



Original article

Critical Discourse Analysis of Competing Narratives in Egypt and Ethiopia on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD)

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ABSTRACT

This article applies a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to the official Egyptian and Ethiopian media coverage of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), published between 2011 and 2025. The objective is to examine how those discourses are constructed, legitimized, and maintained through the linguistic practices of the major state-owned news media outlets in Egypt (Al-Ahram and Daily News Egypt) and Ethiopia (Addis Standard and The Reporter). Egypt professes that it views the dam as an existential threat, while Ethiopia sees its actions as an exercise of developmental sovereignty, anti-colonial struggle and fair utilization. The latter is based on a perceived external framing by Egypt and the West as neocolonialism over the management of the Nile. The study provides evidence for socio-political and symbolic strategies in addition to the rhetoric, and interprets the negotiation deadlock beyond techno-legal aspects.

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Keywords Critical Discourse Analysis, Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), Nile Basin, securitization, postcolonial sovereignty, hydro-politi

تحليل الخطاب النقدي للسرديات المتنافسة بين مصر وإثيوبيا حول سد النهضة الإثيوبي الكبير

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المستخلص

This article applies a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to the official Egyptian and Ethiopian media coverage of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), published between 2011 and 2025. The objective is to examine how those discourses are constructed, legitimized, and maintained through the linguistic practices of the major state-owned news media outlets in Egypt (Al-Ahram and Daily News Egypt) and Ethiopia (Addis Standard and The Reporter). Egypt professes that it views the dam as an existential threat, while Ethiopia sees its actions as an exercise of developmental sovereignty, anti-colonial struggle and fair utilization. The latter is based on a perceived external framing by Egypt and the West as neocolonialism over the management of the Nile. The study provides evidence for socio-political and symbolic strategies in addition to the rhetoric, and interprets the negotiation deadlock beyond techno-legal aspects.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تحليل الخطاب النقدي، سد النهضة الإثيوبي الكبير، حوض النيل، الأمنة، السيادة ما بعد الاستعمارية، الهيدروليستيك.

I. Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), currently under construction in the Benishangul-Gumuz region on the Blue Nile in Ethiopia, is one of the largest infrastructure projects in Africa. When completed, its projected installed capacity is 5150 megawatts (MW), making it the largest power plant in Africa (Ethiopian Ministry of Water and Energy 2024). The dam's construction started in 2011, and it is viewed as a vehicle by which Ethiopia can achieve energy independence, industrialization, and lift millions out of poverty. As the source of the Blue Nile, which supplies 85% of the Nile River, it has a long history of political disagreements with other Nile Basin countries, especially Egypt (Elshamy et al., 2023), which relies on the Nile for over 95% of its freshwater resources.

The Nile Basin is shared by 11 nations, and their historic preferential access to Nile waters is based on colonial-era treaties, such as the 1929 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty and the 1959 Egypt-Sudan Agreement, which allocated over two-thirds of Nile water to the downstream states of Egypt and Sudan. These treaties also gave Egypt a veto over upstream water projects and guaranteed an annual supply of 55.5 BCM (Wheeler et al., 2020). Ethiopia, never a party to these treaties, has always rejected their legitimacy for not providing a fair and equitable use of a shared resource and for being a hydro-hegemony tool. The GERD is thus not only an engineering project but also a symbol of post-colonial resistance and developmental sovereignty for Ethiopia (Tafesse, 2022).

1.2 Problem Statement

While previous study has looked at the legal, technical, and political aspects of the GERD conflict, there has been no systematic comparison of how Egyptian and Ethiopian media use language to generate rival narratives. This study bridges the gap No study has examined the GERD dispute as a two-sided discourse (Egypt, Ethiopia), included voices beyond political elites, or tracked how these narratives have changed over time.

1.3 Research Objectives

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how competing narratives about the GERD are constructed, circulated, and legitimized in Egyptian and Ethiopian public and political discourse between 2011 and 2025. Specifically, it aims to:

- (1) identify the dominant discursive strategies—such as framing, metaphor, lexical choice, and argumentation—used by state and media actors in both countries.
- (2) analyze how these strategies reflect and reproduce underlying ideologies related to sovereignty, security, development, and historical justice.
- (3) explore how discourse functions as both a reflection of and a constraint on geopolitical positioning and negotiation behavior.

