Media Framing of Fatal Bicyclist Crashes in Hillsborough County: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Research Overview

Research Objective
To examine the linguistic choices that frame relationships between bicyclists and other parties involved in fatal crash events

Data Collection
Textual data were collected from 189 media reports of the 94 bicyclist traffic fatalities that occurred from January 2009 – to June 2018 in Hillsborough County, Florida

Methods
Critical discourse analysis (CDA), qualitative method used to analyze oral and written communication

Site of Study – Hillsborough County, FL

Hillsborough County, Florida
2017 Population Estimates
1,408,566
Source: Vintage 2017 Population Estimates
Median Household Income
$ 51,681
Source: 2012-2016 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates
Persons in poverty, percent
15 %
Source: 2016 Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE)
Bicyclist Fatalities in Hillsborough County

Bicyclist Deaths by Sex
Bicyclist Deaths by Age

- 8%: 10 to 19
- 15%: 20 to 29
- 10%: 30 to 39
- 15%: 40 to 49
- 22%: 50 to 59
- 9%: 60 to 69
- 19%: 70 to 79
- 2%: 80 to 89

Bicycle Fatality Crash Location
Hillsborough County, FL
January 2009 Through June 2018
94 total fatalities
Location of Bicyclist Fatality Residence
Hillsborough County, FL
January 2009 through June 2018
94 total fatalities

A Closer Look

- Transportation research is diverse in many ways, but has only begun to look at language (Mangusin, 2017).
- Language is taken for granted, but is more important than it seems.
Language in News Reports

Media language influences public understanding of bicyclist fatalities (Hojman et al., 2005).

Language Matters

“Language, they believe, shapes policy. The word ‘accident,’ they say, presupposes a conclusion that no one bears responsibility” – Transportation Alternatives, 2015

...the words “crash” and “collision” ignore the laws of physics” (Magusin, 2017)

...the use of the word “accident” was no different from the use of the word “crash” and that microscopic language choices such as these do not impact reality (Badger, 2015)
Critical Discourse Analysis – Purpose

Language shapes our perceptions of reality

Critical Discourse Analysis as Method

Classification schemes

Ideologically contested words

Active vs. passive sentences

Agency

Nominalizations
Framing & Bicyclist Identities

A frame is a representation of a topic or subject matter. Can represent:

- Types of people (e.g., bicyclists)
- Inanimate objects (e.g., vehicles)
- Processes (e.g., dying)
- Abstract concepts (e.g., economy)

Episodic Framing (Iyengar, 1991)

- Brief of “the facts”
- Isolates the story and characters from larger context
- Used to report specific events and concrete circumstances
- Invokes individual rather than societal attributions of responsibility
### Thematic Framing

- Larger structural and cultural issues
- Draws attention to society’s role or policy issues
- Studies show that individuals rely on contextual cues to reason through issues; particular attributions depend on whether news is presented episodically or thematically (Iyengar, 1991).

### Hidden Power

Hidden power is exercised through “taken-for-granted” language uses and universal “common sense” practices.

**FAIRCLOUGH:**

- Written language has a nuanced quality
- One-sided communication (news)
- Discourse as a site of ideological struggle
- Text interpretation: the interpretation of an interpretation
Data Collection

DATABASE SEARCH

- Tampa Bay Times, the Tampa Tribune, the St. Petersburg Times, WSTP 10 News, Bay News 9, Fox 13 Tampa Bay, WUSF Public Media, ABC Action News, and other news outlets appearing in print and online
- 190 news reports of 94 bicyclist fatalities

TERMS

- (bike OR bicycle OR bicyclist OR crash OR collision OR struck OR killed OR dead OR death OR dies OR died OR fatal OR fatality OR accident) AND Tampa or Hillsborough County AND (“Name of Bicyclist”)

Coding and Analysis

EXPERIENTIAL

- Vocabulary
- Grammar

EXPRESSIVE

- Producer of texts’ content, particularly the evaluation of subjects, identities, and outcomes
Experiential and Expressive Nodes (Fairclough, 1989)

Results

Taken-for-Granted Vocabulary

- **ACCIDENT**: the word “accident” was used to represent bicyclist fatalities 62 times in 48 articles.
- **INCIDENT**: the word “incident” was used 13 times in 12 articles.
- **CRASH**: the word “crash” was used 168 times in 91 articles.
- **COLLISION**: the word “collision” was used 26 times in 22 articles.
**Grammar and Agency**

Agency is conscious action by a clear actor. It is communicated in language through grammatical structure.

**Passive Sentences and Nominalizations**

**Motorist Agency:** In 55 of 189 sources, the motorist was replaced at least once with the word “truck” (usually multiple times within a source), totaling 111 references to the vehicle as an agent in bicyclists’ deaths.

