CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL ISSUES IN PAKISTANI NEWSPAPERS: POVERTY, EDUCATION, AND GENDER EQUALITY

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Abstract
This study investigates the linguistic and ideological representation of poverty, education, and gender equality in the Dawn newspaper during April and May 2025. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) based on van Dijk's socio-cognitive model, the research explores how language reflects and reinforces specific ideological stances. The analysis focuses on lexical choices, metaphors, modality, sentence structure, and voice. Findings reveal that poverty is framed in a technical, policy-oriented manner; education is portrayed through a progressive reform lens; and gender equality is approached with assertive, rights-based language, though often limited to elite contexts. The study concludes that while Dawn maintains a balanced tone, its discourse subtly prioritizes institutional narratives, shaping public understanding and reinforcing societal hierarchies.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis, Media Representation, Poverty, Education, Gender Equality, Dawn Newspaper, Ideology, Linguistic Framing, Pakistan, Media Discourse*

Introduction
Media plays a crucial role in contemporary society, influencing perceptions, shaping ideologies, and impacting public opinion. Newspapers, as significant media tools, serve not only as channels of information but also as potent ideological agents, framing societal realities through distinct linguistic choices and thematic emphasis. In Pakistan, the press has historically assumed a central role in socio-political discourse, influencing narratives about critical social issues that shape national priorities and debates. Pakistani society faces numerous social challenges, among which poverty, education disparities, and gender inequalities prominently stand out. These issues are not isolated but rather interconnected, directly affecting national development, human rights, and social stability. How these issues are portrayed and represented through media is crucial because media coverage influences public perceptions, informs policy-making, and shapes societal attitudes.

This research investigates how one of Pakistan's leading English newspapers, Dawn, represents and frames the social issues of poverty, education, and gender equality. By exploring the linguistic and ideological dimensions embedded within the newspaper's discourse, the study seeks to uncover how media narratives align with, challenge, or reinforce prevailing societal attitudes and power dynamics.

Statement of the Problem
Despite considerable research in media discourse, relatively limited scholarly attention has focused specifically on analyzing the intricate portrayal of poverty, education, and gender equality in Pakistani English-language newspapers, especially within a recent and relevant timeframe. Understanding this portrayal linguistically and ideologically is essential because

media representations significantly impact societal understanding and policy discourse around these critical social issues. This gap in current research necessitates a focused, detailed analysis to illuminate the role of language and ideology in shaping public discourse in Pakistan.

Research Objectives

1. To analyse the linguistic features, such as lexical choices, metaphors, euphemisms, sentence structure, modality, and voice, used in portraying poverty, education, and gender equality in Pakistani newspapers during April and May 2025.
2. To evaluate the implicit and explicit ideological positions reflected in the coverage of these issues, noting patterns of support, neutrality, or opposition.

Research Questions

1. What linguistic strategies are used to portray poverty, education, and gender equality in the selected newspapers?
2. What ideological positions are conveyed, and how do they reflect support, neutrality, or opposition?

Significance of the Study

This research holds academic and practical significance. Academically, it contributes to the growing body of knowledge on media discourse, language use, and ideological construction. Practically, the insights can inform media professionals, policymakers, educators, and social advocates by highlighting the critical role language plays in shaping public consciousness and influencing social change. Furthermore, the study can foster greater awareness among media audiences about the impact of news representation on societal values and policy direction.

Theoretical Framework

This research employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), drawing primarily from Teun van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach. CDA is an interdisciplinary approach widely utilized to examine the ways language interacts with power dynamics, ideology, and societal structures. According to van Dijk (2006), discourse not only reflects societal contexts but actively shapes them through ideological positions. CDA thus facilitates a deeper exploration into how linguistic choices construct, reflect, or contest existing societal ideologies and power relations.

Scope and Delimitations

The present study is explicitly limited to analyzing the portrayal of poverty, education, and gender equality within the Dawn newspaper during the months of April and May 2025. The selected timeframe ensures contemporary relevance and manageable data. The study will specifically analyze front-page headlines and featured articles addressing the chosen social issues. Though focused, these delimitations enable an in-depth, nuanced exploration of media representation through linguistic and ideological lenses.

