



A COMPARATIVE APPRAISAL STUDY OF ONLINE NEWS COVERAGE ON ANTI-GOVERNMENT PROTESTS IN IRAN IN JANUARY 2026 BY THE NEW YORK TIMES AND AL-JAZEERA ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the appraisal resources of Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation used by *The New York Times* and *Al Jazeera English* in reporting the January 2026 anti-government protests in Iran, and explains how these resources construct evaluative meanings about protesters, government authorities, and the political crisis. Using a qualitative descriptive discourse analysis based on Systemic Functional Linguistics and Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005), the study analyzed six purposively selected online news articles (three from each outlet). Data were collected through document analysis, segmented into clauses, and coded across the three appraisal subsystems. The findings identified 303 appraisal instances in *The New York Times* and 240 in *Al Jazeera English*. Judgement was the most frequent resource in both corpora, followed by Appreciation, Heterogloss, and Force. *The New York Times* framed the crisis through humanitarian concerns, negative judgment of government actions, and affect emphasizing fear, whereas *Al Jazeera English* adopted a more balanced representation by relying on heteroglossic attribution to multiple institutional voices. This study extends Appraisal Theory to international political news discourse and offers insights into ideological positioning and cross-cultural news framing, contributing to discourse analysis, journalism, and critical media literacy.

Keywords: *Evaluative Meaning, Political Protest Discourse, Media Ideology, International Journalism, Media Framing.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's interconnected media environment, international news organizations play a crucial role in shaping public understanding of political crises beyond national borders. As digital journalism continues to expand, news media function not only as channels for disseminating information but also as institutions that influence public interpretation through linguistic and discursive choices (Mccombs & Shaw, 1972). Rather than presenting events as entirely neutral accounts, news reports inevitably construct particular representations of social actors, events, and political realities through evaluative language. Consequently, the same political event may be portrayed differently across news organizations, reflecting variations in editorial

perspectives, institutional values, and geopolitical orientations.

The evaluative dimension of news discourse can be systematically examined through Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which conceptualizes language as a social semiotic resource for constructing meaning within particular social and cultural contexts (Meyer et al., 1987; Eggins, 2004). Within this framework, Appraisal Theory, developed by Martin and White (Martin & White, 2005a), provides a comprehensive model for investigating how writers and speakers express evaluation, negotiate alternative viewpoints, and adjust the intensity of their meanings. Through its three interconnected subsystems; Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation. Appraisal Theory enables researchers to identify how evaluative meanings are

linguistically realized and how particular perspectives are constructed within a text. For this reason, the framework has become one of the most widely applied approaches for examining interpersonal meaning and evaluative language in contemporary discourse studies.

The relevance of Appraisal Theory becomes particularly evident in news discourse, where evaluations are often conveyed implicitly rather than through overt opinion. Although journalism is conventionally associated with objectivity, news texts are shaped by institutional practices, editorial positioning, and ideological perspectives that influence how events and social actors are represented (Fairclough, 1995; (Fowler, 2013). Recent appraisal-based studies likewise demonstrate that even hard news reporting contains subtle evaluative meanings realized through lexical selection, attribution, and other interpersonal resources, allowing news organizations to construct particular interpretations while maintaining an appearance of factual reporting (Risdianto et al., 2024; P. R. White, 2025). Accordingly, Appraisal Theory offers an appropriate analytical framework for uncovering these implicit evaluative meanings and comparing how different international news organizations linguistically construct representations of the same political event.

Previous studies have demonstrated the broad applicability of Appraisal Theory across various discourse contexts. In news discourse, appraisal analyses consistently reveal that evaluative meanings are constructed through systematic patterns of attitude, engagement, and graduation resources, allowing researchers to uncover ideological positioning that is often presented as objective reporting (Arian R. Tolentino & Marilu R. Madrunio, 2025; Novita & Kusumah, 2025). Beyond journalism, the framework has also been successfully applied to literary and cinematic discourse, confirming its flexibility in examining interpersonal meaning across different genres (Wahyudi & Saputro, 2025). More recently, comparative appraisal studies have extended this approach to international news reporting. For example, (Sun et al., 2025a) found that although both The New York Times and China Daily relied extensively on appreciation resources in reporting climate change, their evaluative patterns reflected different national and

institutional perspectives. Collectively, these studies demonstrate the effectiveness of Appraisal Theory in revealing evaluative meanings across diverse contexts while also suggesting its potential for comparative analyses of international political news.

Despite these valuable contributions, several important research gaps remain. Existing appraisal studies have predominantly examined single news organizations, domestic issues, legal cases, or fictional discourse, while only limited attention has been given to comparative analyses of international political news. Although comparative studies such as (Sun et al., 2025a) demonstrate the value of Appraisal Theory in revealing evaluative differences across international media, they focus on environmental reporting rather than politically sensitive events. Likewise, studies of the Iranian protest movement have primarily employed framing theory and content analysis (Esmaeili, 2024; Mubarak, 2025), which identify dominant themes and media perspectives but do not explain how evaluative meanings are linguistically realized through lexical choices, dialogic positioning, and interpersonal resources. Furthermore, no previous study has specifically compared The New York Times and Al Jazeera English in reporting the January 2026 anti-government protests in Iran, a political crisis that unfolded alongside escalating tensions between Iran and the United States. This absence leaves an important gap in understanding how international news organizations with different geopolitical orientations construct evaluative meanings during a rapidly developing political conflict.

To address this gap, the present study conducts a comparative appraisal analysis of online news coverage of the January 2026 anti-government protests in Iran published by The New York Times and Al Jazeera English. Specifically, the study aims (1) to identify the appraisal resources; Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation, employed in both news outlets and (2) to explain how these resources construct evaluative meanings toward protesters, government authorities, and the broader political crisis. Theoretically, this study extends the application of Appraisal Theory to comparative international political news by demonstrating how evaluative meanings are systematically realized in reports produced by news organizations with different geopolitical

backgrounds. Practically, the findings are expected to contribute to discourse analysis, journalism studies, and critical media literacy by providing a linguistic framework through which readers, journalism educators, media practitioners, and researchers can better recognize the evaluative and ideological dimensions embedded in international news reporting.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Appraisal Theory, developed within Systemic Functional Linguistics, explains how language constructs interpersonal meaning through evaluation, positioning, and graduation. Rather than treating language as a neutral medium, the theory shows how speakers and writers express attitudes, negotiate viewpoints, and adjust evaluative intensity to shape readers' interpretations and reveal ideological positioning (Martin & White, 2005a). It comprises three interconnected subsystems: Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation, which together provide a systematic framework for analysing evaluative meaning in discourse (Martin & White, 2005a).

