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# Development of a translation device for axiological-semantic density in political news articles: wording and charging

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**Abstract:** The concept of axiological-semantic density from Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) is extremely helpful in analysing political knowledge-building, as it describes the strength of relations between various people, political stances and moral judgements, enabling these to be positioned in relation to each other. We present a multi-level translation device designed to identify strengths of axiological-semantic density in political news articles from the *Daily Sun*, South Africa's most popular tabloid newspaper. This translation device was devised through analysis of selected texts from a corpus of 516 articles published between January and June 2015. It was developed through a collaborative process involving the first author and a team of student research assistants. The final translation device has five tools, of which two, the wording and charging tools, are described in this article, and then illustrated using an example analysis of a *Daily Sun* political news article. Both tools reveal insights into South African political discourses and ways in which axiological-semantic density can be enacted in future research. Making axiological-semantic density visible using such a translation device also has practical applications in assisting readers to understand the ways in which publications such as the *Daily Sun* position political parties, enabling them to engage more constructively in discussions on the country's future.

**Keywords:** axiological-semantic density; Legitimation Code Theory; political discourse; South Africa; tabloids; translation device

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# 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

South Africa, as a young democracy, is an important context in which to study the role of values, emotion and moral judgements in political discourses. In the country's 2019 elections, its two largest parties, the African National Congress (ANC) and Democratic Alliance (DA), lost support, while the biggest gainers were the radical leftist Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and the far-right Freedom Front Plus (FF+) (Independent Electoral Commission 2020). Thus, there is evidence that, following global trends, political polarization in South Africa is on the increase. Additionally, voter turnout declined to 66% from 73% in the previous national elections in 2014, indicating increased disaffection with political parties in general (Independent Electoral Commission 2014, 2020).

In this context, we are interested in studying how values, emotions and moral judgements influence the ways in which the media are used to build everyday citizens' political knowledge and equip them for democratic participation in public spheres (Fraser 1992; Habermas 1989). To investigate this, we analyse political news coverage in the *Daily Sun*, South Africa's biggest daily newspaper, with a readership of 4.7 million or 12.3% of the country's adult population at the time the statistics were compiled (South African Audience Research Foundation 2015). As a tabloid, the *Daily Sun* foregrounds emotive language in its reporting, making it an excellent source in which to investigate the influence of values, emotions and moral judgments on political knowledge-building.

The concept of *axiological-semantic density*, from Legitimation Code Theory (LCT), a multidimensional framework for describing the (re)production and transmission of knowledge, is extremely helpful in measuring the scale and impact of appeals to emotion and moral judgements in knowledge-building (Maton 2014). Axiological-semantic density comes from the dimension of LCT named Semantics, and refers to the strength of the relations between different meanings or symbols

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related to “affective, aesthetic, ethical, political and moral stances” (Maton 2014: 130) in a given social practice.

In this article, we introduce a set of tools, known as a translation device, that we developed for analysing axiological-semantic density in *Daily Sun* political news articles. We begin by situating our research within recent efforts to describe value-laden language in political discourses (Section 2). Next, we explain what a translation device is (Section 3). Following this, we outline the architecture of our device as a whole (Section 4), and describe how we developed each of the tools comprising the device (Section 5). Then we lay out in detail two of the tools that make up the device: the wording tool (Section 6) and the charging tool (Section 7). We then provide an example showing how the tools can be used together to identify fluctuations of axiological-semantic density in a sample article (Section 8). Finally, we explore the implications and applications of this translation device (Section 9), showing what it reveals about emotive language in political news articles, and how it can help to open dialogue about the use of this language in the formation of citizens’ political opinions.

## 2 Approaches to values in political discourses

A range of approaches have been used to examine the impact of value-laden language on political discourses. In this section we describe two such approaches, from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), and motivate our choice of axiological-semantic density from LCT as a concept that can offer fresh insights into the role of values in political knowledge-building.

Axiological-semantic density can be used to describe the extent to which a particular social practice such as a text or a signifier carries emotional or moral meanings. For example, the word “democracy” carries strong axiological-semantic density: many people think of democracy as something morally virtuous and so associate positive feelings with it. Axiological-semantic density contrasts with epistemic-semantic density, which refers to the strength of the relations between different meanings relating to “formal definitions (such as concepts) and empirical referents” (Maton 2014: 130). For both axiological- and epistemic-semantic density, the relations between concepts can be thought of as comprising *constellations* of ideas. To extend the example above, “democracy” could be the chief idea, or *central signifier*, in a constellation including the words “freedom”, “participation”, “elections” and so on.

Signifiers can be charged with positive, negative or neutral axiological meaning, a phenomenon known as *axiological charging* (Maton 2014). One can charge the word “democracy” positively by saying “It would be desirable for all countries

on earth to embrace democracy.” More axiological meaning can also be added to specific signifiers in the process of *axiological condensation* (Maton 2014). For example, if one says, “Democracy guarantees individual freedoms and participatory governance”, one is associating “individual freedoms” and “participatory governance” with the term “democracy” in a constellation, and condensing the positive values associated with these concepts into the term “democracy”. These concepts from LCT are well-suited to the examination of how emotions and values are used to build knowledge in political discourse.

One earlier approach to the use of values in political discourses derives from CDA, an extremely widely used framework. Fairclough’s (2001) influential articulation of CDA describes certain words as having either experiential value, relational value or expressive value. These concepts are helpful in giving a broad conception of the use of values in political discourses; however, the boundaries between the three categories are fuzzy and do not allow for fine distinctions to be made between different types and strengths of values. These concepts are also embedded in the initial ‘Description’ stage of CDA, and so the ways in which words encode values are not usually mentioned explicitly at the more advanced stages of ‘Interpretation’ and ‘Explanation’. Thus, while CDA is effective in analysing the ideological effects of values in political discourses, it is less helpful for describing precisely how words encode values and the intensity with which these values are expressed.

