



Conceptual Integration of Contextual Synonyms in Contemporary English Media Discourse

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Abstract: Contextual synonymy plays a significant role in contemporary media discourse by shaping semantic emphasis and emotional framing through figurative lexical choices. While previous research has examined metaphorical and evaluative language within individual domains, systematic cross-discursive comparisons remain limited. This study investigates the mechanisms underlying the creation and functioning of contextual synonyms in medical, political, and sports media texts and analyses their pragmatic role in structuring meaning within contemporary English media discourse. The analysis draws on qualitative content analysis supplemented by discourse-analytical interpretation and descriptive statistics. The corpus comprises 300 texts from five British newspapers (The Guardian, The Telegraph, Daily Mail, Mirror, and The Sun). A total of 325 instances of contextual synonyms were manually identified and coded: 120 in medical discourse, 95 in political discourse, and 110 in sports discourse. Contextual synonyms were operationalised as lexical items or multi-word expressions that substitute more neutral terms while introducing evaluative, metaphorical, or imagistic meaning. The units were classified into four functional-semantic categories: military vocabulary, zoomorphic images, strength/endurance images, and cognitive-psychological images. The findings demonstrate systematic cross-discursive variation. Medical discourse is dominated by military metaphors framing health issues as crises requiring mobilisation. Political discourse relies extensively on zoomorphic and cognitive-psychological imagery that stabilises moral evaluation and reinforces ideological polarisation. Sports discourse privileges strength and animal metaphors that contribute to heroisation and spectacle. The study concludes that contextual synonymy functions as a higher-order framing mechanism linking lexical choice, emotional valence, and discursive strategy. By proposing a unified functional-semantic model, the research offers a framework for analysing evaluative language across media domains and provides a basis for further cross-linguistic and cross-cultural investigation.

Keywords: Cognitive Metaphor, Contextual Synonyms, Emotional Tone, Metaphors, Semantic Analysis, Zoomorphism

1. Introduction

Contextual synonyms play an important role in modern mass media discourse, allowing authors to create imagery, evoke emotion, and introduce semantic ambiguity in texts (Al Falaq & Puspita, 2021). Compared to ordinary synonyms, they have a narrower scope of use because their meaning is determined by context. They are often formed through metaphorization, metonymy, or secondary nomination, which gives words additional semantic nuances (Tilavova, 2023). Such lexical units intensify readers' emotional responses, generate new associative chains, and contribute to the personification of phenomena or characters.

English media discourse is a rich source of contextual synonyms, as journalists draw on metaphorical imagery to engage audiences and make news stories more memorable (Semen, 2021). The role of contextual synonyms in media discourse goes beyond that of a simple stylistic device: they create semantic accents, emphasize certain features of objects or phenomena, influence the tone of messages, and often become the basis for creating memes, slogans, or headlines (Lazebna & Prykhodko, 2021). These synonyms help authors convey complex emotions, build tension, and form clear images for the audience (Guo & Sandaran, 2023).

Differences in the use of contextual synonyms across discourses underscore the importance of studying them for a deeper understanding of media discourse (Li et al., 2023). Despite significant research in this area, the issue of integrating contextual synonyms across thematic discourses remains underexplored, necessitating further empirical investigation. The aim of this research is to examine the mechanisms of the creation and functioning of contextual synonyms in modern English media discourse and to determine their role in shaping emotional connotations and semantic accents in medical, political, and sports texts.

In doing so, the study addresses a specific conceptual gap in current research. Previous work has typically focused on individual domains (for example, medicine or politics) and described contextual synonymy as isolated metaphorical or evaluative patterns. What remains lacking is a cross-discursive model that demonstrates how contextual synonyms integrate sema-

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-ntic fields and pragmatic functions across several media domains within the same national media system. By comparing medical, political, and sports texts through a unified coding scheme and a shared set of functional-semantic categories, we aim to move beyond the purely descriptive accumulation of examples and to demonstrate how contextual synonymy contributes to crisis framing, othering, and heroisation in contemporary English media.

More specifically, this study contributes to research on contextual synonymy in three ways. First, it applies a unified coding scheme to three major media discourses (medical, political, and sports) within a single national media system. Second, it distinguishes four functional-semantic categories of contextual synonyms, military vocabulary, zoomorphic images, strength/endurance images, and cognitive-psychological images, and models their pragmatic load in each discourse. Third, it proposes a comparative pragmatic model of contextual synonymy integration across these domains, showing how recurrent synonymic patterns support crisis framing, othering, and heroisation in contemporary English media. This notion of contextual synonymy integration is theoretically grounded in conceptual metaphor theory, semantic field theory, and research on evaluative and emotional framing, which together inform our functional-semantic categories and the comparative analysis in the later sections.

