

ANALYSIS OF METADISOURSE IN BRITISH NEWSPAPERS ABOUT THE OVERTOURISM PROTESTS IN THE CANARY ISLANDS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, demonstrations against mass tourism have been taking place across several European countries, particularly in those most severely impacted by the current touristic model. Spain has become a focal point of this phenomenon, with some of the most affected areas being Barcelona, Andalusia, and the Balearic and Canary Islands (Carballo et al., 2019; García-Buades et al., 2022; Muler Gonzalez et al., 2018; Veríssimo et al., 2020a). In these regions, locals and activist organisations have voiced their growing concern around the consequences of mass tourism on their socioeconomic landscape. Some of these concerns are housing affordability, environmental degradation and a strain on public services, among others.

These protests have attracted widespread attention, not only from national media, but across major international news outlets. Coverage has often highlighted both the economic dependence of these regions on tourism and the growing social tensions that arise in this context (Betancor Nuez, 2025; Sánchez-Bayón & Daumann, 2025; Veríssimo et al., 2020b).

The main focus of this study is to examine how these protests have been presented in international media. More specifically, we analyse the way in which the British press has portrayed the demonstrations that have taken place in the Canary Islands. This case is particularly relevant, as British tourism constitutes one of the archipelago's most important sources of revenue (Hernández Martín, n.d.; Padrón & Godenau, n.d.). By exploring coverage across a range of British newspapers, we aim to shed light on the narratives constructed around these protests by each outlet and how they could impact the British audience's perception of the islands differently.

In the present work, we analyse a corpus of 40 British news articles to analyse how interactional resources are used to frame the issue, focusing specifically on the use of hedges and boosters. In doing so, we aim to explore the metadiscursive function of these elements and the ways in which they serve to either mitigate or strengthen propositional content.

2. OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this paper is to analyse how the Canary Islands are represented in British newspapers and how linguistic choices contribute to the evaluative framing of these representations. The corpus includes a wide range of news reports, but particular attention is paid to coverage of the recent overtourism protests, which have become a defining topic in international reporting on the region amid a global overtourism rejection. These protests provide an especially revealing case for examining how British media frames social tensions, activism and public opinion in relation to a popular tourist destination.

This study therefore aims to determine whether the coverage of these events tends to construct predominantly positive, negative or neutral representations of the islands and to explore how these orientations may vary between newspapers with different editorial perspectives. Beyond identifying evaluative tendencies, the research also seeks to uncover the linguistic mechanisms through which newspapers encode stance and positioning. Special attention is paid to the metafunctions in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), especially the interpersonal metafunction, which

encompasses stance, modality and appraisal, as well as rhetorical devices such as boosters and hedges, that either reinforce or soften claims.

Another objective of this research is to demonstrate the value of combining corpus linguistics with close reading. While corpus methods identify recurring patterns of language use across a large body of texts, together with close reading and the use of theoretical tools to interpret these patterns in terms of meaning, function and context provided by the SFL framework, the study aims not only to contribute to the understanding of British media discourse on the Canary Islands but also highlight the methodological potential of linguistic analysis in the study of news and public debate.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. CORPUS DESCRIPTION

The study is based on a corpus of 40 news articles concerning the Canary Islands collected from five different popular British newspapers: *The Independent*, *BBC*, *Express*, *The Times* and *The Guardian*, with 8 articles of similar extensions from each. Specifically, the corpus has a total of 27078 words, and by order of previous mention of the newspapers, each subcorpus has 4514, 6443, 1679, 8212 and 6230 words respectively. These texts cover different kinds of events and issues but place special emphasis on recent protests against overtourism. Focusing on this specific theme makes it possible to investigate how newspapers portray both the islands as a space, and the local population as actors responding to social and environmental pressures.