By contrast, SFL has an extremely sophisticated, fine-grained framework for describing values in language, known as Appraisal (Martin and White 2005). This framework has been used in many studies of political discourses in the media. For example, Aloy Mayo and Taboada (2017) use Appraisal to show how value-laden language was used in online reporting on the 2014 midterm elections in the United States in the women’s magazine *Cosmopolitan*. In South Africa, Appraisal has been used extensively in analysis of letters to the *Daily Sun* by Smith and Adendorff (2014a, 2014b), showing how these letters construe a community of shared values among readers. They also compare letters to the *Daily Sun* with those in *The Times*, a now defunct South African newspaper which had a middle-class readership (Smith and Adendorff 2014c, 2014d).

One sub-system of Appraisal is Graduation, which describes how lexis is used to tone evaluative meanings up or down, or to sharpen or soften them (Martin and White 2005). However, Graduation does not describe the process by which individual terms accumulate evaluative meanings through the unfolding of a text. For example, in the news article included in the Appendix, the ANC is associated with “a lot of corruption” (para. 5), and later with “empty promises” (para. 5). The ANC does not lose the negative judgement inherent in “a lot of corruption” when it is later charged with making “empty promises”; instead, these value-laden

meanings add to each other. This is the process known as axiological condensation in LCT. In an analysis of a political debate in a committee meeting in the South African Parliament, we found LCT's concepts of axiological condensation and axiological-semantic density a powerful means of describing the use of values to position different actors and parties, complementing our Appraisal analysis (Siebörger and Adendorff 2017).

The use of axiological-semantic density to describe the way values shape discourse is in its infancy, but has already yielded tantalizing insights. Doran (2020a) uses axiological constellations to show how an influential text in the field of ethnopoetics works to cultivate in readers the specialized value systems seen as legitimate in this discipline. Further, Doran (2020b) uses axiological-semantic density and Appraisal to show how implicit values of the kind normally noticed by a small in-group of target readers can be made explicit in political texts, using two news articles from Australia on a debate about whether the arrival of European colonists in the country should be described as an “invasion” or not. Szenes (2021) uses the two frameworks to show how a far-right political group, the Nordic Resistance Movement, recontextualizes environmentalist discourse in support of their cause.

The use of axiological-semantic density to model the use of values in political discourse has three main advantages. Firstly, because axiological-semantic density is a sociological concept, not a linguistic one, it can be used to describe all value-laden discourse, regardless of what linguistic features are used to express values. Secondly, as we show, axiological condensation allows for an examination of how values tend to accumulate and intensify in discourse as it unfolds, using visualizations such as *semantic profiles* that depict the fluctuation of semantic density or semantic gravity over time (Maton 2014; see Figure 3). Lastly, it allows one to describe how these values are built into structures of value and how individual actors are positioned in relation to these structures using *axiological constellations*. However, in every study using axiological-semantic density, decisions must be made about how to enact this concept systematically to describe specific data in a specific problem-situation. These methodological decisions are encapsulated in a translation device, as we elaborate on in the following section.

### 3 What is a translation device?

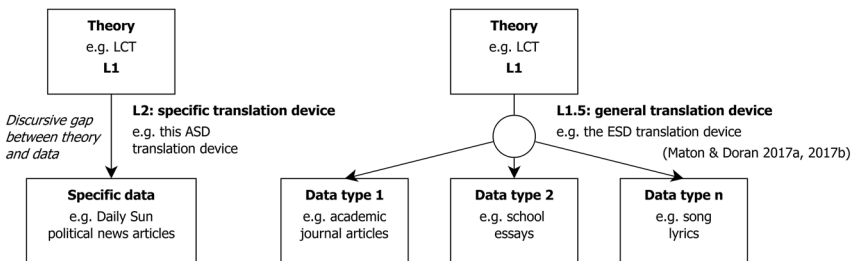
A translation device is an analytic tool or set of tools that allows one to translate between theory and data (Maton and Chen 2016). While theoretical concepts may offer great explanatory power, they often can be used to describe many different

phenomena, and so are difficult to use in analysing specific data without such a translation device.

In LCT, translation devices tend to show how analysts have identified relative strengths or weaknesses of a particular concept, like axiological-semantic density, in a particular social practice. A translation device can show how analysts have used this concept to describe one specific type of data, such as *Daily Sun* political news articles. Because of this, translation devices assist readers in analysing similar data in the same way as the original analysts would have.

Bernstein (2000: 135) distinguishes between a theory's "internal language of description", abbreviated to "L1", or the concepts within the theory and their relations with each other, and its "external language of description" (p. 135), abbreviated to "L2", which explains how the theory relates to a specific kind of data. A *specific translation device* is such an external language of description, as the translation device partially described in this article is.

A different kind of translation device with more general application is known as a mediating language of description ("L1.5"), or *general translation device* in LCT. Maton, Doran and others have developed a mediating language for the description of epistemic-semantic density (ESD), which applies to English discourse as a whole (Maton and Doran 2017a, 2017b). Such a translation device can be used to describe many different genres, including poems, song lyrics, novels and academic journal articles. The differences between an L2 and an L1.5 are illustrated diagrammatically in Figure 1. The translation device described in this article is modelled partly on the structure of the ESD translation device (Maton and Doran 2017a, 2017b), but differs from it in that it is designed to describe *Daily Sun* political news articles as a specific object of study. Despite this, our translation device is designed in such a way that it could in principle be developed into a



**Figure 1:** The distinctions between specific and general translation devices in LCT.

mediating language through engagement with data from other objects of study such as other genres of English discourse.

In inductive analyses, the types used in a translation device emerge out of the process of the analysis, rather than being imposed on the data *a priori* (Maton and Chen 2016). They are often tested and revised many times through ongoing analysis. As a result, translation devices may be as much a product of analysis as they are a tool that shapes analysis.

In a translation device, the characteristics of each type are “rules of thumb” (Maton and Doran 2017b: 56) rather than being universally applicable, and have to be adapted to suit each individual object of study. The need for rules of thumb is particularly important when considering axiological-semantic density, where meanings are much more diffuse and contextually influenced than is the case with epistemic-semantic density. While epistemic-semantic density can be expressed relatively simply using the number of concepts linked together in constellations, axiological-semantic density involves values and feelings, which are more difficult to evaluate or weigh up in relation to each other. As a result, the criteria for what kinds of expressions belong in which type in our translation device are not as precise as those for Maton and Doran’s (2017a, 2017b) translation device for ESD; however, we do try to express the distinctions between the different criteria as clearly as possible in Sections 6 and 7, while providing illustrative examples.

