



SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS IN FORENSIC LINGUISTICS: THE MEANING OF SYMBOLS IN THE TEMPO NEWS OFFICE TERRORISM CASE

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Abstract

The act of terror against the Tempo Newsroom through the delivery of physical symbols such as a pig's head and rat carcasses represents a complex form of threatening communication laden with symbolic meaning. This study examines how the symbolic meanings of these acts of terror can be interpreted through a semiotic approach within the framework of forensic linguistics, and how such symbols function as a form of non-verbal threat communication. The objective of this research is to analyze the pig's head and rat carcasses as cultural signs used in the context of intimidation against independent media. This qualitative descriptive research employs semiotic theories (Saussure and Peirce), Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence, and forensic linguistic analysis of indirect speech acts. Data were obtained through document analysis of online news reports, public statements, and relevant academic literature. The findings reveal that the pig's head and rat carcasses function as symbolic representamen socially constructed as acts of humiliation and warning. These signs carry connotations of impurity, filth, and threats directed at press institutions as a means of controlling freedom of expression. The symbols serve as indirect speech acts that are coercive and intimidating. The study concludes that symbolic violence in the form of non-verbal physical terror can serve as an effective tool of domination, especially when interpreted within the socio-political and cultural context in which it occurs..

Keywords: forensic linguistics, semiotics, symbolic violence, threat communication, pig's head, rat carcass

INTRODUCTION

Freedom of the press is a fundamental pillar of a healthy democratic system (Patnaik & Chauhan, 2024). The press serves primarily as a watchdog against corruption and abuses of power, ensuring that public officials are held accountable for their actions. In practice, however, journalists often face various forms of pressure, ranging from verbal intimidation and physical violence to more covert symbolic threats. In countries such as Indonesia and Ghana, journalists have been targeted in attacks carried out by security forces or political supporters, significantly endangering their safety and freedom to carry out journalistic duties (Simandjuntak et al., 2024). In Indonesia, although the constitution guarantees freedom of expression, its implementation is frequently constrained by regulations that restrict press freedoms such as the Information and Electronic Transactions Law (UU ITE) and the Press Law. Under these conditions, journalists routinely encounter threats, harassment, and

violence, especially when reporting on sensitive issues such as corruption, human rights violations, or abuses of power ([Fakih, 2024](#)).

Several studies have highlighted the various forms of threats against journalists and media outlets. [Fakih \(2024\)](#) describes patterns of violence against journalists in Indonesia, while [Simandjuntak et al. \(2024\)](#) compare intimidation tactics in Indonesia and Ghana. Nevertheless, most of these studies have focused on verbal threats, written texts, or digital communication as the primary objects of forensic linguistic analysis. In the field of semiotics, some research has demonstrated that physical symbols can serve as powerful communicative tools in the context of threats. [McElvaney et al. \(2021\)](#), for example, show that the use of repulsive symbols, such as a pig's head, can trigger very intense emotional responses. [Albuquerque \(2024\)](#) emphasizes that semiotic analysis in forensic linguistics can help reveal hidden meanings in ambiguous, context-dependent threats. Yet, few studies have specifically examined physical symbols as a language of threat in the context of violence against the media.

This gap in the academic literature indicates that while prior research has provided valuable insights into verbal, textual, and digital forms of threat, there remains a critical need to understand how physical symbols function as a means of communication in acts of terror particularly within a semiotic-forensic linguistics framework. The predominant focus on speech, text, and digital channels has overlooked the importance of decoding non-verbal symbols whose emotional intensity and cultural resonance may be equally, if not more, impactful. Physical symbols such as pig's heads or rat carcasses can convey messages that are both potent and culturally laden, especially when interpreted within specific socio-political contexts.

