COVID-19 and Politics of Representation: A CSA of Pakistani Print Media Semiotic Discourses

Muhammad Akbar Sajid[1], Memoona Nazir[2], Muhammad Tayyab[3], Kiran Shehzadi[4]

[1] Assistant professor/ HoD Department of English, National University of Modern Languages, Multan Campus, Pakistan
  Email: masajid@numl.edu.pk
[2] Memoona Nazir, Department of English, National University of Modern Languages, Multan Campus, Pakistan
  Email: muhammad.tayyab@numl.edu.pk
[3] Lecturer, Department of English, National University of Modern Languages, Multan Campus, Pakistan
  Email: memoonanazir55@gmail.com
[4] School of Languages, Civilization and Philosophy, Universiti Utara Malaysia
  Email: kiranshehzadilodhi@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Print media discourses are highly polarized. Different linguistic and meta-linguistic moves are employed to represent the same issue under different socio-political themes. This study decodes the semiotic discourses of two (02) Pakistani English and Urdu newspapers (Dawn & Jang) about the representation of COVID-19 related issues. This has been done to broaden the canvas of the research by including English and Urdu newspapers' readership. The time span for data collection ranges from March 15, 2020, to May 15, 2020. The integrated research approach used in the study has been devised by drawing upon Kress (2010) and Krueger (2001) to analyze the data at linguistic and semiotic levels. The findings of semiotic analysis have been validated through focus group discussions on the selected cartoons from English and Urdu newspapers. The findings of the research reveal that the representation of COVID-19 related issues varies in English and Urdu newspapers. The most frequently occurred themes in English newspapers about the representation of covid19 related issues include economic downfall, danger to the worlds' economy, the clash between America and China, delays in vaccine production, and food and health insecurity at national and international levels. On contrary, the Urdu newspapers highlighted the issues related to corruption, the oil crisis, a satire on the general masses for not observing SOPs, a satire on health ministry, and poverty increase because of lockdown policies. The research contends that semiotic discourses are the best sites for ideological investment and are designed keeping in view the target audience.

Corresponding Author's Email: masajid@numl.edu.pk

1.   Introduction

WHO (world health organization) has declared COVID-19 pandemic as a global health emergency. This pandemic has changed the world scenario altogether. Such types of health hazards have been occurring across the globe from time to time in the history and were represented through the media discourses of that time accordingly. Fairclough (2003) argues that print media discourses are highly polarized and represent a constructed image of reality about an issue keeping in view the target readership. This is done to win general consent about a particular issue. Since the break out of COVID-19 from China, this pandemic is being represented through the media groups of the world. Likewise, the issues related to COVID-19 have been given significant importance through linguistic and semiotic discourses of English and Urdu newspapers. The present study has attempted to decode the semiotic discourses of Pakistani English and Urdu dailies to know how COVID-19 related issues find representation

through the semiotic discourses of the selected Pakistani Urdu and English newspapers, which include "*Dawn and Jang*". The delimitation of the research in terms of time is significant one (15-03-2020 to 15-05-2020). The pandemic broke out in Pakistan in November 2019 but it got worse in March 2020 and hence, complete lockdown was imposed. As a result, issues related to the pandemic were represented seriously through linguistic and semiotic discourses of the Pakistani print media. The rationale behind the selection of these two (02) English and Urdu newspapers is that these newspapers have been taken as representatives of larger population. The inclusion of English and Urdu newspapers is to know how same issue is represented differently through various print media groups through their semiotic discourse. As semiotic discourses carry plethora of meanings and are meant for everyone to decode them accordingly. The stratified sampling technique justifies the inclusion/representation of maximum population.

2.   Literature Review

Sheikh et al. (2013) analyzed political cartoons published in Pakistani newspapers to explore how various political ideologies are disseminated through print media semiotic discourses. The caricatures were analysed at the levels of symbolism, exaggeration, labeling, analogy and irony embedded in them. The study explored that the effects of cartoons on the common people in the back drop of social, political, ethical and religious milieu of Pakistan. The analysis comprised linguistic and semiotic levels. It concludes   that political cartoons play a significant role in shaping public perception about different political agendas.

