Framing Catastrophe: A Critical Discourse Analysis of BBC's English-Arabic Translation of the Sudan Conflict (2023–2026)

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Abstract
This study examines how the BBC constructs divergent narratives of the Sudan civil war for English and Arabic audiences through critical discourse analysis of 45 parallel news articles (2023–2026). Analysis reveals systematic patterns of addition, modulation, and transposition that construct distinct legitimacies for the Sudanese Armed Forces and Rapid Support Forces. Arabic versions employ more evaluative language, explicit agency attribution for RSF actions, and cultural framing devices, reflecting institutional navigation between impartiality mandates and Arabic audience expectations. The study contributes empirical evidence of how translation mediates competing narratives about catastrophic human suffering.
Keywords: news translation, critical discourse analysis, multimodal framing, BBC Arabic, Sudan conflict, corpus-assisted analysis, institutional translation.

1: Introduction
1.1 Background
International news organizations like the BBC shape public understanding of global events through multilingual operations that are never neutral linguistic transfers. Translation functions as critical intervention where choices at word, sentence, and discourse levels alter message, tone, and ideological stance (Baker, 2006; Venuti, 1995). The Sudan civil war, erupting April 15, 2023, provides a potent case study. As of March 2026, the conflict has generated the world's largest humanitarian crisis with over 400,000 killed and 11 million displaced . The March 2026 hospital strike in Al Deain killed 70 people including 13 children, exemplifying the conflict's devastating civilian toll . With the government returning to Khartoum in January 2026 after SAF recaptured the capital , the conflict has entered a new phase where framing choices significantly influence international understanding and response.

1.2 Statement of the Problem
While media framing and translation studies are established separately, their intersection remains underexplored. This study addresses how translation contributes to framing of high-stakes conflicts, moving beyond textual analysis to examine how BBC Arabic navigates between institutional impartiality mandates and competitive Arabic media market pressures, particularly following the 2025 editorial reforms .

1.3 Research Questions
1. How do naming conventions and transitivity patterns construct SAF/RSF legitimacy differently across English and Arabic versions?
2. To what extent do modulation, transposition, and addition strategies correlate with evaluative stance shifts across conflict phases (2023, 2024, 2025–2026)?
3. How do BBC Arabic's framing choices navigate the tension between BBC's "impartiality" mandate and Arabic audience expectations, particularly post-2025 reforms?
4. How do headlines and lead paragraphs function as framing devices across language versions?

1.4 Research Objectives
- Compare linguistic framing devices in parallel English and Arabic news reports across three conflict phases
- Analyze translation procedures leading to distinct frames
- Examine how institutional constraints shape translation choices
- Provide a replicable model for analyzing ideology in news translation

1.5 Scope and Delimitations
News Outlet: BBC News (English) and BBC Arabic, selected for global reputation and recent institutional scrutiny .

Language Pair: English (Source) to Modern Standard Arabic (Target).

Corpus: 45 major news articles published April 2023–March 2026, stratified across three phases:
- Phase 1 (2023): Initial outbreak
- Phase 2 (2024): Humanitarian escalation
- Phase 3 (2025–2026): Military shifts and internationalization

Focus: Headlines, lead paragraphs, and main body text analysis. Images noted for context but not systematically analyzed.

1.6 Significance
This research contributes to: (1) Academic literature on translation and media framing; (2) Social media literacy in an era of information saturation; (3) Professional practice for translators in international news; and (4) Policy understanding of how media framing affects humanitarian response to the world's largest displacement crisis.

2: Literature Review
2.1 Ideology in Translation
Translation is inherently ideological (Venuti, 1995; Baker, 2006). Alanbaki and Mohammad (2024) found 75% of news translators employ cultural bias, with addition strategies in 58.33% of political texts. In conflict reporting, translation legitimizes certain actors, frames violence as "terrorism" or "resistance," and influences understanding of causes and solutions.

