

Hidden Bias in Language: A Comparative Semantic Analysis of Violence Against Women in English-Language Media in Colombia and Costa Rica

Sesgo oculto en el lenguaje: análisis semántico comparativo de la violencia
contra las mujeres en los medios de comunicación en inglés en Colombia y
Costa Rica

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Abstract

Violence against women (VAW) is a pervasive social problem in Latin America, yet little is known about how global English-language media describe these events. Because media reporting shapes public perception, linguistic analysis is necessary. This study applies a comparative qualitative descriptive approach to examine twelve English-language online news articles on VAW published in Colombia and Costa Rica between 2020 and 2024. The articles were uploaded to Delve and coded using themes developed for this study. These themes were used to examine how meaning operates in the texts, drawing on Leech and Short (2007) distinction between literal, implicit, and associative levels of meaning. Delve was used as a practical tool to organize and manage the coding, while the interpretive work was guided by the theoretical framework. This approach made it possible to compare how English-language media in the two national contexts represent

violence against women. These results demonstrate how semantic choices in international journalism shape narratives of gender-based violence and mediate local realities for global audiences.

Keywords: Latin America, journalism, media discourse, semantics, violence against women

Resumen

La violencia contra las mujeres (VCM) constituye un problema social persistente en América Latina; sin embargo, se conoce poco acerca de cómo los medios de comunicación globales en lengua inglesa describen estos eventos. Dado que la cobertura mediática influye en la percepción pública, resulta necesario realizar un análisis lingüístico. Este estudio aplica un enfoque descriptivo cualitativo comparativo para examinar doce artículos periodísticos en línea, escritos en inglés, sobre violencia contra las mujeres publicados en Colombia y Costa Rica entre 2020 y 2024. Los artículos fueron cargados en la plataforma Delve y codificados mediante temas desarrollados específicamente para este estudio. Estos temas se utilizaron para analizar cómo se construye el significado en los textos, tomando como base la distinción propuesta por Leech y Short (2007) entre los niveles de significado literal, implícito y asociativo. Delve se utilizó como una herramienta práctica para organizar y gestionar el proceso de codificación, mientras que el trabajo interpretativo fue guiado por el marco teórico. Este enfoque permitió comparar cómo los medios de comunicación en inglés en ambos contextos nacionales representan la violencia contra las mujeres. Los resultados demuestran cómo las elecciones semánticas en el periodismo internacional configuran las narrativas sobre la violencia de género y median las realidades locales para audiencias globales.

Palabras clave: América Latina, periodismo, discurso mediático, semántica, violencia contra las mujeres

Introduction

Violence against women (VAW) remains a considerable human rights problem across Latin America, and media representations significantly influence how societies interpret its causes, consequences, and broader social implications. As global information increasingly flows through international media outlets, English-language journalism often functions as a cultural mediator that translates local realities for international audiences. In doing so, media reports do not simply describe events but also construct meanings that shape how violence is interpreted beyond national contexts.

Understanding these meanings requires examining how language encodes explicit information as well as more subtle evaluations, associations, and ideological cues embedded in discourse. From a semantic perspective, meanings in discourse are not limited to explicit lexical content but also emerge through contextual implications and associative connotations rooted in language use. Previous research has identified patterns such as victim-blaming narratives, euphemistic descriptions of violence, and sensationalist portrayals in media coverage of gender-based violence (Aldrete & Fernández-Ardèvol, 2023). Examining these semantic dimensions is therefore essential for understanding how journalistic discourse frames social problems and shapes public interpretation.

However, most existing studies focus primarily on Spanish-language media, leaving limited insight into how English-language media portray violence against women in Latin America. Likewise, comparative semantic analyses across different national contexts remain uncommon. To address this gap, the present study analyzes twelve English-language online news reports on violence against women published in Colombia and Costa Rica between 2020 and 2024.