Kazanoglua (2015) conducted a research on presentation of the dominant political ideology within a cartoon series. The data was collected from first Turkish cartoon series "Pepee" which consisted of 8 seasons that comprised 211 episodes, broadcasted from 2008 September until 2015 January. An integrated research approach based on qualitative and content analysis techniques was applied to analyse the data.   The analysis of the data revealed that the selected cartoons series are meant for the propagation of desired political ideologies of the dominant controlling groups and hence, prove the notion that there is ideology within and behind semiotic discourses.

Rahman's (2018) research on representation of Islam and Muslims in American print media semiotic discourses contends that the west is highly terrified by Muslims. It believes that Muslims are hardliners because of the violent ideology of Islam. Most often Islam is associated with Phobia. The data was analysed by using Fairclough (2003) and Barthes' (1974) research models to analyse data at linguistic and semiotic levels. The research concludes that through the semiotic discourses of American print media Islam and Muslims are (mis) represented.

Sajid et al. (2020) investigated the power of image in shaping perception of people regarding post 9/11 American representation in Pakistani print media semiotic discourses. The researchers gathered data from Pakistani English newspapers Dawn (daily). To analyze the data the researchers employed multimodal critical discourse analysis approach. The study drew upon Machin (2007), Van Leeuwen (2008) framework for re-contextualization and Fairclough's (2003) for linguistic analyses. The study revealed that no use of language is ideology free and words and pictures work in conjunction to propagate a desired ideology to general masses more comprehensive.

Afzal et al. (2021) conducted a research on the COVID-19 related scenario in Pakistan and how different SOP's issued by Govt. of Pakistan in the form of smart lockdown and observance of social distancing were violated by politicians during their election campaigns in the Gilgit Baltistan. The researchers used purposive sampling technique for data collection from Pakistani print media. The journalistic texts selected for the study were analysed by using qualitative and interpretive research paradigms. The study concludes that both opposition and the ruling party did not bother themselves to observe SOP's about COVID-19.

Dezhkameh et al. (2021) critically analysed articles of Iranian and American newspapers about the representation of Covid-19 related coverage. The study focused on exploring ideological differences in news reporting about the same event differently through ideologically different media groups. Dijk's (2006) Ideological Square framework was

employed. The study highlighted that no use of language is ideology free and media discourses of both the countries are polarized. A war of words on both sides is going on for self-glorification and misrepresentation of others. The research suggests that newspapers need to be cognizant about language use because it can be used to manipulate readers' minds. The present research answers the following research questions;

Q1: How are political ideologies propagated discursively through semiotic discourses related to COVID-19 in Pakistani English and Urdu Newspapers (daily "Dawn and Jang" from 15th March 2020 to 15th May 2020?

Q2: How do these English and Urdu newspapers vary in disseminating political ideologies through semiotics related to COVID-19?

3.   Methodology Employed

The present research employs an integrated research approach which has been designed by drawing upon Kress (2010) and Kruger's (2001) research models. The data for the study was collected from two Pakistani English newspapers (Dawn & The Nation). The delimitation of the study is that it only deals with the semiotic discourses of the mentioned English and Urdu newspapers from March 15, 2020 to May 15, 2020. The rationale behind this delimitation of the study is that the first lockdown was imposed in Pakistan on 15-03-2020 when some the cases about COVID-19 in Pakistan were confirmed. To stop the widespread of the virus the Government of Pakistan announced the first lockdown. During the mentioned time period fear, based representation of COVID-19 was given much significance through the semiotic discourses of Pakistani print media. Since, the data collected for the study comprises more than one mode i-e language and visual, therefore, Kress' (2010) multimodal social semiotic Approach to Contemporary discourses   has been employed. It considers which mode is foregrounded, which mode carries major informational weight and which mode has what function. This research approach works at the following levels:

- What meaning is being made in the text?
- How is meaning being made in the text.
- What resources have been drawn on to make meanings in the text?
- In what social environment is the meaning being made?
- Whose interest and agency is at work in the making of meaning?

