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Cognitive-Pragmatic Strategies in Ukrainian Wartime Press: A Matrix Model of Symbolic Resistance (2022–2025)

Abstract

This article analyses the cognitive-pragmatic mechanisms of Ukrainian national newspapers between 2022 and 2025, investigating how language functions as a strategic resource under conditions of hybrid war. Drawing on frame semantics, speech-act theory and van Dijk's socio-cognitive model, a 2.1-million-token corpus of 122 front-page items was manually annotated, yielding 3,674 strategy tags. Frequency and association measures reveal seven dominant strategies: "Oppositional Framing", "Emotional Appeal", "Rational Argumentation", "Delegitimisation", "Victimhood-and-Justice Narrative", "Counter-disinformation" and "Personalisation". These moves activate cognitive frames such as "Legitimacy", "Justice", "Empathy" and "Negative Imagery", trigger emotions (fear, pride, compassion) and structure interpretive scenarios that legitimise defensive action while consolidating civic solidarity. A matrix heat map visualises the co-activation of strategies with nine cognitive frames and pragmatic outcomes, revealing synergistic clusters; for example, the triad of oppositional framing, victimhood narrative and counter-disinformation simultaneously reinforces in-group cohesion, mobilises sympathy and protects readers from adversarial messaging. The study demonstrates that wartime journalism orchestrates frames, metaphors and speech acts within an integrated semiotic system, thereby sustaining communicative resilience and ideological agency.
Keywords: cognitive-pragmatic strategies; symbolic resistance; matrix heat map; Ukrainian wartime press; interdiscursivity; illocutionary effects; communicative resilience

1 Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has transformed the national media sphere into an intensified arena of symbolic action in which language operates not merely as a vehicle for reporting events but as a strategic resource for constructing resistance, shaping public cognition and reinforcing collective identity amid hybrid warfare. Ukrainian-language newspapers have consequently become pivotal sites of communicative agency, fulfilling informative, persuasive, affective and ideological functions. Within this discursive environment, press texts act as semiotic vessels that encode shared experience, coordinate collective emotion and sustain sociopolitical cohesion.

The present study investigates seven cognitive-pragmatic strategies that Ukrainian newspapers employed between 2022 and 2025: "Oppositional Framing", "Emotional Appeal", "Rational Argumentation", "Delegitimisation", "Victimhood-and-Justice Narrative", "Counter-disinformation" and "Personalisation". Press communication is conceptualised as a semiotic space in which linguistic structures, rhetorical schemata and mental models intersect to produce perlocutionary effects, including affective mobilisation, identity alignment and epistemic vigilance, which are crucial for societal resilience in the face of protracted aggression. The analysis rests on an integrative theoretical foundation that combines frame semantics (Barsalou, 1992; Fillmore, 1982), speech-act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1979) and the socio-cognitive model of discourse (van Dijk, 2008, 2014).

A communicative strategy is defined here as a context-sensitive configuration of speech acts and rhetorical constructions grounded in collective cognitive experience and oriented toward specific pragmatic goals. These goals are realised through discursive patterns such as "WE/THEY" oppositions, the activation of emotionally salient concepts such as "heroism", "sacrifice" and "homeland", and the delegitimisation of the aggressor. Such patterns coordinate public interpretation, structure moral evaluation and reinforce symbolic boundaries between in-group and out-group. Empirical analysis draws on a purposive corpus of 122 Ukrainian-language newspaper articles published between 2022 and 2025 in *Sudovo-Yurydychna Hazeta*, *Den'*, *Ukraina Moloda*, *Uriadovyi Kurier* and *Radio Svoboda*, comprising approximately 2.1 million tokens. The texts, which include reports, editorials, commentaries and public statements, address themes of resistance, identity formation, moral judgement and information contestation. Qualitative coding yielded 3,674 strategy tags.

To synthesise the findings, the study employs a matrix heat map that plots the co-activation of the seven strategies with nine cognitive frames such as "Legitimacy", "Justice", "Empathy" and "Negative Imagery". Cell shading represents relative frequency per 1,000 tokens, normalised across the full 2.1-million-token corpus, enabling rapid visual identification of dominant and synergistic linkages (see Figure 1). The model provides a replicable framework for tracing how newspaper discourse simultaneously shapes mental representations, mobilises affect and consolidates ideological resilience.