SFL is a key influence on our translation device; however, the translation device is not a set of linguistic tools or model of language. It is designed to be usable by those who have no linguistic background, and so is a first step towards making it possible for non-experts to analyse political news articles for themselves, as explained in Section 9.

This also makes this translation device distinct from other recent innovative methods of enacting axiological-semantic density in analysis. Most of these rely to a large extent on Appraisal, a framework from SFL, for the analysis of evaluative language (Doran 2020b; Hao and Martin 2017; Jones 2015). A more recent approach describes axiological meanings in relation to four rhetorical strategies: positioning, oppositioning, likening and charging (Doran 2020a). Other scholars have worked towards a translation device for axiological meanings, focusing on the ways in which these build constellations (Szenes and Tilakaratna 2018). We have taken a different approach, which allows for full, independent, complementary analyses of data using SFL and LCT (Maton et al. 2016). The result is a set of tools for analysis that could, with further development, become accessible to non-specialists in SFL and LCT.

## 4 Architecture of the device

We decided to develop our translation device as a multi-level set of tools, like the ESD translation device for English discourse (Maton and Doran 2017a, 2017b). These are:

- the wording tool, which describes the contribution of individual words to axiological-semantic density
- the charging tool, which describes the strength of axiological charging enacted by individual words and short expressions
- the modifying tool, which describes the contribution to axiological-semantic density of words that modify a head word in a group of words
- the clausung tool, which describes the contribution of entire clauses to axiological condensation
- the sequencing tool, which describes the contribution to axiological condensation of links between short passages of text

The wording tool is described in Section 6 and the charging tool in Section 7, illustrated using examples drawn from *Daily Sun* articles analysed for this research project. Space constraints preclude a detailed description of the remaining three tools of the translation device, which are described in Siebörger (2018). The *Daily Sun* articles are drawn from a corpus we created, consisting of all news articles from January to June 2015 mentioning the name of at least one of South Africa's five largest political parties, amounting to a total of 516 articles. In Section 8, we give an example of the use of the wording and charging tools in describing different strengths of axiological-semantic density, and axiological charging in a sample *Daily Sun* news article, "Joy as Buthelezi welcomes new members", reprinted in the Appendix. This article was selected because it gives an example of how axiological-semantic density is used to position three political parties – the ANC, Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and National Freedom Party (NFP) – in relation to each other.

## 5 Developing the tools

The wording and charging tools, described in this article, were designed with the help of a group of student research assistants. In preparation for data analysis sessions with these research assistants, we gave each of them a copy of a news article to be analysed, and a pre-prepared form which we called a 'workshopping sheet', on which we had listed a selection of expressions from the article. We asked



each assistant to read the article, and then to rank the expressions on the form according to the strength of axiological-semantic density represented by that expression.

In the data analysis sessions, we would arrive at a ‘consensus’ ranking of expressions according to their strengths of axiological-semantic density. Following the sessions, the first author took the ‘consensus’ rankings and searched for commonalities and differences between the ranked expressions, and cut the list into two types where he found a qualitative difference between different sets of expressions. For example, in the development of the charging tool (see Section 7), he distinguished between expressions that evaluated other words, such as “fed up with”, and those that merely seemed to support evaluation, such as “heard”. Then he cut each of those types into two, and the resulting subtypes into two again, where possible. This follows the method used in the development of the ESD translation device (Maton and Doran 2017a, 2017b).

However, whereas the ESD translation device has three layers of delicacy – types, subtypes and sub-subtypes – we collapsed the types in our translation device into one layer in order to simplify the device somewhat and make it easier to use. The process of arriving at names for each of these types forced the first author to consider the common characteristics that define them, and what distinguished the types from each other.

The resultant translation device was later tested and revised through use in fine-grained analyses of fluctuations in axiological-semantic density in three *Daily Sun* political news articles, reported on in Siebörger (2018). In the process of using the translation device, we found that particular names and rankings of types did not satisfactorily fulfil the role of describing the data as intended, so we refined and adjusted these. For example, the ranking of the top four types of the wording tool was rearranged, as shown in Section 9. This testing and refinement resulted in the final tools which we describe in Sections 6 and 7.

## 6 The wording tool

This tool describes the axiological-semantic density of individual words, independent of their context. It is designed chiefly to describe nouns, because these are most likely to be described in LCT as signifiers that possess axiological-semantic density. The definition of “word” used in applying the wording tool includes proper nouns that are longer than one orthographic word, so that longer proper nouns such as “African National Congress” (ANC) and people’s names such as “President Jacob Zuma” are considered as wholes. Table 1 summarizes the wording tool. The far left column shows how types are arranged according to their strength

**Table 1:** The wording tool.

ASD	Type	Example
+ ↑ ↓ -	ideas	<i>apartheid, poverty</i>
	leaders	<i>Jacob Zuma, Democratic Alliance</i>
	associates	<i>EFF Chief Whip Mbuyiseni Ndlozi, ANC Women's League</i>
	acts	<i>declaration, membership</i>
	names	<i>Pietermaritzburg, Pastor Ray McCauley</i>
	roles and contexts	<i>secretary, conference</i>
	specified things	<i>face, engine</i>
	unspecified things	<i>head, car</i>

of axiological-semantic density, from strongest (+) to weakest (-). The middle column gives the names of the types and the right-hand column lists examples of words that belong to these types.

The wording type with the strongest axiological-semantic density is *ideas*. This refers mainly to systems of thought and/or belief such as “apartheid” and “democracy”. Other abstract nouns such as “corruption” and “poverty” (see Section 8) are included in this type because they appear to link to vast axiological constellations. The status of *ideas* as the strongest type of axiological-semantic density may not be universal; in political systems in other countries, another type such as *leaders* might appear at the top of the translation device. For example, in a democratic country, the *leader* “the Democratic Party” may have stronger axiological-semantic density than the *idea* “democracy” if the party arouses stronger judgments and emotions than the abstract concept of “democracy” by virtue of the party’s real-life actions and decisions. We reflect on this further in Section 9.

