

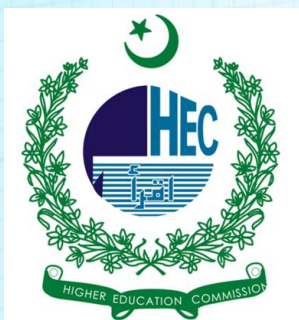
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**War on Terror in Headlines: Lexical Choices and Ideological  
Positioning in Dawn Newspaper**



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**Abstract**

This study examines the ideological construction of the “War on Terror” in the headlines of *Dawn*, a leading English-language newspaper in Pakistan. Drawing on Fairclough’s three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis and van Dijk’s socio-cognitive approach, the research investigates how lexical choices, agency patterns, and evaluative language position actors, assign responsibility, and frame national identity within terrorism-related reporting. A purposive corpus of front-page headlines published during key phases of Pakistan’s counterterrorism operations is analyzed to identify recurring lexical patterns, including nominalization, passive constructions, metaphor, and militarized vocabulary. The findings reveal systematic tendencies toward agency suppression, strategic ambiguity, and selective lexical intensification, which collectively construct particular ideological narratives regarding state authority, militancy, and national security. The analysis demonstrates that headlines do not merely summarize events but actively shape public perception through condensed, ideologically loaded language. By foregrounding lexical selection as a site of power negotiation, this study contributes to scholarship on media discourse, political communication, and the role of English-language press in framing security discourse in Pakistan.

**Keywords:** War on Terror, Headlines, Critical Discourse Analysis, *Dawn* Newspaper, Lexical Choices, Ideology, Media Discourse

**Background of the Study**

The “War on Terror” emerged as a dominant global security discourse following the attacks of September 11, 2001, reshaping international politics, national security policies, and media narratives worldwide (Jackson, 2005). In Pakistan, the War on Terror assumed particular significance due to the country’s geopolitical positioning, internal security challenges, and strategic alliance with the United States. Consequently, terrorism-related events, military operations, and counterterrorism policies became central themes in Pakistani media discourse. English-language newspapers, especially *Dawn*, have played a pivotal role in mediating these events for both domestic and international audiences.

Media discourse is not a neutral reflection of reality; rather, it actively constructs social meanings and ideological positions (Fairclough, 1995). Headlines, in particular, function as powerful discursive sites because of their brevity, prominence, and framing capacity. They shape readers' interpretations by foregrounding specific actors, lexical items, and evaluative stances while backgrounding others (van Dijk, 1988). As van Dijk (1991) argues, news headlines often encapsulate the macrostructure of a news report and thus carry significant ideological weight. Lexical choices such as "militant," "terrorist," "extremist," or "suspect," for instance, are not merely descriptive but encode political and moral positioning.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a theoretical and methodological framework for examining how language in media texts reproduces power relations and ideological structures (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Within CDA, discourse is understood as both socially shaped and socially shaping, contributing to the construction of national identity, legitimacy, and threat perception (Wodak, 2015). In the context of the War on Terror, scholars have shown that media discourse frequently relies on strategies of othering, nomination, predication, and agency manipulation to construct binaries of "us" versus "them" (Jackson, 2005; Richardson, 2007). These discursive strategies legitimize state actions, frame security measures, and influence public opinion.

In Pakistan, terrorism reporting has been deeply intertwined with issues of sovereignty, civil-military relations, and global geopolitics. Research indicates that Pakistani English-language media often navigate complex ideological pressures, balancing national interests, international alliances, and internal political dynamics (Siraj, 2008). Headlines, as condensed forms of discourse, frequently employ nominalization and passive constructions, which may obscure agency and diffuse responsibility—linguistic patterns that have been widely discussed in CDA scholarship (Fowler, 1991; Fairclough, 1995).

Despite extensive global research on media representations of terrorism, there remains a need for focused linguistic analyses of Pakistani English newspaper headlines, particularly in relation to lexical selection and ideological positioning. *Dawn*, as one of the oldest and most influential English-language newspapers in Pakistan, offers a significant site for examining how terrorism and counterterrorism

narratives are constructed. Analyzing its headlines through a CDA lens enables a deeper understanding of how lexical choices frame actors, events, and national identity within the broader War on Terror discourse.

