



## The Semantic Shift of War: A Comparative Analysis of Political Discourse on the Gaza Conflict across News, Speech, and Social Media

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### Abstract

This study investigates the rapid semantic shifts of political terminology within the context of the 2025 Israel-Gaza conflict. Grounded in the cognitive-functional frameworks of Blank and Traugott and Dasher, the research analyzes how lexical meaning is constructed and altered across three distinct registers: international news media (Al Jazeera), diplomatic speech (UN Secretariat), and institutional social media (UN Human Rights). Using a qualitative descriptive approach, 15 key lexicons were analyzed to identify patterns of semantic change, including broadening, narrowing, and pejoration. The findings reveal three divergent trajectories of meaning: (1) Institutional Specialization in diplomatic speech, where general ethical terms like accountability are narrowed into performative legal demands; (2) Pragmatic Broadening in news media, where technical terms like ceasefire expand to encompass complex humanitarian narratives; and (3) Emotive Intensification on social media, where descriptive phrases undergo hyperbolic shifts to mobilize digital publics. The study concludes that political conflict acts as a catalyst for semantic change, driven by the opposing forces of institutional need for legal precision and the media's drive for affective impact. These results support the view that semantic change is fundamentally discourse-driven and highly sensitive to the communicative affordances of the platform.

**Keyword:** Semantic Change; Political Discourse; Israel-Gaza Conflict; Pragmatics; Critical Discourse Analysis

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## INTRODUCTION

Language in the realm of political conflict is never merely a neutral medium of description; it is a strategic instrument of power, delegitimization, and mobilization (Van Dijk, 2006). As Orwell famously observed, political language is often designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable. However, beyond the deliberate manipulation of facts, a more subtle and profound linguistic process occurs during prolonged crises: semantic change. In high-stakes geopolitical environments, the meanings of words do not remain static. Instead, they undergo rapid shifts driven by ideological contestation, media circulation, and institutional discourse. This phenomenon is particularly acute in the context of the 2025 Israel-Gaza conflict, where vocabulary has become a central battleground for competing moral and legal narratives (Cap, 2013). While traditional perspectives in historical linguistics often view semantic change as a slow, gradual process spanning centuries, driven largely by cognitive efficiency or phonetic erosion, modern semantic scholarship argues otherwise (Geeraerts, 2010). Cognitive-functional approaches, particularly those championed by Blank (1999) and Traugott, E. C., & Dasher (2002), posit that meaning is dynamic and fundamentally discourse-driven (Hart, 2014). In this view, semantic shifts can occur rapidly when pragmatic pressures—such as the need to persuade, condemn, or justify—force speakers to repurpose existing lexicons for new communicative needs. The current conflict has accelerated this process, transforming general vocabulary into specialized legal terms and intensifying descriptive words into emotive weapons.

To understand how political conflict reshapes meaning, we must ground our analysis in the mechanisms of Subjectification and Pragmatic Inference. Traugott and Dasher (2002) propose that semantic change typically moves towards "subjectification," where meanings become increasingly based in the speaker's subjective belief state or attitude towards the proposition. In the context of war, a word like *ceasefire*—originally a technical military

term denoting a temporary suspension of hostilities—gains evaluative and prescriptive features, evolving from a description of an event to a moral imperative or a "humanitarian package" demanded by advocacy groups. Furthermore, Andreas Blank's (1999) typology of motivations for semantic change provides a crucial framework for analyzing political lexicon, identifying that new meanings often occur due to discourse pressures and institutionalization. In the diplomatic register, for instance, general ethical terms often undergo "narrowing" or "specialization" to fit specific legal frameworks. When UN officials speak of *accountability*, they are not referring to a vague sense of responsibility, but are indexing specific mechanisms like International Criminal Court (ICC) referrals, effectively turning ordinary language into a term of art (Pehar, 2001). Conversely, the logic of social media drives meaning in the opposite direction towards Pejoration and Intensification. The constraints of platforms like X (formerly Twitter) force institutional actors to use hyperbolic markers, where phrases like *military takeover* act as "metonymic intensifiers" designed to mobilize outrage, aligning with Leech's (1981) classification of affective meaning (Serrano-Puche, 2016).

While the geopolitical history of the Gaza conflict has been extensively examined, this study introduces a novel simultaneous cross-register analysis of the 2025 escalation. Unlike previous iterations of the conflict, the current discourse offers a unique opportunity to track 'semantic contestation' in real-time across diverging spheres. Data from recent months reveals a distinct fracture in how the war is framed simultaneously: News media functions as a 'broadener,' framing terms to encompass humanitarian consequences (e.g., repurposing statehood as leverage) (Entman, 1993). Conversely, diplomatic discourse operates as a 'specializer' and 'performer'; following Austin's (1962) Speech Act Theory, words here are performative, where calling for accountability initiates political processes. Simultaneously, social media acts as an 'intensifier,' transforming modal verbs like *must* into moral commands. This research fills a gap by examining how these registers interact and compete for semantic legitimacy.