Because it examines evaluation at lexical and clause levels, Appraisal Theory has been widely applied across media and other discourse contexts to reveal how evaluative language is constructed beyond surface meanings (P. R. White, 2025). Previous studies consistently demonstrate its effectiveness in explaining interpersonal meaning, ideological positioning, and audience alignment across institutional and cultural settings.

Comparative studies show that similar appraisal resources may produce different evaluative meanings depending on socio-cultural and institutional contexts. For instance, climate change reporting in *The New York Times* and *China Daily* reflected different national perspectives despite similar use of Appreciation (Sun et al., 2025b). Likewise, English and Chinese university publicity texts differed in their use of Affect and Appreciation (Zheng, 2025), while British and Pakistani sports journalism showed contrasting preferences for Force and Focus within Graduation (Anwar et al., 2026). Although employing different analytical approaches, these studies consistently confirm that comparative appraisal analysis effectively reveals subtle evaluative differences across

contexts (Sun et al., 2025b; Zheng, 2025; Anwar et al., 2026).

Beyond comparative research, Appraisal Theory has also been applied to journalism, editorials, legal discourse, and literary texts. Hard news and commentary differ in evaluative strategies (P. R. White, 2025), editorials primarily employ Appreciation, monoglossic Engagement, and Force (Novita & Kusumah, 2025), courtroom discourse is dominated by Judgement (Arian R. Tolentino & Marilu R. Madrunio, 2025), and fictional dialogue relies mainly on Affect (Wahyudi & Saputro, 2025). These findings demonstrate the flexibility of Appraisal Theory for analysing evaluative meaning across diverse genres.

Research on media representation has frequently relied on framing analysis to explain how news organisations construct interpretations of political events, including Iranian protest movements (Esmaeili, 2024; Mubarak, 2025). However, framing analysis primarily identifies thematic patterns and provides limited explanation of how evaluation is linguistically realised through lexical choices, attribution, and interpersonal resources. Appraisal Theory addresses this limitation by systematically analysing evaluative meaning through Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation, making it particularly suitable for political news discourse (Martin & White, 2005a).

Despite its broad application, several research gaps remain. Previous studies have focused mainly on editorials, climate reporting, institutional discourse, legal proceedings, sports journalism, and fictional narratives, with relatively little attention to comparative analyses of politically sensitive protest coverage (Novita & Kusumah, 2025; Sun et al., 2025a; P. R. White, 2025; Zheng, 2025). Moreover, many studies emphasise only specific appraisal subsystems, such as Graduation or Attitude (Anwar et al., 2026; Arian R. Tolentino & Marilu R. Madrunio, 2025), while few compare Western and Middle Eastern international media reporting the same political crisis.

Accordingly, this study compares *The New York Times* and *Al Jazeera English* in reporting the January 2026 anti-government protests in Iran by analysing the complete Appraisal framework. This research extends previous appraisal studies and contributes to

understanding how evaluative meanings are linguistically constructed in international political news.

3. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive discourse analysis to examine evaluative meanings in online news discourse. Qualitative research is appropriate because it focuses on interpreting meaning rather than measuring data statistically (Creswell, 2023). Guided by discourse analysis, the study views language as a social practice reflecting ideology and power relations (Fairclough, 1995), while its analytical framework is based on Systemic Functional Linguistics, specifically Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005). The theory was selected because it systematically explains interpersonal meaning through the interconnected subsystems of Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation (Eggins, 2004). A descriptive qualitative design was adopted to identify, classify, and interpret appraisal resources without seeking statistical generalisation (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Sandelowski, 2000, as cited in Creswell, 2023).

The data comprised six online news articles on the January 2026 anti-government protests in Iran: three from *The New York Times* and three from *Al Jazeera English*. These organisations were selected because they represent different institutional and geopolitical perspectives while reporting the same political event, enabling meaningful comparative discourse analysis. The *New York Times* articles included *Iran Postpones Execution of Protester, Family and Rights Group Say* (14 January 2026), *Trump Says Iran Is Stopping Its Killings of Protesters as U.S. Moves Troops* (14 January 2026), and *Iran Backpedals on Executions Threat but Casts Protesters as 'Terrorists'* (15 January 2026). The *Al Jazeera English* corpus consisted of *Iran's FM Says No Executions of Protesters, as Trump Lowers Rhetoric* (14 January 2026), *Iran Says Over 100 Officers Killed as Protesters Defy Government Crackdown* (11 January 2026), and *US Says 'All Options on the Table' if Iran Protest Killings Continue* (15 January 2026). Limiting the corpus to six articles ensured that both datasets covered the same political event within a comparable period, allowing differences in evaluation to be attributed to

institutional perspectives rather than variations in news events.

Purposive sampling was employed because qualitative research prioritises information-rich data over statistical representativeness (Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Sugiyono, 2023). The selected articles had to meet four criteria: (1) published in English on the official websites of *The New York Times* or *Al Jazeera English*; (2) presented as straight news reports rather than editorials, opinion pieces, or live updates; (3) focused primarily on the January 2026 anti-government protests in Iran; and (4) published within a comparable time frame and available in full-text form. Articles that failed to meet these criteria, including editorials, commentaries, multimedia reports, duplicate stories, or unrelated reports, were excluded to ensure comparability in genre, topic, publication period, and communicative purpose.

Data were collected through document analysis by retrieving relevant news articles from the official websites of both newspapers using search terms such as *Iran protests* and *anti-government protests*. Each article was screened against the inclusion criteria before being incorporated into the research corpus (Bowen, 2009).