The urgency for further study of this phenomenon became starkly evident in the March 2025 terrorist acts against the Tempo News Office. Over the course of several days, the Tempo newsroom received three highly symbolic terror items: an earless pig's head, a rat carcass, and instances of doxing against journalists reporting on sensitive issues ([Tempo, 2025b, 2025a](#)). These artifacts were not only manifestations of physical threats but also carriers of strong symbolic and cultural messages. In Indonesia's socio-political landscape, such symbolic terror reflects the tension between political power and press freedom, illustrating how symbols can be weaponized to exert psychological and societal pressure. A semiotic approach within forensic linguistics is therefore essential to decode the latent meanings behind these non-verbal threats and to explore the structure of the communicative messages they convey. By focusing on physical symbols in the context of criminal actions against the media, this research offers both novelty and high relevance to the current state of press freedoms.

This study centers on understanding symbolic violence against the media through an analysis of the terror acts targeting the Tempo News Office. The pig's head and rat carcass used in these threats raise significant questions about how such symbols operate as structured communicative tools. In many cultures, pig's heads are associated with disgrace, impurity, and insult, whereas rat carcasses often connote decay, betrayal, or covert death. These symbols were deliberately chosen to represent strategic intent to intimidate or discredit a media institution. Accordingly, this research addresses the following primary questions: What are the symbolic meanings of the pig's head and rat carcass in the socio-political context of press freedom in

Indonesia? How do these symbols function as forms of communicative threat and expressions of symbolic violence against journalists and media institutions? And how can a semiotic approach within a forensic linguistics framework be employed to interpret these symbolic threats?

Based on these questions, the objective of this study is to uncover the symbolic meanings behind the use of a pig's head and rat carcass in the terror acts against the Tempo newsroom, employing a semiotic perspective within forensic linguistics. Specifically, the study will analyze how these symbols function as communicative threats and to what extent they represent structured expressions of symbolic violence against press freedom. The main contribution of this research lies in expanding academic understanding of symbolic communication in criminal acts and providing a novel perspective for analyzing non-verbal terror strategies against media institutions. Consequently, the findings are expected to not only reinforce the role of semiotics in forensic linguistics but also offer concrete contributions to the discourse on protecting freedom of expression amid rising symbolic threats against journalists.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Forensic Linguistics

Forensic linguistics is an interdisciplinary field that combines linguistics and forensic science. It is applied to understand the use of language in various legal contexts, including criminal investigations and court proceedings ([Musawir et al., 2022](#)). [Shuy \(2023\)](#) serta [Mozaheb et al. \(2018\)](#) state that forensic linguistics includes phonetic, syntactic, semantic, and discourse analysis to interpret linguistic evidence, both written and spoken. In addition, [Larner \(2015\)](#) emphasizes that the domain of forensic linguistics also includes courtroom interactions, investigative interviews, and understanding legal documents.

In the context of threats, forensic linguistics is used to identify forms of intimidating speech acts, whether delivered directly or indirectly. [Rahmat \(2015\)](#) explains that direct speech acts are explicit and easy to recognize, while indirect speech acts require contextual analysis to interpret the actual intent. This is important to distinguish between ordinary utterances and those that contain threatening intent. [Баранов \(2014\)](#) categorizes various forms of threats, such as coercive threats, warnings, and punishments, based on their characteristics and contexts. Meanwhile, [Kovkina et al. \(2022\)](#) add that the language used in threats can be analyzed through specific lexemes that carry intimidating or provocative connotations.

Furthermore, forensic linguistic studies have expanded to include non-verbal communication. Gestures, symbols, or physical objects can convey messages with as much power as spoken words. [Azhniuk \(2022\)](#) asserts that in forensic contexts, non-verbal cues can represent hidden intentions, especially in situations involving threats or psychological pressure. [Baranov \(2020\)](#) states that physical symbols like icons or objects (e.g., a pig's head) can be media for delivering terror and fear more deeply than explicit verbal communication.

Semiotic Theory

Semiotic theory underpins the understanding of symbols as a form of communication that conveys meaning through systems of signs. Ferdinand de Saussure divided signs into two elements: the signifier and the signified ([Barthes, 1967](#)). Within this framework, symbols such as a pig's head or a rat's carcass serve as

signifiers whose meaning is derived through social conventions and cultural context ([Innis, 1985](#)). [Sebeok \(2001\)](#) emphasizes that the symbolic meaning of an object depends heavily on cultural background: in one context, it may signify abundance; in another, it may represent insult or threat. [Jurj \(2007\)](#) also notes that such symbols communicate messages about deep-rooted norms and values, such as community, tradition, or spiritual beliefs.

