



A CRITICAL STUDY OF LANGUAGE IN PAKISTANI ENGLISH NEWSPAPER CRIME REPORTING

Muhammad Akbar sirmuhammadakbar@gmail.com	PhD Scholar, Department of English, Riphah International University, Faisalabad Campus, Pakistan.
Eman Khalid shahzaibmian104@gmail.com	ADP English, Department of English, Riphah International University, Shahkot, Pakistan.
Laiqa Wafa wafaaslam1810@gmail.com	ADP English, Department of English, Riphah International University, Shahkot Campus, Pakistan.
Muqadas Jamil s74262370@gmail.com	ADP English, Department of English, Riphah International University, Shahkot Campus, Pakistan.
Ayesha Naeem ayeshabarbrie678@gmail.com	ADP English, Department of English, Riphah International University, Shahkot Campus, Pakistan.
Mubashra Javed Musawirjaved63@gmail.com	ADP English, Department of English, Riphah International University, Shahkot Campus, Pakistan.

Abstract

Pakistani English newspapers employ sensationalized language in crime reporting that reflects broader societal inequalities related to gender, class, and ethnicity. Prominent publications such as Dawn and The Express Tribune are particularly noted for their crime coverage. News reports not only convey events but also carry significant social implications, shaping public attitudes and perceptions. The language used in English-language Pakistani newspapers frequently mirrors class divisions, distinguishing between lower and upper socioeconomic groups. Authorities and journalists alike are expected to adhere to clear ethical guidelines and unbiased standards to ensure that reporting does not reinforce harmful stereotypes or alienate readers. This study demonstrates that Pakistani journalists often fail to maintain neutral language in crime reporting, instead favouring elite social groups, thereby perpetuating systemic inequalities. Journalism, in its truest sense, serves not merely as a conduit for information but as a complete reflection of the society it operates within.

Keywords: *Crime Narratives, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Language of Journalism, Linguistic Framing, Media Discourse Analysis, News Headlines Language, Pakistani English Newspaper, Sensationalism in Media, Victim and Offender Representation.*

Corresponding Author: Muhammad Akbar (PhD Scholar, Department of English, Riphah International University, Faisalabad Campus, Pakistan)
Email: sirmuhammadakbar@gmail.com

1. Introduction

The English language holds considerable prestige in Pakistan owing to its socio-cultural and educational significance. In the domain of education, English-language newspapers primarily serve the elite segments of society. From a linguistic perspective, engaging with English newspapers is not only instrumental in developing language skills but also cultivates a localized identity for English within the Pakistani context. Newspapers provide verified information across a range of topics, including crime, politics, business, and sports. Regular engagement with print media enhances critical thinking and helps readers distinguish credible information from misinformation.

Contemporary media wields immense influence, with news stories spreading rapidly due to the pervasive reach of sensationalized content. Media broadly falls into two categories: traditional and digital. Traditional print media retains its credibility because it provides comprehensive accounts of incidents in a format that is difficult to alter once published, thereby maintaining reader trust. In Pakistan, the media functions as a powerful institution that transforms national issues into public discourse. Key English-language newspapers include Dawn, The Nation, The Express Tribune, Daily Times, and The Frontier Post.

English serves as Pakistan's second language. In most newspapers, the front page is typically dominated by political news, celebrity stories, and economic affairs, all of which capture immediate reader attention. Subsequent pages cover criminal activity such as theft, robbery, and sexual assault. Terrorism and politically sensitive matters are treated with heightened prominence, while other crimes receive limited coverage. Crimes occurring in major urban centres tend to receive more attention and resources, whereas those in rural areas are often overlooked. English newspapers frequently use informal or dramatic language to draw readers into crime stories. In cases involving sexual violence, the identity of victims is generally protected to shield them from future stigmatization and enable their reintegration into society.

Newspapers tend to give disproportionate prominence to major crimes, which accelerates the resolution of such issues. However, the application of the law is far from uniform. In practice, if members of the elite are implicated in criminal activity, they are described in conciliatory or mitigating terms, whereas individuals from lower or middle-class backgrounds are labelled with derogatory terms such as 'snatcher' or 'ringleader'. Pakistani English is a distinct variety of the language that has evolved from the interplay of Urdu and various regional languages. As a result, the vocabulary and dialogic patterns of Pakistani English continue to shift and develop. It also functions as a lingua franca, facilitating communication between speakers of different native languages.

Crime news plays a constructive role in society by raising public awareness about threats such as robbery and encouraging preventative measures. Media coverage of

criminal activity contributes to accountability and serves as a deterrent. The language used in Pakistani English crime newspapers is generally characterised by a degree of formality, targeting urban, national, and international readerships with relatively objective and factual reporting. In contrast, Urdu newspapers often employ more dramatic styles and cover a broader range of topics, particularly in rural and underrepresented areas.

