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SMOG AS AGGRESSOR: FEAR, RESPONSIBILITY AND METAPHOR IN PAKISTANI NEWSPAPER HEADLINES

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Abstract
The subject of the environment is becoming a part of public and media debate. Smog is a frequent issue in Pakistan and newspapers have been addressing it extensively particularly in Punjab. Headlines are the most prominent part of a news report, as they give readers an overview of the topic and help them understand the report. This study aims to examine the headlines of Pakistani English newspapers to critically analyze their construction of environmental fear in the context of reporting on smog. It analyzes 50 headlines based on van Dijk's model of news discourse from three news sources: Dawn, The Express Tribune and The News International (2022-2025) by identifying topic, actors, responsibility, lexis and metaphor, orientation and ideological positioning. Headlines highlight the government's actions rather than the cause; responsibility for smog is rarely attributed; the word frequency count and van Dijk-based reading show that headlines emphasise government control measures more than causes; the word smog occurs mainly in threatening terminology and attack. The Express Tribune uses mostly metaphor and human-impact words, while Dawn devotes the most attention to institutional action. The study shows how headlines construct smog as a threat and shape how responsibility and response are represented in Pakistani English-language newspapers. This study focuses on the construction of the concept of smog in news headlines of three Pakistani newspapers (The News International, The Express Tribune and Dawn) and the promotion of the fear of the environment in Pakistan.

1. Introduction

Environmental pollution is one of the most important problems of a modern society. Due to its effects on air quality, health, transportation and daily life, one of its varieties, smog, has become increasingly popular among the public and media. Seasonal smog is one of the serious problems in Pakistan, particularly in Punjab province. If the air quality is bad, then cities such as Lahore get a lot of attention in the media, which reports on hazardous air quality, health risks, school closures and government action. Smog is a combination of secondary pollutants, primarily ozone and fine particulate matter, which are formed when emissions react in the atmosphere. Recently, there has been an increasing focus in the literature on its health and policy dimensions. In the photochemical case, ozone is produced by photochemical reactions between nitrogen oxides and VOCs, with anthropogenic emissions of aromatics and alkenes being the most important for urban areas, while biogenic emissions are more important in suburban areas (Carrasco-Venegas et al., 2025). An editorial in the journal eBioMedicine points out that "dangerous smog events are regularly re-occurring in dense cities like Dhaka, Delhi, and Lahore," with even short term exposure to PM2.5 having a negative effect on lung health (Wildfires, smog, and the persistent threat, 2025). Similarly, a cross-sectional study of 400 outpatients reported a high burden of multisystem symptoms during the 2024-2025 smog season in Lahore ("Health Under Haze," 2026) but there is a limitation of generalizability due to the small sample base of the health-seeking population. Research on policy suggests that intervention works if it is sustained. When modelling the system dynamics of Beijing,

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researchers discovered that a combination of policies was most effective at reducing energy consumption and emissions, while reducing the consumption of coal by industry was the most effective single policy (Lv et al., 2024). A different study calculated the fine particulate reduction in 2017 as 18% due to the winter policy in China, which equated to 19,400 deaths (Ren & Jha, 2026). The modelling indicates that substantial savings can be realized for South Asia with cooperation among states, regions and countries, which should be considered a cost-optimal strategy to improve air quality (Purohit et al., 2024).

Pollution is thought to be caused by the emissions from vehicles and industries, burning of crop residues and weather conditions that retain pollutants at ground level, and happens to be heavier in the colder half of the year, in Punjab. It repeats itself annually, and newspapers have to "re-make" a familiar event into news each year. These repeated exposures allow the effects of language to be studied on public perceptions of an environmental hazard.

Newspapers are a valuable medium for raising awareness in the public on environmental matters, but environmental reporting can be more than just about conveying scientific facts. Journalists choose the words, descriptions and metaphors that indicate the seriousness of a situation. Phrases such as dangerous, deadly, toxic, hazardous, crisis and choking can trigger emotional reactions, and mentions of death, disease and suffocation can make an environment feel threatening.

The headline is the first line in a report that the reader comes across. It summarises the topic, places, emphasis on specific actors and can contain evaluative language (Bell, 1991; van Dijk, 1988). Headlines can therefore foster a sense of environmental dread in public discourse. The words in an expression, such as “health emergency”, can make a bad day feel like a special occasion instead of a typical spring day.

