

LINGUISTIC DEPICTION OF THE INDUS REGION IN PAKISTANI PRINT MEDIA: AN ANALYSIS OF 2023–2025 NEWSPAPER COVERAGE

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Abstract

This paper examines the linguistic representation of the Indus region in Pakistani English-language print media from 2023 to 2025. Using a qualitative linguistic approach, the study explores how three leading newspapers “DAWN, The News, and The Express Tribune” construct different discourses surrounding the Indus region. By examining word frequencies, collocations, and thematic patterns in articles discussing the region, the study reveals that each publication employs distinct narrative framings. DAWN emphasizes cultural heritage and indigenous identity; The News uses the Indus as a metaphor for national unity and continuity; while The Express Tribune focuses on educational and civic discourse. Despite the river’s environmental and historical relevance, ecological concerns are largely marginalized. This paper argues that media framing not only reflects but also shapes societal understandings of regional identities, and it underscores the need for more inclusive and context-sensitive reporting.

INTRODUCTION

The Indus region stands as a cornerstone of Pakistan's environmental, cultural, and historical landscape. As one of the world's oldest civilizations flourished along its banks, the region continues to influence the country's socio-political dynamics today. However, how the Indus is discussed and described in media narratives has profound implications for national identity, cultural memory, and policy orientation. Language is not a neutral medium; it actively constructs social realities and influences public discourse. Therefore, examining the linguistic representation of the Indus in national media becomes critical to understanding broader societal attitudes toward the region.

This paper investigates how the Indus region is portrayed in three prominent English-language newspapers in Pakistan between 2023 and 2025. It considers how media outlets frame the region through

recurring vocabulary, metaphors, collocational patterns, and discursive themes. The analysis not only focuses on textual content but also explores the ideological dimensions embedded in linguistic choices. The goal is to examine whether the media offers a diverse and inclusive portrayal of the Indus or perpetuates reductive, symbolic, or politically charged narratives. This kind of research is particularly important in multilingual and multiethnic nations like Pakistan, where media discourse plays a critical role in shaping public perceptions and regional cohesion.

2. Literature Review

Research in media discourse studies has long emphasized the role of language in shaping social ideologies and power relations (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998). In the context of Pakistan, numerous

studies have examined how political, regional, and cultural discourses are framed in print media. Afzaal, Naqvi, and Raees (2022) conducted a corpus-oriented study revealing how political slogans such as "Naya Pakistan" are embedded with ideological undercurrents, reflecting broader state narratives and populist appeal.

Hingorjo and Memon (2019) explored how environmental concerns regarding the Indus Delta are underrepresented in mainstream media, often overshadowed by political news. This highlights an existing gap in how ecological issues related to the Indus are marginalized in favor of more sensationalist coverage.

Qadeer and Shehzad (2017) examined how media outlets selectively represent political discourses, often privileging urban over rural narratives. Their findings align with concerns raised by Yusuf and Schoemaker (2013), who argue that systemic bias in Pakistani media tends to silence peripheral regions. Hassan and Seyal (2017) further emphasize the exclusion of indigenous and minority voices, underlining the need for broader inclusivity in national discourse.

Lawler's (2004) historical study on the Indus script underscores the symbolic richness and civilizational depth of the region. Despite its historical and archaeological prominence, Lawler notes the relative lack of representation in contemporary discourse, a concern mirrored in this study.

What sets the present study apart is its focus on recent coverage (2023–2025), its triangulated analysis across three editorially distinct newspapers, and its use of linguistic tools to reveal subtle patterns in framing, metaphor, and ideological positioning.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative linguistic analysis framework anchored in principles of critical discourse analysis (CDA). Articles were collected from the digital archives of DAWN, The News, and The Express Tribune published between January 2023 and February 2025. The selection was guided by the presence of keywords such as "Indus," "Sindh," "heritage," "river," "culture," and related terms. These keywords ensured thematic relevance to the Indus region.

The selected articles include a variety of genres, such as news reports, opinion columns, event coverage, and

feature stories. This diversity allows the study to capture how different textual modes contribute to the discursive construction of the Indus region. Once selected, the texts were cleaned and processed: standardizing case (lowercasing), removing punctuation, and segmenting into tokens for analysis. Using AntConc, the data were analyzed through several key tools:

- **Word Frequency Lists** to identify dominant lexical items across the corpora.
- **Collocation Analysis** to examine word pairings and semantic proximity to "Indus."
- **Concordance Lines (KWIC)** to observe contextual usage and thematic framing.

While the software facilitated pattern detection, interpretation was driven by CDA, especially the frameworks of Norman Fairclough and Teun A. van Dijk, focusing on power relations, representation, and ideology. This methodological blend of empirical analysis and interpretative depth provides a grounded yet nuanced exploration of how the Indus region is discursively represented in Pakistani print media.

4. Results and Analysis

4.1. Concordance Analysis (KWIC)

The keyword-in-context (KWIC) tool was used to analyze the immediate linguistic environment surrounding the term "Indus" in each newspaper corpus.