The wording type placed in second position following testing and refinement, *leaders*, refers to political leaders, including past or present state presidents, such as “Jacob Zuma”; party leaders such as “Mmusi Maimane” or the names of their parties, for example the “Democratic Alliance” (DA). Institutions such as “government” seemed to function similarly to these words and so were grouped with *leaders*, as they refer to bodies whose task is to give political leadership to the country. The set of names that belong to this type is intentionally small and focused particularly on political leaders, since this translation device is designed to describe only political news articles. These leaders’ names enact relatively strong axiological-semantic density because they are associated with organizations and groups of people that are constellated in readers’ minds with certain

political stances. In other words, readers will associate them with particular *ideas*, which in turn are linked to other people and stances in constellations.

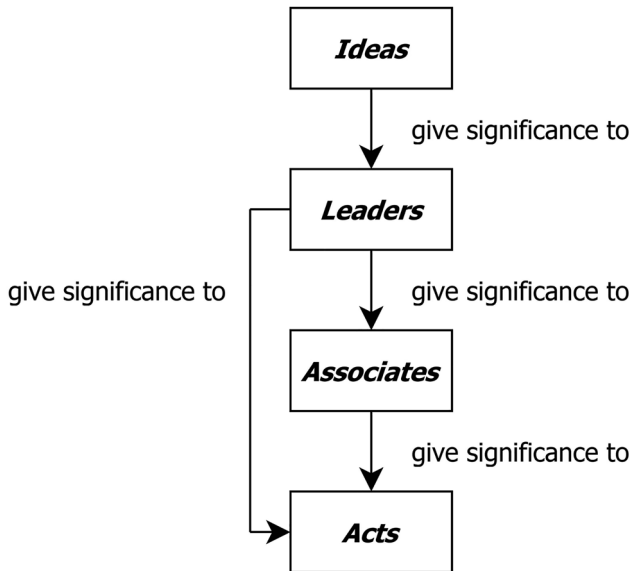
The third-strongest wording type, *associates*, consists of people and groups which are affiliated to *leaders*. Typically, these people and groups are identified in news articles primarily by their affiliation to a particular party or organization (including government). For example, one may be referred to as “EFF chief whip Mbuyiseni Ndlozi”. Also included are organizations which are sub-groups or affiliates of a political party, such as the “African National Congress Women’s League” (ANCWL). These people and groups derive part of their significance from the fact that they are associated with particular *leaders*, and so their names can be characterized as having weaker axiological-semantic density than those *leaders*.

Rounding out the top half of the wording tool is *acts*, the fourth-strongest wording type. This type includes mostly nouns that have been converted from verbs, such as “declaration” and “action”. These would be described as experiential grammatical metaphors in SFL: instances where a process or quality is referred to using an atypical grammatical class (Martin and Rose 2007). It also includes more abstract nouns describing concepts that do not refer to full-scale belief systems, but which nevertheless are associated strongly with values and stances, such as the word “membership”. *Acts* have relatively strong axiological-semantic density because they usually involve implicit actors and implicit objects or circumstances and link these together. Frequently, part of the significance of *acts* is derived from the *leaders* or *associates* who are responsible for them.

The motivation behind our ranking of the top four types in our wording tool is illustrated in Figure 2 by showing how weaker types derive part of their strength of axiological-semantic density from stronger types. This figure shows why this ranking is effective in describing *Daily Sun* political news articles; as mentioned above, a different ranking may be necessary in a different context.

The lower half of the wording tool begins with *names*, that is names of people and places, for example “Pastor Ray McCauley”, or “Johannesburg”. What distinguishes *names* from *leaders* and *associates* is that *leaders* and *associates* refer to people and groups that have significance through a relatively strong association with larger constellations, while *names* do not.

Such *names* are stronger in axiological-semantic density than *roles and contexts*, which include the titles of offices in an organization, such as “secretary”, generic references to individuals, such as “a party member”, and to places where events happen, such as “conference”. These generic references have weaker axiological-semantic density than *names* because the mention of a specific person fulfilling a particular role or a specific place or named context (such as the “Legitimation Code Theory Conference 3”, which would fall under *names*) adds



**Figure 2:** Relations between the four wording types with the strongest axiological-semantic density.

meaning to that generic reference and assists the reader in placing it in a particular constellation.

The two types with the weakest axiological-semantic density in the wording tool are *specified things* and *unspecified things*. Both refer to concrete, non-human objects, including animals, plants and body parts. *Specified things* are those which have a more specific meaning and so are more likely to have an axiological component to their meaning, while *unspecified things* have a more generalized meaning which is less likely to be axiologically charged.

“Face” is an example of a *specified thing* and “head” is an example of an *unspecified thing*. As this pair of examples shows, it is useful to describe these two types in relation to each other, but demarcating the boundary between them may be difficult since both part-whole relationships and hyponymy relationships exist on continua: “nose” is more specified than “face”, which is more specified than “head”, which in turn is more specified than “body”, for example. If one finds examples of two words that exist in a part-whole or hyponymous relationship in a text, it is most useful to assign one to the *specified* category and the other to the *unspecified* category for ease of comparison, even though this means that the dividing line between the two categories will lie in a different place in each text one analyses. If one has only one object in isolation which one is trying to classify, a

rule of thumb is to ask oneself “Is there a less specific word which I could easily use to describe this object, or can I easily say it is part of a bigger object?” If the answer is yes, then the object is a *specified thing*; if the answer is no, it is an *unspecified thing*.

## 7 The charging tool

The charging tool describes the strength of axiological charging inherent in short expressions, or, in other words, the strength with which these expressions charge other signifiers with values, emotions or judgements. In most cases, the expressions described by the charging tool are single words, but they may also be longer groups of words that work together to accomplish charging. Any kind of grammatical structure may be described using the charging tool, but for the most part, it is used to describe lexical items apart from nouns, as well as their modifiers. Adjectives and their modifiers, verbal groups and adverbial groups, as described using SFL (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014), are prime candidates for description using this tool. Where words that work together to accomplish charging transgress the boundaries of grammatical constituents, as in “fed up with” (a phrasal verb and a preposition), then those words are still considered together as a unit for the purposes of the charging tool.