Charles Sanders Peirce proposed a triadic approach to signs: representamen, object, and interpretant. Representamen refers to the physical form of the sign, in this case, the pig's head as a symbol of threat. The object is what the sign refers to, either directly or dynamically ([Zhu, 2024](#)). The interpretant, as explained by [Schmidt \(2022\)](#), is the meaning or understanding produced by the sign's recipient, which can be emotional, energetic, or logical.

Interpretation of symbols is also greatly influenced by cultural context. Symbols do not have fixed meanings; they depend on the social background and values of the receiving community ([Sigdel, 2018](#)). In Indonesia, for example, a pig's head is considered impure within Muslim cultural contexts and can function as a representation of insult or spiritual impurity ([Hoogervorst & Jákl, 2024](#); [Rodrigues, 2008](#)). In this framework, the symbolic meaning of the pig's head stems not only from its form but also from the religious and historical values associated with it.

Threat Communication and Symbolic Terror

Pierre Bourdieu introduced the concept of symbolic violence, a form of domination that does not involve physical violence but is culturally legitimized through language and symbols ([Schubert, 2012](#)). In this context, symbolic threats use symbols to instill fear or submission indirectly. [Fatmawati \(2020\)](#) explains that symbolic violence relates to cultural capital and habitus, whereby dominant groups impose their norms on subordinate groups through symbols or social representations..

Language and symbols in threat communication also play a key role in reinforcing domination. [Kramsch \(2020\)](#) states that language is not merely a communication tool but also an arena in which power is negotiated. In the context of threats, symbols like a pig's head become rhetorical devices that suppress rational responses and evoke emotional reactions instead. [Ozyumenko & Larina \(2020\)](#) argue that symbols in threat rhetoric allow power-laden messages to enter public consciousness without critical resistance. [Kilby \(2016\)](#) gives an example of how symbols like "9/11" in public discourse have become convergence points between collective memory and trauma, continuously used to construct threats.

In the literature, the use of symbols also appears as a way to convey hidden messages. [Hammadi & AL-Ahmedi \(2015\)](#) through a semiotic analysis of George Orwell's *1984*, show how threatening symbols can communicate profound socio-political warnings.

Socio-Political Context and Media

The media occupies a strategic position as a power watchdog, making it vulnerable to pressure and threats, especially when voicing criticism of authority. [Husain \(2023\)](#) asserts that the media has the capacity to shape social and political behavior and to frame issues important to the public. However, this ability often invites repressive responses, either through censorship or direct terror. [Corduneanu-Huci & Hamilton \(2022\)](#) reveal that in many cases, governments or politically

powerful actors use legal instruments or violence to silence overly vocal media outlets.

The context in Indonesia also reflects similar dynamics. From the New Order era to the Reformation era, journalists have faced risks of criminalization, violence, and psychological pressure that threaten press freedom. [Simandjuntak et al. \(2024\)](#) note that intimidation of journalists, both physical and symbolic, has created a climate of fear that limits freedom of expression and information distribution. In addition, the use of legal instruments as a form of intimidation further exacerbates the situation.

In the context of Indonesian political culture, symbols such as pigs and rats are often used as tools of social and political communication. [Wessing \(2006\)](#) notes that animals and other natural elements in Southeast Asia are frequently interpreted as markers of transition, power, or warning. Therefore, the use of a pig's head and a rat carcass in the Tempo case is not a random act, but one laden with symbolic messages connected to local cultural and political narratives.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical nature, enabling a deep interpretation of symbolic meanings within their socio-cultural context. Conducted in a naturalistic setting, this approach is essential to grasp the complexity of social and cultural phenomena, especially those involving symbolic threats ([Werdiningsih & B, 2022](#)). The study integrates semiotic analysis based on Saussure's and Peirce's models within a forensic linguistics framework to examine the communicative function and symbolic significance of the physical terror objects namely the pig's head and the rat's carcass sent to the Tempo News Office. Saussure's dyadic model of signifier and signified provides the basis for understanding meaning construction through socially accepted systems ([Nöth, 2023](#)).

