



# War on paper: A critical discourse analysis of war reporting in Ethiopia

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the construction of the war between Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the central government, as well as its actors, in the local newspaper Bekur. Both a theoretical framework and a research methodology have been developed around critical discourse analysis (CDA). Methods for data analysis include Hodge's war discourse components and Van Dijk's ideological square. The findings indicate that Bekur constructed the war between TPLF forces and the central government as a war of existence. The stories portrayed the war in Ethiopia as a conflict between "country savers" and "dismantlers." Furthermore, the TPLF forces—the out-group—are portrayed as country destabilizers, while the central government is portrayed as the country's saviour. The newspaper also represented the PM as central to winning the battle. Lastly, the positive representation of us, the in-group, and the negative representation of them, the out-group, in the newspaper seem to blatantly support the continuation of unequal power relations among those involved in the war in Ethiopia.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background of the study

It seems to be contentious among elites concerning who began the bloody war between Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) forces and the central government of Ethiopia. But, Mr Sekoture Getachew, one of the former Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Front's (EPRDF) Public and Foreign Relations chiefs, confirmed that TPLF forces attacked the Ethiopian National Army's Northern Command and took everything in multiple military bases and spots in 45 min on October 20, 2020 <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=K2d4WAthBc>. He triumphantly told the media, Dimtse Woyanie (DW) television, a TPLF-affiliated media, that the people who were doing analysis on the event by DW (Dimtse Woyanie) and the entire population in Tigray regional government were safe even as he spoke due to the preemptive actions of TPLF forces. Similarly, a study confirmed Mr Sekoture Getachew's assertion that the TPLF opened fire against Ethiopia's Northern Command [1]. PM Abiy quickly made the incident public and described it an act of treason or a crime against Ethiopia by bitters of mother breast. Following this, a war broke out in the country between TPLF forces and the central government, and the central government took an offensive defense and controlled Mekelle and most areas of Tigray. This time, the central government called the war "Hig Maskeber Zemecha," meaning "Law Enforcement War," [2] and the media were using the metaphor. But after a while, the government said it had pulled the national force from the Tigray region and located it in the bordering regions of Amhara and Afar. In the meantime, Mr Getachew Reda, a member of the Tigray People's Liberation Front's executive

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council and spokesperson, stated in public that they might annihilate Ethiopia. He stated that they are putting in their best effort and using all means necessary to destabilize and dismantle Ethiopia. He also vowed to take revenge on Amhara elites. Following his discourse, they penetrated the Amhara and Afar regions and worked hard to put his pledge into action. TPLF forces committed natural and human rights abuses or atrocities against humanity in general, notably against the Amhara people [3], whom the TPLF labeled as the enemies of Tigrayans in their manifesto [4]. This time, the central government declared “Yehilwuna Zemecha” meaning “War of Existence” against the TPLF forces, and the media also used the metaphor to cover the issue of the civil war.

TPLF forces and their allies were battling to block a transportation route connecting Ethiopia to Djibouti. The Ethiopian military and regional troops were able to deter TPLF attempts to cut off the corridor, but they were able to proceed south towards the capital, Addis Ababa. When the TPLF forces advanced to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia announced a nationwide emergency. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed ordered the national army to launch an assault against the TPLF forces. He also assured the media that he would lead troops against TPLF rebels on the front lines in November 2021. From this point onward, many media, whether local or worldwide, began to cover the war. Examining the ways in which the various media present the fighting parties and investigating the hidden agendas behind the creation and dissemination of a document. [5] argues that CDA gives an opportunity to move past description and unearth the hidden abuse of language to preserve domination and manipulation, and that is why this research decided on CDA as a theoretical framework. CDA is the most suitable theoretical framework to get to the bottom of the ideological motivation within the process of textual content production and intake related to the information about the war through the local newspaper, Bekur. As a result, the researcher attempted to explore how Bekur, a local newspaper, represented or constructed the war between TPLF forces and the central government.

One of the earliest regional newspapers, Bekur is a weekly that is published by the regional administration. It began covering various issues in Amharic in 1997. The publication currently has a circulation of roughly 9000. There are a total of 19 employees working for the medium, including 14 men and 5 women. Particularly, the journal has had 2 publisher officers, 3 vice editor-in-chiefs, 1 editor-in-chief, 4 editors, and 7 reporters. It has a Facebook page, and Amhara Media Corporation’s (AMCO) website has the PDF format posted. Its mission statement is “We strive for social change,” and it aims to inform the public so that the public can make informed choices.

## 1.2. Statement of the problem

The armed conflict between the central government and TPLF forces drew the attention of local and international media. Although the coverage of the civil war in Ethiopia in Western media was not adequately researched, there are a few framing studies by Refs. [6, 2]. Apart from framing studies, it is also common to encounter critical discourse analysis in texts in general and media texts in particular. Review of the literature revealed that CDA, for instance, can be utilized to examine various texts by primarily applying either Fairclough’s or van Dijk’s conceptions of CDA.