Despite these observable patterns, there is a paucity of research that compares how the same lexical items mutate across different registers simultaneously during a crisis. While extensive research exists on the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of war reporting, most studies focus on bias and framing within a single medium. This study distinguishes itself from existing CDA scholarship by moving beyond the identification of bias to reveal the specific linguistic mechanisms of *semantic weaponization* (Lakoff, 2004). Current literature often treats semantic change as a historical artifact rather than a real-time political strategy. This study fills that gap by applying historical semantic theories to synchronic political data, arguing that the 'instability' of meaning in the Gaza conflict is not accidental confusion, but a structural feature of modern crisis communication (Fairclough, 2013). Consequently, this study aims to identify key lexicons in the 2025 Israel-Gaza discourse that have undergone significant semantic change, classify these changes using standard semantic typologies, and analyze the motivating factors behind them. The central thesis of this article is that political conflict accelerates semantic change through two opposing forces: Institutional Specialization, which narrows meaning to create legal barriers, and Pragmatic Subjectification, which broadens meaning to maximize moral urgency. By tracing these shifts, we reveal how language does not merely reflect the war, but actively shapes the diplomatic and humanitarian response to it (Chouliaraki, 2006).

## METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design with a comparative approach to analyze semantic change in political discourse. While this study acknowledges the ideological dimensions central to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), it adopts a descriptive design to isolate the linguistic mechanisms of semantic change independent of their political merit. The research is grounded in the framework of historical-philological semantics applied to synchronic data, specifically utilizing the cognitive-functional models proposed by Blank (1999) and Traugott and Dasher (2002). This design was chosen to move beyond static dictionary definitions and instead examine how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and altered within specific communicative contexts. By comparing three distinct registers—journalistic, diplomatic, and digital—the study isolates the variable of 'medium' to understand its influence on lexical evolution. Specifically, the influence of the medium is identified by correlating semantic shifts with the unique constraints of each register: the binding terminology of diplomatic texts, the editorial neutrality of journalism, and the affect-driven brevity of digital discourse.

The data for this study consists of three primary texts, each representing a specific register of political communication related to the Israel-Gaza conflict. The texts were selected based on their high impact, verifiable

authorship, and publication during the escalation period of August–October 2025. The corpus comprises: (1) International News Media: An article by *Al Jazeera* titled "UN General Assembly: what did world leaders say about Israel's war on Gaza?" published on September 30, 2025 (Richardson, 2007). This source represents the descriptive yet framing-heavy register of global journalism (Al Jazeera, 2025); (2) Political/Diplomatic Speech: Official press remarks by UN Secretary-General António Guterres titled "Gaza: Another deadly escalation," delivered on August 28, 2025 (KhosraviNik, 2014) repur. This source represents high-stakes institutional discourse with performative force (Guterres, 2025); (3) Social Media (Microblogging): A verified tweet by *United Nations Human Rights* (@UNHumanRights) posted on October 15, 2025. This source represents the compressed, urgent, and viral nature of digital advocacy (United Nations Human Rights [UNHumanRights], 2025).

Data collection followed a purposive sampling technique. The procedure was conducted in three steps: (1) Selection of Texts: Three data sources were identified corresponding to political news, political speech, and social media; (2) Lexical Identification: From each text, five (5) key lexical items (words or collocations) were extracted. The criteria for selection were: (a) high frequency or prominence in the text, (b) relevance to the conflict narrative, and (c) evidence of divergence from standard denotative meaning; (3) Contextual Extraction: Each lexicon was extracted alongside its immediate syntactic context (sentences or phrases) to ensure accurate pragmatic analysis. In total, 15 lexical items were analyzed, including terms such as "ceasefire," "accountability," "statehood," "dehumanization," and "military takeover".

The collected data were analyzed using a multi-layered semantic framework. The analysis focused on three dimensions as outlined in the research guidelines: (1) Contextual Meaning Identification: Each lexicon was analyzed to determine its "new meaning" within the specific context of the 2025 conflict, distinguishing it from its standard dictionary definition; (2) Classification of Semantic Change: The specific type of semantic change was categorized based on Traugott and Dasher's (2002) theory of regularity in semantic change (e.g., subjectification) and Blank's (1999) cognitive typology (e.g., broadening, narrowing, pejoration, metaphor); (3) Analysis of Meaning Type and Motivation: (a) Meaning Type: Leech's (1981) seven types of meaning were applied to classify the lexical shifts (e.g., Conceptual, Connotative, Affective, Social); (b) Drivers of Change: The motivating factors for each shift were interpreted, focusing on external forces such as media framing, institutional pressure, and technological constraints. Performative Analysis: For diplomatic and social media texts, Austin's (1962) Speech Act Theory was utilized to analyze the illocutionary force of the terms (e.g., words functioning as demands rather than descriptions).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the 15 selected lexicons reveals that semantic change in the 2025 Gaza conflict discourse is not random but follows distinct patterns dictated by the register (medium) and the pragmatic intent of the speaker. The findings suggest three primary mechanisms of change: (1) The legalization of general vocabulary in diplomatic speech, (2) Subjectification and broadening in news media, and (3) Emotive intensification in social media.