The charging tool consists of six types, which are shown in Table 2. The left-hand column shows a continuum of strengths of charging, from strong (+) to weak (-), while the middle column gives the names of types and the right-hand column gives examples of expressions belonging to these types.

**Table 2:** The charging tool.

Charging	Type	Example
+	multidirectional	<i>fed up with</i>
↑ ↓	resonant	<i>empty promises</i>
	vigorous	<i>excited</i>
	placid	<i>common</i>
	salient	<i>new</i>
-	frequent	<i>asking</i>

The strongest type of charging found in our data is *multidirectional* charging. This type is so named because *multidirectionals* assist in axiologically charging more than one signifier. For example, in the sentence “The people are fed up with the ANC”, the expression “fed up with” charges “the ANC” negatively, but also describes “the people” and places them in opposition to the ANC (see Section 8).

*Resonant* charging is the second strongest type of charging. Expressions belonging to this type are unidirectional, that is, they only charge one signifier positively or negatively. However, the charging is of a type that resonates from one context to another. In other words, *resonants* often involve some form of metaphor or other kind of figurative language, which extends across from another domain of meaning into the domain being used in the text. An example is the phrase “empty promises” in “The people are fed up with the ANC and its empty promises” (see Section 8). In this phrase, the word “empty” is used metaphorically to describe “promises” as being like containers of meaning.

By contrast, *vigorous* charging refers to expressions that denote a strong emotion or a drastic action, but one that does not have different meanings in different contexts as *resonants* do. The word “excited” in “he was excited to welcome the new members” (see Section 8) is a prototypical example of such an expression.

The fourth strongest type of charging is *placid* charging. This refers to expressions that contain evaluation,<sup>2</sup> where this evaluation is weak and lacks the drastic character of *vigorous* charging. An example is the word “common” in “But in the ANC, that [investigation by the Public Protector of corruption among party representatives] is common” (see Section 8). Here, “common” is used to evaluate the ANC negatively, but does not describe a strong emotion or intentional action.

While the four types of charging thus far can clearly be said to evaluate signifiers in some way, the remaining two types do not obviously evaluate them, but may support evaluation through repeating meanings, toning meanings up or down<sup>3</sup> or simply associating signifiers with each other. The first of these types is *salient* charging, which describes words or expressions that cannot be said to be evaluative, but which are specific to the topic of the article in some way, and so are likely to appear more frequently in the article in question than in a larger corpus of political news articles. An example is the word “new” in the article “Joy as Buthelezi welcomes new members” (see Section 8), because the article is about the

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<sup>2</sup> That is, they would be instantiations of Attitude in SFL’s Appraisal framework. Attitude describes lexis that expresses emotions, judges people or evaluates objects (Martin and White 2005).

<sup>3</sup> This means that these charging types can, but do not always, function in a similar way to Graduation in SFL’s Appraisal system (Martin and White 2005). However, there are far more affinities between Graduation and the modifying tool (Siebörger 2018).

welcoming of these new members. Such *salients* support charging by reminding readers of the main themes or topics of the article and showing how the words in their environment contribute to those themes.

*Frequent* charging, on the other hand, involves words or expressions that are likely to appear with the same frequency in any political news article. For example, in the sentence “a man wearing an ANC shirt is seen in a white Toyota bakkie [light delivery vehicle] asking a DA member to go away”, the word “asking” is a *frequent* charger, making it possible for the content of what is asked (“go away”) to charge the ANC member negatively for his rude behaviour toward the DA member. In the following section we demonstrate the use of the wording and charging tools to analyse an example text.

## 8 Example analysis

In this section we illustrate the use of the wording and charging tools to analyse one sample *Daily Sun* article, “Joy as Buthelezi welcomes new members” by Bongani Gina, published on 26 May 2015. The full article is reprinted in the Appendix. We use text formatting to identify different wording and charging types, as shown in Tables 3 and 4 respectively. Bold face is used to mark the four strongest wording types, while the four weakest wording types are not bolded. In each of these sets of four wording types, capitals are used to mark the two strongest wording types. Italics are used to mark the four strongest charging types, in which there is explicit evaluation. As the tables show, superscript numbers are used to differentiate the different wording and charging types: numbers before words indicate wording types, and those following words indicate charging types. Pronouns are marked with a superscript ‘P’. This convention is borrowed from Maton and Doran (2017b) to indicate that these pronouns belong in the same wording type as their referents, but are slightly weaker in axiological-semantic density because the original referent is not repeated in full.

In paragraph 1 of the news article, the names of political parties are evident as *leaders*: the IFP, NFP and ANC.

(Para. 1) *More than 500*<sup>3</sup> PEOPLE *left*<sup>5</sup> the <sup>7</sup>**NFP** and <sup>7</sup>**ANC** to *join*<sup>5</sup> the <sup>7</sup>**IFP**.

The parties’ names form the central signifiers of the two constellations set up in the article, one centred on the IFP and the other on the parties that the new members left, including the NFP and ANC. The number of new recruits (“more than 500”) is classed as a *placid* charger because this large number positively charges the IFP even though more explicit evaluative language is not used here.

**Table 3:** Annotation conventions for wording types.

Wording type	Example
<sup>8</sup> IDEAS	<sup>8</sup> DEMOCRACY
<sup>7</sup> LEADERS	<sup>7</sup> IFP LEADER MANGOSUTHU BUTHELEZI
<sup>6</sup> associates	<sup>6</sup> former Mafakatini ANC leader, Mbongeni Zuma
<sup>5</sup> acts	<sup>5</sup> promises
<sup>4</sup> NAMES	<sup>4</sup> TRURO HALL
<sup>3</sup> ROLES AND CONTEXTS	<sup>3</sup> MEMBERS
<sup>2</sup> specified things	<sup>2</sup> cellphone
<sup>1</sup> unspecified things	<sup>1</sup> instance

Pronouns referring to these words are marked with superscript ‘P’. Bold face is used to mark the four strongest wording types, while the four weakest wording types are not bolded.