3.2. CORPUS LINGUISTICS AND CLOSE READING

The methodology combines corpus linguistic techniques such as keyword analysis, collocation analysis, or frequency count to identify lexical and grammatical patterns that reveal evaluative tendencies across the newspapers. These quantitative results are complemented by a qualitative analysis carried out through a close reading of selected excerpts, in order to examine how stance and evaluation are constructed at the level of discourse. That said, to be able to undertake the close reading analysis

in a manageable way, the corpus has been kept modest in terms of number of words, and therefore it will be normalised per a thousand words to provide more interpretable figures. In addition, another reason for this normalisation is the irregular number of words in each subcorpus, as the different newspapers regularly write articles of different extensions, so in order to provide reliable data, these must be taken into account.

3.3. SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS

SFL, as introduced by Halliday and developed further by Banks, conceptualises language as a network of choices that speakers or writers navigate in order to construct meaning:

At each point in the system the steps which follow are obligatory. You cannot choose indicative without choosing between declarative and interrogative; it must be one or the other. So in creating language we move through the system [...], and the final choice that is made [...] is the choice of the individual words that make up our message (Banks, 2019, p. 2).

This view positions linguistic production as inherently functional and context-dependent, which is particularly relevant when reporting socially charged events such as protests or tourism debates.

As explained by Halliday, (1985); Vande Kopple, (1985) a central principle of SFL is that meaning is simultaneously organised across three metafunctions, which in a summarised and simplified manner come to be: the ideational, representing experience; the interpersonal, involving the relationships between the participants, stance and evaluation; and the textual metafunction, which concerns the organisation of information. Of these, the interpersonal metafunction is especially significant for this study, as it encompasses mood, modality, appraisal and evaluative language. Through this lens, features such as boosters and hedges, among others, can be analysed as strategies that journalists employ to strengthen certainty, project authority, or adopt caution.

Finally, in the SFL framework, context is crucial, divided into field, tenor and mode, providing a way to situate media discourse within its broader communicative environment, showing how different newspapers adapt evaluative strategies depending on their target audience, readership and institutional voice:

Field is the ongoing activity of which the language is a part. Tenor is the relationship between the person who is communicating and those he is communicating with. Mode is the form through which the message is communicated, that is, basically, spoken or written (Banks, 2019, p. 5)

By combining the broad quantitative reach of corpus linguistics with the nuanced, meaning-focused perspective of close reading and the SFL framework, the methodology enables a comprehensive analysis of how the Canary Islands, and especially the overtourism protests are discursively framed in the British press.

3.4. METADISOURSE

Regarding metadiscourse, Hyland (2005) notes that the idea was first introduced by Zelig Harris in 1959, who described it as a way of interpreting language in context, showing how writers and speakers help guide reader's or listener's understanding of a text. Since then, many scholars have expanded on the concept, including Williams (1981), Vande Kopple (1985) and Crismore (1989), as well as more recent researchers such as Alonso-Almeida (2012, 2015) Hyland (2005, 2010, 2012) and Álvarez-Gil (2017, 2024) which have continued to develop the field, demonstrating the wide scholarly interest in the subject.

That said, the complexity of metadiscourse is evident in Hyland & Tse (2004; Infantidou, 2005), who view that the term has often been used loosely serving as an “[...] umbrella term, which covers a quite disparate range of data.” Infantidou, (2005, p. 1326). Due to this, and despite the considerable research devoted to the subject, scholars still disagree on a precise definition and hence, for this study, Hyland's (2005) framework and taxonomy will be adopted:

Essentially metadiscourse embodies the idea that communication is more than just the exchange of information, goods or services, but also involves the personalities, attitudes and assumptions of those who are communicating. Language is always a consequence of interaction, of the differences between people which are expressed verbally, and metadiscourse options are the ways we articulate and construct these interactions. This, then, is a dynamic view of language as metadiscourse stresses the fact that, as we speak or write, we negotiate with others, making decisions about the kind of effects we are having on our listeners or readers (2005, p. 3).

4. RESULTS

4.1. CORPUS ANALYSIS

In this section, we will introduce the quantitative analysis of this research project. After, we will present the outcomes of a further qualitative analysis. 4.1.1. Boosters

In terms of booster use, utilising *Lancsbox X*, when the boosters command is introduced, we obtain a total of 31 hits, divided per newspaper as can be seen in the table below. It is interesting to notice that almost half of all hits are from *The Times*, hinting that the newspaper could be particularly sensationalist and might make use of this linguistic resource to further catch the reader's attention. On the opposite side of the spectrum, *Express* and *The Independent* have only one and two examples respectively, revealing the complete opposite, as it may be that these pieces of news transmit the information more objectively.