Data analysis followed an inductive coding procedure informed by Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005a). First, all articles were transferred into Microsoft Word and read repeatedly to establish familiarity with their content and context (John W. Creswell & Cheryl N. Poth, 2018). The texts were then segmented into clauses because appraisal resources are interpreted most accurately within clause boundaries (Eggins, 2004; Martin & White, 2005). Lexical items expressing evaluation were manually identified and coded into Attitude (Affect, Judgement, Appreciation), Engagement (Monogloss, Heterogloss), and Graduation (Force, Focus). Different colours were used to distinguish appraisal categories, and each occurrence of an evaluative item was counted separately, even when repeated across different clauses. Frequencies were subsequently calculated for each category and compared across the two corpora. Finally, the quantitative patterns were interpreted qualitatively to explain how appraisal resources represented protesters, the Iranian government, the United States, and other social actors, thereby addressing the

study's research questions (Bowen, 2009; John W. Creswell & Cheryl N. Poth, 2018).

To enhance trustworthiness, the coding process was conducted through repeated manual coding. After the initial classification, the entire corpus was reviewed several times to ensure consistent application of the appraisal categories. Whenever uncertainties arose, lexical items were re-evaluated against the theoretical definitions proposed by Martin and White (2005). No qualitative data analysis software was used; all coding, classification, frequency calculations, and interpretations were completed manually. This iterative procedure strengthened the credibility and dependability of the findings by ensuring systematic and consistent analysis throughout the corpus.

The study analysed only publicly accessible news articles from the official websites of *The New York Times* and *Al Jazeera English*. Because no human

participants, personal data, interviews, surveys, or experiments were involved, institutional ethical approval was not required. All materials were used solely for academic purposes, and the original sources were fully acknowledged.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of appraisal resources in news articles from *The New York Times* and *Al Jazeera* yielded a total of 303 and 240 appraisal instances respectively. In *The New York Times*, a total of 303 appraisal items were identified, consisting of engagement resources (monogloss and heterogloss), attitude (affect, judgment, appreciation), and graduation (force and focus). These instances represent all evaluative lexical items found throughout the dataset, where judgment emerges as the most dominant category.

Table 1. Distribution of Appraisal Resources in The New York Times

Appraisal Category	Sub-category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Engagement	Monogloss	12	3.96%
	Heterogloss	62	20.46%
Attitude	Affect	17	5.61%
	Judgment	80	26.40%
	Appreciation	67	22.11%
Graduation	Force	50	16.50%
	Focus	15	4.95%

Meanwhile, the analysis of *Al Jazeera* produced 240 appraisal instances in total, covering the same appraisal categories. These instances reflect every occurrence of

evaluative meaning expressed through lexical choices in the news discourse, with judgment also appearing as the most frequent attitude resource across the data.

Table 2. Distribution of Appraisal Resources in Al-jazeera

Appraisal Category	Sub-category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Engagement	Monogloss	19	7.92%
	Heterogloss	43	17.92%
Attitude	Affect	16	6.67%
	Judgment	63	26.25%
	Appreciation	49	20.42%
Graduation	Force	47	19.58%
	Focus	3	1.25%

The dominance of Judgement indicates that both newspapers primarily constructed the protests through evaluations of human behaviour, responsibility, legitimacy, and morality rather than emotions or assessments of events. This is expected in political protest reporting, where governments, protesters, and political actors are commonly evaluated against social and ethical standards (Martin & White, 2005). Similar findings were reported by Mirzaaghabeyk (2022), who identified Judgement as the most frequent appraisal resource in news discourse, and by Arian R. Tolentino and Marilu R. Madrunio (2025), who found Judgement dominant in courtroom discourse. The present study extends these findings by demonstrating that Judgement also plays the central evaluative role in international political news.

Although both newspapers relied most heavily on Judgement, they differed in the overall density of appraisal resources. *The New York Times* employed a greater number of appraisal instances, producing a more explicitly evaluative style, whereas *Al Jazeera English* used fewer appraisal resources while maintaining a similar overall distribution. This suggests that both outlets adopted comparable interpersonal strategies, but *The New York Times* expressed evaluation more extensively throughout its coverage.

The high frequency of Heterogloss in both corpora indicates that evaluative meanings were commonly attributed to politicians, officials, eyewitnesses, and international organisations through quotation and reported speech rather than presented as the journalists' own views. According to Martin and White (2005), heteroglossic resources enable writers to incorporate multiple voices and alternative perspectives. Likewise, Bakhtin (1986, as cited in Martin & White, 2005) argues that reporting verbs themselves carry evaluative meaning by positioning speakers differently. Consistent with this, P. R. White (2012) demonstrated that attribution allows news reports to construct evaluative positioning while maintaining an appearance of objectivity. These findings suggest that both newspapers largely conveyed evaluation indirectly through attributed voices.

Within the Graduation subsystem, Force occurred much more frequently than Focus in both newspapers, indicating that evaluation was primarily strengthened or softened rather than categorically sharpened or

blurred. Such a pattern reflects the demands of political crisis reporting, where journalists continually adjust the perceived intensity of events, government actions, casualties, and public responses. Similar results were reported by Anwar et al. (2026), who found Force to be the dominant Graduation resource in comparative sports journalism. The present study demonstrates that this pattern also characterises international political news, suggesting that Force is a common mechanism for scaling evaluative meaning across journalistic genres.

Overall, both newspapers employed the complete Appraisal framework to construct evaluative meaning. Attitude evaluated social actors and their actions, Engagement positioned these evaluations among multiple voices, and Graduation regulated their intensity and precision. Although the overall distribution of appraisal resources was broadly similar, the two newspapers differed in how they realised these resources linguistically, which social actors they foregrounded, and the evaluative meanings they constructed. The following sections examine each appraisal subsystem in greater detail to explain these similarities and differences.

Graduation Resources: The New York Times vs Al-Jazeera

As shown in Tables 1 and 2, Graduation was an important part of the appraisal patterns in both newspapers. Force was the dominant resource, appearing 50 times (16.50%) in *The New York Times* and 47 times (19.58%) in *Al Jazeera English*, while Focus was much rarer, 15 times (4.95%) in *The New York Times* and just 3 times (1.25%) in *Al Jazeera English*. This shows that both outlets mainly adjusted the intensity, amount, or degree of their evaluations, rather than blurring or sharpening category boundaries.

