

# SILENCES IN THE STORM: AN ECOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF ERASURE IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS HEADLINES OF PAKISTANI ENGLISH-LANGUAGE NEWSPAPERS

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## Abstract

*When it comes to reporting floods, smog, locust swarms, earthquakes, heatwaves or stray-animal conflicts, Pakistani newspapers keep relentlessly reporting the events but the language of the headline doesn't mention who suffers, who is in charge or who is to be blamed. In this study, this absence was explored. Following Stibbe (2015), and especially the notion of erasure and its three stages, the study has been based on twenty-nine environmental news headlines that have been picked from English-language sources in Pakistan: twenty-six headlines from Dawn, one from The Express Tribune, and two supplementary policy and archival texts. A qualitative, descriptive and interpretive design was used, and each headline was explored in terms of the language/suppression/backgrounding of participants, the ecological ideologies embedded in those language/suppressions and the amount to which that ideology could be accepted within the stated ecosophy of interdependence, justice and ecological limits. The analysis, which confirmed that erasure was not limited to occasional occurrences, revealed that nearly all headlines committed at least one type of erasure and most undertook two or three. Through the processes of nominalisation, agentless and passive constructions, the personification of nature as a destructive entity, the massification of animal and casualty, numerical abstraction and superordinate economic categories, the vulnerable populations, non-human life, and institutional responsibility were all backgrounded. The three conceptual groupings that emerged throughout the data were: economic anthropocentrism, where nature was important only as a means of production for markets; environmental determinism, where the hazards were autonomous forces acting upon a helpless population; and technocratic managerialism, where the crisis was a matter of administrative control, not of justice. The study concludes that the ecological harm headlines in Pakistan not only record ecological harm but also erode accountability for it, while the study recommends a change in the practice of headlines to restore the people, living things and responsible institutions to the sentence.*

**Keywords:** Erasure; Environmental News Headlines; Ecological Ideologies; Ecological Harm; Pakistan

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background

Discourse has always been known as more than a vehicle to convey information. According to Fairclough (1989), it is a social practice which creates social identities, social relations and forms the knowledge and meaning systems of the social world. In this view language does not merely represent a pre-existing reality but is a part of the reality that speakers and readers make. That participation became visible through the critical discourse analysis, which was a means of examining written or spoken language in the context of its social conditions of production and reception, as well as enquiring whose interests a specific language of address serves.

News headlines are in a unique niche in this field. They are short, succinct frames that can catch the reader's eye, summarise a whole report in a clause, modify the reader's understanding of the

event before he/she reads the rest of the article and, often, instead of the rest of the article. Headlines act as gatekeepers – they make you pay attention, ignore you or remember you. The ideological work that is accomplished in the headline is uneasily proportionate to its length, as a large percentage of the public, especially those in the age of social media circulation, see only the headline.

Ecological discourse is defined in the use of language to represent, construct and communicate the relationship between humans, society and the natural environment, which influences attitudes, ideologies and actions towards ecological issues (Stibbe, 2015). Environmental news makes up the ecological compass, setting the agendas of what is urgent, who is to blame and what sort of solution is feasible (Stibbe, 2015). The language they use can serve to reinforce sustainable ideologies or alternatively, to hide environmental damage in unsustainable ways by making it natural, inevitable and pure technical (Fairclough, 1989). The analysis of such headlines, therefore, uncovers biases, and can highlight the potential to promote environmental responsibility versus an implicit minimization of environmental harm.

The argument to this project that Stibbe (2015) introduces is that an ecological analysis ought to also take into account what a text systematically does not enunciate. His idea of erasure refers to the process of discursivity, of areas of life, which are important to the ecosystems that sustain us, are ignored, backgrounded or completely absent from representation. There are three levels of this process, according to Stibbe. The void – this would be the complete absence where a participant that should be present is not in the text. The mask is a distorted substitute, a representation that's simplified or misrepresented, in place of erased reality. Trace: Faint presence, a participant is suggested but not defined in terms of vividness, agency and moral content.

## 1.2 Rationale for the Study

The Pakistani national press is reporting environmental crisis with frequent occurrences and Pakistan is making a number of efforts to tackle climate change and its consequences. Floods, monsoon damages, locust invasion, urban human-animal conflict, urban smog, seasonal fog, seismic events and heat waves make regular headlines. The critical discourse analysis of Pakistani headlines has been focused on political and ideological framing, which laid a significant emphasis on the analysis of coverage of peace marches, economic corridors, courts, and polarisation between the army and party (Sajjad, 2013; Anjum & Manzoor 2020; Jamila et al., 2022). The environmental beat, however, has received very little linguistic attention, even though it is a very salient beat.

If there is any research in Pakistan that has engaged with the study of ecolinguistics in the press, it has focused on corpus-level or thematic description of entire articles and editorials, while the headline, which is the most read and ideologically condensed unit of environmental journalism, has received little attention. Moreover, most of the environmental discourse analysis has been concerned with what texts say about nature, with metaphor, evaluation, and framing, and not with the people that are silently omitted from texts. Stibbe's (2015) category of erasure is relevant to this gap and would be more frequently used in Western media corpora (Saleem & Khattak, 2025) than for South Asian environmental reporting.