The study takes a qualitative critical discourse analysis approach supported by descriptive word-frequency counts by examining smog headlines in three English-language newspapers in Pakistan. It is based on van Dijk's model of news discourse to demonstrate how language use creates the image of the environmental threat, pinpoints who is responsible and communicates the effects of smog to readers.

Smog reporting has emerged as one of the areas of environmental journalism in Pakistan. The news media routinely prints reports on air quality problems, health issues, environmental crises and institutional reactions. Headlines for these stories could affect the reader's interpretation of the severity and urgency of the problem, who is responsible and what action is expected.

Some can highlight the threat, evoke anxiety, blame, and present pollution as a national problem. These choices are critical, the subjects, characters and language used in newspaper headlines to create environmental fear in Pakistan do not seem to have been studied in focused qualitative research (see Section 5.5). The study aims to fulfil this need by systematically analysing the headlines of newspapers in Pakistan pertaining to the topic of smog and its portrayal as a social and environmental danger.

2. Statement of the Problem

Smog reporting has become an important part of environmental journalism in Pakistan. Newspapers regularly publish stories about deteriorating air quality, health concerns, environmental emergencies, and institutional responses. However, the language of these reports may influence how readers perceive the severity and urgency of environmental problems. Certain expressions can emphasize danger, generate anxiety, assign responsibility, or frame environmental pollution as a national crisis. Despite the importance of these linguistic choices, the recurring vocabulary and discourse patterns through which Pakistani newspapers

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construct environmental fear appear to have received limited attention in focused qualitative discourse research.

3. Research Objectives

1. To identify the topics that Pakistani English-language newspaper headlines foreground when reporting smog.
2. To describe which actors (government, courts, industry, agriculture, neighbouring countries, experts and the public) are named or left out, and how responsibility for smog and its solution is assigned, shared or withheld.
3. To examine the words, metaphors and other linguistic devices that construct smog as a danger or crisis and evoke fear or concern.
4. To interpret how these choices position the in-group and out-groups ideologically, using van Dijk's ideological square.
5. To compare these patterns across Dawn, The Express Tribune and The News International.

4. Research Questions

1. Which topics do smog headlines foreground?
2. Which actors are named or left out of smog headlines, and how is responsibility for smog and its solution assigned, shared or withheld?
3. Which words, metaphors, and other linguistic choices construct smog as a danger or crisis and evoke fear or concern?
4. How do these representations position the in-group and out-groups ideologically: do the headlines follow van Dijk's ideological square by presenting government action positively, blaming other actors or countries, or mitigating domestic responsibility?
5. What are the differences between these patterns at Dawn, The Express Tribune and The News International?

5. Literature Review

5.1 Environmental Discourse and Language

Environmental discourse examines how language represents relationships between human beings, society, and the natural environment. Language is not a neutral instrument for describing environmental conditions; it influences how environmental problems are understood and evaluated. Stibbe (2015) explains that language communicates particular stories about the relationship between humans and the environment, and these stories can encourage responsible attitudes or normalize harmful practices. In environmental journalism, choices are particularly important because descriptions of pollution, climate change, and environmental degradation construct particular understandings of risk and responsibility.

5.2 News Headlines and the Construction of Fear

Language in the news media is used for emphasis and to alert readers to information. Crisis terms like 'crisis', 'emergency', 'toxicity' and 'health risk' can trigger environmental issues as urgent problems that need immediate response. Bednarek and Caple (2012) demonstrate the part that the language and the semiotic elements play in the process of newsworthiness, while Bell (1991) describes the headline as a summary of the story that is usually not written by the reporter and generally is written by the sub-editor. A headline, as such, represents the newspaper's editorial voice, and because it is short, it requires decisions about which words, characters and ideas to use. These attributes make headlines a focus for the study of framing of environmental hazard. They also are important for a practical reason: If a reader reads just the headline, they still get a picture of what happened, who did it, and what its significance is. Headlines that use the same actors repeatedly and/or the same "danger" and "crisis" language

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can create a stable understanding of the smog, regardless of the articles below them being more detailed and cautious.