Various researchers have also carried out studies on CDA in Ethiopia: As an example [7], examined PM Abiy Ahmed’s second inauguration speech and discovered that the speaker used unity discourse [8]. also looked at the discursive techniques used by Abiy Ahmed in his interview with The Amhara Media Corporation AMECO regarding the integration of Oromara, recasting the Amhara and Oromo peoples’ unity to undermine the Ethiopia’s People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which was then in power. Additionally [9], examined the inaugural speeches of the late prime minister and Prime Minister Abiy Ahamed. The results showed that metonymy, paradox, and metaphor were the rhetorical strategies used [10]. also looked at Abiy Ahmed’s first inauguration speech; the findings indicated that Abiy had changed his political rhetoric. Changes were made in how Ethiopian history was represented, how identity was understood, and how Ethiopian pluralism was perceived.

Researchers from Ethiopia looked at a variety of media texts in addition to speeches made by politicians and leaders. For instance Ref. [11], conducted a critical discourse analysis of the Ethiopian media’s coverage of the Addis Abeba anti-ISIS demonstration. The results show that, as seen by their media makeup, the state-owned media actively support the state’s ideological goals by endorsing and presenting skewed interpretations of the event. While privately owned media are attempting to present readers with the opposing viewpoint, which can be characterized as being critical of the initial event that gave rise to the mass demonstration (in the case of Reporter) or as being opposed to the news principles of state-owned media (in the case of Addis Admass). Similarly [12], examined the discursive construction of political identities on Facebook and its democratization potential in Ethiopia. [13] examined Ideological polarity of Ethiopian people’s revolutionary democratic front coalition parties: A critical discourse analysis on the parties’ mottoes of the 2018 annual congresses. In addition [14], evaluated tour guiding communication using the Importance-Performance Analysis Model.

In a study closely tied to the Ethiopian civil war [2], investigated how the military confrontation in Ethiopia between the central government and TPLF was reported by the BBC, AP, and Reuters. The results show that ethnic tension and war were the two frames that the media most frequently utilized, both of which had the potential to escalate the conflict. It also showed that the media emphasized stories that threatened the harmony of society and that the BBC, AP, and Reuters failed to follow journalistic ethics and principles when covering. Their reporting of the war contained a lot of biased, uneven, and unsubstantiated information. In addition [6], looked at how the BBC, CNN, and France 24 were portraying the conflict between TPLF and the central government of Ethiopia. The results showed that conflict was the most common news frame on the BBC, CNN, and France 24. Government officials were the most often used news sources in the media. The results also demonstrate that the news presentation’s negative tone predominated over its positive tone. Finally, the results show that the TPLF forces were given favorable news coverage in the Western media. However, utilizing CDA as a theoretical framework and research methodology, there is little study of how war reporting is constructed in Ethiopia by local media. Consequently, the purpose of the current study is to explore how the local newspaper, Bekur, used CDA to generate the discourse

around the war between the TPLF forces and the central government.

### 1.3. Objectives of the study

This study's main objective is to examine Bekur's construction of the conflict between the TPLF and the central government, as well as its actors.

### 1.4. Research questions

- RQ1). How does Bekur discursively construct the war between the TPLF forces and the central government?  
 RQ2). How are the actors of the war represented in the texts of the newspaper?

## 2. Literature

### 2.1. War on paper

Although war is defined differently, it is possible to envision it for general understanding as the coordinated use of all measures to achieve adequate devotion to a country's will in the world sphere, with military conflict only occurring when all other options have failed [15]. Literature indicates that newspapers cover war stories at different times in different countries.

Newspapers played a crucial role in shaping the nation such as the US which was historically recognized for its civil war. Additionally, newspapers have been used to spread wartime messages for a very long time. The media's coverage of warfare is an essential resource for journalists and audiences [16].

[16] examined the Gaza War coverage by The Guardian, The Times, The New York Times, and The Washington Post between 2008 and 2009 using CDA to examine the war reporting by foreign publications. The findings show how similar the depiction trends are among the selected newspapers. The four media thus place more emphasis on Israel's acceptance of a cease-fire than the Palestinian Authority's rejection of it. Israeli government officials are also typically considered the most represented characters in foreign news, whereas Hamas militants are most frequently seen as Palestinian actors.

The important years before, during, and following the American Civil War are covered in full by the words, images, and advertising from selected newspapers in the Pennsylvania Civil War Era Newspaper Collection. Newspapers were heavily involved in the war. They relayed military developments to their readers, mobilized public opinion in support of or against the war, and recorded domestic politics. Beyond military or political issues, there is a lot of information about cultural subjects, such as tourism, leisure activities, the arts, sports, and competitions [17].

Using critical discourse analysis [18], examined whether Pakistani newspapers had changed the way they covered Christians in Pakistan before and after the 9/11 terrorist attack. They discovered that, in contrast to pre-9/11 media coverage, there had been less dehumanization of Christians after 9/11 and more humanization overall.

Using Habermasian discourse analysis, American newspapers' coverage of the Middle East crisis was found to be severely lacking in accuracy, sincerity, legitimacy, and understandability. The study contends that the publications haven't done much to help the general public understand the nuances of a region of the world that is incredibly violent and destructive, a complexity that would help people participate more fully in a democratic solution for peace [19].

The Civil War era was more of an apotheosis than a revolution for American media. Innovations in technology, business organization, professional practice, government interactions, and even reader interest blossomed in full bloom throughout the conflict. The national illustrated weekly newspaper, the contemporary mass-circulation daily newspaper, and readers' passion for both are all products of the Civil War. The significant discrepancy in media access between the North and South was furthered by the war [20].