This study, therefore, situates itself at the intersection of media linguistics, political discourse, and Pakistani socio-political studies, aiming to uncover how seemingly neutral headline language participates in the ideological construction of security narratives.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Since 9/11, the “War on Terror” has functioned not only as a geopolitical strategy but also as a powerful discursive construct shaped and circulated through media institutions. In Pakistan, where counterterrorism operations, militancy, and civil-military relations have profoundly influenced national politics, English-language newspapers such as *Dawn* play a central role in framing terrorism-related events. While prior studies have examined media representations of terrorism at a global level, limited research has focused specifically on the linguistic and ideological dimensions of headlines in Pakistani English newspapers.

Headlines are particularly significant because they condense complex events into brief, highly salient textual units that guide readers’ interpretation. Through lexical selection, agency construction, nominalization, and evaluative labeling, headlines may foreground certain actors while background or obscuring others, thereby subtly shaping ideological positioning. However, the extent to which *Dawn*’s War on Terror headlines employ specific lexical strategies to construct narratives of state authority, militancy, victimhood, or national identity remains underexplored.

This study therefore addresses the gap by critically examining how lexical choices in *Dawn*’s headlines contribute to the ideological construction of the War on Terror discourse in Pakistan.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant at theoretical, methodological, and socio-political levels. Theoretically, it contributes to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) by extending its application to headline discourse within the Pakistani media context. By focusing specifically on lexical choices and ideological positioning, the study deepens understanding of how micro-level linguistic features encode macro-level power

relations.

Methodologically, it foregrounds headlines as autonomous sites of ideological production rather than merely summaries of full news reports. This emphasis enriches media linguistics research, particularly in non-Western contexts that remain underrepresented in discourse studies.

Socio-politically, the study provides insight into how terrorism narratives are framed for English-speaking audiences in Pakistan, including policymakers, elites, and international readers. By uncovering patterns of agency suppression, evaluative labeling, and strategic ambiguity, the research enhances critical media literacy and encourages more reflective engagement with security-related reporting.

### **Research Questions**

1. What lexical choices are most frequently used in *Dawn's* War on Terror headlines to represent actors, actions, and events?
2. How do linguistic strategies such as nominalization, agency manipulation, and evaluative labeling contribute to ideological positioning in these headlines?
3. In what ways do the headlines construct narratives of national identity, legitimacy, and responsibility within the broader War on Terror discourse?

### **Literature Review**

This review synthesizes key research on media discourse, headlines, terrorism reporting, and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to ground the study of *Dawn's* War on Terror headlines within existing scholarship. It proceeds in four sections: (1) the role of headlines in media discourse, (2) CDA and ideological analysis, (3) discourse of terrorism and the War on Terror in media, and (4) Pakistani media and terrorism reporting.

Headlines are not neutral summaries; they are highly evaluative and ideologically loaded textual units that shape how readers interpret news content (Bell, 1991; van Dijk, 1991). Bell (1991) argues that headlines function as a *macrostructure*, encapsulating the gist of a news story while foregrounding selected actors and actions. Because of their position and brevity, headlines operate as interpretive frames that influence readers' attention, expectations, and judgments even before the main text is read (Cotter, 2010).

Van Dijk's (1991) work on news discourse emphasizes that headline language often

reflects underlying power relations, constructing social actors in ways that privilege certain perspectives while marginalizing others. Similarly, Richardson (2007) asserts that lexical choices in headlines—such as nominalization, passive voice, and agent suppression—can subtly shift responsibility, agency, and blame, shaping the ideological orientation of the entire news story.

Because of these properties, headlines are now recognized not merely as stylistic devices but as sites of ideological negotiation where social meanings and power asymmetries are constructed and contested (Fowler, 1991; Fairclough, 1995). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is the dominant paradigm for examining how language reflects, reproduces, and challenges power structures in society (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). CDA theorists consider discourse to be both socially shaped and socially shaping: while social practices influence discourse structures, discourse also contributes to maintaining or transforming social power relations (Fairclough, 1995).

Central concepts in CDA include nomination (how social actors are named), predication (qualities attributed to actors), agency (who does what), and framing (which aspects of an event are foregrounded or backgrounded). These mechanisms are crucial for understanding how linguistic choices construct interpretations of social phenomena and are particularly relevant for analyzing news discourse on terrorism (van Dijk, 1991; Richardson, 2007).

CDA scholars have also highlighted the importance of ideological positioning, whereby texts encode assumptions, values, and power interests, often in ways that appear neutral or commonsensical to readers (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak, 2015). For example, lexical choices that label some actors as “terrorists” and others as “freedom fighters” carry evaluative weight that reflects political and cultural ideologies rather than objective description (Jackson, 2005).