**Table 4:** Annotation conventions for charging types.

Charging type	Example
<i>multidirectional</i> <sup>6</sup>	<i>fed up with</i> <sup>6</sup>
<i>resonant</i> <sup>5</sup>	<i>left</i> <sup>5</sup>
<i>vigorous</i> <sup>4</sup>	<i>excited</i> <sup>4</sup>
<i>placid</i> <sup>3</sup>	<i>leader</i> <sup>3</sup>
salient <sup>2</sup>	new <sup>2</sup>
frequent <sup>1</sup>	heard <sup>1</sup>

Italics are used to mark the four strongest charging types, in which there is explicit evaluation.

Two prominent charging expressions throughout the article are “left” and “join”. These short words do not seem to have much axiological meaning of their own at first glance, but they are classed as *resonants* because of the role they play in the context of this article. They construe the new members as having taken a metaphorical journey from one constellation (the NFP and ANC) to another (the IFP), and so “join” charges the IFP positively, and “left” charges the other parties negatively, in ways that resonate beyond the text.

Two new recruits, Sifiso Nene and Mbongeni Zuma, are *associates*:

(Para. 3) Among <sup>3</sup>THOSE<sup>P</sup> who *left*<sup>5</sup> the <sup>7</sup>ANC are <sup>6</sup>**former<sup>3</sup> party leader<sup>3</sup> at Jika Joe squatter camp, Sifiso Nene and <sup>6</sup>former<sup>3</sup> Mafakatini ANC leader<sup>3</sup>, Mbongeni Zuma.**

In each case, the *placid* charger “leader” condenses positive charging into their names as influential people, while another *placid* charger, “former”, disassociates them from the ANC, thereby charging this party negatively. Mbongeni Zuma’s



axiological-semantic density is further strengthened by linking him to the then-president, “Jacob Zuma” (clearly a *leader*):

(Para. 4) **“Mbongeni** is the <sup>3</sup>RELATIVE of <sup>7</sup>**PRESIDENT JACOB ZUMA**.

Most of the article is dedicated to negative charging of parties other than the IFP. Mbongeni Zuma says “there’s a lot of corruption” in the ANC:

(Para. 5) **“I<sup>6</sup> left<sup>5</sup> the <sup>7</sup>ANC** because there’s *a lot of* <sup>8</sup>**CORRUPTION<sup>5</sup>** in the <sup>3</sup>PARTY,” said **“Mbongeni**.

Here and throughout the article, “corruption” is both an *idea* which carries extremely strong axiological-semantic density, and a *resonant* which could be used to charge negatively in multiple contexts.

Mbongeni Zuma further dissociates the IFP from corruption in paragraph 6:

(Para. 6) **“I<sup>6</sup> have never heard<sup>1</sup> of <sup>7</sup>PUBLIC PROTECTOR THULI MADONSELA** *investigating<sup>3</sup>* any <sup>7</sup>IFP <sup>3</sup>OFFICIAL for <sup>8</sup>**CORRUPTION<sup>5</sup>**.

Madonsela is well-known and admired in many circles for her courage in investigating various corruption scandals relating to Jacob Zuma, including allegations of state capture in which he was implicated (Wolf 2017). This, and her occupying the high office of Public Protector at the time the article was published, qualifies her as a *leader* according to the wording tool, lending weight to Mbongeni Zuma’s claims. The reference to Madonsela’s “investigating” (a *placid* charger) of corruption is ultimately used to heighten the condensing of negative meanings with the ANC:

(Para. 7) “But in the <sup>7</sup>ANC, that is *common<sup>3</sup>*.”

Here, “common” is a *placid* charger, as explained in Section 7.

Further axiological charging is accomplished through explicit positive evaluations of Buthelezi. Mbongeni Zuma calls Buthelezi “a good leader”, a *resonant* charger:

(Para. 8) **“I<sup>6</sup> joined<sup>5</sup> the <sup>7</sup>IFP** because **“I<sup>6</sup> believe<sup>1</sup> that <sup>7</sup>BUTHELEZI** is a *good* <sup>3</sup>LEADER<sup>5</sup>.”

Sifiso Nene clusters further negatively charged meanings with the ANC, using stronger charging expressions:

(Para. 9) **“Sifiso** said: “The <sup>3</sup>PEOPLE are *fed up with<sup>6</sup>* the <sup>7</sup>ANC and its *empty* <sup>5</sup>promises<sup>5</sup>.”

The colloquialism “fed up with” is a *multidirectional* charger, as shown in Section 7. He accuses the party of making “empty promises”, a *resonant*.

In the last two paragraphs, Buthelezi boasts about his leadership and criticizes other parties:

(Paras. 11–12) <sup>7</sup>HE<sup>P</sup> said his *honest* <sup>8</sup>GOVERNANCE<sup>5</sup> and *good* <sup>1</sup>policies<sup>5</sup> had *attracted*<sup>3</sup> the new<sup>2</sup> <sup>3</sup>RECRUITS. “For <sup>1</sup>instance, <sup>3</sup>SOME PARTIES will *advocate* <sup>8</sup>DEMOCRACY<sup>5</sup> but will *try to buy your* <sup>5</sup>vote<sup>5</sup>, or *manipulate electoral results*<sup>5</sup>.  
<sup>3</sup>SOME will *talk about putting an end to* <sup>8</sup>POVERTY<sup>5</sup>, but will *prioritise*<sup>1</sup> *giving* <sup>1</sup>jobs to <sup>3</sup>FRIENDS<sup>5</sup> and *enriching* <sup>3</sup>TENDERPRENEURS<sup>5</sup>,” <sup>7</sup>HE<sup>P</sup> said.

“Honest governance” and “good policies” are *resonants* which could be used to evaluate positively in various contexts, each time with slightly different meanings. “Governance” is also an *idea* – an abstract concept around which constellations of meaning could be built – which further strengthens the axiological-semantic density of Buthelezi’s boasts.

