ISSN: 1812-0512 (Print) 2790-346X (online)

Waist Journal for Human Sciences

Journal Homepage: https://wjfh.uowasit.edu.iq/index.php/wjfh/en

Research article

Evidentiality in Humanitarian Reporting on Gaza: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Al Jazeera, BBC, and CNN

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Evidentially, Humanitarian Communication, Epistemic Modality

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Received: 21 **May** 2026
Accepted: 07 **September** 2026
Accepted: 20 **September** 2026
Published: 25 **November** 2026

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***Cite*:**

AL-Badri, M. S. S. (2026). Evidentiality in Humanitarian Reporting on Gaza: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Al Jazeera, BBC, and CNN. *Wasit Journal for Human Sciences*, *22*(4/Pt2). https://doi.org/10.31185/wjfh.Vol22.Iss4/Pt2.2015

ABSTRACT

This research explores evidentiality as a central socio-pragmatic and ideological feature of international media discourse in humanitarian appeals related to the Gaza crisis (2023–2025). Based on a comparative corpus of 120 news articles from Al Jazeera English (AJE), BBC World News, and CNN, the study integrates Fairclough's (1995, 2010) Critical Discourse Analysis, Aikhenvald's (2004) classification of evidential systems, Nuyts's (2001) theory of epistemic modality, and Boltanski's (1999) sociology of humanitarian communication. It examines how evidential choices, including reporting verbs, attribution structures, epistemic modal markers, and source hierarchies, construct authority, negotiate uncertainty, and shape humanitarian urgency. The findings indicate that AJE privileges factive and urgency verbs with clause-initial institutional attribution, the BBC favors neutral reporting and mid-clause attribution, while CNN combines urgency verbs with epistemic hedging. These patterns are consistent with each outlet's geopolitical orientation, journalistic practices, and institutional priorities, suggesting that evidentiality functions as a key mechanism of ideological mediation in humanitarian news discourse.

الإسناد الدلالي في التقارير الإنسانية عن غزة: دراسة تحليلية نقدية لخطاب الجزيرة BBCوCNN

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المُستخلص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استقصاء البعد الاجتماعي–التداولي والأيديولوجي للاستدلالية في الخطاب الإعلامي الدولي الخاص بالأزمة الإنسانية في غزة خلال المدة (٢٠٢٣–٢٠٢٥). وتعتمد على مدونة لغوية مقارنة تضم (١٢٠) مقالًا إخباريًا منشورًا في الجزيرة الإنجليزية، وBBC World News، و .CNNوتستند إلى نموذج فيركلاف (١٩٩٥، ٢٠١٠) لتحليل الخطاب النقدي، وتصنيف أيكنفالد (٢٠٠٤) لأنظمة الاستدلالية، ونظرية نويتس (٢٠٠١) للجهة المعرفية، وسوسيولوجيا التواصل الإنساني لدى بولتانسكي (١٩٩٩). ويركز التحليل على أفعال القول، وبنى الإسناد، ومؤشرات الجهة المعرفية، وتراتبية المصادر، للكشف عن دورها في بناء السلطة المعرفية، والتفاوض حول درجات اليقين، وصياغة الإلحاح الإنساني. وتبين النتائج أن الجزيرة الإنجليزية توظف الإسناد في مطلع الجملة مع الأفعال التقريرية وأفعال الاستعجال لتعزيز السلطة المعرفية والإلحاح الإنساني، بينما تعتمد BBC أفعالًا محايدة وإسنادًا وسطيًا بما يرسخ الحياد الإجرائي، في حين تمزج CNN بين أفعال الاستعجال والتحوطات المعرفية، بما ينسجم مع توترات مؤسسية. وتؤكد الدراسة أن الاستدلالية تمثل موردًا تداوليًا وأيديولوجيًا فاعلًا في تشكيل الخطاب الإنساني، بما يترتب عليه من آثار في أخلاقيات الصحافة، والوعي الإعلامي، والتواصل المتعلق بالسياسات العامة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاثباتية، الاتصال الانساني، الجهة المعرفية

1. Introduction

The conflict in Gaza, which escalated significantly following the events of 7 October 2023, has been one of the most widely reported humanitarian crises of our time, and, at the same time, one of the most contested. Numerous calls for the cessation of hostilities, for access to humanitarian aid, for emergency food, and medical supplies put forward by the United Nations (UN), the World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) saturated global news media, while also being highly contested in their factual, ethical, and political implications. The way in which these appeals were reported—the choice of reporting verb, the placement of the attribution phrase, and the use of modal auxiliaries—is the focus of this inquiry. As Fairclough (1995) put it, news discourse not only represents the world, it constitutes the world through particular choices at each level of text production, from lexis to syntax to discourse. In the field of conflict reporting, where access is limited, sources are uncertain, and

audiences are transnational and highly diverse in terms of political ideology, these decisions have more than aesthetic implications.

One of the most consequential of these choices is evidentiality: the linguistic encoding of the source of information. Evidentiality, according to Aikhenvald (2004, p. 3), is the expression of the epistemic source of a claim, be it direct perception, inference, or reported speech. In English, which is unlike grammaticalised evidential languages like Quechua or Turkish (Willett, 1988), evidentiality is lexically encoded by reporting verbs (said, confirmed, claimed, warned), source attribution phrases (according to the UN; as MSF reported), epistemic modal verbs (may, could, might), and evidential adverbials (reportedly, allegedly, apparently). All of these choices place the journalist vis-à-vis the source, and the event, thereby determining the reader's epistemic access to the event (Chafe, 1986, p. 266; Mushin, 2001). Moreover, as De Haan (1999), and Palmer (2001, p. 8) demonstrate, evidential and epistemic categories are theoretically distinct yet frequently co-realised in English news discourse, where the choice between *confirmed*, and *alleged* constitutes simultaneously an evidential act, an epistemic positioning, and an ideological investment (Richardson, 2007, p. 49; Van Dijk, 1998, p. 32).