The primary data include the aforementioned terror symbols, while data sources consist of credible online news platforms such as Tempo, Kompas, and CNN Indonesia, along with official statements from institutions like the Tempo editorial team, the police, and national press organizations. Academic literature on semiotics, forensic linguistics, and symbolic terror in sociopolitical contexts is also used to support the analysis. Data collection methods include document analysis and literature review. Document analysis gathers online news, public statements, visual materials, and a detailed timeline of the Tempo incident, while the literature review enhances theoretical and analytical understanding by referencing scholarly books, journals, and prior research.

The researcher acts as the primary instrument, a key aspect in qualitative inquiry as emphasized by [Ravindran \(2019\)](#), allowing contextual and in-depth interpretation of symbolic meaning. To support objectivity, a checklist is employed based on semiotic and forensic linguistic indicators, including Saussure's signifier–signified relation, Peirce's representamen object interpretant triad, and signs of symbolic threats in Indonesia's cultural-political context. The data collection procedure involves identifying the incident chronology, categorizing symbolic data into semiotic and forensic classes, and contextualizing it through religious (particularly Islamic), social, and political dimensions relevant at the time of the event.

Analysis is conducted through the integration of semiotic and forensic linguistic frameworks. Saussure's model helps map the link between the signifier and signified, while Peirce's triadic model aids in decoding the meaning-making process. Forensic

linguistic tools are employed to identify how the symbols function as direct or indirect communicative threats and how they operate within systems of symbolic violence. Interpretations are reinforced by referencing relevant cultural, political, and religious contexts. Data validity is ensured through triangulation by cross-referencing symbolic evidence, primary news reports, theoretical sources, and public responses following the incident.

DISCUSSION

Chronology and Socio-Political Context of the Terror Attack on the Tempo Office

The terror incident targeting the Tempo News Office occurred in March 2025 and drew widespread public attention due to its highly symbolic and unusual nature. Over a span of four days, Tempo experienced three interconnected events: first, the delivery of a pig's head to the editorial office in Palmerah, Jakarta; second, the delivery of six rat carcasses to the same location; and third, the doxxing of one of its journalists by an anonymous social media account that also included verbal threats. These symbolic actions were deliberately and systematically executed, indicating that the perpetrator acted with a specific motive rather than randomly.

This incident followed Tempo's publication of a series of investigative reports that were critical of certain power holders and political elites. As a media outlet known for its independence and vocal stance in reporting on corruption and abuse of power, Tempo has frequently faced political pressure. Within this context, the delivery of grotesque symbols such as a pig's head and rat carcasses can be interpreted as expressions of anger, humiliation, and an attempt to silence journalistic activities. These symbolic objects cannot be separated from the broader political climate in Indonesia at the time, which was highly sensitive to criticism particularly criticism directed at government policies involving security forces and influential political actors. The use of symbolic threats represents a deliberate form of communication, designed to convey an intimidating message without the use of words. From a semiotic framework, such actions illustrate how physical symbols function as signifiers that represent latent meanings (signifieds), such as threats and social control within power structures.

Public responses including those from institutions and prominent figures—indicated that this attack was not merely seen as an act of vandalism, but as a direct threat to press freedom. Tempo reported the incident to the police, and several organizations such as the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) and the Press Council expressed deep concern. However, no perpetrators have been identified to date, and the investigation appears to have stalled with no clear outcome. This situation reinforces concerns that acts of terror against the media can occur without consequence, highlighting the weak protection afforded to journalists in the course of their work. These contextual elements play a crucial role in interpreting the symbolic messages contained within the terror acts. From a forensic linguistics perspective, these symbols function as forms of nonverbal communication that, although latent, possess a strong threatening intensity due to their reliance on cultural and political interpretation.

