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**Construction of “Identity” in Reporting Smog Crisis: An Ecological
Discourse Analysis of Pakistani English Newspapers**



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Abstract

The worsening smog problem in Pakistan has attracted significant media attention. This study aims to explore the linguistic construction of identities in news reports on smog in Pakistani English newspapers, using qualitative ecological discourse analysis framed by Stibbe (2021). The study analyzes general environmental discourse and examines how identity is constructed at the lexical and grammatical levels. The data comprise 150 news reports from 2016 to 2026, collected through purposive sampling from the digital archives of Dawn, The News International, and The Express Tribune. The analysis examines the processes of nomination, categorization, predication, allocation of agency, transitivity, referential strategies, and collective representation that identify different social actors. The findings reveal how recurrent linguistic patterns normalize particular ecological identities while marginalizing others, thereby shaping public understanding of responsibility and environmental relationships. This study advances eco-linguistic scholarship by examining how environmental journalism shapes anthropocentric and eco-centric identities in smog-related news reporting. It also contributes to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (10 and 13) by highlighting gaps in the construction of environmental identities that may help institutions, policymakers, and media experts. Future research may focus on examining data in national and regional languages, collected from print, electronic, social, and digital resources.

Key words: environmental discourse, identity, Pakistani Newspapers, smog, Social Actors

Introduction

This study investigates how Pakistani English-language newspapers report the smog crisis and how they linguistically construct the identities of human and ecological actors, using Stibbe's (2021) identity framework. Air pollution is now one of the most critical environmental and public health issues of the twenty-first century, affecting environmental sustainability, human health, and socio-economic development. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2024) reports that nearly 99% of the world's population breathes air that does not meet recommended air quality guidelines, resulting in about 6.7 million premature deaths each year. Pollutants linked to respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, biodiversity loss, reduced agricultural productivity, and climate change include particulate matter (PM_{2.52.5}), nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), sulfur dioxide (SO₂), and ground-level ozone (O₃) (IPCC, 2023; UNEP, 2022; WHO, 2024). Today, air pollution is recognized as a serious socio-ecological problem, not just an environmental one, and thus demands scientific, political, and communicative solutions.

Science is not the only way to educate the public about environmental crises; communication is equally important. Newspapers, television, and digital media play a key role in making environmental issues socially relevant, making science understandable, and shaping public narratives (Boykoff, 2019; Cox & Pezzullo, 2021). Media institutions do not simply deliver information but act as agents that shape understanding of environmental risks, as well as the sense of responsibility and the legitimacy of solutions. Newspapers remain a key medium, through their institutional

power, for influencing environmental awareness, public policy discussions and ecological responsibility (Carvalho, 2021; Hansen, 2024).

This view aligns with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which conceptualizes language as a social practice closely linked to ideology and power (van Dijk, 2018; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). News discourse is an active, selective construction of reality that normalizes certain interpretations of environmental events, assigns responsibility to specific actors, and favours certain perspectives. Environmental journalism, thus, is seen as a discursive approach that has become a form of ecological knowledge production, rather than merely reporting environmental facts.

This research is especially relevant in South Asia where air pollution has become a critical concern. Rapid industrialization, urbanization, vehicle emissions, agricultural burning, and weak environmental governance are responsible for persistently high particulate matter concentrations in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Nepal (IQAir, 2025; UNEP, 2022; World Bank, 2022). Of these countries, Pakistan experiences recurring smog, particularly in Punjab, where cities such as Lahore, Faisalabad, Gujranwala, and Sheikhupura are severely affected by air pollution during the fall and winter seasons. Electrical outages are believed to be caused by a mix of industrial emissions, transport pollution, burning crop residues, brick kilns, construction dust, and worsening weather (WHO, 2024; World Bank, 2022). In addition to environmental pollution, smog has become a social problem that affects public health, education, transportation, and all economic activity.