Force's dominance fits the nature of crisis reporting, where journalists often stress the scale, urgency, and seriousness of events. Force works by scaling evaluations up or down in intensity or quantity, letting writers highlight the weight of actions, casualties, and political responses (Martin & White, 2005). Writers commonly do this through intensifying adverbs (e.g., "slightly," "really") or through numbers, mass, and. In this study, Force showed up mainly through urgent language, maximizing expressions, and numerical figures, letting both

papers heighten the emotional weight of their coverage while still sounding factual and objective.

Focus, by contrast, works differently: instead of intensifying an evaluation, it adjusts how closely something fits a category sharpened by words like "exact" or blurred by hedges like "kind of" (Martin & White, 2005). Because of this, Focus tends to appear only when writers or quoted sources want to soften or sharpen a politically sensitive label without making a firm claim. Its rarity here suggests that coverage of the January 2026 Iran protests leaned more on measurable, quantified description than on redefining categories.

Even so, some differences appeared between the two papers. The New York Times used Focus more often, suggesting a slightly stronger tendency to fine-tune sensitive labels through careful word choice. Al Jazeera English, meanwhile, leaned more heavily on Force especially numbers and intensified language to underline the scale and consequences of the crisis. In short, while both papers used Graduation to calibrate evaluative meaning, they balanced intensity and precision differently in representing the same event. The next sections give concrete examples of Force and Focus from each newspaper.

Focus

The New York Times

Excerpt:

*"On Tuesday, the family said Mr. Soltani had never engaged in violence and had been **merely** seeking basic freedoms for Iranians."*

In paragraph 14 of the article *"Iran Postpones Execution of Protester, Family and Rights Group Say"*, the lexical item "merely" functions as Graduation: Focus (Soften) within Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005). Unlike Force, which scales the intensity of qualities or processes, Focus adjusts the boundaries of experiential categories by sharpening or softening category membership. Rather than indicating degree, Focus redefines how closely an entity or action fits a particular category.

In this context, the family's claim that Mr. Soltani had "merely" been seeking basic freedoms softens the categorisation of his actions. The modifier distances his behaviour from more serious labels such as political

activism, rebellion, or incitement, which could be used to justify state punishment. Instead, it presents his actions as limited, ordinary, and non-threatening, thereby reducing their perceived political significance.

This interpretation is consistent with Hood (2010), who explains that Focus resources operate by negotiating category membership rather than intensity. Here, "merely" does not amplify or reduce a gradable quality but repositions the action from the socially marked category of political resistance toward the less marked category of ordinary civic behaviour. Consequently, the lexical choice functions as a categorical softener, illustrating Hood's view that Focus concerns what kind of action is being represented rather than how much of it is expressed.

Al-Jazeera

Excerpt:

*"Iran is currently in the midst of a **near-total** telecommunications blackout, with monitor NetBlocks reporting on Wednesday..."*

In paragraph 30 of the article *"Iran's FM Says No Executions of Protesters, as Trump Lowers Rhetoric,"* the lexical item "near-total" functions as Graduation: Focus (Soften) in Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005). Unlike Force, which grades the intensity or extent of qualities, Focus modifies category membership. The adjective "total" represents an absolute category, while the prefix "near-" softens its boundary by indicating that the blackout closely approximates, but does not fully meet, the condition of being total. Thus, the expression adjusts category membership rather than intensifying degree.

This choice serves an important rhetorical purpose in crisis reporting. By describing the communications shutdown as "near-total," the journalist conveys its seriousness while avoiding an absolute claim that could later be challenged if limited connectivity remained. The event is therefore presented as approaching the prototype of a total blackout without fully belonging to that category, balancing accuracy with caution.

This interpretation is consistent with Hood (2010), who argues that Focus resources negotiate how fully an entity or event belongs to a category rather than scaling its intensity. Likewise, Kuswoyo et al. (2022) distinguish Force, which grades extent or intensity, from

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Focus, which adjusts categorical membership. The expression “near-total” therefore answers the question of how completely the blackout fits the category of *total* rather than how severe it is. This reading is further supported by Channell (1983), who explains that approximating expressions function as vague language, enabling writers to avoid overcommitting to absolute claims while maintaining credibility in situations involving uncertain or evolving information.

Force***The New York Times***

Excerpt:

“...beheaded people in the streets or burned people alive must be tried and punished as quickly as possible,” he said. “If we don’t do it fast, it won’t have the same impact.”

In paragraph 4 of the article “Iran Postpones Execution of Protester, Family and Rights Group Say”, the phrase “as quickly as possible” functions as an instance of Graduation: Force (Intensification; Maximization). Unlike Focus, which operates on categories that are inherently non-gradable and either sharpens or softens their boundary of membership, Force operates on qualities and processes that are already scalar by nature meaning they can be measured along a continuum from low to high degree. Speed is precisely such a quality: an action can be done slowly, moderately, or quickly, occupying any point along that scale.

The construction “as possible” is a maximizing intensifier, pushing the scalable quality of speed to its highest attainable point on the continuum, rather than negotiating whether the action belongs to the category of “quick” action at all. This distinguishes it clearly from Focus items like near-total or mostly, which negotiate categorical fit rather than degree. Here, the speaker is not questioning whether punishment counts as “quick” punishment; rather, he is intensifying the urgency of the process to its upper limit, reinforcing the rhetorical force of the demand for immediate accountability.

This maximizing function is significant in context: it amplifies the speaker's evaluative

stance toward the urgency of justice, constructing a heightened sense of necessity and immediacy around the punishment of those responsible for violence. As Halliday & Matthiessen, (2013) account of gradability in the interpersonal metafunction suggests, such intensifiers realize the speaker's affective and evaluative investment in a proposition by scaling the intensity of a process, here amplifying urgency rather than blurring category membership.

Al-Jazeera

Excerpt:

“The US-based Human Rights Activists News Agency has said that it has confirmed the deaths of more than 2,400 protesters...”

In paragraph 28 of the article “Iran's FM Says No Executions of Protesters, as Trump Lowers Rhetoric,” the phrase “more than 2,400” functions as Graduation: Force (Quantification) within Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005). Force scales qualities, processes, or quantities that are inherently gradable, and Quantification specifically grades entities according to number or extent. The expression “more than” acts as a quantifying booster, indicating that the reported death toll exceeds the stated figure. Rather than questioning category membership, it amplifies the magnitude of the casualties, emphasizing the scale of the crackdown and suggesting that the actual number may be even higher.