Reporting on terrorism, especially in the context of the global War on Terror, has been a critical focus of media discourse research. Jackson (2005) argues that the War on Terror discourse is deeply ideological: it constructs binary oppositions between the West and the “Other,” normalizes securitization narratives, and justifies counterterrorism measures. According to him, media language plays a central role in shaping public perceptions of terrorism, victims, and perpetrators.

Richardson (2007) demonstrates how Western newspapers often frame terrorism through metaphors of war, threat, and fear, embedding normative assumptions that favor state power and securitized responses. Similarly, Özkırımlı (2010) contends that media narratives tend to depoliticize the root causes of terrorism, focusing instead on sensationalism and moral panic, which serves to obscure broader socio-political dynamics.

Research on lexical analysis shows that terrorism reporting frequently employs emotive and evaluative vocabulary, such as “militant,” “radical,” and “extremist,” which carries ideological implications beyond simple description (Entman, 2004; Richardson, 2007). These choices can shape public attitudes toward policies, minorities, and international actors by reinforcing particular threat narratives and normative stances.

Scholarship on South Asian media highlights that newspapers in Pakistan operate in a context shaped by internal security challenges, geopolitical pressures, and complex civil–military relations. Siraj (2008) examines how U.S. and Western media frame Pakistan–India conflicts differently, noting the impact of national interests and ideological commitments on news representation. Though not exclusively focused on terrorism, this work underscores how national positioning influences discourse choices.

Ahmer (2012) studies Pakistani television news language and finds that terrorism-related reporting often reflects the priorities of state and security institutions, emphasizing threat and instability. Similarly, Bari (2015) suggests that English-language press in Pakistan negotiates between international standards of journalism and domestic political pressures, resulting in varying frames of national identity, victimhood, and security narratives.

While there is substantial research on general news framing in Pakistan, there is limited scholarship that specifically examines linguistic and lexical mechanisms in newspaper headlines in the context of terrorism discourse. Studies that do exist tend to focus on larger narrative frames rather than detailed lexical analysis of headlines—a gap this study aims to address.

### **Research Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in Critical Discourse

Analysis (CDA) to examine lexical choices and ideological positioning in *Dawn*'s War on Terror headlines. The theoretical framework is informed by Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model of discourse (text, discursive practice, and social practice) and van Dijk's (1998) socio-cognitive approach to ideology and news discourse. A purposive sampling technique is employed to compile a corpus of front-page headlines related to terrorism, militancy, and counterterrorism operations published in *Dawn* during selected peak periods of War on Terror activity in Pakistan. The headlines are collected from the newspaper's digital archive and organized chronologically to ensure contextual coherence. The unit of analysis is the headline text itself, treated as an autonomous discursive construct rather than merely a summary of the accompanying article.

The analytical procedure focuses on micro-level linguistic features and their macro-level ideological implications. Specifically, the study examines lexicalization (e.g., labels such as "militant," "terrorist," "suspect"), agency construction (active vs. passive voice), nominalization, modality, presupposition, and evaluative language. These features are analyzed to identify patterns of actor representation, blame attribution, and national identity construction. The findings are then interpreted in relation to broader socio-political contexts, including Pakistan's security policies, civil-military relations, and global counterterrorism discourse. Through this systematic textual analysis, the study aims to uncover how condensed headline language contributes to the ideological framing of the War on Terror in Pakistani English media.

### **Data Analysis**

#### **Excerpt 1:** *Confusion over death toll after capital terror attack*

In a front-page update *Dawn* reported: "Confusion over death toll after capital terror attack" referring to a suicide bombing in Islamabad that resulted in multiple casualties. The headline foregrounds "confusion" and "death toll" without specifying actors, which delays clear assignment of agency. This lexical choice reflects nominalization and vagueness, potentially obscuring responsibility while emphasizing chaos and impact rather than perpetrators. Such headlines can shape the public's interpretation by highlighting uncertainty and human loss rather than focusing on who conducted or orchestrated the attack.

The absence of agentive subjects (“terrorists did X”) allows the event to stand alone as a phenomenon, which can dilute political accountability.

Choosing terms like *confusion* foregrounds disorder and fear, resonating with broader security narratives.

**Excerpt 2:** *Afghan link being probed as terror revisits Islamabad after nearly 3 years*

Another *Dawn* headline states: “Afghan link being probed as terror revisits Islamabad after nearly 3 years.” This headline accomplishes several CDA-relevant moves: (i) it presents terrorism as a returning threat, (ii) frames Afghanistan as a locus of investigation (“Afghan link”), and (iii) anchors the event in a temporal comparison (“after nearly 3 years”) that suggests a security breach. These lexical choices position external actors (Afghan context) in relation to internal insecurity.