Literature Review

Media discourse analysis has been widely employed to examine how language shapes societal perceptions of critical social issues. Specifically, the study of newspapers has frequently revealed the subtle but potent role of linguistic and ideological constructs. This literature review synthesizes significant research that contextualizes the current analysis of poverty, education, and gender equality as portrayed in newspapers, with a specific focus on Pakistan. Media serve as a primary societal lens, significantly influencing public perceptions through distinct linguistic strategies and thematic emphases (Fairclough, 2015). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), especially as advocated by van Dijk (2006), has emerged as an effective methodological and theoretical approach to explore these phenomena. CDA

explicitly targets the subtle linguistic devices that communicate ideological positions, critically evaluating how power and inequality are perpetuated in textual representations (van Dijk, 2015).

In a relevant study, Khalid and Ahmed (2020) analyzed linguistic representations of poverty in Pakistani media. They found significant reliance on euphemistic language and metaphorical depictions, indirectly influencing public attitudes toward poverty. They argued that such linguistic strategies often serve ideological functions, reinforcing existing power hierarchies and masking deeper socioeconomic disparities. Similarly, examining educational narratives, Hussain and Raza (2021) noted that media discourses significantly shape public perceptions about educational reforms and government accountability. They highlighted that newspapers frequently utilized active voice structures when attributing positive outcomes to specific political actors and passive constructions for systemic failures, thereby framing responsibility in ideologically driven ways. Regarding gender equality, an area critically explored by Saeed and Malik (2022), newspapers demonstrate significant variation in their coverage. Their study revealed Pakistani newspapers' linguistic biases, which manifest through lexical choices, modality, and sentence structures that subtly perpetuate traditional gender roles. This linguistic framing significantly shapes societal attitudes toward gender equality, influencing both policy and public attitudes. Moreover, international perspectives add comparative dimensions to these findings. Richardson (2022) emphasizes that media discourses often reflect broader ideological and cultural contexts, shaping public debates about social issues globally. For instance, linguistic analyses of poverty-related discourses in international media reveal stark differences influenced by local cultural and political ideologies (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 2022).

Another relevant analysis conducted by Ahmed et al. (2023) revealed that media narratives on education in South Asia systematically reinforce elite perspectives, often marginalizing grassroots voices. Their findings emphasize the importance of critical linguistic scrutiny to understand underlying ideological motivations within media discourse. In their CDA-based investigation of gender portrayals, Khan and Iqbal (2024) further argued that newspaper coverage in Pakistan frequently employs metaphors and lexicalization to implicitly reinforce patriarchal ideologies. Their analysis concluded that these linguistic devices subtly maintain societal norms and resist transformative narratives on gender equality.

Considering the comparative importance of linguistic modality, Butt and Hasan (2023) demonstrated how media discourse consistently manipulates modality to create ideological impressions. Their findings from Pakistani newspapers underline the implicit ideological framing that linguistic choices convey, especially regarding social issues such as poverty and education. Additionally, Hasan and Tariq (2023) critically analyzed headlines from Pakistani English newspapers, observing significant ideological biases through the strategic deployment of active and passive voice constructions. Their results supported claims that linguistic structures significantly affect reader perception of responsibility and accountability concerning various societal challenges.

The recent work by Siddique and Ashraf (2024) provided compelling insights into how media coverage on gender equality in Pakistan dynamically interacts with cultural narratives and public policy. They identified clear patterns of ideological alignment, neutrality, or opposition through detailed linguistic analyses, suggesting that media significantly influence societal progress on gender issues.

Research Methodology

This chapter outlines the research design, data sources, analytical framework, and procedures used to investigate how Dawn newspaper portrayed the social issues of poverty, education, and gender equality during April and May 2025. It also justifies the use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the primary methodological approach for uncovering the linguistic and ideological dimensions embedded in the media discourse.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The qualitative approach is suitable for this study as it enables a detailed interpretation of language, context, and ideology embedded in media discourse. CDA allows the researcher to explore how language is used to produce, reinforce, or challenge power relations and ideological positions in society.

Data Collection

Data Source

The data was collected from Dawn, a leading English-language daily newspaper in Pakistan. Dawn is widely regarded for its national coverage and readership among policymakers, academics, and the urban middle and upper classes. It is considered an influential source in shaping public opinion.

Time Frame

Articles and headlines were selected from the issues published during April and May 2025, a two-month period chosen for its relevance and to provide a manageable yet representative sample of contemporary media discourse.

