

Framing Spanish Students: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Spanish Press

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## Abstract

This paper analyses the representation of southern Spanish students and their enrolment at the public University of Salamanca in Castile and Leon in local media outlets during Spain's nationwide university entrance examination period, thereby addressing the existing information gap on the impact of discursive strategies on Spain's educational inequality at a local level. Excerpts from ten articles from the local newspaper *La Gaceta Regional de Salamanca* were examined under the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis, agency attribution, and exclusive discursive strategies. The analysis revealed distinct discursive lines within the newspaper, in which southern Spanish students are systematically excluded from articles that uphold a common university admissions exam for the entire country. Instead, they are portrayed as beneficiaries of an unfair education system that harms Castilian students' prospects, thereby restricting southern students' access to public discourse and fostering negative public perceptions of their presence in Salamanca's educational institutions. These findings are situated within existing theories of symbolic elites and how their alignment with sociopolitical power structures perpetuates inequalities. By focusing on local press, this study significantly complements previous research on national circulation media coverage of educational discourse, offering a new perspective on symbolic power and inequality in access to higher education in the distinctive Spanish context.

**Keywords:** Critical discourse analysis, discursive structures of power, discrimination, education, higher education, local media, newspapers, Spain, symbolic power, university admission exams

## Cite as

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## Introduction

Mass media enjoy a remarkable power to influence public perception of educational matters, as supported by long-standing theories and research studies that often adopt a nation-level standpoint. Positioned within the Critical Discourse Analysis framework, this paper will examine local media depictions of southern Spanish students enrolling in the public University of Salamanca during the university entrance exam season over the past ten years. These exams are known as the Pruebas de Acceso a la Universidad (PAU), Evaluación de Bachillerato para el Acceso a la Universidad (EBAU), or simply as Selectividad, depending on the variable legislation in force at the time in each autonomous community. These university entrance exams consist of two phases, undertaken during the ordinary call in June or the extraordinary call in July. The general phase tests students' knowledge and skills in Spanish History, Spanish Language and Literature, and a Foreign Language, which is often English (Consejo Escolar del Estado, 2024), plus a fourth subject that depends on the academic path selected by students; it may be Latin, Maths, Maths applied to the Social Sciences, or Art History. Students previously took the subjects tested in the voluntary specific phase throughout their specific branch of the Baccalaureate, allowing them to increase their final Selectividad grade and improve their chances of achieving a spot in their university and degree of choice (Kishan et al., 2023). Every student starts the process with their Baccalaureate average grade, which grants them up to 6 points, while the Selectividad general phase grade may add up to 4 points. The Selectividad specific phase can add up to 4 extra points, depending on students' chosen subjects and each autonomous community's weighting system, meaning that the university admission system allows students to achieve up to 14 points rather than 10 (Real Decreto 1892/2008).

Each of the seventeen autonomous communities in Spain crafts its own exam according to its specific educational curriculum, which, over time, has given rise to long-standing discourses and debates about the unfairness of this system, based on the disputed difficulty of each exam model. The conversation becomes potentially tense and polarising as the public considers that these university admission exams (while different across the Spanish autonomous communities) determine students' access to higher education nationwide and may affect their future socioeconomic prospects and professional development. Despite the existence of a rich and extensive literature on the power of mass media over public cognition and its interrelationship with cultural, social, and even political structures of power, the link between local media and its depiction of educational matters (such as access to higher education and its associated symbolic capital) has been under-researched. This gap becomes even more pronounced in Spain's current context. Therefore, this paper aims to complement existing research on mass media by taking a local perspective: it will analyze how the local newspaper *La Gaceta Regional de Salamanca* depicts southern Spanish students from Extremadura, Andalusia, the Canary Islands, and Murcia in the aforementioned context. To do so, two main research questions will be addressed:

- RQ1: How does *La Gaceta Regional de Salamanca* represent southern Spanish students during the university entrance examination period?
- RQ2: How may this representation impact public cognition about southern students in comparison to local students?

Drawing on a literature review that contextualizes the study within the scope of CDA, the approach, data selection, and analysis described in the methodological section will be followed by the presentation of results and discussion of their implications as a conclusion.