- **DAWN** frequently used the term in cultural and linguistic contexts, such as "Indus Cultural Forum" and "Indus Kohistani". The region was framed as a hub of ethnic identity, indigenous languages, and cultural heritage. The concordance lines reflected a deep engagement with language rights and literary activism, e.g., "curated sessions on Indus Kohistani literature."

- **The News** presented the Indus River more symbolically. It was described as "the axis of Pakistan", and often placed within narratives of national unity and collective identity. Concordance entries such as "the River Indus flows from the mountains to the heart of the nation" reflected an abstract, metaphorical portrayal with an emphasis on unity and historical significance.

- **The Express Tribune** offered more diversified contexts, featuring the Indus in relation to events, educational campaigns, and historical narratives. Phrases like “River Indus: A Confluence of Economy, Language and Culture” linked the region to themes of civic participation and cultural discourse. The newspaper also covered media screenings and academic events linked to the Indus Valley Civilization.

These distinctions reveal how DAWN emphasizes regional and linguistic identity, The News frames the Indus in nationalistic and metaphorical terms, and The Tribune presents it as a space of cultural learning and civic engagement.

4.2. Collocation Analysis

Collocation analysis sheds light on lexical associations tied to “Indus.” The strength and frequency of these pairings indicate how the region is discursively anchored in different thematic frames.

- **DAWN:** The term “Indus” frequently collocated with “Kohistani,” “language,” “forum,” and “indigenous”. These associations suggest a strong ethno-linguistic framing. Words like “preservation,” “heritage,” and “identity” also appeared frequently in the vicinity of “Indus,” reinforcing themes of cultural resilience and activism.

- **The News:** Here, “Indus” was commonly found alongside “river,” “axis,” “spine,” and “nation”. These collocations reflect a rhetorical elevation of the Indus as a timeless and unifying natural entity. Other linked words like “Islamic Republic,” “history,” and “civilization” indicate the use of the river as a nationalist symbol rather than a localized region.

- **The Express Tribune:** Surprisingly, the Tribune showed fewer statistically strong collocates, implying more dispersed or varied usage. However, terms like “forum,” “learning,” “civilization,” “language,” and “expedition” point to a framing grounded in academic, educational, and cultural programming. The absence of strong collocational anchoring in The Tribune may suggest a more open-ended or evolving discourse, while DAWN and The News show tightly constructed ideological anchors.

4.3. Word Frequency Analysis

Word frequency counts reveal which lexical fields are dominant within each newspaper corpus in relation to the Indus region.

- **DAWN:** Frequent words included “language,” “Sindhi,” “indigenous,” “heritage,” “preservation,” and “authority”. This supports the argument that DAWN constructs the Indus as a zone of cultural preservation and linguistic activism. The emphasis on regional languages signals an editorial commitment to minority representation.

- **The News:** Words like “national,” “river,” “unity,” “diversity,” “violence,” and “Baluchistan” were more frequent. These results show a hybrid narrative—combining the metaphorical (national unity via the river) with sociopolitical commentary (violence, provincial tension).

- **The Express Tribune:** Common terms included “Sindhi,” “learning,” “languages,” “civilization,” “authority,” “federal,” and “diversity”. This reinforces the newspaper’s tendency to treat the Indus region as a cultural knowledge space. The appearance of “federal” also suggests mild political engagement, but not to the extent of The News.

4.4. Thematic Contrasts Across Newspapers

By triangulating data from KWIC, collocations, and word frequencies, we observe three distinct narrative patterns:

Newspaper	Dominant Theme	Linguistic Features
DAWN	Cultural heritage and language rights	“Indus Kohistani,” “indigenous,” “preservation,” “forum”
The News	National identity and symbolism	“axis of the nation,” “unity,” “river,” “Islamic Republic”
Express Tribune	Civic discourse and cultural education	“learning,” “civilization,” “languages,” “expedition,” “festival”

Each newspaper reflects its editorial philosophy: DAWN as a promoter of minority voices; The News as a nationalist outlet; and The Tribune as an educational and participatory platform.

5. Discussion

The linguistic analysis conducted across three major English-language newspapers “DAWN, The News, and The Express Tribune” reveals distinct discursive framings of the Indus region. These differences are not merely editorial quirks but are deeply embedded in broader ideological currents, institutional orientations, and audience expectations. Drawing on critical discourse theory, this section interprets how language shapes perception and power in the context of regional representation.

5.1. Language as an Ideological Instrument

As Fairclough (1995) posits, language is a site of social struggle, reflecting and reinforcing dominant ideologies. In this context, DAWN uses language to challenge dominant narratives by foregrounding the voices of linguistic minorities and indigenous communities. The emphasis on terms like “indigenous,” “Kohistani,” and “preservation” situates the Indus not as a peripheral region but as a culturally vital landscape that resists erasure.