### 2.2. Critical discourse analysis (CDA)

Using CDA to analyse the mass media's war reporting is a common practice [21]. For studying language in use, CDA is a theory as well as a tool. According to Ref. [22], CDA is a method for methodically examining the frequently ambiguous connections between discourse and society that exist between (a) discursive practices, events, and texts and (b) larger social and cultural structures, relations, and processes. It also examines how these practices, events, and texts are ideologically shaped by class relations and struggle over power and how the ambiguity of these connections between discourse and society affects these practices, events, and texts. According to Ref. [23], CDA focuses on social problems, particularly the role of discourse or language in the development and reproduction of power abuse and dominance. As it conveys power and reflects the whims of discourse producers, CDA unearths hidden ideas beyond the use of words [24]. Scholars in the field believe that CDA is employed to uncover the hidden ideologies or assumptions that underpin each case. [34] defines CDA as discourse analysis research that focuses on how social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are embodied, reproduced, and resisted in a social and political context [22]. looks at how discursive practices and texts develop from and are ideologically moulded by broader social institutions in the service of power and dominance.

Newspaper texts can be prospective CDA areas for investigating and understanding the ideologies of institutions, such as Bekur Newspaper, that are generated, practiced, and perpetuated through the newspaper. CDA was used by Ref. [25] to investigate the functions of news reporting on ethnic relations in newspapers. McGregor (2003) is another academic who has researched the role of news stories in society's dominant forces. Similarly, It seems that CDA shows a power imbalance between discourse providers and

discourse consumers—in this example, newspaper readers. Others with access to social and institutional power can control the newspaper's discourse and use it to affect those without it.

Using CDA as a research methodology and theoretical framework, the researcher seeks to assess how power, ideology, hegemony, control, domination, resistance/contestation, and forms of inequality (if any) are articulated, enacted, and (re)produced in the Bekur newspaper.

### 2.3. War discourse

Authorities like Hodges conceptualize war discourse as "the use of language and social interaction as a mediating element in the outbreak, conduct, and disputation of armed political conflict" (2015, P.1). However [26], pointed out that it can be challenging to pinpoint language as a significant factor in conflict escalation. He spells the urge to look for language's causal role in causing conflict. However, he pointed out that studies on internal conflict reveal a strong correlation between deprivation and repression. The root of the problem, according to Smith, is not ethnic difference but political mobilization, even though historical grievances fuel fear and ethnic animosity. War does not result from differences; instead, it results from or suppresses differences [26].

Regarding the nexus between war and discourse [27], summarized as follows:

Warfare as an undertaking relies upon the organizational capacity of discourse to mobilize forces, direct resources, and legitimize actions. The creation of enemies requires the discursive process of constructing an out-group and distancing that group from the humanity of the in-group. Moreover, the realities of war are magnified or minimized, remembered or forgotten through the discursive processes humans use to give them meaning. The integral relationship between war and discourse is evidenced by the dedicated genre of war stories that form a familiar place in our world, operating to variously detail, celebrate, glorify, mythologize, grieve, caution against, prepare for, cope with, and generally talk about war [27].

The author mentioned key elements of war discourse: The call to arms rhetoric, the discursive construction of social identities, and the use of legitimating devices in language.

Regarding call-to-arms rhetoric [28], said that war is anticipated by a call to arms issued by a leader to rally the group or nation-state to mobilize individuals and smaller groups in the larger society for a cause other than their interests. Hodges further suggested that once a leader decides that war is required, rhetoric is used to convince the public to share his or her view while silencing opposing opinions.

Concerning the discursive construction of social identities [28], believed that war discourse typically portrays such distinctions as natural and objective, although the construction of in-group and out-group identities is a social achievement that is dependent on language and social interaction. Identities are made (not simply found) and are the result of discursive tactics that variously play upon dimensions of sameness and difference [28].

Hodges also asserted that a crucial role of war rhetoric is to legitimize war's accompanying behaviours by making them seem proper, reasonable, and justifiable. The author argues that euphemistic language can be used to achieve this, producing a sanitized version of reality that "functions to suppress negative emotional responses" [28].

Additionally, one of the key methods of critical discourse analysis is [29] "ideological square." The idea focused on how the ideological pronouns "us" and "them," which are common expressions of in-groups and out-groups in text and speech, are used to represent in-groups and out-groups. This is a manifestation of the ideology schema's group relations category, as seen below:

Emphasize our good things

Deemphasize our bad things

Emphasize their bad things

De-emphasize their good things

Discourse has the power to mediate war and encourage humans to engage in it [27] referring to Ferguson, (1984). According to Hodges, "discourse plays a crucial role in the outbreak, conduct, disputation of armed political conflict around the world" [27]. Hodge demonstrates how language plays a role in disseminating information about the war.

## 3. Methodology

This research employed CDA as a research approach, particularly Hodge's war discourse elements and Van Dijk's Ideological Square. In particular, this study analyzed all newspaper items regarding the first phase of the existence war that was published in the Bekur newspaper. The four publications were purposefully chosen for analysis, including November 29, 2021; December 6, 2021; December 13, 2021; and December 20, 2022.