5.3 Van Dijk's Model of News Discourse

Van Dijk (1988) treats news as a form of discourse with its own structure. A news report follows a schema in which the headline and lead come first and summarize the main topic. Topics are organized as macrostructures, the overall themes a text is about, and the headline expresses the topic that the writer treats as most important. Headlines and leads also have a cognitive role: they signal what the text is mainly about and so guide how the rest of it is read and remembered (van Dijk, 1988). At the level of local meaning, the model examines lexical choice, the level of description, and implication, together with how actors are described and given agency. It also treats rhetorical devices, such as metaphor, hyperbole, numbers, quotation, and appeals to authority, as ways of making a version of events more persuasive and credible.

In later work, van Dijk (1998, 2008) links news discourse to ideology and power. A central idea is the ideological square, in which discourse tends to emphasize positive things about "us", emphasize negative things about "them", de-emphasize "our" negative things, and de-emphasize "their" positive things. Applied to smog reporting, this raises questions about who is presented as responsible and who as acting, such as whether blame is directed at neighbouring countries or at domestic actors, and whether government measures are presented positively. Van Dijk (1993) also argues that critical discourse analysis should examine how discourse reproduces dominance and inequality, which includes whose voices are quoted and whose are absent.

5.4 Fear, Risk, and Emotion in Environmental Reporting

Research on risk communication offers a way to define fear in news language. Witte (1992) argues that messages combining a serious, personally relevant threat with little information about how to respond tend to prompt fear-control reactions, such as denial or avoidance, rather than protective action. For smog coverage, this makes it relevant to examine whether headlines also report protective measures. Beck (1992) characterizes modern environmental hazards as often invisible and dependent on expert and media definition, which fits smog, because readers learn about air quality largely through reported measurements and official statements. Hansen (2010) and Cox (2013) discuss the role of the media in making environmental problems visible and shaping public concern.

In this study, environmental fear is defined as the linguistic construction of smog as a serious threat to health and safety that invites alarm, anxiety, or concern. Following van Dijk's account of local meaning and rhetoric (1988), it is realized through lexical choice, evaluation, intensification (for example superlatives, rankings, and numbers), and the framing of risk and responsibility. The definition is analytic: it concerns how texts are written, not how readers feel.

5.5 Critical Discourse Analysis and the Research Gap

Critical discourse analysis interprets texts in their social context and does not rely on frequencies alone (van Dijk, 1993). This is especially suitable for a small set of short texts, where close reading can show how wording, actors, and topics work together in a way that word counts cannot. Van Dijk's model has been applied to many kinds of news, but within the literature reviewed here, focused qualitative work on how Pakistani English-language headlines construct environmental fear in smog reporting appears limited. This study addresses that gap by applying van Dijk's model of news discourse to smog headlines in three Pakistani newspapers.

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6. Research Methodology

6.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative critical discourse analysis design based on van Dijk's model of news discourse, supported by descriptive frequency counts. Headlines are coded for a set of discourse features and interpreted in their social context. Word frequencies and semantic-group counts are used only to describe patterns and to guide close reading; no statistical tests are used and no claims of statistical generalization are made.

6.2 Data Collection

The data are headlines of news reports on smog published between January 2022 and December 2025 in three Pakistani English-language newspapers: Dawn, The Express Tribune, and The News International. Only Pakistani news is included. Headlines are retrieved from each newspaper's own online archive using neutral topic terms, such as smog, air pollution, air quality, and AQI, combined with Lahore, Punjab, or Pakistan. Evaluative words such as hazardous, crisis, toxic, or emergency are not used as search terms, because they would select headlines that already contain danger wording.

Because smog coverage is seasonal, sampling is stratified by newspaper and year. All qualifying headlines for each newspaper and year are listed, numbered, and a minimum of 50 headlines are analyzed; the corpus analysed in Section 7 contains 50 headlines (Dawn 17, The Express Tribune 17, The News International 16). Editorials, opinion columns, letters, duplicates, and non-Pakistani agency copy are excluded. For each headline, the newspaper, date, section, and link are recorded in a spreadsheet, and the selection procedure is documented so that it can be repeated.

Headlines are short public texts and are quoted with full attribution. Only the headline text is analyzed. The article body is opened only to confirm the date, the section, and that the report is about smog or air pollution in Pakistan, and it is not coded. Where a newspaper prints different headlines in its print and online editions, the online headline is used and this choice is recorded.

