

Media Framing of the 2020 Sabah State Election: A Collocational Study of Malaysian Online Newspapers Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Doi <https://doi.org/10.55640/ijssl-01-10-01>

ABSTRACT

This study explores the media framing of the 2020 Sabah State Election in Malaysia, focusing on a collocational analysis of language used in online newspapers during the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining the frequency and patterns of key terms and phrases associated with the election, the research investigates how media outlets framed political narratives, public sentiments, and the pandemic's influence on voter behavior. Utilizing a corpus linguistic approach, the study identifies common collocations in news coverage, revealing how the pandemic intertwined with political discourse, shaping public perceptions of health, safety, and governance. Findings indicate that media outlets predominantly framed the election within the context of crisis management, political instability, and the government's response to COVID-19. The study highlights the role of language in constructing political realities and its implications for public opinion during times of national uncertainty. This research contributes to understanding the intersections between media, politics, and public health in a pandemic context.

Keywords: media framing, Sabah State Election 2020, COVID-19 pandemic, collocational analysis, online newspapers, political discourse.

INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 was a period of profound political and public health challenges for Malaysia. The nation experienced significant shifts in its political landscape, culminating in the collapse of the Pakatan Harapan federal government and the subsequent formation of the Perikatan Nasional administration. Amidst this political fluidity, the Sabah state election, held on September 26, 2020, emerged as a critical event, drawing considerable national attention. This election was not merely a regional contest; it was widely perceived as a crucial indicator of public sentiment and political stability in the wake of the federal government changes [35, 36]. Adding an unprecedented layer of complexity, the election coincided with a worrying resurgence of COVID-19 cases, particularly concentrated in Sabah, which raised significant concerns about the potential for the electoral process to become a "super-spreader event" [4, 12, 19, 20, 23].

Newspapers, as influential channels of information dissemination, play an indispensable role in shaping public discourse and influencing perceptions, especially during high-stakes electoral periods [14, 24]. Their reporting, through

deliberate lexical choices and the framing of narratives, possesses the power to highlight certain aspects of an event while downplaying others, thereby actively constructing specific realities for their diverse readership [18, 22]. In a multicultural and politically dynamic nation like Malaysia, where various media outlets cater to distinct audiences, a nuanced understanding of the linguistic patterns embedded within their reporting is paramount for a comprehensive grasp of media representation and its societal impact.

Corpus linguistics, a robust methodology centered on the systematic study of language through the analysis of large collections of texts (corpora), offers powerful analytical tools to uncover pervasive patterns and regularities in language use [2, 3, 27, 29]. A foundational concept within this approach is "collocation," defined as the habitual co-occurrence of words beyond mere chance [8]. By meticulously examining collocations, researchers can unveil underlying semantic and ideological associations that might remain obscure through traditional qualitative analysis alone [18, 22]. The strategic integration of corpus linguistics with discourse analysis, commonly referred to

as Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS), provides a powerful and rigorous framework for investigating how social realities are constructed, negotiated, and contested within media texts [2, 9, 16, 21, 26]. Numerous studies have successfully applied the CADS approach to scrutinize political discourse [11, 28], analyze media representations of various societal groups [3, 14], and examine public responses to major events, including global pandemics [17].

Despite the undeniable significance of the 2020 Sabah election and the pivotal role played by Malaysian media in its coverage, there remains a notable lacuna in research that employs a comparative corpus-driven approach to analyze the intricate linguistic patterns in online newspaper reporting of this specific event. This gap is particularly pronounced concerning the complex interplay between political narratives and the concurrent, rapidly escalating COVID-19 crisis. While existing scholarship has explored Malaysian elections [10, 25, 31, 35, 36] and broader Malaysian media discourse [15, 24], as well as the multifaceted impact of COVID-19 [1, 12, 17, 20], a focused comparative collocational analysis specifically addressing this unique confluence of political and public health events in online news is limited.

This study endeavors to bridge this research gap by conducting a comparative analysis of lexical collocations found in the reporting of two prominent Malaysian English-language online newspapers. The focus is on their coverage surrounding the 2020 Sabah State Election Day. Specifically, this research aims to:

1. Identify the most frequent and statistically significant collocations associated with key election-related terms in the coverage of each respective newspaper.
2. Compare and contrast the identified collocational patterns between the two newspapers to uncover similarities and divergences in their framing of the election and its associated issues, with a particular emphasis on the emerging COVID-19 dimension.
3. Discuss the potential ideological implications and discursive stances conveyed through these distinct collocational choices.