Crime reporting in Pakistani English newspapers employs specific linguistic tools, including active and passive voice constructions, adjectives, and adverbs, all of which contribute to how victims, perpetrators, and events are represented. Code-switching is also observable, with crime stories occasionally incorporating local terminology relating to dress, culture, and religious practices. Such reports serve the function of informing communities about murders, corruption, kidnapping, and violence. Media attention is largely concentrated on high-profile cases involving celebrities and politicians. English crime reporting is considered the standard for official communication at both national and international levels, placing pressure on authorities to act.

Crime news is disseminated through print, electronic, and digital platforms in Pakistan. Print media, in both Urdu and English, primarily covers urban crime. Digital media tends to address long-term issues such as cybercrime and terrorism, with videos and hashtags serving as effective tools for raising awareness. Pakistani English newspapers are published in a form that is internationally accessible, thereby extending their reach beyond national borders. English-language journalism both informs readers about global events and contributes to the development of writing and literacy skills.

Crime reporting has long been a cornerstone of journalism, shaping public perceptions of safety, security, and social order. In Pakistan, English newspapers play a distinctive role in constructing these perceptions for an educated and authoritative readership. The language deployed in crime news is never merely a neutral vehicle for information; it embodies editorial decisions, cultural biases, institutional constraints, and socio-political contexts. Through deliberate linguistic choices, narrative structures, and framing strategies, Pakistani English newspapers influence how crime is understood, how victims and perpetrators are portrayed, and how issues of justice, law enforcement, and social inequality are debated.

Analytical frameworks such as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) enable researchers to examine how crime is narrated, what ideological positions are embedded within texts, and how linguistic features, including imagery, metaphor, reflexive language, and the attribution of agency, shape public discourse. Such analysis also reveals patterns of exaggeration, omission, victim-blaming, and the normalization of violence within crime reportage. Reporters and editors select specific words, perspectives, and voices that reflect prevailing ideologies, cultural norms, and editorial priorities. Crime reports may, for instance, foreground shocking details to capture reader interest, rely heavily on police

statements to project authority, or construct narratives that subtly assign blame or elicit sympathy. These linguistic choices collectively influence public attitudes toward criminals, victims, and the criminal justice system.

In the Pakistani context, where issues of intimidation, gender-based violence, political corruption, and street crime are deeply intertwined with socio-political dynamics, the mediation of crime through language takes on heightened significance. Ultimately, examining the discursive features of crime reporting in Pakistani English newspapers offers a deeper understanding of how media, power, and society intersect. Such research not only enriches academic scholarship in media studies and linguistics but also underscores the ethical, balanced, and accountable standards that responsible journalism demands. By exposing hidden biases and ideological assumptions, this study advocates for more accurate and socially sensitive representations of crime, offenders, and victims within Pakistan's media landscape.

2. Literature Review

Pakistani English encompasses a distinctive vocabulary that merges linguistic and cultural elements from Urdu, Punjabi, and Pashto. It possesses identifiable features in pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax, and reflects Pakistan's multicultural and multilingual environment. These characteristics include the incorporation of phrases from native languages, code-switching, and literal translations that carry cultural resonance. Crime news reporting involves conveying criminal incidents to inform the public. Media portrayals often amplify public concern through the exaggeration of crime narratives. Among the various types of crime covered, violent offences such as murder attract the greatest media attention due to their perceived significance as disruptions to social order.

Pakistani English has developed its own syntactic features, including distinct clause constructions that differ from standard British English. Its phonology is characterized by a unique sound system, syllabic patterning, and vowel variations. In terms of pragmatics, Pakistani English speakers tend to adapt their usage contextually, for example by adopting a polite register in situations requiring requests or assistance, while not always adhering strictly to conventional grammatical rules.

Crime news in Pakistan frequently incorporates local Urdu terminology, such as dacoity, chori, and bandobast, to reflect cultural specificity. Crime reports commonly cite exact locations to assist public safety. The use of sensational language in crime coverage can heighten public anxiety. The English language in crime news is influenced by linguistic conventions, as well as social and cultural communication norms. Media outlets also employ visual aids such as infographics, photographs, and maps to present information in a chronological and accessible manner. The main themes foregrounded in crime reporting are social dysfunction and violent crime, including harassment and kidnapping. Crime coverage can, in turn, assist law enforcement and the justice system.