Focus groups discussions have also been used in the study to collect data. Some of the people related to academia argue that semiotic analysis privileges semioticians' particular perception and interpretation of text, which may not match, with general perception of the same text. To counter this issue and to validate researchers' semiotic analysis two focus group discussions among the participants of various educational backgrounds were conducted to compare researchers' analysis with their perception. The first group comprised the participants who are M.Phil. in English, whereas the second group comprised the participants who are M.Phil. in other disciplines. The same selected semiotics from Urdu and English newspapers were discussed in the two focus group discussions. Same questions about the critical analysis of the selected images were asked from the participants and discussions were visually recorded. Besides, in order to analyse the focus group data Kruger's (2001) model has been used. This model analyses the data at word, context, internal consistency, extensiveness and finding the big idea levels.

3.1   Newspapers
The English and Urdu newspapers have been selected on the following basis:

- Both English and Urdu newspapers were the leading media houses representation
- These newspapers have broad readership and substantial impact factor.
- They have wider circulation as it is mentioned on their websites.
- They are representatives of two strata of society English and Urdu readership.
- Stratified sampling technique was used in the selection of data from these two dailies.

3.2   Selection of Semiotics
The strategy of random sampling technique was used for the selection of the cartoons. The cartoons were selected on the basis of following categories which have been shown in

table mentioned below. Moreover, these cartoons were further categorized on the basis of themes related to Covid 19 situation in Pakistan during the mentioned time period.

Table 1

Pandemic	Political Issues
Pandemic	Sugar
Lockdown	Wheat
SOPs	Corruption
Covid-19	NAB
WHO	Jobs
	Economy

4. Data Analysis

Kress (2010) argues that media discourses are layered and different modes of communication are employed to disseminate messages more persuasively. They embody various political and cultural connotations in them. Similarly, the semiotic under analysis about the social impacts of technology on family set up coupled with COVID-19 illustrates that the concept of social distance has long prevailed in Pakistani society as the linguistic text along with the semiotic carries different interpretations. At surface level it is being conveyed that in order to stay healthy and safe we must observe six feet distance from others preferably when we are outside our homes.

Figure 1

This is how we can be safe from getting virus from others and hence, social distancing is highly recommended. At deeper level it imparts the message that not only we are away from our near and dear ones because of the observance of COVID-19 SOPs but also the wrong use of digital gadgets has aloof us from others. Every individual has become self-centered and lost in his/her own self. The use of first person pronoun *we* is metaphorical in nature has been used inclusively and exclusively. Simply talking about it refers to the particular family depicted in the image. Whereas, it can be taken as inclusive representation of Pakistani family setup where family bond seems losing its strength. Every individual has become a universe in himself/ herself least bothering about his/her close relatives including parents and other family members. Besides, the use of helping verb *were* confirms already existing the concept of *social distancing* which is itself connotative in nature. However, the word-picture conjunction conveys the message comprehensively focusing on surface and deeper meanings. The heap shown in the background implies the bad effects of not observing COVID-19 SOPs in the form of social distancing and implicitly the bad effects of isolating ourselves from our families. The existing social scenario in terms of COVID-19 and family setup in Pakistan has been shown by using visual and verbal modes of communication. The icon bearing linguistic message represents the mind mapping of every individual of this symbolic family. Their engrossed postures imply that

576

observance of COVID-19's SOP's carries nothing new to them. They have already been set apart from each other by technology. The use of typographic technique in the form of bold font and capital letters suggests that the implied message is of vital significance. In this way, socio-political scenario of Pakistan has been depicted by employing linguistic and semiotic modes of communication.

Kress (2010) opines that media discourses represent social critique of a particular society. Through them dominant trends, prevailing in a society can be known. In this regard, the semiotic under analysis highlights that the younger is completely lost in watching TV. It is highly ironic that although he   is not watching his favorite cartoon series yet prefers listening news to interacting with his father, mother and elder brother. The parents' role has also been caricatured in the cartoon. The outbreak of COVID-19 has proven blessing in disguise for them. The connotative use of word picture conjunction is ideological to satirize existing social tendencies in terms of social bonding and observance of COVID-19 related SOPs.