- Analyse the frequency of use of contextual synonyms in medical, political, and sports texts.
- Identify the main categories of contextual synonyms used in each discourse.
- Investigate the influence of contextual synonyms on the creation of emotional connotations and semantic accents in texts of different genres.

2. Literature Review

A critical analysis of the literature on contextual synonymy, semantic groups, and metaphorical thinking in contemporary discourses reveals both convergences and divergences among different scholarly approaches.

The study of contextual synonymy as a situation-dependent phenomenon is a central area of contemporary research. This is clearly reflected in Basile (2022), who emphasizes that the meaning of contextual synonyms is determined not only by lexical characteristics but also by the broader context of their use. This view is supported by Gooding et al. (2021), who argue that word complexity and contextual synonymy often depend on cognitive aspects of perception as well as on social factors. Syrett (2024) further adds that pragmatics and context are crucial for interpreting the meaning of synonyms, highlighting the multilevel nature of lexical variability. However, Del Tredici (2020) introduces an additional dimension, noting that communication is often asymmetrical, with some words having more synonyms or connotations than others, which can significantly influence the dynamics of discourse.

In political discourse, synonymy also plays a significant role. Tsvirkun (2020) emphasizes that synonyms are employed to enhance rhetorical effects and influence the audience, creating associative series that strengthen argumentative impact. Similar views are expressed by Braçaj (2020) and Pasternak (2023), who observe that political language frequently utilizes metaphors and synonyms to construct positive or negative images of political actors. Yu and Zheng (2022) add that cultural differences substantially affect the choice of contextual synonyms, as distinct political systems generate different semantic fields. Bosworth (2023) examines the role of lexical choices in shaping public perceptions of political figures, stressing the importance of accurate translation and appropriate synonym selection in political contexts. This aligns with Diachuk (2024), who underscores the key role of contextual synonyms in political discourse, where individual lexical choices can significantly influence audience perception. Both studies highlight the importance of cultural context for the accurate interpretation of political communication.

The study by Absattar et al. (2022) demonstrates that the functional load of synonyms depends on the thematic category of news coverage. In political discourse, negatively evaluated synonyms (fear, threat, failure) tend to dominate, whereas in entertainment materials, lexemes with positive connotations (joy, hope, inspiration) are more prevalent. This confirms that not only the discursive genre but also the thematic focus influences lexical selection and the message's emotional tone. Jähde et al. (2025) approach synonymy through automated analyses of media bias, employing topic modelling, sentiment analysis, and Large Language Models (LLMs) to identify lexical differences across ideologically oriented sources. In this perspective, contextual synonyms function as markers of positionality, and their variability reflects deeper semantic strategies of audience influence. Complementing these findings, Caiani et al. (2021), Castaño-Pulgarin et al. (2021), and Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas (2021) demonstrate that in explicitly radicalised online environments, emotionally charged synonymic choices and metaphors intensify hate speech, polarise in-groups and out-groups, and “play on emotions” such as fear, confusion, and national pride.

Sports discourse also actively employs contextual synonyms to create dramatic effects. Barseghyan (2020) identifies numerous semantic groups in sports reporting, including war metaphors that emphasize competition and rivalry. This observation is consistent with Elsoufy's (2024) findings, which interpret sports texts as representations of constant struggle and challenge, reinforced by emotionally coloured lexical choices. In *Semantic Groups of Vocabulary in Sports Reports*, Barseghyan (2020) examines the role of semantic groupings in sports journalism, emphasizing the frequent use of war metaphors and other emotionally marked lexical units to heighten competitive dynamics and dramatize events. Similarly, Graichen (2023), in his study *Context-Aware Swedish Lexical Simplification*, highlights the importance of context for accurately interpreting lexical units, including sports terminology. Both authors stress the need to select synonyms appropriately for the specific communicative situation.

Medical discourse, according to Elsoufy's (2024), likewise actively employs contextual synonymy to heighten dramatic effect and intensify emotional impact. This is confirmed by Naamati-Schneider and Gabay (2022), who observe that war metaphors used by medical directors during the COVID-19 pandemic helped structure the experience of crisis and mobilize audiences for action. However, Zhang et al. (2021) argue that medical discourse may also contain more technical and neutral contextual synonyms that perform cognitively oriented functions, assisting in the structuring of complex medical concepts.

Overall, the reviewed literature demonstrates that contextual synonymy is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon shaped by cultural, social, cognitive, and discourse-specific factors. Despite extensive research across individual domains, a systematic cross-discursive comparison within a single media system remains underdeveloped.