The lexical phrase *Afghan link being probed* introduces a spatial and political association with Afghanistan, contributing to othering and attribution of threat beyond national borders—an ideological framing common in war-related discourse.

Using *revisits* ties past and present events, reinforcing a sense of recurring insecurity that legitimizes continued counterterrorism measures.

**Excerpt 3:** *Terror attack at Cadet College foiled, students, staff rescued (report)*

A related report on *Dawn* reads: “Terror attack at Cadet College foiled, students, staff rescued.” Although this phrasing may appear in the story rather than as a headline, its content mirrors typical *Dawn* headline strategies—employing active verbs like *foiled* and *rescued* that center state/security agency success while the actual perpetrators are described generically as *terror* agents.

The lexical pairing of *foiled* and *rescued* foregrounds the effectiveness and heroism of security forces. This aligns with ideological positioning that values state competence and resilience.

By referring to *terror attack* without specifying group affiliation, the headline displays a lexical generalization that universalizes the threat without complex attribution.

Across these *Dawn* examples:

- Headlines often use terms that downplay or delay explicit agent identification (e.g., “confusion,” “terror revisits”), which can affect how readers assign blame or perceive ongoing threats.

- By referencing external links (e.g., Afghanistan), headlines participate in geopolitical framing, emphasizing a cross-border narrative that aligns with established state concerns over sanctuary and influence.
- Active verbs related to security forces (*foiled*, *rescued*) serve ideological functions by reinforcing the legitimacy and effectiveness of state responses—this aligns with critical discourse observations about how media can reproduce or contest power structures.

Together, these patterns illustrate how *Dawn*'s lexical choices in terrorism-related headlines do not merely report events but actively participate in shaping ideological positioning about security, threat, and responsibility.

**Table 1: CDA of Selected Dawn War on Terror Headlines**

No.	Headline (Dawn)	Key Lexical Choices	Linguistic Strategy	CDA Interpretation
1	"Confusion over death toll after capital terror attack"	<i>confusion</i> , <i>death toll</i> , <i>terror</i> <i>attack</i>	Nominalization; agency deletion	Focus on impact rather than perpetrators; suppresses direct blame attribution and foregrounds chaos.
2	"Afghan link being probed as terror revisits Islamabad after nearly 3 years"	<i>Afghan link</i> , <i>being probed</i> , <i>revisits</i>	Passive construction; external attribution; metaphor	Suggests cross-border responsibility; 'revisits' metaphor constructs terrorism as recurring entity; indirect blame framing.
3	"Terror attack at cadet college foiled, students, staff rescued"	<i>foiled</i> , <i>rescued</i>	Positive agency assignment to state actors	Highlights state efficiency and heroism; foregrounds security forces while backgrounding perpetrators.
4	"Militants kill X"	<i>militants</i> ,	Explicit agent	Direct attribution of

	in Balochistan	<i>kill</i>	naming; active	violence; constructs
	attack”		voice	perpetrators as primary agents of action.
	“Security forces	<i>eliminate,</i>	Militarized	Lexical choices frame
	eliminate	<i>intelligence-</i>	vocabulary;	state violence as
5	terrorists in	<i>based</i>	legitimizing	strategic and justified;
	intelligence-based	<i>operation</i>	language	‘eliminate’ carries
	operation”			institutional authority.

The data reveal consistent linguistic patterns aligned with Critical Discourse Analysis principles (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998).

Headlines 1 and 2 demonstrate agency suppression through nominalization (“confusion”) and passive constructions (“being probed”), which obscure immediate responsibility. In contrast, Headlines 3 and 5 assign clear positive agency to state actors, highlighting institutional competence. This asymmetry reflects ideological positioning that legitimizes state authority while diffusing complexity around perpetrators.

The lexical distinction between “militants” and “terrorists” is significant. While both carry negative connotations, “terrorists” is more morally absolute, aligning with global War on Terror discourse (Jackson, 2005). Additionally, verbs such as “eliminate” and “foiled” are institutional and militarized, reinforcing narratives of control and legitimacy.

The phrase “Afghan link” introduces geopolitical framing, potentially constructing terrorism as externally rooted. This aligns with broader national security discourse in Pakistan, where cross-border militancy is a recurring theme. Similarly, the emphasis on “security forces” and “intelligence-based operation” contributes to constructing a resilient national identity.

These patterns support van Dijk’s (1991) argument that headlines function as ideological macrostructures, shaping reader cognition before engagement with full reports. Fairclough’s (1995) concept of discourse as social practice is also evident, as lexical choices reproduce broader socio-political narratives about terrorism, sovereignty, and legitimacy.

