore, it draws on van Leeuwen’s (1996) model of social actors to examine the specific strategies employed to introduce the external sources in the new context. And finally, it tries to investigate if similar sources and strategies serve disparate functions and whether there is any systematic variation across different themes.

We preferred van Leeuwen’s model of social actors over Martin and White’s (2005) Appraisal framework because we wanted to solely focus on how the external sources were introduced and described in the text, whereas the Appraisal framework is more pertinent to a study on reporting structures (*say, believe, according to*, etc.) to evaluate the stance of the writer with regard to the cited propositions. Thus, this study specifically addresses the following questions:

1. Are there any statistically significant differences between the frequency, transparency, and types of external sources used in the American and Iranian newspapers reports?
2. What strategies are used to introduce the sources in the American and Iranian hard news reporting?
3. Are the distribution and functions of these sources impacted by different contextual factors?

In a sense, this study aims to 1) offer a genre-specific, functional model of external sources and 2) analyze such sources in two different languages with a unifying topic (the case of intervention in Syria) in order to discover the potential contextual factors governing each flank’s strategies.

### **1.1 Situated context**

To fully understand the study’s macro- and micro-contexts, it is necessary to explore the socio-political context and related concepts. March 2011 marked the outbreak of the unrest in Syria, which developed into a civil war (Rodgers et al.

2016). Since then, there has been a range of theories regarding how it all broke out, by whom, and who was feeding this encroaching fire and fanning the flames. News outlets, therefore, shed light on the events with different slants. What could readily be inferred from the news was that it did not take long for the unrest to develop into a full-fledged international war, one hallmark of which was the intervention of foreign powers, both through proxy and diplomatic means (“Why has the Syrian war lasted for 11 years,” 2022). Therefore, in what follows, we will elaborate on proxy and diplomatic intervention in Syria and further explanation of why we chose these themes will be provided in the methodology section.

### **1.1.1 Proxy intervention**

Proxy intervention became widespread after World War II, coinciding with a decline in interstate wars (Szayna et al. 2017). In general terms, a proxy war “occurs when State A encourages the people of State C to take up arms against State B, which happens to be its own adversary” (Stern 2000: 216). Media, as well, adopt certain positions based on their political slants. On the one hand, Western media maintained that the crisis in Syria was a spillover of the violence from the regional so-called *Arab Spring* as the unrest had been spreading over the region, leaping from one country to the other. On the other hand, Iranian media (e.g. *Press TV* and *Young Journalists Club*) accused Qatar and Saudi Arabia of producing and abetting the 2011 outbreaks in Syria, and Barack Obama for his support of the unrest.

### **1.1.2 Diplomatic intervention**

As the name suggests, diplomatic intervention is considered “attempts by outside parties to transform a conflict by means of communicating information about the conflict that can help generate movement toward potentially overlapping bargaining positions” (Regan & Aydin 2006: 745). However, these interventions by outsiders are not usually impartial and each group seeks its own vested interest and tries to win advantages for its desired side. Fierke (2005) believes that not only states, but also international organizations, nongovernmental organizations, journalists, and others can be actors in some form of cross-border communication related to war. Two influential groups diplomatically involved in Syria were the Arab League and the United Nations (UN).

Arab League’s activities in Syria ranged from an offer to send civilian and military monitors to Syria to determine whether it is abiding by a league-brokered peace plan to end the crackdown on the country’s uprising to the recognition of the opposition and blaming the Syrian government of taking the offensive against civilians (Stack & MacFarquhar 2012). In addition, as a result of the United

Nations Security Council Resolution 2043 (2012) in response to the Syrian Civil War, the United Nations set up its peacekeeping mission in Syria in April 2012 to observe the implementation of the Kofi Annan peace plan for Syria on the Syrian Civil War. The United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria was frozen in August 2012, following an increasingly unstable and violent situation in Syria (UNSMIS, n.d.).

## **2 Methodology**

Bell (1991: 3) maintains that “gathering a corpus of media language” demands decisions in three areas: the genre (type of media content), the outlet (carriers of content), and the outputs (programs and the time period), according to which we made the following decisions.

### **2.1 The genre**

The primary phase was to determine the mode (text, audio, and/or video) and medium (journal, radio, TV, or online) of the reports. After a comprehensive investigation of different sources in Persian and English languages to find comparable data, it was decided that written news reports in the most representative newspapers of the respective languages would make the optimum data sets. Comparability, popularity, readership, availability, and ease of access were among the most pertinent features of newspapers compared to other forms of media.

### **2.2 The outlets**

Since the main project purported to be both a cross-linguistic and intra-linguistic study of evidentiality and there are two major political parties in the United States (Republican and Democratic) and two in Iran (Fundamentalist and Reformist), it was concluded that two representative newspapers from each language would suit the purpose and scope of the project. To this end, we ran an extensive pilot study on the potential candidates among American and Iranian newspapers considering their circulation, popularity, readership, availability, coverage scope, as well as the political leaning and reporting bias which played a decisive role in the qualification of these newspapers. With regard to the American newspapers, we concluded that *The New York Times* (hereafter NYT) and *The Wall Street Journal* (hereafter WSJ) qualify for the main analysis.