Hence there exists a solid argument for an in-depth headline level analysis of environmental news in Pakistan from an ecolinguistic perspective. If the primary interface between the public and the ecological crisis is the headline, and if that headline regularly obliterates the humans, the living systems, the institutions involved in the crisis, then the implications go beyond the linguistic curiosity to public understanding, civic pressure and policy response. To really start to understand how erasure works, and what it does in terms of ideology, is crucial for a more responsible environmental journalism.

### 1.3 Objectives of the Study

The study was guided by two objectives:

1. To identify the forms of erasure operating in the environmental news headlines of Pakistani English-language newspapers and the linguistic devices through which those erasures are realized.
2. To examine the ecological ideologies constructed through these patterns of erasure and to evaluate them against an ecosophy grounded in ecological interdependence, social justice and environmental limits.

### 1.4 Research Questions

Corresponding to these objectives, the study addressed two research questions:

3. What forms of erasure are present in the environmental news headlines of Pakistani English-language newspapers, and through which linguistic devices are they realized?
4. What ecological ideologies do these erasures construct, and to what extent do they align with or diverge from an ecosophy of interdependence, justice and ecological limits?

### 1.5 Significance of the Study

There are three important aspects to this study. It theoretically extends Stibbe's (2015) model of erasure to a South Asian collection of environmental news, and assesses if the categories of void, mask and trace, which largely emerged during Western and corporate discourse are analytically useful in this postcolonial media environment where states are less capable and exposed to climate risks. It helps advance the effort of internationalisation of ecolinguistics from its empirical foundation.

In methodologically, the study shows that analysis at the level of headlines are too fragmentary to be taken seriously in the context of discourse research but when analyzed through an erasure-sensitive lens can provide dense and patterned ideological data. A headline is a structurally revealing place to see what is dispensable for a discourse community: since it must "fit" into one clause, it cannot be incidental.

In practice, the findings have implications for training journalists and communicating about the environment and public policy. If the language patterns described here systematically exclude the affected communities, the non-human living and responsible institutions from view, then the discourse fosters fatalism as a response to the need for accountabilities. Throughout the analysis, the restorative rewrites signal the possibility that this could be remedied through low-impact adjustments to transitivity, and to the abstraction/specificity distinction, and to agents' names. The restorative rewrites throughout the analysis suggest that it is possible to restore the ethical and ecological presence without losing any of the brevity. This study is thus useful as a diagnostic tool for editors, sub-editors and communication practitioners on the environmental beat in Pakistan and similar scenarios.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis of News Headlines

Based on the study of news headlines by Montejo and Adriano (2018), discursive devices used in news headlines and the underlying ideologies of news practitioners were identified. They gathered 30 headlines from five major news portals — ABS-CBN, CNN Philippines, and other four — and used the critical discourse analysis of Fairclough's to conduct a qualitative analysis, resulting in the discovery of 10 discursive devices used by the practitioners to gain attention and encode ideology and bias. The roles of writers and editors were objective, subjective or misleading and they had a material influence over perception. The study highlighted the need to read beyond headlines, and provided some tips to spot sensationalism (Montejo & Adriano, 2018).

Sajjad (2013) critically analysed the news headlines of peace march of Imran Khan towards the Waziristan's news items using critical discourse analysis and twenty headlines of news items from English and Urdu news papers of local papers and English newspapers from abroad were used for the purpose of the analysis. Political criticism of the march was the focus of local media, whereas foreign media highlighted the implications of drone attacks, and condemned the role of the Pakistani government. The study found that news presentation is influenced by an editor's bias, and claims of objectivity often veiled in ideology.

Tabe and Fieze (2018) analyzed the newspaper headlines about the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon, revealing the ideologies of the reporters and the rhetorical questions they used in their headlines, affecting the perception. 130 headlines from 29 randomly selected newspapers were sampled. The authors analysed both government and privately owned newspaper titles and found significant differences: while the private papers blamed the government, they also hinted at government inaction, the government-owned paper highlighted the importance of national unity and drew a contrast between Anglophone activists and government officials. The study has shown that the power of media and its influence on public opinion on controversial issues (Tabe & Fieze, 2018).

The research conducted by Syartanti (2021) aimed to examine the way that the news about a celebrity's immoral video case was constructed through different media platforms online using the critical discourse analysis approach of Fairclough. The samples were taken between November 2020 and January 2021 from detik.com, Kompas.com, liputan6.com and tribunnews.com and analyzed using Fairclough's microstructural, mesostructural and macrostructural stages. The vocabulary was largely directed towards the video, and the grammar used were the constructions in shaping a negative image of the celebrity in Indonesian society. Outlets were presented accurately, though some were presented in a certain manner that highlighted a conflict between press freedom and traditional values (Syartanti, 2021).

Dragas (2012) analysed gender-related discourse in a sample of daily newspaper headlines and critically examined the media strategies that reflect social power relations in gender relations. The critical discourse analysis was used to analyse data taken from several newspapers in the USA. Media discourse was found to be predominantly masculine which meant men were seen as leaders and women were seen simplistically. Dragas highlighted the ideology behind these images as sexist and masculine chauvinist and illustrated how the media reinforces gender inequality and promotes dominant social ideology.