This interpretation is supported by Bednarek (2010), who identifies quantity as an important evaluative resource in news discourse. By presenting the figure as a minimum rather than a fixed total, the report frames the crisis as more severe and ongoing, thereby increasing its perceived significance while maintaining factual credibility.

Overall, the Graduation analysis indicates that both *The New York Times* and *Al Jazeera English* relied predominantly on Force rather than Focus to construct evaluative meaning. Consistent with Martin and White (2005), Force intensified or quantified evaluations, whereas Focus adjusted category boundaries. In reporting the January 2026 anti-government protests, Force was primarily realised through numerical expressions and intensified descriptions of violence, casualties, and political responses, allowing journalists to

highlight the severity of events while preserving an objective tone. Focus occurred less frequently but remained important for softening or sharpening politically sensitive categories.

Although both newspapers displayed a similar overall pattern, they differed in emphasis. *The New York Times* employed Focus more frequently, showing a greater tendency to refine sensitive categorizations through lexical choices such as “merely.” By contrast, *Al Jazeera English* relied more heavily on Force, particularly through quantification and intensified language, to emphasize the scale and impact of the crisis. Thus, while both newspapers utilised the full Graduation subsystem, they differed in balancing evaluative intensity and categorical precision when representing the same political event.

Attitude Resources: The New York Times vs Al-Jazeera

As shown in Tables 1 and 2, Attitude was the most dominant appraisal category in both *The New York Times* and *Al Jazeera English*. Within this subsystem, Judgement occurred most frequently, accounting for 80 instances (26.40%) in *The New York Times* and 63 instances (26.25%) in *Al Jazeera English*, followed by Appreciation, while Affect appeared least often. This similar distribution indicates that both newspapers primarily framed the January 2026 Iran protests through evaluations of human behaviour rather than emotions or aesthetic assessments of events.

The predominance of Judgement reflects the nature of political crisis reporting, which focuses on evaluating the actions, responsibilities, and legitimacy of governments, protesters, security forces, and other political actors. As Martin and White (2005) explain, Judgement serves to assess human behaviour against social and ethical standards. Although both newspapers covered the same event, they directed these evaluations toward different actors and aspects of behaviour, reflecting their distinct editorial perspectives.

Appreciation, the second most frequent Attitude resource, was used to evaluate events, political developments, and institutional processes rather than individuals. Through Appreciation, both newspapers assessed the significance, complexity, and consequences of issues such as legal proceedings, diplomatic

relations, and the broader protest situation. This finding supports White (2025), who argues that evaluative meaning in hard news is often embedded in descriptions of events, and Pounds (2010), who notes that subjectivity is conveyed through seemingly objective news reporting.

By contrast, Affect appeared relatively infrequently, suggesting that personal emotions were less central than political evaluation. When Affect occurred, it mainly represented collective emotions such as fear, anxiety, and uncertainty associated with the escalating crisis rather than individual feelings. This finding is consistent with Bednarek and Caple (2017), who argue that emotional language enhances newsworthiness while remaining subordinate to factual reporting, and with Bednarek (2010), who maintains that emotion in hard news is typically mediated through news values rather than direct personal expression.

Although the overall distribution of Attitude resources was similar, the two newspapers differed in their evaluative emphasis. *The New York Times* focused more on governmental accountability, legal issues, and international political implications, whereas *Al Jazeera English* gave greater attention to the experiences of affected people alongside political developments. The following sections examine Affect, Judgement, and Appreciation in greater detail to explain how each newspaper constructed these evaluative meanings.

Affect

The New York Times

Excerpt:

“...have **heightened fears** of another U.S. strike on Iran in a region already on tenterhooks after multiple wars in the past two years.”

In paragraph 20 of the article “*Iran Postpones Execution of Protester, Family and Rights Group Say*,” the lexical item “heightened fears” is classified as Attitude: Affect (Insecurity) because it expresses anxiety and uncertainty about a possible future event. In Appraisal Theory, Affect represents emotional responses, while Insecurity refers to feelings of worry, apprehension, and vulnerability (Martin & White, 2005). In this context, “fears” reflects growing concern over

the possibility of another United States military strike against Iran, and the modifier “heightened” intensifies this emotional response by indicating that existing anxiety has increased.

The expression portrays the regional situation as unstable and potentially dangerous. By referring to a region “already on tenterhooks after multiple wars in the past two years,” the article frames fear as a reasonable reaction to escalating political and military tensions. The evaluation therefore focuses not on the morality of military action but on its emotional consequences, emphasizing the atmosphere of insecurity surrounding the prospect of renewed conflict.

This interpretation is consistent with Bednarek and Caple (2017), who argue that emotional language functions as a news value by making events appear more urgent and consequential. From this perspective, “heightened fears” does more than describe an emotional state; it enhances the perceived significance of the crisis and directs readers' attention to the seriousness of renewed U.S.–Iran tensions through affective framing.

Al-Jazeera

Excerpt:

*“...Tohid Asadi said that people in the city and across the country are **anxious** because they have psychologically felt the...”*

In paragraph 23 of the news article “Iran’s FM says no executions of protesters, as Trump lowers rhetoric” the lexical item “anxious” is categorized as Attitude: Affect (Insecurity) because it directly represents the emotional state of individuals experiencing worry, fear, and psychological tension. The word does not evaluate behavior or assess events, but instead expresses a subjective feeling arising from perceived threat and instability. Because in Appraisal Theory, Affect refers to the expression of emotions, while the subtype Insecurity covers feelings such as anxiety, fear, unease, and uncertainty. In this context, anxious reflects the emotional consequences of prolonged geopolitical tension and the lingering “shadow of war.” The population is portrayed as emotionally affected by past conflict, which continues to influence their psychological state.