Stibbe (2021) builds on this insight by framing identity as one of the stories we live by in the ecological world. From this viewpoint, discourse repeatedly produces cognitive narratives about actors in the environment, their roles, and their relationship with the natural world. Governments can be depicted as responsible stewards or as poor administrators; industries can be portrayed as accountable polluters or as invisible economic forces; scientists can be portrayed as knowledgeable experts or as poorly informed amateurs; citizens can be represented as victims or as responsible environmental participants; and ecological entities (such as plants, animals, and other components of the ecosystem) can be portrayed as passive resources or as living, interconnected entities (Wuyts, 2024). These persistent images shape public attitudes toward environmental citizenship and ecological responsibility.

Literature Review

Identity as Discursive Construct

Identity, once used to describe personal characteristics, has been reframed as a socially constructed, dynamic phenomenon shaped by discourse. Contemporary discourse theory suggests that identities are not fixed but are constructed through language, interaction, and social practices (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; De Fina et al., 2006). Social constructionist theory views discourse not merely as a reflection of reality, but as a process that creates identities by situating individuals and institutions within a system of meaning. Identity is not stable or universal; it is situational and mutually constructed. Such a discursive understanding is influenced by poststructuralism, which rejects essentialist ideas of identity and privileges an approach that views identity as emerging through repeated linguistic and social practices, grounded in power dynamics (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) principles of emergence, positionality, indexicality, relationality, and partialness illustrate that identities are meaningful only within the social and relational contexts in which they are produced. Thus, discourse analysis has emerged as a key methodological tool for exploring how institutional

communication constructs authority, legitimacy, expertise, and social belonging. In discourse studies, identity is closely tied to how social actors are portrayed. Language styles, including the processes of nomination, categorization, functionalization, personalization, collectivization, inclusion, and exclusion, create discourse participants, as described by Van Leeuwen (2008). Representational decisions foreground action or highlight responsibility for it, while marginalizing some people's involvement. For instance, polluters may be framed as industries, factories, or corporations, leading to different perceptions of accountability. The construction of identity is thus entangled with the distribution of agency and responsibility in discourse.

Identity in Eco linguistics

Eco linguistics extends discourse analysis by examining how language is used to represent relationships between humans and the natural world. While Haugen (1972) developed the idea of the ecology of language, Halliday (1990) challenged environmentally harmful linguistic patterns, paving the way for modern Eco linguistics. Since then, the field has grown into an interdisciplinary framework that combines discourse analysis, cognitive linguistics, systemic functional linguistics, and ecological philosophy, and examines how language can support or undermine unsustainable worldviews (Fill & Penz, 2018; Steffensen & Fill, 2014).

Stories We Live By (Stibbe, 2021) is one of the most influential frameworks for analyzing environmental discourse among current approaches. Stibbe suggests that discourse is structured around the repetition of cultural narratives and by dimensions including ideology, framing, evaluation, metaphor, identity, narrative, salience, erasure, and conviction. The framework does not simply use language to describe reality, but rather considers language as a way of creating ecological values and shaping human behaviour.

Identity holds a special place in this context because it concerns the narratives that discourse communicates to us about people, institutions, communities and the more-than-human world. Stibbe (2021) states that identities are shared social cognitive constructions that arise in regular patterns of language. Governments can be portrayed as good stewards of the environment or as bad administrators; industries as economic drivers or as polluters; citizens as victims, contributors, or guardians of the environment; and ecosystems as passive resources or as interconnected living systems. These types of representations are relevant to ecology because they shape understanding of the responsibility, accountability, and citizenship in relation to the environment.

Eco linguistics is not typical of identity research because it focuses on the ecological impact of identity formation rather than on interpersonal interaction (Daraz et al., 2024). Human-centered or anthropocentric identities tend to naturalize humanity's place on the planet, while eco centric identities emphasize the ecological interdependence, stewardship, and sustainability (Zhang & He, 2020; Stibbe, 2015). Thus, examining identity becomes a way to evaluate the extent to which the discourse fosters ecological resilience or perpetuates environmentally harmful assumptions.