Isti'anah (2019) investigated the depiction of Rohingya issue in the newspaper headlines in South-East Asian countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand and Bangladesh, during the newspaper publications in 2017, which was analyzed by using critical discourse analysis by Fairclough and textual functions by Halliday to look for the ideological framing. The ideologies and themes presented were similar but there were significant differences in the way the newspapers presented responsibility and blame for the crisis. The need for a solution to resolve the issue for peace and harmony was the common theme of all sources.

Shojaei et al. (2013) analyzed the biased interpretation and representation of ideologically conflicted ideas in Western printed media by studying the coverage of Iran's nuclear program, Iran sanctions and the Syria crisis. The researchers identified the following linguistic tools as the headings of the lexicalisation, collocational patterning, presupposition, intertextuality and modality based on van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach and Fairclough's intertextual analysis. These features were important in communicating ideology and distorting news reports and provided the legitimacy for specific ideologies.



In the study of how the CPEC is represented in the local newspapers, Anjum and Manzoor (2020) used Critical Discourse Analysis on the headlines of three newspapers namely, Dawn, The Express Tribune and Business Recorder in the light of van Dijk's (2000) model of discursive strategies. The results indicated different editorial stance and expressed uncertainty and acceptance regarding the corridor, highlighting the way in which language is manipulated and how it affects the readers' understanding, as well as the editors' ideological positions.

Jamila et al. (2022) conducted critical social analysis of the ideological aspects of newspaper headlines, with the data collected from two newspapers, Dawn and Jang, over one month in April 2022 where they looked at actor description and polarisation based on van Dijk's (2006) model. More often than not, national and international politics, courts, the army, and the economy and terrorism were emerging themes, suggesting a considerable investment of ideology. The study found that headlines were polarised and very indicative of the changes in the ideology of the print newspaper.

This study by Badawi and Najjar (2021) used the socio-cultural approach presented by Fairclough (2013) to analyse 39 headlines from the BBC and CNN concerning the Christchurch mosque massacre. When reporting on the attacker, New Zealand's policy of protecting his identity was followed, with the passive voice used often in the reporting, whereas the active voice was used when describing victims and their families, to highlight their experience. The job of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was also brought to the fore, and thus, the linguistic choices in headlines and how they influence the meaning of the political message was highlighted.

There are three main conclusions to be drawn from this body of work. First, headlines are ideologically saturated not just summarising. Secondly, the grammatical resources which are used to encode ideology, and in particular voice, transitivity, nominalisation and selection of lexical items, are recurrent and can be identified across languages and contexts. Third and most significantly for the purposes of this study, the decision of whether to name or not to name an agent is one of the most potent ideological gestures any headline writer can make as is shown by the systematic alternation between an active and passive voice, as Badawi and Najjar (2021) make clear.

## **2.2 The Ecolinguistic Perspective**

This paper, authored by Saleem and Khattak (2025), explored this dichotomy and investigated how nature and humans are framed in the context of environmental news, analyzing the framing of nature and humans in a corpus of 500 weather reports from outlets such as BBC and CNN totaling 98,763 tokens. Using Stibbe's ecolinguistic framework of discourses of living, they identified an abundance of anthropocentric discourses that focused on human interest, and an occurrence of ecocentric discourses that focused on ecological integrity and non-human agency. The study highlighted the discursive nature of environmental journalism and the need for more ecological and ecocentric journalism for the promotion of sustainability and ecological justice.

A related study was examined in the context of environmental reporting in Cameroonian newspapers with a sample of 40 articles from ten newspapers published from March 2019 to July 2020, including the ones on the conservation and the advertorials on conservation. Using descriptive statistics and a mixture of qualitative and quantitative approach, the analysis evaluated the linguistic and pragmatic features and concluded that the Cameroon press was successful in using linguistic categories that embody the ecological ideals, relevance and conservation – linguistic markers such as adjectives, hedging, metaphor and intertextuality, and the importance of language in encouraging environmental consciousness (Kajian Linguistik dan Sastra, 2023).

Sadiq et al. (2025) used an ecolinguistic approach to study environmental discourse in the print and digital media of Pakistan, examining the media's portrayal of environmental issues and how

these are linguistically mediated to the public in terms of language patterns and metaphors. The articles and editorials of the major newspapers, namely Dawn and The News were used as sources of data and a qualitative design of critical discourse and corpus linguistics was employed to identify the ideologies being used. Media was identified as an important medium of environmental issues, which was found that the majority of the material that is conveyed by media is politically and economically constructed and does not serve its duty to the nature, therefore a need was felt to bring about reorientation of media language.

In another study, Sadiq et al. (2025) studied the reporting and communication of environmental news in the Pakistani media. They were based on a multi-methodological approach with an ecolinguistic perspective and analyzed the linguistic opportunities and narrative devices that determined the configuration of the events like the smog or the flood. The analysis revealed traces of media's emphasis or denial of important aspects of environmental issues that can create perception and awareness and thus, an ecocentric discourse that provides an understanding of ecological interdependence was required in Pakistan.