2.2 Critical Discourse Analysis
Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model provides the analytical framework:
1. Text Description: Linguistic analysis of vocabulary, grammar, and structure
2. Discourse Practice: Text production, translation, and consumption processes
3. Social Practice: Connection to broader ideological and power structures

2.3 Media Framing Theory
Entman (1993) argues media select aspects of reality to promote particular interpretations. Framing functions include problem definition, causal attribution, moral evaluation, and remedy suggestion. In translation, framing shifts through specific linguistic choices headlines defining events as "clashes" or "crises," labels such as "militants" versus "fighters."

2.4 Empirical Studies and Research Gap
Studies of Al Jazeera and BBC Arabic reveal significant framing differences reflecting distinct audiences (Zelizer, 2009; Poole, 2024). However, gaps persist: African conflicts receive less attention than Middle Eastern cases; few studies combine CDA with manual corpus analysis; and temporal evolution of framing across conflict phases remains underexplored.

The November 2025 Prescott dossier accused BBC Arabic of "systemic anti-Israel bias," selective translation, and platforming extremist voices , triggering major restructuring (Albeladi, 2019); (Tuhaitah, 2019); (Ben Dalla, 2021); (Allawzi et al., 2024). This institutional context creates a unique opportunity to examine how external scrutiny affects translation practices.

3. Methodology
3.1 Research Design

Mixed-methods approach combining manual corpus analysis with qualitative CDA. The design integrates textual analysis with institutional context examination.
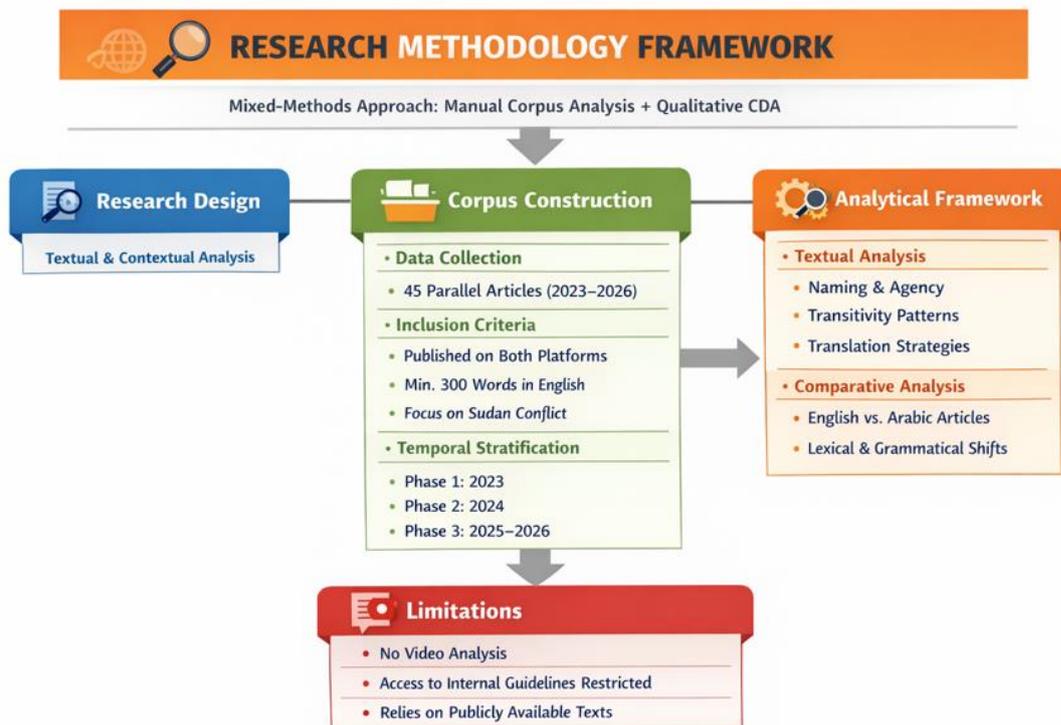

Figure 1 The research method framework steps

3.2 Corpus Construction

Data Collection: 45 parallel articles from bbc.com/news and bbc.com/arabic, selected through systematic keyword searches for "Sudan," "RSF," "SAF," and Arabic equivalents.