Discourse and the Pakistani Context: Environmental Issues

The newspaper is a significant site for exploring identity, as it produces a range of public perceptions of environmental problems through repeated linguistic representations. As noted above, news discourse is not merely a medium for conveying scientific information; it shapes the environment by selecting actors, apportioning blame, and imposing a particular interpretation on ecological crises (Cox & Pezzullo, 2021; Fairclough, 2015; Hansen, 2024). Government, industry, science, citizens, and

environmental groups are represented through systematic linguistic choices that shape the public image of expertise, accountability, and environmental action.

The study of environmental discourse in Pakistan has grown significantly in light of climate change, flooding, water scarcity, heat waves, and air pollution issues (Zaman et al., 2024). Rashid and Mahmood (2019) examine linguistic variations in Pakistani research articles from this perspective, demonstrating that the communicated intent, as well as the selection of both grammatical and lexical items, can vary significantly across different academic disciplines. Theoretical frameworks that have already been used to study ideological positioning and media representation include Critical Discourse Analysis, framing theory, appraisal theory, and metaphor analysis. Together, they show that newspapers have a significant role in public perception of environmental hazards and government action. Generally, however, identity has not been analyzed as a category in its own right, but rather as a part of other analytical frameworks such as framing or ideology.

Research Method

The study uses qualitative ecological discourse analysis to examine how identities are linguistically constructed in Pakistani English-language newspapers in the context of smog. A qualitative design is appropriate because the study aims to interpret the language process by eliciting the meanings of ecological and social actors rather than quantifying linguistic patterns. Adopting Stibbe's (2021) *Stories We Live By* approach, the analysis begins by exploring identities embedded in prevalent linguistic representations of human and ecological actors.

The data consists of 150 purposively selected news reports from three major English newspapers in Pakistan, namely Dawn, The News International and The Express Tribune. The selection of these newspapers was based on their readership, overall influence in the country, and their role in environmental discourse among policymakers, academics, professionals, and English newspaper readers. They are credible institutions and have been widely accessible for archival research, making them appropriate sources for analyzing environmental news discourse.

The sampling period spans from 2016 to 2026. Data analysis is grounded on Stibbe (2021)'s conceptualization of identity as a repetitive cognitive narrative involving social and ecological actors (Zhang et al., 2024). The analytical approach involved repeated close readings of the data to identify patterns, followed by systematic coding of linguistic features relevant to those patterns. These coded extracts were then analyzed within their local texts and within the socio-environmental context in which they are embedded, to explore how institutional news discourse produces ecological relationships and allocates environmental responsibility. The analysis is not confined to linguistic aspects of the text, but is linked to the wider discourse and ecological narratives. This interpretive method enables a more complex analysis of the discourse in Pakistani newspapers that shapes understanding of environmental responsibility, ecological citizenship, and human–nature relationships amid one of the country's most enduring environmental crises.