As a synthesis of the above discussion, it can be concluded that the terror incident against Tempo represents a concrete manifestation of symbolic violence against the media, executed through a strategy of nonverbal communication. The pig's head and rat carcasses not only conveyed a message of intimidation, but also

reflected the power dynamics between dominant actors and media institutions. Within the framework of semiotics and forensic linguistics, this incident illustrates how symbols operate as tools of socio-political control that carry implicit threats, leveraging cultural context to amplify their intimidating effect. Thus, the interpretation of symbols in this case reveals not only the hidden messages of the perpetrator but also underscores the fragile state of press freedom amid the pressures of a repressive power structure.

Semiotic Analysis of the Pig's Head and Rat Carcasses as Symbols Interpretation of Symbols Based on Saussure's Dyadic Model

Saussure's semiotic model provides a foundational approach to understanding how symbols function as systems of signs. In this framework, a sign is composed of two main components: the *signifier*, referring to the physical or material form of the sign, and the *signified*, which is the concept or meaning represented by the signifier. In the Tempo case, the pig's head and rat carcasses function as signifiers. These signifiers are then arbitrarily linked to specific signifieds shaped by social and cultural conventions. In the context of Indonesian society particularly among Muslim communities—the pig's head is commonly associated with impurity, disgrace, and revulsion. Likewise, rat carcasses are generally linked to disease, betrayal, and uncleanness.

The meanings attached to the pig's head and rat carcasses are not inherent to the objects themselves; rather, they are constructed through social agreement and cultural influence. Within the Islamic context, which dominates Indonesian society, pigs are considered impure animals and are forbidden for consumption. As such, the use of a pig's head in an act of terror is likely intended to provoke shock, emotional disgust, and a sense of humiliation. The pig's head becomes more than a lifeless object—it is socially constructed as a maximal insult to the values, identity, and dignity of the recipient. Similarly, rats are commonly used in everyday language as metaphors for traitors or vile individuals, making their carcasses a symbolic and emotional threat.

Thus, in Saussure's framework, these signs communicate not only literal meanings but also connotative ones. The resulting connotations are aggressive and insulting, meant to intimidate the media institution both psychologically and socially. The signifiers (pig's head and rat carcasses) activate signifieds such as “you are impure,” “you are rotten,” or “you must be silent,” aimed at Tempo as a form of suppression. These layers of connotative meaning amplify the symbolic effect and demonstrate how threats can operate beyond verbal language.

Peirce's Triadic Analysis: Representamen, Object, and Interpretant

Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic semiotic model expands our understanding of sign systems by introducing three core elements: the *representamen* (the observable form of the sign), the *object* (what the sign refers to or represents), and the *interpretant* (the meaning constructed in the mind of the sign's receiver). In this case, the *representamen* consists of the physical symbols the pig's head and rat carcasses. The *object* being referred to is not the literal animal remains, but rather concepts such as impurity, decay, disgrace, or a warning. The *interpretant* emerges when the recipient Tempo's editorial team and the broader public constructs meaning from the relationship between the representamen and the object.

The interpretation of these symbols involves cultural experience, social knowledge, and the emotional condition of the message recipient. For Tempo's

journalists, the pig's head might not only be interpreted as religiously impure, but also as a professional insult—implying that their journalistic work is seen as disgusting by the perpetrator. In Peirce's model, this is referred to as a *logical interpretant*, meaning derived from the symbolic relationship established through social convention. However, the *interpretant* may also be *emotional*, involving spontaneous reactions of fear, shock, or disgust upon encountering the objects. Thus, a single sign may generate multiple interpretants depending on the context of the receiver.

Moreover, symbolic meaning is dynamic and evolves along with the social responses that follow. Public reactions including those from press institutions and freedom of expression advocates further reinforce the interpretative framing of the symbols as threats to democracy and press freedom. In this context, the signs used by the perpetrator convey more than just personal messages; they influence broader public discourse. These symbols become a point of intersection between the perpetrator's intent, the victim's perception, and public opinion, making them a complex form of communication that cannot be separated from Indonesia's socio-cultural and political context.