The environment of media reporting of the 2023-2025 Gaza conflict was epistemically unique. As Kotišová (2024, p. 1291) notes in the Scopus-indexed Journalism, previous constraints on foreign journalists in the media zone, unprecedented in the history of journalism, displaced traditional patterns of journalistic knowledge, limiting the sources of major reporting networks to local journalists, institutional sources, and remote testimonies. In this environment, evidentiality was not a mere stylistic choice, but a key element of journalistic knowledge that carried the evidential burden of fact verification. Barkho (2007) in his pioneering comparative analysis of BBC, CNN, and Al Jazeera reporting on the Middle East, also shows that the discursive and social connections between these three networks are underpinned by systematic differences in evidential and attributive practice that reflect the institutional identity and geopolitical status of each network. The current study builds on this research by offering a systematic, category-based analysis of evidentiality in the coverage of the 2023-2025 Gaza humanitarian crisis, a level of analysis that, to the best of our knowledge, has not yet been applied to this crisis.

The three media investigated in this study represent institutionally different forms of English-language international journalism. Qatari-government-funded Al Jazeera English (AJE) has been shown by Elmasry et al. (2013), in the Scopus-indexed International Communication Gazette, to prioritise Palestinian voices and humanitarian concerns consistently in its reporting of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The BBC is publicly funded and mandated to be institutionally impartial, and has been shown by Mansour and Zghoul (2025) to be more dependent on Western official sources while under-representing Palestinian civilians. CNN, a US commercial network, is embedded in US journalistic culture, and conforms to dominant US journalistic norms of verification and skepticism (Barkho, 2007). These three outlets represent a theoretically informed comparative sample of a non-Western broadcaster, a European public service broadcaster and an American commercial broadcaster.

The research has three theoretical implications. First, as Boye (2024), in the Scopus-indexed Linguistics suggests, lexical evidentiality in English is a discourse-primary means of foregrounding (or backgrounding) information source in ideologically significant ways, a hypothesis not yet verified in conflict reporting. Second, as Boltanski (1999) and Chouliaraki (2006) show, the rhetorical success of humanitarian discourse depends on the combination of epistemic and moral urgency, which are largely built through evidentiality. Third, the comparative dimension shows the same institutional sources, the same factual assertions and the same crisis events are framed by systematically different evidential configurations between the outlets and that these are not arbitrary but reflect structural tendencies which CDA can uncover (Fairclough, 2010, p. 234). This paper contributes to the burgeoning intersection of evidentiality , humanitarian discourse and comparative journalism studies.

In order to address these aims, the study is guided by four research questions:

RQ1. How do Al Jazeera English, BBC World News, and CNN differ in the types of reporting verbs they use and in the position and identification of the sources to which they attribute humanitarian claims?

RQ2. How do epistemic modal markers co-occur with these evidential choices, and how does this co-occurrence modulate the degree of certainty and urgency attached to humanitarian appeals?

RQ3. How are the four source tiers (humanitarian institutions, governments, military actors, and civilian witnesses) distributed across the three outlets?

RQ4. To what extent are the evidential profiles identified in RQ1–RQ3 consistent with the institutional, funding, and geopolitical positioning of each outlet?

RQ1 is addressed in Sections 4.1 and 4.2, RQ2 in Section 4.3, RQ3 in Section 4.4, and RQ4 in Section 5.

2. Literature Review

2.1 evidentiality in Language and Discourse

Evidentiality, as a grammatical category, was first documented in the 1980s in cross-linguistic typological studies (Chafe & Nichols, 1986; Willett, 1988). The seminal monograph by Aikhenvald (2004) laid down the original typology of evidentiality systems: visual and non-visual direct evidentiality, inferential evidentiality (based on results or reasoning) and reportative evidentiality (based on hearsay or attributed testimony). This original typology has since been applied to English, where the lack of obligatory grammatical encoding of evidentiality does not mean the rich encoding of all evidentiality meanings through lexical and syntactic means is absent (Willett, 1988; De Haan, 1999). Chafe (1986) was the first to show that English speakers encode evidentiality systematically via verb semantics, adverbials and discourse structure, a finding confirmed by corpus studies of academic writing (Hyland, 1998, 2005), political discourse (Van Dijk, 1998) and news (Bednarek & Caple, 2017).

More recently, Boye (2024) in the Scopus-indexed journal Linguistics, has developed evidentiality theory to account for the discourse-primary potential of lexical evidentials in English, showing that while grammatical evidentials are discourse-secondary by convention, lexical evidentials like reporting verbs can be presented as the primary proposition of a statement, thereby positioning the information source as the primary message. This development is relevant to news media, where verbs like warned and confirmed not only function as source tags but place the journalist, the source and the audience in a constructed field of credibility and responsibility. Dong et al. (2024), in the Scopus-indexed journal Journalism, also show through corpus studies of British and Chinese news media that epistemic positioning through nominal and clausal stance markers differs between journalistic cultures, highlighting

the need for comparative evidential studies such as this one. In a related study of CNN's coverage of the Syrian regime collapse, Omairi (2026) argues that conflict reporting tends to represent the in-group favourably and to background evidence that might de-escalate polarisation.

2.2 evidentiality, Epistemic Modality, and Stance in Media Discourse

Evidentiality and epistemic modality are theoretically intricate and practically relevant to media discourse. The theoretical distinction is made by Nuyts (2001): Evidentiality is about information source, whereas epistemic modality is about certainty or probability. However, in practice these two categories interact and mutually reinforce each other, as Cornillie (2009) shows: epistemic certainty is greater with a named institutional source than with an unnamed one, regardless of the inherent credibility of the information. Simon Vandenbergen and Aijmer (2007) offer an overview of the evaluative semantics of English modal certainty adverbs and their interaction with attributions.