By employing a systematic corpus-driven methodology, this research seeks to offer a nuanced and data-driven understanding of how different media outlets presented a critical national event during an unprecedented public health crisis, thereby contributing to the broader field of media studies and corpus linguistics in Southeast Asia.

METHODOLOGY

This comparative collocational analysis was firmly grounded in a Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) framework, harnessing computational tools to systematically examine and interpret linguistic patterns within news texts [2, 16, 22, 27]. The methodological process was structured into distinct phases:

corpus construction, meticulous data processing, and a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis of collocations.

Corpus Construction and Data Collection

Two distinct sub-corpora were meticulously compiled, each representing the online news coverage from a major Malaysian English-language newspaper. For the purpose of this study, and to ensure anonymity and generalizability, these newspapers are referred to as Newspaper A and Newspaper B. The selection of these particular newspapers was based on their established widespread readership and significant influence within the Malaysian online media landscape, a fact supported by various reports on digital news consumption trends in the region [33].

The defined target period for data collection was established to comprehensively capture the crucial days surrounding the 2020 Sabah State Election Day. This period spanned from September 20, 2020, to October 5, 2020. This specific timeframe was chosen to ensure the inclusion of pre-election coverage, real-time election day reporting, and immediate post-election analyses, critically encompassing the period during which concerns about escalating COVID-19 cases, particularly in Sabah, began to intensify [4, 19, 20]. All articles, editorials, and opinion pieces explicitly related to the Sabah election and/or the COVID-19 pandemic published within this specified window were systematically retrieved from the respective online archives of Newspaper A and Newspaper B. Rigorous attention was paid to include articles that explicitly mentioned key terms such as 'Sabah', 'election', 'COVID-19', or other closely related vocabulary.

The collected textual data was then converted into plain text format to ensure optimal compatibility with the chosen corpus analysis software. Each sub-corpus underwent a meticulous cleaning process to remove any extraneous characters, embedded advertisements, navigational elements, or other non-content-bearing text, thereby ensuring that only the relevant news content remained for analysis. The final size of Corpus A (representing Newspaper A's coverage) amounted to approximately 185,000 words, while Corpus B (representing Newspaper B's coverage) comprised approximately 160,000 words. These corpus sizes are substantial enough to allow for robust statistical analysis of linguistic patterns.

Data Processing and Collocation Analysis

The cleaned text files from both corpora were subsequently processed using #LancsBox v. 6.x, a widely

recognized and robust corpus analysis toolkit [6]. This software facilitated several essential preliminary steps for effective collocation analysis, including tokenization (breaking text into individual words or units), part-of-speech tagging (identifying the grammatical category of each word), and generating frequency counts of all tokens [32].

The central focus of the analysis revolved around identifying statistically significant collocations. In line with Firth's seminal definition, collocations are understood as words that habitually co-occur with each other with a frequency greater than what would be expected by chance [8]. For the purpose of this study, the following key terms, or "node words," were strategically selected for their central relevance to the research topic:

- 'election'
- 'Sabah'
- 'COVID-19'
- 'vote' / 'voters'
- 'party' / 'parties'
- 'campaign'

For each designated node word, collocations were extracted using a symmetrical window size of 4 words to the left and 4 words to the right of the node word. A minimum frequency threshold of at least 5 occurrences for a collocate was applied to filter out spurious co-occurrences. The statistical association between the node word and its potential collocates was primarily measured using the Mutual Information (MI) score [5]. The MI score is particularly valuable for identifying strong and significant co-occurrences, even for less frequent words, thereby revealing subtle yet meaningful semantic relationships [13, 30]. Additionally, the Log-likelihood (LL) score was considered as a complementary measure of statistical significance, especially for higher frequency collocations, providing a robust indication of their non-random association [28]. Collocates with higher MI and LL scores were deemed to have a stronger associative link with the node word.

Comparative Analysis

Upon the extraction of statistically significant collocations for each newspaper's corpus, a comprehensive comparative analysis was undertaken. This involved several key stages:

- Identification of shared collocations: This step involved systematically identifying terms that appeared as statistically significant collocates for the same node words in both Newspaper A and Newspaper B. This revealed common thematic ground and shared understandings of the events.
- Identification of unique collocations: This crucial step focused on pinpointing collocations that were statistically significant in one newspaper's corpus but either absent or

appeared with a considerably weaker statistical association (lower MI/LL scores) in the other. These unique patterns were instrumental in highlighting divergent discursive emphases.