The semiotic analysis of the symbolic terror directed at the Tempo News Office reveals that the delivery of a pig's head and rat carcasses was laden with symbolic meaning shaped by the social and cultural constructs of Indonesian society. In Saussure's dyadic model, these objects function as signifiers that evoke signifieds such as humiliation, impurity, and betrayal. These meanings are formed through dominant cultural systems, particularly within Muslim communities, thus activating connotative messages that are both insulting and intimidating. Within Peirce's triadic framework, these symbols are interpreted as forms of professional and emotional degradation, generating both logical and emotional interpretants and causing psychological impacts on recipients. These signs operate not only in the communication between the perpetrator and the victim but also shape collective opinion that articulates threats against press freedom.

The interpretation of these symbols evolves through social responses, producing interpretants with socio-political dimensions. Public and institutional reactions expand the meaning of the symbols as systematic threats to democratic values. These symbols are thus represented as powerful forms of nonverbal communication, reflecting the tension between power and freedom of expression in contemporary Indonesian society. Accordingly, in both Saussurean and Peircean terms, the symbols used in this case demonstrate significant threatening power and broad impact. Symbolic language of threat illustrates that violent communication can occur nonverbally, and semiotic analysis plays a crucial role in understanding modern strategies of intimidation toward the media.

Symbols as Threat Communication in the Perspective of Forensic Linguistics

In forensic linguistics, threats are not always conveyed through verbal language; physical symbols may also function as forms of intimidating messages. The incident involving Tempo illustrates this phenomenon clearly. Media reports indicate that on Wednesday, March 19, 2025, the Tempo newsroom received a package containing a pig's head tightly sealed in cardboard, styrofoam, and plastic addressed to journalist Francisca "Cica" Christy Rosana ([Media, 2025b](#), [2025c](#)). A few days later, on the morning of Saturday, March 22, 2025, the newsroom received a second delivery: "a box containing six decapitated rat carcasses" ([Media, 2025d](#)). When the security

officer opened the box, six headless rats were found stacked inside ([Media, 2025b](#)). No written message accompanied the package, yet the manner of delivery itself constituted an intense form of indirect speech act. As [Rahmat \(2015\)](#) explains, direct threats are typically explicit and easily recognizable (e.g., “I will kill you”), while indirect threats require contextual interpretation. The Tempo case exemplifies this: even in the absence of words, these grotesque and culturally polluted symbols carried a clear implicit message of intimidation ([Kovkina et al., 2022](#); [Rahmat, 2015](#)). Notably, prior to the delivery of the dead animals, an anonymous social media account had threatened, “I hope your office dies” ([Media, 2025b](#)), thereby clarifying the perpetrator’s intent. The Tempo editorial team acknowledged that the sender “deliberately sought to terrorize the work of journalists” and called for an end to “such cowardly acts.”

From a semiotic perspective, the pig’s head and rat carcasses function as signifiers associated with culturally constructed signifieds. In the Indonesian context—particularly within Muslim communities pigs are commonly associated with impurity, disgrace, and disgust, while rats often symbolize disease, betrayal, or filth. Although the signifier–signified relationship is arbitrary, it is strongly reinforced by socio-cultural convention. Thus, the appearance of a pig’s head can convey maximal insult essentially implying that the recipient is “impure” while the rat carcasses add another layer of threat, suggesting “you are rotten/a traitor.” Saussure’s model emphasizes that the meaning of a sign does not arise naturally from the object itself, but rather from the social and cultural frameworks of both sender and receiver. This combination of aggressive connotations intensifies the psychological impact of the message: these grotesque symbols serve not merely as literal signs but as vehicles for unspoken threats, designed to silence.

In Peirce’s triadic model, the pig’s head and rat carcasses function as representamens (observable forms of signs). The object they refer to is not the animal per se, but abstract concepts such as impurity, corruption, disgrace, and warning. The interpretant is the meaning and emotional response formed in the receiver’s mind; for example, Tempo journalists interpreted the pig’s head not simply as a filthy animal, but as a symbolic insult to their professional identity suggesting that their work is “disgusting to the sender.” The interpretant may also take the form of visceral emotional reactions: fear, revulsion, or anger upon opening the package. In this sense, a single symbol may produce multiple interpretants depending on the recipient’s context. The process of meaning-making is dynamic: once the incident went viral, public and media responses broadened the interpretation of these symbols. For instance, the Press Council’s statement suggests that the symbols were interpreted as real threats to press freedom ([Media, 2025a](#)).