By elucidating these multilayered relationships, the research advances cognitive discourse studies with an empirically grounded and theoretically coherent account of language-mediated symbolic resistance, showing how wartime journalism orchestrates cognition and emotion to maintain societal cohesion under sustained geopolitical threat.

2 Theoretical Background

This study is anchored in an interdisciplinary framework that combines cognitive linguistics, speech-act theory, the socio-cognitive approach to discourse, critical discourse analysis, and quantitative statistical reasoning, thereby providing a coherent lens for examining Ukrainian wartime newspaper discourse as a strategic semiotic system.

Central to this framework is *frame semantics*, inaugurated by Fillmore (1982) and elaborated by Barsalou (1992). Frame semantics posits that meaning is embedded in experientially organised *schemata* rather than isolated lexical items. Frames such as "Legitimacy", "Justice", "Empathy", "Negative Imagery" and "Binary Opposition" structure evaluative stances and moral positioning, enabling wartime journalism to reinforce collective identity and justify defensive action. This perspective converges with Philip Johnson-Laird's (1983) *mental model theory*, which foregrounds the role of schematic knowledge in inferential processing.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory, developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and further elaborated by Lakoff (1993), explains how metaphors such as "WAR IS A VIRUS" function as deep cognitive schemata that orient affective responses and ideological alignment. Lakoff's (1991) analysis of war rhetoric further demonstrates how metaphorical systems structure political reasoning and moral evaluation. McLuhan's (1964) conception of media as extensions of human perception clarifies how newspapers amplify particular frames and metaphors, thereby constructing a shared perceptual field that demarcates in-group and out-group boundaries.

Speech-Act Theory adds an additional explanatory tier. Building on Austin's (1962) tripartite distinction among locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts and Searle's (1979) taxonomy of illocutionary forces, the present study analyses how journalistic discourse not only informs but also commands, exhorts and morally positions its readership. In wartime reportage, illocutionary acts are calibrated to generate perlocutionary effects such as mobilisation, solidarity and vigilance.

The Socio-Cognitive model of van Dijk (2008, 2014) bridges textual patterns and ideological reproduction by positing that discourse is shaped by context-sensitive mental models capable of sustaining or subverting power relations through binary oppositions such as "WE" versus "THEY". This complements Fairclough's (1995) view of media as a contested arena where social meanings are negotiated.

From a quantitative perspective, Brown and Kass (2009) reconceptualise statistics as a science of information modelling and decision-making, underscoring the value of integrating statistical visualisation techniques into discourse research. Their argument bolsters the use of matrix heat maps in the present study as rigorous tools for revealing co-activation patterns between strategies and cognitive frames.

Building on the conceptual and methodological foundation provided by linguistic communication theory, newspaper rhetoric and lexical dynamics (IAshenkova, 2010; Naval′na, 2011; Zahnitko, 2007), Maslova (2023a, 2023b) demonstrates that wartime periodicals re-personalise the semantic oppositions of "war" and "peace", and "heroism" and "gender", thereby constructing a semiotic infrastructure for collective resilience and cognitive resistance. This claim is further corroborated by Mezhov et al. (2022), whose corpus-driven analysis of directive speech acts shows their capacity to trigger readers' affective alignment and to activate pragmatic scenarios of solidarity. Complementarily, Levchuk (2019) reveals that language-choice practices in Ukrainian–Russian bilingual settings function as overt acts of ideological positioning, exposing latent mechanisms of symbolic control in public communication. Taken together, these studies delineate an integrated panorama ranging from the strategic re-engineering of discursive concepts to the pragmatic mobilisation of the audience and the ideological markedness of code selection.

Taken together, these interlocking perspectives – including frames, metaphors, speech acts, socio-cognitive schemata and statistical visual analytics – enable a multilayered analysis of Ukrainian wartime newspaper discourse as a cognitive-pragmatic apparatus that orchestrates collective cognition, mobilises emotion and sustains ideological agency under conditions of hybrid warfare.

3 Methodology

This study follows a qualitative discourse-analytic design situated within the cognitive-pragmatic paradigm. The procedure comprises five interlocking components that ensure analytical transparency and replicability.