Buthelezi does not criticize other parties by name but refers to them as “some parties”. This label has weaker axiological-semantic density than the party names; it is part of the *roles and contexts* type, denoting an empty ‘role’ that could be taken up by any specific party. Despite this, in the context of this article it stands for the NFP and ANC and is used by Buthelezi to condense negative charging into their constellation. The condensing function of “some parties” occurs on a broader level of analysis than that described by the wording and charging tools; it can be described in further detail using the sequencing tool, which is introduced in Siebörger (2018).

Buthelezi uses parallelism to mention two things that these parties will do to appear morally virtuous, that is “advocate democracy” and “talk about putting an end to poverty”. Both expressions include *ideas* with strong axiological-semantic density: “democracy” and “poverty”. These expressions are included within *resonants* that introduce strong positive charging. However, on both occasions Buthelezi dramatically reverses the polarity of charging by following these with a strong negative evaluation to accuse the parties of hypocrisy. The first of these refers to ways in which parties subvert democracy: “will try to buy your vote”, and “manipulate electoral results”. Both accusations are *resonants*, condensing very strong negative axiological charging into the “other parties” constellation.

Buthelezi’s second accusation refers to ways in which parties aggravate economic inequality by making a few people rich instead of “putting an end to poverty”: they “will prioritise giving jobs to friends and enriching tenderpreneurs”. Here both “giving jobs to friends” and “enriching tenderpreneurs” are *resonants*. The charging in them is supported by the word “prioritise”, a *frequent* charger which does not evaluate on its own but suggests that benefitting friends is more important for these

parties than ending poverty is. The word “tenderpreneur” is a South African neologism referring to someone who uses his/her political connections to make large profits by winning government tenders, usually at grossly inflated prices. This word, like “friends”, belongs to the *roles and contexts* type of the wording tool in terms of axiological-semantic density, but it enacts very strong negative charging as a *resonant* in South African society.

A profile depicting the fluctuations in axiological-semantic density in the article is shown in Figure 3. This semantic profile reveals that most of the article can be described as a high *semantic flatline*, where the strength of semantic density is relatively constant over a long period (Maton 2014). The headline is at a moderate strength of axiological-semantic density: while it mentions the emotion of “joy” and Buthelezi’s name as IFP leader, it does not have as strong a level of axiological-semantic density as paragraph 1, which mentions the three parties that are central signifiers in the article. Much of the remainder of the first part of the article is dedicated to the negative charging of the IFP’s rivals, leading to strong levels of axiological-semantic density predominating. There is a sharp dip to relatively weak axiological-semantic density in paragraph 10, where Buthelezi says he is “excited to welcome the new members”. Although “excited” is a *vigorous* charger, this does not have nearly as strong an effect as other expressions in the article in evaluating either the IFP or its competitors, and “Buthelezi” is the only signifier from the top half of the wording tool that appears in this paragraph. Towards the end of the article, Buthelezi strengthens axiological-semantic density considerably with his accusations levelled at “some parties” (paras. 11–12), mentioning the *ideas* of “democracy” and “poverty”.

In this example, there is far more negative charging attached to the ANC and NFP than there is positive charging attached to the IFP. When read against the

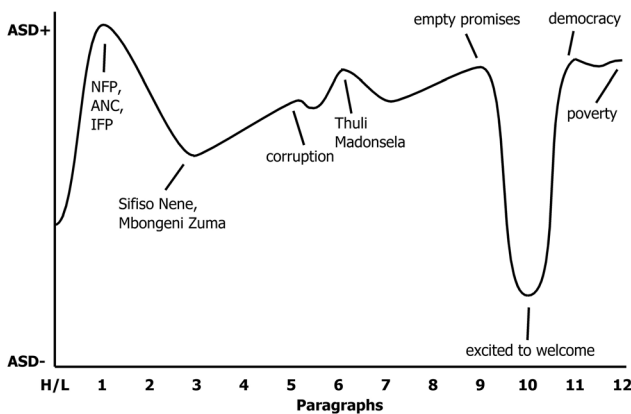


Figure 3: Semantic profile for “Joy as Buthelezi welcomes new members”.

background context outlined in Section 1, it becomes clear that this type of negative political campaigning, as it may be called, has the potential to increase polarization and readers' scepticism about the political process. This article follows a trend evidenced throughout our research on the *Daily Sun*: there is an emphasis on accusations against various politicians or parties; in other words, readers are given reasons *not* to vote for parties, rather than given information about policy decisions of those parties so that they can evaluate these for themselves.

## 9 Implications and applications of the translation device

In this section we briefly describe some of the implications of our translation device for political discourse in the *Daily Sun*, and for our understanding of axiological-semantic density more generally.

Firstly, the distinction between the wording tool and the charging tool reveals that there may be a division of labour between classes of words that are more useful in enacting axiological-semantic density (wording tool), and other classes of words and expressions that are more useful in charging these words axiologically (charging tool). In the translation device, the wording tool largely describes nouns, while the charging tool describes mostly verbs, adjectives and adverbs and multi-word expressions that combine them. As shown in Section 8, there are some nouns like “tenderpreneur” and “corruption” that both possess axiological-semantic density and enact axiological charging; where these are used, hypercharging tends to take place, rapidly escalating the strength of positive or negative values associated with a constellation. Use of this translation device and adaptations of it have the potential to reveal much about how the relationship between axiological-semantic density and axiological charging plays out in various knowledge practices.

Secondly, the ordering of the top four types in the wording tool yields an interesting insight into the nature of South African political discourse. *Ideas*, abstract systems of thought, emerged at the top of the wording tool, since they are frequently central signifiers in constellations in the *Daily Sun* articles we analysed. However, in some political systems, it is conceivable that *leaders* may be placed higher than *ideas* in terms of axiological-semantic density. The high position of *ideas* shows that more axiological meanings attach to systems of ideas in South African politics than to individual parties and political leaders. This may be a

positive sign, allowing these leaders and parties to be measured against the values and ideals they espouse more easily.