From a forensic standpoint, these deliveries can be categorized as indirect threats involving coercion and warning. Coercive threats aim to compel the recipient in this case, the newsroom to cease certain actions (e.g., publishing critical reports) ([Баранов, 2014](#)); warning threats serve as “early alerts” of negative consequences should demands not be met ([Баранов, 2014](#)). Laden with religious and cultural meaning, these symbols exert emotional and ideological pressure without uttering a single word ([Kovkina et al., 2022](#); [Баранов, 2014](#)). As emphasized by Press Council Chair Ninik Rahayu, “These actions constitute a real form of terror and threats against press freedom and independence” ([Media, 2025a](#)). Her assertion that “acts of terror and intimidation against journalists are criminal offenses that must be prosecuted”

([Media, 2025a](#)) affirms that such symbolic acts should not be dismissed as mere vandalism, but rather recognized as serious symbolic crimes.

From Bourdieu's theoretical lens, the delivery of a pig's head and rats to Tempo constitutes a form of symbolic violence subtle yet powerful. Bourdieu posits that language and symbols serve as mechanisms for the reproduction of power, even in the absence of direct physical force. Here, the perpetrators deployed symbolic tools to subjugate the press: rather than attacking physical bodies, they targeted the dignity and professional ethics of Tempo through the imagery of filth and rot. In doing so, the act becomes a manifestation of symbolic domination silencing critical voices through culturally unsettling means.

In sum, the delivery of a pig's head and rat carcasses to Tempo's editorial office represents a structured and multilayered form of communicative threat. Media reports emphasized that these symbols conveyed "hatred and threats toward journalistic independence" ([Media, 2025a, 2025d](#)). Through the combined lens of semiotic and forensic linguistic theory, these physical symbols are revealed to contain implicit messages of insult and violence: as culturally encoded signifiers, they deliver the implicit warning "stay silent or face the consequences" ([Kovkina et al., 2022](#)). These symbols were not chosen arbitrarily, but strategically selected to generate fear and suppress freedom of expression. As such, this case illustrates how symbolic violence—manifested through non-verbal terror can operate as an effective tool of domination when analyzed within its broader socio-political and cultural context.

Symbolic Violence and Cultural Domination: A Critical Reading through Bourdieu

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence provides a relevant critical framework for analyzing the symbolic terror attacks on the Tempo newsroom. Symbolic violence is a form of domination that is socially legitimized, operating subtly and often unconsciously among the dominated. In this context, the delivery of a pig's head and rat carcasses becomes an instrument of power used by certain actors to subjugate the media not through physical repression, but through symbolic terror that undermines dignity and exerts cultural intimidation. [Schubert \(2012\)](#) emphasizes that language and symbols are not merely tools of communication, but also instruments for sustaining and reproducing power structures.

Symbolic violence operates through the exploitation of cultural capital by dominant groups. In this case, the perpetrators of the terror utilize symbols laden with strong cultural meaning (the pig as a symbol of impurity, the rat as a symbol of filth and betrayal) to pressure the press, which is perceived as disturbing dominant narratives. [Fatmawati \(2020\)](#) notes that symbolic domination occurs when subordinate groups internalize meanings imposed by the dominant as "natural." In the case of Tempo, the use of such symbols is not only intended to humiliate, but also to instill a consciousness that criticism of power will be repaid with insults targeting one's deepest identity values. In other words, power suppresses not only with weapons but also with symbols.

Moreover, symbolic violence in the media context is often tied to efforts to preserve the status quo and restrict critical discourse. In societies where religious and cultural symbols carry profound resonance, as in Indonesia, symbols such as the pig's head and rat carcasses become effective tools for generating symbolic trauma. These symbols do not attack the body, but rather assault self-representation and the value systems people hold dear. Through the use of such symbols, perpetrators aim to

produce widespread psychological and social effects: shame, fear, and submission. Therefore, this act must be understood as part of a broader strategy of domination that operates at the level of representation and perception.