- Omit motorist name
- Obscure presence of driver
- Emphasize activity of motor vehicle
- Use inanimate nouns instead of driver names

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Boger was standing with his bicycle on the corner of Waters Avenue and Florida Mining Boulevard at 2:14 p.m. when a Mack truck made a sharp right turn and hit Boger, deputies said.
Passive Sentences

A man wearing dark clothing and riding a bicycle was killed when he was hit by a car early Sunday on Hillsborough Avenue. The accident happened about 5 a.m. at the intersection with Lois Avenue. Jerome Thomas, 44, was riding a bike north, across Hillsborough Avenue, about 300 feet west of the intersection, when he was hit by a car in the eastbound lanes, according to Tampa police. Thomas died at the scene. The car’s driver, Lorenzo Rodriguez, 57, was not issued any traffic citations, police said (Tampa Bay Times, 2014).

Bicyclist Class vs. Bicyclist Safety

A relationship exists between unsafe bicycling behaviors and lower-class identity markers, while an inverse relationship exists between safe bicycling behaviors and higher-class identity markers.

- Weeks, riding against traffic, was on his way home from a landscaping job.
- Police said Gutierrez was riding north against a red light at Woodland Corporate Blvd., in front of the Waterford at Cypress Lakes apartment complex, where he lives.
- At the time of the crash, Ishizuka had lights on her bike, wore a helmet and rode in the bike lane, Coleman said.
News as Narrative

■ The Story
  • Newsworthiness
  • Balance

Elements of the Story

■ Schemata
  • Hit-and-run
■ Social Identities
  • Bicyclist
  • Demographics
■ Scripts
  • Police Reports
  • Laws
Recommendations

- Active sentences
- Appropriate vocabulary
- Thematic frames
- Nominalizations

Opportunities for Thematic Framing

A significant portion of the dataset are written with thematic frames (56 of 189), suggesting that bicyclist fatalities happen for reasons that can be prevented.

- Social Capital
- Safety Education
- Bicyclist Advocacy
Social Capital

Both the below examples illustrate social capital via family networks and the deep-seated grief that is suffered by real people when bicyclists die and leave beloved kin behind.

- Bryan’s mother said the family was close. The boys shared a bunk bed. Bryan had the top where a big stuffed green frog remains, along with an open book: 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea. Donté listed his brother’s favorite things: basketball and the colors red, blue and black. What did he like most? “Me,” Donté said.

- Each Friday morning, at the exact minute her bicyclist sister Diane was hit and killed on a Tampa sidewalk, JoAnn Vega stands at the street corner and rings three cowbells. Her sister loved the Rays...Tuesdays, instead of meeting her daughter Diane for their once-weekly lunches, Amelia Vega visits the corner to tidy the memorial. She rearranges the candles and brings fresh flowers.

Safety Education

“But also the need for riders and drivers to understand the rules of Florida roads. Under state law, bicycles are considered vehicles and have the same rights as motorists”, said Tim Bustos, executive director of the Florida Bicycle Association.

Bicycling safety advocate Alan Snel said motorists and bicyclists must learn to properly share the road. “And bicyclists need reflective clothing and lights on both wheels when riding in the dark. Light yourself up like a Christmas tree,” Snel said.

“The solution is not just to try and rid the roads of bicyclists and put them on a trail,” she said. “A bicycle is a vehicle.” (Gena Torres, Hillsborough County MPO)
Bicyclist Advocacy

The bikes are personal memorials honoring the dead, but they’re also symbols, part of an international movement aimed at reminding motorists to watch out for bicyclists.

Bicyclists are a common sight along the stretch of road. Bicycle safety advocates already were planning a 15-mile bike ride Friday to honor five bicyclists killed in about two months. They said people need to speak up to politicians about the need to improve bicycle safety. About 60 people attended the Honor the Fallen Bike Ride, which traveled into downtown Tampa and Ybor City before returning to Seminole Heights.

Linguistic strategies for reporting bicyclist deaths

Reframe the bicyclist to shift from blaming the individual toward a focus on social action and policy reform

More thematic frames to humanize bicyclists and contextualize traffic events in law, infrastructures, attitudes, environments, etc.

Active versus passive constructions to clarify agency and responsibility
Future Research

- Investigate why certain bicyclist fatality cases are not covered by the media.
- Comparative research, specifically looking at coverage of bicyclist fatalities in other geographic locations.
- Comparative research, examining differences in urban environments, infrastructure and law enforcement policies.
- Examine other sources of texts such as police report forms and written legislation.

Thank You!

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