3.1 Corpus Compilation

A purposive corpus of 122 Ukrainian-language newspaper texts was assembled from digital archives covering the period from February 2022 to March 2025. The inclusion criteria required that each item originate from a national outlet with verified circulation, explicitly address the Russo-Ukrainian war and belong to a persuasive or evaluative genre, such as an editorial, a front-page report, a commentary or a public statement. The final dataset, drawn from *Sudovo-Yurydychna Hazeta*, *Den*, *Ukraina Moloda*, *Uriadovyi Kurier* and *Radio Svoboda*, contains approximately 2.1 million running tokens.

3.2 Annotation Scheme and Reliability

Guided by frame semantics, speech-act theory and van Dijk's socio-cognitive model, the study developed a codebook that distinguishes nine cognitive frames, such as "Legitimacy", "Empathy" and "Negative Imagery", and seven communicative strategies, including "Oppositional Framing", "Emotional Appeal", "Rational Argumentation", "Delegitimisation", "Victimhood-and-Justice Narrative", "Counter-disinformation" and "Personalisation". Two trained coders independently annotated the corpus in MAXQDA 24, producing 3,674 tags. The inter-annotator agreement reached $\kappa = 0.82$, indicating substantial reliability. All discrepancies were resolved through consensus.

3.3 Analytical Procedures

Lexical salience was calculated in AntConc 4.2, and collocational strength was assessed via log-likelihood ($p < 0.01$). Illocutionary sequences were identified by classifying speech acts as directives, commissives or expressives according to Searle's taxonomy. Discourse-level oppositions ("WE" vs "THEY") were reconstructed to surface the mental models underpinning ideological polarisation.

3.4 Visualisation

Multilayered findings were synthesised in a matrix heat map generated in R (tidyverse, ggplot2). Strategies populate the vertical axis, while frames populate the horizontal axis; cell shading denotes relative frequency per 1,000 tokens, using a modified viridis palette with zero values mapped to white.

3.5 Ethical and Quality Assurance

All analysed texts are publicly accessible media content, and no personal or sensitive data were processed. The study received no external funding and reports no conflicts of interest. By combining rigorously annotated qualitative data with targeted quantitative checks, this methodology provides a robust and replicable account of how Ukrainian wartime newspaper discourse orchestrates cognitive frames, speech acts and evaluative rhetoric to sustain symbolic resistance.

4 Results

Quantitative coding of the 2.1-million-token corpus produced 3,674 strategy tags distributed across seven macro-strategies (Table 1). “Oppositional Framing” predominates, accounting for 17.6% of all annotated moves and systematically activating the “WE–THEY” schema. “Emotional Appeal” follows at 16.6%, primarily mobilising fear, pride and compassion scripts. “Rational Argumentation” constitutes 14.5%, typically anchored in references to international law and the principle of territorial integrity. “Delegitimisation” contributes 14.1%, relying on moral qualifiers (e.g. “barbaric”, “lawless”) and legalistic labels (“war crime”, “genocide”). “Victimhood-and-Justice” narratives comprise 14.7%, foregrounding diachronic patterns of domination to embed current hostilities in a *longue-durée* morality tale. “Counter-disinformation” registers 11.1%, pairing fact-checking routines with explicit source attribution, while “Personalisation” appears in 11.5%, chiefly through micro-stories of soldiers, volunteers and affected civilians.

Table 1. Distribution of cognitive-pragmatic strategies in the corpus ($N = 3,674$).

Strategy	**Tag count (n)**	**Share of corpus (%)**
Oppositional Framing	645	17.6
Emotional Appeal	609	16.6
Rational Argumentation	532	14.5
Delegitimisation	517	14.1
Victimhood-and-Justice Narrative	540	14.7
Counter-disinformation	408	11.1
Personalisation	423	11.5

Note: Percentages are rounded to one decimal place.