1.4 Significance of the Study

Thus, the article provides theoretical and practical contributions to a range of models and disciplines including critical geopolitics, by revealing how national identities and risks are discursively constructed in transboundary water disputes (Ó Tuathail, 2022), and environmental politics, by exposing the limitations of a technical/legalistic water diplomacy in the face of narratives of historical grievance and existential risk (Zeitoun et al., 2023). Theoretically, it criticizes Eurocentrism by applying CDA to a non-Western Global South context and showing how postcolonial subjectivity is relevant to global governance disputes (Makoni & Pennycook, 2023). Practically, the findings could help mediators and other policy makers make use of narrative reframing strategies, such as appeal to common futures or co-benefits, to de-escalate conflict and promote cooperation.

1.5 Methodology Overview

Following Norman Fairclough's (2015) model for CDA, which includes analyzing text, discursive practice, and sociopolitical context, the study is based on a corpus of official rhetoric, state media editorials, and political discourse produced by the governments of Egypt and Ethiopia. This includes statements and speeches published in each country in their state-run media outlets, including Al-Ahram and Al-Gomhuria (Egypt), and The Ethiopian Herald and the Fana Broadcasting Corporation (Ethiopia), as well as transcripts of presidential speeches and foreign ministry briefings. In this article, we focus on the announcement of the dam (2011), the first filling of the dam (2020) and negotiations of the 2023-2025 period. Thematic coding and a discourse-historical approach (Reisigl & Wodak, 2023) are used to investigate shifts in framing and to assess the employed legitimization strategies.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary approach that investigates how language enacts, legitimizes, and contests social power relations in the context of political power struggle. Stemming from the works of Norman Fairclough, Teun van Dijk, Ruth Wodak, and others, CDA analyzes discourse as a form of social practice which reflects, manifests, and constructs ideology, identity, and institutional power (van Dijk, 2023, Fairclough, 2015, Wodak et al., 2009). From the combination of Fairclough's (2015) three-dimensional model of text (linguistic features), discursive practice (production and interpretation), and sociopolitical context (structures of power), the analysis systematically explores how state narratives on the GERD have been constructed to serve state interests.

In international conflict as in GERD, discourse is a form of "soft power", in that lexical choices (e.g. "threat" versus "sovereignty") may naturalize and marginalize disparate worldviews (Wodak, 2021). CDA can help to make these ideologies visible, for instance, through analysis of the lexis, argumentation strategies, or frames that depict the actors as victims, aggressors, or rightful claimants. Discourse plays a key role in the legitimation of political action (Reisigl & Wodak, 2023) specifically in nationalist and securitized contexts, which is precisely the terrain on which Egypt and Ethiopia have debated the GERD.

2.2 Narrative and Identity in International Relations

However, CDA has been linked to constructivist IR theory beyond the linguistic level through its understanding of the role of narrative in constructing state identity and foreign policy. National identities are not essentialist structures but discursively reproduced through the labeling of who is a 'self' and who is an 'other' (Weldes, 2022). In the Nile case, Egypt constructs itself as a vulnerable civilization dependent on a consistent historical flow, and Ethiopia as an upstream state whose unpredictable control of the river threatens the stability of Egypt and the region. Ethiopia, by contrast, perceives itself as the resurgent African power who is reclaiming its rightful position to develop after centuries of (neo)colonial marginalization and Egypt as the relic of colonial hydro-hegemony (Tafesse, 2022).

This binary framing is in line with the so-called Copenhagen School theory of securitization, which holds that an issue becomes a "security threat" not because of its objective situation, but because it is legitimized by speech acts that describe it as an existential threat which justifies emergency measures (Buzan & Hansen, 2023). Egypt's repeated calls about a "red line" and "national survival" regarding the GERD reflect this logic of transforming a technical water-sharing issue into a state security issue (Saleh & El-Sayed, 2024). CDA thus complements IR theory by examining how the act of securitization is performed, and how political logics of identity are reproduced.