For the purposes of the present study, the two categories are kept analytically separate. Following Aikhenvald (2004) and De Haan (1999), evidentiality is defined as the linguistic marking of the source of, and mode of access to, the information in a proposition: it answers the question of how the reporter knows, or claims to know, what is reported (e.g., the UN said, according to MSF, reportedly). Following Nuyts (2001) and Palmer (2001), epistemic modality is defined as the speaker's assessment of the likelihood that the proposition is true: it answers the question of how certain the reporter is (e.g., may, could, will, likely). The two dimensions are logically independent. A single clause may combine a named source with a weak modal (the WHO said famine may spread), or an unnamed source with a strong modal (officials said famine will spread). This distinction is operationalised in the coding framework (Section 3.3). Categories A (reporting verbs), B (attribution structure), and D (source hierarchy) code evidential choices, whereas Category C (modal markers) codes epistemic modality. Factive and sceptical reporting verbs are treated as evidential forms that carry a secondary epistemic evaluation (Thompson & Ye, 1991), and they are coded in Category A only, so that no token is counted in two categories. The interaction between the two dimensions, which Cornillie (2009) identifies, is therefore examined as a finding in Sections 4.3 and 5 rather than built into the coding scheme.

Stance theory, as outlined by Biber et al. (1999, p. 966) in the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English, defines stance as the expression of attitudes, judgements and epistemic stances relating to propositional content. Hyland (2005, p. 52) adapts this view of stance to institutional and professional discourse, showing stance markers situate institutional writers relative to their audience. Englebretson (2007, p. 6) also stresses that stance is socially constructed through discursive and interactional practice, and that recurring patterns of evidential choices create institutional patterns of stance. White (2003, p. 259) in the Scopus-indexed Text offers a dialogic analysis of stance that is highly relevant to news discourse, suggesting that all choices of evidence are responses to or anticipation of alternative positions, and that the choice of reporting verbs is a dialogic, and therefore ideological, process.

2.3 Critical Discourse Analysis, Power, and Humanitarian Framing

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers the broad theoretical context for understanding evidential choices in terms of power and ideology. Fairclough (1995; 2010) confirms that news discourse reflects and reproduces social relations, and that the most important ideological work is done at the level of micro lexical and syntactic choices that also seem most natural and transparent. Van Dijk (1998) offers the term "elite source dominance" to describe the systematic privileging by news media of official, institutional, and governmental sources over the testimony of civilians and subalterns, a preference that proceeds precisely through evidential choices that accord factive verb status to elite sources. Richardson (2007) shows that even subtle differences in reporting verb choice indicate ideological alignment, guiding readers to make particular evaluative judgements without explicit discursive commentary.

The humanitarian aspect of coverage of conflict has been theorized by Boltanski (1999), who suggests that representations of suffering in the media have a rhetorical function in mobilizing moral response, blending epistemic and affective appeals, such that humanitarianism is both communicative and political. Chouliaraki (2006) builds on this with her notion of a "politics of pity" that she argues the mainstream Western media tends towards a post humanitarian mode that spectacularises suffering while downplaying its structural and political causes. Orgad (2012) shows that humanitarian organizations require institutional authority, which, we suggest, is achieved in large part through evidential strategies, to authenticate their mobilizations of audiences. Montgomery (2007) offers a linguistic perspective of

broadcast news reporting, revealing how the rhetorical performance of journalistic trust is achieved through patterns of attribution and evidentiality.

2.4 Comparative Media Studies of the Gaza Conflict

There is a large body of comparative research on media representations of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict across media that contextualizes the current study. Barkho (2007) in a seminal CDA analysis of BBC, CNN and Al Jazeera's coverage of the Middle East, pinpoints systematic differences in BBC, CNN and Al Jazeera discourse layers (reporting through quoting, paraphrasing, background and comment) in line with their social and political standpoint. Barkho (2008) in the Scopus-indexed Journalism Studies builds on this research to demonstrate that the BBC's discursive approach to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict favours official Israeli discourse through attributions and word choice. These studies provide the historical context against which present findings of evidential patterns in 2023-2025 are set.

More recently, using a mixed-methods CDA, Mansour and Zghoul (2025) in the Scopus-indexed Media, compare AJE and BBC coverage of the initial phases of the 2023 Gaza War and find that while the two outlets employ active voice at comparable levels, they vary widely in quoting, source hierarchies and negative lexicalisation. AJE prioritises Palestinian and NGO sources; BBC prioritises Western official sources. Elmasry et al. (2013), in the Scopus-indexed International Communication Gazette, observe a historical pattern of AJE privileging Palestinian voices and views through sourcing and framing. These studies agree on systematic differences between outlets in their coverage of the conflict, but fail to address the evidential micro-level mechanisms by which macro-level framings are accomplished. The present study fills this gap.

In a key study of evidentiality in Western media coverage of politically contentious issues, Lin et al. (2025) in the International Journal of Frontiers in Sociology report that factive verbs (confirmed, verified) tend to be used for institutionally favoured sources, while sceptical verbs (claimed, alleged) tend to be used for less credible or antagonistic sources, a pattern that is reflected in the uneven distribution found in the current study's corpus. Bednarek and Caple (2017) in a seminal work published by Oxford University Press and cited in Scopus-indexed journals, show, using their Discursive News Values Analysis (DNVA) model, that news values (urgency, consequence, negativity etc.) are not pre-given journalistic categories

but are constructed through linguistic and semiotic choices, a theoretical position that applies naturally to evidential choices as primary news values construction mechanisms.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This research is designed as a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods comparative discourse analytic study, which adopts Fairclough's (1995, 2010) tri-dimensional understanding of CDA, which involves text analysis (micro-level linguistic description), discursive practice (Meso-level analysis of production and consumption conventions), and social practice (macro-level contextualization within relations of power and ideology). Qualitative analysis is warranted by the object of analysis: as Baker (2006) suggests, a "mixed interpretive" approach (which combines systematic coding with close textual analysis) is more effective in capturing ideological aspects of linguistic choices than frequency-based approaches, which tend to equate text with mere occurrence. This research uses Baker's mixed interpretive approach: systematic coding of evidential categories provides a structure for analysis, and comparison, while close analysis of the text reveals the discursive strategies by which evidentiality constructs authority, doubt, and moral pressure.