Mukminin (2025) was an environmental researcher who found the environmental terms, classified the environmental discourse and followed the ecological ideologies presented in NU online articles. The research combined quantitative and qualitative methods and analyzed 20 articles obtained by using keyword search method, using theories of word frequency, discourse practice and ecological ideology, discourse-analytic and ecolinguistic frameworks. Throughout the content of NU Online, the use of ecological terms was always present, with a focus on the ecological, ethical and natural resource aspects; three primary discourse kinds developed, destructive and constructive discourses on ecological practice (Mukminin, 2025), which appeared in the content of NU Online.

Two observations follow. Ecolinguistic analysis of the Pakistani press is still in its nascent stages and has been mostly conducted on the levels of full articles and editorials, and not headlines (Sadiq et al., 2025). Second, if the framework is applied to the context of weather reporting in the west, it was fruitful (Saleem & Khattak, 2025), and if applied to the context of the environmental discourse of religion in Indonesia, it proved useful (Mukminin, 2025), then the threefold distinction of the void, the mask and the trace has yet not been applied as the primary analytical lens on the Pakistani environmental headlines. The present study attempts to fill that void.

### 3. Methodology

The study was qualitative descriptive and interpretive, and did not start with any hypothesis, but rather progressed inductively. Twenty-nine headlines were considered for the data, with twenty-six collected from Dawn, one from The Express Tribune, and two from supplementary policy and archival documents (one a peer-reviewed paper indexed on the JSTOR and the other a conference abstract on the NASA Astrophysics Data System) which were chosen for their coverage of the same environmental events and allowed a comparison between the journalistic and academic framings of the same environmental crisis. The selection of headlines was guided by topical relevance to environmental and ecological events reported in or affecting in Pakistan and resulted in a corpus consisting of nine thematic clusters: riverine and monsoon flooding, locust infestation, urban air pollution and smog, seasonal fog, seismic events, extreme heat, stray-animal management, wildlife habitat loss, and climate change as a general policy object. Every headline was written exactly as it appeared in the text, along with the link that was used to retrieve it, so that the exact words being analyzed are kept as they appeared in the text, and not paraphrased. The analysis of the material was done manually in four phases following Stibbe's (2015) ecolinguistic framework. As part of the first stage, each headline was read thoroughly and marked for its lexicogrammatical features, such as those of transitivity, the assignment of participant roles, the nominalisation, the use of voice and

agent deletion, abstraction and superordination, massification, personification and metaphor, and numerical quantification. In the second stage the participants who were absent, distorted or faintly present were identified and the erasure was categorised as being a void (where an important participant had been erased entirely), a mask (where a simplification or even misleading substitute replaced the erased reality) and a trace (where the presence and agency of a participant was erased, but it was implied nonetheless). In the third stage the ideology articulated by the pattern of erasure was inferred, based on Stibbe's argument that recurrent linguistic patterning throughout a discourse reflects a common ideology of how the world is and should be. In the fourth stage each headline was analyzed against the ecosophy expressed on the study which argues that discourse that erases accountability is ecologically destructive, regardless of its factual content and that people or non-human life are not separate but interdependent; if the headline was found to be destructive under this ecosophy, a restorative rephrased version of the headline was proposed to show that the erasure was not inevitable, but a choice. The findings were presented newspaper by newspaper, and within newspapers, in thematic clusters, before being compared with patterns found in previous critical discourse and ecolinguistic studies, to highlight the similarities and differences.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The analysis is done newspaper by newspaper. The corpus is overwhelmingly dominated by Dawn, so this section is further organized into thematic clusters, and particular headlines in each cluster are examined in isolation before a small synthesis brings the cluster together. Each headline is printed in exactly the same wording as published, followed by its retrieval link. Comparisons to previous studies, and comparisons to the theoretical constructs of the framework are developed in the syntheses and consolidated in Sections 4.4 and 4.5.

##### 4.1 Dawn

Twenty-six headlines were analyzed from Dawn, distributed across eight thematic clusters. Dawn is Pakistan's oldest English-language daily and is widely regarded as its newspaper of record, which makes its linguistic habits consequential: the framings it establishes circulate into policy discussion, secondary reporting and international coverage of Pakistani environmental events.

##### 4.1.1 Flooding and the Monsoon

**“Massive floods in Pakistan have struck both the rural heartland and industrial centres for the first time in decades, causing billions of dollars in damage while straining food supplies, exports and a fragile economic recovery.”**

*Dawn. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1944130>*

Void and trace work hand-in-hand. The most affected stakeholders such as displaced families, subsistence farmers and informal workers are completely missing, a vacuum. Nature only exists as a reminder, not as a river, not as a soil and not as a living system, but as food and as an exporter of food. Nominalisation turns destructive processes into abstracts, such as damage and recovery, and devastation into a financial value, as dollars and cents. The agency is given to natural forces, in that it is the floods that ‘have struck’ rather than hunger; the superordinates, such as ‘food supplies’ and ‘exports’, are substituted for hunger and farming communities.