TABLE 1. *Booster command results in Lancsbox.*

Newspaper	Hits	Normalised per 1000 tokens	Texts
Whole corpus	31	1.14	14/40
BBC	7	1.09	3/8
Express	1	0.6	1/8
The Guardian	7	1.12	4/8
The Times	14	1.7	4/8
The Independent	2	0.44	2/8

Source: self creation

When looking at the normalised data in the table above, *The Times* is still the newspaper with the most tokens, followed by *The Guardian* and *The Times* with similar numbers. The only notable difference compared to the non-normalised data is that it is not *Express* but *The Independent* that has the lower use of boosters in proportion, which is extremely low for both newspapers.

Specifically, when looking at the specific boosters that are present, we can see in the following table that the most common booster is the

adverb *very*, representing 20 of the 31 boosters, therefore representing around 65% of all booster hits, followed by *completely* and *absolutely* with three instances each. However, observing the table below, what is clear is that *The Times* is not only the newspaper with the most hits as was mentioned before, but also the one that has the most variation, with six different booster cases.

TABLE 2. *Specific booster examples in the corpora.*

	Adverbs and Instances							
	Very	Completely	Absolutely	Perfectly	Totally	Extremely	Highly	Strongly
Whole corpus	20	3	3	1	1	1	1	1
The Independent	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Express	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
BBC	6	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
The Times	7	1	3	0	0	1	1	1
The Guardian	4	1	0	1	1	0	0	0

Source: self creation

Nevertheless, it must be noted that, when searching for boosters, Lancsbox seeks only for specific terms, which are the following: *absolutely*, *altogether*, *completely*, *enormously*, *entirely*, *extremely*, *fully*, *greatly*, *highly*, *intensely*, *perfectly*, *strongly*, *thoroughly*, *totally*, *utterly* and *very*. Keeping this in mind, it is obvious that not all boosters have really been included in this search, and therefore, to continue to properly investigate their use, a manual search took place with all adjectives and adverbs ending in *-ly* and eliminating the afore-mentioned ones to reveal the following:

TABLE 3. *Results of adverbs and adjectives ending in -ly excluding the aforementioned.*

Newspaper	Hits	Normalised per 1000 tokens	Texts
Whole corpus	221	8.16	38/40
BBC	40	6.21	8/8
Express	14	8.34	7/8

The Guardian	45	7.22	8/8
The Times	83	10.1	8/8
The Independent	40	8.86	7/8

Source: self creation

The table above shows a considerable number of adverbs and adjectives ending in *ly*, which all function as potential boosters. It is clear that these are very common in all newspapers, but especially once again in *The Times*, opposite to the *BBC* that has the lowest proportion of all the newspapers even though they are present in all their articles. Continuing with the research, a careful individual analysis of the data presented above was clearly necessary to determine whether these particles acted as boosters or not, which is presented in the table below in addition to other boosters such as superlatives in the next table.

TABLE 4. Boosters ending in *-ly* present in the corpora excluding the afore-mentioned.

Newspaper	Boosters ending in <i>-ly</i>		
	Hits	Normalised per 1000 tokens	Texts
Whole corpus	142	5.24	38/40
BBC	26	4.04	8/8
Express	9	5.36	7/8
The Guardian	31	4.98	8/8
The Times	52	6.33	8/8
The Independent	24	5.32	7/8

Source: self creation

When looking at the data presented in Table 4, we can find that as it was expected, the number of boosters present is actually much greater than when utilising the booster quick search. Another unsurprising fact is that once again *The Times* has the most hits among both non-normalised and normalised figures, with boosters present in all its texts. Followingly is a somewhat significant drop with *Express*, that with only 9 boosters present and in only seven of its texts, obtains the second highest ratio of use per 1000 tokens, followed very closely by *The Independent* and succeeded by *The Guardian* and *BBC*, which continues to have the lowest number of boosters, possibly suggesting a more objective tone to the pieces of news it presents.