2.3 Postcolonial Perspectives on Resource Sovereignty

The GERD dispute occurs within the international context of postcolonial critiques of water law and governance, as treaties made in the colonial era allocated almost all Nile water to downstream riparians. The following 1929 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty and the 1959 Egypt-Sudan agreement did not include upstream countries such as Ethiopia in their decision-making (Wheeler et al., 2020). Although legally ambiguous, they are currently used by Egypt to claim "historic rights" in the Nile,

which are considered neocolonial by Ethiopian diplomats, officials and scholars (Gebremeskel, 2023).

Applied postcolonially to environmental politics, these principles challenge the Western hydrological and legal status quo of the water sector, insisting on the agency of formerly colonized states in rearticulating the meaning of sovereignty (Zeitoun et al., 2023). From this perspective, the GERD is not just a dam, but a discursive site of decolonial resistance and material claim to Ethiopia's right to equitable development. The CDA shows how Ethiopian discursive strategies deploy anti-colonial and self-determination narratives to delegitimize historical Egyptian claims and to frame the conflict as one of justice, rather than a struggle over a scarce resource (Hagmann & Abbink, 2023).

2.4 Applications of Critical Discourse Analysis

Despite the emphasis on discourse in GERD scholarship, explicit applications of CDA to GERD have been limited. Most researchers have used thematic/content analysis, rather than a linguistic analysis of metaphor, modality, and transitivity, to analyze GERD discourse. The exception is Tafesse (2022), who applies CDA to deconstruct colonial legacies in Nile discourse, but also analyzes how certain legal arguments put forward by Egypt reproduce imperial hierarchies. Likewise, Zeitoun et al. (2023) analyze how Egypt frames equity in terms of maintaining historical allocations, while Ethiopia frames it as redistributing access based on need and location, employing discourse-historical methods. In addition, (Alhousseini & Zeidan, 2024, p.610) said that to analyse the textual characteristics of references to the hijab in political discourse, focusing on the power dynamics and ideological constructs evident in political speeches.

Furthermore, current CDA-informed studies are centered on a single national narrative, rarely adopting a comparative approach or van Dijk's (2023) socio-cognitive model of how discourse connects to ideologies and social identities. This model is important here, as the conflict is driven as much by historical grievance as by hydrology. Limited research on Arabic and Amharic primary sources can lead to a reliance on English language media, and obscure culturally situated rhetorical strategies unique to these contexts.

A survey of the existing literature on the discursive construction of the GERD dispute shows that there is a great deal of descriptive work which provides an inventory of the rhetorical positions taken by Egypt and Ethiopia, but that attention is rarely paid to Fairclough's (2015) three-dimension framework as a whole (Gebremeskel, 2023; Saleh & El-Sayed, 2024). Few works have inquired into the discursive-practice dimension, i.e. how texts are produced by political and media actors, circulated across platforms and consumed or rejected by audiences, or explored the Egypt-Ethiopia binary within which Sudan's voice is muted and sub-state and sub-national voices are sidelined (Cascão, 2008; Hagmann & Abbink, 2023; Yihdego et al., 2017). Analytically, the social-practice dimension, which links micro-level linguistic patterns to macro-level structures of hydro-hegemony, power asymmetry, and identity, has similarly been underutilized (Mirumachi, 2015; Zeitoun, 2008), leaving scholars unable to explain how discourse reproduces the unequal riparian relations of the Nile basin. The present study addresses these deficiencies by applying Fairclough's (1995) framework in its entirety—analyzing textual features, tracing production-

distribution-consumption trajectories, and interpreting ideological and hegemonic implications—thereby moving the field beyond description toward a critical, integrated explanation of the GERD controversy.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design within the theoretical framework of CDA to investigate the discourses produced, legitimized, and contested by the two countries regarding the GERD. CDA is suitable for this study as it allows for the analysis of the relationship between language, power, and ideology within political discourse (Fairclough, 2015). This article employs Fairclough's three-dimensional model of analysis of discourse to compare key phases of the GERD conflict (2011-2025) for changes, continuities, and calculated rhetorical shifts between the two countries.