The ideology is economistic and anthropocentric: the environment is seen as a resource base, it has value for its contribution to the stability of the markets; flooding is seen as a natural phenomenon, as a shock in the external environment and not as a consequence of climate change, environmental degradation or political decision. This framing is destructive under the study's ecosophy, as it turns a humanitarian and ecological emergency into a technical issue of economic systems, and limits to being “legitimate” the responses that can be considered technically feasible.

### **“Not just a disaster, the 2025 floods are a call to reimagine resilience”**

*Dawn. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1940947>*

The use of this headline is another step away from economistic disaster discourse, but it also erases. Rather than a blank it creates an impression: it signals transformation but it refers to no one, any people, ecosystems in which resilience needs to be actualized; resilience becomes a conceptual answer, no real process of transformation is actually described. No agents are in place, there is nothing that can be reimaged and it is not indicated whose resilience is under threat, which diminishes power relations and makes resilience a depoliticised universal goal.

The headline is both a political and a tactical statement. Floods are reimaged as a chance to transform the system instead of a crisis that must be "managed," yet there is a danger that they become normalised and accepted as a crisis to be lived with. This reformist stance puts the emphasis on adaptation instead of prevention and on resilience instead of responsibility, and thus presents a picture of moral engagement without any specifics around inequality.

### **“Monsoon wreaks havoc on Punjab’s rural economy”**

*Dawn. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1938517>*

Personification naturalizes causality. A discourse that makes the monsoon the agent of “wreaking havoc”, which removes another set of factors that would delineate its severity – infrastructure, water management, deforestation, preparedness and policy neglect. The overarching term “rural economy” hides various livelihood strategies as a trace, meaning that it covers small farmers, landless labourers, women in informal agriculture and tenant farmers. The metaphor of violence acts as a mask erasure by only portraying it as destructive, thus obscuring its life sustaining power.

The headline creates the notion of nature as enemy, thus promoting the binary of human vs. nature and a crisis narrative over a systemic solution. It is destructive, declared ecosophy, for their voices are silenced, governance failures are obscured, ecological process is warped, and suffering becomes normalised and the blame for the damage is shifted to the reader, who sees what they've read as “tragic but inevitable.”

A common structure develops throughout the flood cluster: natural forces take the role of agent, human institutions disappear and the population concerned, if mentioned, is presented as an economic aggregate. This echoes the result by Saleem and Khattak 2025, who found the anthropocentric aspect present in the weather media reports of major Western media outlets, and adds that in the Pakistani corpus it is not merely human-centred, but it is economistic, meaning that nature is valued not for its significance in human life, but for its export potential and fiscal recovery. Furthermore, the cluster findings validate the findings of Sadiq et al. (2025) that messages that are created politically and economically go against the responsibility of the media towards nature.

#### **4.1.2 Locust Infestation**

### **“Locust attack may cause food security crisis in Pakistan”**

*Dawn. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1554148>*

The term “food security crisis” refers only to a situation of food scarcity without revealing the social processes and actors that created it. The crisis is not about individuals or their specific experiences, such as the small farmer, the rural worker, the woman or the child, but is an abstracted national experience, a 'trace level' erasure, in which suffering is suggested rather than shown. There is no naming of institutional actors responsible for prevention or mitigation, and there are no agricultural policy and climate management and preparedness systems, an accountability void. The militarised concept of a ‘locust attack’ conceals climatic and ecological conditions which allow proliferation.



Another erasure happens through scale: by dealing in the “Pakistan” level, the focus is on the nation-state and the effect is felt at the provincial level and on marginalized agrarian communities, without being articulated. It's consistent with erasure via superordinates. The news headline conveys a sense of danger, but it does not call attention to systemic causes.

**“Locust Attack: Managing and Control Strategies by the Government of Pakistan”**

*Dawn. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1555487>*

The centralization here is not the absence of agency but itself is erased. The omission of farmers, communities, agricultural workers, and regional authorities who are directly affected and respond to infestation leaves out local knowledge and coping strategies, an erasure of the voices of people who are on the ground, directly affected by the infestation, and who are likely to take action with much greater impact. Managing and control strategies detracts from the socio-ecological processes and obscures the interplay of climate, land use, cross-border ecological processes and delayed response.

The militarized framing places the insects as enemies to be eliminated, justifying a response of control, and omits human prices of infestation, like food insecurity, indebtedness and migration, leaving them as a trace. The discourse assumes the primacy of authority, efficiency, control, that is, making the crisis a question of government not justice.

**“FAO starts training its staff for fighting locust menace”**

*Dawn. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1901228>*

The whole frame is occupied by the institutional preparedness. The spotlight is on the FAO staff as agents of action, yet the farmers, pastoralists and local people are missing, leaving the crisis limited to the institutional sphere and excluding human experience. The term “fighting locust menace” turns a socio-ecological problem into a technical military mission while the generic use of the term “menace” obscures the climatic conditions, ecosystem imbalance and farming practices that fuel the locust outbreak. The time ordering “starts training” implies a linear process that fails to convey the urgency / unpredictability of infestation.

The headline focuses on human control and omits biodiversity, sustainability and the issue of the interdependency of pest management and ecosystem health, and attempts to pass off a moral and ecological issue as a technical operation.