Findings and Discussion

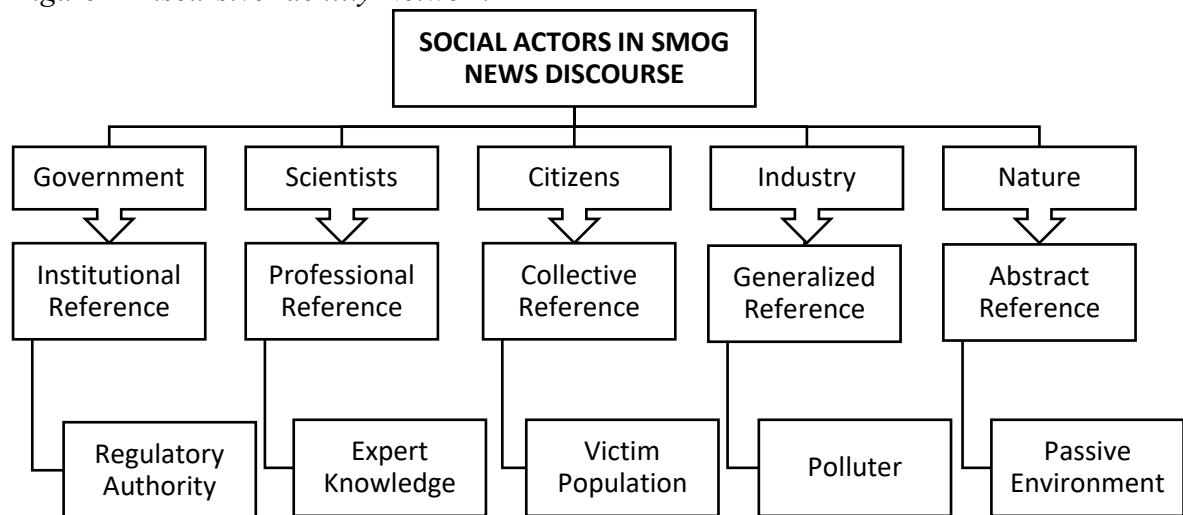
Identity Construction through Nomination and Referential Strategies

The analysis reveals that Pakistani English newspapers construct environmental identities through systematic nomination and referential patterns that position institutional actors differently during the smog crisis. Building on Van Leeuwen (2008), nomination refers to instances in which actors in the discourse are explicitly named,

while referential strategies describe how actors are repeatedly identified and recognized throughout the discourse.

Government institutions are formally designated, such as the Punjab government, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Punjab Environment Protection Department, and provincial authorities (Penz & Fill, 2022). Institutionalized references position the state as the key player in crisis management. For example, “*The Environmental Protection Agency says it has installed emission control systems in 96 percent of industries in Lahore*” and “*Strict measures will be taken against those who are violating environmental laws*” have been highlighted in the reports. These nomination patterns present governmental institutions as active regulators, thereby strengthening the governmental institutional identity, which is associated with an image of authority and intervention. The use of official and expert voices entails an interdiscursive negotiation of institutional legitimacy, as described by Fairclough (2015).

Figure 1 Discursive Identity Network



Scientific actors are consistently identified by profession, never by name. Initiatives such as *Pakistan Air Quality Initiative (PAQI)*, *Pakistan Air Quality Experts (PAQE)*, and *environmental experts* and *researchers* present scientists as authoritative interpreters of environmental reality, but not as political players. They often use numerical data, satellite data, emission inventories, and AQI measurements as evidence in their discourse, further reinforcing their epistemic authority. PAQI's report, for instance, singles out transport, industry, and brick kilns as the main sources of particulate pollution in Lahore and calls for evidence-based governance. Scientists' repeated connection to empirical evidence builds an identity based on expertise and objectivity.

There is a very significant difference in how industrial actors are addressed. They are addressed by collective terms such as *industry* or *industrial emissions*, *brick kilns*, *transport sector*, or *factories*, rather than the names of particular corporations. This abstraction also resolves the dilemma of who is responsible for the pollution by focusing on the economy as a whole. While transport, industry, and brick kilns are identified as significant sources of pollution, the lack of identified companies makes it difficult to determine responsibility and conduct institutional scrutiny. This discovery aligns with Stibbe's (2021) insight that the discourse can help normalize environmentally destructive systems through eviscerating the identities of actors