Consistent with the American newspaper selection process, the Iranian newspapers were selected based on their coverage, availability and ease of access, circulation, quality (of the reports), and political affiliation. To this end, a primary scanning of the coverage of Syria in quality newspapers from both

sides (*Kayhan*, *Resalat*, and *Iran* from Fundamentalists, *Shargh*, *Aftabe Yazd*, and *Etemad* from Reformists, and *Jomhouri-e Eslami* and *Ettela'at* from in between) was done and it transpired that many could not qualify for the study mainly because of the scant coverage of the issue and the linguistic quality of the reports (length of the reports, rhetoric, etc.). *Kayhan*, as “the most conservative Iranian newspaper” (Ghasemi 2006), was the optimal representative of the Fundamentalists (rightists); however, we were not able to select an absolutely Reformist (leftist) newspaper due to the above-mentioned issues. The best alternative we could nominate was *Jomhouri-e Eslami* (JE hereafter). It is also worth mentioning that these newspapers are only nationally distributed and are not comparable with their American counterparts in terms of circulation and readership.

## 2.3 The outputs

As far as data collection was concerned, we concluded that a unifying theme, i.e. that of Syria, as a hotly debated issue, could be the pivot. However, there were numerous reports on Syria in the selected newspapers focusing on different aspects of the issue. Thus, all the headlines on Syria within three months since the emergence of the uprising/unrest (March 2011) were extracted from the four newspapers and were labeled based on their themes. The results demonstrated that *intervention* was the most dominant theme over the intended time span. Then, the sample intervention reports were re-examined and categorized into two dominant sub-themes: proxy intervention and diplomatic intervention. The reason behind this sub-categorization was to look for any meaningful correlation between changes in slant and the use of external sources within and between different newspapers.

Overall, having considered similar previous studies and following the suggestions of the prominent scholars in the field of corpus linguistics and journalism, we determined that 30 reports from each newspaper, with a total of 120 reports, would make an adequate sample. Besides, a systematic theme-based approach was employed to meet the requirement of representativeness. Furthermore, to decide upon the time span, different newspapers, websites, and timelines were searched for the date thenceforth interventions had been reflected in the reports and it was concluded that January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012 (corresponding Dey 11<sup>th</sup>, 1390 in the Iranian calendar) was the right date. Since the issue is still ongoing, the ending point was naturally the time of data collection, that is, June 31<sup>st</sup>, 2013 (corresponding Tir 10<sup>th</sup>, 1392 in the Iranian calendar) which made up a total of 18 months.

Therefore, all reports on these two subthemes (proxy and diplomatic intervention) were extracted and perused to probe the linguistic quality, length, and relevance of the reports, coherence of the content, and consistency between the headline and the content. Next, they were sifted by the researcher and a second rater against the aforementioned criteria, and finally, the top-most qualified 120 reports were singled out. Care was taken to have a fairly equal distribution of the final sample along the period. Thus, 30 reports from each newspaper (15 on each sub-theme), with a total of 120 reports, comprising about 100,000 words were selected. The total number of words in the reports was 30,000 in each American newspaper and 20,000 in each Iranian newspaper. However, the number of words per theme was not equally divided between the newspapers in each language. Thus, to enable comparison on a common scale, the data were normalized based on the larger number per analysis (see Table 1). That is, 30,000 for cross-linguistic analysis, 32,000 for proxy intervention analysis, and 28,000 for diplomatic intervention analysis.

	Cross-linguistic	Proxy	Diplomatic
American newspapers	30,000	32,000	28,000
Iranian newspapers	20,000	15,000	15,000
Normalization	30,000	32,000	28,000

**Table 1: Normalization of the corpus (word counts) across analyses**

## 2.4 Analytical approach

Informed by the pilot stage, first, we drew upon Martin and White's (2005) model of engagement system to analyze the reports. Thus, we scrutinized the texts for instances of evidentiality. Martin and White (2005: 112) define *Acknowledge* as "those locutions where there is no overt indication, at least via the choice of the framer, as to where the authorial voice stands with respect to the proposition". This is the main category of evidentials in the news reports (about 90% in our data) where reporting verbs such as *say*, *report*, *state*, *declare*, *announce*, *believe*, and *think* play a vital role. As far as reported speech is concerned, each pre-citation segment consists of a source introduced in the new context and an evidentiality marker attributed to him/her by the author (e.g. *experts believe*). Since most studies have only focused on the identity of the external sources, we decided to delve into the features of the accompanying descriptors as well, to see if there is any systematic approach to framing these sources. In so doing, we tabulated and analyzed the data in two phases.