Against this background, the present study integrates three partially overlapping strands of research: studies of contextual synonymy and semantic variation, analyses of metaphorical and zoomorphic modelling in media discourse, and investigations of emotional and evaluative framing. Drawing on these approaches, we justify four functional-semantic categories of contextual synonyms, military vocabulary, zoomorphic images, strength/endurance images, and cognitive-psychological images, and propose a comparative design that conceptualizes medical, political, and sports discourse as interconnected arenas of symbolic struggle. This synthesis provides the theoretical foundation for our coding scheme and for the cross-discursive interpretation of the findings.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design

The aim of the research was achieved through a step-by-step procedure that included forming a representative sample, extracting contextual synonyms, analyzing them, and classifying them. A summary of the main stages of the research is presented below (Table 1).

Table 1: Stages of the research into the conceptual integration of contextual synonyms in contemporary English media discourse.

Research stages	Description of actions	Quantitative parameters
1. Sampling	The texts were selected from 5 British English media (The Guardian, The Telegraph, Daily Mail, Mirror, The Sun)	300 texts: 100 medical, 100 political, 100 sports
2. Initial reading of texts	The texts were read and initially reviewed to identify potential figurative meanings	All 300 texts
3. Extraction of contextual units	Examples of lexemes and word combinations that function as contextual synonyms were manually removed from the texts	Medical , 120; political , 95; sports , 110
4. Contextual semantic analysis	An analysis of the meaning of each example in a specific context was carried out to determine the type of substitution	Manual coding in tables
5. Classification of synonyms	Examples were distributed by categories: military vocabulary, zoomorphisms, images of strength/endurance, cognitive-psychological images	4 categories for comparison
6. Frequency counting	The number of uses of each category of synonyms in each thematic discourse was recorded	The data are expressed in number of cases and percentages
7. Creation of tables and graphs	Tables and diagrams were created to visually represent the distribution	Excel/Google Sheets are used
8. Interpretations	The functional load of each type of synonym was analysed	The explanation provided in the Discussion section

*Developed by the author

Each stage was carefully planned to ensure the representativeness of the results and to minimize subjectivity in assessing linguistic phenomena. These stages were implemented sequentially to systematize examples of contextual synonyms and identify patterns in their use across different types of media discourse. This procedure provided an empirical foundation for further interpretation and comparative analysis.

For the purposes of this study, a contextual synonym was operationalised as a lexical item or multi-word expression that, within a given co-text, performs a substitutive function with respect to another expression while adding a distinct evaluative, metaphorical, or imagistic component. Inclusion criteria required that (a) the expression could reasonably be paraphrased by a more neutral or literal term in the same context, and (b) the choice of the contextual synonym altered the emotional tone, conceptual framing, or degree of personification. Purely technical rephrasings without such shifts were excluded. On this basis, the identified units were grouped into four functional-semantic categories, drawing on semantic field theory and conceptual metaphor research: military vocabulary, zoomorphic images, strength/endurance images (body and mind), and cognitive-psychological images.

3.2. Research methods

To ensure methodological rigour and analytical depth, the study combined qualitative and quantitative approaches within an integrated research design. More specifically, qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis were employed to identify and interpret contextual synonyms, while statistical procedures were used to quantify their distribution across discourses.

First, qualitative content analysis was the primary method for identifying contextual synonyms in the corpus. This approach enabled a systematic examination of semantic features and facilitated the detection of recurrent imagery and metaphorical constructions. The texts were manually analysed to identify lexical items functioning in figurative or contextually extended meanings. Particular attention was paid to zoomorphic images, military terminology, and analogies associated with physical qualities (e.g., strength, endurance). In this way, the analysis focused not merely on lexical substitution, but on instances in which figurative choice introduced additional evaluative, metaphorical, or imagistic components beyond literal reference.

Second, discourse analysis was employed to examine the pragmatic and interpretative functions of contextual synonyms within their communicative contexts. Whereas content analysis identified candidate units, discourse analysis allowed for the investigation of semantic accents, evaluative positioning, and emotional connotations generated by these lexical choices. In particular, the analysis explored how contextual synonyms shaped reader perception, structured associative networks, and contributed to broader framing strategies. For example, in medical texts, lexical items such as “fight” and “battle” intensified the dramatic framing of disease, thereby reinforcing crisis narratives. By contrast, in political discourse, zoomorphic images frequently served to personify political actors and stabilise moral evaluations.

Third, statistical frequency analysis was conducted to quantify the distribution of contextual synonyms across the three discourse domains. The total number of occurrences of each functional-semantic category (military vocabulary, zoomorphic metaphors, strength/endurance images, and cognitive-psychological images) was calculated. Subsequently, percentage distributions were computed to enable systematic cross-disciplinary comparison and to identify statistically meaningful patterns.

To ensure analytical consistency, a detailed coding guideline was developed specifying decision rules for assigning each contextual synonym to one of the four functional-semantic categories defined in Section 3.1. Category assignment was grounded in semantic field membership (e.g., war/struggle lexemes) as well as dominant conceptual metaphor mappings (e.g., HUMAN AS ANIMAL; BODY AS MACHINE). Thus, classification was theory-driven rather than impressionistic.