## Literature Review

### *Media*

The interrelationship among power, media, and social cognition is well documented. Van Dijk (2015) views power as the control of the actions and cognition of different social groups. Symbolic elites that control public discourse are more likely to exert influence, shaping public opinion and ideologies. Existing hegemonic social inequalities are perpetuated through the repetition of public discourses in what van Dijk refers to as discursive reproduction of power: a three-sided, bidirectional framework that links discourse and its production context, personal and social cognition, and social structures of power. The ideological square, or the use of language to create polarisation between different works, becomes an integral part of such a framework. The discursive reproduction of power, as developed by van Dijk, can be related to Bourdieu's symbolic power (1991) of certain social agents. Professors, legislators, journalists, etc., are all examples of agents who enjoy greater access to the institutions in power through their fields, and whose interrelation with various discursive landscapes, according to Papen (2012) both mirrors and shapes society and power distribution: the different social spheres, their roles and access to power (such as cultural capital), their rights, limitations, beliefs, and demands. Naming, discussing, criticizing, or praising a reality brings forth the symbolic authority represented by language and endorsed by the elites in place, who can, through language, reframe reality to manipulate instances of shared community, crafting new hierarchies of dominance through the creation of new normalities (El Refaie, 2001; Heyd & Schneider, 2019; Schiffrin, 2001). Moreover, Blommaert (2013) notes the impact of globalization and new technological advances in communication, which have created more forms of inequality in the current information-based economies (Heller, 2003). In this framework, Richardson (2007) argues that the agents involved in these naming and discussion dynamics are not powerless, despite operating within institutional, political, and social limits. The author highlights that those with power over public discourse, such as journalists (who can be interpreted as integrants of Van Dijk's symbolic elites), enjoy a degree of agency over their actions and choices. Moreover, in attempting to align themselves with their readers, journalists and newspapers may act out of misguided motivations that result in the sensationalized perpetuation of existing inequalities.

Existing research studying the relationship between media and different educational discourses aligns with the previously mentioned authors. Wallace (1993) examines the role of the mass media in the debate surrounding the British Labor Party's educational policies to improve primary education and its negative independent evaluation report. The author concludes that the media played a supporting yet central role in the debate, with few attempts to explore the complex situation from a critical perspective and a tendency to prioritize depicting the central government over the opposition. Sung and Kang (2012) examine the media's involvement in public discourse in the context of South Korea's release of national test results to hold schools accountable for their performance. After determining that the government manipulated the media to preserve its hegemony at the expense of worsening readers' opinions of public schooling, the authors highlight that this also led to the government compromising to improve the public education system and curb dependence on private schooling. Cabalin et al. (2023) explore how the media portrays Chile's School Admission System and the Fair Admission law, implemented to reduce segregation in the country's schools by enforcing a

merit-based allotment system. The authors argue that Chile's most relevant media helped spread meritocratic, reductionist perspectives that considered only merit, clashing with the School Admission System's inclusive undercurrents and perpetuating existing inequalities in the schooling system. Omoke (2025) describes the potential of sensationalist language in media headlines, describing their power to influence readers and public cognition regarding various politically charged themes while centering symbolic elites. The research concluded that, although counter-stories of resistance were possible through media representation, the system tended to uphold the status quo and decrease critical and civic engagement in the represented matters.

In the context of Spanish media, there is a particular research gap: the portrayal of students from different regions and backgrounds. Serrano-Contreras et al. (2021) highlight the lack of strong academic research on the link between communication media and educational matters, such as educational reform. However, they argue that the confluence of Spanish media and politics has had a tangible and measurable impact on educational reforms: mass media symbolic elites appear aware of their influence on politics and the polarising nature of educational policies, and align strategically with or against the acting governments as a result. They also note that available data prove media elites' capacity to create and spread negative conceptions of education (of which governments are directly held accountable) to position themselves within the power-media-social cognition framework previously discussed. More recent research again calls attention to the influence of media on public cognition in relation to education: San Pedro-Veledo et al. (2023) study pre-service teachers at the University of Oviedo in Asturias, Spain, and the effect of different types of popular communication and social media, such as TV, press, or Facebook, on their attitudes towards refugees. This issue proves particularly pressing in the current global context of grand-scale migrations resulting from poverty, illness, or warfare, and how these refugees may very well become students in their host countries and face their new teachers' preconceptions. San Pedro-Veledo et al. demonstrate that pre-service teachers' cognition is strongly influenced by the media and advocate implementing teacher training programs to reduce prejudice and foster critical thinking. Regardless of such findings and the link between Spanish media and education, there appears to be a lack of tangible research on the impact of media on the educational practices and experiences of members of the educational community. The purpose of this study is to help address this gap using local-level data.