First, we categorized the source segments based on their identifiability into two categories, namely *Identification* and *Unidentification*. Second, we ran a bottom-up analysis of our data against van Leeuwen’s schema (1996: 66) of representation of social actors which proved the following categories relevant: *Nomination*, *Functionalization*, *Objectivation*, *Individualization*, *Collectivization*, *Aggregation*, *Genericization*, and *Association*. Besides the aforementioned categories, we noticed that, on occasions, agents are not mentioned at all through either *passivization* or *topicalization* of actions or events. Thus, we labeled such instances as *Agent avoiding* (inspired by Holmes 1984: 358). Moreover, the analysis laid bare another characteristic of the sources which we labeled *Contextualization*. This refers to the extent to which the setting of the reported statements has been elaborated, videlicet, where, when, how (via what medium or channel), and why it has taken place. Finally, drawing on the aforesaid models and relying on the bottom-up analysis of the data, the following model emerged:

<b>Source segment:</b> A preparatory frame for the introduction and description of the cited source
<b>Identification:</b> transparent introduction of the source by mentioning their name or any other references which clearly identifies that specific source (1) <i>Susan E. Rice, the American ambassador to the United Nations, said that ...</i> (2) <i>The president of the United States said that ...</i>
<b>Unidentification:</b> unspecific introduction of the source by withholding all or part of their identity and making an indefinite reference to the source, e.g. <i>an expert</i> (individualization), <i>American officials</i> (collectivization), <i>many people</i> (aggregation) or <i>critics</i> (genericization) (3) <i>According to American officials ...</i> (4) <i>Many of the rebels confessed that ...</i>
<b>Nomination:</b> introduction of the source by mentioning their name, which can be formal, semi-formal, or informal (5) <i>Mr. Lavrov repeated that ...</i>
<b>Functionalization:</b> introduction of the source through the type of activity they are involved in or a title connoting their position or profession, e.g. <i>president, minister, activist, member</i> (6) <i>American officials said that ...</i>
<b>Objectivation:</b> introduction of the source by means of reference to a place or thing closely associated either with them or with the activity they are engaged in, e.g. <i>the United States, committee, parliament</i> (7) <i>Syria announced that ...</i>
<b>Individualization:</b> introduction of individual sources through citation of their names, honorifics, or affiliations, or by actions, events, or things related to them, e.g. <i>Obama, the Government, a report, he</i> (8) <i>Among other things, the president said that ...</i> (9) <i>Ahmadinejad believed that ...</i>



<p><b>Collectivization:</b> introduction of the source by a mass noun or a noun denoting a group of people as homogeneous and consensual, e.g. <i>the opposition, American officials</i></p> <p>(10) <i>The United Nations estimates that ...</i></p>
<p><b>Aggregation:</b> quantification of the source by “definite or indefinite quantifiers which either function as the numerative or as the head of the nominal group”, e.g. <i>a number of, some</i></p> <p>(11) <i>Some political analysts said that ...</i></p>
<p><b>Genericization:</b> introduction of the source realized by plurals without articles, or by the singular with a definite or indefinite article</p> <p>(12) <i>Critics have described ...</i></p>
<p><b>Association:</b> conjoining individuals and/or groups of sources via combinations of <i>Genericization, Individualization, Collectivization, and Aggregation</i></p> <p>(13) <i>Russia, China, and the United Nations also argued that ...</i></p>
<p><b>Contextualization:</b> the extent to which the setting of the reported statements has been elaborated, viz, where, when, how (via what medium or channel), why</p> <p>(14) <i>The leader of the opposition delegation, Sheik Moaz al-Khatib, said in a speech at the Arab League meeting in Doha, Qatar.</i></p>
<p><b>Agent avoiding:</b> omission of the source by passivization, nominalization, or topicalization of actions or events (e.g. <i>concerns are growing that ...</i>)</p> <p>(15) <i>A European supply line could alter the dynamics of the two-year Syrian civil war, which is believed to have cost the lives of 70,000 people, without ending the Assad family's decades of rule.</i></p>

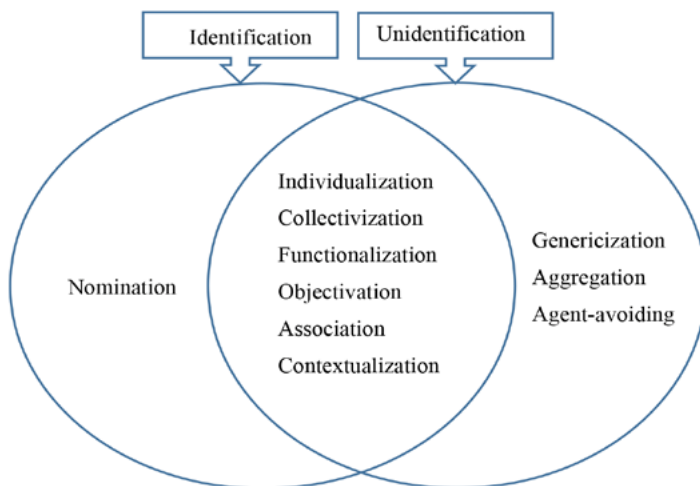
Table 2: Strategies of external source employment in hard news reports

It is worth noting here that some of the abovementioned categories tend to overlap and/or co-occur (see Figure 1 for further details). As for the analysis, first, we compared and contrasted the whole data cross-linguistically to see if there are any statistically significant differences between the two languages, with regard to frequency, transparency, and types of strategies employed to introduce and describe the sources. Besides, we searched for the most frequent sources these newspapers used. Second, we analyzed the reports thematically to see if newspapers incline towards certain strategies across different themes. That is, if reports treat external sources differently according to the theme of the report.