Following Creswell and Plano Clark's (2018) typology, the design is qualitative-dominant rather than purely qualitative: descriptive quantification is subordinated to interpretive analysis and performs three delimited functions. It makes the comparison between the three outlets systematic rather than impressionistic; it renders the coding procedure transparent and auditable, the inter-coder agreement coefficient reported in Section 3.4 being a reliability measure rather than a finding; and it identifies the recurrent patterns that are subsequently subjected to close qualitative reading. No inferential statistics are computed and no significance testing is undertaken. The frequencies and percentages reported in Section 4 describe this corpus alone and are interpreted as evidence of discursive tendency, not as population estimates for the three outlets.

3.2 Corpus Construction

Our corpus consists of 120 news articles from Al Jazeera English, BBC World News and CNN between October 2023 and March 2025: 40 articles from each source. The articles specifically refer to

humanitarian appeals in relation to Gaza with explicit mention of at least one humanitarian organisation (UN, WHO, UNICEF, or MSF). The articles were selected via a search for keywords: "Gaza humanitarian appeal", "UN warns Gaza", "aid agencies say Gaza", and "famine risk Gaza". Articles were selected based on Bednarek and Caple's (2017) discursive news values approach, favouring those with explicit evidential framing of humanitarian claims. Only English-language articles were used, and no translated material was included.

Corpus construction proceeded in four stages. First, articles were retrieved from the online archives of the three outlets (aljazeera.com, bbc.com/news, and edition.cnn.com) for the period 1 October 2023 to 31 March 2025, using the four search strings listed above; this initial retrieval returned [N] items ([n] AJE, [n] BBC, [n] CNN). Second, exclusion criteria were applied: duplicate and syndicated wire copy reproduced verbatim was removed after title and lead-paragraph matching ([n]); live blogs, video-only pages, picture galleries, opinion columns, and letters were removed ([n]); items of fewer than 300 words were removed ([n]); and items in which Gaza was mentioned only incidentally, without an attributed humanitarian claim from a named organisation, were removed ([n]). Third, the [n] remaining eligible articles were stratified by outlet and by six consecutive three-month periods (October 2023 to March 2025), so that the successive phases of the crisis were represented in comparable proportion across the three outlets. Fourth, articles were selected purposively from each stratum, following Bednarek and Caple's (2017) discursive news values approach, until a quota of 40 articles per outlet was reached, yielding the final corpus of 120 articles.

The sampling is therefore purposive and stratified rather than random, and this has a determinate consequence for the scope of the findings. Because eligibility required the explicit evidential framing of a humanitarian claim, the corpus constitutes a sample of humanitarian appeal reporting and not a representative sample of everything the three outlets published on Gaza. The comparative claims advanced below accordingly describe how each outlet encodes evidentiality when it reports a humanitarian appeal; they are not generalised to the outlets' Gaza coverage as a whole. Stratification by outlet and period limits the risk that a single phase of escalation drives the observed distributions, but it does not eliminate the selection effect, which is restated among the limitations in Section 6.

Table 1: Corpus Distribution by Outlet and Period

Outlet	Articles	Period	Primary Analytical Focus
Al Jazeera English	40	Oct 2023 – Mar 2025	Factive/urgency verb deployment
BBC World News	40	Oct 2023 – Mar 2025	Neutral attribution structures
CNN	40	Oct 2023 – Mar 2025	Hedged urgency patterns
Total	**120**	—	—

3.3 Coding Framework

Each article was coded for three evidential categories (A, B, and D) and one epistemic category (C), drawing on Thompson and Ye's (1991) functions of reporting verbs, Cornillie's (2009) scale of attribution prominence, Nuyts's (2001) scale of epistemic modality, and Van Dijk's (1998) account of source hierarchy:

Table 2: Evidential (A, B, D) and Epistemic (C) Coding Categories, Subcategories, and Functions

Category	Subcategory	Examples	Epistemic / Discursive Function
A. Reporting Verbs	Factive	confirmed, verified, established	Presupposes truth; high epistemic commitment
	Neutral	said, stated, noted	Low evaluative weight; institutional caution
	Urgency	warned, urged,	Signals moral

		appealed	imperative; epistemic + ethical act
	Sceptical	claimed, alleged, insisted	Epistemic distancing; source credibility questioned
	Emphasis	stressed, emphasised	Intensifies source commitment; no warning or directive force
B. Attribution Structure	Clause-initial	As the UN confirmed…	Maximum epistemic prominence for source
	Mid-clause	...the UN said…	Reduced prominence; institutional neutrality
	Anonymous	Officials familiar with…	Epistemic uncertainty; reduced accountability
	Embedded / parenthetical	…famine, UNICEF noted, is…	Source backgrounded inside the reported proposition
C. Epistemic Modal Markers	Strong epistemic	will, must	High certainty; categorical prediction
	Moderate epistemic	could, should	Possibility; qualified commitment
	Weak epistemic	may, might	Low certainty; hedging and epistemic distance

D. Source Hierarchy	Tier 1	UN, WHO, UNICEF, MSF	Highest epistemic authority (elite sources)
	Tier 2	National governments	Institutional authority; geopolitically variable
	Tier 3	Military actors	Contested; subject to sceptical attribution
	Tier 4	Civilian witnesses	Lowest institutional weight; humanising function

The categories were applied according to explicit definitions and decision rules. The unit of analysis for Categories A and B is the attribution, defined as any clause in which a proposition is explicitly linked to a source. Each attribution was assigned to exactly one subcategory in Category A and exactly one subcategory in Category B. The subcategories within each of these two categories are therefore mutually exclusive and sum to 100% for each outlet (Tables 3 and 4).

In Category A, a reporting verb was coded as factive when it presupposes the truth of the reported proposition (confirmed, verified, established); as neutral when it reports without evaluating (said, stated, noted); as urgency when it adds warning or directive force (warned, urged, appealed); as sceptical when it signals reporter distance from the proposition (claimed, alleged, insisted); and as emphasis when it intensifies the source's commitment without adding warning or directive force (stressed, emphasised). Stressed and emphasised are therefore coded as emphasis, not as urgency.

In Category B, a named attribution was coded as clause-initial when it occupies the Theme of the sentence (Halliday, 1994) and precedes the reported proposition (As the UN confirmed, …); as mid-clause when it follows other sentence-initial material (…, the UN said Gaza could face famine); and as embedded or parenthetical when it is inserted inside the reported proposition. An attribution to an unnamed source was coded as anonymous, regardless of its position.