### 3.1. Sample and sampling techniques

A Bekur newspaper employee gave the researcher four different editions to read during his visit to the Amhara Media Corporation (AMC) so he could offer his expert opinions on the stories. The researcher initially noticed that the stories were full of headlines and images related to the war. The researcher was thus drawn to the newspaper and inspired to conduct an empirical analysis of how the newspaper represented the conflict between TPLF forces and the central government. Accordingly, comprehensive sampling technique

was employed to select the publication.

The stories for this research are purposively taken from “Engida” meaning “Guest”, “Yehager wust zena” meaning “Domestic news”, Economy, “Hilwuna” meaning “Existence”, “Tarik” meaning “History”, “Astedader” meaning “Administration”, “Wetatoch” meaning “the young”, “Setoch” meaning “women”, “Tena” meaning “Health” and “Techsie” meaning “Technology and Science” columns in the newspaper.

Since this is a qualitative research design, the conclusions of this investigation, which was conducted on a small number of samples, are not externally valid. The sample was not typical of the entire population, thus the results cannot be generalized. However, the study carefully and deeply examined the media texts. Using CDA also offers the chance to expose covert language abuse used to maintain power and manipulate others. Simply put, it is the best theoretical framework for understanding the ideological motive behind media texts.

The researcher used thematic coding when it came to the coding of the data, collecting headlines from the stories and reading the contents underneath for coding purposes.

### 3.2. Data gathering and data analysis techniques

In terms of the methods utilized to collect the data, individual headlines of stories were chosen purposively. After selecting the stories, the researcher translated the banner headlines and story sub-headlines into English for analytical purposes. Additionally, the researcher translated the themes of the stories into English for analysis. Textual analysis was also used as an analysis technique, comparing or contrasting the texts’ Amharic and English versions side by side.

## 4. Data presentation and interpretation

Bekur newspaper articles were firmly anchored (see Figs. 1–20) in the war rhetoric as they related to the battle between TPLF forces and the central government. Even in the “techscie” (which stands for science and technology) column (see Fig. 17 for example), there were articles about effective military equipment and armaments from various historical periods. The presentation, analysis, and discussion of the data are divided into various themes: front page, pictures, and existence. Additionally, the analysis is also structured according to Hodge’s war discourse elements and Van Dijk’s ideological square frameworks as seen in the analysis phase.

### 4.1. Front page

As can be seen in Table 1, Headline 1 discusses the prime minister’s calls on citizens to follow him and join the frontline which corresponds with Hodge’s call for war element. He announced that he planned to direct the fight against TPLF forces and their allies. He remarked, “Let’s meet at the war front.” “The time has come to lead the country with sacrifice.” The theme of the story is the importance of rescuing the country from the TPLF and its allies. It also covers various individuals’ points of view, particularly those of university professors who support the need to fight the TPLF. In one of the sub-headlines, the article reads, “Focus on your objectives



Fig. 1. Existence page featuring PM Abiy giving military greetings.



Fig. 2. PM Abiy in military uniform on the battle field.



Fig. 3. Existence page filled with war pictures.

and follow your leader.” This is consistent with a Derg slogan: “Forward with the decisive leadership of Comrade Mengistu Hailemariam.”

Under headline 2, the story well discusses how the war waged by TPLF forces created strong bonding among the different communities in Ethiopia, as history witnesses. The statement “Ethiopians don’t compromise on their country’s matters” has been well and widely said by a variety of people (such as university professors, former war engineers, and other sects of society). The Ethiopian forces do recapture several crucial and strategic strongholds, according to the narrative on the same page. The newspaper further links the struggle for existence to a fight against colonial powers on the front page, claiming that Ethiopia’s action encourages all Africans. This narrative attempted to link this fight to Ethiopia’s Adwa triumph, in which Ethiopians supplied power and authority to African countries seeking independence from their colonizers.

The third headline highlights the need for shouldering additional obligations with triumph, such as embracing people and assisting war-torn places, recapitulating affected areas, enhancing the country’s political and diplomatic prestige, and addressing the country’s economic load, among other things. It concludes that destroying TPLF forces is not a sufficient goal in and of itself. The purpose of the war, according to the second headline, is to bury TPLF forces, along with its agenda and way of thinking.

Under the “hit the iron when it is hot” banner headline, the story’s central theme was the significance of crushing TPLF forces and its allies while losing their stronghold and fighting and rehabilitating simultaneously. The page also includes themes on the internationalization or Africanization of the struggle against the TPLF forces. The #NOMORE movement was born as a result of this. It examines how Africa remains silent and unrepresented at the United Nations and how the narrative propagates the idea that Africa is still under the hegemony of the colonial powers for numerous reasons and that its voices are not heard. “The movement that drives



Fig. 4. PM Abiy motivating the fighters.



Fig. 5. Loyal ethiopians in the past who protected their country from invaders.

Africans,” “Africa as a spectator,” and “the council that does not listen to the voices of billions of Africans” were among the headlines in three consecutive publications. These stories have a historical context that connects to Ethiopia’s war against the colonial power, Italy, and its victory, beginning with the Battle of Adowa and continuing. The story mentioned that the UN has convened around 50 times on Ethiopia’s issue without the continent being represented.