### 3 Results and discussion

To address the questions of the study, all the reports were analyzed with regard to the characteristics of the cited sources based on the aforementioned categories in Table 2. However, before moving on to the results, it is apt to elaborate on the possible combinations of these strategies. Although most of these strategies can be used to introduce both identified and unidentified sources, some of them are mutually exclusive and some can only be used with *Identification* or *Unidentification*. *Nomination* is a strategy used only for identification of a source,

whereas *Genericization*, *Aggregation*, and *Agent-avoiding* are specifically used for unidentified sources. In addition, *Functionalization*, *Objectivation*, *Association*, and *Contextualization* can be employed with both identified and unidentified sources. On the other hand, a source can appear either individually (*Individualization*) or in mass (*Collectivization*, *Aggregation*, or *Genericization*) (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Possible strategies used with identified and unidentified sources**

Considering the abovementioned possibilities, Table 3 illustrates a sample analysis of two source segments labeled with the relevant categories.

<b>Source segment</b>	Mr. Obama,	the president of the US,	said	in a speech at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum	
<b>Analysis</b>	<i>Identification</i> <i>Nomination</i> <i>Individualization</i>	<i>Functionalization</i>	<i>Reporting verb</i>	<i>Contextualization</i>	
<b>Source segment</b>	Some	opposition activists	and	residents	said
<b>Analysis</b>	<i>Unidentification</i> <i>Aggregation</i>	<i>Functionalization</i>	<i>Association</i>	<i>Functionalization</i>	<i>Reporting verb</i>

**Table 3: Sample analysis of the source segments**

In order to gain a better understanding of the distribution and characteristics of the data, descriptive statistics were calculated for the whole data set (Table 4). In the Persian news reports, there were 12 categories of external source employment strategies, with a range of frequency counts from 15 to 1,389. The total frequency count was 5,322, with a mean of 443.50 and a standard deviation of 426.88842. The skewness value of 1.095 indicates that the distribution of strategies is positively skewed, with more categories having lower frequency counts than higher frequency counts. Similarly, in the English news reports, there were also 12 categories, with a smaller range of frequency counts from 31 to 862. The total frequency count was 4,557, with a mean of 379.75 and a standard deviation of 296.66453. The skewness value of 0.432 indicates that the distribution of strategies is also positively skewed, but not as much as the Persian news reports. Overall, these statistics provide some basic information about the frequencies of categories of external source employment strategies in the English and Persian data. However, without more context and information about the data and the study, it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions or interpretations.

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness
Persian	12	1,374	15	1,389	5,322	443.50	426.88842	1.095
English	12	831	31	862	4,557	379.75	296.66453	0.432

**Table 4: Descriptive statistics**

### 3.1 Cross-linguistic analysis of the external sources

To address the first two research questions, we compared the whole data cross-linguistically to probe the outcomes for significant differences in terms of frequency and transparency of the sources, as well as different forms of representation of these sources. The results of this general analysis of the two sets of newspapers are detailed in Table 5. It should be noted that the total frequency is the total number of source segments found in the corpus. It is not the sum of the frequencies of the categories because a single segment can fit into more than one category at the same time.

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Categories	Persian F (%)	English F (%)	Chi-square	p-value
Total frequency	1,737 (2.895)	1,469 (2.44)	22.403	0.00*
Identification	1,389 (2.31)	848 (1.41)	130.836	0.00*
Unidentification	348 (0.58)	621 (1.035)	76.913	0.00*
Nomination	427 (0.711)	397 (0.661)	1.092	0.296
Functionalization	549 (0.915)	581 (0.968)	0.906	0.341
Objectivation	612 (1.02)	334 (0.55)	81.696	0.00*
Individualization	1,035 (1.72)	862 (1.43)	945.606	0.00*
Collectivization	558 (0.93)	360 (0.6)	42.706	0.00*
Aggregation	15 (0.025)	54 (0.09)	22.043	0.00*
Genericization	48 (0.075)	31 (0.051)	3.658	0.056
Association	50 (0.083)	118 (0.196)	27.524	0.00*
Contextualization	260 (0.43)	308 (0.513)	4.056	0.044*
Agent avoiding	31 (0.051)	43 (0.071)	1.946	0.163