6.3 Analytical Framework

Each headline is coded on six dimensions, summarized in Table 1. The dimensions derive from van Dijk's model: topic (the thematic macrostructure), actors and responsibility (actor description and agency), lexis and metaphor (local meaning and rhetoric), and ideological positioning (the ideological square). Orientation follows from the definition of environmental fear in Section 5.4.

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Table 1. Coding scheme for smog headlines

Dimension	Categories	Guiding question
1. Topic	Air-quality readings and rankings; health effects; government and legal measures; causes and blame; social disruption; other	What is the headline mainly about?
2. Actors	Government; courts; industry; agriculture; transport; neighbouring country; experts and organizations; public; none named	Who is named or implied?
3. Responsibility	Assigned; shared; withheld (agent absent); not relevant	Who or what is presented as responsible for smog or its solution?
4. Lexis and metaphor	Danger words; crisis or emergency words; health-harm words; intensification; metaphor; neutral wording	Which words create danger, crisis, or fear?
5. Orientation	Informational; fear-constructing; response-oriented; mixed	Does the headline report facts, evoke fear, or report action?
6. Ideological positioning	Positive self-presentation; negative other-presentation; mitigation of own responsibility; none	Does the headline follow the ideological square?

The categories are defined as follows. Danger words are expressions that present smog as harmful or threatening, for example hazardous, toxic, dangerous, or deadly. Crisis or emergency words present smog as an exceptional situation requiring urgent action, for example crisis, emergency, or calamity. Health-harm words refer to bodily harm, illness, or death. Intensification includes superlatives and rankings that stress severity, such as “worst” or “most polluted”. Metaphor covers figurative language that presents smog as an active, physical threat, such as a force that chokes a city. An informational headline reports facts, numbers, or rankings without evaluative wording; a fear-constructing headline uses danger, crisis, or harm wording to present smog as a threat; and a response-oriented headline reports a measure taken against smog, such as a school closure or a ban. A headline that does more than one of these is coded as mixed.

Each research question is answered with a specific part of the coding. Research question 1 uses the topic codes. Research question 2 is descriptive: the actor and responsibility codes identify who is named, who is left out, and who is held responsible. Research question 3 uses the lexis, metaphor and orientation codes. Research question 4 is interpretive: the ideological positioning codes are read together with the actor and responsibility findings, with close attention to headlines that blame other actors or countries or emphasise government action. Research question 5 compares all of these patterns across the three newspapers.

6.4 Coding Procedure and Reliability

Coding is conducted in a systematic manner using the thematic analysis method of Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the headlines, initial coding, reviewing and refining codes, and defining categories. Van Dijk's account of actor description and agency is used as the basis for analysis of responsibility: Do actors get named? Do active and passive forms differ with respect to having an agent? Does the newspaper voice responsibility or does it blame a

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quoted source? Close reading of these phrases reveals that they are rhetorical devices which influence the way the event is interpreted (van Dijk, 1988), and are metaphorical expressions.

6.5 Interpretation

The interpretation of the coded patterns takes place at three levels, namely the topics (thematic macrostructures), the local meanings contained in the headlines (actors, wording, and rhetoric), and the context of newsmaking, such as the news genre, headline making, sources quoted, and the wider contexts of governance, public health, and cross-border pollution in Punjab. The analysis examines whether the coverage balances highlighting government action and responsiveness with highlighting government blame, or the blame of other actors or countries. The study identifies patterns that recur across headlines and reports counter-examples, such as reassuring or neutral headlines. The patterns are then compared across the three newspapers.

6.6 Ethics and Limitations

The study analyzes newspaper headlines only, with no human participants. Several limitations apply. The results are only representative of English-language newspapers, and cannot be expanded to Urdu-language or broadcast media. The sample is small and qualitative; findings are interpretive and not statistically representative. Lastly, the study is not about readers, but about texts: it can demonstrate how fear is built into language but not how readers react to it.