A separate pairwise association analysis confirms that the strategies seldom operate in isolation. “Rational Argumentation” co-occurs most strongly with “Delegitimisation” ($\phi \approx 0.32$, $p < 0.001$), indicating a tendency to combine juridico-ethical reasoning with negative other-presentation. “Emotional Appeal” clusters with “Personalisation” ($\phi \approx 0.29$, $p < 0.001$), underscoring the affective potential of human-interest narratives. The densest triadic overlap links “Oppositional Framing”, “Victimhood-and-Justice” and “Counter-disinformation” – a configuration that simultaneously reinforces in-group cohesion, mobilises sympathy and inoculates readers against adversarial narratives.

5 Discussion

The evidence corroborates the view that Ukrainian wartime journalism functions as a strategic semiotic apparatus. "Oppositional Framing" supplies the discursive skeleton that differentiates legitimate defence from illegitimate aggression. Onto this scaffold, "Rational Argumentation" adds juridical legitimacy, whereas "Delegitimisation" provides the moral antithesis necessary for binary contrast. "Victimhood-and-Justice" narratives extend the temporal horizon of conflict, transforming episodic events into chapters of a collective historical script and amplifying mnemonic solidarity. "Emotional Appeal" and "Personalisation" translate macro-level geopolitics into relatable vignettes, heightening empathic engagement and motivational drive.

"Counter-disinformation" performs a metacommunicative function by calibrating epistemic vigilance; its frequent pairing with "Oppositional Framing" suggests that newspapers simultaneously delineate the information battlefield and fortify cognitive defences against hostile influence. The heat map confirms that these strategies intersect along multiple cognitive axes, generating amplified perlocutionary effects – mobilisation, moral justification and critical vigilance.

Taken together, the results indicate that Ukrainian newspapers construct a layered discourse architecture that sustains ideological resilience. By synchronising frames, metaphors and speech acts within an integrated narrative grid, the press orchestrates collective meaning-making and emotional regulation, thereby underpinning symbolic resistance under conditions of hybrid warfare.

6 Empirical Illustrations

The strategic repertoire outlined above is firmly anchored in authentic wartime reportage. The excerpts below exemplify the linguistic and rhetorical mechanisms through which Ukrainian newspapers structure collective cognition, mobilise affect and legitimate defensive action.

(1) Українці захищають свою територію від російської агресії…
[Ukrainians are defending their territory against Russian aggression…]
Sudovo-Iurydychna Hazeta, 20 Aug 2024, https://sud.ua/

This declarative clause instantiates "Oppositional Framing", activating the "WE/THEY" dichotomy that casts Ukraine as the lawful defender and Russia as the unlawful aggressor, thereby reinforcing in-group solidarity and out-group threat perception.

(2) Російсько-українська війна триває навіть не з 2014-го, а понад 350 років…
[The Russo-Ukrainian war has been going on not merely since 2014, but for over 350 years…]
Uriadovyi Kurier, 14 Dec 2022, https://ukurier.gov.ua/

By embedding the current conflict in a centuries-long chronology, the sentence realises a "Victimhood-and-Justice" narrative that endows present resistance with historical inevitability and moral gravitas.

(3) Захищаючи Україну з першого дня повномасштабного вторгнення РФ, 9 лютого загинув наш друг, воїн 58-ї бригади та журналіст "Юридичної Газети" Олексій Борис…
[Defending Ukraine from the first day of Russia's full-scale invasion, on 9 February our friend, a soldier of the 58th Brigade and journalist of Iurydychna Hazeta, Oleksii Borys, was killed…]
Iurydychna Hazeta, 10 Feb 2023, https://yur-gazeta.com/

The personalised narrative converts geopolitical confrontation into an emotionally proximate human drama, facilitating empathy and symbolic identification; it simultaneously embodies "Personalisation" and "Emotional Appeal".

(4) Центр протидії дезінформації попереджає про поширення фейку, який російські ЗМІ вигадали…
[The Centre for Countering Disinformation warns about the spread of a fake story invented by

Russian mass media…]
Sudovo-Iurydychna Hazeta, 19 Apr 2024, https://sud.ua/

By naming an authoritative source, exposing the fabrication and attributing it to the adversary, the passage exemplifies the "Counter-disinformation" strategy, cultivating cognitive vigilance and media literacy.