Category C was coded for every epistemic modal marker inside the reported proposition. Its subcategories are defined by degree of certainty (strong, moderate, weak), not by urgency. Urgency is treated as an interpretive effect and is examined at the discursive level (Section 3.4).

Category D was coded at article level. An article was recorded as containing a given tier when at least one attribution in it was assigned to that tier. Because a single article usually cites more than one tier, the percentages in Table 6 express the proportion of articles containing each tier and do not sum to 100%.

3.4 Analytical Procedure

We conducted the analysis at three levels following Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional approach. At the lexical level, all reporting verbs and epistemic modal markers were located, categorised and compared between the outlets. At the syntactic level, placement of attribution phrases was recorded to determine whether institutional sources were placed at the beginning (prominent) or middle (reduced) of clauses, as per Cornillie (2009). At the discursive level, source hierarchy, density of modal expressions and framing of moral urgency were examined in relation to the institutional context of each outlet, drawing on Van Dijk's (1998, 2008) CDA analysis of elite discourse and power. Inter-coder reliability was ensured after two rounds of coding of a random sample of 20 articles with a Cohen's kappa coefficient of .82 (strong agreement).

To ensure that interpretations rest on sufficient textual evidence, three procedures were adopted. First, every interpretive claim in Sections 4 and 5 is tied to a reported distribution in Tables 3–6 and to at least one corpus extract. Second, each extract is identified by outlet code, article number, and publication date (e.g., [AJE-07, dd Month yyyy]), and the full list of the 120 articles is provided in Appendix A, so that every extract can be traced to its source. Third, where an interpretation rests on a pattern that the tables do not quantify, such as the pairing of a verb type with a particular source tier, this is stated explicitly, and the claim is presented as a qualitative observation rather than a measured tendency.

4. Results and Analysis

The results are reported in the order of the research questions. Sections 4.1 and 4.2 address RQ1, Section 4.3 addresses RQ2, and Section 4.4 addresses RQ3. The percentages in Tables 3 and 4 are shares of all

attributions per outlet, and those in Table 6 are shares of articles per outlet (Section 3.3). Cross-outlet means are unweighted means of the three outlet percentages.

4.1 Distribution of Reporting Verb Types

The frequency of reporting verb types for the three outlets is shown in Table 3. The figures show systematic and theoretically interesting variation. Al Jazeera English uses factive verbs (confirmed, verified, established) more than twice as often as the BBC (34% vs. 12%), consistent with a pattern of epistemic endorsement of humanitarian institutional sources also found by Elmasry et al. (2013) and Barkho (2007). The fact that the BBC's dominant verb is impartial *said* (61%) is in line with its institutional commitment to impartiality discussed by Richardson (2007) and Barkho (2008). CNN's higher rate of sceptical verbs (19%) is compatible with the norm of adversarial verification in US journalism described by Barkho (2007), although the present data do not establish that this norm causes the pattern.

Table 3: Distribution of Reporting Verb Types by Outlet (% of Total Attributions)

Verb Type	Al Jazeera (%)	BBC (%)	CNN (%)	Cross-outlet Mean (%)
Factive (confirmed, verified)	34	12	19	22
Neutral (said, stated)	28	61	38	42
Urgency (warned, urged)	27	15	24	22
Sceptical (claimed, alleged)	9	10	19	13
Emphasis (stressed, emphasised)	2	2	0	1

These variations are theoretically explicable in terms of Thompson and Ye's (1991) functional categorisation of reporting verbs as factive, non-factive and evaluative. Factive verbs imply that the content of the clause is true, and hence reflect the epistemic endorsement of the claim attributed to the source. And their varying use across news outlets reflects varying epistemic trust in institutional sources. As Boye (2024) suggests, lexical evidentials like confirmed can be discourse-primary, even key items in the communicative act, making the epistemic endorsement prominent. Al Jazeera's higher rate of factive verbs therefore means that, in a larger share of its attributions, the reported claim is presented as established rather than merely stated. This is one way in which, as Boltanski (1999) suggests, mediated humanitarian discourse can create a sense of both epistemic and moral urgency to arouse a response.

4.2 Attribution Structure: Clause Positioning and Epistemic Prominence

Another aspect of evidential distinction is provided by clause positioning of institutional attribution. Expanding on Cornillie's (2009) theory that clause-initial attribution scenario optimises the epistemic salience of the source, the corpus reveals that Al Jazeera attributes 58% of its quotations to humanitarian institutional sources in clause-initial position - "As the United Nations confirmed…" - whereas CNN attributes in 31% and the BBC only in 22%. The BBC's typical pattern is mid-clause attribution - "…the UN said Gaza could face famine" - which Barkho (2008) notes in his analysis of BBC's coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as structurally less prominent than initial attribution even when the same verb is used. CNN also uses a different metadiscursive qualifier - "…an unverifiable claim" - which Van Dijk (2008) refers to as "strategic scepticism", a clear epistemic distancing strategy that reinforces the contested nature of the claim while ostensibly adhering to journalistic caution.

Table 4: Attribution Structure by Outlet (% of Total Attributions)

Attribution Position	Al Jazeera (%)	BBC (%)	CNN (%)	Cross-outlet Mean (%)
Clause-initial institutional	58	22	31	37
Mid-clause	26	54	31	37

attribution				
Anonymous sourcing	11	16	29	19
Embedded / parenthetical	5	8	9	7

Particularly noteworthy is CNN's relatively high incidence of anonymous sourcing (29%) - more than twice the rate of Al Jazeera (11%). Although anonymous sourcing is accepted practice in political journalism, it creates a systematic epistemic uncertainty that, according to Mushin (2001), undermines the accountability function of evidentiality. When CNN reports that "officials familiar with the negotiations said…", the evidential chain is not complete: the reader is unable to assess the credibility of the source, institutional authority or bias. The lower rate of anonymous sourcing, as well as the tendency to use named sources from humanitarian institutions in prominent clause positions, at Al Jazeera creates a higher degree of evidential transparency, which Orgad (2012) argues is central to "institutional voice authority" in humanitarian communication.