Figure 2: Analysis of the Semiotic from Urdu Newspaper
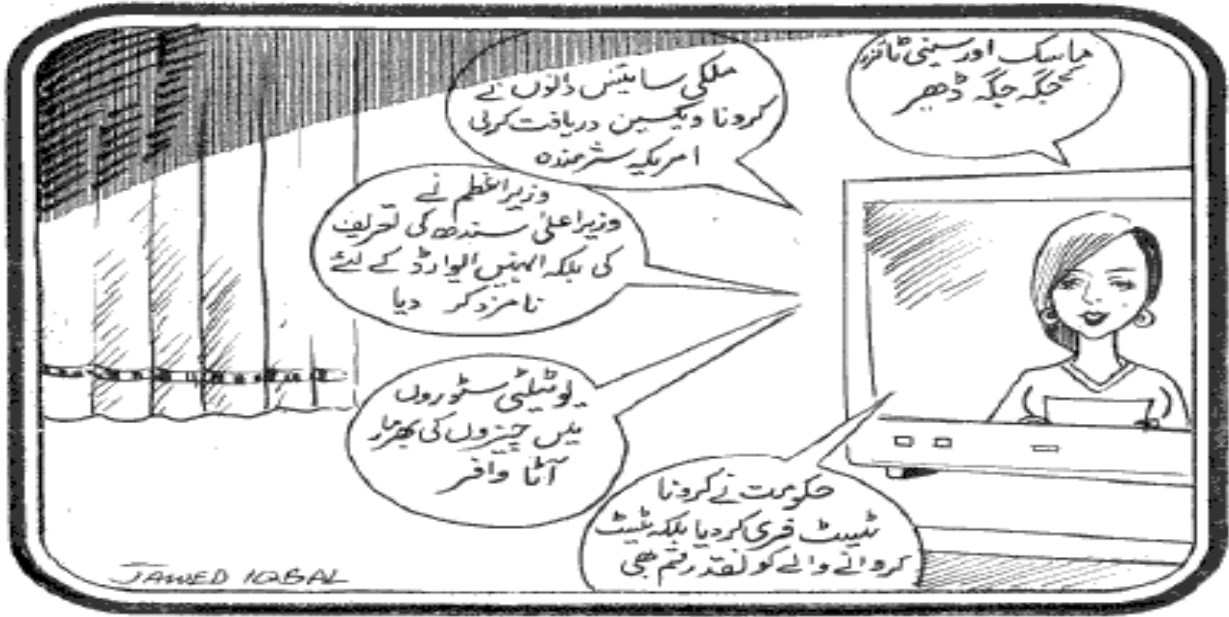
Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) are of the view that by employing multimode of communication in cartoons dual faces of persons and institutes are cartooned. This is done by highlighting the difference between appearance and reality. In this regard, most often media discourses act as distorting prism and disseminate a mirror image of reality to the target audience. Similarly, the semiotic under analysis illustrates that everything is in Utopian state in Pakistan during Covid-19. As the media representation reveals that people are provided with masks and sanitizers. One of the linguistic messages illustrates that the govt. is very much serious about the health issues of the people related to COVID19. Therefore, every possible effort has been made to protest the people in the best possible manner. As the very use of pronoun, Jaga, Jaga, Implies that no place and no individual is unprovided with health facilities and people are more than willing to observe SOPs related to their protection from novel virus. Moreover, the use of noun Dhair (Heap) implies that not only the people have been provided with required no of masks and sanitizers rather in abundance. The other side of the message could be ironic mockery of the prevailing situation in Pakistan during pandemic time. Instead of mask, sanitizers and vaccine, what is observed is unavailability of these facilities and heaps dirt everywhere. A majority of the people is least inclined towards observing COVID19 SOPs. Here lies the disparity between actual, real and the way media represents a mirror image of social reality. This is because people start believing what is made available to them through media discourses.

Kress and Van Leuween (2006) maintain that multimodal discourses, most often carry bundles of interpretation. One of the salient features of such discourses is to high light the difference between ideal and the real. The purpose is to highlight what is actual in the guise of what is ideal. Similarly, one of the speech bubbles embodying an ideal state of affairs in terms

of preparing vaccine for the cure of COVID-19. The message illustrates that after the untiring efforts of Pakistani scientists, they have finally prepared vaccine for the virus. Everybody including America is ashamed of being so lazy in making vaccine for the virus. Here, the use of expression, "America sharminda" Americans feel ashamed represents the image of utopian world where everything is applied pie order. On one hand, people are observing corona SOPs and on the other, medical scientists have prepared vaccine for COVID-19. The meanings within the lines is to mock at Pakistani Health scientists who are eyeing at America to prepare vaccine against COVID-19. Instead of doing some wonders to provide relief to Pakistanis. In the way, it is pertinent to mention that media discourses say something by implying something unsaid.