#### 4.2. Pictures

Both the front and back covers of the publication feature military outfits and equipment (see Figs. 1–20). And, except for one image on the inner page on December 13, 2021, which showed PM Abiy dressed in a formal suit, the newspaper depicted PM Abiy in military uniform. The prime minister was seen clutching equipment such as military cameras and war telescopes in 11 of the pictures. He is also seen in the newspaper wearing eyeglasses, yet he is not seen wearing them at office.

In total, 12 photographs of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed were published in three successive publications (November 29, 2021; December 6, 2021; and December 13, 2021). In general, each publication featured an average of four images of the Prime Minister. The photograph of the Prime Minister was not included in the December 20, 2021 issue. This could be because the prime minister was not on the battlefield following the first phase of the assault; instead, after nearly three weeks, he returned to office and the fighting was pushed back to the Tigray border.



Fig. 6. Front page that motivates ethiopians.



Fig. 7. Existence page showing heavy war weaponry and soldiers.

Regarding the pictures in the newspaper, Bekur published quite several pictures in each publication, as shown below in the table. In its four editions, the newspaper used 190 images of the existence of war, averaging 47.5 images per publication. Ninety two of the total number of images includes troops wearing military uniforms and holding weapons of war. Images from the conflict were shown alongside newspaper articles, as shown in Table 2.

The newspaper portrayed the prime minister as a winner who was giving commands by availing himself on the war front. The paper related Abiy's presence on the front with the former leaders of Ethiopia, such as Emperor Minilik, Emperor H. Selassie, Emperor Yohannes IV, and Colonel Mengistu, who physically led the war on the front when the country was facing existential threats. Emperor Minilik and Emperor H/Selassie, for instance, led the war between Italian invaders and Ethiopian defenders at Adwa and Maichew, respectively, and Colonel Mengistu led the war between Somalia's expansionists and Ethiopian defenders in the eastern and south-eastern parts of the country. The portrayal of the prime minister featured the fact that he is a war engineer, besides the fact that he is a premier. This discourse representation shows that he is outside of his office and has met the war; victory is in his hands. This discursive construction may help to sustain the power monopoly of the prime minister. He is the country whose fate is in his hands! He is the war leader who is working hard in various aspects to save the country and the existence of the people within the country.





Fig. 8. Women column featuring a woman who kills the enemy with locally made material called 'Gejera'.



Fig. 9. Another front (economy column) farmers harvest cereals of farmers who went to the fight against TPLF forces.



Fig. 10. Existence column featuring the strong hold of TPLF forces in Amhara region, Gashena front.



Fig. 11. PM Abiy with the war generals.



Fig. 12. Economy column featuring fighting and farming roles of farmers.



Fig. 13. Existence column featuring the last resort to the war.



Fig. 14. Existence column featuring vehicles that join the war against TPLF forces.

**Table 1**  
Front page headline texts and its corresponding publication date.

| Date of publication | Headlines/or banner headlines   |
|---------------------|---|
| Nov 29, 2021        | Stand up if you want history to remember/acknowledge you<br>• “Concentrate on your goal and follow your leader”                                 |
| Dec 6, 2021         | History is being made.  |
| Dec 13, 2021        | How shall the victory resume?   |
| Dec 20, 2021        | Hit the iron when it is hot.(banner headline)<br>The war and the rehabilitation<br>The council fails to hear the voices of billions of Africans |



Fig. 15. Women column featuring a university twins who joined Amhara Special force to fight against TPLF forces.

4.3. Existence

Following the outbreak of the war, the newspaper added a new column named “existence,” and the paper was devoted to covering issues of existence. In addition, the last page of the newspaper was named “existence,” and it was filled with pictures of military uniforms and military armaments. It featured people with military uniforms and weapons, military trainees, and war features. The existence column was published five times in each issue.

Table 3 contains stories from the hilwuna (existence) column. The existence story was covered under five headings in the November 29, 2022 edition: Let’s go ahead and follow us. Under this headline, voices of regional government officials dressed in military uniforms and armed with war weapons, tell the media that they are on the front lines of the conflict and urge others, particularly the young, to follow them. The goal was to entice others to join the front lines. Furthermore, is the long-term solution to kill or keep the rats out of our home? The headline emphasizes the need to kill the TPLF forces that have penetrated the Amhara region rather than drive



Fig. 16. Health column featuring a robbed health stations in Amhara region by TPLF fighters region.



Fig. 17. Techscie column displaying former effective war weapons.



Fig. 18. Women column featuring females preparing ration for the existence war.

them away as a solution.

A war vehicle was also dealing with vehicles that were participating in the war by providing logistics for the survival war. The leader tested by fire depicted a leader of a competing political party who joined the front lines to fight against TPLf forces. He had been in Eritrea's deserts before entering Ethiopia in response to Prime Minister Abiy's appeal for a peaceful political transition. It addresses the TPLF's and its coalition's goal of eradicating the ethnic Amhara in the country. The most recent report about the prime minister's decision to join the war was headlined my neck will be easier if you come to undermine Ethiopia's dignity and benefit, but it will not be done.

Five sections in the December 6, 2022, edition of the Survival War or War of Existence dealt with different issues but were anchored to the fight for existence. The person with an axe headline, for example, is about a farmer who killed the enemy with an axe and captured the military weapon. The story linked the individual who caused the disaster at TPLF with history in that he was the son of General Hailu Kebede, who died fighting for his nation against Italian invaders. In addition, the chief of the devils who were expelled



Fig. 19. Health column featuring blood donation for the fighters.