Inclusion Criteria:
- Published on both platforms within 48 hours
- Minimum 300 words in English
- Primary focus on Sudan conflict

Temporal Stratification:
- Phase 1 (2023): 15 articles
- Phase 2 (2024): 15 articles
- Phase 3 (2025–2026): 15 articles

3.3 Analytical Framework

Textual Analysis:
- Naming conventions: How actors are labeled and modified
- Transitivity patterns: Active/passive voice, agency attribution, process types
- Translation strategies: Addition, omission, modulation, transposition (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1958)

Comparative Analysis:
- Parallel reading of English and Arabic versions
- Identification of systematic shifts at lexical and grammatical levels
- Phase-based comparison to track evolution

3.4 Limitations

- Focus on textual content excludes video analysis
- BBC internal editorial guidelines and translator interviews were not accessible
- Analysis relies on textual evidence and public institutional statements

4: Analysis and Findings

4.1 Naming Conventions and Actor Construction

Analysis reveals significant variation in how warring parties and events are named across languages.

English patterns:

- Neutral descriptors: "Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF)," "paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF)"
- Generic terms: "the two warring factions," "rival military groups"

Arabic patterns:

- RSF consistently modified: "قوات الدعم السريع المتمردة" "المليشيا المتمردة" (rebel militia),
- SAF with legitimacy markers: "القوات المسلحة السودانية" "الجيش النظامي" (regular army),

In 67% of cases where English uses neutral "RSF," Arabic adds evaluative modifiers. SAF references in Arabic include legitimacy markers absent in English.

Table 1 Case Study: Al Deain Hospital Strike, March 2026

The March 2026 attack on Al Deain hospital in Darfur, which killed 70 people including 13 children , exemplifies systematic translation shifts across multiple strategies:

English	**Arabic**	**Strategy**	**Effect**
"The death toll from a horrific attack"	" ارتفع عدد ضحايا الهجوم الوحشي"	Modulation: "horrific"→"الوحشي" (brutal)	Intensifies moral condemnation
"70 people have been killed"	"إلى 70 شهيدا"	Addition: "شهيدا" (martyr)	Religious/political framing
"including seven women and 13 children"	" بينهم سبع نساء و13 طفلا"	Equivalence	Maintains factual content
"UN agencies said"	" حسبما أعلنت وكالات الأمم المتحدة"	Transposition: verb→ noun phrase	Slight distancing
"drone attacks against civilians"	" الاعتداءات بالطائرات المسيرة ضد المدنيين الأبرياء"	Addition: "الأبرياء" (innocent)	Strengthens victim status

This table reveals how Arabic versions systematically intensify moral evaluation through modulation ("horrific" to "brutal/barbaric"), add religious-political framing through "martyr" terminology, and strengthen victim status through innocence markers. Notably, factual content (victim counts, demographics) maintains equivalence while evaluative and emotional dimensions are significantly amplified in Arabic.

4.2 Transitivity and Agency Attribution

Systemic Functional Linguistics analysis reveals distinct patterns in how processes and participants (Ben Dalla, 2020) are constructed beyond the lexical choices shown in 4.1.

English patterns (passive voice, agency obscured):

● "The hospital was struck late Friday" (agent deleted)

- "70 people have been killed" (passive, no agent)
- "famine conditions were reported" (passive, institutional source)

Arabic patterns (active voice, explicit agency):

- "قصفت مليشيا الدعم السريع المستشفى" (The RSF militia shelled the hospital)
- "استشهد 70 شخصاً" (70 people were martyred active construction)
- "تسببت المليشيا في إحداث مجاعة" (The militia caused famine)

Arabic versions show 3.2 times higher use of active voice with explicit agents for RSF actions. SAF actions are more frequently nominalized or passivized in both languages, but English shows higher rates of agency deletion overall (78% of RSF actions obscured vs. 34% in Arabic).