The use of anxious is reinforced by the surrounding description that people have

“psychologically felt the shadow of war,” which intensifies the sense of ongoing mental pressure and insecurity. As Bednarek & Caple, (2017) describe as the emotionalization of news discourse, whereby journalists strategically foreground collective emotional states to construct events as urgent and consequential for readers, rather than relying solely on factual or statistical framing. By quoting a correspondent's direct assessment of the population's psychological state, the report lends this emotionalized framing an air of on-the-ground authenticity, reinforcing the perceived reality and immediacy of the anxiety being described.

Judgment

The New York Times

Excerpt:

*“The President of the United States, who repeatedly speaks about the **unsuccessful** attack ...”*

In paragraph 23 of the article “*Trump Says Iran Is Stopping Its Killings of Protesters as U.S. Moves Troops*,” the lexical item “unsuccessful” is classified as Attitude: Judgement (Social Esteem: Capacity, negative). In Appraisal Theory, Judgement evaluates human behaviour according to social norms, while Capacity specifically assesses competence and effectiveness (Martin & White, 2005). Here, “unsuccessful” explicitly evaluates the effectiveness of the U.S. military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities, indicating a failure of capability rather than questioning its morality or truthfulness.

Because “unsuccessful” is an explicit evaluative adjective, it represents inscribed Judgement, directly attributing incompetence instead of leaving readers to infer it from neutral descriptions. The evaluation is presented through a direct quotation from Ali Shamkhani, a senior Iranian official, rather than the journalist's own voice. This attribution allows the newspaper to report a strongly evaluative political statement while maintaining an appearance of neutrality. As Carmen Rosa (2002) explains, direct quotations transfer responsibility for evaluative language to the quoted speaker, enabling ideological or controversial evaluations to appear in news reports without implying the reporter's endorsement.

The evaluative effect becomes stronger when “unsuccessful” is contrasted with the subsequent claim that Iran's missile strike had “crushed” the U.S. base. Together, these lexical choices construct a rhetorical contrast that portrays U.S. military capability as ineffective while simultaneously presenting Iran as more capable and resilient. This illustrates how inscribed Judgement can be strategically employed in political discourse to shape competing narratives of competence and legitimacy during international conflict.

Al-Jazeera

Excerpt:

*“People also started going away from those kinds of **violent activities** ...”*

In paragraph 10 of the article *“Iran Says Over 100 Officers Killed as Protesters Defy Government Crackdown,”* the phrase “violent activities” is classified as Attitude: Judgement (Social Sanction: Propriety, negative). In Appraisal Theory, Social Sanction evaluates behaviour against moral, ethical, or legal norms. In this case, the evaluation is invoked rather than inscribed because the phrase classifies the behaviour without explicitly describing it as illegal, immoral, or reprehensible (Martin & White, 2005).

The adjective “violent” categorises certain protest-related actions as falling outside the boundaries of acceptable civic conduct. Although the report does not directly condemn these actions, the negative evaluation is implied because violence is conventionally associated with the violation of social and legal norms. Consequently, readers infer the judgement from the classificatory label rather than from an explicit moral evaluation.

The phrase is also characterised by agentive vagueness, as it does not identify who engaged in the “violent activities.” This broad categorisation distributes the evaluative meaning across unspecified actors instead of targeting particular individuals or groups. Van Leeuwen (2008) explains that such classification functions as a strategy of representing social actors by assigning them to socially meaningful categories rather than naming them directly. In this context, describing the conduct as “violent activities” serves to delegitimise the behaviour by placing it within a negatively valued category while

avoiding direct attribution of blame to specific actors.

Appreciation

The New York Times

Excerpt:

*“It was **not immediately clear** how those people would be punished or how the authorities would define their ...”*

In paragraph 6 of the article “Iran Backpedals on Executions Threat but Casts Protesters as ‘Terrorists’”, the phrase “not immediately clear” functions as an instance of Attitude: Appreciation (Composition: Complexity, negative). Within Appraisal Theory, Appreciation evaluates “things” objects, processes, texts, and states of affairs rather than human character (Judgement) or emotional response (Affect). Composition, one of Appreciation's three subtypes, specifically concerns whether something is well-formed, balanced, or comprehensible. Here, not clear directly assesses the epistemic state of the situation namely, the ambiguity surrounding how accused individuals would be punished and how their alleged crimes would even be legally defined placing this evaluation squarely within Composition: Complexity, as it concerns the coherence and transparency of a state of affairs rather than any person's inner feelings or moral conduct.

This Appreciation item performs an important interpersonal function in the surrounding co-text. The preceding sentences report Iranian officials' Judgement-laden rhetoric, explicitly labeling protesters as “rioters” and “terrorists” and pledging swift prosecution. By contrast, “not immediately clear” shifts the evaluative register: rather than the writer directly challenging or endorsing the officials' harsh characterizations, the text instead flags a lack of transparency in the process itself how punishment will be carried out and how crimes will be defined remain unspecified. This subtle move allows the writer to implicitly question the legitimacy and due-process integrity of Iran's prosecution announcement without resorting to explicit Judgement language that would compromise journalistic neutrality. The negative evaluation of Complexity thus functions as an indirect critical device: ambiguity in official process becomes, in itself, a noteworthy and evaluatively marked absence, inviting the

reader to interpret the government's announcement as vague, procedurally opaque, or potentially arbitrary.

Al-Jazeera

Excerpt:

"If Washington wants to test the military option it has tested before, we are ready for it," Araghchi said in an interview with our colleagues at Al Jazeera Arabic on Monday. 'Great deal of uncertainty'. It remained difficult on Thursday..."

In paragraph 15 of the article "US says 'all options on the table' if Iran protest killings continue", the phrase "Great deal of uncertainty", used as a subheading, functions as an instance of Attitude: Appreciation (Composition: Complexity, negative). Within Appraisal Theory, Appreciation is the subsystem of Attitude concerned with evaluating "things" objects, texts, processes, and states of affairs rather than human character (Judgement) or emotional response (Affect). Appreciation is further divided into three subtypes: Reaction (whether something captures attention or has emotional impact/appeal), Composition (whether something is balanced, proportioned, or comprehensible), and Valuation (whether something is worthwhile or significant).