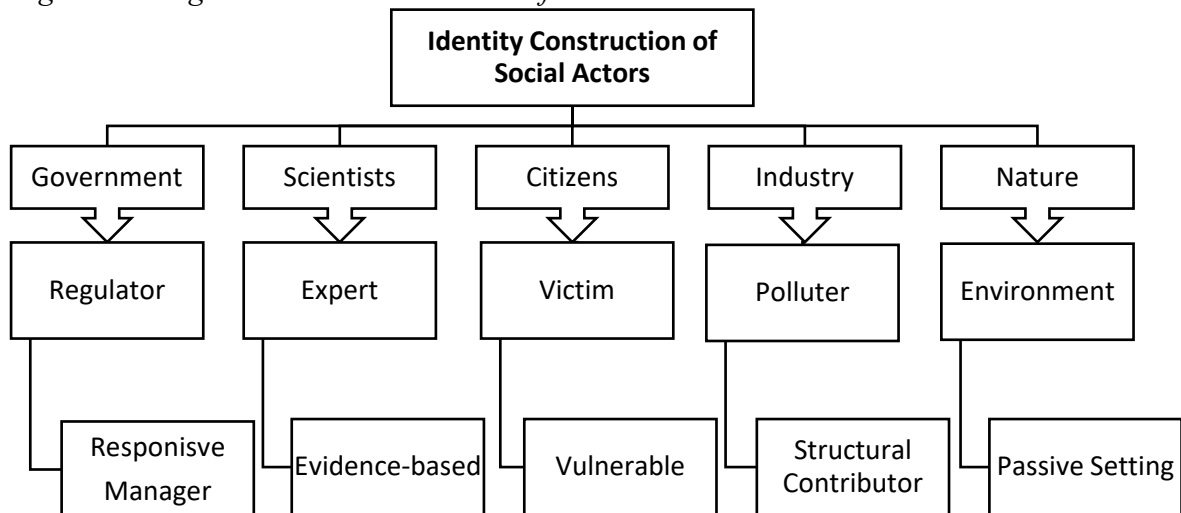
involved in ecological harm.

Categorization and Prediction of Environmental Actors

In addition to naming social actors, newspapers build environmental identities by categorizing them and predicating attributes, functions, and evaluative characteristics. Categorization refers to recognizing groups in terms of social categories and predication to adding properties and activities that interpret those groups (Van Leeuwen, 2008). These strategies generate a series of tales of competence, vulnerability, expertise, and ecological responsibility within the smog texts.

The government is primarily divided into regulators, policy makers, and crisis managers. The use of terms such as authorities, officials, administration, and government departments in every instance presents the government as the proper mechanism for coordinating environmental governance. Phrasing such as *'take stringent action'*, *'anti-smog efforts'*, *'all schools will be closed'*, or *'emergency plans are in place'* conveys the impression of administrative action. However, newspapers also present evaluative counter-discourses featuring experts who doubt the effectiveness of such interventions, especially regarding artificial rain, smog towers, and emergency measures. The resultant identity is thus complicated: governments are depicted as active institutional managers, yet their effectiveness is called into question.

Figure 2 Categorization and Prediction of Environmental Actors



The scientific community is classified as knowledge producers (as shown in Figure 2), whose authority is based on empirical evidence, not politics. Predictions often focus on the processes of *observation*, *analysis*, *measurement*, *reporting* and *recommendation*, which include all activities that leave the scientist as a neutral interpreter of environmental reality. Epistemic credibility can be further strengthened by scientific actors repeatedly using technical jargon, such as concentration, emissions inventory, and satellite modeling.

By contrast, the overwhelming majority of citizens are defined as vulnerable populations. Predicative descriptions emphasize respiratory disease, while obscuring the closure of schools, disruptions to transport systems, and health emergencies, and depict ordinary people primarily as experiencing environments rather than creating them. The focus on children, elderly persons, and patients undergoing treatment heightens this discourse of vulnerability. The level of active citizen participation in environmental governance is relatively low, suggesting that environmental citizenship is shaped more by compliance with official directives than by collective ecological

agency (Bortoluzzi & Zurru, 2024).

Lastly, there are limited predicative agencies in ecological entities. Air quality is *hazardous*, *toxic*, or *dangerous*, and smog is there as *cities are engulfed*, *blanketed*, or *shrouded*. These lexical choices anthropomorphize pollution, and rarely portray it as an active member of a connected ecosystem. Rather, nature is mainly encountered as a place where human behaviour causes measurable environmental degradation. Stibbe's (2021) view is that this is an anthropocentric identity narrative in which ecological systems are backgrounded, and human institutions are placed at the center of environmental narratives.

