



Greening the Discourse: A Critical Ecolinguistic Analysis of Metaphors in English Newspaper Editorials

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ABSTRACT

This research paper analyses how metaphor serves as a positive force in perception in climate change coverage in the newspaper of Pakistan in the English language. Through an integrated approach to analysis relying on the synthesis of Eco-Critical Discourse Analysis, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, and the ecolinguistic model proposed by Stibbe, the paper explores how the use of metaphorical expressions can and does shape ideological, ecological, and socio-political conceptions of climate change. The study is based on a purposively compiled sample of eighteen newspaper editorials, based on which the national and global environmental problem-setting is studied critically. The results reveal that metaphors are powerful mental and moral processes, which guide the interpretative courses of the readers toward ecological accountability, resilience, and urgency. This work promotes the field of ecolinguistics and discourse studies as it suggests the positive role of media discourse in environmental sense-making in how journalistic language determines how people are aware of and respond to climate change.

1. Introduction

Climate change is a complex global phenomenon that intersects environmental, economic, social, and political domains, posing profound challenges for human societies and governance systems. Because scientific information about climate risks is often abstract and highly technical, mass media play a critical role in translating scientific findings into public narratives that shape awareness, urgency, and perceived responsibility (Borth et al., 2021; Boykoff & Roberts, 2007). In the context of Pakistan, one of the world's most climate-vulnerable countries, the way media outlets frame climate issues has significant implications for public understanding and policy discourse, influencing both elite debates and broader societal perceptions of environmental risk.

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English-language newspapers such as *Dawn* and *The Express Tribune* occupy important positions in Pakistan's media landscape, particularly among policymakers, researchers, and urban readers. Studies of Pakistani print media reveal that climate change coverage is often framed around disaster reporting, economic consequences, and governance challenges, with limited focus on mitigation strategies or community engagement (Khan & Taj, 2025; Asif et al., 2024). Critical analyses have shown that newspaper language, metaphor, and framing structures do more than report events; they construct narratives that foreground certain aspects of climate change such as security, finance, and vulnerability—while sidelining others, ultimately shaping how readers interpret the causes, impacts, and solutions of environmental change in a local and national context (Saleem & Khan, 2025; Asif et al., 2024).

Media framing not only reflects editorial choices but also exerts influence on public cognition and political agendas by determining which elements of climate change are seen as salient, urgent, or actionable. Research on climate communication highlights that media frames affect public perception, risk evaluation, and engagement, underscoring the power of news outlets to steer societal discourse toward particular interpretations of environmental issues (Nisbet, 2009; Borth et al., 2021). In Pakistan's socio-political environment, where climate vulnerability intersects with developmental pressures and institutional limitations, examining editorial rhetoric and metaphors in leading newspapers provides vital insight into how climate change is socially constructed and communicated to influence awareness, responsibility, and collective action.

1.1. Research Objectives

1. Analyze how climate issues are represented in editorial texts.
2. Identify the socio-political and economic dimensions emphasized or marginalized.
3. Examine communication strategies employed by the newspapers.
4. Explore solution-oriented pathways proposed to mitigate climate risks.

2. Literature Review

This study employs a combination of **Framing Theory**, **Agenda-Setting Theory**, and **Risk Society Theory** to analyze the editorial discourse on climate change in Pakistani English-language newspapers. These theories provide complementary lenses for understanding how media not only report environmental events but also actively construct social meanings, influence public perceptions, and shape policy priorities.

Framing Theory (Entman, 1993) posits that media select certain aspects of reality and make them more salient to audiences, thereby shaping how issues are interpreted and understood. Frames influence what people think about and how they think about it, highlighting particular causes, consequences, and solutions while downplaying others. In the context of climate change reporting, framing allows newspapers to emphasize urgency, moral responsibility, or catastrophic risk, while simultaneously shaping narratives about institutional failures, economic priorities, or adaptation strategies. By examining the metaphors, narratives, and evaluative language used in editorials, this study explores how Pakistani newspapers construct climate change as a multidimensional social problem with moral, economic, and political implications.

Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) complements framing by focusing on the media's role in prioritizing issues and directing public attention. According to this theory, the repeated coverage of specific topics signals their importance to the audience, thereby influencing what the public and policymakers perceive as salient. In Pakistani media, agenda-setting may manifest through sustained reporting on floods, droughts, energy crises, or climate financing, which positions these issues as central to national discourse. This framework helps to interpret how editorial decisions contribute to the collective prioritization of climate issues, influencing both citizen concern and governmental responses.

Risk Society Theory (Beck, 1992) provides a broader sociological perspective, emphasizing that modern societies are increasingly preoccupied with managing complex, global, and often invisible risks, such as climate change. According to Beck, these risks are characterized by uncertainty, unequal distribution, and transboundary effects, which challenge traditional governance and policy mechanisms. Editorial coverage, through the lens of risk society theory, reflects societal anxieties about environmental hazards and communicates both individual and collective vulnerabilities. It also highlights the interplay between global risks and local experiences, demonstrating how media translate abstract scientific data into narratives that resonate with the public's lived realities and moral reasoning.

By integrating these three theoretical perspectives, this study captures the multiple dimensions of climate change discourse. **Framing Theory** provides insight into interpretive constructions of meaning; **Agenda-Setting Theory** explains the prominence and prioritization of issues; and **Risk Society Theory** situates these discussions within a broader societal context of uncertainty

and vulnerability. Together, these frameworks allow for a nuanced analysis of how Pakistani editorial media construct climate change not merely as an environmental or scientific problem but as a socially, politically, and economically mediated phenomenon that demands public awareness, policy engagement, and collective action.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative research design** to explore the editorial representation of climate change in Pakistani English-language newspapers. The research is interpretive in nature, aiming to understand the construction of meaning, rhetorical strategies, and socio-political implications embedded in editorial texts. A **qualitative content analysis** approach was selected as it allows for in-depth examination of language use, metaphors, narrative structures, and framing devices, which are crucial in understanding how climate change is communicated to the public.

3.1. Research Design

The study uses a **descriptive-interpretive research design**, combining elements of critical discourse analysis and thematic analysis. This design facilitates the exploration of textual patterns while linking these patterns to broader theoretical frameworks, namely Framing Theory (Entman, 1993), Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), and Risk Society Theory (Beck, 1992). By adopting this design, the research not only identifies what is communicated but also interprets **how climate change narratives are constructed**, which socio-political and economic dimensions are emphasized or marginalized, and how editorial choices shape public perceptions and policy priorities.

3.2. Data Source and Sampling

The primary data consisted of **50 editorials** published in two leading Pakistani English-language newspapers: **Dawn** (n = 21) and **The Express Tribune** (n = 29), spanning the period from **January 2020 to mid-2025**. These newspapers were selected for their wide readership, editorial influence, and intellectual prominence in shaping public and policy discourse. The sampling strategy was purposive, focusing on editorials explicitly addressing climate change, environmental risk, or related socio-political and economic issues. This ensured that the collected data was relevant to the research objectives and provided sufficient textual depth for qualitative analysis.

3.3. Data Collection

Editorial texts were systematically retrieved from the online archives of the newspapers. Each editorial was read multiple times to gain familiarity with the content, identify recurring rhetorical and narrative patterns, and note the use of metaphors, evaluative language, and framing structures. A **coding framework** was developed based on the research objectives and theoretical underpinnings, focusing on:

1. **Rhetorical and metaphoric strategies** : including anthropomorphism, catastrophe metaphors, and figurative language.
2. **Framing devices** : such as emphasis on urgency, socio-economic inequities, governance accountability, and solution-oriented pathways.
3. **Narrative and evaluative structures** : assessing how stories are constructed to convey moral responsibility, civic engagement, or policy imperatives.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a **reflexive thematic analysis** approach, which is well-suited for examining nuanced patterns in qualitative data. The analysis involved several iterative steps:

1. **Familiarization** – repeated reading of editorial texts to understand overarching themes, metaphoric language, and narrative tone.
2. **Initial coding** – identification of textual features and rhetorical strategies, including key metaphors, evaluative statements, and recurrent framing devices.
3. **Theme development** – grouping codes into broader themes that reflect recurring patterns in climate change discourse, such as urgency, governance, economic constraints, or public engagement.
4. **Integration with theoretical perspectives** – mapping themes onto **Framing Theory**, **Agenda-Setting Theory**, and **Risk Society Theory** to interpret the implications for public perception, moral accountability, and policy discourse.