The noun uncertainty here evaluates the overall geopolitical and informational situation in Iran, assessing it not in terms of how it emotionally affects an observer (which would place it under Reaction), nor in terms of its inherent worth or importance (Valuation), but rather in terms of its comprehensibility and clarity that is, how well-formed, resolved, or interpretable the situation is to outside observers. This placement under Composition: Complexity reflects the negative evaluation that the situation lacks order, predictability, or coherence, positioning it as difficult to make sense of rather than as an event that is inherently distressing (Affect) or morally evaluable (Judgement).

The item's placement as a standalone headline/subheading, set off in quotation marks, is also significant: this structural choice foregrounds uncertainty as the organizing evaluative frame for the entire subsequent section of the article, priming the reader to interpret the following details (the internet

blackout, difficulty accessing information, heightened security in Tehran) through the lens of an unresolved, opaque situation before any specific facts are even presented. This use of an evaluative noun as a section header is a common journalistic device for compressing an overarching Appreciation judgement into a compact, attention-orienting label.

Engagement Resources: The New York Times vs Al-Jazeera

As shown in Tables 1 and 2, Engagement resources accounted for a substantial proportion of appraisal instances in both newspapers. Heterogloss was considerably more frequent than Monogloss, occurring 62 times (20.46%) in *The New York Times* and 43 times (17.92%) in *Al Jazeera English*, compared with only 12 (3.96%) and 19 (7.92%) instances of Monogloss, respectively. This indicates that both newspapers predominantly constructed their reports through dialogically open discourse by incorporating external voices rather than relying solely on the journalists' own assertions.

The predominance of Heterogloss reflects the conventions of international political journalism, particularly when reporting politically sensitive events involving competing narratives. According to Martin and White (2005), heteroglossic resources enable writers to acknowledge alternative viewpoints, attribute claims to external sources, and avoid presenting contested information as unquestionable fact. Accordingly, both newspapers frequently quoted government officials, political leaders, international organisations, eyewitnesses, and state media, allowing them to communicate politically charged evaluations while maintaining journalistic credibility.

Despite this shared reliance on Heterogloss, the two newspapers differed slightly in their dialogic positioning. *The New York Times* employed Heterogloss more extensively, suggesting a greater dependence on attributed voices when reporting rapidly evolving developments. In contrast, *Al Jazeera English* used Monogloss more frequently, presenting a larger proportion of contextual and narrative information directly through the journalist's voice. These differences reflect alternative strategies for balancing direct narration with attributed evaluation rather than fundamentally different reporting styles.

The relatively limited use of Monogloss further demonstrates the dialogic nature of contemporary news discourse. Monoglossic statements were mainly used to provide background information, describe observable events, or present contextual details considered sufficiently established to require neither attribution nor qualification. As Martin and White (2005) explain, Monogloss closes down dialogic alternatives by presenting propositions as given or unproblematic. However, because the January 2026 Iran protests involved highly contested political claims, explicit attribution through Heterogloss was generally preferred.

These findings support White's (2025) argument that objectivity in hard news is achieved not by eliminating evaluation but by managing dialogic positioning through attribution and source selection. Similarly, Fairclough (2003) argues that journalistic discourse negotiates authority by deciding which propositions are presented as factual and which are attributed to external voices. This perspective is also consistent with Martin and White's (2005) distinction between dialogic expansion and contraction, which recent political discourse research continues to identify as a strategic means of positioning evaluative meaning.

Overall, both *The New York Times* and *Al Jazeera English* relied predominantly on Heterogloss to construct evaluative meaning, although they differed in the extent to which they combined attributed voices with direct narration. The following section examines specific examples of Monogloss and Heterogloss to illustrate how these Engagement resources shaped the representation of the January 2026 anti-government protests in Iran.

Monogloss

The New York Times

Excerpt:

"The authorities have also sent text messages warning families not to let their children go out into the streets"

In paragraph 14 of the article "Iran Backpedals on Executions Threat but Casts Protesters as 'Terrorists'", this sentence functions as an instance of Engagement: Monogloss. Within Appraisal Theory, the Engagement system distinguishes between Monoglossic assertions, which present a

proposition as a single, unproblematic fact requiring no acknowledgment of alternative voices or viewpoints, and Heteroglossic formulations, which explicitly open dialogic space by hedging (Modality), attributing claims to external sources (Attribution), or countering anticipated objections (Denial/Counter). As Martin and White (2005) explain, Monogloss is realized precisely through the absence of these dialogic markers: the proposition is construed as if it were simply a fact about the world, with no trace of the utterance having been produced by a particular speaking subject open to challenge.

This Monoglossic framing is notable in the context of an article otherwise saturated with Heteroglossic. Fairclough's (2003) concept of presupposition and naturalized assumption is useful here: he argues that texts can render certain claims as unproblematic, taken-for-granted background knowledge by presenting them without qualification or sourcing, thereby positioning them as part of the shared, uncontested common ground between writer and reader rather than as one contestable viewpoint among others. Applying this framework, the writer's choice to assert the sending of warning text messages without hedging or attribution suggests the claim is treated as sufficiently corroborated perhaps through multiple independent channels such as family testimony or documented message screenshots that it no longer requires the distancing device of explicit sourcing. This stands in clear contrast to the treatment of more contested or politically volatile claims elsewhere in the same article, such as execution intentions or military planning, which the writer consistently attributes to named sources rather than asserting directly.

Al-Jazeera

Excerpt:

"...Trump on Wednesday dialled down the rhetoric, saying he had received assurances that the killings of demonstrators had stopped."

In paragraph 11 of the news article "US says 'all options on the table' if Iran protest killings continue," the sentence is categorized as Engagement: Monogloss because it is presented as the journalist's own unmediated characterization of President Trump's observable communicative behavior. The clause "Trump on Wednesday dialled down the

rhetoric” is expressed as a declarative statement without attribution, hedging, or modalization, thereby presenting the proposition as an authorial assertion rather than one negotiated with alternative voices.

According to Martin and White (2005), Monogloss refers to propositions that are presented as self-evident or factual, without explicitly acknowledging, entertaining, or engaging with alternative viewpoints or external voices. Such utterances contract the dialogic space by offering information as an unproblematic statement of fact. In this instance, the journalist directly characterizes Trump’s rhetorical shift without using engagement markers such as according to, reportedly, it appears, or he claimed, which would otherwise introduce heteroglossic positioning. The subsequent clause “saying he had received assurances...” contains attributed speech and therefore introduces another voice into the discourse, the main clause itself remains a monoglossic assertion. The evaluation that Trump dialled down his rhetoric is presented as the writer’s own narrative description rather than as a claim attributed to another source.