3.2 Data Collection

The study consists of public texts and speeches from Egyptian and Ethiopian official and government-affiliated sources, such as presidential speeches and statements from the Egyptian Foreign Ministry, as well as editorials and articles from official and government-affiliated media in both countries, including Al-Ahram, Daily News Egypt, The Addis Standard, and The Reporter Ethiopia. The analysis is limited to the period from the announcement of the GERD project in April 2011 until early 2025. From 2020 to 2023, key milestones and fillings and major negotiations were identified through purposive sampling to reflect major moments of discourse representing the official position of the countries involved (Hagmann & Abbink, 2023). The original Arabic and Amharic texts are also consulted, when possible, to ensure the discursive reliability of the translations. A major limitation of the study is the purposive sampling of milestone events instead of a longitudinal corpus. This was, however, carried out to allow for a focus on high-impact discursive events (e.g. dam filling phases and negotiation rounds) that are most likely to reflect official national positions and planned rhetorical shifts (Hagmann & Abbink, 2023).

3.3 Analytical Framework and Procedures

The analysis is performed with Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse, which views discourse in three dimensions: the textual dimension (lexico-grammatical properties), the discursive practice dimension (norms of production and interpretation), and the sociopolitical dimension (ideological formations). Van Dijk's (2023) socio-cognitive model of discourse can also be used to analyze identity and power. Specific analytical tools include:

- Lexical and metaphor analysis: a list of words (e.g. "threat", "sovereignty", "justice") and metaphors (e.g. "red line", "gift from God") used to describe the dam.
- Argumentation and legitimation strategies: Exploring how different actors appeal to law, history, science, or morality to legitimize their positions (Reisigl & Wodak, 2023).

Representation of social actors: Analysis of how in-group and out-group identities are constructed through nomination, predication and agency attribution.

3.4 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

As this study examines publicly available official discourse, the ethical implications regarding privacy and informed consent are minimal. The researcher acknowledges positionality and

potential subjectivity in this research, which are addressed through reflective journaling and triangulation of the sources. The analysis is limited to the state discourse which may not include all voices from civil society and/or the opposition. Further, while translation may lose culturally-specific rhetorical conventions, the representation of the state discourse is justified as it is the most relevant to national strategy and international relationships (Saleh & El-Sayed, 2024).

In order to control for culturally and linguistically specific rhetoric, all documents in Arabic and Amharic were translated to English by the researcher, and then double-checked via back-translation from English to Arabic and Amharic by two independent, bilingual, native speakers, one a scholar of Middle Eastern political communication and the other an expert in Ethiopian public communication. Variances of subtlety, tone, or idioms were negotiated through successive discussion (Temple & Young 2023), reducing ethnocentric bias, and increasing the validity of the interpretive construction of cross-cultural discussion.

4. The Analysis

4.1 First Article: Discourse Analysis of Al-Ahram Coverage on the GERD

4.1.1 Textual Analysis

The Ahram Online article “Ethiopia prepares for fifth filling of GERD: Water expert” (2023) exemplifies a strategic lexical and syntactic framing that positions Ethiopia’s actions as unlawful and threatening. The headline itself foregrounds agency (“Ethiopia prepares”) while invoking technical authority (“Water expert”), lending credibility to the narrative. Ethiopia as a norm violator acting outside international consensus is communicated by high-profile lexical items such as “unilateral filling”, “breach”, “violation”, and “disputed dam”. The passive constructions “water passing over the dam” contrast with Ethiopia-centric subject constructions (“Ethiopia has started”, “Addis Ababa unilaterally completed”) to display differing levels of agency between Ethiopia and Egypt. Thus, the language of “Declaration of Principles”, “international norms”, “agreements” indicates that this is not a problem of development or technicalities of technology but of legal obligations and sovereignty.