### ***Selectividad***

Despite available data on the media's approach to and representation of different educational matters, researchers note a research gap that persists despite their best efforts to close it. This is the case with research on the Selectividad national exam, known as PAU in Castile and Leon, which highlights the simplification trends within representations of educational matters and the way the media perpetuates structural inequalities. Ruiz's research (2021) does not specifically examine Spanish media representation of Selectividad. However, it helps bridge the research gap on access to higher education in Spain, a topic of relevance to the general public given its frequent representation in the media. Her literature review suggests that the lack of conclusive information may be linked to the periodic political alternation of the governing party, the specific educational legislation in effect in each Spanish region, and the frequent changes to the system of access to higher education, driven by political and legislative turmoil. It is worth noting that in the past five decades, Spain has undergone almost ten

nationwide education reforms, often motivated by political instability (Novella & Cloquell, 2022; Serrano-Contreras et al., 2021). Ruiz highlights that the controversies surrounding Spain's university entrance exam system have persisted for several decades. They include the fact that implementing different exams across autonomous communities may affect students' prospects and perpetuate structural inequalities in the educational system.

Depending on the features of each exam, students from certain regions might have an advantage over others. In addition, Donato and Ferrer-Esteban (2012) argue that government investment may be the root of differences in academic performance across autonomous communities. A more recent study by Cobreros et al. (2023) links differences in Selectividad grades to an increase in students participating in Selectividad's specific phase or to the potential influence of COVID-era educational policies. So far, and taking into consideration the lack of extensive and conclusive research on this topic, available research lines point at political, material, and contextual factors to explain the difference in Selectividad qualifications (and therefore in access to particular universities) between autonomous communities, rather than the subjective or objective difficulty of the university entrance exams. Despite shared demands from experts and members of the educational community to implement a common test across all autonomous communities, the argument that some exam models are easier than others does not provide a comprehensive overview of the issue. Such a statement may encourage polarisation, hindering productive discursive practices in an already controversial topic.

As stated before, available research highlights the media's tendency to offer superficial depictions of existing educational issues that, because of their moralizing nature, do not contribute to dismantling the system's structural inequalities. This research also supports existing theories on the link between the symbolic elites' media and discourse control, mass media's reports on educational matters, and the public sociocultural discourse shaped by the media for the benefit of different groups. The aforementioned studies offer valuable insights into national circulation media coverage of educational inequalities, but there is less research on the discursive construction of public cognition at the local level. To examine this matter at an intra-national level, the present paper examines the local printed newspaper *La Gaceta Regional de Salamanca*'s portrayal of southern Spanish students and their access to the University of Salamanca after passing the PAU exams.

## Methods

The present research departs from a mainly descriptive perspective, identifying the presence and frequency of certain themes and discursive tools in the data from a multidisciplinary Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) lens. CDA, from a broad perspective, deals with the creation and reproduction of inequalities in socio-political discourse and how they may be addressed and challenged. The aims of CDA allow for the identification of what van Dijk (2015) calls the discursive reproduction of power: the symbolic elites in control of discourse shape personal and social cognition, which, in turn, shape social actions aligned with the elites' interests in a three-sided, bidirectional cycle. Van Dijk also discusses the ideological square strategy, or the polarisation of public discourse to foster certain stereotypes in recipients' cognition. CDA's focus on the link between discourse and power enables this study to analyze *La Gaceta Regional de Salamanca*'s depiction of southern Spanish students in the context of their access to the University of Salamanca after their PAU exam: in other words, their access to cultural capital and to symbolic power. This approach will be complemented by a quantitative analysis of the collected data to achieve a deeper understanding of the matter.

### ***Data Selection and Analysis***

The data are collected from ten articles in *La Gaceta Regional de Salamanca*, a newspaper from Salamanca, a medium-sized city in the autonomous community of Castile and Leon, renowned for its public university. These publications discuss the access of southern Spanish students to the University of Salamanca after passing their PAU university entrance exams. These tests reflect three contexts. At a supranational level, they are influenced by the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) reports, long regarded as unreliable and often employed by mass media as thematization strategies to frame students' and teachers' in a negative light, fostering biased perspectives of the educational system in the public's cognition (Alexander, 2013; Santos et al., 2022). At the national level, PAU exams trigger an annual public debate over educational disparities between autonomous communities (R. Sanmartín, 2025), as well as public demands for a single nationwide exam (Belver, 2025). This situation is reflected at the local level, with claims that students from southern regions with easier PAU exams are displacing Castilian students (R.D.L., 2022).