The locust cluster really helps to show the mask in a way that's unusual. Each title of the three focuses on a biological population reacting to climatic and ecological events and each is reconstructed as an invading army with a coloration of fighting, control and elimination that then allows the words used to express those attributes. This is exactly what Stibbe (2015) calls when a distorting representation takes place of an erased reality. The cluster also demonstrates that erasure does not equal omission; the second headline for example – the state – is no less effective at erasing communities than to not mention them at all. Tabe and Fieze (2018) discovered similar ideological positioning in terms of the use of lexical choice in the coverage of political crisis in Cameroon and the present data confirms this mechanism for non-human participants.

**4.1.3 Urban Air Pollution and Smog**

**“Lahore again emerges as the most polluted city in the world”**

*Dawn. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1960634>*

The construction “emerges as” is vague, almost amorphous, eliminating any focus on the mechanisms and agents involved in pollution production. Industrial, vehicular, deficient, planning energy policies are all eliminated, an informative erasure of institutional and corporate accountability that positions pollution as an emergent property that simply appears. Most polluted city nominalizes pollution as an achievement, a ranking that does not identify polluters or victims,

and eliminates any differential focus on inhabitants through the super-ordination of city. The adverb again produces a normalization and tautology of pollution as an occurrence that recurs as a misfortune rather than as an alarming phenomenon, thus masking the pollution problem as an unfortunate statistic detached from lungs, deaths, and environmental degradation.

**“Lahore again emerges as most polluted city in the world”**

*Dawn. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1968206>*

The recurrence of the same formulation in a later report is arguably more informative, as it suggests a systemic erasure of accountability rather than an incidental one. By massification, Lahore’s pollution becomes a ranking, an impersonal statistic that subsumes individual experience under an abstract average. Agent erasure eliminates any focus on the causes of pollution, whether industrial, vehicular, or agricultural, and replaces it with an impersonal mask of measurement, while the mask itself replaces concrete socially differentiated victims with an abstract number, the only trace of inhabitants being children and the elderly. The construction emerges as suggests autonomy of pollution as an entity with its own life.

The ideology is one of determinism, which negates human agency in pollution, presenting environmental degradation as an inexorable fact, thus diminishing any potential for transformative change through policy or industrial practice. A different formulation focusing on the effects on human respiratory systems as emissions intensify and the air quality index crosses dangerous thresholds would have been more informative and socially engaging.

**“Air quality continues to deteriorate across Punjab”**

*Dawn. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1955288>*

Abstractness and nominalization replaces causality with an impersonal process called “air quality”, eliminating any focus on the sources of pollution, whether industrial, agricultural, vehicular, or governmental, as well as its effects, focusing instead on a statistical surrogate for the experience of inhalation. Agency is eliminated, as the only actor is the impersonal process of pollution indicated by the phrase continues to deteriorate. The mask is the abstraction of the pollution process replacing specific causes with an averaged trend, and the only trace of inhabitants are the socially differentiated individuals, children and the elderly, as well as animals and ecosystems. The phrase emerges as implies autonomy of pollution as a force of nature.

The construction enacts environmental determinism and existential hazard normalization, negating human agency in pollution while simultaneously presenting environmental degradation as an inevitable fact of life, reducing the potential for transformative change through policy or industrial practice, while eliminating environmental ethics by presenting ecological destruction as a given.

**“Misting out smog”**

*Dawn. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1951728>*

The construction is notable for its very brevity, which is arguably revelatory in terms of ideology. The subject who mists is not identified, eliding any potential for institutional accountability; the government, municipal authorities, industries, and subcontractors are all masked. The focus on misting replaces focus on causes of smog such as industrial and vehicular pollution, agricultural burning, and governmental negligence, substituting it with a superficial remedy, misting. A similar process of mask replacement operates through the construction smog, which elides social differentiation of inhabitants, presenting them as homogenous when in reality children, the elderly, and outdoor workers are especially vulnerable. The construction reveals a technocratic environmentalism that focuses on superficial remedies rather than systemic change.

The brevity is misleading, suggesting a proactive institutional stance when in reality it is merely a smokescreen behind which institutional accountability is hidden. The focus on misting creates an illusion of action, but in reality, the headline serves to normalize air pollution as an occurring nuisance rather than a life-threatening phenomenon.

The pollution cluster represents the mask par excellence identified by Stibbe (2015) as the pervasive substitute for representational adequacy in media texts about environment. In all three cases, the mask takes the form of a substitute for causality, as a ranking takes the place of mechanisms and agents of pollution, an averaged trend takes the place of institutional accountability, and a superficial remedy takes the place of systemic solutions. Thus, the discovery also offers support for the claims made by Shojaei et al. (2013) in their discussion of lexicalisation of prescriptive news. Notably, the two stories about Lahore, which appeared in separate issues, are virtually identical in construction, suggesting that the practice of erasure is systemic rather than incidental.