By applying CMT (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) in Fairclough’s (2001) textual dimension, treating the metaphors in our corpus (e.g. breach, very high risk, scarcity, fresh round of talks) as structured source-to-target mappings that represent political reasoning (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003), not just lexical choices. The dam is metaphorized in the news article through legal/conflict (e.g. breach, unilateral, dispute), danger (e.g. high risk, lives at stake), and deficit (e.g. scarcity level) source domains, which map to violation and vulnerability in the GERD target domain. Cyclic failure/renewal source domains (“failed”, “fresh round”) construct a disjunctive, heavily contested but possibly open-ended discursive potential. This CMT-guided decoding shows the ideological work of metaphor in normalizing Egypt’s/Sudan’s framing of the dam as a violating, threatening object, thus reproducing a moral order between riparians. This adds to Fairclough (1992)’s textual analysis of the dispute and illustrates a lack of interpretative potential in lexico-grammatical coding (Charteris-Black, 2004 ; Musolff, 2016).

4.1.2 Discursive Practice

At the level of the discursive practice, the article uses a classic Egyptian media strategy of legitimating state-controlled discourse through local academic voices. The article cites Cairo University's Professor Abbas Sharaki, and claims authority by means of satellite imagery and technical observations, in what looks like an objective articulation of science and politics. Sudan is included, as one of the two Arab downstream states, in order to strengthen Egypt's negotiating position and its international legitimacy, and to present a united Arab position in the face of Ethiopian unilateralism. The upstream state point of view is not taken into consideration, which is a general approach in the media affiliated with the Egyptian state (Saleh & El-Sayed, 2024).

4.1.3 Sociopolitical Context

The current article seeks to situate itself within Egypt's securitization of the GERD. By invoking the 2015 Declaration of Principles, which Egypt views as a legally binding document, Egypt affirms a discourse of entitlement and continuity within the context of postcolonial hydro-hegemonic discourses (Tafesse, 2022). The term 'scarcity level' and the existential threat posed to a 'important water supply' resonates with rhetoric stressing the Nile's centrality to Egyptian identity and survival (Hagmann & Abbink, 2023). The article's timing, occurring concurrently with renewed negotiations, suggests the intention to inform the public and convey resolve to Ethiopian negotiators. Using Fairclough's (2015) three-dimensional model of discourse analysis, it is shown how language is not used to communicate facts about events, but rather to reproduce the ideological fabric of Egypt's geopolitical posture towards the GERD.

4.2. Second Article: Discourse Analysis of *Daily News Egypt* Coverage on the GERD

4.2.1 Textual Analysis

The Daily News Egypt article 'Ethiopia shows no sign of accepting solutions to Nile dam crisis: Shoukry' (Hegazi, 2023) presents a clear discursive binary through word choice and syntax. Ethiopia is framed as negated and intransigent (e.g. 'has not shown any sign', 'position has not changed', 'no willingness'). The language erases agency and represents Ethiopia as defying reason. Egypt's role is much more involved and diplomatic. The collocations the country "continues its tireless efforts", "hosted a trilateral round" and "peaceful solution" present this concept. In addition, the collocation "water rights, interests and national security", in relation to GERD, takes the form of a semantic chain, turning the GERD project into a security threat, not just an infrastructure project (Hagmann & Abbink, 2023). The phrases "unilateral approach" and "mega Nile dam" are implicitly pejorative.

4.2.2 Discursive Practice

At the level of discursive practice, we thus find a straightforward intertextuality of state discourse in the form of an excerpt of Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry's speech at the Arab League. The Arab League as a high-status diplomatic forum confers institutional legitimacy on the Egyptian position, while the absence of Ethiopian counter-discourse is meaningful. Alongside the NWFE Programme, its mention, on the other hand, conveys a positive role of Egypt in climate adaptation and a responsible regional leadership role in contrast to Ethiopian obstructionism. This seems in line with the Egyptian English-language media, which have also been observed to fit into forms of soft diplomacy toward foreign audiences (Saleh & El-Sayed, 2024).