The coding procedure was carried out by two trained linguists with expertise in discourse analysis. Initially, during a pilot phase, the coders jointly annotated a subset of 60 texts (20 from each discourse) to refine the operational definition of contextual synonymy and clarify inclusion and exclusion criteria for borderline cases. Following this calibration stage, 20% of the corpus (61 texts) were independently double-coded.

Inter-coder reliability was assessed using Cohen's kappa for two dimensions: (a) identification of contextual synonyms (presence vs. absence of a contextual-synonymic relation) and (b) assignment to the four functional-semantic categories. Agreement for identification was substantial (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.82$), while agreement for category assignment was good (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.76$), indicating satisfactory methodological reliability. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion, after which the consolidated coding scheme was established as the reference standard. The remaining texts were subsequently coded by the first author in accordance with the validated guidelines.

3.3. Sample

The corpus comprised 300 English-language media texts, with 100 texts in each thematic domain: medical, political, and sports discourse. The texts were drawn from five widely circulated British publications, The Guardian, The Telegraph, Daily Mail, Mirror, and The Sun. These outlets were selected because they represent diverse editorial styles, genres, and readership profiles, thereby ensuring discursive heterogeneity within a single national media system.

The total number of texts was determined in order to provide a sufficiently robust dataset for cross-discursive comparison while also allowing for qualitative depth of analysis. Moreover, equal distribution across the three thematic groups enabled systematic comparison of contextual synonym use across domains. Within each group, texts were authored by different writers and spanned multiple journalistic formats (including news reports, analytical articles, and blog-style commentary). This design was intended to capture typical patterns of contextual synonym deployment as they occur across genre and stylistic variation.

3.4. Instruments

To facilitate systematic data processing and analysis, several digital tools were employed. First, qualitative data analysis software (MAXQDA and NVivo) was used to organise, systematise, and manually code contextual synonym instances. These platforms enabled structured annotation and category assignment according to the established coding scheme. Second, spreadsheet software (Microsoft Excel and Google Sheets) was used for frequency calculations and the visualisation of distribution patterns. These tools supported the quantitative component of the analysis and ensured transparency in data processing.

Percentages were calculated using the following formula:

$$P = \frac{n}{N} \times 100 \quad (1)$$

where:

P represents the percentage of cases for each synonym type.

n denotes the number of identified cases;

N indicates the total number of cases in the sample.

3.5. Analytical Positioning

Taken together, these methodological procedures enabled a comprehensive analysis that integrated qualitative interpretation with quantitative distributional evidence. Because the corpus was constructed through purposive sampling rather than probabilistic sampling, the study is primarily qualitative and exploratory. Accordingly, descriptive statistics (raw frequencies and percentages) were employed to characterise distributional tendencies across discourses rather than to support broad generalisations.

Nevertheless, to assess whether observed differences across discourse domains were statistically meaningful, a chi-square test was conducted on the contingency table in Table 2. The result ($\chi^2(6, N = 325) = 106.81, p < .001$) indicates a statistically significant association between discourse type and synonym category. Thus, the distributional contrasts identified in the corpus are unlikely to be attributable to random variation. At the same time, given the purposive nature of the sample, interpretative emphasis remains on pragmatic and discursive patterns rather than on universal generalisation beyond the selected media outlets.

4. Results

Figure 1 shows the number of contextual synonyms identified across three thematic domains of media discourse: medical, political, and sports. The analysis was conducted on a corpus of 300 texts (100 in each category). Only those cases were included in which lexical items functioned in a figurative sense, generating additional associative connections or emotional connotations beyond their literal meaning.

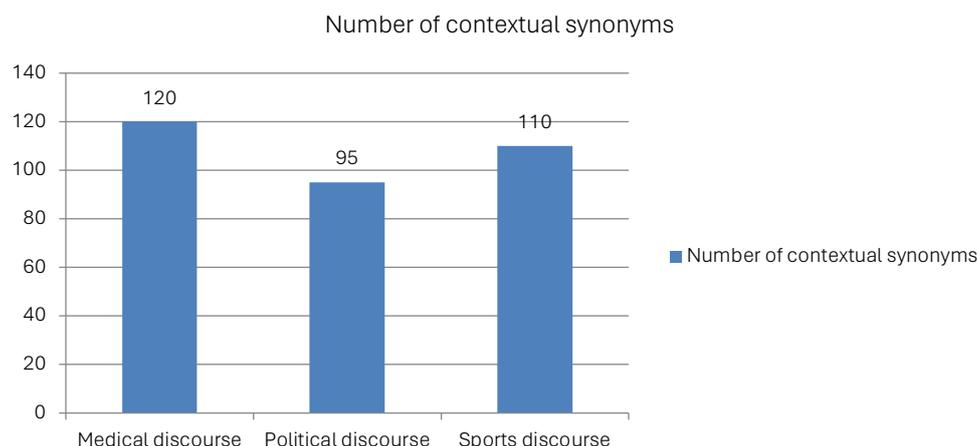


Figure 1: Number of identified contextual synonyms in medical, political, and sports texts