7. Analysis and Findings

This section presents the results of the analysis of 50 headlines, covering the Dawn 17, The Express Tribune 17 and The News International 16, from approximately 2022–2025. There are 425 words in the headlines. This leaves 340 words in the text (content-word tokens), represented by 175 different words, with 127 occurring only once. The analysis is carried out along the lines of the dimensions of Table 1 and the levels of van Dijk's model as outlined in Section 5.3: the top of the thematic macrostructure (the headline), local meaning, actor description and agency, the ideological square, and rhetorical devices. The frequency table only includes words that repeat, and counts are included with the headlines. Sections 7.3 to 7.7 answer research questions 1 to 5 in order, after the frequency overview in Sections 7.1 and 7.2. The central discovery is that smog is the subject of and, by metaphor, the assailant. The victims of it and the ones responsible for it are largely absent, and the responsibility for action lies with anonymous or institutional agents.

7.1 Word Frequency

Table 2 lists the twenty most frequent content words, with raw counts per newspaper. Percentages are shares of the 340 content tokens. The full list of all 175 words is in the accompanying Excel file.

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Table 2. The twenty most frequent content words in the corpus

Rank	Word	Total	%	Dawn	Express Tribune	The News
1	smog	34	10.0	12	9	13
2	Lahore	27	7.9	9	8	10
3	Punjab	22	6.5	8	8	6
4	air	11	3.2	3	6	2
5	quality	7	2.1	3	2	2
6	govt.	6	1.8	3	0	3
7	pollution	6	1.8	2	3	1
8	schools	5	1.5	2	0	3
9	hit	4	1.2	1	0	3
10	aqi	4	1.2	1	3	0
11	chokes	4	1.2	1	2	1
12	hazardous	4	1.2	1	1	2
13	crisis	4	1.2	0	2	2
14	emergency	3	0.9	2	0	1
15	lhc	3	0.9	2	0	1
16	lockdown	3	0.9	2	1	0
17	polluted	3	0.9	1	1	1
18	health	3	0.9	0	2	1
19	control	2	0.6	1	0	1
20	imposes	2	0.6	1	0	1

Smog (34), Lahore (27) and Punjab (22) together account for 83 of the 340 content tokens (24%). Among the remaining frequent words, govt. (6) and schools (5) are the most frequent actor and site words, and hazardous, crisis, chokes and emergency are the most frequent evaluative terms.

7.2 Semantic Groups

Grouping the words by function shows what the vocabulary is doing. Table 3 gives the count for each group, its share of the 340 content tokens, the split by newspaper, and the words in each group so that every figure can be checked.

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Table 3. Semantic groups of content words

Group	Total	%	Dawn	Express Tribune	The News	Words (count)
Phenomenon (smog / air / pollution)	65	19.1	22	24	19	smog 34, air 11, quality 7, pollution 6, polluted 3, aqi 4
Place (Lahore / Punjab / Pakistan)	52	15.3	18	16	18	lahore 27, punjab 22, pakistan 2, multan 1
Institutional actors	12	3.5	7	0	5	govt 6, lhc 3, authorities 1, cm 1, maryam 1
Control measures / actions	28	8.2	17	2	9	lockdown 3, closure 2, closed 2, closes 1, shut 1, shuts 1, bans 1, suspend 1, imposes 2, crackdown 1, control 2, combat 2, curb 1, tackle 1, counter 1, orders 1, declares 1, declared 1, announces 2, holiday 1
Threat / intensity evaluation	25	7.4	9	10	6	hazardous 4, crisis 4, emergency 3, dangerous 2, dangerously 1, toxic 2, worst 2, record 2, calamity 1, epidemic 1, chronic 1, unhealthy 1, deteriorate 1
Violence / entrapment metaphor	15	4.4	2	10	3	chokes 4, choke 1, chokehold 1, grip 1, tightens 2, smothered 1, fortress 1, stalk 1, pushes 1, thickens 1, thickening 1
Human / health impact	13	3.8	5	7	1	health 3, disease 1, death 1, ill 1, hospital 1, dengue 1, anguish 1, anxiety 1, residents 1, millions 1, strained 1
Education sites	9	2.6	4	0	5	schools 5, school 1, colleges 1, educational 1, institutions 1
Ranking / comparison	16	4.7	7	5	4	tops 2, ranks 2, ranked 1, ranking 1, second 2, 2nd 1, third 1, most 2, global 2, globally 1, world 1

The phenomenon group is the largest: 65 tokens (19.1%), so about one in five content words names the problem itself, and place names add a further 52 (15.3%). By contrast, institutional actors account for only 12 tokens (3.5%).