The analysis applies Leech and Short's (2007) Levels of Meaning—literal, implicit, and associative—as a theoretical framework for examining how meaning operates at different semantic layers within journalistic discourse. Leech and Short's theory provides a useful

analytical lens to identify how explicit descriptions, implied interpretations, and associative evaluations contribute to the construction of meaning in texts. By applying this semantic framework to media reporting, the study highlights how linguistic choices in journalism contribute to influencing broader discursive narratives about gender-based violence.

The research seeks to answer the following questions: How do English-language media in Colombia and Costa Rica semantically construct violence against women? What literal, implicit, and associative meanings are present in the reports? How do these meanings converge or diverge across national contexts?

By examining these semantic arrangements, the study contributes to existing scholarship on media discourse and gender-based violence by demonstrating how linguistic choices shape the ways in which international audiences interpret violence against women in Latin America. The following section describes the methodological approach used to collect and analyze the news reports, including the selection of the corpus, the coding procedures, and the application of Leech and Short's semantic framework.

Materials and Methods

This study used a comparative qualitative descriptive design to analyze semantic patterns English-language media in Colombia and Costa Rica between 2020 and 2024. Qualitative description was chosen to provide rich and contextually grounded interpretations of linguistic patterns (Bradshaw et al., 2017; Sandelowski, 2000, 2010), allowing nuanced meanings to be captured in news discourse and their location within broader cultural and social contexts. In line with Latin American methodological traditions, the design emphasized contextualization, ethical responsibility, and narrative exploration (Sampieri et al., 2018).

The study established explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, constructed an intentional corpus of twelve articles, and applied Leech and Short's (2007) Levels of Meaning to ensure theoretical depth and procedural transparency.

The population was defined as English-language news articles reporting on violence against women (VAW) in Colombia and Costa Rica between 2020 and 2024. From this population, an intentional sample of twelve articles was selected to ensure variation in timing, source, and thematic emphasis. The corpus was extracted from four English-language media: The Tico Times, The Costa Rica Star, The Bogotá Post and The City Paper Bogotá. These media were chosen following the inclusion criteria. This sampling strategy ensured representativeness within the scope of the study and facilitated the systematic comparison between the two national contexts.

The articles were selected according to the criteria summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Corpus Selection

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Articles published between 2020 and 2024	Articles published before 2020
English-language reports from selected news outlets	Reports published in languages other than English
Articles explicitly addressing violence against women (VAW)	Articles mentioning crime without reference to violence against women
Online news reports from Colombia and Costa Rica	Opinion pieces, editorials, blogs, or commentary articles

Note. The criteria were used to select English-language online news reports addressing violence against women in Colombia and Costa Rica for inclusion in the study corpus.

The metadata of the twelve selected articles included source, country, date of publication, title, author, and key topics (see Table 2).

Table 2
Corpus Description of English-Language News Reports on Violence Against Women

Source	Country	Date	Article Topic	Author	Thematic Category
The Bogotá Post	Colombia	Mar 6, 2021	Students protesting sexual aggression on campus	Cristina Dorado Suaza	Sexual aggression
The Bogotá Post	Colombia	Sep 27, 2021	Impunity in femicide cases	Hayley McCord	Femicide
The Bogotá Post	Colombia	May 10, 2020	Domestic violence during the pandemic	Tasha Sandoval	Domestic violence
The City Paper Bogotá	Colombia	Apr 16, 2024	Sex-abuse prevention campaign in Medellín	Richard Emblin	Sexual abuse
The City Paper Bogotá	Colombia	Oct 3, 2024	Murder suspect investigation	Staff reporter	Murder
The City Paper Bogotá	Colombia	Nov 14, 2024	Law banning child marriage	Staff reporter	Child marriage
Costa Rica Star News	Costa Rica	Jul 28, 2020	Murder of doctor in Manuel Antonio	Carol Vaughn	Murder
Costa Rica Star News	Costa Rica	Sep 4, 2020	Tourist body discovered in Jacó	Laura Alvarado	Femicide case
Costa Rica Star News	Costa Rica	Apr 3, 2020	Sentencing in tourist murder case	Carol Vaughn	Murder
The Tico Times	Costa Rica	Sep 14, 2024	Increase in violence against women	Staff reporter	Violence against women
The Tico Times	Costa Rica	Nov 25, 2024	Gender-based violence in Costa Rica	Ileana Fernández	Gender-based violence
The Tico Times	Costa Rica	Apr 27, 2023	Sexual violence case in Santa Teresa	Staff reporter	Sexual violence