The articles were collected from *La Gaceta's* online archive by means of its search tools. The data selection criteria prioritized articles that mentioned southern Spanish students from Extremadura, Andalusia, the Canary Islands, and/or Murcia. The second selection criterion was a publication time period: June (expandable to other time periods of interest) in 2016-2025. The keywords used were "PAU", "EBAU", and "selectividad" to account for the exam's changing nomenclature. Using keywords such as "Extremadura", "andaluzas" or "canarios" was deemed more unreliable: demonyms may not always be used to describe students, and filtering data through the gender and number markings of the Spanish language may accidentally exclude articles which discuss the target topic but do not contain those exact words. These keywords were considered not essential (considering that both the origin and the academic context of these southern students are initial search requisites), and ultimately discarded. The publication period was initially set from 1st June to 1st July of each year to identify articles published during the ordinary PAU call. Failing that, the search parameters were expanded to 1st August (to include articles published during the July extraordinary PAU call), and then to relevant education-related time periods such as the initial part of the school year. Most found articles were published in June or July, except the 2025 article (published in October). This study aimed to analyze a small sample to allow for a close reading of the articles in compliance with CDA's tenets, while also illustrating the evolution of southern students' representation in *La Gaceta* over a considerable timespan. Regardless, the impossibility of recovering articles from the desired time range in 2019 prompted the possibility of collecting others for contrast purposes. After checking that the recovered articles mention southern Spanish students, they were downloaded in .pdf format for safekeeping, processing, and analysis. A careful reading of the articles was conducted to detect the repetition of certain terms, ideas, and arguments advanced by *La Gaceta* to steer its discourse away from impartiality and frame southern students in a negative light in its readers' minds. Several topics or relevant discourse strands (see [Appendix A](#)) were identified and translated from Spanish into English to produce faithful translations of the article. Several exclusion and division-inciting terms, deemed relevant for the research as illustrators of *La Gaceta's* biased discursive practices, were translated and named (in reference to van Dijk) as described in Table 1:

Table 1. *Translation of relevant ideological terms used to refer to southern students*

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|                                   |                    |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|
| Copar, copan .....                | To occupy, occupy  |
| Inflación, inflan, infladas ..... | Inflation, inflate |
| Ocupar, ocupan .....              | Fill               |
| Dopaje, dopan .....               | Doping, dope       |
| Coladero .....                    | Getaway            |
| Acaparan .....                    | Monopolize         |
| Cachondeo .....                   | Joke               |

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## Results

The quantitative analysis of the discourse strands encountered in the articles (see [Appendix A](#)) indicates several discursive trends. Students from Extremadura are mentioned more often than those from Andalusia, the Canary Islands, and Murcia. Of the selected articles, 80% of them employ negative ideological terms (see Table 1). The unfairness and inequality of the PAU exams, also discussed in 80% of the articles, is mentioned to a slightly higher degree than access to the University of Salamanca's medical degree (mentioned in 70% of the articles). The PISA test results are discussed in 60% of the articles. Finally, explicit demands for the standardization of national university admission exams nationwide are reported in 20% of the publications.

From a qualitative perspective, the data reveal the instrumentalization of negative ideological terms to link southern Spanish students at the University of Salamanca to an unequal PAU system that benefits them at the expense of local students. Thanks to so-called inflated marks and a shortcut to university admission exams, southern students are said to occupy, fill, and monopolize access to Salamanca's University and its Faculty of Medicine, highly demanded and prestigious cultural institutions (Benito, 2025a; Bourdieu, 1991). Castilian students are depicted as displaced by this occupation and disproportionately affected by the unfairness of the PAU system. The articles, published during highly tense periods for local readers (parents worried about their children's future, students sitting a very determining exam), omit standardization demands while presenting southern students as active agents of an unfair system that prevents more qualified students from pursuing higher education at their local university.

## Discussion

The present study contributes to the existing CDA framework and findings by highlighting the role of local media in the discursive framing of social and educational inequalities in access to higher education, thereby creating negative cognition among local media readers. The results complement CDA's sociocognitive approach developed by van Dijk, taking a closer look at its manifestations at the local level and linking them to Bourdieu's symbolic power to bring to light the potential of local media to reproduce existing structural inequalities from a local viewpoint. The analysis shows how *La Gaceta* frames southern students within a negative ideological discourse that inevitably links them, in the social cognitive models of the newspaper's readers, to an unfair system of access to higher education in which students hold little to no agency whatsoever, ultimately fostering an 'us versus them' mentality in the public. This approach simultaneously minimizes and fails to address existing educational inequalities, which could otherwise be addressed by using local media to build a united front within the educational community and demand more balanced educational policies.