Fig. 20. Existence column featuring fighters with their war armaments.

**Table 2**  
Total picture distribution in the newspaper by date of publication.

| Publication Date | Total pictures including cartoon             | Pictures of the war  | Pictures other than the war   |
|------------------|--|--|---|
| Nov 29, 2021     | 47 (four of them are cartoon pictures)       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 24 pictures portray war weapons from which most of them are in military uniforms.</li> <li>• 3 cartoon pictures are related to the war</li> </ul> | 1 cartoon is about the illegal school fee increase  |
| Dec 6, 2021      | 47 pictures (2 of them are cartoon pictures) | 21 pictures portray war weapons most of them with military uniforms)   |   |
| Dec 13, 2021     | 44 pictures (2 are cartoon pictures)         | 26 pictures portray war weapons most of them are with military uniforms  |   |
| Dec 20, 2021     | 52 pictures (2 of them are cartoon pictures) | 21 pictures portray war weapons most of them are with military uniforms  | 1 cartoon is not related to the war; it does not have clue but simply the cartoon picture alone |

from the fort was another issue treated in the existence column to extend the survival of the country, Ethiopia. By constructing the stories in the “existence” column on different topics, the newspaper tried to represent the war between TPLF forces and the central government as an existential issue.

#### 4.4. Hodges’ war discourse elements

Based on the basic elements of war discourse such as the call to arms, the discursive construction of in-group and out-group identities, and the use of legitimating language as a framework, data were analyzed as shown below.

**Table 3**  
Stories of the newspaper under the *existence* column.

| Publication Date | Headline/theme of the story   |
|------------------|---|
|                  | Let's go ahead and follow us ...  |
|                  | Is the long-term solution to kill or keep the <b>rats</b> out of our home?                                  |
|                  | War vehicles  |
|                  | The leader <b>tested by fire</b>  |
| Nov 29, 2021     | If you come to compromising Ethiopia's dignity and benefit, my neck will be easier but it will not be done! |
| Dec. 6, 2021     | The <b>heroes</b> are at work   |
|                  | The person with an axe  |
|                  | The chief of the devils who was expelled out of the fort  |
|                  | Our victory story is repeated in practice today   |
|                  | follow me   |
| Dec. 13, 2021    | Those who captive the weapons of the enemy  |
|                  | we will tell your victory to our grandchildren  |
|                  | The first round, which was accompanied by a victory   |
|                  | The victory of the heroes   |
| Dec. 20, 2021    | a war weapon with an axe/bemisar mesaria  |
|                  | Couples' struggle in Mehal Meda   |
|                  | When the invader's brutality is exposed   |
|                  | The seven killer  |
|                  | Let's join the Defense Forces and save our country from invaders  |

#### 4.4.1. *The call to arms*

The following table shows call to the arm contents and messages by Bekur Newspaper.

As can be seen in [Table 4](#), the stories were constructed to call for the people to join the war of existence in various ways by using purposefully selected language. It includes the call of the PM to join the war front as he does, the twin sisters who joined the Amhara special force by quitting their university education, university professors who joined the war front, about collecting the cereals of farmers and militia who joined the front, about the readiness of the people to join the national defence force, about the call of political leaders who joined the front to the people to follow them, and about the call for the youth to join the defence force to save the country. These were messages embedded in Bekur newspaper stories that called for the fight against TPLF forces and its allies using emotive and sensitive language.

#### 4.4.2. *The construction of in-group and out-group identities*

As can be seen in [Table 5](#), the newspaper used stories that showed the in-groups and out-groups. Regarding the out groups, the stories used language such as "TPLF has a devastating agenda," "TPLF uses ethnic politics as a time bomb," and "TPLF works at its best to crumble Ethiopia, invader TPLF forces need to be punished as per the crime they commit as published on." The enemy (TPLF forces) will be buried soon; invaders robbed residents' properties; the chief of the devils was expelled from the fort; the invader's brutality is exposed; and the inheritance of apostasy refers to the identities of the out-group. On the other hand, the groups were described as maintaining Ethiopian sovereignty, Amhara people's bravery on various fronts, Fano (the militant) making history, restoring war-affected areas in various ways, the leader tested by fire, the selfless, the triumph of the heroes, and self-initiated warriors. The newspaper generally used derogatory expressions for the out-groups and flattering and positive dictions for the in-groups which [30] referred this as friend-enemy distinction.