In contrast, The News employs language to consolidate national identity, positioning the Indus River as a metaphorical “spine” of Pakistan. This aligns with van Dijk’s (1998) theory of symbolic elites using media to naturalize dominant ideologies. The repeated use of “axis,” “nation,” and “Islamic Republic” suggests a deliberate elevation of the Indus as a unifying national symbol, possibly at the cost of regional nuance.

The Express Tribune straddles a middle path, using language associated with education, dialogue, and cultural programming. Words like “civilization,” “festival,” and “learning” reflect a civic, modernist discourse that seeks to inform and involve. While less ideologically rigid, it may also risk depoliticizing the region by framing it primarily through academic or performative lenses.

5.2. Selective Visibility and Silences

One of the most striking patterns is the near-absence of ecological discourse. Despite the environmental fragility of the Indus River basin, none of the

newspapers foregrounded issues like climate change, water scarcity, or river pollution in a sustained manner. This echoes concerns raised by Hingorjo and Memon (2019), who argue that Pakistani media often marginalizes environmental issues in favor of politically resonant content.

This silence is especially problematic given the Indus region’s centrality to Pakistan’s environmental sustainability. The linguistic absence suggests that ecological urgency has yet to penetrate media discourse at a structural level, pointing to a discursive gap with real-world consequences.

5.3. Editorial Identity and Regional Framing

Each newspaper’s treatment of the Indus reflects its editorial and ideological orientation:

- DAWN presents itself as a platform for minority voices and cultural heritage, using language that champions diversity and inclusion.
- The News reflects a state-centric worldview, framing regional symbols in service of national unity and historical continuity.
- The Express Tribune positions itself as a moderate, civic-oriented outlet, favoring intellectual engagement and public dialogue over overt politics. These framings not only reveal the values of the institutions but also shape how readers conceptualize the Indus region. In CDA terms, this reflects how media discourse co-constructs public memory, influencing which regions are seen as valuable, which narratives are amplified, and which are marginalized.

5.4. Implications for Media and Society

The implications of this study extend beyond media linguistics. In a diverse and multilingual nation like Pakistan, how the press portrays historically significant yet often overlooked regions can affect policy discourse, national cohesion, and regional autonomy. The current portrayals of the Indus, while rich in symbolism and culture, lack environmental realism and often fail to center the lived experiences of local communities.

This calls for more balanced journalism, where symbolic representations are supplemented by grounded, inclusive reporting. Integrating voices from

Sindh, Gilgit-Baltistan, and Kohistan in national narratives is not just an ethical imperative, it's essential for holistic nation-building.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to explore how the Indus region is linguistically represented in three of Pakistan's leading English-language newspapers "DAWN, The News, and The Express Tribune" between 2023 and 2025. Through a combination of concordance analysis, collocation mapping, and word frequency investigation, the study identified divergent discursive strategies used by each publication to frame the Indus.

- DAWN emphasized linguistic heritage and cultural preservation, portraying the Indus as a site of indigenous identity and marginalized voices.
- The News adopted a symbolic and nationalistic framing, casting the Indus as a unifying metaphor of the Pakistani state.
- The Express Tribune maintained a civic and educational orientation, associating the Indus with cultural programs, learning, and dialogue.

These findings reinforce the argument that media narratives are not neutral but ideologically constructed. The study also uncovered a critical silence: despite the river's ecological centrality, environmental issues remained significantly underreported across all three corpora. This reflects a structural absence that calls for both scholarly and journalistic attention.

From a theoretical standpoint, this research supports key arguments in critical discourse analysis, namely, that media language functions as a tool of power, identity construction, and ideological reproduction. By examining how language is used to frame the Indus, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how Pakistani media participate in shaping regional consciousness.

7. Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Encourage Environmentally Inclusive Reporting:

Newsrooms should incorporate environmental journalism more prominently when covering the Indus. Stories addressing water scarcity, pollution,

and climate threats should complement historical or symbolic portrayals.

2. **Diversify Regional Sources and Voices:** Media outlets should prioritize interviews, stories, and editorials from individuals and organizations based within the Indus region, particularly from underrepresented groups such as indigenous language speakers, farmers, and activists.

3. **Promote Balanced Narrative Framing:** Editorial boards should consciously avoid oversymbolizing regions like the Indus as mere metaphors for nationhood. Instead, framing should reflect both symbolic and material realities, including lived experiences and regional challenges.

4. Strengthen Collaboration with Cultural Institutions:

Journalists could benefit from partnerships with institutions such as the Indus Cultural Forum or local universities. This would allow for greater factual depth and richer narrative complexity.

5. Integrate Corpus-Based Monitoring into Newsrooms:

Media organizations can utilize basic linguistic tools (e.g., word clouds, frequency analysis) to monitor recurring biases in coverage. This could serve as an internal metric for improving editorial balance over time.

6. Further Research Beyond English-Language Media:

Future studies should include Urdu, Sindhi, and other vernacular newspapers to gain a fuller picture of national discourse. This multilingual expansion would offer deeper insight into how different linguistic communities conceptualize the Indus.

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