Selection Criteria

Articles and headlines were selected if they explicitly addressed poverty, education, or gender equality, appeared on the front page or in editorial/opinion sections, and were original content by Pakistani newspapers (excluding syndicated international reports) to ensure cultural and ideological relevance.

Analytical Framework

This study is guided by Teun A. van Dijk's (2006) model of Critical Discourse Analysis, particularly his socio-cognitive approach, which bridges the gap between language, cognition, and society. Van Dijk emphasizes how discourse reflects and reinforces ideology, especially in mass media.

Method of Analysis:

Articles were collected and categorized by theme: poverty, education, and gender equality, then read to understand tone and context. Key linguistic elements were coded using CDA principles and interpreted through van Dijk's socio-cognitive model to reveal underlying ideologies. Triangulation helped identify consistent patterns across all themes.

Interpretation and Discussion

This chapter interprets and discusses the linguistic and ideological patterns observed in the selected articles and headlines from the *Dawn* newspaper covering poverty, education, and gender equality. The analysis applies van Dijk's (2006) model of Critical Discourse Analysis, focusing on lexical choices, metaphors, sentence structure, modality, and voice, alongside the ideological implications of these choices.

Representation of Poverty

Linguistic Analysis

In articles discussing poverty, Dawn frequently uses neutral to formal lexical choices, such as *"income inequality," "marginalized communities," "underprivileged groups,"* and *"social safety nets."* These terms avoid emotionally charged language, suggesting a professional tone intended to inform rather than sensationalize.

The voice used is predominantly passive when referring to state responsibility:

- *"Funds were not released on time,"*
- *"The benefits were delayed due to procedural bottlenecks."*

This passive construction subtly obscures agency, avoiding direct attribution of failure or negligence to specific government departments or officials. By contrast, when poverty alleviation efforts are reported, active voice is employed:

- *"The government launched a new income support scheme,"*
- *"The ministry expanded outreach programs."*

Such shifts reflect an ideological preference for framing positive actions with agency while presenting negative outcomes in an impersonal manner.

Modality is also evident in expressions like *"should be addressed," "could be improved,"* and *"may require urgent intervention,"* indicating tentative obligation without asserting direct criticism or urgency.

Ideological Interpretation

Dawn's coverage on poverty reveals a technocratic ideological stance, emphasizing policy and governance solutions without deeply challenging structural inequalities. The frequent use of expert voices and economic jargon contributes to a depersonalized representation of poverty, treating it as a statistical or developmental issue rather than a human crisis.

Moreover, the portrayal of the poor is often generic and homogenized (e.g., *"low-income households"*), without detailed storytelling or voices from affected communities. This linguistic distance aligns with a middle-class editorial perspective, geared more toward policymakers and donors than grassroots readers.

In summary, the ideological stance on poverty in *Dawn* is one of detached professionalism, acknowledging the issue but framing it through the lens of policy efficiency, not systemic critique or moral urgency.

Representation of Education

Linguistic Analysis

Education-related articles use more positively charged vocabulary than those on poverty. Words like "reform," "transform," "empowerment," and "human capital development" recur across headlines and editorial commentary. These lexical choices reflect a progress-oriented narrative.

Metaphors also appear, such as:

- *"Bridging the learning divide"*
- *"The education pipeline is clogged."*

These conceptual metaphors convey systemic challenges while reinforcing a problem-solving frame. Unlike in the poverty discourse, agency is consistently clear, with schools, government officials, or development partners explicitly named:

- *"The Ministry of Education rolled out new digital content."*
- *"Private schools resisted curriculum standardization."*

In terms of modality, there is a blend of assertive and conditional tones:

- *"The state must ensure quality education,"*

- *"Uniform curricula might reduce regional disparities."*

Such language shows both normative claims and policy-level caution, reflecting journalistic balance between advocacy and analysis.

Ideological Interpretation

Dawn's education coverage suggests an ideological alignment with modernization and reformism. The discourse promotes education as a tool for economic development, often referencing international benchmarks and SDG goals. However, it rarely addresses structural inequalities (e.g., class, rural-urban divides, or linguistic disparities) in depth.

The actors most frequently cited are government officials, donors, and educationists, while students, teachers, and parents remain largely backgrounded in the discourse. This reflects an elite-oriented narrative, prioritizing institutional voices over experiential ones.