(5) Якщо не дамо їм відсічі, то вони просто нас знищуватимуть… Коли бачиш наших хлопців і дівчат, як вони воюють, серце виповнює гордість.
[If we do not repel them, they will simply annihilate us… When you see our boys and girls fighting, the heart fills with pride.]
Uriadovyi Kurier, 14 Dec 2022, https://ukurier.gov.ua/

The conditional menace fused with an affective tribute merges fear, pride and compassion, illustrating the synergistic operation of "Emotional Appeal" and "Personalisation" to intensify motivational engagement.

(6) Російські окупанти знову порушили міжнародні норми гуманного поводження… розстріляв ши двох українських захисників, які опинилися у полоні.
[Russian occupants again violated international norms of humane treatment… by shooting two Ukrainian defenders who had fallen into captivity.]
Sudovo-Iurydychna Hazeta, 18 Feb 2024, https://sud.ua/

Through explicit attribution of war-crime status, the wording constructs the enemy as lawless and immoral, enacting "Delegitimisation" and supplying moral warrant for continued resistance.

Collectively, these vignettes confirm that Ukrainian wartime newspaper discourse operates as a dynamic semiotic system. By interweaving "Oppositional Framing", "Rational Argumentation", "Personalisation", "Counter-disinformation", "Emotional Appeal", "Victimhood-and-Justice" narration and "Delegitimisation", the press orchestrates resilient cognitive and affective infrastructures that uphold symbolic resistance and societal cohesion under sustained external threat.

7 Visual Interpretation

Figure 1 offers a heat map that renders, in a single synoptic plane, the co-activation frequencies between seven cognitive-pragmatic strategies evidenced in Ukrainian wartime journalism and nine cognitive frames and pragmatic outcomes they mobilise. By colour-coding the normalised counts (0 = white; 45 occurrences per 1,000 tokens = dark yellow-green), the visualisation functions both as an analytical device and as an explanatory scaffold that makes visible the interdependent architecture through which the press shapes public cognition, orchestrates affect and maintains ideological cohesion.

The matrix identifies two maximum-intensity cells: "Delegitimisation" with "Negative Imagery" (45) and "Counter-disinformation" with "Justice" (45). "Oppositional Framing" is most strongly linked to "Binary Opposition" (40), confirming the centrality of the "WE" versus "THEY" schema. "Emotional Appeal" is associated most strongly with "Vigilance" (42) and "Solidarity" (40), followed by "Empathy" (35) and "Mobilisation" (32). "Rational Argumentation" reaches its highest value in relation to "Binary Opposition" (35), followed by "Moral Justification" (30), "Mobilisation" (28) and "Legitimacy" (22).

Because these linkages are rarely isolated, the matrix foregrounds the synergistic nature of discursive operations: multiple strategies converge upon shared cognitive architectures, thereby amplifying their perlocutionary force and enhancing communicative resilience in times of crisis. The heat map thus transcends a linear inventory of rhetorical moves, instead tracing the recursive pathways through which language frames events, shapes mental representations and anchors moral evaluation.

In sum, the visualisation operates as a heuristic framework that discloses the symbolic mechanics of wartime journalism. It demonstrates that, under conditions of sustained external threat, language functions as a strategic resource that integrates cognitive and affective dimensions, thereby fostering collective agency and ideological solidarity.