In addition, in Table 5, when looking at the boosters composed of the superlatives *best*, *most*, *never* and adjectives ending in *-est*, it reveals clear differences in usage between outlets. Overall, the most common form is the grammatical *-est* ending, which occurs 70 times in the whole corpus and appears in 26 out of the 40 texts, making it the highest normalised frequency of 2.59 per 1000 tokens. However, the distribution of forms varies across sources. *The Times* and *Express* make frequent use of lexical superlatives such as *best* and *most*, suggesting a more emphatic style. In contrast, *The Guardian* and *The Independent* rely more heavily on the *-est* endings, which may reflect a subtler or more formal tone. The BBC falls between these extremes, with moderate use of each form. These patterns could indicate that while all the analysed newspapers employ superlatives, their stylistic preferences differ, as some prioritise direct evaluative terms while other prefer grammatical constructions.

TABLE 5. *Superlative boosters.*

	Superlatives											
	Hits				Normalised per 1000 tokens				Texts out of 40			
	Best	most	never	-est	best	most	never	-est	best	Most	never	-est
Whole corpus	18	27	8	70	0.66	1	0.3	2.59	18	15	6	26
BBC	2	6	4	13	0.31	0.93	0.62	2.02	2	2	3	5
Express	4	4	0	2	2.38	2.38	0	1.19	1	4	0	1
The Guardian	0	4	3	11	0	0.64	0.48	1.77	0	2	2	7
The Times	12	12	1	19	1.46	1.46	0.12	1.1	3	6	1	7
The Independent	0	1	0	11	0	0.22	0	2.44	0	1	0	4

Furthermore, when searching for different kinds of boosters, it was thought that modal verbs could be useful, as they may also have this function. However, after having analysed them, no instances of boosting modals were found, as most of them expressed dynamic or deontic modality rather than epistemic modality.

Finally, to end this section on boosters in the corpus analysis, it must be said that there are many kinds of boosters, but it has been chosen for this study to research only the types mentioned above, as the rest have been deemed to be less relevant for the present research. The same methodology has been followed with the next section on hedges.

4.1.2. Hedges

4.1.2.1. Modals

When it comes to the analysis of modals, we performed a modals search on *Lancsbox*, which gave us the following results:

TABLE 6. *Modals per subcorpora.*

Newspaper	Hits	(normalised per 1000 tokens)	Texts
Whole corpus	157	5.79	34/40
BBC	32	4.97	6/8
Express	9	5.36	5/8
The Guardian	41	6.58	8/8
The Times	50	6.09	8/8
The Independent	25	5.54	7/8

Source: self creation

From a global perspective, *The Times* and *The Guardian* are more prone to the use of modals in their articles and can be found across all 16 articles, with a total of 50 and 41 instances respectively. The *BBC* and *The Independent* use modal verbs more moderately. The presence of modal verbs in *Express* is scant. However, their relative frequency is high, surpassing the *BBC*.

TABLE 7. *Modal hedges.*

Newspaper	Hits	(normalised per 1000 tokens)	Texts
Whole corpus	15	0.53	9
BBC	0	0	0
Express	1	0.6	1
The Guardian	4	0.64	2
The Times	7	0.85	3
The Independent	3	0.66	3

Source: self creation

A closer analysis of the modals reveals that hedges are mostly present in *The Times*, followed by *The Guardian*. It is worth noting that the *BBC* does not use modals as a hedging strategy, but rather as markers of obligation, necessity or possibility, which results in a more nuanced presentation of the events.

Some examples of the use of modals as hedges in *The Times*:

- (1) I *wouldn't* mind a tourist tax.
- (2) Holidaying in the Canary Islands? The locals *may* not like you.
- (3) He said: "There's a perfect amount of people – the islands *could* even take more to be honest".

4.1.2. Adjectives

Adjectives are not the most prominent resources when it comes to hedging propositional content, as the only adjective that functions as a hedge in the corpus is *possible*, which appears twice in *The Independent*.