4.2.3 Sociopolitical Context

Analyzing the article using Fairclough (2015), this suggests that the Ethiopian crisis is represented as part of the Egyptian foreign policy of regional bloc-building. Using the Arab League and pan-Arab identity, the discourse pressures Ethiopia within the context of the Arab League while maintaining internal discourse of national vulnerability. Draped in "national security" rhetoric, the article adopts a narrative long espoused by states, linking Nile water to the existence of civilizations. This narrative spans as far back as the postcolonial era, when concerns about control over resources dominated (Tafesse 2022). The article's timing also indicates its role in justifying continued recourse to multilateral avenues and seeking international sympathy. Analyzing through this lens of three-dimensional discourse, the Daily News Egypt article is not neutral reporting but a form of discursive statecraft employed within the GERD dispute.

4.3 Third Article: Discourse Analysis of Addis Standard Coverage on the GERD

4.3.1 Textual Analysis

According to the Addis Standard's "In-depth: Navigating through the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam negotiations, future outcomes" (Biyenssa & Beyene, 2023), the choice of words and themes represents the Fourth filling of the GERD as a "momentous occasion" and a "critical juncture" steeped in "unfaltering belief", going beyond being just a piece of infrastructure. Egyptian interests are framed in terms of outdated treaties ("1959 agreement" and "colonial era") and an obstructionist approach, while Sudan is framed as "inconsistent" and "shifting". The narrative is the same as that of the international debate on water sharing: Ethiopia builds "fairly and equitably", "without causing significant harm" and is exercising its "natural and legal right". The sovereign tropes of "no need for mediators" or "against national interest", also evoke postcolonial struggles against intervention.

In this article, Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 2003) has been incorporated in the textual level of Fairclough (2015). Thus, the metaphors of 'navigating', 'milestone', 'push through', 'obstruct', 'break the deadlock', 'collapse', 'block', 'backtracking', 'slip', 'binding', 'restrict', 'strained', 'dominant', and 'tensions' have been seen as structural mappings that organize political reasoning rather than lexical expressions (Koevcses 2010). In particular, the GERD discourse in this article is saturated with journey/progress metaphors depicting motion and trajectory for negotiations; container/obstruction metaphors reproducing blockage for cooperation; constraint/force metaphors producing restriction for Egypt's legal demands; and verticality/power metaphors reproducing hydro-hegemonic order of upstream and downstream (Musolff 2016). In doing so, the CMT-guided decoding exposes how metaphor, far from merely naturalizing each actor's ideological position and foreclosing alternatives, also reproduces a moral geography of progress, threat and legitimate use, which pure lexico-grammatical coding in Fairclough's framework cannot capture (Charteris Black, 2004).

4.3.2 Discursive Practice

Finally, polyvocality at the level of discursive practice is used in the article by including quotes from Ethiopian academics, diplomats, and researchers who often form a consensus in support of the government and of the negotiations. For example, some academics express skepticism about the negotiations, but the article presents this as critique of the approach. The Egyptian perspective narrated is often met with an instant reply from Ethiopian experts or merely described as an 'Egypt claimed...' (Reisigl & Wodak, 2023) label. The UAE's mediation efforts and AU engagement situate Ethiopia within African and Global South diplomatic frameworks, contrasting with what is perceived as Western/Egyptian 'dictation' (Reisigl & Wodak, 2023). These forms of representation and positioning are often a discursive strategy of Ethiopian media.

4.3.3 Sociopolitical Context

In Fairclough's (2015) sociopolitical interpretation of the text, taking part in the Ethiopia unifying, developmentalist and anti-colonial nation-building project, in which the GERD is part of Ethiopia's developmental state offering energy, unity, and regional leadership, counters Egypt's association of the dam with security and risk with a vision of prosperity and technical rationality (Gebremeskel, 2023). Reference to domestic political risks such as compromise backlash also shows that external engagement is intertwined with the issue of domestic legitimation. The paper argues that Ethiopia's choice of AU-led mediation (instead of UN-led or US-led mediation) reflects Ethiopia's changing foreign policy under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. Using a 3D perspective, it concludes that Addis Standard's framing of the Nile dispute can be viewed as a site of contestation between national identity, historical justice and Ethiopia's geopolitical status.