Agency and Responsibility through Transitivity

The analysis of transitivity patterns shows that the construction of environmental responsibility in Pakistani English newspapers is selective with respect to agency. Transitivity is treated not as a grammatical system, but as a discursive resource that shapes how people perform actions, how they experience an action's consequences, and who is absent from an action's representation (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Across the data, agency is unevenly distributed among governments, environmental institutions, industries, citizens, and the environment, reflecting the ideology about who is responsible for the smog crisis. (See Table 1)

Pollution is often treated as a material actor, with actions aimed at controlling or mitigating it. Government agencies are often portrayed as proactive managers of the crisis, as evidenced by verbs such as *launched*, *imposed*, *announced*, *directed*, *monitored*, *inspected*, and *implemented*. The narrative of these constructions is the institutional narrative, in which state authorities are identified as the primary actors intervening in response to environmental degradation. This typology bolsters the government's legitimacy as an authority by emphasizing intervention over cause. The same pattern is observed in the study of environmental discourse, where the government is often seen as an agent of change and problem-solving, yet it still has a weak focus on structural responsibility (Carvalho, 2021).

Table 1 Transitivity Pattern and Environmental Responsibility

Social Actor	Dominant Process Type	Typical Linguistic Realization	Discursive Identity	Effect on Responsibility
Government	Material Process	Implemented, launched, announced, directed	Active regulator	High institutional agency and legitimacy
Scientists	Verbal / Mental Process	Reported, warned, analysed, recommended	Knowledge authority	Provides scientific legitimacy
Citizens	Mental / Relational Material (Goal)	/ Suffered, / experienced, faced	Passive victims	Receivers of environmental consequences
Industries	Nominalized Backgrounded	/ Industrial emissions,	Anonymous	Corporate accountability

Social Actor	Dominant Process Type	Typical Linguistic Realization	Discursive Identity	Effect on Responsibility
	Material Processes	vehicular pollution	polluters	diffused
Nature	Relational Circumstantial	/ Air quality deteriorated, smog engulfed	Passive environment	Minimal ecological agency

The use of a wide range of passive constructions in reports of government actions or environmental effects is also common. Phrases such as *"schools were closed"*, *"emergency measures were announced"*, *"warnings were issued"*, and *"anti-smog campaigns were launched"* emphasize institutional responses but not who is actually responsible for action. Likewise, phrases such as *'air quality was seriously impacted'* and *'visibility was affected'* describe environmental degradation as a tangible state, rather than as a result of specific human actions. Passive constructions contribute to the objectivity of journalism, but they also reduce explicit attribution of responsibility. As Fairclough (2015) has argued, it is ideologically significant that such a grammatical choice naturalizes social events and hides human agency.