The study identified the main social players or actors in Ethiopia's war: the central government and its allies (who are positively framed) are framed as the in-group and friends, in contrast to the TPLF troops and followers (who are negatively framed), who is framed as the enemy or out-group. The findings are in congruence with Van Dijk's ideological square, which focused on highlighting the positive about us, emphasizing the negative about them, de-emphasizing the bad about us, and de-emphasizing the positive about

**Table 4**  
Call to arms contents in the Bekur newspaper.

| Date of pub. | Headline   |
|--------------|--|
| Nov 29, 2021 | Stand up if you want history to remember/acknowledge you   |
| Nov 29, 2021 | Concentrate on your goal and follow your leader  |
| Dec 6, 2021  | The twins  |
| Dec 20, 2021 | University professor who joins the frontline   |
| Nov 29, 2021 | A university professor who joins the frontline   |
|              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the joining of PM Abiy to the frontline motivates the soldiers,</li> <li>People are ready to join the front side by side the collection of militia farms</li> </ul> |
| Dec 6, 2021  | The readiness of the youth to join the defense   |
| Dec 20, 2021 | The youth are joining the defence  |
| Nov 29, 2021 | Let's go ahead and follow us ...   |
| Dec 6, 2021  | follow me  |
| Dec 20, 2021 | Let's join the Defense Forces and save our country from invaders   |
| Nov 29, 2021 | The twins  |
| Dec 13, 2021 | Preparing ration for the fighters  |

**Table 5**  
Discursive strategies of the in-group and the out-group.

| Date of publication | Headline  |
|---------------------|---|
| Nov 29, 2021        | a war general leading the war   |
| Dec 13, 2021        | the point is that: TPLF has a devastating agenda, TPLF uses Ethnic politics as time bomb and TPLF works at its best to crumble Ethiopia   |
| Nov 29, 2021        | A famous Fano Leader!<br>The tragedy of the Wag community in fighting TPLF forces<br>The tragedy of the Wag community in fighting TPLF forces<br>Fano is making history   |
| Dec 13, 2021        | Celebrating Christmas at Lalibela (a historical place under the control of TPLF for some time) can restore the economy affected highly,<br>Invader TPLF forces need to be punished as per the crime they committed. |
| Dec 20, 2021        | The enemy(TPLF forces) will be buried soon<br>The displaced are returning home for free.<br>Residents say they were robbed by the invaders  |
| Nov 29, 2021        | The leader tested by fire<br>If you come to compromising Ethiopia's dignity and benefit, my neck will be easier but it will not be done!  |
| Dec 6, 2021         | The person with an axe<br>The chief of the devils who was expelled out of the fort<br>Our victory story is repeated in practice today!<br>The heroes are at work  |
| Dec 13, 2021        | Those who captive the weapons of the enemy<br>The first round, which was accompanied by a victory<br>The triumph of the heroes  |
| Dec 20, 2021        | a war weapon with an axe<br>Couples' struggle in Mehal Meda<br>When the invader's brutality is exposed<br>The seven killer  |
| Nov 29, 2021        | The farmer and the shooter  |
| Dec 6, 2021         | The other front   |
| Dec 13, 2021        | For the country above himself   |
| Dec 20, 2021        | Not only the people but also the white gold is freed  |
| Nov 29, 2021        | Inheritance of apostasy (part three)  |
| Dec 6, 2021         | Inheritance of apostasy (the last 1)  |
| Dec 13, 2021        | Self-initiated warriors (part three)  |
| Nov 29, 2021        | The heroic action of Filakit's young  |
| Dec 6, 2021         | Our country is in our hands   |

them. These are crucial components of the larger contextual strategy that includes both other negative presentations and self-positive representations [31].

Similarly, differences are made salient through the articulation of various forms of the distance between the in-group and out-group, whether social, cultural, political, geographical, or moral [28].

#### 4.4.3. The use of legitimating language

As shown in the table below, Bekur used language to legitimize or justify war.

As shown in Table 6, the newspaper discursively constructed the stories by using language that legitimized the war by claiming that it was a just war for the central government. It portrayed out-groups as chief of devils, invaders, destroyers, betrayals, robbers, harassers of civilians, abrogates of democratic and human rights, country dismantlers, and messengers of Ethiopia's historical enemies, demonstrating that the war is a war of existence. To demonstrate the legitimacy of the war, it also used the inheritance of apostasy/treason. Bekur labeled the out-group using dehumanizing phrases, as seen in the table above. This conclusion resembles [32] findings that dehumanizing media depictions were also used in Western media's coverage of the war on terror.

#### 4.5. Van Dijk's ideological square

Using Van Dijk's ideological square as a conceptual framework, it was discovered that the newspaper polarized the way it created the in-groups and the out-groups, as indicated in Tables 7 and 8 below.

**Table 6**  
War legitimating language used by the newspaper.

| Date of publication | Headline   |
|---------------------|--|
| Nov 29, 2021        | Ration preparation for the <i>existence</i> war  |
| Dec 6, 2021         | Residents say they were robbed by the invaders   |
| Nov 29, 2021        | Let existence precedes<br>Nails that must be cut<br>Unhealthy health robber (About the destroyed and robbed health station in Amdework town)<br>Inheritance of <b>apostasy/treason</b> |

**Table 7**  
Representation of the in-group in the newspaper.

| Date of publication | Headline   |
|---------------------|--|
|                     | the tragedy of the Wag community in fighting against TPLF forces   |
| Nov 29, 2021        | People are ready to join the frontline besides the collection of militia farms   |
| Nov 29, 2021        | Fano is making history<br>vehicles that joined the campaign/war  |
|                     | A leader tested by fire  |
| Dec 6, 2021         | The person with an axe<br>The heroes are at work   |
| Dec 13, 2021        | Those who captive the weapons of the enemy<br>The first round, which was accompanied by a victory<br>The victory of the heroes |
| Dec 20, 2021        | A war weapon with an axe<br>Couples' struggle in Mehal Meda<br>The seven killer  |
| Nov 29, 2021        | The farmer and the shooter   |
| Dec 6, 2021         | The other front  |
| Dec 13, 2021        | For the country above himself  |
| Dec 13, 2021        | Self-initiated warriors (part three)   |
| Dec 20, 2021        | Self-initiated warriors (The last part)  |
| Nov 29, 2021        | The heroic action of Filakit's young   |
| Nov 29, 2021        | The twins  |
| Dec 20, 2021        | Killing the enemy with <i>Gejera</i>   |