#### **4.1.4 Fog and Winter Hazard**

##### **“Heavy smog and fog forecast across Punjab”**

*Dawn. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1960773>*

Abstractness operates via mass nouns smog and fog that replace concrete processes of pollution causing with an impersonal abstract force. Agency is eliminated as the constructions forecast across Punjab suggest that the smog and fog are active entities that operate across a region, when in reality the pollutants are suspended in the air. The construction fails to mention any of the victims, eliminating any focus on the differential impact on regions and inhabitants.

Ideologically, the construction promotes technocratic determinism, human-centrism, and fatalism, while eliminating ecological ethics by presenting smog as an inconvenient force of nature rather than a life-threatening pollutant. Even the brief forecast informs public opinion about the environmental crisis.

##### **“Three dead, 34 injured in fog-related accidents”**

*Dawn. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1965773>*

Massification operates via the numerical reduction of human lives to three dead and 34 injured, eliminating any focus on the human cost of the tragedy. Fog-related accidents erases human agency that results in accidents, such as drivers’ negligence, road conditions, and law enforcement, while replacing it with an impersonal fog as the sole cause. The emphasis on statistics detracts from an individual human experience of loss and grief, simultaneously eliminating any potential for institutional accountability, while presenting the fog as an agent with a life and will of its own. In terms of ideology, the construction normalises human mortality in the face of environmental hazard, negates human agency, and detracts from institutional accountability by presenting a naturalised event as the sole cause of death and injury.

The ideology is environmental determinism combined with technocratic assumption: nature works on its own, and humans have to obey, which covers up systemic issues such as infrastructure or law enforcement. Framing fatality in terms of fog creates an impression of inevitability and removes potential for moral judgment, while the lack of reference to community members’ grief and loss disconnects the audience with the issue.

The fog cluster demonstrates that as the event’s impact increases, so does the level of erasure: while the forecast headline barely mentions consequences, the accident headline transforms it into a mere statistic. Badawi and Najjar (2021) note a similar tactic in the Christchurch attack coverage, with the attacker’s voice replaced by the victims’ to suggest that no one is at fault; in this cluster,

the resource is nominalisation, which creates the impression that fog is an autonomous agent equal to the human characters.

#### **4.1.5 Seismic Events**

##### **“Over 800 dead as 6.0-magnitude earthquake hits Afghanistan”**

*Dawn. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1938863>*

Massification is the major strategy, as more than 800 victims are reduced to a statistical figure, which hides individual experiences and losses. Transitivity structure contributes to the erasure, as the earthquake hits and is positioned as the only agent, with humans, society, and governance removed from the equation. Mask replaces the complex reality of societal shortcomings with an impersonal natural disaster, while the hint at survivors and local response keeps it at a low level.

The headline's ideology is environmental determinism: by focusing on the earthquake's power, it suggests that nature is the sole actor, which hides human responsibility for adhering to safety standards, disaster management protocols, and building codes. Mortality rates in earthquakes are primarily dependent on the structural properties of buildings, meaning that the lack of mentioned measures is misleading.

##### **“Quake kills over 800, flattens villages in Afghanistan”**

*Dawn. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1939079>*

The words kill and flatten assign agency to the earthquake, while the number of victims is once again massified and depersonalized. Flatten villages further devalues the impact by conceptualizing the consequences as destruction and ignoring the complex social realities of the affected communities and local response. The erasure of human and societal dimensions is masked by the implied scale of casualties, destruction, and absence of international aid.

The fact that the same topic is covered in two news items with similar transitivity structures demonstrates that the approach is not an occasional choice, but rather a common practice. In both cases, the event is framed as an agent with autonomy, which promotes the ideology of nature being out of human control. Referring to the affected residents, the flattened buildings, and search-and-rescue operations would've shifted the focus to humanity's shortcomings.

##### **“Magnitude 5 earthquake jolts Punjab's Layyah: PMD”**

*Dawn. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1948200>*

The technical language of magnitude 5 combines with the personification jolts to conceal human and societal dimensions under natural ones. Residents and their suffering, building integrity, and relief operations are all masked by the headline, which also fails to comment on the earthquake's impact otherwise apart from mentioning the met office.

This formulation's ideology is naturalisation through technical language and personification. By referring to the earthquake with technical terms and presenting it as a jolt, the authors make the event seem like a routine occurrence, thus removing urgency and responsibility. It would've been more informative had the news item explicitly stated how many residents were affected by the disaster.

##### **“Earthquake jolts Bangladesh, killing five and injuring around 100”**

*Dawn. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1956489>*

Similar to the previous headlines, this one uses the word jolts to personify the earthquake and present it as an agent capable of killing and injuring. Once again, casualties are massified and depersonalized, with injured being “around 100.” The mask of the headline is the implied impact of the event on affected residents, with the absence of reference to their lives, communities, and personal tragedies making it invisible to the reader.



Focusing on the number of casualties and using the word jolts, the authors shift the reader's attention from the disaster's impact on the locals to its technical aspects and power, thus eliminating the sense of urgency and responsibility. Failure to mention the residents, their homes, and the relief operations abstracts the event, shifting the emphasis from the community to nature's power.