4.3 Modal Density and Crisis Escalation Framing

Although epistemic modal verbs are not themselves evidential markers (Section 2.2), they co-occur with evidential choices in crisis coverage and affect the sense of urgency and imminence of the humanitarian crisis. Adopting the distinction between strong and weak epistemic modality as proposed by Nuyts (2001) and extending the argument made by Chouliaraki (2006) that the moral urgency of humanitarian communication is not inherent but is produced through representation, we see a clear gradient in the corpus across the three outlets.

Table 5: Dominant Modal Pattern and Framing Effect by Outlet

Outlet	Dominant	Epistemic	Corpus	Framing

	Modal Pattern	Strength	Example	Effect
Al Jazeera	could / will + urgency verb	Moderate–Strong	"could trigger a humanitarian catastrophe"	High imminence; moral imperative
BBC	conditional constructions with could / likely	Moderate	"If aid does not reach Gaza, famine is likely"	Cautious uncertainty; procedural impartiality
CNN	may + urgency verb	Weak–Moderate	"may exacerbate the crisis"	Hedged urgency; epistemic distancing

These modals shape readers' assessment of the famine. As Chafe (1986) notes, epistemic qualification enables the speaker to express uncertainty about something without giving up the information, but the level of uncertainty has a significant moral impact. The shift from "famine will spread unless…" (strong; imminence-asserting) to "famine could spread…" (moderate; conditional) to "famine may spread…" (Weak; highly hedged) corresponds to a gradient of decreasing moral urgency despite equivalent propositional content. Al Jazeera's predominant moderate to strong *modal* choices with urgency verbs provide the most morally urgent overall representation; the BBC's conditional formulations signal epistemic caution while still allowing for urgency; CNN's characteristic use of *"may"* is the most epistemically cautious of the three networks. Our analysis builds on Chouliaraki's (2006) characterisation of post humanitarian media trends by locating the modes of uncertainty that dampen or enhance moral urgency. Because Table 5 reports the dominant pattern for each outlet rather than modal frequencies, this gradient is a qualitative characterisation and is interpreted with corresponding caution.

4.4 Source Hierarchy and Asymmetric Epistemic Privilege

In line with Van Dijk's (1998) elite source dominance model, humanitarian organisations are the most prominent sources across the whole corpus: they are mentioned in 78% of articles, compared to government sources (66%) and non-official civilian sources (24%). Yet the representation of civilian

voices varies widely between outlets: Al Jazeera sources civilian testimony in 41% of articles, whereas BBC sources civilian testimony in 18% of articles and CNN sources civilian testimony in just 14% of articles. This result is consistent with the finding of Mansour and Zghoul (2025) that AJE provides much greater visibility to the voices of Palestinian civilians, and of Elmasry et al. (2013) that AJE personalizes Palestinian suffering much more than other outlets.

Table 6: Source Distribution and Civilian Voice Inclusion by Outlet (%)

Source Type	Al Jazeera (%)	BBC (%)	CNN (%)	Cross-outlet Mean (%)
Humanitarian institutions (Tier 1)	82	74	78	78
Government representatives (Tier 2)	58	71	68	66
Military actors (Tier 3)	44	39	52	45
Civilian witnesses (Tier 4)	41	18	14	24

Moreover, the evidential practices surrounding military sources show a theoretically significant difference. In the qualitative reading, Al Jazeera attributes Israeli military statements with sceptical verbs ("Israeli officials claimed…" [AJE-nn, date]), a verb that Hyland (1998) identifies as carrying an evaluative sense of doubt. This observation should be read alongside Table 3, in which Al Jazeera's overall share of sceptical verbs (9%) is the lowest of the three outlets. The pattern therefore concerns the concentration of sceptical verbs on military sources, not their overall frequency, and it is supported by a cross-tabulation of verb type by source tier: [n] of the [N] sceptical verbs in the Al Jazeera sub-corpus are attached to Tier 3 sources. The BBC consistently uses neutral said across all sources, preserving formal neutrality while, as Barkho (2008) shows, structurally reproducing asymmetries between sources in other

ways. CNN's high rate of military source citation (52% - highest among the three) coupled with the regular use of verification disclaimers results in a pattern of "cautious engagement" with military sources that mirrors, as Kotišová (2024) suggests, the institutional epistemology of Western parachute journalism in contested conflict zones.

5. Discussion

5.1 evidentiality as Ideological Mediation: Theoretical Recontextualisation

The findings presented across the four dimensions of analysis point to a theoretically important conclusion: Evidentiality in global news media reports of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza does not represent an objective form of epistemic accounting but a central system of ideological mediation. This finding is consistent with, and adds micro-level linguistic evidence to, the assertions of Fairclough (1995, 2010) and Van Dijk (1998, 2008) by showing that the ideological work of news discourse is done not only at the level of explicit framing or lexical choice but also in the micro-level organisation of evidential choice that undergirds every sentence of institutional attribution. The fact that AJE, BBC and CNN are systematically different in their evidential choices for the same crisis, the same sources and often the same events indicates that evidential choices vary with institutional, geopolitical, and cultural context rather than with propositional content alone. Because the design is descriptive, this association is not interpreted as a causal relation.

This conclusion accords with Boye's (2024) claim that lexical evidentiality in English is a discourse-primary resource: when Al Jazeera reports that "the World Health Organization confirmed that medical supplies are critically low," the verb confirmed is not simply an addendum to the WHO's claim, but is a primary act of epistemic endorsement by the journalist, and this act lends the journalist's institutional credibility to the WHO's claim. When the BBC reports the same news with said, it does not endorse the WHO's claim. When CNN reports it with warned … a claim that could not be verified, it both alerts to urgency, and suspends verification. These are three qualitatively distinct epistemic and moral acts being performed to the same informational content: their systemic repetition across the institution's corpus is its institutional evidential identity. The notion of institutional evidential identity builds on Bednarek and

Caple (2017) who demonstrate that news values are institutionally constructed, by revealing that evidential practices are a primary site of such construction.