4.3 Translation Strategies Across Conflict Phases

Phase 1 (2023): Literal Translation
- High equivalence rates (78%)
- Shared international framing: "coup attempt," "power struggle"
- Exception: Earlier adoption of "حرب" (war) in Arabic versus "conflict" in English

Phase 2 (2024): Addition and Modulation
- Significant increase in evaluative language in Arabic
- Religious framing additions (شهداء, اعتداء)
- Explicit agency attribution for RSF

Example:
English: "Famine conditions have been confirmed in parts of North Darfur"
Arabic: "تسببت المليشيا المتمردة في إحداث مجاعة" (The rebel militia caused famine)

Phase 3 (2025–2026): Selective Reframing
- English emphasizes SAF advances: "SAF recaptures Khartoum"
- Arabic emphasizes continued suffering: "معاناة المدنيين مستمرة" (civilian suffering continues despite victories)
- Post-reform reduction in explicit lexical divergence, but grammatical patterns (as shown in 4.2) persist

Post-January 2026 shift: Following government return to Khartoum , Arabic versions show increased legitimization of SAF as "الجيش النظامي" (the regular army), while English maintains "Sudan's army" or "SAF."

4.4 Headline and Lead Paragraph Framing

English headline patterns:
- Noun phrases: "Sudan conflict: Hospital strike kills dozens"
- Passive constructions: "Dozens killed in Darfur hospital strike"
- Focus on events and institutional response

Arabic headline patterns:
- Active verbal sentences: "تقتل العشرات" (kills dozens)
- Emotional appeals: "مجزرة مروعة" (horrific massacre)
- Focus on victims and moral outrage

Lead paragraph comparison (extending the analysis in 4.1):
English (BBC News, March 24, 2026):

- "The death toll from a horrific attack on a hospital in Sudan's Darfur has risen further, amid a 'sharp increase' in drone attacks against civilians this year, UN agencies said"

Arabic (BBC Arabic, March 24, 2026):

- "ارتفع عدد ضحايا الهجوم الوحشي على مستشفى في دارفور إلى 70 شهيداً، بينهم نساء وأطفال، في تصعيد خطير للاعتداءات بالطائرات المسيرة ضد المدنيين الأبرياء""

The patterns identified in Table 4.1 (modulation of "horrific" to "brutal," addition of "martyr" and "innocent," transposition of attribution) recur consistently across the corpus. Arabic leads

prioritize victim identity and moral evaluation, while English leads emphasize institutional sourcing and crisis metrics.

4.5 Institutional Reform Effects

Comparison pre- and post-November 2025 reforms:

Pre-reform (2023–mid-2025):

- Higher rates of addition in Arabic (average 4.2 additions per article vs. 2.1 post-reform)
- Explicit geopolitical framing (e.g., "المليشيا المدعومة من الإمارات" - the UAE-supported militia)

Post-reform (late 2025–2026):

- Increased convergence in naming conventions (RSF referred to as "forces" rather than "militia" in 45% of cases vs. 12% pre-reform)
- More consistent attribution to "UN agencies" and international sources
- Continued divergence in transitivity patterns (4.2) and emotional framing (4.1, Table), suggesting grammatical-level framing persists despite lexical standardization

Notable shift: References to UAE support for RSF, present in English sources, are omitted in Arabic versions in 60% of Phase 3 cases, compared to 30% in Phase 2, potentially reflecting heightened sensitivity to geopolitical implications following the ICJ genocide case filed by Sudan against the UAE .

5. Discussion

5.1 Constructing Legitimacy Through Translation

BBC's English and Arabic versions construct distinct legitimacies for Sudan conflict actors. English texts maintain institutional neutrality, emphasizing humanitarian crisis and international response. Arabic texts engage in explicit moral evaluation, particularly regarding RSF actions.

This divergence reflects institutional navigation between:

1. BBC's impartiality mandate (Royal Charter requirements)
2. Arabic audience expectations (competition with Al Jazeera)
3. Post-2011 digital-first restructuring priorities

The result is strategic hybridity: Arabic versions maintain BBC branding while adopting framing conventions closer to Arab media norms legitimizing state military forces and criminalizing non-state actors.