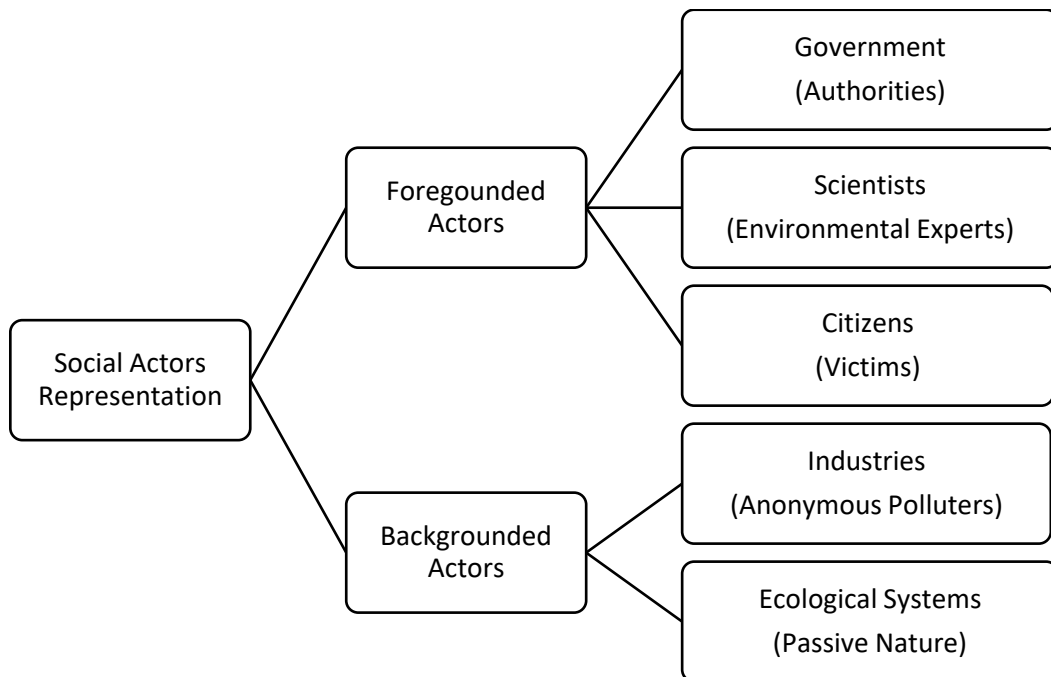
Overall, agency is unevenly distributed in newspapers – government agency is foregrounded, industrial agency is backgrounded, and ecological agency is barely present. Such linguistic choices feed into institutional discourses that prioritize crisis management over structural issues of environmental degradation.

Inclusion, Exclusion, and Backgrounding of Social Actors

The analysis also shows that a systematic process of inclusion and exclusion shapes identity construction. Van Leeuwen (2008) views discourse as a social act that selectively foregrounds and backgrounds social actors. These representational strategies shape the public's sense of legitimacy, responsibility, and environmental citizenship. Inclusion and exclusion are significant organizational mechanisms within the smog corpus, which organizes newspapers' ecological knowledge.

Environmental scientists also have a strong presence through expert opinion, scientific reports, and air-quality information. They lend epistemic authority to environmental reporting, because their work is grounded in empirical evidence and can support a news narrative. However, the role of experts remains largely advisory, and policy decisions are still presented as government affairs. Therefore, institutional authority cannot be supplanted by scientific authority.

Figure 3 Foregrounding and backgrounding of Social Actors



In contrast, industries are often backgrounded. Whenever *industrial emissions*, *transport*, or *brick kilns* are mentioned, they are usually not identified as a specific company, owner, or violation of the regulations. This kind of generalization spreads responsibility across faceless areas of economic activity rather than assinging it to specific institutions or organizations. Proponents of ecological discourse have, precisely in this way, normalized environmentally problematic systems (Stibbe 2021), thus obscuring the deeper roots of ecological problems such as structural issues.

Likewise, *farmers* who burn crop residues are rarely represented collectively, and the broader economic and policy context of farming operations is overlooked. Without context, responsibility is likely to be attributed to the individual, and structural constraints, such as limited technological alternatives, inadequate incentives, or policy errors, are ignored. This reflects a selective representation, consistent with Fairclough's (2015) argument that discourse often obscures complex socio-political realities by favouring institutionally acceptable explanations.

Ordinary citizens are given space to be recognized as victims, yet remain underrepresented as active participants in environmental governance. News discourse focuses on respiratory illness, school closures, disrupted transportation, and reduced visibility, and frames citizens mostly as sufferers. Although there is a growing trend of community organizations, environmental activists, and local initiatives in environmental advocacy, they receive little attention. This imbalance limits citizens' identity to receiving government actions, rather than participating in environmental governance.