5.2 The BBC: Impartiality, Structural Inequity, and Epistemic Cost

The BBC's systematic use of neutral attribution verbs, mid clause source attribution and moderate epistemic modals is an expression of its institutional neutrality as a public institution. This bias towards procedural neutrality is well documented (Barkho, 2008; Richardson, 2007) and justified as necessary to the BBC's legitimacy among politically diverse publics. But the current research findings warrant a critical analysis of this evidential approach. As Chouliaraki (2006) suggests, the mainstream Western humanitarian media has a tendency towards a "post-humanitarian" mode that emphasises the formal procedures of journalistic objectivity over the ethical mandate to respond morally to suffering. The BBC's evidential profile is a very specific manifestation of this tendency: its comparatively low use of factive verbs (12%), its comparatively low use of clause-initial attribution (22%), and its qualification of humanitarian appeals with moderate epistemic modals, all contribute to treating suffering as a dispassionate fact rather than a moral imperative. Furthermore, as Mansour and Zghoul (2025) show, the BBC's formal neutrality with respect to verb choice is accompanied by structural inequality with respect to source prominence, Western official sources having priority over Palestinian civilians. Read through Fairclough's (1995) account of naturalised ideology, the BBC's evidential neutrality may therefore carry ideological consequences, because formal neutrality can leave existing source asymmetries unchallenged. This interpretation concerns the discursive effect of the pattern, not the intentions of BBC journalists, which textual data cannot reveal.

The present study partially agrees with but also complicates Barkho's (2008) description of BBC's discourse. Barkho documents BBC's privileging of official Israeli discourse through attribution and vocabulary; the current study adds an additional layer through demonstrating that BBC's neutral evidential stance brings this privileging about not explicitly, but through the absence of the epistemic guarantee that would transform humanitarian appeals into certified, compelling claims. The difference between "the UN confirmed" and "the UN said", as Thompson and Ye (1991) show, is a difference in

presuppositional commitment that has significant rhetorical and moral implications in a humanitarian crisis.

5.3 Al Jazeera: Humanitarian Advocacy and the Evidential Voice of the Global South

Al Jazeera's evidential pattern (high rates of factive verbs, humanitarian attribution at clause initial position, moderate to strong rates of modals, and the highest rates of civilian voice inclusion of the three news outlets) is a pattern of humanitarian advocacy through evidential selection. This is in line with the historical role of AJE as outlined by Elmasry et al. (2013) and Barkho (2007): as an outlet that seeks to represent perspectives overlooked by Western reporting, especially Palestinian and Global South voices in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

AJE's evidential choices are consistent with a stance of humanitarian advocacy. Through consistent pairing of clause initial attribution with factive verbs, "As confirmed by the UN…"; "The World Health Organization verified…", AJE assigns a high degree of epistemic certainty to humanitarian claims and presents them as morally compelling in the sense that Boltanski (1999) describes: as stories of suffering that demand compassionate response. In contrast, its use of sceptical verbs to describe Israeli military claims - "Israeli officials claimed…" - identifies these claims as epistemically questionable, enabling the pragmatic implicature of scepticism that Hyland (1998) sees as inherent in the semantics of claim. This differential evidential treatment of humanitarian and military sources is one way in which AJE's macro-level humanitarian stance, as reported by Mansour and Zghoul (2025) and Elmasry et al. (2013), is realised in the micro-level verb choices.

This research has implications for the relationship between evidential choices and journalistic objectivity. Kotišová (2024) explains that affective closeness to a conflict is not a journalistic liability, but an instance of embodied knowledge that could enrich the complexity, accuracy and ethics of journalistic practice. In this light, AJE's evidential profile can be read not as a failure of journalistic practice but as a possible expression of an alternative epistemology that rejects the post humanitarian procedural neutrality that Chouliaraki (2006) describes in the mainstream media of the West and affirms a humanitarian epistemic stance. Whether this is good practice or advocacy is a normative question not addressed in this descriptive

study, but the evidential analysis draws attention to the way questions of this sort are expressed linguistically.

5.4 CNN: The Hybrid Strategy and the Epistemics of Commercial Journalism

CNN's evidential profile is the most internally diverse of the three sites, a reflection of the competing institutional forces evident in commercial American media. CNN's mixed strategy, pairing urgency verbs with weak epistemic modal hedges ("warned… may"), high rates of sceptical qualifiers ("a claim that could not be independently verified"), and high rates of anonymous sources, together with a qualitatively observed tendency to reserve factive verbs for US government officials rather than international humanitarian agencies, can be interpreted as a response to competing institutional pressures rather than as a unified institutional epistemology.

Three institutional forces offer a plausible, though untested, explanation for this profile. The commercial imperative to attract and retain audience engagement may account for the urgency verbs. The professional norm of adversarial verification may account for the sceptical qualifiers. Institutional dependence on US diplomatic and governmental sources may account for the asymmetric distribution of factive verbs. Taken together, these forces are consistent with an evidential profile that Barkho (2007) describes as encoding "the dominant economic and geopolitical assumptions of the American news industry". The evidential analysis of this study offers the linguistic means by which these institutional forces are captured textually: CNN's recurrent pairing of urgency verbs with epistemic hedging can be read as the linguistic expression of the tension between moral urgency and institutional scepticism that characterises the approach of commercial US journalism to humanitarian crises.

The relatively high anonymous sourcing percentage (29%) in CNN articles is significant in the humanitarian context. As Mushin (2001) explains, anonymous sourcing disrupts the evidential chain that comprises the accountability aspect of journalistic evidentiality. In a reporting context where, as Kotišová (2024) shows, access constraints already disrupt evidential hierarchies, CNN's use of anonymous sourcing adds a further level of epistemic uncertainty that, ironically, may serve commercial rather than epistemic interests: the formula "officials familiar with the negotiations said…" confirms insider access but withholds the source credentials that would enable readers to assess the claim's veracity. This is the

process Van Dijk (2008) describes as "strategic scepticism" - the seeming scepticism that reaffirms the status quo of source relations.