*Developed by the author

Medical discourse demonstrates the largest number of contextual synonyms (120 cases). This predominance can be explained by the widespread use of metaphors of struggle (e.g., “fight against disease”, “war on cancer”), which construct an image of protection and resistance to health threats. Such vocabulary heightens the perceived seriousness of medical situations and reinforces a sense of urgency. Previous studies indicate that militarised metaphors of this type may increase anxiety and fear among audiences, thereby significantly influencing the perception of medical problems.

Political discourse, although containing fewer contextual synonyms (95 cases), employs a rich repertoire of zoomorphic and military imagery to describe political processes and actors. For instance, lexical items such as “hawk” and “dove” symbolise tough and conciliatory approaches, respectively, thereby creating stable associative series. Through such metaphorical framing, political actors are personified and placed within recognisable evaluative categories, making their positions more vivid and accessible for readers.

Sports discourse ranks second in overall frequency (110 cases), attributable to frequent use of metaphors emphasising strength, speed, and courage. Expressions such as “the lion of the field” or “tiger-like reflexes” associate athletes with predatory animals, foregrounding their physical superiority and competitive spirit. These metaphorical constructions create an atmosphere of rivalry and dramatise sporting events, thereby intensifying audience engagement. Figure 2 presents the distribution of contextual synonym categories within each discourse. The percentages shown on the y-axis are calculated relative to the total number of contextual synonyms identified within each discourse domain.

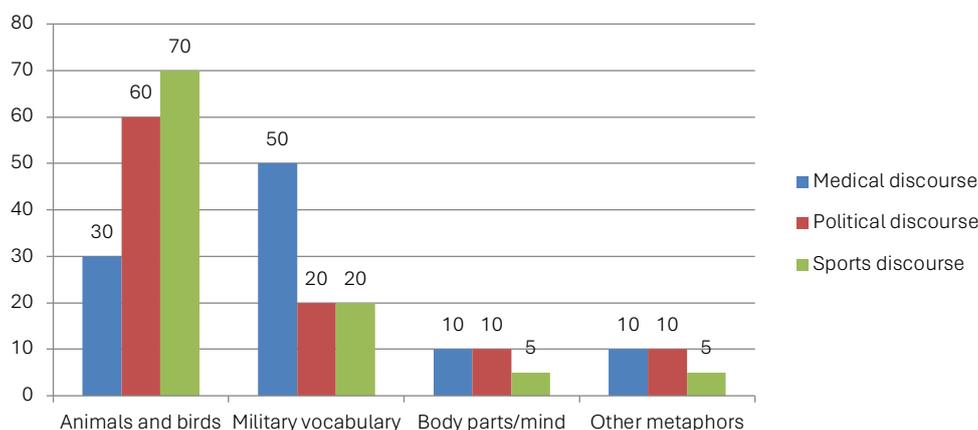


Figure 2: Distribution of categories of contextual synonyms in different discourses

* Developed by the author

The comparison reveals clear cross-discursive differences. Political discourse relies heavily on representations of agents as animals or birds (e.g., “villain”, “predator”) and on established political archetypes such as *hawk* and *dove*. In contrast, medical discourse contains a significant proportion of military vocabulary (e.g., “struggle”, “campaign”), where the emphasis is placed on the “fighting spirit” against disease. Sports discourse, meanwhile, is dominated by animal imagery used to personify strength (for example, describing a football player as a “great lion”), although motifs of battle and confrontation also appear in match descriptions.

More broadly, each category of contextual synonym introduces additional semantic characteristics to the referent. Military metaphors mobilise the imagination around narratives of struggle and survival. Zoomorphic metaphors highlight personal traits such as cunning, bravery, or aggression. Cognitive-psychological images frame phenomena in terms of mental states and evaluative perception. For example, the expression “brain rot”, described in *The Guardian* as a metaphor for trivial material, constructs the idea of digital erosion of cognitive abilities and reframes media consumption as a process of mental decline.

Thus, the identified contextual synonyms do not merely decorate the discourse but actively reshape its tone and guide the interpretation of events through a figurative lens. From a cross-discursive perspective, these distributional patterns suggest that contextual synonymy serves to align semantic fields with discourse-specific communicative purposes. In medical texts, military vocabulary clusters around crisis framing and the construction of collective vulnerability and mobilisation. In political discourse, zoomorphic and cognitive-psychological images stabilise moral evaluations and polarise the symbolic space into allies and opponents. In sports reporting, images of strength and endurance support processes of heroisation and the ritualisation of competition.