Source. Own elaboration.

Note. The table presents metadata of the twelve English-language online news reports analyzed in this study. The corpus includes reports published between 2020 and 2024

from three English-language media outlets covering Colombia and Costa Rica. The template was adapted from Delve (n.d.); data were completed manually.

Data analysis was carried out with the Delve platform, applying thematic coding as the main analytical strategy (Saldaña, 2021). The procedure comprised three stages: initial in vivo extraction, highlighting words, phrases, and sentences directly from the articles; category development, during which the extracted codes were refined and grouped into thematic categories to capture recurring linguistic and discursive patterns; and theoretical mapping, aligning the emerging thematic categories with the semantic meanings of Leech and Short (2007), ensuring that each coded segment reflected conceptual, implicit, or associative meaning as constructed in the news discourse.

The final coding scheme revealed recurring patterns in the twelve texts, ensuring thematic saturation, analytical consistency, and systematic comparison between Colombian and Costa Rican sources.

Table 3
Semantic Coding Framework Based on Leech and Short's (2007) Levels of Meaning

Semantic Level	Analytical Focus	Coding Indicators in News Reports	Example Expressions
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Literal Meaning (Conceptual)	Explicit factual information describing events, actors, and circumstances.	Direct descriptions of incidents, references to victims, perpetrators, locations, and investigative actions.	"The victim was found..." "Police launched an investigation..." "Authorities reported the attack."
Implicit Meaning (Connotative)	Implied evaluations or interpretations suggested through contextual framing and linguistic choices.	Language that indirectly attributes responsibility, minimizes agency, or frames events through narrative context.	"She was walking alone at night..." "The situation escalated..." indirect references to responsibility.
Associative Meaning (Affective / Stylistic)	Emotional or cultural associations conveyed through stylistic or evaluative language.	Metaphors, emotionally loaded adjectives, or expressions that evoke broader social interpretations.	"Shadow pandemic," "brutal attack," "a tragic case that shocked the nation."

Source. Own elaboration.

Note. The coding framework adapts Leech and Short's (2007) semantic model to the analysis of journalistic discourse. The three levels of meaning—literal, implicit and associative—guided the identification and classification of linguistic patterns in the selected news reports on violence against women.

The study analyzed open-source media texts. Ethical principles were maintained throughout the research process. Transparency guided corpus selection to prevent sampling bias, with all inclusion and exclusion selection explicitly documented to ensure consistency rather than subjective preference. Sensitivity was maintained when handling content that involves survivors and victims, avoiding stigmatization, revictimization, or unnecessary repetition of harmful stereotypes (Fairclough, 2015; Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

Results

The analysis revealed convergences and divergences in how English-language media in Colombia and Costa Rica constructed narratives of violence against women (VAW). Patterns in the construction of meaning were identified using the qualitative analysis platform Delve and interpreted through the three semantic levels proposed by Leech and Short (2007): literal, implicit, and associative.

At the level of literal meaning, reporting in both countries was primarily event-focused, presenting key factual information and following standard journalistic practices. News reports described incidents, investigative actions, locations, and timelines, reflecting typical conventions of journalistic reporting. However, differences emerged in the use of implicit and associative meanings. Colombian media often incorporated associative expressions linked to systemic inequality and feminist activism, including references to the “*shadow pandemic*” and campaigns such as “*They Are Girls, Not Wives.*” In contrast, Costa Rican reporting more frequently associated VAW with tourism contexts, emphasizing crimes involving foreign visitors and broader concerns about public safety.