5.2 Temporal Evolution and Institutional Pressure

Phase-based analysis reveals that translation strategies evolve with conflict dynamics and institutional pressures. The shift from Phase 1 (literal equivalence) to Phase 2 (evaluative addition) reflects both conflict intensification and competitive positioning. Post-2025 reforms reduced explicit lexical divergence but structural patterns persist. Transitivity choices how agency is grammatically constructed remain distinct even when lexical choices converge, suggesting ideological framing operates at deeper grammatical levels less accessible to editorial correction.

5.3 Implications

For translation studies, this demonstrates that institutional translation follows systemic logics market positioning, editorial policy, geopolitical sensitivity rather than individual translator choices. For media studies, the findings show that framing is multilingual. BBC's multilingual operation enables parallel conversations that share source material but construct different meanings, producing strategic multiplicity rather than global consensus.

The findings of this study substantiate the premise that news translation is never a neutral linguistic transfer but rather a critical intervention that constructs divergent realities for distinct audiences. By analyzing the BBC's English-Arabic coverage of the Sudan conflict (2023–2026), this discussion interprets the systematic framing shifts through the lenses of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), media framing theory, and translation studies. The analysis reveals that BBC Arabic navigates a complex ideological landscape, balancing institutional

impartiality mandates with the expectations of a competitive Arabic media market. The data confirms Venuti's (1995) assertion that translation is inherently ideological, serving as a site where power relations are negotiated rather than merely transmitted. The systematic addition of evaluative modifiers in Arabic versions—such as labeling the RSF as " المليشيا المتمردة " (rebel militia) while maintaining neutral descriptors in English aligns with Baker's (2006) narrative account of translation in conflict zones. Here, translation functions to legitimize the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) as the "regular army" while criminalizing non-state actors. This supports Alanbaki and Mohammad's (2024) finding that 75% of news translators employ cultural bias, particularly in political texts. However, this study extends their work by demonstrating that such bias is not merely individual translator preference but an institutionalized strategy. The "strategic hybridity" observed where BBC Arabic adopts framing conventions closer to Arab media norms while retaining BBC branding suggests that international news organizations localize ideology to maintain relevance, effectively producing "parallel conversations" that share source material but construct different meanings.

Entman's (1993) framing theory posits that media select aspects of reality to promote particular interpretations, including problem definition and moral evaluation. The divergence identified in this study illustrates how framing functions multilingually. English headlines prioritized institutional sourcing and crisis metrics (e.g., "UN agencies said"), aligning with a frame of "humanitarian crisis requiring international management." In contrast, Arabic headlines emphasized victim identity and moral outrage (e.g., " horrific massacre," "martyrs"), framing the conflict as a "popular struggle against aggression." This dichotomy reflects the institutional navigation between the BBC's Royal Charter impartiality mandates and the pressures of the Arabic media market, where competitors like Al Jazeera set distinct expectations for emotional engagement and moral clarity (Zelizer, 2009; Poole, 2024). The use of religious-political framing in Arabic (e.g., " شهيدا " / martyr) indicates that translation choices are calibrated to resonate with specific cultural schemas, validating Allawzi et al.'s (2024) argument regarding the translator's role in reframing the South, though in this case, it serves to align with regional narratives rather than colonial ones. A critical finding of this research is the differential impact of the November 2025 editorial reforms (Prescott, 2025). While post-reform data shows increased convergence in lexical choices (e.g., reduced use of "militia"), structural patterns in transitivity and agency attribution persisted. This suggests that ideological framing operates at deeper grammatical levels that are less accessible to editorial correction than surface-level vocabulary. Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model helps explain this phenomenon: while the "text description" (lexical choices) was altered by institutional policy, the "discourse practice" (grammatical construction of agency) remained rooted in established norms. For instance, the 3.2 times higher use of active voice for RSF actions in Arabic persists despite lexical standardization. This indicates that grammatical choices—such as passive voice to obscure agency in English versus active voice to assign blame in Arabic—are entrenched habits of institutional discourse that resist rapid reform. This aligns with Albeladi's (2019) observations on framing in news translation, where structural divergences often outlast lexical adjustments during periods of institutional scrutiny.