The aggregated distribution of contextual synonym categories is presented in Table 2. A chi-square test based on the frequencies in Table 2 indicates that the association between discourse type and synonym category is statistically significant ($\chi^2(6, N = 325) = 106.81, p < .001$), supporting the interpretation that these contrasts are systematic rather than random.

Table 2: Distribution of contextual synonyms by categories in three discourses

Synonyms category	Medical discourse	Political discourse	Sports discourse	Total	% of total
Military vocabulary	78	28	16	122	37.7%
Zoomorphic images	10	42	56	108	33.3%
Images of strength / endurance (body parts and mind)	12	9	34	55	17.0%
Cognitive psychological images	20	16	4	40	12.0%
Total	120	95	110	325	100%

* Developed by the author

Below is a table (Table 3) showing examples of contextual synonyms used in contemporary English media discourse.

Table 3: Comparison of contextual synonyms across three discourses

Contextual synonym	Meaning	Medical discourse	Political discourse	Sports discourse
Battle / Fight	Fighting a disease or problem	<i>The fight against cancer, battle with depression</i>	<i>Political battles over immigration reform</i>	<i>A fierce battle on the field</i>
Hawk	A supporter of tough policies	–	<i>One of the most prominent hawks in Congress</i>	–
Dove	A supporter of peaceful policies	–	<i>The peace talks were led by a known dove</i>	–
Fox	Cunning	–	<i>The cunning fox in the political game</i>	–
Lion	Strength, courage	–	<i>The lion of the Senate</i> (leader in the Senate, brave politician)	<i>The lion on the field</i> (indomitable player, team leader)
Snake	Cunning, treachery	–	<i>A snake in the political arena</i> (traitor in politics, insidious figure)	–
Brain rot	Metaphor for information overload or cognitive exhaustion	<i>Social media is causing brain rot</i> (social networks lead to mental degradation)	–	–
Titan	Power, influence, greatness	–	<i>A titan of industry</i> (industry giant)	<i>A titan on the field</i> (dominant player, undefeated champion)
Shark	Aggression, competitiveness	–	<i>Sharks in the political waters</i> (aggressive competitors in politics)	<i>A shark on the field</i> (aggressive, ruthless player)
Eagle	Foresight, observation	<i>An eagle-eyed doctor</i> (attentive doctor)	<i>An eagle in the political landscape</i> (far-sighted politician, strategist)	–
Wolves	Teamwork, unity	–	<i>The wolves of Wall Street</i> (aggressive financiers)	<i>The wolves in defence</i> (united defence, strong team)
Bull	Physical strength, stubbornness	–	<i>The political bull charging through reforms</i> (an assertive politician who pushes for reforms)	<i>A bull on the pitch</i> (a player who acts aggressively, physically strong)
Bear	Heaviness, strength, threat	–	<i>The bear of economic pressure</i> (economic pressure, threat)	–
Tiger	Aggressiveness, determination	–	–	<i>A tiger in the ring</i> (aggressive boxer, brave fighter)
Horse	Resilience, endurance	<i>A workhorse in the lab</i> (reliable, hardworking researcher)	<i>A dark horse in the election</i> (unexpected favourite in the elections)	<i>A horse on the track</i> (hardy strong player)

* Developed by the author

The table further demonstrates that abstract metaphors (e.g., “struggle”, “mental disorder”) prevail in medical texts, whereas political and sports discourse more frequently employ figurative and archetypal imagery (e.g., “hawk/dove”, “villain/brave lion”). Each of these metaphorical configurations generates specific connotative effects: war imagery intensifies perceptions of threat and urgency; animal metaphors attribute characterological features to individuals; and transferred meanings introduce critical evaluative perspectives on phenomena.

Overall, the results confirm that contextual synonyms play an active role in shaping media discourse. By introducing metaphorical, evaluative, and affective dimensions, they contribute to the emotional colouring of events and structure

interpretative frameworks within each thematic domain. For a more comprehensive understanding of the functional load of contextual synonyms, a generalising model of their pragmatic functions is proposed in Table 4. In medical discourse, contextual synonyms primarily dramatise events: military metaphors such as fight, war, and battle intensify perceptions of threat and urgency while mobilising emotions of fear, anxiety, empathy, and solidarity. Consequently, medical texts display a heightened degree of emotional tension.

Table 4: Pragmatic functions of contextual synonyms in media discourses.