7.3 Topics (Dimension 1; RQ1)

In van Dijk's model the headline is the top of the thematic macrostructure, the central theme that the author considers to be most significant. In conjunction the headline translates into one

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macroproposition: Punjab, especially Lahore, is experiencing another environmental crisis. The term "Lahore" is often used as a synecdoche for Punjab, which is why “Punjab bets Rs350m”, “Punjab imposes health emergency”, “Punjab bans all outdoor activities” are used to name the state or the government. Place and state collide, and so can a headline. The coded topics are presented in Table 4. The most frequent topics are control measures (23 of 50 headlines, 46%) and the status/ranking of air quality (13 headlines, 26%). There are only two headlines that are primarily causative in nature. The press thus covers and reports the answer rather than the source of the problem.

Table 4. Main topic of the 50 headlines

Topic (Table 1 category)	Headlines	%
Air-quality readings and rankings	13	26%
Health effects and social disruption	6	12%
Government and legal measures (control measures)	23	46%
Causes and blame	2	4%
Other (headlines that mainly depict smog itself)	6	12%
Total	50	100%

7.4 Actors, Agency and Responsibility (Dimensions 2 and 3; RQ2)

Three patterns are evident in how actors are represented.

Elite voices. The people who appear are institutional: govt (6), LHC (3), CM Maryam, authorities, and an unnamed “expert”. Ordinary people are named only twice, in headlines 11 and 33. This is consistent with van Dijk’s analysis of news discourse, in which elite sources have privileged access to the news (van Dijk, 1988, 1993).

Agentless action. Control measures are the largest action vocabulary (28 tokens, Table 3), and many appear without a specific agent: “Markets in Lahore to shut on Wednesdays”, “Smog declared ‘calamity’”, “Lockdown returns as smog thickens”, “School, colleges to be closed”. Passives and nominalizations (closure, lockdown, health crisis) obscure the decision makers and those responsible.

Schools as places of protection. Schools, colleges and institutions account for 9 tokens (2.6%), and schools are the most common site of state action. The most common protective measure in the headlines is closure (2 of 50 headlines). Measures aimed at industry or fuel are rarer still (2 of 50 headlines). Causes and blame are the main topic of only 2 of 50 headlines, and responsibility for causing smog is rarely assigned. Where internal blame appears, it is vague, as with “industrial units” in headline 1 or “Factories using plastic as fuel” in headline 39, which is attributed to an expert. The strongest criticism of the government comes not from the newspaper but from another institution, the Lahore High Court: “LHC dissatisfied with Punjab govt’s handling of smog crisis” (headline 50). Blame is thus attributed through authoritative sources, and the newspapers seldom name a culprit themselves.

7.5 Lexis and Metaphor (Dimension 4; RQ3)

Threat and intensity. Threat and intensity words total 25 tokens (7.4%): hazardous (4), crisis (4), emergency (3), dangerous and dangerously (3), toxic (2), worst (2), record (2), and calamity, epidemic, chronic, unhealthy and deteriorate (one each). Together with metaphor (15 tokens) and human and health impact (13 tokens), evaluative and affective vocabulary totals 53 tokens (25 + 15 + 13, or 15.6% of the corpus), compared with 12 tokens (3.5%) for institutional actors.

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Van Dijk (1988) treats lexical choice as an expression of the writer's model of the event. The vocabulary forms a scale of severity, from "unhealthy" to "hazardous", "emergency", "calamity" and "epidemic". Two frames stand out. "Lockdown" ("green lockdown", "stricter lockdown", "lockdown returns") borrows the language of the COVID-19 emergency, and "epidemic" presents smog as a disease. Both support exceptional state action. The control vocabulary of crackdown, combat, counter, tackle and curb is parallel to them and describes the response in terms of war.

Metaphor: smog as an aggressor. Fifteen tokens (4.4%) present smog as an aggressor that grips or confines: chokes (4), choke, chokehold, tightens (2), grip, smothered, fortress, stalk, pushes, thickens, thickening. In "Smog chokes Lahore", "Punjab smothered by toxic smog" and "Smog tightens grip on Punjab", smog is the grammatical agent and Lahore or Punjab is the patient. The result is a natural-disaster frame in which smog appears as an autonomous force and its human causes are backgrounded. The metaphor is concentrated in one paper: 10 of the 15 tokens occur in The Express Tribune (Section 7.7).