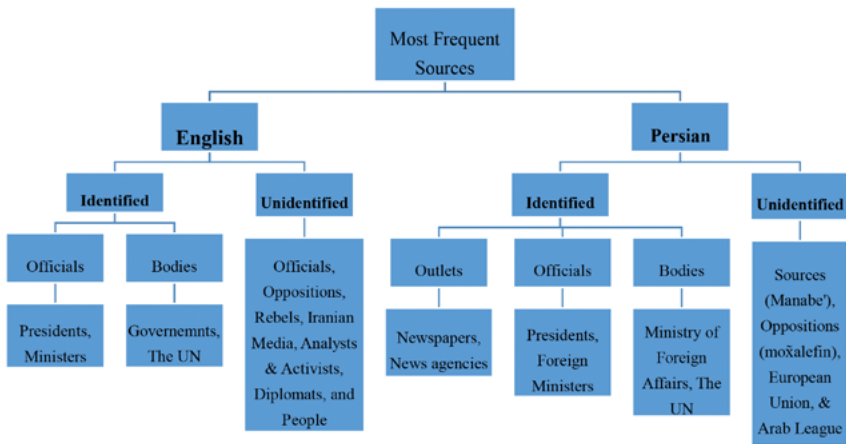
**Table 5: Cross-linguistic comparison of total external sources (\*p <0.05 was considered statistically significant)**

Objectivity is an essential feature of news reports which is partly achieved via the citation of external sources. Mindich (1998: 1) maintains that “if American journalism were a religion, as it has been called from time to time, its supreme deity would be ‘objectivity’”. Similarly, Stephens (1988: 207-208) called it the “highest moral concept ever developed in America and given to the world”. Nevertheless, the total frequency of the cited sources in Table 5 reveals the greater inclination of the Iranian newspapers toward employing reported sources (1,737 vs. 1,469). Hence, it can be said that the Persian reports can be perceived as more objective, at least apparently, compared to their English counterparts. Although the incorporation of external sources is a tool to enhance the objectivity of the reports, it should be noted that citations can be manipulated to serve the ideologies of the writer, “giving a slant to what is said” (Calsamiglia & Ferrero 2003: 149).

The identity of an external voice can be transparent, obscured, or completely withheld from the reader. The identification of cited sources, particularly credible ones, is contributory to the reliability of the information (Fairclough 1988, Lemke 1998, van Leeuwen 2008, White 2006, 2012). According to the Code of Ethics by the Society of Professional Journalists (“Seek Truth and Report it”, 2014, para. 7), journalists should “identify sources whenever feasible” and that “the public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources’ reliability”. According to Table 5, although both sets of newspapers have incorporated more named sources than obscured ones, the ratio of the identified to unidentified sources in the Persian

reports is 80/20 while it is only 58/42 in the American newspapers. Moreover, the Iranian newspapers exceeded the American newspapers in *Identification* of the sources (1,389 vs. 848), whereas *Unidentification* in the American data set outnumbered the Iranian newspapers (621 vs. 348). These remarkable differences also allude to the perceived objectivity of the Iranian newspapers as their sources seem to be more transparent, and, hence, more reliable and verifiable than their American counterparts.

Montgomery (2007: 87) argues that “a way of ‘doing objectivity’, or impartiality, is by harvesting quotations from a range of representative viewpoints while aligning with none of them”. Thus, in addition to the previous numerical analyses, it seemed imperative to investigate whether certain types of voices have been more frequently cited and if they have been cited as identified or unidentified. To this end, the following diagram (Figure 2) illustrates the most frequent sources based on the two categories of *Identification* and *Unidentification*:



**Figure 2: Most frequent external sources**

Although a range of sources has been harvested, to use Montgomery’s (2007) words, objectivity does not seem to have been achieved accordingly. To unpack this claim, the following conclusions have been drawn from the above diagram: 1) Both Iranian and American newspapers have generally found similar sources (mostly authorities) quote-worthy. Bergler (2006, as cited in White 2012) suggests that high certainty or reliability can be achieved through tagging sources perceived as authoritative or expert; 2) While both sets of newspapers

often cited *Identified* sources from official bodies and individuals, Iranian newspapers employed a good number of quotations from other outlets too. The number of such nested sources was strikingly eight times more compared to the American newspapers. 3) *Unidentified* sources were more diverse in both sets of newspapers, ranging from high-ranking officials to even laypersons. Stenvall (2008: 229) argues that unnamed sources “can undermine the alleged factuality/objectivity of news agency discourse”. Furthermore, Denham (1997) maintains that when an official source is reluctant to be named, the reader should be cautious about the reliability of the information.

Whether identified or unidentified, sources can be introduced using different strategies. To address the second question, we categorized the sources based on their linguistic features, mainly informed by van Leeuwen’s model of representation of social actors (1996). The results of the analyses showed that the main strategies used by both sets of newspapers were *Nomination*, *Functionalization*, *Objectivation*, *Individualization*, *Collectivization*, and *Contextualization*. Despite the fact that the first two were employed comparably by both sets of newspapers in terms of quantity, the Iranian newspapers outnumbered meaningfully in *Objectivation*, *Individualization*, and *Collectivization*. However, *Contextualization* was favored significantly more by the American newspapers. On the other hand, *Agent-avoiding*, *Genericization*, *Aggregation*, and *Association* were not employed frequently by the journalists, although the last two strategies outnumbered significantly in the English data. In what follows we will elaborate on the highlights of these statistics.

The use of *Nomination* and *Functionalization* was mostly intertwined in the data across the two languages. They were similarly used, by both sets of newspapers, to introduce the source “by such linguistic means as names, proper names, titles or honorifics, designation of status and public position, relational adjectives, etc.” (Calsamiglia & Ferrero 2003: 156).