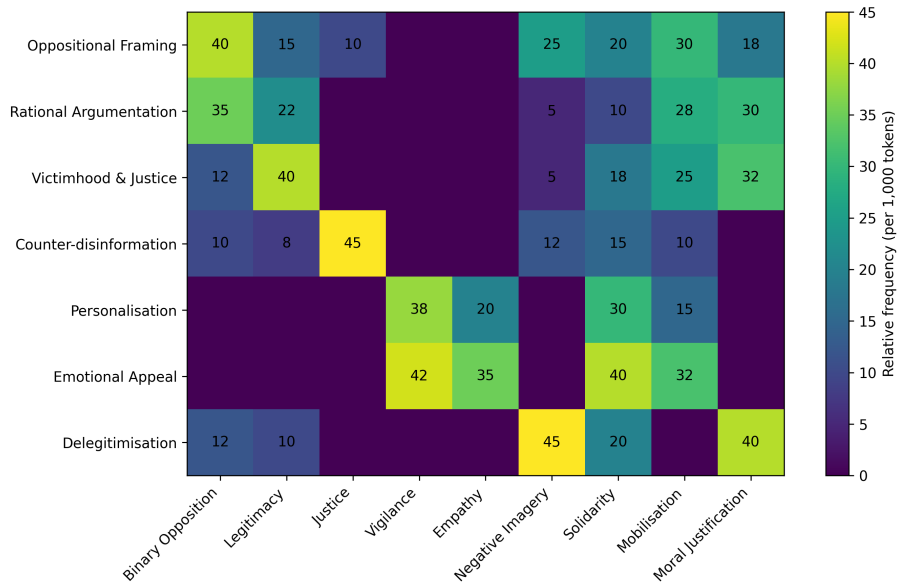


Figure 1. Heat map of strategy-frame co-activation in Ukrainian wartime newspaper discourse. Values represent relative frequency per 1,000 tokens, normalised across the full 2.1-million-token corpus.

8 Limitations

Although this study advances a systematic cognitive-pragmatic account of Ukrainian wartime newspaper discourse, several methodological and empirical constraints circumscribe the scope of its conclusions. First, the dataset is confined to print-based articles; consequently, the analysis does not encompass multimodal formats, television broadcasts, social media posts, infographics or battlefield visuals that increasingly shape the contemporary information ecology. Second, the corpus is purposively sampled and qualitatively coded, privileging interpretive granularity over statistical generalisability. The resulting patterns should therefore be read as illustrative of dominant strategic tendencies rather than exhaustive of all communicative practices.

Third, the investigation is limited to Ukrainian-language texts – a focus that illuminates the discursive construction of national identity and symbolic resistance, yet excludes Russian-language outputs that likewise influence the conflict's cognitive landscape. Finally, despite substantial inter-coder agreement, qualitative annotation inherently involves a degree of interpretive subjectivity, and the temporal frame (February 2022 – March 2025) may not capture diachronic shifts beyond this period. Future research could address these constraints by conducting cross-linguistic and multimodal comparisons, incorporating audience-reception studies and deploying mixed-methods designs that integrate automated corpus analytics with ethnographic observation to enrich our understanding of strategic language use in hybrid warfare.

9 Conclusions

This study has shown that Ukrainian wartime newspaper discourse operates as a strategically coordinated semiotic system in which seven cognitive-pragmatic strategies – namely "Oppositional Framing", "Emotional Appeal", "Rational Argumentation", "Delegitimisation", "Victimhood-and-Justice" narrative, "Counter-disinformation" and "Personalisation" – interact to shape public cognition, mobilise affect and sustain ideological resilience under conditions of hybrid warfare. These moves systematically activate a shared set of cognitive frames (e.g. "Binary Opposition", "Legitimacy", "Justice", "Empathy", "Negative

Imagery") and generate intersecting pragmatic effects, such as solidarity, mobilisation, epistemic vigilance and moral legitimation of defensive action.

The heat map matrix developed here captured these multilayered linkages by visualising the relative frequency with which each strategy co-activates specific frames and communicative outcomes. The visual model revealed, for instance, that the triad of "Oppositional Framing", "Victimhood-and-Justice" narrative and "Counter-disinformation" forms a high-density nexus that simultaneously reinforces in-group cohesion, mobilises sympathy and inoculates readers against hostile narratives. Likewise, the coupling of "Rational Argumentation" with "Delegitimisation" illustrates how legal-ethical reasoning and negative enemy imagery operate in tandem to amplify the perlocutionary force of wartime persuasion.

Taken together, the findings confirm that Ukrainian wartime journalism functions not merely as an information conduit but as an integrated apparatus of cognitive and emotional mobilisation and symbolic resistance. The matrix model proposed in this study provides a replicable analytical instrument for mapping interactions between strategies and frames in other crisis-related discourses, thereby extending the methodological toolkit of corpus-assisted critical discourse studies.

Future research could enrich this framework by: (1) incorporating multimodal data (images, infographics, video); (2) tracing diachronic shifts between wartime and peacetime communication; and (3) conducting audience-reception studies to assess how strategic language is internalised and contested by different publics. Such extensions would deepen our understanding of how discourse organises collective thought and affective solidarity during periods of armed conflict and informational confrontation.

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