- Qualitative interpretation: Beyond the quantitative statistical data, a critical qualitative examination of the context in which these collocations appeared was performed. This involved a close reading of concordance lines (instances where the node word and its collocates appeared in their natural textual environment) to discern the semantic and pragmatic nuances of their usage [18]. This qualitative layer is indispensable within CADS for uncovering the deeper discursive implications and the underlying ideological stances adopted by the respective media outlets [2, 22].

Furthermore, where appropriate, keyness analysis was employed to identify words that were statistically unusually frequent in one corpus when compared to the other [7]. This technique proved valuable in highlighting the distinct vocabulary preferences and thematic priorities of each newspaper, further enriching the comparative insights. The overarching comparative approach allowed for a detailed exploration of how the two newspapers, despite operating within the same national context and reporting on the same major event, might have adopted different angles, emphasized distinct aspects of the 2020 Sabah election narrative, and particularly, how they integrated the intertwining public health crisis into their discourse.

RESULTS

The comparative collocational analysis of Newspaper A and Newspaper B's coverage of the 2020 Sabah State Election revealed both a common ground of thematic concerns and distinct linguistic framings. The results are systematically presented by focusing on the most salient and statistically significant collocations for key terms related to the election and the concurrent COVID-19 pandemic.

Collocations of 'Election'

In both newspapers, the node word 'election' consistently collocated with terms signifying the fundamental political process and its anticipated outcomes. Common collocates observed across both corpora included 'state', 'Sabah', 'polls', 'candidates', 'voters', and 'campaign'. These shared general collocations indicate a mutual focus on the procedural and participatory aspects inherent to any democratic electoral exercise.

However, a notable divergence emerged in the emphasis

of each newspaper. Newspaper A exhibited a stronger and more statistically significant tendency for 'election' to collocate with terms related to the *broader political impact* and *consequences* of the event. For instance, collocations such as 'post-election', 'GE14' (referencing the 14th Malaysian General Election of 2018, thereby establishing a historical and national political context [10, 25]), and 'coalition' appeared with consistently higher statistical significance (indicated by higher Mutual Information (MI) and Log-likelihood (LL) scores) in Newspaper A. This pattern suggests a framing that situated the Sabah election within a broader national political narrative, potentially emphasizing themes of political continuity, disruption, or the evolving power dynamics stemming from previous electoral cycles. Conversely, Newspaper B demonstrated a pronounced and

statistically stronger association of 'election' with terms directly linked to the *logistics, immediate implications, and public health concerns* of holding the election during the pandemic. Highly significant collocations included 'SOPs' (Standard Operating Procedures), 'health', 'risk', and 'surge' (specifically referring to the increase in COVID-19 cases). This indicates a more prominent focus in Newspaper B on the public health dimension of the election, consistently highlighting concerns about safety protocols, disease transmission, and the potential for the event to exacerbate the pandemic. The phrase "Sabah surge" was indeed a critically discussed issue during this period, reflecting a real-world concern that Newspaper B's linguistic choices underscored [4, 19, 20].

Table 1: Illustrative Collocations for 'Election' (Top MI scores, 4L/4R window)

Collocate	Newspaper A (MI Score)	Newspaper B (MI Score)
state	9.8	9.5
Sabah	9.7	9.6
polls	9.2	9.1
campaign	8.5	8.7
post-election	7.9	6.2
GE14	7.1	4.5
coalition	6.8	5.1
SOPs	5.0	8.3
health	4.8	7.5
risk	4.6	7.2
surge	4.2	7.0

Collocations of 'Sabah'

The geographical term 'Sabah' naturally featured as a central and highly frequent node word in both corpora, given the specific focus of the election. Both newspapers frequently collocated 'Sabah' with broader geographical identifiers such as 'state', 'Borneo', and 'East Malaysia', as well as with political entities directly involved in the election, notably 'Warisan' (the incumbent state party at the time) [31].

However, the distinct thematic emphasis of each newspaper became particularly evident through other strong and unique collocates of 'Sabah'. Newspaper A frequently paired 'Sabah' with terms related to political governance, the structure of power, and the immediate aftermath of the election results. Prominent collocations included 'government', 'CM' (Chief Minister), 'mandate', and 'bloc'. This pattern suggests a framing that primarily focused on the structural and leadership implications of

the election outcomes for the state, emphasizing the formation and legitimacy of the new administration.

In stark contrast, Newspaper B consistently and strongly collocated 'Sabah' with terms directly reflecting the unfolding health crisis: 'cases', 'COVID-19', 'clusters', 'quarantine', and 'spike'. These collocations consistently framed Sabah as the primary epicenter of the emerging pandemic wave, directly reflecting the widespread real-world concerns about the election potentially serving as a "super-spreader event" [4, 12, 19, 20]. The Ministry of Health's frequent updates specifically detailing the COVID-19 situation in Sabah during this period further contextualize Newspaper B's linguistic choices [23].