Discourse	The main function of synonyms	Emotional effect	Examples of images
Medical	Dramatization of the situation, mobilization	Anxiety, tension	fight, war, battle
Political	Personification, rhetorical impact	Sympathy/antagonism	hawk, dove, fox, bull
Sports	Heroization, energy	Enthusiasm, tension	lion, tiger, warrior, titan

* Developed by the author

In political discourse, contextual synonyms primarily serve to personify political phenomena and actors. Through zoomorphic images (e.g., *hawk*, *dove*, *fox*), political figures are assigned metaphorical portraits that often carry ideologically charged connotations. This strategy facilitates the identification of political camps and evokes emotional responses ranging from approval to antagonism. In this sense, synonymous variation functions as a tool of discursive influence appealing to imaginative and evaluative cognition.

In contrast, sports discourse tends to heroise its subjects. Lexical items such as *lion*, *tiger*, *warrior*, and *titan* construct an elevated image of the athlete as exceptional and superior. Such representations generate a sense of spectacle, admiration, and emotional involvement, sometimes even invoking patriotic pride. Accordingly, contextual synonyms in sports reporting enhance excitement and reinforce audience engagement. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that the pragmatic load of contextual synonymy is closely connected to the communicative and functional specificities of each discourse domain. Contextual synonyms, therefore, operate as strategic mechanisms in modelling emotional impact and structuring semantic emphasis in contemporary media discourse.

5. Discussion

The findings of the present study confirm that contextual synonyms are used with considerable frequency in contemporary media discourse. Compared with recent scholarship, the results show strong convergence with established trends. In particular, Naamati-Schneider and Gabay (2022) observe that the metaphor “*we are at war*” and related expressions were highly prominent in COVID-19 media coverage, where they functioned to construct symbolic responses that mobilised emotions of fear, uncertainty, and national pride. Similarly, Tan et al. (2021) demonstrate that war-related terminology is widely used in sports journalism because of the perceived conceptual analogy between sport and warfare. Our corpus, which contains 110 sports examples with numerous references to fighting and battle, aligns closely with these findings.

More broadly, numerous studies have identified a high proportion of military-based contextual synonyms in both sports and medical discourse. The quantitative results of the present study (120 medical, 110 sports, 95 political examples) reinforce this observation. At the same time, zoomorphic imagery emerges as another prominent feature. For instance, Pasternak (2023) shows that expressions such as “*Russia is a beast*” or “*Russia is a bear*” function as strategies of discursive “othering” in English-language media. Maslova (2023) likewise argues that zoomorphisms in political discourse contribute to constructing fragments of the political worldview while saturating them with evaluative connotations. Our analysis identified a substantial number of comparable figurative constructions in political texts, including representations of the “enemy-beast” or the “hero-beastman,” thereby confirming these observations.

Although zoomorphisms have been less extensively examined in sports discourse, our materials contain frequent comparisons of athletes to strong or predatory animals (e.g., “*like tigers*”), indicating the salience of strength and endurance imagery in this genre. Importantly, the category of “images of strength/endurance,” which we identify as analytically distinct, often intersects with the broader metaphorical model *SPORT IS WAR*, within which athletes are conceptualised as warriors. Thus, while metaphorical patterns overlap across discourses, their semantic emphasis varies according to communicative purpose. These findings support the broader claim that contextual synonymy performs structurally comparable functions across different media domains.

The reviewed literature consistently underscores the prevalence of militarised metaphors in media discourse. In sports journalism, such metaphors are virtually conventionalised, as demonstrated by corpus-based research and longitudinal studies. Our data confirm this tendency: among the 110 sports examples, recurrent lexical items such as “*fight*,” “*defence*,” and “*strike*” appear with notable frequency, corroborating Tan et al.’s (2021) conclusion regarding the ubiquity of military terminology in sports reporting. Similarly, in medical discourse, particularly during the pandemic, war metaphors have been extensively documented (Naamati-Schneider & Gabay, 2022), which corresponds with our identification of numerous military-based contextual synonyms in 120 medical texts.

Earlier research has also addressed evaluative synonymous structures in British medical journalism. Kazymir (2023), for example, examined lexical variation as a strategy for enhancing expressiveness. However, the present study extends this line of inquiry by moving beyond the documentation of lexical variability toward a systematic analysis of its pragmatic functions within contemporary media discourse. Particular attention is given to the relationship between synonymous variation and emotional valence. Likewise, building on Kazymir’s (2024) analysis of nominative variation in sports discourse, the current research advances the discussion by classifying nominations into functional-semantic categories and isolating the distinctive features of strength and endurance imagery. Furthermore, ideas developed in earlier work (2022; 2024) on metaphorical integration and periphrastic nomination are elaborated here through a detailed examination of contextual synonymy as an evaluative mechanism. The newly analysed material demonstrates how such lexical choices activate the expressive potential of texts and shape the emotional perception of events.

Poplavska et al. (2023) describe the military model of sport in terms of “combat actions,” “participants,” and “results,” yet they do not differentiate these elements according to categories such as strength or endurance. While the overall communicative function identified in their study is comparable to ours, the present classification offers greater analytical precision by distinguishing physical strength imagery as a separate functional-semantic category.