### The Legalization of Meaning: Specialization in Diplomatic Discourse

In the register of diplomatic speech, particularly in the remarks by UN Secretary-General António Guterres, general ethical terms undergo a process of **specialization** or **narrowing**. Words that typically carry broad moral meanings are repurposed as precise technical instruments to signal specific legal mechanisms (Wodak, 2009).

A prime example is the lexicon "Accountability". In general usage, this term denotes a vague state of being responsible. However, in the analyzed UN speech, *accountability* functions as a performative speech act. It does not merely describe a need for blame but serves as a formal demand initiating institutional processes, such as independent inquiries or ICC referrals. This aligns with Blank's (1999) observation that institutionalization drives semantic narrowing; the term sheds its general senses to become a "term of art" within international law.

Similarly, the term "Impunity" shifts from a general description of "exemption from punishment" to a specialized political condemnation. In the context of the speech, *impunity* indexes a specific failure of the international legal order, signaling the need for future collective response. Furthermore, the phrase "Unfettered humanitarian access" demonstrates how collocations become conventionalized. It has evolved into a rigid

diplomatic formula where "unfettered" no longer just means "unrestrained" but specifically legally guarantees safe corridors and no conditional inspections. This illustrates the "legalization" of language, where semantic change is driven by the necessity to create binding obligations through words.

### Subjectification and Pragmatic Broadening in Media Narratives

In contrast to the narrowing found in diplomatic speech, the analysis of the *Al Jazeera* news report reveals a tendency towards broadening via subjectification. Following Traugott and Dasher's (2002) framework, subjectification occurs when meanings become increasingly based in the speaker's subjective belief state or attitude.

The term "Ceasefire" illustrates this shift. Historically a military term denoting a temporary suspension of hostilities, in the 2025 news media context, it has broadened to represent an "integrated humanitarian intervention package". The term now encodes the speaker's advocacy for humanitarian access and hostage release, gaining strong evaluative and prescriptive features. It is no longer a description of a non-event (stopping fire) but a demand for a positive set of actions.

Another significant shift is observed in the term "Statehood". Beyond its juridical definition, the news text frames *statehood* as a "diplomatic leverage tool" or a signal of political alignment. The referent (legal recognition) remains, but the pragmatic meaning—the use of the term to reward or punish geopolitical actors—becomes primary. This supports the view that in media discourse, words are "pragmatically revalued" to serve the narrative needs of the reporting institution and its audience.

### Emotive Intensification and the "Speed" of Social Media

The third pattern, observed primarily in the UN Human Rights tweet (and partially in news media), is emotive intensification. The constraints of social media (brevity, speed) and the need for viral mobilization drive semantic changes characterized by pejoration and hyperbole (Papacharissi, 2015).

The phrase "Military takeover", used in the tweet regarding Gaza, undergoes a metonymic shift. It moves beyond a literal description of territorial seizure to function as an urgent accusation implying "total removal of civil authority" and imminent rights abuses. Blank (1999) notes that such metonymic extensions are common in emotive contexts. Here, the term acts as a rallying label to mobilize outrage.

This intensification is further achieved through the use of hyperbolic modifiers. The tweet's use of "Complete" in "complete military takeover" acts as an intensifier to maximize the perceived danger and frame the event as a total existential threat. Similarly, the modal construction "Must be immediately halted" demonstrates a pragmatic shift in illocutionary force. On social media, this is not merely a suggestion but an "urgent legal-moral imperative". The medium transforms the modal verb into a stronger speech act, designed to provoke an immediate reaction from the digital public.

Finally, the collocation "Humanitarian catastrophe" (found in the news text but sharing the emotive load of social media) shows how descriptive terms acquire "pejorative" and "reflected" meanings. It functions as a framing device that inherently delegitimizes the policy choices causing the condition, effectively equating the "catastrophe" with a crime.

### Synthesis of Findings

Comparing these three registers, a clear divergence in semantic motivation appears. Diplomatic language changes through specialization to achieve legal precision and performative power (Austin, 1962). News media changes through broadening to encompass complex humanitarian narratives (Traugott & Dasher, 2002). Social media changes through intensification to maximize affective impact and mobilization (Leech, 1981). These findings confirm that semantic change in conflict is not a uniform process but is highly sensitive to the communicative affordances of the platform and the institutional goals of the speaker (Zappavigna, 2012).

### CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis of the 2025 Israel-Gaza conflict discourse demonstrates that the lexicon of war is not a neutral medium but a dynamic site of ideological contestation, characterized by three simultaneous trajectories of semantic change: the legalization of meaning in diplomatic speech, pragmatic broadening in news

media, and emotive intensification on social platforms. Validating Traugott and Dasher's (2002) cognitive-functional view that meaning is fundamentally discourse-driven, these findings reveal how the opposing forces of institutional precision and affective persuasion fuel a rapid "semantic war" where definitions are actively negotiated to legitimize actions or condemn atrocities. Ultimately, this study highlights that how terms like statehood or humanitarian catastrophe are defined is as critical as physical combat, as these definitions dictate legal and diplomatic mechanisms, suggesting that future research must determine whether these crisis-induced lexical shifts will remain transient or become permanent fixtures of political discourse.

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