Dijk (2006) asserts that media discourses are highly polarized. Politics are done in or through media discourses. In the same vein, the third speech bubble (shown in the picture) demonstrates an ideal state of affairs existing between federal and provisional governments. Here Sindh, a province of Pakistan has been highlighted having complete harmony with the center. The federal government has been represented positively because as the linguistic text suggests that prime minister of Pakistan has taken the initiative to provide Sindh province with maximum health facilities against COVID-19 and equally Sindh government has been represented positively for using all the facilities in the best possible manner to government provides good health facilities to the people of the province. Therefore, the chief minister has been nominated for the award. But connotative meanings of the speech bubble is to highlight the long existing rift between Sindh province and federal government. In this way, Ideal state of affairs has been compared with the real in a mocking manner.

Dijk (1996) argues that discourses are layered and most often the concept of said versus unsaid is propagated through them. This technique is employed in media discourses either to ridicule or to represent someone positively. Here, in the speech bubble carrying the linguistics message "Utility storon me cheezon ki barmar, ata wafar," commodities available in abundance in utilities stores, Flour availability maximum. The surface meaning being propagated represents an ideal circumstance prevailed in Pakistani society people have been provided commodities at cheaper rates and no shortage of flour is there. The implied message being disseminated is to highlight the pathetic state people are facing in terms of having commodities and heal facilities. Another significant feature of the text under analysis is that the actor has not been mentioned. The reader can infer the meanings that every government official is concerned about public problems and has been efficient enough to resolve them well in time. The actual situation, which is observed, is opposite and hence, the concept polarization of media discourses has been played up.

Wang (2002) opines that different linguistic moves are employed in media discourses to create sensationalism. Sometimes it is done either to increase the rating of a particular media group or to criticize some existing social reality. Similarly, the fifth and the last speech bubble in the image under analysis at surface level highlights that because of the timely taken measures of the government people have become aware of the importance of getting Corona tests done. It is because that government of Pakistan has provided free Covid-19 test facility to every citizen. Not only free tests are being done but also the people who do so are given cash prizes as well. If it is analyzed at deeper level the image implies that there is a hell of difference between what is and what should be. It is very costly to have this test done. There is and has been no sufficient facility for the people in this regard. All the five speech bubbles have mocked at the existing socio-political scenario in Pakistan because of the outbreak of COVID-19. The purpose of the image under analysis is to highlight the contrast between what is and what must have been.

The newscaster shown in the image is a smart and beautiful woman with a smile on her face. It implies that there is nothing to be worried about. There is harmony between the get up of the woman and the surface messages conveyed by the speech bubbles. This is a representation of inside image (one side of coin). The outer inferred message is that media and power behind media discourses employ various techniques to disseminate a desired version of reality to the target audience to make them behave in a desired manner and to win their consent. The overall implied message is that one who believes in media representation is not less than a fool is. Such types of April Fooling techniques very much there in and behind media discourses.

Table 2: Difference of Representation

Daily *DAWN*	Daily *JANG*
Social Distancing	Sehat ky Buray Halat (Bad health conditions)
Economic crisis	Corona aur Gurbat (Covid-19 and poverty)
Covid-19 and Poverty	Korona ky naam per siyasta (politics in the name of Covid-19)
Politic through Covid-19 caricatures	Korona aur tail ka buhran (Covid-19 and oil crisis)
Danger the world over	Covid-19 aur corruption (Civid-19 and corruption)
Danger to tourism industry	Awam ki la parwahi (carelessness of masses)
Covid-19 and Global health issues	Logon pr shaded tanqeed (severe criticism on the public)
Clash between America and China	No sops
Metaphor of game and Covid-19	Vaccine aik ehm masla (vaccine supply, an important issues)