Media Narratives and Framing of Symbolic Terror

The media, as an institution that plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion, also frames the case of symbolic terror against Tempo within a very specific narrative. Tempo itself, as the victim, constructed its news coverage by emphasizing the elements of strangeness, symbolism, and threat inherent in the incident. The articles published by Tempo presented facts chronologically, highlighted reactions from national figures, and underscored Tempo's consistent stance as a media outlet that does not bow to pressure. This strategy was not only aimed at self-defense but also at creating a moral narrative that free media must be protected from all forms of intimidation, including symbolic ones. In this context, the framing focused attention on the threatening message, rather than solely on the object of terror.

Other media outlets such as Kompas, Detik, CNN Indonesia, and even international media portrayed the incident as a tangible manifestation of efforts to silence press freedom. In various reports, the pig's head and rat carcass symbols were directly associated with threats to journalistic independence. This framing indirectly expanded the interpretation of these symbols to the national and even global level. From a semiotic perspective, media do not merely reproduce reality but also create new systems of signs that connect symbols to broader structural issues such as political repression, censorship, and authoritarianism. Hence, the symbols are not merely visual objects, but elements of discourse that shape collective meaning about threats to democracy.

Public responses on social media also played a significant role in reinforcing media framing. Many netizens linked the symbols to political elites' attempts to intimidate critical voices. Some even interpreted the act as an effort to "rot public opinion" through disgusting and immoral means. On the other hand, there were also groups who viewed the symbols as a form of "symbolic revenge" against narratives considered defamatory to certain parties. This shows that the interpretation of symbols is highly dependent on context, social position, and the recipient's ideology. However, the dominant framing in the media presented the case as a form of symbolic terrorism against press freedom, thus demanding attention and collective solidarity.

Through various narratives constructed by the media, the pig's head and rat carcass have evolved beyond mere instruments of intimidation. They have become icons of resistance against symbolic repression. The media's framing serves not only as event documentation but also as a mechanism for meaning-making and public support mobilization. In other words, through media representation and interpretation, the symbolic power of the terror act is not only critiqued but also transformed into a tool for public education on the importance of press freedom protection and the latent danger of symbolic violence that often escapes legal scrutiny.

A deeper analysis of the pig's head and rat carcass through the lenses of semiotic theory, forensic linguistics, and symbolic violence reveals that the terror against the Tempo news agency is a complex, layered, and meaning-rich form of communication. These symbols did not appear randomly; they were strategically chosen to convey threats, humiliation, and a form of domination over the press institution. Through sign analysis, cultural context interpretation, and media discourse

reading, it becomes evident that the act represents an expression of power operating symbolically, yet with real impacts on psychology, reputation, and the sustainability of democratic space. These findings form the basis for drawing conclusions that will summarize the symbolic meaning and the function of threat in this case as a response to the research problem.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the pig's head and rat carcass used in the terror act against the *Tempo* News Agency function as complex forms of non-verbal threat communication. From the semiotic perspectives of Saussure and Peirce, these symbols represent cultural signs imbued with strong connotative meanings impurity, disgrace, and filth reflecting an intentional effort to humiliate and silence. These symbols speak not only of hatred, but also of power seeking to control the narrative. When analyzed through the lens of forensic linguistics, the act is identified as a form of indirect threatening speech, utilizing symbolic power to exert psychological and moral pressure on press freedom. Furthermore, within Bourdieu's framework of symbolic violence, the action is a manifestation of symbolic domination by invisible forces with tangible political intentions. Thus, the meaning of the symbols in this case lies not only in their physical form but also in the social, cultural, and political contexts in which they are deployed. The act of sending such repulsive symbols to an independent press institution is part of a terror strategy aimed at redefining the boundaries of free speech. In this context, symbols become silent weapons unheard, yet deeply felt; they attack not through sound, but through meaning. Therefore, these symbols must be understood not as inert objects, but as components of a living discourse of power that continues to operate within our social space.

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