These findings indicate a shared reliance on literal descriptions while revealing national variation in implicit and associative meanings, demonstrating how English-language media encode distinct interpretations of violence against women.

The comparison of Colombian and Costa Rican English-language media also highlights how semantic meanings are constructed across the three levels identified by Leech and Short (2007). As summarized in Table 4, Colombian reports frequently employed associative meanings linking violence against women to systemic issues such as feminist activism and institutional responses. Expressions such as “*shadow pandemic*” and references to the campaign #*TheyAreGirlsNotWives* framed harassment and gender inequality as structural problems. By contrast, Costa Rican reports tended to emphasize literal descriptions of events, focusing on factual accounts of incidents, particularly those involving tourists or public safety concerns, such as cases reported in Jacó or Santa

Teresa. While both contexts relied on literal meanings to report events, Colombian reporting more often incorporated associative meanings connected to activism and structural inequality, whereas Costa Rican reporting more frequently framed incidents as isolated crimes associated with tourism and public safety.

Table 4

Similarities and Differences in Media Discourses on Violence Against Women in Colombia and Costa Rica

Dimension	Colombia	Costa Rica	Comparative Insight
Textual– Narrative Patterns (Leech & Short, 2007)	Reports frequently employ associative meanings linking violence against women to systemic issues such as feminist activism and institutional responses. Expressions such as “shadow pandemic” and references to the campaign <i>#TheyAreGirlsNotWives</i> frame harassment and gender inequality as structural problems.	Reports tend to emphasize literal descriptions of events, focusing on factual accounts of incidents, particularly those involving tourists or public safety concerns (e.g., cases reported in Jacó or Santa Teresa).	Both contexts rely on literal meanings to report events. However, Colombian reporting more often incorporates associative meanings connected to activism and systemic inequality, while Costa Rican reporting more frequently frames incidents as isolated crimes related to tourism and public safety.

Note. The comparison summarizes patterns identified through the semantic coding framework based on Leech and Short’s (2007) levels of meaning.

Table 4 synthesizes the semantic patterns identified in Colombian and Costa Rican English-language reports on violence against women (VAW), interpreted through the semantic framework proposed by Leech and Short (2007). The analysis shows that literal meaning constituted the factual basis in both corpora, consistent with journalistic standards of accuracy and event-centered reporting (Richardson, 2007). Nevertheless, transnational differences emerged in the use of implicit and associative meanings.

In Colombia, literal descriptions frequently appeared alongside institutional references—such as universities, legal processes, and broader structural concerns—suggesting a tendency to situate VAW within wider systems of inequality (Aldrete & Fernández-Ardèvol, 2023). In Costa Rica, literal meaning more often focused on tourism-related incidents involving foreign visitors, reflecting patterns in which tourism economies shape public narratives of crime and vulnerability (Gilmore & Säävälä, 2023).

Discussion

The comparison of Colombian and Costa Rican English-language media reveals both convergence and divergence in how violence against women (VAW) is semantically constructed. Interpreting the findings through Leech and Short's (2007) Levels of Meaning highlights how each national context emphasizes different aspects of VAW through language choice and narrative framing.

In terms of implicit meaning, the reports revealed divergent ideological orientations. The Colombian articles implied institutional deficiencies, referring to cases of harassment, impunity rates exceeding 90%, and failures in protection mechanisms—aligning with research on institutional responsibility in the coverage of gender-based violence (De Souza & Selis, 2022). In contrast, Costa Rican articles emphasized situational vulnerability, particularly in leisure or beach settings, through lexical choices that subtly suggested victim risk-taking or environmental precariousness—echoing research on individualized narratives of victimization (Gillespie et al., 2013).