5. Focus Group Findings

In order to validate the findings of semiotic analysis the researchers have employed focus groups discussion technique. Kreuger (2001) asserts that in order to generalize the results of qualitative analysis of semiotics one needs to have them validated the general perception can be compared with researcher's analysis. Similarly, data collected by the focus group has been analyzed at word, context, internal consistency, and finding the big idea levels. The remarks of some of the participants have been included as under:

"COVID-19 situation has widened the gap (social distance) among the members of elite-class families. The family shown in the picture is metaphorical and exposes elite family set up, where everyone is lost in his/her own world. Even before the outbreak of corona they almost isolated from one and other."

"The upper class seems least affected from the virus in terms of economy and other problems. They are as they were. The worst thing to notice according to me is posture of the younger child, who prefers watching news in which perhaps he/she is least interested to talk to other family members including the parents."

"The semiotic which appeared in Urdu newspaper represent the problems of middle class like dearness, shortage of commodities on utility stores, unavailability of medicine/vaccine and masks, the suffering of the general public because of the rift between Federal government and Sind, province, poor health conditions and looking towards West for the solution of everything including the vaccine of corona as well."

All the participants agreed that both the newspapers are representatives of their respective readership. The big idea of the discussions is that media discourses can exploit the masses in a desired manner because people start believing what is conveyed to them to media discourses.

6. Conclusion

The present research was under taken to know the politics of representation about COVID-19 issues through the semiotic discourses of Pakistani English and Urdu newspapers. The analysis of the data used in the study reveals that same event finds different representations through different media groups. The analysis of the data collected from English newspaper in terms of thematic categories reveals that this newspaper highlighted corona related issues focusing on social distancing, economic crisis, danger to tourism industry, global health issues, clash between America and China. Whereas, its counterpart (Urdu newspaper) represented the issues such as poor health of masses, corona and poverty, politics in the name of corona, oil crisis and, corona and poverty, carelessness of the public, and unavailability of vaccine. The findings highlight that the concept of media polarization is very much there and

the same event is represented differently keeping in view the ideological mindset of the target readership. Besides, it contends that there is power within and behind media discourses.

References

Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and Social Change.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

— (1995). *Critical Discourse Analysis.* London: Longman.

— (2003). *Analyzing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research.* London: Routledge.

Kress, G. (1991). Critical discourse analysis. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics,* 11, 84–99.

— (1993). Against arbitrariness: The social production of the sign as a foundational issue in critical discourse analysis. *Discourse & Society,* 4, 169–91.

— (2010). *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication.* London: Routledge.

Kress, G. and van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (2nd edn). London: Routledge

Krueger, R.A. (2002). Designing and conducting focus group interviews. October, available at: www.sph.umn.edu/img/assets/18528/FocGrp_Krueger_Oct02.pdf

M Akbar Sajid, S. W. (2020). Post 9/11 American Footprints in Pakistani Media: A Critique of Semiotoc Discourse of Pakistani Newspapers. *Reads*, 220-230.

Muhammad Akbar Sajid, Hafsa Qadir Buzdar, Sajid Waqar. (2019). A Semiological Discourse Analysis of Pak-Army Representation in Pakistan Print Media. *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences*, 1375-1381.

Nazra Zahid Shaikh, R. T.-u.-S. (2016). Cartoon war.... A Political dilemma ! A semiotic Analysis of Political Cartoons. *Journal of Media Studies* , 74-92.

Rahman, T. (2018). *Language and Politics in Pakistan.* Karachi: OUP.

Van Dijk, T. A. (1991). *Racism and the Press.* London: Routledge.

— (1998). *Ideology.* London: Sage.

— (2011). Discourse studies and hermeneutics. *Discourse Studies,* 13, 609–21.

Van Leeuwen, T. (2005a). *Introducing Social Semiotics.* London: Routledge.

— (2005b). Multimodality, genre and design. in S. Norris and R. H. Jones (eds), *Discourse in Action: Introducing Mediated Discourse Analysis.* London: Routledge, pp. 73–94.

Wang, W. (2002). A contrastive analysis of letters to the editor in English and Chinese. (MEd dissertation, University of Sydney).