

Project: [Media Framing of Fatal Bicycle Crashes in Hillsborough County: A Critical Discourse Analysis](#)

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Summary

In the examination of literature and communicative works, the method of discourse analysis reveals a multitude of language that reflects and potentially influences local understandings. Inspecting language choices can provide insight into local culture and inform future media reporting of events, thereby shifting the way social actors approach issues like bicycle deaths. The purpose of this project is to examine the linguistic choices that frame the relationships between cyclists and other parties involved in fatal crash events, while attempting to identify constructions of social actors and interrogating sociocultural contexts. Through critical discourse analysis, a rigorous qualitative method is used to analyze both written and oral communication; this research identifies how linguistic choice form patterns that reoccur and reproduce systems of meaning that shape urban landscapes and the social identities of cyclists and motorists. The main objective of this research is to understand the ways bicyclists are portrayed by common language practices. Grammar and vocabulary have the potential to skew identities and deprioritize the safety for people who ride bicycles.

The Tampa Bay Area has a disproportionately high number of bicycle and pedestrian fatalities in comparison to other metropolitan areas in the United States, making it an appropriate and necessary site of transportation inquiry. From January 2009 to June 2018, there were 94 bicycle fatalities in Hillsborough County. Further, Florida in general consistently leads the nation with the highest per capita rate of bicycle deaths at 16.6% of the US total in 2016. Additionally, the bicycle is legally considered a vehicle for travel giving it separate challenges. Since the dataset used in this dataset represents Hillsborough County, the results may not be generalizable to all of Florida but could be indicative of local urban and regional language practices in news reports about bicycle deaths.

In an initial literature review of similar research efforts, the study found a few trends. In media reports, the report often took the perspective of the motorist by explaining what happened from the driver's perspective. In addition, the media often fails to explain the circumstances of a crossing by failing to address which vehicle had the right of way and other details. Previous research efforts also found that media reports often used passive voice, which obscured the logistics of the collision. References to a bicyclist's equipment or attire were made without explaining what the law required. A study conducted in Sydney and Melbourne, Australia found that reporting on cycling was 47% positive and 30% negative and three quarters of negative reporting involved the death of bicyclist. The study also found that "cycling" was more often framed positively while "cyclists" were more commonly framed negatively. In another Australian study, over 70% of the reports mentioned characteristics of the cyclists- age, gender, and instances of the crash. Key factors of the crash were mentioned in less than 13% of the reports.

The methods of the study followed common steps of critical discourse analysis: first examine the literature for formulaic features like grammar, vocabulary, and other textual structures, then interpret and explain based on the description of the data. This research effort collected 190 news reports of 94 bicycle fatalities from January 2009 to June 2018 in Hillsborough County. Name, data, and locations using the Florida Department of Transportation Crash Data Management System. Stories were collected from local news sources and then coded using software and selective, manual coding.

The results found that the narrative of each bicycle fatality is delivered in only a few brief paragraphs. A variety of viewpoints were found, but the viewpoint most often found: these fatalities happen and happen often. Almost no episodic articles addressed the outcomes for the parties involved, larger causes of these events, or preventative safety measures.

Quantitatively, the study found that the word “crash” was used 168 times in 91 articles and the word “collision” was used 26 times in 22 articles. The word “accident,” which, in transportation literature, is criticized for implying that there are no larger issues or people at fault, was used 62 times in 48 articles. Similarly, the word “incident” was used 13 times in 12 articles. In 55 of the 189 sources, the motorist driver was replaced at least once with the word “truck,” 138 times with “car,” and “vehicle” 103 times over 70 articles. The make and model of the vehicle was replaced 106 times. Changing the subject from person to object eliminates fault. In evaluating the relationship between bicyclist class and safety, the report found that when bicyclist was of a lower class, they were described by their jobs and what they were doing wrong. When bicyclists were of a higher class, they were more often portrayed as having practiced safe behaviors at the time of their deaths. The results indicate that thematic framing is an important device and has the potential to be instrumental in reporting these fatalities.

This study continued by suggesting a formula for reframing bicyclists’ deaths in the news. Attending to language frames, and the ways those frames alter public perception, is one place to start that may not have been considered previously. News reports should employ thematic framing when reporting traffic events, moving beyond the details of the events and the parties involved toward a larger discussion of social responsibility for transportation infrastructure and policy reform. Further, journalists should continue to give the reader a sense of the person injured or killed; they were not just a bicyclist. Journalists could also acknowledge the tragedy the driver suffered, as well. In addition, word choices made should be considered in terms of their meanings and the ways they might contribute to a common-sense set of assumptions about bicycle safety.

Ultimately, if the death of a bicyclist depicts little more than an isolated incident, then it hardly functions as evidence of any kind. But if these deaths allow journalists to tell stories that depict traumatized motorists, grieving families, the tragic nature of untimely deaths, the search for answers, and more toward advocacy, then there is something to work with.

Future research could compare textual framework of news reports in Hillsborough County to other areas. This study could also be replicated with a focus on pedestrian fatalities.

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