Across the literature, scholars consistently highlight the central role of emotional dynamics in metaphorical framing. War metaphors and zoomorphic representations are repeatedly shown to evoke strong emotional reactions. Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas (2021) note that militarised metaphors “play on emotions,” including fear, confusion, and national pride. Tan et al. (2021) further demonstrate that military imagery in sports journalism, especially when combined with evaluative modifiers such as “*hero*” or “*defeat*,” produces a complex tonal balance incorporating both positive and negative affect. These observations resonate with our findings: contextual synonyms in the analysed corpus frequently intensified emotional tone, contributing to atmospheres of optimism, anxiety, admiration, or tension.

Taken together, the reviewed scholarship and the present findings converge in demonstrating that figurative lexical choices in media discourse function as powerful instruments of emotional influence. While our results largely confirm established conclusions regarding the prevalence of military metaphors and evaluative synonymy, the study contributes several novel insights. First, it offers a unified comparative analysis of three major discourse domains within a single national media system. Second, it proposes a functional-semantic model that differentiates four recurrent types of contextual synonyms and explicates their pragmatic load. Whereas previous research has typically focused on either war metaphors, zoomorphic representations, or evaluative nominations within isolated domains, the present analysis demonstrates how these metaphorical resources are systematically reconfigured across medical, political, and sports discourse.

By revealing these patterned reconfigurations, the study introduces the concept of contextual synonym integration as a higher-order discursive mechanism. Through this mechanism, media discourse reorganises semantic fields and restructures the emotional landscape of public events. Thus, contextual synonymy emerges not merely as a stylistic phenomenon but as a strategic resource in shaping crisis framing, othering processes, and heroisation across contemporary media domains.

6. Conclusions

The present study has demonstrated that contextual synonyms are actively employed across all three thematic domains, medical, political, and sports discourse, yet their distribution and functional load differ systematically. Based on the analysis of 300 texts from five British publications, 325 instances of contextual synonyms were identified: 120 in medical discourse, 95 in political discourse, and 110 in sports discourse. These units were classified into four functional-semantic categories: military vocabulary, zoomorphic images, strength/endurance images, and cognitive-psychological images, which enabled a comparative examination not only of their frequency but also of their pragmatic functions across discourses.

In medical texts, contextual synonyms are predominantly realised through military metaphors such as “*fight against disease*” and “*war on cancer*.” Such expressions frame illness as a collective battle, thereby accentuating urgency, vulnerability, and the necessity of mobilisation. Consequently, contextual synonymy in medical discourse functions as a mechanism of dramatisation, channelling readers’ emotions toward anxiety, empathy, and solidarity.

By contrast, political discourse is characterised by the extensive use of zoomorphic and cognitive-psychological images (e.g., “*hawk*,” “*dove*,” “*beast*,” “*predator*”), which construct metaphorical portraits of political actors and encode relatively stable evaluative positions. Within this domain, contextual synonyms operate as instruments of symbolic inclusion and exclusion, contributing to the polarisation of political space and foregrounding antagonistic alignments between opposing camps.

Sports discourse, in turn, is marked by the predominance of strength and endurance imagery, frequently intertwined with zoomorphic metaphors (e.g., “*lion on the field*,” “*tiger-like reflexes*,” “*warrior*,” “*titan*”). These lexical choices support processes of heroisation, reinforce the ritualised character of competition, and intensify spectators’ emotional involvement. Thus, in sports reporting, contextual synonyms contribute to the construction of spectacle and the elevation of athletic performance into symbolic narrative.

Taken together, the findings indicate that contextual synonymy cannot be reduced to a marginal stylistic device. Rather, it functions as a central mechanism for organising emotional colouring and semantic emphasis in media texts. Through the integration of conceptual metaphors, semantic fields, and genre conventions, contextual synonyms generate coherent scenario-like patterns that guide readers’ interpretations of public events.

Beyond these empirical observations, the study carries broader theoretical implications. By applying a unified functional-semantic model to three media domains within a single national media system, the analysis demonstrates how contextual synonym integration operates as a higher-order framing mechanism. In medical discourse, it supports crisis framing; in political discourse, it reinforces processes of othering and ideological polarisation; and in sports discourse, it sustains heroisation and spectacle. In this respect, the cross-discursive perspective advanced here refines existing accounts of metaphorical and evaluative language in media communication.

Finally, the study suggests that contextual synonymy should be considered a key interface between lexical choice, emotional valence, and discursive strategy. Future research may extend this approach to economic, cultural, or digital media discourses, as well as to cross-linguistic contexts, in order to test the robustness of the proposed functional-semantic model and to explore further how contextual synonyms participate in shaping distinct linguistic representations of social reality.

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