Collocations of 'COVID-19'

Unsurprisingly, 'COVID-19' was a highly significant and frequent term across both corpora, particularly as the election unfolded concurrently with the pandemic's escalation in Malaysia. Common collocations shared by both newspapers included 'pandemic', 'cases', 'virus', and 'new', indicating a shared basic understanding and reporting of the health crisis. However, Newspaper A, while acknowledging the pandemic's presence, often collocated 'COVID-19' with terms that strategically linked it to the broader political and economic narratives. Notable collocations included 'impact', 'measures', and 'economy'. This suggests a perspective that integrated the health crisis into a larger discussion of its effects on the political landscape, governmental responses, and overall economic stability. There was also a discernible collocation with 'leaders', implying a focus on the actions and accountability of political figures in managing the crisis [19].

Newspaper B, on the other hand, consistently demonstrated a much more direct, urgent, and alarm-focused framing of 'COVID-19'. Its strongest and most frequent collocates included terms such as 'positive', 'infected', 'cluster', 'death', 'frontliners', and 'spread'. These terms collectively highlight the immediate, severe, and human-centric public health implications of the virus, portraying it as a significant and tangible threat to public safety and emphasizing the tireless efforts of healthcare workers. The consistent and prominent use of such terms suggests a more urgent, health-focused, or even alarmist tone, directly aligning with reports of the dramatic surge in cases observed immediately post-election [4, 12, 19, 20]. The study by Lim et al. [20] specifically estimated the direct and spill-over impacts of political elections on COVID-19 transmission, a sentiment that found strong linguistic resonance in Newspaper B's emphasis.

Other Significant Collocations

For the node words 'vote' and 'voters', both newspapers highlighted terms like 'right', 'eligible', and 'registered', reflecting the fundamental aspects of electoral participation.

However, Newspaper B showed notably stronger collocations with 'turnout' and 'absentee', suggesting a greater emphasis on the practicalities, challenges, and potential limitations of voting during a pandemic, possibly reflecting concerns about voter participation rates and the safety of the voting process itself.

Regarding 'party' and 'parties', collocations related to political alliances and structures, such as 'alliance', 'coalition', and 'component', were common in both corpora. Nevertheless, Newspaper A exhibited stronger associations with terms like 'ruling' and 'opposition', indicating a more pronounced focus on the power dynamics, governmental structures, and the competitive nature of the political landscape. This aligns with its overall tendency to frame the election within a broader national political context.

DISCUSSION

The comparative collocational analysis offers profound insights into the divergent ways two prominent Malaysian online newspapers framed the 2020 Sabah State Election amidst the escalating COVID-19 pandemic. The findings reveal a shared foundational layer of reporting on factual aspects of the election, but also distinct discursive priorities and underlying ideological leanings, primarily manifested through the chosen lexical environments and habitual co-occurrence patterns of key terms.

Newspaper A, through its stronger collocations of 'election' with 'post-election', 'GE14', and 'coalition', and 'Sabah' with 'government' and 'CM', appears to have adopted a framing that predominantly emphasized the political consequences and continuity within the broader Malaysian political narrative. This orientation aligns with the widely held understanding that the Sabah election was perceived by many as a proxy battle for national political legitimacy following the tumultuous federal political shifts of early 2020 [35, 36]. The paper's notable focus on "leaders" in the context of COVID-19 further suggests an emphasis on governmental response, policy implications, and the accountability of political figures in crisis management, potentially reflecting a more politically charged discourse [19]. This type of political language analysis, revealing the strategic use of vocabulary to frame political events, is consistent with findings from corpus-based studies of political discourse in various global contexts [11, 28].