Associative meanings also differed significantly. Colombian media used expressions linked to activism, such as *“shadow pandemic”* and *“They Are Girls, Not Wives,”* reflecting collective mobilization and feminist discourse (Lazar, 2007). In contrast, Costa Rican media used sensationalist collocations—*“gruesome murder”* and *“found dead on the beach”*—consistent with the emotionally intensified framing documented in crime reporting within tourism-dependent contexts (Adamson et al., 2020).

These general patterns—literal, implicit, and associative—emerged through systematic coding in Delve. Literal meaning appeared through explicit descriptive structures; implicit meanings were identified through evaluative language, omissions, passive constructions, and connotative signals; and associative meanings were revealed through recurrent affective collocations and culturally charged expressions, in line with the semantic framework proposed by Leech and Short (2007).

The iterative comparison of the national sub-corpora revealed consistent semantic patterns. Colombian texts combined literal descriptions with institutional and activist semantic cues, whereas Costa Rican texts paired factual reporting of events with tourism-related vulnerability and emotionally charged descriptors. These divergences illustrate how semantic choices reflect different ideological orientations. Colombian reporting framed VAW as rooted in structural inequality, collective mobilization, and institutional failure—an interpretation supported by studies on feminist media framing in Latin America (Olza et al., 2020). In contrast, Costa Rican reporting framed VAW as episodic, situational, and intricately linked to tourism, aligning with studies indicating that news in tourism-driven economies often prioritize narratives of safety and risk perception (Adamson et al., 2020).

The semantic levels proposed by Leech and Short make these ideological differences analytically visible without relying exclusively on broader discursive or framing frameworks. As observed in studies based on corpora of gender-based violence reports (Busso et al., 2020; Santaemilia-Ruiz & Maruenda-Bataller, 2016), semantic and lexical choices in journalistic discourse beyond explicit framing mediate constructions of victimization, responsibility, and social meaning.

Taken together, these results demonstrate the value of semantic analysis as an effective analytical tool for uncovering ideological meaning in international reporting. By differentiating literal, implicit, and associative meanings, the study shows how English-

language media mediate local contexts for global audiences, shaping perceptions of violence against women, institutional responsibility, and social risk.

Conclusion

The semantic analysis conducted in this study demonstrates that English-language media in Colombia and Costa Rica shape meanings around violence against women (VAW) in ways that are parallel yet divergent. While literal meaning provides the shared factual foundation of reporting, implicit, and associative meanings reveal how linguistic choices embed broader cultural and ideological perspectives within media narratives.

In the Colombian context, reporting frequently situates violence against women within structural inequalities and institutional shortcomings, while also highlighting feminist activism and legal reforms. In contrast, Costa Rican reporting tends to frame VAW as episodic events associated with tourism and public safety concerns. These differences illustrate how semantic choices contribute to distinct narrative constructions of gender-based violence across national contexts.

By applying Leech and Short's (2007) Levels of Meaning, this study demonstrates how micro-level linguistic choices make ideological meaning-making visible within international media discourse. The findings also highlight the role of English-language journalism in shaping global interpretations of violence against women by not only reporting events but also framing them through semantic patterns. In this way, the study contributes to broader discussions in media discourse analysis by showing how semantic approaches can reveal the subtle linguistic mechanisms through which media narratives construct social meaning.

This study has limitations. The corpus consists of twelve articles from four English-language outlets, which restricts generalizability beyond the selected media sources. Future research could expand the corpus, incorporate additional national contexts, or combine semantic analysis with corpus-linguistic methods to examine larger datasets.

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Artificial Intelligence Use Statement

The author used artificial intelligence tools (ChatGPT-4, Grammarly, and Quillbot) to assist in proofreading, improving academic writing, and translating text between English and Spanish. The conceptualization of the study, the methodological design, the data collection, the semantic analysis, the interpretation of the results and the conclusions were carried out by the author.