Ranking and numbers. Six headlines place Lahore or Pakistan against the world in a pollution ranking, using words such as tops, ranks, second, third and 2nd (16 ranking and comparison tokens, 4.7%). Ranking verbs such as "tops" and "ranks" report a negative fact in wording that sounds neutral or even positive. Precise numbers (470 AQI, Rs350m, "four-day") lend credibility; van Dijk calls this the "number game".

7.6 Ideological Positioning (Dimension 6; RQ4)

The headlines give prominence to the initiative and resources of the in-group, the provincial government: "Punjab bets Rs350m on clear skies", "CM Maryam announces joint working group with China", and "Smog clean tower installed in Lahore". China appears as a friendly outsider who can help. The out-group is introduced in only one external-blame headline, "India's polluted air hits Lahore" (headline 21, The Express Tribune), where the possessive makes the pollution India's and moves its cause outside Pakistan.

In terms of the ideological square, positive self-presentation is carried by government initiative and spending, negative other-presentation appears once and plainly (India), and the in-group's own negative actions are de-emphasized through agentless wording and the attribution of criticism to other institutions.

Quotation and distancing. Ten headlines use quotation marks for a key term, for example 'environmental emergency', 'calamity', 'year-round epidemic', 'green lockdown', 'hazardous', and 'very unhealthy'. This is in van Dijk's phrase, evidentiality and distancing; the newspaper is not really claiming the official title but still is using the strongest language. Dawn has 5 such headlines of its 17 (29%), The Express Tribune 2 of 17 (12%), and The News International 3 of 16 (19%).

7.7 Comparison across the Three Newspapers (RQ5)

Table 5 repeats the per-newspaper counts from Table 3 for the groups that differ most. The three papers contribute almost equal numbers of headlines (17, 17 and 16), but the counts are raw and small, so the differences are indicative rather than conclusive.

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Table 5. Selected semantic groups by newspaper (raw token counts)

Group	Dawn	Express Tribune	The News
Control measures / actions	17	2	9
Institutional actors	7	0	5
Threat / intensity evaluation	9	10	6
Violence / entrapment metaphor	2	10	3
Human / health impact	5	7	1
Education sites	4	0	5

Dawn accounts for 17 of the 28 control-measure tokens (61%) and 7 of the 12 institutional-actor tokens (58%), so its headlines are the most institution and response-centred. The Express Tribune has no institutional-actor tokens and only 2 control tokens, but 10 of the 15 metaphor tokens (67%), the most threat words (10), and 7 of the 13 human-impact tokens (54%): it constructs fear mainly through vivid language and human consequences. The News International has the most school-related tokens (5 of 9) and the fewest human-impact terms (1), combining institutional reporting with little affective vocabulary.

8. Expected Contribution of the Study

The study is expected to contribute to environmental linguistics and media discourse research by providing a qualitative analysis of how headlines represent smog in Pakistani newspapers. It is expected to highlight topics and foregrounded actors, to demonstrate how responsibility is given or denied, and to show what linguistic resources are used to build the image of danger and fear. It could also provide some lessons for environmental journalists and communicators regarding public perception of air pollution in terms of the headlines used, and it could exemplify the application of van Dijk's model for environmental discourses in Pakistani media. The findings may also guide later research. A headline analysis can identify topics, actors, and expressions that deserve closer study in full articles, in other newspapers, or in Urdu-language and broadcast media, and it can provide a coding scheme that later corpus-based or reader-based studies can test on larger datasets.

9. Conclusion

Smog is an environmental and public-health concern and an important subject of media representation. The language of headlines is the most visible part of a news report, which influences how environmental threats are communicated and understood. The study used van Dijk's model of news discourse for 50 smog headlines from three English language newspapers of Pakistan. Analysis reveals that government control measures are highlighted more than causes, its usage of danger creating vocabulary and metaphors of attack and entrapment, institutional voice is given more prominence than ordinary voice, and rarely does it pinpoint responsibility. The emphasis differs across the newspapers: Dawn focuses on institutional action, and The Express Tribune focuses on metaphor and human impact. Headlines in turn, do not just report smog, they help readers interpret it, its agents and what is expected of them.

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