### **Discussion**

The analysis of *Dawn*'s War on Terror headlines demonstrates that headline discourse operates as a condensed yet ideologically potent site of meaning-making. Consistent with van Dijk's (1991) notion of headlines as macrostructures, the selected examples reveal patterned lexical and syntactic strategies that shape readers' interpretations before engagement with full news reports. The findings indicate that agency manipulation, lexical labeling, and militarized vocabulary play a central role in constructing narratives of threat, legitimacy, and national resilience.

One of the most salient patterns is agency asymmetry. In several headlines, agency related to terrorist violence is either suppressed through nominalization ("confusion over death toll") or backgrounded via passive constructions ("link being probed"), whereas state actors are foregrounded through active verbs such as "foiled," "rescued," and "eliminate." This imbalance aligns with Fairclough's (1995) argument that discourse naturalizes power relations by presenting certain actors as legitimate and competent while minimizing alternative perspectives. By highlighting state success and operational efficiency, the headlines reinforce the authority and capability of security institutions. Such linguistic choices contribute to the normalization of securitized governance within the broader War on Terror discourse (Jackson, 2005).

The lexical distinction between labels such as "militants" and "terrorists" also carries ideological implications. As Richardson (2007) notes, naming practices are never neutral; they construct moral evaluations and position actors within particular ideological frames. The term "terrorist" invokes globalized moral condemnation and aligns with international counterterrorism narratives, whereas "militant" may suggest a localized or politically contextualized identity. The oscillation between these terms in *Dawn*'s headlines reflects the negotiation between domestic political sensitivities and global security discourse. This supports van Dijk's (1998) socio-cognitive view that media discourse mediates between elite ideology and public cognition.

Furthermore, the recurring reference to external links (e.g., "Afghan link") illustrates processes of geopolitical framing and othering. By associating acts of violence with cross-border elements, the headlines participate in constructing terrorism as an externalized threat. This discursive move resonates with Wodak's (2015) concept of the politics of fear, where national identity is reinforced through the

construction of external danger. At the same time, such framing may simplify complex socio-political dynamics by foregrounding foreign involvement over internal structural factors.

Another important observation concerns the use of militarized and technocratic vocabulary such as “intelligence-based operation.” This lexical pattern legitimizes state violence by framing it as strategic, rational, and professional. According to Fowler (1991), institutional language in news discourse often encodes ideological assumptions about authority and legitimacy. In the case of *Dawn*, the linguistic emphasis on operational precision and success contributes to a narrative of institutional competence and national resilience, particularly during periods of heightened insecurity.

Overall, the discussion suggests that *Dawn*’s headlines do more than report terrorism-related events; they actively construct ideological meanings that align with broader state-centric security narratives. While not overtly propagandistic, the linguistic patterns reveal subtle yet systematic positioning that privileges institutional authority, frames terrorism within externalized threat paradigms, and reinforces national solidarity. These findings underscore the importance of analyzing headlines as autonomous discursive units and highlight the role of English-language media in shaping elite and international perceptions of Pakistan’s War on Terror.

The study therefore contributes to CDA scholarship by demonstrating how micro-level lexical and grammatical choices in headlines participate in macro-level ideological formations. Future research may expand this analysis through comparative corpus studies across newspapers or by integrating reader-response perspectives to further explore how such discursive constructions influence public cognition and political attitudes.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined the ideological construction of the War on Terror in *Dawn* newspaper headlines through a Critical Discourse Analysis lens. The analysis revealed that lexical choices, syntactic structures, and evaluative language collectively shape readers’ understanding of terrorism, state authority, and national identity. Headlines frequently employ agency manipulation, foregrounding state actors while backgrounding or suppressing perpetrators, which reinforces institutional legitimacy.

Lexical labeling, such as the use of “terrorist” versus “militant,” conveys moral and political positioning, reflecting both domestic sensitivities and alignment with global counterterrorism discourse. Additionally, references to external actors, passive constructions, and militarized vocabulary contribute to framing terrorism as an ongoing and externally influenced threat, emphasizing national resilience and state competence.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that *Dawn*’s headlines are not neutral summaries but active sites of ideological meaning-making, where language functions to mediate public perception, reproduce power structures, and legitimize security measures. The study underscores the significance of analyzing headlines as autonomous discursive units and highlights the capacity of English-language media in Pakistan to shape narratives of terrorism and national security. By combining lexical, syntactic, and evaluative analysis, this research contributes to scholarship on media discourse, political communication, and the role of language in constructing ideological frameworks within conflict and security contexts.

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