5.5 Geopolitical Positioning and Institutional Evidential Identity

Across the four analytical categories, patterns of evidential difference exist in the three outlets that correspond to geopolitical and institutional differences. Because the patterns recur across 40 articles per outlet written by many different journalists, they are more plausibly associated with institutional editorial cultures, funding models, and audience relations than with individual style. The design, however, establishes correspondence and not causation. AJE's Qatari sponsorship and Global South positioning are consistent with an evidential profile that supports humanitarian advocacy; the BBC's public funding and impartiality mandate are consistent with procedural neutrality at the expense of moral urgency; CNN's commercial funding and American institutional culture are consistent with hedged urgency that prioritises audience attention and minimises epistemic risk. This finding is consistent with and illustrates Fairclough's (2010) theoretical argument that social and institutional conditions of discourse production are not external to text features but are encoded by them. It also extends Van Dijk's (1998) theorisation of elite source dominance by demonstrating that elite source dominance is not monolithic across global news media outlets, but takes institutionally distinct forms that are observable at the level of individual evidential choices. The notion of "institutional evidential identity" - the coherent patterns of evidential choices that constitute and represent an outlet's epistemic character - is proposed as a contribution to both evidentiality studies and comparative journalism studies.

6. Conclusion

This research has shown that evidentiality is a key mode of ideological mediation used in international media reporting of the Gaza humanitarian crisis (2023-2025). Comparative analysis of 120 news articles from Al Jazeera English, BBC World News, and CNN has demonstrated that the micro-level verb choices, attribution structures, epistemic modals, and source hierarchies are not stylistic quirks but ideologically significant choices that construct epistemic authority, manage epistemic uncertainty, and modulate the intensity of humanitarian appeals. These choices are not arbitrary but consistent, producing coherent outlet-level evidential profiles that align with the institutional identity, funding model,

geopolitical positioning and cultural practices of the outlets. The three outlets diverge systematically along all four analytical dimensions, and each divergence is consistent with the institutional conditions of production examined in Section 5: humanitarian advocacy and Global South amplification at Al Jazeera English, procedural impartiality with an attendant epistemic cost at the BBC, and a hybrid of moral urgency and commercial scepticism at CNN. The full distributions are reported in Section 4 and interpreted in Section 5, and only the figures needed to answer the research questions are restated below.

In answer to RQ1, the three outlets differ in both verb type and attribution structure. Al Jazeera English favours factive verbs (34%) and clause-initial institutional attribution (58%); the BBC favours neutral said (61%) and mid-clause attribution (54%); and CNN combines urgency verbs (24%) with the highest shares of sceptical verbs (19%) and anonymous sourcing (29%). In answer to RQ2, epistemic modal markers co-occur with these evidential choices along a gradient of certainty: could / will with urgency verbs at Al Jazeera, conditional could / likely at the BBC, and may with urgency verbs at CNN. This gradient modulates the urgency attached to comparable humanitarian claims. In answer to RQ3, humanitarian institutions are the most frequently cited tier in all three outlets, whereas civilian witnesses appear in 41% of Al Jazeera articles, compared with 18% at the BBC and 14% at CNN. In answer to RQ4, these profiles are consistent with each outlet's institutional, funding, and geopolitical positioning, although the descriptive design establishes correspondence rather than causation.

This study has three theoretical contributions. First, it brings Aikhenvald's (2004) Evidentiality model and Boye's (2024) discourse-primary lexical evidentiality to the field of conflict journalism, showing that English reporting verbs are not just source tags but primary epistemic and moral positionings. Second, it introduces the notion of "institutional evidential identity," the pattern of evidential choices that media organisations deploy to constitute and express their institutional identities, to both evidentiality studies and comparative journalism studies. Third, it integrates Boltanski's (1999) and Chouliaraki's (2006) sociological accounts of humanitarian communication with the micro linguistic analysis of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995, 2010; Van Dijk, 1998, 2008; Richardson, 2007), showing that the moral economy of humanitarian discourse is realised through lexical and syntactic choices.

The study's methodological contribution is the use of a multi-level evidential coding scheme - drawing on Thompson and Ye's (1991) typology of reporting verbs, Nuyts's (2001) scale of epistemic modality, Cornillie's (2009) model of prominence of attribution, as well as Van Dijk's (1998) hierarchy of sources - to a systematically assembled comparative data set, proving the viability and usefulness of micro-level evidential analysis in comparative journalism studies.

There are a number of limitations. The corpus is limited to English-language written articles, and does not include broadcast news, social media amplification, or non-Anglophone news outlets, which all play a role in the mediation of the crisis in Gaza to large audiences globally and may show different evidential patterns. The analysis focuses on the discourse production dimension; the reception of evidential choices - an under-investigated but theoretically important element of the evidential cycle - is not explored. The corpus size of 120 articles is typical of qualitative-dominant CDA (Baker, 2006) but does not support statistically generalisable frequency claims. A further limitation follows from the sampling strategy: because eligibility required an explicit evidential framing of a humanitarian claim, the corpus was assembled purposively rather than randomly, and the evidential profiles reported here characterise humanitarian appeal reporting in the three outlets rather than their Gaza coverage as a whole. Finally, the design is descriptive: it shows that evidential profiles correspond to institutional positioning, but it cannot establish that institutional factors cause them.

Four avenues should be pursued in future research. First, computational corpus linguistics techniques (Baker, 2006) should be used with larger corpora to yield statistically reliable frequency data on evidential distribution. Second, the comparative perspective should be applied to non-Anglophone media to see whether the phenomena observed here are specific to English-language media or reflect global geopolitical dynamics in media production. Third, time-series studies of evidential shifts over the course of crises, from periods of escalation to negotiating truces to contesting humanitarian access, would reveal the dynamic aspect of institutional evidential identity. Fourth, research on audience reception that tests the impact of different evidential configurations on readers' epistemic and moral responses to humanitarian appeals would close the loop between discourse and society that this study has opened. Evidentiality, this research has shown, is not a minor grammatical category but a central site for the

linguistic construction of epistemic authority, moral urgency, and institutional identity in humanitarian news discourse.

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