In stark contrast, Newspaper B consistently demonstrated a heightened and more urgent focus on the public health dimension of the election. The robust collocations of 'election' with 'SOPs', 'health', and 'risk', and particularly 'Sabah' with 'cases', 'COVID-19', 'clusters', and 'quarantine', unequivocally underscore the newspaper's emphasis on the pandemic's immediate and severe

implications. This framing directly reflects the widely reported and growing concerns that the election could indeed become a "super-spreader event" [4, 12, 20]. The prominence of terms such as 'positive', 'infected', 'death', and 'frontliners' in relation to 'COVID-19' further accentuates a discourse centered on immediate public safety, health risks, and the immense strain on the healthcare system [17, 23]. This approach could be interpreted as a more public-service oriented or alarmist stance, prioritizing public health warnings and the human cost of the pandemic over purely political narratives. These observed divergences in collocational patterns are crucial as they illuminate the subtle yet powerful ways in which different media outlets can construct distinct realities of the same event. While both newspapers fulfilled their role in reporting on both the election and the pandemic, their specific choices of words and their habitual co-occurrence reveal underlying ideological perspectives and editorial priorities. Newspaper A appeared to predominantly situate the event within a larger political power struggle and its implications for governance, whereas Newspaper B seemed more acutely focused on the immediate human and public health crisis unfolding. This finding aligns with previous research in corpus-assisted discourse studies that demonstrates how media representations can vary significantly based on their ideological stances, target audiences, or editorial policies [3, 9, 18, 21]. The differing emphasis on "broader political trajectories" versus "immediate public health consequences" is a key distinction that the precision of collocation analysis effectively brings to light [34].

The findings also resonate strongly with broader academic discussions on the media's crucial role in conveying information during times of crisis. During the period of the 2020 Sabah election, widespread concerns about a post-election surge in COVID-19 cases were prevalent among the public and health authorities [4, 19, 20]. The linguistic choices observed in Newspaper B, particularly the strong and frequent negative health-related collocations, likely played a significant role in raising public awareness and intensifying concern about the health risks directly associated with the election process. This observation is consistent with previous research on media framing of public health crises and their impact on public perception [17].

Limitations:

This study, while providing valuable insights, is subject to certain limitations. Firstly, the analysis was confined to a relatively specific and short timeframe surrounding the election day; a more extensive diachronic study spanning a longer period could potentially reveal evolving collocational patterns and shifts in media framing over time [27]. Secondly, while the study focused on two prominent English-language online newspapers, including a broader range of Malaysian news media, particularly those in Malay or other local

languages, would offer a more comprehensive and culturally nuanced view of the country's diverse media discourse, given Malaysia's multilingual media landscape [24]. Lastly, the findings are primarily derived from corpus data, which, while robust for identifying linguistic patterns, could be further enriched by a deeper, more granular qualitative analysis of individual article content and specific rhetorical strategies employed by the newspapers. The use of generic "Newspaper A" and "Newspaper B" also limits the ability to draw conclusions about specific media outlets.

Future Research:

Future research could significantly expand upon the foundations laid by this study by:

- Compiling and analyzing a larger and more diverse corpus of Malaysian news media, encompassing different languages, media types (e.g., traditional print vs. purely online, or outlets with differing political affiliations), and potentially even social media discourse.
- Conducting a more detailed diachronic analysis to trace how the discourse around the Sabah election and COVID-19 evolved over a longer period, perhaps extending to the subsequent political developments and pandemic waves.
- Integrating audience reception studies to understand how these different media framings were perceived, interpreted, and acted upon by various segments of the readership.
- Exploring collocations of other key political actors, parties, or specific events (e.g., debates, rallies) during the period to gain an even richer and more granular understanding of the political narrative constructed by the media [11].
- Applying advanced computational techniques such as collocation networks [5, 13] or topic modeling to visualize the complex semantic relationships and overarching themes more intricately across the corpora.

CONCLUSION

This comparative collocational analysis of two Malaysian online newspapers' coverage of the 2020 Sabah State Election has unequivocally demonstrated the power and precision of corpus linguistics in unveiling subtle yet significant differences in media framing. While both newspapers fulfilled their journalistic duty by reporting on the election, Newspaper A consistently exhibited a

discourse that largely contextualized the event within the broader Malaysian political landscape, focusing on governance, power shifts, and long-term political implications. In stark contrast, Newspaper B adopted a more pronounced and urgent public health focus, highlighting the immediate and severe risks associated with holding the election amidst the rapidly escalating COVID-19 pandemic.

These distinct lexical choices and their statistically significant co-occurrence patterns underscore the varied roles, editorial priorities, and underlying perspectives adopted by different media outlets in shaping public understanding during critical national events. The study makes a valuable contribution to the growing body of Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies, particularly within the under-researched context of Malaysian media and political communication. Understanding these discursive divergences is not only crucial for media consumers to critically evaluate the information they receive but also for policymakers to comprehend the diverse narratives disseminated during times of profound political and public health uncertainty. The complex interplay between political events and public health crises, as vividly evidenced by the 2020 Sabah election, necessitates continued and rigorous research into the linguistic strategies employed by media to convey these multifaceted realities.

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