TABLE 8. *Adjectival hedges.*

Newspaper	Hits	(normalised per 1000 tokens)	Texts
Whole corpus	2	0	2
BBC	0	0	0
Express	0	0	0
The Guardian	0	0	0
The Times	0	0	0
The Independent	2	0.44	2

4.1.3. Adverbs ending in *-ly* acting as hedges

When it comes to adverbs ending in *-ly* acting as hedges, we have found a total amount of 14 occurrences across the entire corpus. It is worth noting that *The Independent* is more prone to using adverbs as hedges, while the rest of newspapers almost do not use them. *Express* has the second highest normalised frequency of adverbs as hedges.

TABLE 9. *Adverbs ending in -ly acting as hedges.*

Newspaper	Hits	(normalised per 1000 tokens)	Texts
Whole corpus	14	0.52	10
BBC	2	0.31	2
Express	2	1.19	2
The Guardian	1	0.16	1
The Times	2	0.24	1
The Independent	7	1.55	4

Source: self creation

Orally, it is common to employ adverbs ending in *-ly* as hedges to mitigate possible negative messages, but in the case of these corpora, when searching in each of them, only one single case is identified in *The Guardian*:

- (4) “Well, I’m sorry to say that it’s *probably* some lurid nonsense [...]”

It is evident in the example above, that the speaker, being this a direct quotation of spoken language, utilises *probably* to try to decrease the possible negative effect of their statement. This example also ties with the following subsection of interjections, due to the case of *well*.

4.1.4. Interjections

As mentioned, the case of *well* in example 4 is another kind of hedge, as it mitigates the speaker’s opinion. There are another two examples from *The Times*:

- (5) “[...] but, *well*, you get the picture”

(6) “*Well*, they did pancakes, salads [...]”

In addition, there are a few other interjections such as:

(7) “*Sorry*, I don’t make the rules.”

In a case from *The Guardian*, as well as one case of the use of *oh*:

(8) “*Oh*, fine. I don’t care about [...]”

These are all the interjections present in the corpus, which was to be expected due to the expository nature of pieces of news, since they typically aim for a more formal and objective tone, and hence the use of interjections is naturally limited compared to conversational genres. Their occurrence here, though rare, highlights moments where the writer or quoted speaker momentarily shifts into a more informal or expressive register, often to convey attitude or soften the impact of a statement, which end up being reflected in these pieces of news as hedging devices.

4.2. CLOSE READING ANALYSIS

Although we have mainly analysed the frequency of those adverbs ending in *-ly*, it is worth noting that we have found some instances where adverbs that did not end in *-ly* were used as hedges. Among the adverbs that we found were *perhaps*, *almost* and *about*.

(9) And *perhaps* even one with a kids’ club so, you know, we could actually have a holiday?

(10) The low stone walls act as barriers against the wind, while the vines are buried in hand-dug conical holes known as hoyos and are *almost* completely covered in ash-rich dirt that helps them retain moisture.

(11) Dotted in the Atlantic, *about* 850 miles southwest of mainland Spain, the eight sun-baked Canary Islands often feel like their own spectacular, volcanic world.

In example 9 we can see the only instance of the adverb *perhaps* in the corpus. Its function here is unmistakably that of a hedge, as the speaker avoids direct commitment to the suggestion and instead frames it as a tentative possibility. In example 10, *almost* precedes the adverb

completely and mitigates the absolute force of the latter, rather than representing the vines as being entirely buried, the writer introduces nuance and softens the claim. In this way, *almost* also functions as a hedge, modifying the statement so that it does not appear overly categorical. Finally, in example 11, a different case is visible, as the use of *about* introduces an approximation in relation to distance, and while this does not hedge an attitude or evaluation in the same sense as the previous examples, it does serve to avoid over-precision by signalling that the figure should be taken as an estimate. For this reason, *about* may be described more accurately as an approximator rather than a proper hedge, even if it shares with hedges the pragmatic function of hedges by softening the degree of certainty expressed. Moreover, it is interesting to note that the structure *it is + adjective + that*, which is common in hedging, is not present whatsoever across the 40 articles.

5. DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of boosters and hedges across the selected corpus reveals several important tendencies that help illuminate stylistic and rhetorical choices in British newspapers. One of the most striking findings concerns the distribution of boosters, as *The Times* consistently emerges as the newspaper with both the highest frequency and the greatest variety of boosters, particularly in the form of intensifying adverbs such as *very*, as well as a wider range of emphatic markers. These patterns suggest that *The Times* may adopt a more expressive and evaluative stance, which could be linked to the need to attract reader's attention through heightened rhetoric. By contrast, outlets such as the *BBC* and *The Independent* display more restrained use of boosters, with the *BBC* especially standing out for its relatively objective tone and avoidance of emphatic language. This divergence aligns with the *BBC*'s institutional role as a public broadcaster, where naturalness is expected, and helps explain the lower booster frequency observed.

When the analysis is extended to adverbs ending in *-ly*, it becomes clear that many potential boosters were overlooked by the initial corpus tool search. The subsequent manual analysis uncovered a much larger set of

candidates, again reinforcing the prominence of *The Times* using these forms, while *Express*, despite a low absolute count, shows a relatively high frequency once normalised. Such findings highlight not only the methodological importance of combining automated and manual approaches, but also the stylistic differences across outlets. Similarly, the use of superlatives varied markedly, with *The Times* and *Express* preferring lexical items such as *best* and *most*, while *The Guardian* and *The Independent* relied more heavily on grammatical *-est* forms.

In terms of hedging strategies, the findings are equally revealing. Modal verbs were the most frequent hedge type, particularly in *The Times* and *The Guardian*, where they often appeared in contexts that conveyed possibility or limited commitment, as in *may* or *could*. Interestingly, the *BBC* employed modals less as hedging devices and more in their deontic or dynamic senses, which again supports the interpretation that its style prioritises factuality over stance. Adjectives functioning as hedges were scarce, with *possible* appearing only twice and both in *The Independent*. Oppositely, adverbs ending in *-ly* were somewhat more common, such as *probably*, which is used in spoken quotations to mitigate negative statements. Here again, the corpus suggests that hedging through adverbs is more typical of spoken or conversational registers than written expository texts.

The analysis of interjections further highlighted this fact, as forms such as *well*, *sorry* and *oh* occurred only rarely and always in quoted speech rather than in the expository or narrative elements. Their role was mainly to soften evaluations or express hesitation, acting as hedges. However, their limited presence reflects the formal and expository nature of news once again, where personal or conversational markers are generally avoided (Boudana, 2011; Messagi Júnior, 2022; Stenvall, 2008).

Finally, these findings come to say that hedging in news discourse is more constrained than boosting, but remains present in contexts where evaluation, stance or reported speech are relevant. These results also indicate a clear tension in news discourse between objectivity and rhetorical engagement, as the analysed newspapers appear to differ in how they balance the amplification and dramatisation of boosters and the

softening and mitigation of hedges, which point at underlying fixed institutional identities or specific readership expectations.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study analysed how the British press has represented the overtourism protests in the Canary Islands, with a focus on the evaluative role of boosters and hedges. The findings show that boosters are far more frequent than hedges, suggesting that news outlets often prefer emphatic strategies over cautious or mitigated language when reporting on these events. *The Times* stood out for its heavy use and variety of boosters, which points to a more dramatic and sensationalist style, while the *BBC* consistently avoided strong evaluative markers, aligning with its institutional role of impartiality. Other newspapers, such as *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, occupied more intermediate positions.

Hedges appeared much less frequently, and their distribution was particular, as modal verbs were the most common form, especially in *The Times* and *The Guardian*, but other devices such as adverbs and interjections occurred only rarely and mostly in quoted speech. This reflects the expository nature of news writing, where hedging is not part of the journalist's objective voice but rather tied to the subjective perspectives of those being reported.

Overall, the results suggest that British newspapers construct the Canary Islands' protest through different rhetorical lenses, balancing objectivity with emphasis, in line with their individual institutional identities, shaping how British audiences will perceive the social tensions in the Canary Islands depending on the source of information differently.

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