- (16) *Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the U.S. military’s Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the Syrian opposition appeared to be taking steps to unite as a group, ...* (WSJ 2012, March 29)

Also, we found a good number of instances where only *Functionalization* was employed for the introduction of unidentified sources, especially by the American newspapers. In such cases, journalists had tried to compensate for this lack of clarity by references to positions or ranks of the sources, particularly those of officials and experts.

- (17) *In a new twist, according to one American official, there have been reliable reports that Iraqi Shiite militia fighters, long backed by Iran during its efforts to shape events inside Iraq, are now making their way to Syria to help the Assad government.* (NYT 2012, September 4)

As the conflict in Syria is an example of a proxy war (Phillips & Valbjørn 2018), it seems that the principals (i.e. pro- and anti-Assad states) do their best to level accusatory remarks against each other. In this example, the newspaper makes multiple allegations against the Iraqi Shiite militia fighters and Iran all according to an unidentified source with no supporting evidence on the reliability of the propositions. The label of an *American official* is deemed to have inherent credibility and authority to obviate the need to provide some verifiable references as to the reliability of the reports.

*Objectivation* is the impersonalization of social actors through metonymical references. In case of individuals and groups, writers might mention their institution or affiliation to refer to them (the Government or the U.S.) while sometimes actions or discursive practices represent the source (e.g. statement, sanction, report). As such, this strategy can be a useful tool at the disposal of the writers to augment the credibility of the sources and give them a solid structure and unison. It is important to mention that *Objectivation* more often accompanied *Collectivization* in our data.

- (18) *The New York Times recently revealed that Saudi Arabia, during the last few months, has been sending arms, bought from Croatia, to the Syrian rebels through Jordan.* (Kayhan 2013, March 3)

An external source can be cited as either an individual (*Individualization*) or a group (*Collectivization*, *Genericization*, and *Aggregation*). Van Leeuwen (1996: 50) maintains that individualization of actors “allows their titles, credentials and institutional affiliations to be showcased”. Interestingly enough, the results of this study showed that the frequency of *Individualization* stood atop all strategies of source introduction in both English and Persian data.

- (19) *“Mohamed Hassanein Heikal” the eminent Egyptian journalist, author, and researcher, in an interview with the Egyptian newspaper Al Ahram stated that the U.S. is the major actor against Syria and mercenaries of this country are involved in the events in Syria, disguised under Black Water security firm.* (Kayhan 2012, August 29)

From among strategies for group sources (as opposed to individual sources), *Collectivization* was the dominant one in both sets of data. Sometimes, sources are not independent individuals but are homogenously grouped (e.g. American

officials, the parliament). Van Leeuwen (1996) believes that *Collectivization* helps to signal agreement, homogeneity, and consensus. This uniformity provides the sources with amplified power, authority, and public trust that, in turn, enhance the reliability of the propositions.

- (20) *In late November, U.S. officials said they gathered information that showed Iran was stepping in to aid Syria with its oil trade. U.S. and European officials believe Tehran is assisting Damascus with its crackdown by providing arms, software, training and intelligence.* (WSJ 2012, January 19)

As the last major category, *Contextualization* refers to the details or descriptions of the setting of the reported speech provided by the journalist to inform the readers and establish the authenticity of the source. This strategy surfaced as a result of the bottom-up analysis of the data and was utilized more with identified sources. Unlike most categories, English reports contextualized the citations significantly more than the Persian reports, that is, 308 (0.51%) vs. 260 (0.43%) respectively.

- (21) *At a meeting in Brussels on Friday, EU foreign ministers also agreed to add 17 Iranians to its sanctions list for human rights abuses, and signed off on a legal text that details how they will implement an oil embargo on Iran.* (WSJ 2012, March 24)

So far, the analyses have shown considerable differences between the English and Persian news reports in terms of the frequency and types of strategies employed to cite external sources. Nevertheless, the types of sources were generally similar across the two languages, i.e. officials and experts. To explore whether these similar sources would serve disparate functions in the text, we conducted an in-depth content analysis drawing on van Dijk's (2000) model of ideology in discourse. We observed that both sets of reports have dominantly applied the strategies of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. However, the analysis indicated a greater inclination of the American newspapers toward positive self-presentation while the Iranian reports leaned toward negative other-presentation. More specifically, the American journals tended to embrace voices that exonerated the US from the accusations of aggravating the conflict in Syria by funding and arming the rebels; hence, resonating with image repair (Example 22). On the other hand, Iranian journals found attacking, through citing voices that substantiate the US and allies as the main culprit in the conflict in Syria, as the best strategy (see Examples 18, 19 and 23). This end was mainly achieved by the Iranian reports through resorting to secondary sources from Western media to use the words of the opponents against themselves, i.e. endorsing an opposing source to denounce a position. We termed



the strategies used by American and Iranian newspapers as *self-exoneration* and *other-accusation*, respectively. While in Example 22 the WSJ tries to acquit the U.S. of the charges regarding arming the rebels, in Example 23, *Kayhan* uses Haaretz's report as a proof of America's intervention in the conflict.