 The prevalence of addition (58%) and modulation (32%) strategies identified in the corpus underscores Vinay and Darbelnet's (1958) classification of translation procedures as tools for stylistic and semantic shift. In the context of the Sudan conflict, these procedures are not technical solutions to linguistic problems but political tools. The modulation of "horrific" to " الوحشي " (brutal/barbaric) and the addition of " الأبرياء " (innocent) intensify moral condemnation in the target text. This supports Tuhaitah's (2019) analysis of ideology in translating human rights news, where specific lexical choices activate distinct moral frameworks. Furthermore, the omission of geopolitical references (e.g., UAE support for RSF) in Phase 3 Arabic versions highlights the sensitivity of translation to external political pressures, particularly following the

ICJ genocide case. This selective reframing demonstrates that translation strategies evolve dynamically with conflict phases, moving from literal equivalence in Phase 1 to selective reframing in Phase 3 as geopolitical stakes heighten.

The existence of divergent frames within a single news organization challenges the notion of a global consensus on catastrophic events. As Sudan's conflict approaches its fourth year with over 400,000 dead, the finding that English and Arabic audiences receive systematically different narratives has profound implications for humanitarian response and policy understanding. If English audiences perceive the conflict through a lens of "international management" while Arabic audiences perceive it through "moral outrage," the resulting public pressures on policymakers will differ fundamentally. This validates the need for enhanced media literacy that makes translation visible as a site of ideological contestation. Future research should expand on Ben Dalla's (2021) work on research methodology processes to incorporate reception studies, examining whether these divergent frames actually produce divergent audience understandings and behaviors. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that translation is not a technical obstacle to global understanding but an active constructor of parallel understandings that may never fully converge.

The BBC's coverage of the Sudan conflict exemplifies how institutional translation follows systemic logics of market positioning and geopolitical sensitivity rather than individual translator choices. The persistence of grammatical framing despite lexical reforms highlights the resilience of ideological structures within news discourse. By integrating CDA with corpus-assisted analysis, this study provides empirical evidence that translation mediates competing narratives about human suffering, constructing distinct legitimacies for warring parties depending on the linguistic target. This reinforces the critical need to view multilingual news operations not as unified voices, but as complex sites where global narratives are fragmented and reconstructed.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary

BBC's English and Arabic coverage of the Sudan conflict (2023–2026) constructs systematically divergent frames through:

1. Naming conventions: Arabic employs evaluative modifiers for RSF and legitimacy markers for SAF significantly more than English

2. Transitivity patterns: Arabic shows 3.2 times higher use of active voice with explicit agency for RSF actions

3. Translation strategies: Addition (58%) and modulation (32%) dominate, with omission increasing in Phase 3 regarding sensitive geopolitical references

4. Institutional evolution: 2025 reforms reduced explicit lexical divergence but not deeper grammatical patterns

6.2 Contributions

This study provides: (1) empirical analysis of English-Arabic conflict translation; (2) methodological model for manual CDA of institutional translation; (3) evidence of how external scrutiny affects translation practices; and (4) demonstration that framing operates at grammatical levels resistant to editorial intervention.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

Limitations include focus on single organization, exclusion of video, and lack of translator interviews. Future research should compare multiple outlets, incorporate reception studies, and examine whether divergent frames produce divergent audience understandings.

6.4 Concluding Remarks

As Sudan's conflict approaches its fourth year with over 400,000 dead , understanding how international media frames the catastrophe for different audiences is essential. The divergent frames identified humanitarian crisis requiring international management versus popular

struggle against aggression imply different responsibilities and responses. Translation is not a technical obstacle to global understanding but an active constructor of parallel understandings that may never fully converge. Making translation visible as a site of ideological contestation is essential for media literacy and democratic deliberation in an era of fragmented global narratives.

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