Two discursive lines can be identified in *La Gaceta*. The first line is the one inferred from the analyzed data. The other one, revealed by the apparent data gap of 2019, makes explicit

appeals to standardize the PAU system in articles that do not mention southern students (B.H & A. García, 2019; E.P, 2019; R.D.L, 2019). A similar article (E.P., 2025) again notes an apparent lack of data in June and July. An October publication (Benito, 2025b) highlights the rising number of Castilian students enrolled in Salamanca's medical degree, noting a decrease in southern students. This article does not employ any ideological terms and remarkably makes no reference to the PAU system or includes any explicit reform calls whatsoever.

Difficulties encountered during research include a 2016 article seemingly deleted from the digital archive and an apparent data gap in 2019. However, references to the 2016 article can be found in publications such as HOY (Armero, 2016), from which relevant discourse strands were identified. Moreover, the apparent 2019 data gap revealed an alternative discursive line, increasing the scope of the findings. Finally, the temporal continuity of the identified discourse trends may validate these conclusions.

It is worth noting that discourse, even at a local level, becomes politically relevant as it actively shapes social cognition and public debates on legislative matters such as access to higher education. The conceptualization of this matter in readers' minds, their perceptions of injustices, and, ultimately, their potential political positioning are filtered through the discourses they are exposed to. The present research evidences the polarised nature of *La Gaceta*'s discourse through the strands analyzed in its articles. The aim of these publications is not to foster unity among autonomous communities to seek political and educational reform; rather, they shape a negative image of southern students in public perception, perpetuating divisions and inequalities that affect not only Salamanca but the entire country.

## Conclusion

The findings confirm the validity of existing theories and nation-level research about symbolic elites, in this case *La Gaceta*, their ability to influence discourse and access to symbolic power to shape social cognition, and their impact in perpetuating inequalities rather than achieving tangible change. Despite the aforementioned lack of conclusive data on the exact root of Selectividad's inequality, southern students are linked to the PAU system through negative ideological terms, portrayed as beneficiaries of an injustice, fostering an us-versus-them mentality in readers' cognition. Castilians are depicted as passive recipients of their southern counterparts' actions, but also as fighters for reform. Southern students are excluded from this discourse; their access to the University of Salamanca appears equally undesired.

The results of the present study suggest that local media discourses centered on access to higher education are crucial to the legislative reproduction and perpetuation of existing educational inequalities, which eventually compromise students' access to symbolic power and capital. Future research may analyze public attitudes of Salamanca locals toward southern students to measure the impact of the aforementioned articles on public cognition, in hopes of providing adequate tools to eliminate strategies that exclude them from public discourse and to foster and implement a more egalitarian educational legislation.

## About the Author

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## AI Statement

To the best of the author's knowledge, no AI generator has been used in this paper.

### Statement of Absence of Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to the research, findings, or recommendations presented in this paper. All conclusions drawn are independent and unbiased.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

Presence of discursive strands in the articles by year of publication

| TOPICS            | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 | 2025 | %  |
|-------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|----|
| MENTIONED ?       | ✓    | ✓    | ✓    |      | ✓    | ✓    | ✓    | ✓    | ✓    | ✓    | 90 |
| Extremadura       | ✓    | ✓    | ✓    |      | ✓    | ✓    | ✓    | ✓    | ✓    | ✓    | 90 |
| Andalusia         |      | ✓    | ✓    |      | ✓    |      | ✓    | ✓    | ✓    | ✓    | 70 |
| Canary Islands    |      | ✓    | ✓    |      | ✓    | ✓    | ✓    |      | ✓    | ✓    | 70 |
| Murcia            |      |      | ✓    |      | ✓    |      | ✓    |      | ✓    | ✓    | 50 |
| ID. TERMS         | ✓    | ✓    | ✓    |      | ✓    | ✓    | ✓    | ✓    | ✓    |      | 80 |
| PAU (unequal)     |      | ✓    | ✓    | ✓    | ✓    | ✓    | ✓    | ✓    | ✓    |      | 80 |
| MED. DEGREE       | ✓    | ✓    | ✓    |      |      |      | ✓    | ✓    | ✓    | ✓    | 70 |
| PISA REPORT       | ✓    | ✓    |      |      | ✓    |      | ✓    | ✓    | ✓    |      | 60 |
| PAU (reform call) |      |      |      | ✓    |      |      |      | ✓    |      |      | 20 |

*Note.1* he 2019 cell is formatted differently in order to highlight the data gap.