Heterogloss

The New York Times

Excerpt:

“Mr. Trump said that he had received the information from ...”

In the excerpt, of the news article “Trump Says Iran Is Stopping Its Killings of Protesters as U.S. Moves Troops,” paragraph 3 the journalist attributes the information to President Trump through the reporting verb said. This lexical item is categorized as Engagement: Heterogloss (Attribution) because it introduces a voice other than that of the journalist (Li et al., 2023). Rather than presenting the information as an unquestionable fact, the writer attributes the claim to a specific source, namely Mr. Trump. As a result, the proposition is represented as one perspective among multiple possible viewpoints.

According to Appraisal Theory, Heterogloss occurs when a text acknowledges alternative voices, opinions, or sources of information. The reporting verb said creates dialogic space by distancing the journalist from the truth value of the statement and assigning responsibility for the claim to Mr. Trump. This

allows readers to recognize that the information originates from a particular speaker rather than from the journalist’s own authorial voice. The heteroglossic nature of the statement is reinforced by Trump’s admission that he would “find out” later whether the information was accurate. This indicates that the claim remains uncertain and open to verification. By attributing the statement to Mr. Trump, the article avoids fully endorsing the information and instead presents it as a reported viewpoint.

Al-Jazeera

Excerpt:

“Meanwhile, Iran’s President Masoud Pezeshkian addressed economic plans and “people’s demands” in an interview on Sunday, according to state TV”

In paragraph 13 of the article “Iran Says Over 100 Officers Killed as Protesters Defy Government Crackdown,” the lexical item “according to” is classified as Engagement: Heterogloss (Attribution) because it explicitly attributes information to an external source rather than presenting it as the journalist’s own assertion. In Appraisal Theory, Heterogloss encompasses linguistic resources that introduce alternative voices or perspectives, thereby expanding dialogic space (Martin & White, 2005). Here, “according to” functions as an attribution marker by indicating that the information originates from state TV, distancing the authorial voice from the reported proposition. As Karam and Hameed Mayuuf (2025) note, such attribution allows journalists to report information without claiming independent verification. At the same time, identifying state TV as the source signals that the information is mediated through an official institution that may reflect a particular ideological perspective.

Overall, both *The New York Times* and *Al Jazeera English* relied predominantly on Heterogloss when reporting the January 2026 anti-government protests in Iran, demonstrating the dialogically expansive character of contemporary international news discourse. Rather than presenting politically sensitive information as uncontested fact, both newspapers frequently attributed claims to government officials, political leaders, state media, eyewitnesses, and other institutional sources. This finding supports Martin and White’s (2005) argument that Heterogloss

enables journalists to incorporate multiple voices while maintaining an appearance of objectivity. Nevertheless, the two newspapers differed slightly in their engagement strategies. *The New York Times* employed Heterogloss more extensively, indicating a stronger reliance on attributed voices when reporting politically contested developments, whereas *Al Jazeera English* used Monogloss somewhat more frequently to present contextual information before introducing attributed statements. Consistent with Fairclough (2003), these differences illustrate alternative ways of negotiating credibility and neutrality through selective attribution rather than fundamentally different journalistic practices. Although their overall engagement patterns were similar, each newspaper displayed distinct rhetorical preferences in constructing evaluative meaning and managing dialogic positioning throughout its coverage of the protests.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that both *The New York Times* and *Al Jazeera English* employed all three appraisal systems Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation although with different frequencies. *The New York Times* contained 303 appraisal instances, compared with 240 in *Al Jazeera English*. In both corpora, Judgement was the dominant appraisal resource (26.40% and 26.25%, respectively), followed by Appreciation, Heterogloss, and Force, whereas Affect, Monogloss, and Focus occurred less frequently. The predominance of Judgement suggests that both newspapers primarily evaluated the behaviour of protesters, government authorities, and political leaders through social and moral assessment. Likewise, the frequent use of Heterogloss indicates extensive reliance on attribution and reported speech, while the greater use of Force than Focus shows that evaluative meanings were more often intensified than categorically adjusted.

Although both newspapers employed the same appraisal framework, they constructed different evaluative meanings. *The New York Times* framed the protests mainly as a humanitarian and political crisis by emphasizing negative judgements of government actions, appreciation of political instability, and affective expressions of fear and insecurity. In contrast, *Al Jazeera English* adopted a broader and more diplomatically

oriented representation by incorporating multiple institutional voices and distributing evaluations across a wider range of political actors. These differences demonstrate that ideological positioning was reflected not in the choice of appraisal systems but in the frequency, distribution, and contextual realization of specific appraisal resources.

Theoretically, this study extends the application of Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005) to comparative international political crisis reporting. The findings demonstrate that the integrated analysis of Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation effectively reveals evaluative meaning and ideological positioning in contemporary news discourse, while highlighting the value of lexical-level appraisal analysis for uncovering subtle evaluations embedded in texts that appear objective.

Practically, the study contributes to discourse analysis, journalism, and media studies by illustrating the systematic application of Appraisal Theory to political news. It also shows how apparently objective reporting conveys evaluative perspectives through lexical choices, attribution, and graduation resources, thereby supporting the development of critical media literacy and encouraging readers to compare representations of the same political event across media organizations with different geopolitical backgrounds.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study examined only six English-language news articles from two international news organizations, limiting the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the analysis focused exclusively on lexical appraisal resources and did not examine multimodal features such as images, headlines, typography, or visual framing. Finally, the qualitative descriptive design provided in-depth interpretation but did not test statistical significance across larger datasets.

Future research should investigate larger multilingual corpora, include additional international and regional news organizations, and examine broader political contexts to strengthen comparative analysis. Longitudinal studies could also explore changes in evaluative language across different stages of political crises. Furthermore, integrating Appraisal Theory with Critical Discourse Analysis, corpus linguistics, or multimodal discourse

analysis would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how verbal and visual resources jointly construct ideological meanings in contemporary political journalism.

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