4.4. Fourth Article: Discourse Analysis of *The Reporter* Coverage on the GERD

4.4.1 Textual Analysis

The Reporter article "Ethiopia to launch fourth filling of a disputed dam" (Staff Reporter, 2023) presents Ethiopia's perspective with a strong modality. For example, Deputy Prime Minister Demeke Mekonnen's quote: "The last three fillings have not affected lower riparian states" uses factual modality to reduce downstream concerns. The source's title thus constructs Egypt (and implicitly Sudan) as illegitimate gatekeepers of a common resource, while it adopts anti-colonial and pan-African discourses. In addition, the choice of words for the expression "mega-dam", "USD 4.2 billion" and "near completion" stresses the scale and financial investment of the project, stressing its importance as a *fait accompli* and its environmental, agricultural and economic potential to upstream states. The word "disputed" only appears in the headline. The article describes only one-sided opposition, not a dispute between the GERD stakeholders.

4.4.2 Discursive Practice

By placing the announcement in its official context, which is a high-level government event of Nile Basin countries, the GERD is represented in the context of regional cooperation, despite Egypt and Sudan's absence. The absence of Egypt and Sudan, and conclusion to mention only the neighboring upstream states (Uganda, DRC, South Sudan, Tanzania) create a different bloc that legitimizes the Ethiopian actions outside the historic triad of the three Nile Basin states. The lack of response in Egyptian or Sudanese press reflects an Ethiopian media convention understood as monologic discursive, the state issuing statements without regard for opposition (Gebremeskel, 2023). The announcement about the ministerial forum signals diplomatic messaging: Ethiopia

asserting itself as reasonable (calling for negotiations) while maintaining resolve (advancing unilaterally).

4.4.3 Sociopolitical Context

Based on Fairclough's (2015) sociopolitical discourse framework, the article is situated within the nation-building, developmentalist ideological frameworks associated with Ethiopia. The GERD project is discursively connected with national pride, energy sovereignty, and Africa's right to self-determined development, all meant to delegitimize colonial-era water allocations. Egypt is thereby represented as seeking to "monopolize" the Nile, consistent with the postcolonial "hydro-hegemon" theory that characterizes Egypt as privileged in Nile usage, and Ethiopia as the equal use defender. These dynamics of internal issues, including cessation of US aid discussed in the issue, have led to the GERD being represented as a symbol of unity and resilience. Through this three-dimensional framing, The Reporter shows how media discourse strengthens the legitimacy of the state by representing technical water management as a moral and civilizational endeavor.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

5.1 Summary of Key Findings

Adopting Fairclough's (2015) three-dimensional CDA framework, the study investigates the competing news discourses in the Egyptian and Ethiopian newspapers regarding the GERD. The analysis of the news articles published in Al Ahram, Daily News Egypt, Addis Standard and The Reporter illustrate the differing discourses employed by each nation's media. This article examines how the dominant narratives in the Egyptian and Ethiopian media on GERD have relied on existentialism, historical entitlement, international law violations, and national security in one case, and developmental sovereignty, anti-colonialism, and equitable utilization of shared rivers in the other. Language, specific quotations, and omission of competing narratives were strategically employed to legitimize national narratives and discredit the opposing side amid pronounced ideological and identity-based divisions.