3.5. Rigor and Reliability

To enhance the credibility of the analysis, the study adopted several strategies:

- **Triangulation of sources** – comparing editorial narratives across two newspapers to identify convergent and divergent framing patterns.
- **Reflexivity** – continuous reflection on the researcher’s interpretive role to minimize bias in coding and theme identification.
- **Systematic coding** – using a theoretically grounded framework to ensure consistency and transparency in the identification of patterns and metaphoric devices.

By combining these qualitative approaches, the methodology enables a **deep understanding of how Pakistani editorials construct climate change**, not only as an environmental or scientific issue but also as a socio-political, economic, and cultural phenomenon. This approach allows for both descriptive and interpretive insights into the ways media shape public understanding, moral discourse, and policy priorities.

4. Data Analysis Results and Findings

The qualitative content analysis of 50 editorials from **Dawn** (n = 21) and **The Express Tribune** (n = 29) revealed a multi-dimensional discourse on climate change. Reflexive thematic analysis identified **eight interconnected themes** that were consistently present across both newspapers, highlighting how climate risks, societal responsibility, and solutions are constructed in editorial media.

4.1. Urgency and Temporal Thresholds

Editorials frequently framed climate change as an **immediate and pressing threat**, using metaphors of countdowns, deadlines, and breaking points. This framing created a sense of temporal acceleration, translating long-term environmental processes into urgent, human-scale timeframes that demand immediate action.

4.2. Militarization and Security

Climate change was often represented as a **national security issue**, emphasizing risks to territorial integrity, food and water security, and political stability. Militarized language and securitization metaphors positioned environmental hazards as both internal and external threats, highlighting the strategic importance of climate action for national resilience.

4.3. Burden, Inequity, and Justice

Editorials foregrounded the disproportionate impact of climate risks on **vulnerable populations**, including farmers, urban poor, women, and future generations. This theme highlighted ethical responsibility, social inequities, and the moral obligation of governments and citizens to act fairly and equitably.

4.4. Economy, Scarcity, and Technocracy

The economic dimensions of climate change were emphasized through discussions of **financial constraints, adaptation funding gaps, energy transitions, and technological solutions**. Editorials framed climate action as both a managerial challenge and a moral responsibility, linking sustainable planning, market mechanisms, and innovation to effective environmental governance.

4.5. Nature-as-Agent and Catastrophe

Nature was personified and presented as an active agent capable of **overwhelming human systems**, with floods, droughts, heatwaves, and smog portrayed as destructive forces. Apocalyptic metaphors intensified the perception of risk, fostering both fear and moral concern among readers while underscoring human vulnerability.

4.6. Governance, Communication, and Performative Politics

Editorials critically examined **state responsiveness, institutional credibility, and the coherence of climate policies**. Media functioned as a watchdog, highlighting gaps between policy statements and tangible action, advocating participatory governance, and promoting civic accountability through evaluative and solution-oriented rhetoric.

4.7. Pathways, Transition, and Reimagining

Both newspapers emphasized **solution-oriented narratives**, including energy transition, behavioral change, technological innovation, and community resilience. Editorials encouraged readers to perceive themselves as active participants capable of shaping environmental futures, blending hope and agency with the portrayal of climate risk.

4.8. Health, Livability, and Education

Climate change was localized through its effects on **human health, education, and daily living**, such as school disruptions, water scarcity, respiratory illness, and urban heat stress. By linking global climate phenomena to domestic and community experiences, editorials strengthened the perceived immediacy, relevance, and ethical imperative for individual and collective action.

5. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of how **Pakistani English-language editorials** in *Dawn* and *The Express Tribune* construct the discourse of climate change. The findings show that climate change is not only represented as an environmental problem but also as a **political, economic, moral, and social phenomenon**. Editorials employ a combination of **rhetorical, narrative, and metaphoric strategies** to convey urgency, highlight responsibility, and propose actionable solutions, shaping both public understanding and policy discourse.

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