Nawaz and Hussain (2021) observed that crime news headlines frequently employ provocative and emotionally evocative language to attract readers:

"Crime news in Pakistani English newspapers often uses a sensational and emotionally charged language to attract readers." (Nawaz, T. & Hussain, I., 2021)

Research into the reporting of rape cases in Pakistani newspapers has found evidence of structural bias and selective omission that contribute to victim-blaming:

"Reports on rape cases in Pakistani newspapers often contain structural bias and selective omission." (Zaman, S., 2023)

Studies on gender representation in Pakistani English newspapers reveal a tendency to portray women in stereotypical or passive terms:

"Women are often represented using stereotypical or passive language in Pakistani English newspapers." (Asghar & Akhter, 2022)

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan noted that crime patterns have shifted significantly, while research suggests that media coverage may exaggerate or oversimplify such developments:

"Crime patterns in Pakistan have shifted significantly in the past decade." (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2022)

The increasing sensationalism of crime-related vocabulary in newspapers has been widely documented:

"Crime-related vocabulary in newspapers has become increasingly sensational." (Rising Crime Trends, 2020)

News functions as a storytelling mechanism for informing the public about daily incidents, as Jiwan (2006) noted with his foundational question:

"What makes a story worth telling?" (Jiwan, C., 2006)

The concept of newsworthiness is not fixed but varies depending on the individual journalist or news organization, as Chermak (1955) observed:

"The specific criteria of newsworthiness can change depending on the individual reporter or news organization." (Chermak, S., 1955)

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to investigate the linguistic and ideological features of crime reporting in Pakistani English newspapers. CDA was selected because it enables researchers to examine how language reflects and reproduces power relations, social inequalities, and ideological assumptions within media discourse (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998).

3.2. Data Source and Sampling

The data for this study consisted of crime news reports and headlines collected from leading Pakistani English-language newspapers, including:

- Dawn
- The Express Tribune
- The Nation
- Daily Times
- The Frontier Post

Purposive sampling was employed to select crime-related reports covering incidents such as murder, robbery, kidnapping, sexual violence, corruption, and terrorism. Reports were chosen because they represented diverse crime categories and demonstrated recurring linguistic patterns relevant to the study's objectives.

4. Theoretical Framework

The analysis was informed by:

1. Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (1989, 1995, 2003)
2. Teun A. van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to media discourse and ideology (1988, 1991, 1998)
3. Entman's (1993) Framing Theory

These frameworks facilitated the examination of linguistic choices, ideological representations, and framing strategies used in crime reporting.

4.1. Analytical Categories

The selected news reports were analyzed according to the following discursive features:

1. **Headline Construction**
 - Use of sensational and emotionally loaded expressions
 - Ambiguity and dramatization
2. **Lexical Choices**
 - Adjectives and adverbs used to intensify crime narratives
 - Representation of victims and offenders
3. **Grammatical Structures**
 - Use of active and passive voice
 - Attribution or concealment of agency
4. **Source Attribution**
 - Reliance on police and official statements
 - Inclusion or exclusion of alternative voices
5. **Metaphorical Language**
 - Expressions creating fear, panic, or social insecurity
6. **Representation of Social Actors**
 - Portrayal of elite and non-elite offenders
 - Representation of women, minorities, and marginalized groups

7. Ideological Framing

- Construction of crime as an individual versus structural issue
- Legitimation of state authority and law enforcement agencies

4.2. Data Analysis Procedure

The collected reports were read repeatedly and coded manually. Linguistic features relevant to the analytical categories were identified and grouped into recurring themes. The themes were then interpreted through the lens of CDA to uncover underlying ideologies, power relations, and social inequalities embedded within crime news discourse.

5. Results and Discussion

Newspapers serve as a primary source of current affairs and verified information. Pakistani English newspapers employ professional and formal language in crime coverage, enabling readers to comprehend criminal events, victims' circumstances, and the role of law enforcement agencies. This aligns with the Critical Discourse Analysis view that media language plays a vital role in constructing and sustaining power relations in society.

The language used in Pakistani English crime reporting contains several notable features. Emotionally charged expressions such as 'brutal', 'heinous', 'cold-blooded', and 'ruthless' are routinely employed to engage readers and intensify the dramatic impact of stories. Headlines play a particularly significant role in shaping reader perceptions. Crime headlines tend to prioritize dramatic effect over clarity, and in doing so, often obscure crucial contextual information such as the identity of the perpetrator, the motive for the crime, or the circumstances under which it occurred. Headlines such as 'Man Shot Dead' or 'Woman Found Murdered' are brief but deliberately vague.

Newspapers frequently use the passive voice to describe criminal events, for example 'was killed' rather than specifying who carried out the act. This linguistic choice depersonalizes the crime and shifts attention away from the perpetrator, directing reader focus toward the victim instead. Crime reporting also shows a heavy reliance on official sources, with phrases such as 'according to official sources' or 'the victim's family stated' frequently appearing. Police statements are accorded disproportionate authority, which can create the misleading impression that investigations are thorough and ongoing.