- (22) *The Obama administration hasn't agreed to arm the FSA, the U.S. officials stressed Mrs. Clinton on Wednesday **denied charges** by Syria and others that the U.S. has armed the rebels.* (WSJ 2012, June 13)
- (23) *Regarding the issue, then **Zionist newspaper Haaretz reported** of the shipment of several American weapons to Jordan in the last few days, and of the probable military intervention of Washington in Syria.* (Kayhan 2012, December 19)

### 3.2 Theme-based cross-linguistic analysis

To address the third question, we compared and contrasted the reports thematically (i.e. diplomatic intervention and proxy intervention) to examine the impact of contextual factors on the representation, distribution, and functions of external sources in the text. This examination aims to provide a full picture of how these two sets of newspapers framed intervention in Syria.

#### 3.2.1 Proxy intervention

Reports on *Proxy Intervention* reflect stories in which there is an indication that either side provided their proxy with financial, humanitarian, intelligence, training, and military aids. It seems that the intervening parties usually try to legitimize their involvement or conceal it to eschew public or legal ramifications. In line with this policy, we found out that both Iranian and American newspapers showed a proclivity to employ more unidentified sources measured against the general comparison (Table 5) to the extent that the frequency of unidentified sources in the American newspapers outnumbered that of identified sources. Nonetheless, Persian reports still tended to rely significantly more on *Identification*. The subliminal impetus for such a strong proclivity is that principals (i.e. pro- and anti-Assad states) preferred to camouflage their implication in the insurgencies, which is reflected by a similar approach to source tagging by the newspapers of either flank.

As Table 6 depicts, the frequency of sources in Persian reports revolving around proxy intervention is not significantly higher than that of the English reports focusing on the same sub-theme (2.78 % vs. 2.64 %). Compared to the general comparison (Table 5), most of the strategies employed by both sets remained the same, however, American newspapers meaningfully outnumbered in *Functionalization* and *Agent-avoiding* as strategies for the introduction of

the unidentified sources. With the same purpose, Iranian newspapers widened the gap with American counterparts in the incorporation of *Objectivation* and *Collectivization*. In addition, their use of *Nomination* and *Individualization* decreased considerably, as these strategies were mostly used for source identification. All these fluctuations were in line with our expectations to have more unidentified sources for the aforementioned reasons. In line with Hamada (2016: 202), our findings indicate that “while journalists, especially in the West, value the notion of truthfulness through a number of ‘disconnected’ ethics such as objectivity and sincerity”, they are like media elsewhere, including journalists of Iran, “constantly subject to manipulation of all sorts”.

Categories	Persian F (%)	English F (%)	Chi-square	p-value
Total frequency	892 (2.78)	845 (2.64)	1.272	0.259
Identification	647 (2.02)	389 (1.21)	64.251	0.00*
Unidentification	244 (0.76)	455 (1.42)	63.692	0.00*
Nomination	148 (0.46)	195 (0.60)	6.440	0.011*
Functionalization	260 (0.81)	384 (1.2)	23.876	0.00*
Objectivation	366 (1.14)	171 (0.53)	79.810	0.00*
Individualization	450 (1.40)	446 (1.39)	0.018	0.894
Collectivization	369 (1.15)	238 (0.74)	28.272	0.00*
Aggregation	9 (0.028)	35 (0.109)	15.364	0.00*
Genericization	20 (0.062)	13 (0.04)	1.485	0.223
Association	25 (0.078)	81 (0.25)	29.585	0.00*
Contextualization	123 (0.38)	184 (0.57)	12.121	0.00*
Agent avoiding	17 (0.053)	31 (0.096)	4.083	0.043*

**Table 6: Cross-linguistic comparison of proxy intervention (\*p <0.05 was considered statistically significant)**

### **3.2.2 Diplomatic intervention**

Regan and Aydin (2006: 754) maintain that “diplomatic interventions are effective conflict management strategies that dramatically change the course of the events in a civil war”. Reports on diplomatic intervention generally revolved around the U.N. negotiations, resolutions, sanctions, vetoes, and recognition of the opposition. The comparison of the diplomatic intervention reports (Table 7) showed an increase in the use of *Identification* in both sets of newspapers. An interesting finding was that, unlike proxy reports, identified sources outnumbered unidentified ones in the American newspapers in diplomatic intervention reports. The reason behind this trend shift, especially in the American newspapers, seems to be that diplomatic relations, negotiations, and

measures are carried out by government officials, and the U.N. also is purported to act as the international institution in this respect. In addition, contrary to the case of proxy interventions, each party would pride itself on its involvement in such activities and showcasing them. To substantiate this conclusion, we focused on the strategies to represent actors. The number of *Individualization* and *Nomination* in both languages had climbed, although they were employed more in the Persian reports. *Functionalization*, as a complementary strategy to *Identification*, was frequently employed as well, though meaningfully more in Persian. These facts promote the Persian reports to a higher position relative to the English ones for the incorporation of considerably more identifiable sources. Even in *Collectivization* and *Objectivation*, the Iranian newspapers outnumbered their counterpart papers. As for their typical strategies, English reports tried to declare unison through *Association* of more sources and, though not widely used, resorted to *Aggregation* considerably more than Iranian newspapers.