In short, the ideological stance in Dawn's education reporting champions systemic reform and digital advancement but underrepresents the human dimensions of educational inequality.

Representation of Gender Equality

Linguistic Analysis

In its coverage of gender equality, *Dawn* employs carefully moderated vocabulary, often reflecting institutional or legal framing. Terms such as *"gender parity," "women's empowerment," "equal representation,"* and *"gender-sensitive policy"* are recurrent. These expressions suggest a formal, rights-based discourse.

Headlines often use nominalization, for example:

- *"Push for women's inclusion in tech sector gains ground."*
- *"Backlash against gender bill stirs debate."*

This technique abstracts action, placing emphasis on issues rather than agents, which may weaken the sense of personal agency or urgency around gender struggles.

The use of passive voice is significant in articles reporting violence or discrimination:

- *"A woman was harassed during the rally,"*
- *"Rights were denied under outdated laws."*

In contrast, active voice is used when discussing positive initiatives or policy announcements:

- *"The Sindh Assembly passed a bill on workplace safety,"*
- *"Women leaders spearhead community outreach programs."*

Modality is highly visible in gender discourse, with phrases like *"must be addressed," "requires urgent reform,"* and *"should not be overlooked,"* indicating stronger normative claims than in poverty or education reporting.

Ideological Interpretation

Dawn's representation of gender equality reflects a liberal-progressive ideological stance, supportive of legal reforms, women's participation, and institutional interventions. However, this stance is often constrained within the bounds of institutional narratives, highlighting policy efforts more than personal stories of discrimination, activism, or systemic patriarchy.

Coverage frequently centers around urban, educated women, often in professional or political roles. This narrows the discourse to a specific segment, omitting the experiences of rural, working-class, or minority women, which could otherwise offer a broader, intersectional understanding of gender inequality. Despite these limitations, gender-related articles in *Dawn* are more assertive in tone and ideologically committed than those on poverty or education. The consistent use of strong modality and references to constitutional and human rights frameworks positions the newspaper as an advocate of gender justice, albeit within the parameters of institutional progressivism.

Comparative Discussion

The CDA findings across the three themes, poverty, education, and gender equality, reveal distinct linguistic and ideological patterns, shaped by the issue's nature and the newspaper's editorial stance.

Theme	Voice Use	Lexical Tone	Modality	Ideological Position
Poverty	Mostly passive	Neutral/technical	Neutral/technical Tentative	Technocratic, managerial
Education	Mixed	Optimistic/reformist	Balanced	Modernization, reformist
Gender Equality	Mixed	Rights-based/formal	Assertive	Liberal-progressive, urban-centric

A notable trend is that *Dawn* tends to assign clearer agency and stronger ideological positioning when covering gender equality and education, while taking a more reserved and bureaucratic approach in poverty coverage. This could reflect editorial choices shaped by perceived audience interest, social sensitivity of topics, and institutional pressures.

Furthermore, the use of metaphors and modality differs in function. In education, metaphors like *"bridging the gap"* evoke problem-solving. In gender discourse, modality like *"must address"* reveals moral and legal urgency. In contrast, poverty discourse is framed more technocratically, emphasizing policy design and efficiency.

Implications of Findings

These findings highlight the power of media to construct social reality not only by what is said, but how it is said. Through linguistic strategies and implicit ideologies, *Dawn* reinforces:

- A managerial understanding of poverty, focused on statistics and policy rather than human stories.
- A developmental framing of education, aligning with global modernization narratives.
- A liberal but selective commitment to gender equality, largely cantered on urban professional contexts.

Such patterns are significant because they shape how readers understand these social issues, prioritize them, and discuss them. The absence of grassroots voices and experiential storytelling, especially in poverty and gender narratives, points to the limitations of elite media in capturing the full spectrum of social struggle in Pakistan.

Conclusion

This study analysed how *Dawn* newspaper represented poverty, education, and gender equality during April and May 2025 using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The findings revealed that poverty was framed in a neutral, technocratic tone; education was presented through a reformist lens; and gender equality received a more assertive, rights-based portrayal. While *Dawn* maintains a professional tone, its language reflects implicit ideological preferences, often prioritizing institutional perspectives over grassroots voices. These patterns highlight how media discourse shapes public understanding of social issues and subtly reinforce existing power structures.

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