Table 1

Comparative Discursive Strategies in Egyptian and Ethiopian GERD Narratives

Discursive Feature	Egyptian Narrative	Ethiopian Narrative
Key Lexical Choices	"existential threat," "red line," "violation," "the right to life," "water security," "historical rights" — citing normalized representation. (Al-Ahram, 2023; Daily News Egypt, 2023)	"sovereign right," "unjustified veto," "collective interest," "non-negotiable right," "African Renaissance," "white card," "self-inflicted harm," "domination." (Addis Standard, 2023; The Reporter, 2023)
Dominant Metaphors	"The Nile is life," "enemy's blood," "the historical rights," "water security and existence" — invoking mortality, security, and ontological continuity. (Saleh & El-Sayed, 2024)	"The Grand Dam (God's gift)," "for collective benefit," "kill, displace," "calls of Renaissance," "malicious propaganda," "paternalist claims" — liberating, mortal metaphors, and historical fight. (Charteris-Black, 2004)
Legitimation Strategies	Appeals to colonial-era treaties (1929, 1959), international law, and historical ownership; framing the GERD as an existential threat. (Yihdego, 2022)	Invokes pan-African solidarity, sovereignty, the right to development, citing the NBI and CFA framework; deployed through a fairness discourse. (Hagmann & Abbink, 2023; Tesfaye, 2023)
Representation of Self	President el-Sisi positions the regime as guarantor of water stability and, by extension, of Egyptian sovereignty.	Sovereignty is framed as an indivisible right; framing the region's "water card" against Ethiopia is rejected as unacceptable foreign interference.
Representation of Other	Ethiopia portrayed as an irrational, obstructionist actor that threatens Egyptian national security.	Egypt portrayed as a historical hegemon that imposes its will, blocks development, and adopts paternalist claims over the Nile.

The findings illustrate the utility of CDA for unpacking social and political aspects of transboundary water conflict: in this case, language is not merely a window on policy but is constitutive of the perception of threat, national identity, and diplomatic possibilities. At the same time, our analysis shows how securitization, at least in the Egyptian discourse, turns the technological question of water allocation into an existential question, thereby providing a justification for existentially-driven political action (Hagmann & Abbink, 2023). The de-securitized framing, at least on the Ethiopian side, reinforces postcolonial claims of agency and disrupts the Eurocentric conception of international water law (Tafesse, 2022). These discursive binaries express how power circulates through language, consolidating uneven structures even as the material world shifts.

5.3 Policy and Diplomatic Implications

These secured narratives create meaningful obstacles to negotiations. Saleh and El-Sayed (2024) note that media narratives in both states force politicians to pay a high political cost for reaching compromise. Mediators cannot simply focus on technical bargaining factors such as filling rates or sharing drought years, but may use "discursive de-escalation" strategies such as connecting the actors through narratives of mutual gain, climate resiliency, or regional integration to overcome the divisive narratives fueling distrust. One such platform is the Nexus of Water, Food and Energy (NWFE) Programme, referred to by Egyptian officials but underused in domestic political rhetoric. For this study, discursive de-escalation is operationally defined as a deliberate, observable shift in

state and media actors' linguistic choices that lowers the register of threat, reframes the dispute from zero-sum to cooperative framings, and opens semantic space for negotiation without conceding substantive claims (Fairclough, 2015). It is identifiable when such shifts co-occur across Fairclough's (1995) three dimensions: textual (absolute → modal lexis), discursive practice (venue and speaker shifts toward technical fora), and social practice (reduced coercion and renewed trilateral engagement). This triadic operationalization enables consistent coding across actors, phases, and text types, specifying who de-escalates, when, and via which linguistic strategies.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

Given the nature of the current study, we focus on the official discourse between Egypt and Ethiopia, the two principal actors in the GERD dispute, whose conflicting discourses have supported the impasse and regional debate over the dam (Hagmann & Abbink, 2023). Sudan, a key downstream player, has followed a more variable and volatile policy trajectory, supporting the dam initially before siding with Egypt as a result of internal political shifts (Biyenssa & Beyene, 2023). The aim of this study has been to conduct a CDA that compares two secured binary national narratives. The weak position of Sudan has thus fallen outside the focus of the analysis, which is therefore a clear limitation and gap identified in this research. Following the perspective of Sudanese media and official sources would thus allow for a more complete tripartite picture of this important transboundary infrastructure issue, given Sudan's planned geographic location, its own infrastructural concerns (e.g., the Roseires Dam), and the impact of Sudan's internal civil war on Nile Basin diplomacy (Gebremeskel, 2023).

Appendices

1. Addis Standard (2023, September 21). In-depth: Navigating through the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam negotiations, future outcomes. Available at: <https://addisstandard.com/in-depth-navigating-through-the-grand-ethiopian-renaissance-dam-negotiations-future-outcomes/>
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