Masterton (2005) argues that secrecy is a news value in Middle Eastern journalism. She holds that secrecy manifests when some organization (government, companies, groups, etc.) hides some newsworthy information from the public (ibid.: 47). However, our findings suggest that Iranian journalists, unlike their American counterparts, practice more transparency in their news reporting. This finding is further substantiated by Masterton's (2005: 45) more fine-grained analyses of the Middle Eastern countries where Iranian journalism is claimed to be "closer to the world average than either of its Middle East neighbours".

Categories	Persian F (%)	English F (%)	Chi-square	p-value
Total frequency	842 (3.00)	713 (2.54)	10.702	0.001*
Identification	731 (2.61)	510 (1.82)	39.356	0.00*
Unidentification	111 (0.39)	203 (0.72)	26.955	0.00*
Nomination	269 (0.96)	228 (0.81)	3.382	0.066
Functionalization	285 (1.01)	233 (0.83)	5.220	0.022*
Objectivation	258 (0.92)	171 (0.61)	17.643	0.00*
Individualization	573 (1.91)	468 (1.67)	10.591	0.001*
Collectivization	199 (0.71)	144 (0.51)	8.819	0.003*
Aggregation	5 (0.01)	23 (0.082)	11.571	0.001*
Genericization	27 (0.096)	19 (0.067)	1.391	0.238
Association	24 (0.085)	44 (0.15)	5.882	0.015*
Contextualization	134 (0.47)	142(0.50)	0.232	0.630
Agent avoiding	14 (0.05)	14 (0.05)	-	-

**Table 7: Cross-linguistic comparison of diplomatic intervention (\*p <0.05 was considered statistically significant)**

## 4 Conclusion

In the realm of journalism, particularly political discourse, newspapers resort to all possible discursive tools to substantiate their own stance and indoctrinate their own ideologies. The author employs others' words to grant credibility to those of their own. These citations can be in line with the author's message “to *reassert* what has been or will be said later, to detach him/her from the *responsibility* of the content of the quotes” (Jullian 2011: 768), to *assess* the original writer/speaker him/herself (Scollon 2014), or even by ironically representing a counter-argument, invoke intended meanings or feelings against them. Moreover, quotes can “give *flavor* to the story” or “*confront* different views of the event” (Jullian 2011: 768).

Overall, the results indicated that Iranian newspapers employed more external sources across all comparisons, which is a contributory factor to the perceived objectivity and consequently, reliability of the reports. Transparency of the sources was also conspicuously higher in Persian reports across all comparisons, which is in line with the SPJ Code of Ethics (2014) that urges journalists to clearly identify sources. Furthermore, fluctuations in the frequency and transparency of the sources across the two sub-themes showed that the process of selection and introduction of these voices is not arbitrary but systematic and purposeful on the part of the newspapers. Regardless of the quantitative dominance of the Persian reports in cross-linguistic comparisons, the number of external sources quoted in the reports on diplomatic intervention and the transparency of these sources increased in both sets of newspapers. On the contrary, none of the newspapers in the study relied as heavily on external sources in their reporting on proxy intervention, and their use of unidentified sources increased as well. Finally, whereas both sides stuck to the strategies of positive self-representation and negative other-representation, the American newspapers' main strategy was *self-exoneration* while that of the Iranian newspapers was *other-accusation*.

Elaborate discussion about values in Iranian journalism and how well Iranian journalists and media outlets abide by them is all too rare. Nevertheless, the current study has provided a different perspective on most of the assumptions about Iranian journalistic practices in comparison to their Western counterparts. The Iranian newspapers almost always tended to slam the anti-Assad flank by incorporating quotations against them, either from Assad allies, especially Russia, or even from the opponents provided that the voice was favorable. Furthermore, Iranian papers rarely included any propositions implicating Iranian officials in the event. These findings are in line with the Iranian media landscape: *Kayhan* is the most conservative Iranian newspaper which is supervised by the office of the Supreme Leader, Khamenei. *Jomhuri-e Eslami*, another conservative newspaper, is claimed to be closely linked to the Supreme Leader too (Mazrooei

et al. n.d). The media industry in Iran has, therefore, remained firmly a state monopoly in terms of ownership and regulation (Rahimi 2015). State intervention, the hallmark of Iranian media, is argued to negatively correlate with the level of media autonomy (Meng & Rantanen 2015). Newspapers' close allegiance to the state, therefore, imbued their stances with the state agenda.

On the other side, American newspapers seldom gave voice to Syrian officials, particularly to Assad, except to entangle him. These newspapers appeared, to some extent, fair by providing room for a pro-Assad voice too, particularly that of Russia. Nonetheless, they preferred to affirm their own position and legitimize their actions on the grounds of threat against humanity through victimization of the opposition and, accordingly, congregation of the West bloc and Arab League against the Syrian government for the oppression and suppression of the people. Objectivity is, hence, more than the incorporation of external sources, and is rather creating spaces wherein voices of both sides of conflicts can be equally heard.

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