Human-Nature Relationship and Ecological Identity

A salient finding from this analysis is how Pakistani English newspapers portray the human-environment link in the context of the smog crisis. The debate on environmental reporting has long focused on air pollution and the degradation of nature, but it has been framed within an anthropocentric framework, with nature mostly seen through the lens of its effects on human society. From an ecolinguistic viewpoint, as outlined by Stibbe (2021), this identity formation results from the "stories we live by" that underpin

public understandings of environmental responsibility and human–nature relations. Throughout the data, terms such as *air quality*, *smog*, *pollution*, *the atmosphere*, and *environment* refer to environmental entities. These are expressions rather than ecosystems in their own right, with intrinsic value and influence on human life. Rising Air Quality Index (AQI) levels, high PM_{2.5} concentrations, respiratory diseases, school closures, traffic congestion, and economic losses are repeatedly highlighted in the reports. As a result, rather than the broader ecological impacts, such as biodiversity loss, ecosystem degradation, or the breakdown of natural cycles, the deterioration is primarily understood in terms of impacts on public health and on urban functioning. This is the anthropocentric discourse described by Stibbe (2021), which judges nature based on its usefulness to human beings.

This orientation is reinforced by the transitivity patterns discussed in the previous section. Ecological entities are seldom active in clause structures. Instead, they are used mainly as affected entities or as settings for circumstances, rather than describing human activities. Phrases such as "*the air became hazardous*", "*pollution levels increased*", or "*the city was engulfed in smog*" describe an environmental condition, rather than an ecological process driven by the interactions among human and non-human systems. The role of participants in the production of a text affects the readers' understanding of agency, according to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014). The limited agency given to ecological entities in the newspaper also downplays the idea that nature is a passive recipient of human action, and an active part in complex ecological systems.

Table 2 Human-Nature Relationship and Identity Construction

Discursive Feature	Anthropocentric Representation	Emerging Representation	Ecocentric
Nature	Environmental condition	Living ecological system	
Human Identity	Victims of pollution	Ecological stewards	
Government	Crisis manager	Sustainability facilitator	
Scientific Community	Public health experts	Environmental advocates	
Environmental Problem	Public health emergency	Ecological crisis	
Dominant Focus	Human welfare	Human–nature interdependence	
Ecological Orientation	Anthropocentric	Ecocentric	

Another trend to note in the data is the portrayal of ecological duty. Anthropogenic sources of pollution, such as *vehicle emissions*, *industrial operations*, *brick kilns*, *construction dust*, and *burning crop residues*, are common in the newspapers but are often reported within administrative and regulatory processes. Environmental degradation is thus seen primarily as a governance issue and a problem that the government must address, rather than as a reflection of a broader imbalance in human development or ecological sustainability. Policy responses are emphasized, and

unsustainable consumption, urban planning and human-nature connections are backgrounded.

The findings suggest that in general, Pakistani English newspapers have constructed ecological identities through a dynamic interplay between anthropocentric and emerging ecocentric narratives (Poole, 2022; Virdis, 2022). In contrast, human welfare remains at the forefront of the dominant discourse despite the growing attention to scientific evidence and long-term environmental governance in environmental reporting. From an ecolinguistic lens, these identity constructions can shape a reader's understanding of environmental responsibility, and encourage news discourse that better acknowledges the interdependence of humans and the more-than-human world.

Conclusion

The study concludes that newspapers construct a discourse of identity hierarchies through distinct linguistic patterns, in which governments are portrayed as legitimate regulators of the environment, scientists appear as authoritative and uncontroversial experts, citizens as helpless victims, industry as a generalizable polluter, and ecological entities as passive, uncontroversial environmental conditions. The representations primarily acknowledge an anthropocentric worldview that focuses on human well-being and institutional actions, and often neglects the role of ecological agency and corporate accountability. New eco centric stories, however, that foreground scientific evidence, sustainability, and future environmental governance signify a slight turn towards a more balanced environmental communication. The study contributes to the field of Eco linguistic research by demonstrating that identity is a central discursive element that influence perceptions of responsibility and environmental citizenship. The researcher recommends that future comparative studies of identity construction be conducted across Urdu newspapers, Television, and digital media to advance the understanding of environmental discourse in Pakistan.

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