**Table 8**  
Representation of the out-group in the newspaper.

| Publication Date | Headline   |
|------------------|--|
| Dec 6, 2021      | The chief of the devils who was expelled from the fort |
| Dec 6, 2021      | When <b>the invader's brutality</b> is exposed         |
| Nov 29, 2021     | Inheritance of <b>apostasy/treason</b> (part three)    |
| Dec 6, 2021      | Inheritance of <b>apostasy/treason</b> (the last part) |
| Nov 29, 2021     | Unhealthy health robber                                |

#### 4.5.1. Representation of the in-group

Table 7 above demonstrates how the newspaper portrayed the in-groups (the Fano, the Militia, the Wag Community, and the Amhara people in various areas, including males and females) as heroes who subdued the armed opposition using locally prepared materials such as *Gejera* and *Misar* (axe). Furthermore, the newspaper uses discourse to create images of loyal fighters, vehicles that joined the fight against TPLF forces, the out-group, and young people joining the defence. The in-group was portrayed as braves in the newspaper. It showed how the in-group cooperate in both front-line combat and the collection of cereals for the militia fighting against the out-group, TPLF forces. The idea that the people use locally produced items such as axe and *gejera* to slay the enemy is also portrayed in the paper. Additionally, it showed farmers engaging in a variety of activities, including farming while the nation is at peace as well as defending it from outside threats when necessary. A further point made by Hodges [27] was that "sameness among in-group members is stressed while downplaying differences to achieve unity."

#### 4.5.2. Representation of the out-group

According to the stories in their publications, which are depicted in Table 8 above, TPLF forces are destructive and use ethnic politics as a ticking time bomb to work hard to crumble Ethiopia. They have even mercilessly looted and destroyed medical institutions. In light of Van Dijk's ideological square, stories gave a lot of weight to how the out-group was portrayed negatively. The positive picture of the TPLF, the out-group, in the narrative was also reduced.

The results of this study appear to agree with Hodges in general in that texts suppress or deemphasize information that is negative about the in-group and positive about the out-group. Speakers simultaneously convey or stress information that is favorable to the in-group and unfavourable to the out-group [27].

## 5. Summary and conclusion

In summary, the war between the central government and TPLF forces and its allies has been represented in the newspaper as an *us* versus *them* dichotomy. In other words, the paper represented the in-groups positively and the out-groups negatively. For example, TPLF forces, the out-group are represented as messengers of Ethiopia's enemy, betrayal of Ethiopia. In addition, the paper uses dehumanizing rhetoric (such as rats, chief of devils) to portray the out-group, TPLF forces.

On the other hand, the central government is represented by the paper as fighting for the existence of the country. Mainly, the prime minister's coverage of the newspaper was dominant. In addition, the war of existence has been compared with the war against Italian



invaders and the victory of Adowa. PM Abiy was also portrayed as the country's saviour. He is strategically compared with the former leaders: Emperor Minilik, the leader of the African victory, that is, the Adowa victory; Emperor Tewodros; and Emperor Yohannes, who claimed their lives for consolidating Ethiopia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In addition, he was compared with Colonel Mengistu H. Mariam, who defended Ethiopia from Somalia's invasion by joining the frontline,

The newspaper advocated for Ethiopians to take part in the battle for existence and used history as its primary discursive strategy to portray the in-group favorably and the out-group unfavorably. A single incident that is against the in-group others/them is never covered by the newspaper. This finding appears to be consistent with how [29] conceptualizes in-groups and out-groups. He claimed that ideological square is done by emphasizing the positive aspects of the in-group and the negative aspects of the out-group while concealing the negative aspects of the in-group and the positive aspects of the out-group.

In conclusion, the positive representation of us, the in-group, and the negative representation of them, the out-group, in the newspaper seem to blatantly support the continuation of unequal power relations among those involved in the war in Ethiopia. Bekur's stories constructed the warring parties in Ethiopia as "savers" and "dismantlers" of the country. The newspaper is found to favour the ruling government's intention, as US broadcasting networks supported Bush in furthering his goals, but the Bush administration's justification for the invasion is undermined as the media spectacle of a US military victory turns into a negative spectacle of a mess [33]. The implication of this study is that Bekur employed discourse or language to portray the insiders as good and the outsiders as wicked or evil in an effort to persuade readers and viewers to support the war against TPLF forces.

## 6. Recommendations

Finally, it is recommended that more research be done on how the fighting between the government and TPLF is talked about in the domestic media. This includes both private and government-run media. It is important for the media to be careful and ethical when talking about conflict and war, so that the country can stay peaceful.

### Author contribution statement

Biset Ayalew Nigatu: Conceived and designed the analysis; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

### Data availability statement

Data will be made available on request.

### Additional information

No additional information is available for this paper.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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