In designing the charging tool, we found that the chief factor that distinguishes the stronger types of charging from each other is the extent to which the charging expressions have resonance, that is, the extent to which the expressions influence a variety of meanings, rather than just one or two. This meaning of the term *resonance* is described and used by Maton and Doran (2017b) in their description of the ESD translation device. The strongest type of charging, *multi-directional* charging, refers to expressions which have extremely strong resonance because they charge more than one signifier in the text. The second strongest type, *resonant* charging, refers to expressions which charge only one signifier in the text, but where use of figurative language or multiple meanings allow meanings to resonate out to multiple contexts. *Vigorous* and *placid* charging refers to expressions that are less resonant because they are used typically only in one context. This shows that strength of charging, in the *Daily Sun* data, has much to do with the extent to which the meanings of charging expressions can be transferred to other signifiers and other contexts.

At the beginning of this article, we referred to the fact that studying axiological-semantic density is particularly pertinent in understanding political discourse, particularly in the many societies such as South Africa where political polarization is deepening. In the light of this context, building a translation device for axiological-semantic density is important because it makes visible the ways that political discourse in the *Daily Sun* is used to express political stances, moral judgements, values and emotions. In contexts of political polarization, it enables us to see how judgements and values are being used to divide people into opposing camps. Frequently, people from these camps ‘talk past’ each other using words that condense values in quite opaque ways, using axiologically-charged expressions like dog-whistles to build up sentiment against people on the opposing side.

One way to counteract this effect could be to help people understand axiology better. A translation device is one step towards showing everyday people the ways in which axiological condensation is happening. In a school context, for example, this research can be used as a basis for resources that help learners study the characteristics and discursive effects of value-laden language in media texts. For adults, short news articles or videos or any other kind of medium could be used to achieve similar goals. The first author has begun doing this in a blog associated with the *Mail & Guardian*, an influential South African newspaper (see <https://thoughtleader.co.za/author/ian-sieborger/>). This is becoming more and more important in the so-called ‘post-truth’ era, in which it is becoming harder and harder to distinguish facts from fake news. Our hope is that focusing attention on the effects of value-laden language in our political discourses may empower people to participate more meaningfully in democracy.

## Appendix: Example news article – “Joy as Buthelezi welcomes new members” by Bongani Gina, *Daily Sun*, 26 May 2015

*Joy*<sup>4</sup> as <sup>7</sup>BUTHELEZI *welcomes*<sup>3</sup> new<sup>2</sup> <sup>3</sup>MEMBERS<sup>2</sup>

1. *More than 500*<sup>3</sup> <sup>3</sup>PEOPLE *left*<sup>5</sup> the <sup>7</sup>NFP and <sup>7</sup>ANC to *join*<sup>5</sup> the <sup>7</sup>IFP.
2. <sup>3</sup>THEY<sup>P</sup> were *welcomed*<sup>3</sup> by <sup>7</sup>IFP LEADER MANGOSUTHU BUTHELEZI at <sup>4</sup>TRURO HALL in <sup>4</sup>NORTHDALE, PIETERMARITZBURG on <sup>3</sup>SUNDAY.
3. Among <sup>3</sup>THOSE<sup>P</sup> who *left*<sup>5</sup> the <sup>7</sup>ANC are <sup>6</sup>former<sup>3</sup> party leader<sup>3</sup> at Jika Joe squatter camp, Sifiso Nene and <sup>6</sup>former<sup>3</sup> Mafakatini ANC leader<sup>3</sup>, Mbongeni Zuma.
4. <sup>6</sup>Mbongeni is the <sup>3</sup>RELATIVE of <sup>7</sup>PRESIDENT JACOB ZUMA.
5. <sup>6</sup>I<sup>P</sup> *left*<sup>5</sup> the <sup>7</sup>ANC because there's *a lot of*<sup>8</sup> <sup>8</sup>CORRUPTION<sup>5</sup> in the <sup>3</sup>PARTY,” said <sup>6</sup>Mbongeni.
6. <sup>6</sup>I<sup>P</sup> have never heard<sup>1</sup> of <sup>7</sup>PUBLIC PROTECTOR THULI MADONSELA *investigating*<sup>3</sup> any <sup>7</sup>IFP <sup>3</sup>OFFICIAL for <sup>8</sup>CORRUPTION<sup>5</sup>.
7. “But in the <sup>7</sup>ANC, that is *common*<sup>3</sup>.”
8. <sup>6</sup>I<sup>P</sup> *joined*<sup>5</sup> the <sup>7</sup>IFP because <sup>6</sup>I<sup>P</sup> believe<sup>1</sup> that <sup>7</sup>BUTHELEZI is a *good*<sup>3</sup> <sup>3</sup>LEADER<sup>5</sup>.”
9. <sup>6</sup>Sifiso said: “The <sup>3</sup>PEOPLE are *fed up with*<sup>6</sup> the <sup>7</sup>ANC and its *empty*<sup>5</sup> <sup>5</sup>promises<sup>5</sup>.”
10. <sup>7</sup>BUTHELEZI said <sup>7</sup>HE<sup>P</sup> was *excited*<sup>4</sup> to *welcome*<sup>3</sup> the new<sup>2</sup> <sup>3</sup>MEMBERS.
11. <sup>7</sup>HE<sup>P</sup> said his *honest*<sup>8</sup> <sup>8</sup>GOVERNANCE<sup>5</sup> and *good*<sup>1</sup> <sup>1</sup>policies<sup>5</sup> had *attracted*<sup>3</sup> the new<sup>2</sup> <sup>3</sup>RECRUITS. “For <sup>1</sup>instance, <sup>3</sup>SOME PARTIES will *advocate*<sup>8</sup> <sup>8</sup>DEMOCRACY<sup>5</sup> but will *try to buy your*<sup>5</sup> <sup>5</sup>vote<sup>5</sup>, or *manipulate electoral results*<sup>5</sup>.”
12. “<sup>3</sup>SOME will *talk about putting an end to*<sup>8</sup> <sup>8</sup>POVERTY<sup>5</sup>, but will *prioritise*<sup>1</sup> *giving*<sup>1</sup> <sup>1</sup>jobs to <sup>3</sup>FRIENDS<sup>5</sup> and *enriching*<sup>3</sup> <sup>3</sup>TENDERPRENEURS<sup>5</sup>,” <sup>7</sup>HE<sup>P</sup> said.

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