Government narratives are consistently privileged, reinforcing the authority of state institutions and escalating public anxiety. The use of metaphorical language further intensifies emotional impact. Phrases such as 'a city gripped by fear' suggest that crime is ubiquitous and inescapable, reinforcing its perceived severity and social threat. While such metaphors make stories more compelling, they also cultivate a pervasive sense of negativity and insecurity.

A recurring deficiency in crime reporting is the absence of analytical depth and contextual grounding. Coverage tends to focus on the 'what' of a crime rather than the

'why'. Crime is rarely contextualised within broader structural factors such as poverty, unemployment, or institutional weaknesses in the legal system. Instead, criminal behaviour is typically framed as an individual failing rather than a social phenomenon. This framing discourages readers from engaging critically with the root causes of crime.

The discussion also highlights significant disparities in geographic coverage. Crimes occurring in affluent urban areas receive extensive and detailed reporting, while those in rural or economically marginalised communities are addressed only briefly, if at all. Certain social groups are also disproportionately associated with criminality in media narratives, reinforcing harmful stereotypes. Victims are routinely reduced to demographic categories, such as age or gender, rather than being accorded individual identity. In cases involving women or minority groups, language may subtly imply culpability or moral judgment, thereby reinforcing discriminatory attitudes already present in social discourse.

Ethical shortcomings are also prevalent in crime reporting. Newspapers at times publish crime stories without adequate consideration for the privacy of individuals involved, the accuracy of information, or the potential psychological harm to victims and their families. Identifying suspects prior to conviction and using intrusive visual content can have severe consequences for those involved. Commercial competition and the pressure for rapid publication often override ethical considerations.

A comparison with Western journalistic practice reveals notable differences. Western crime reporting generally incorporates expert commentary, investigative depth, and contextual analysis. Pakistani English newspapers, by contrast, tend to prioritize immediacy and emotional appeal over analytical rigour. This discrepancy underscores the need for improved professional training and ethical standards in Pakistani journalism.

Crime reporting also shapes public perceptions of law enforcement. By consistently presenting police activity in a positive light and avoiding criticism of institutional failures, newspapers legitimize state authority while discouraging public scrutiny. This means that crime reporting simultaneously serves informational and ideological functions. Prolonged exposure to violent and alarmist crime news has measurable psychological effects on readers, fostering fear, anxiety, and social distrust. Such exposure may lead people to overestimate crime rates and support punitive measures disproportionate to the reality of criminal activity.

Crime news has also become a commercialized product. Sensational stories attract more readers and generate more online engagement. This commercialization prioritizes profit over public responsibility and undermines journalism's educational role. Overall, this discussion confirms that the language of crime news in Pakistani English newspapers is deeply ideological and socially influential. Through the use of sensational vocabulary, passive constructions, metaphor, and selective sourcing, newspapers construct a reality that promotes fear and buttresses authority. This study calls for meaningful reform in crime

reporting. Journalists should employ impartial language, provide contextual depth, avoid unnecessary sensationalism, and incorporate diverse perspectives. Ethical standards must be upheld to protect both victims and suspects. In conclusion, crime news in Pakistani English newspapers is not merely informative but constitutes a powerful discourse that shapes social thinking. Responsible and critically informed reporting is essential for the promotion of justice, public awareness, and institutional accountability in Pakistani society.

6. Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates that crime reporting in Pakistani English newspapers is not impartial but is profoundly shaped by ideology, commercial imperatives, and the exercise of power. Through sensational and emotionally charged language, ambiguous and dramatic headlines, passive voice constructions, and an overreliance on official sources, newspapers construct a version of reality that privileges fear, drama, and authority over clarity, context, and accountability. These linguistic choices systematically deflect attention from perpetrators, limit critical examination of state institutions, and present crime as an individual failure rather than as a social problem rooted in poverty, unemployment, and a deficient legal framework.

The persistent use of metaphor and the selective emphasis on urban and elite-related crime reinforce public anxiety and social stereotypes, while crimes affecting rural populations and marginalized communities remain underreported or misrepresented. Ethical failures, including the violation of privacy and the premature identification of suspects, are frequently overlooked in the pursuit of commercial viability and speed of publication. By comparison with Western journalistic standards, Pakistani crime reporting lacks investigative balance, analytical depth, and the incorporation of expert perspectives.

In sum, crime news functions as a form of persuasive discourse that shapes public perception, legitimizes state power, and influences social behaviour. Accordingly, there is a pressing need for responsible, ethically grounded, and critically informed crime reporting that foregrounds context, equity, and social accountability to advance justice and public awareness within Pakistani society.

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