**“Quake-hit areas: poverty cut must to protect environment”**

*Dawn. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/256111>*

The formulation quake-hit areas conceptually encapsulates the impact of the disaster on the residents by stating it as the background for post-disaster considerations, thus erasing the poverty, homelessness, and lack of security with which the areas are hit. Poverty cut, in turn, conceals the complex social reality of poverty with a single word, while the agents referred to in the headline are those who will take action, not those who failed to prevent the disaster or provide aid.

The mask of the headline is the implied connection between poverty and environmental sustainability, which the formulation fails to explicitly state. As a result, the formulation erases the complex social realities of affected communities, shifts the responsibility for disaster response to the state, and oversimplifies the relationship between environment and poverty.

The seismic cluster is the most consistent in terms of grammatical patterns, as four out of five headlines use the earthquake as the subject of a material process. In four items, humans are the object, with no other participants present, which erases them as either actors or moral agents. This finding aligns with Isti'anah's (2019) analysis of earthquake disaster reporting, which demonstrated that the framing of such events depended on the chosen voice, with the author's responsibility shaping the potential for blame attribution. However, this study's findings expand upon Isti'anah's conclusions by demonstrating the process of moral agency deprivation in greater detail. While the latter study's headlines either omitted the responsible party or positioned it as an external actor (2019), the present study's items attribute responsibility to the environment, essentially removing it from the discourse. The exception is the last headline, which attempts to address the ethical aspect of the disaster. Still, it fails to do so, as it positions responsibility with the poor, not the state or organizations.

**4.1.6 Extreme Heat**

**“Mercury soars to 46°C in Dera Ismail Khan city as heat wave grips southern KP”**

*Dawn. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1912878>*

Abstraction and nominalization obscure the social reality of extreme temperatures, which is further masked by the author's omission of relevant actors. The headline's focus on the rising mercury and heat wave suggests that the disaster is a natural occurrence beyond human control, while the verbs soar and grip personify the phenomenon. Mask erasure encompasses the potential local consequences, with vulnerable populations only implicitly referred to.

The ideology behind the formulation is environmental determinism: the focus on the temperature and heat wave distracts the reader from the responsibility of local authorities to ensure that the population has access to essential services. Reframing the headline to explicitly refer to residents suffering from the temperature rises and heat stroke would've enhanced accountability.

**“Heatwave to get severe in coming days, PDMA tells LHC”**

*Dawn. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1836935>*

Abstraction and nominalisation conceal the reality of the heat wave as a severe weather phenomenon, with the author failing to mention relevant actors and omitting the issue's social dimensions. Agent erasure is masked by the indirect reference to government and organisations, which only appear as the PDMA relays information to the LHC on the issue. This approach reframes the event as a legal proceeding, thus failing to hold the relevant actors accountable.

The formulation's ideology is fatalism, which is reinforced by the author's omission of the heat wave's effects and failure to explicitly refer to the actors who should address them. Specifying the social consequences and advising the LHC on the matters of heat stroke would've enhanced the ethical dimension of the disclosure.

It is worth noting that extreme heat reporting in the corpus follows the pattern of thermometric erasure, with temperature measurement serving as a complete substitute for discussion of its effects on the community. Thermometric erasure is an effective means of naturalizing the phenomenon, as it reframes it as an abstract measurement rather than a socioculturally embedded issue. Saleem and Khattak (2025) discuss a similar approach, which they term anthropocentrism, when extreme temperatures are framed within human experiences rather than the environment's needs. However, the formulation's mask erasure demonstrates that even within anthropocentrism, the community can be entirely absent, with the focus on human experiences being misplaced. The thermometric headline does not speak of human experiences, but rather human infrastructure: measuring devices.

#### **4.1.7 Stray Animals and Urban Human–Animal Conflict**

##### **“Until the last dog dies”**

*Dawn. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1221255>*

The phrase ‘Until the last dog dies’ is rhetorically effective precisely because of its vagueness and extremity. The ellipsis obscures the exact implementation of the referred-to plan, which is implied to be universally applicable to all dogs, regardless of their status as pets, strays, or pests. The headline suggests that death is an acceptable solution to canine overpopulation, not an ethical dilemma, and masks the responsibility by failing to explicitly refer to any actors, including governmental and private dog shelters, canine extermination services or local governments.

Massification erases the lives of stray dogs, with dogs conceptualized as the mass that needs to be eliminated. The use of last dog implies that every dog, including pets, should be gone, erasing individual experience with blanket extermination rhetoric. The headline's transitivity structure further erases humanness: the dogs are only present as the affected entity, not as sensors. Responsibility for the overpopulation is masked, suggesting that it is an inevitable occurrence rather than an outcome of human activity. The implied extermination policy erases more humane methods of population control.

##### **“Inhuman killing of stray dogs continues in Karachi, Pakistan”**

*Dawn. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1757218>*

Although morally tinged with the evaluative “inhuman”, the headline effaces agency through nominalization and the absence of actors: killing is foregrounded whereas municipal authorities, private individuals and enforcing agencies are absent, a void erasure presenting the killing as an ongoing and almost naturalized process rather than the outcome of specific decisions. Abstraction and masking operate in “stray dogs” and “inhuman killing”, which conceal the methods and policies involved and depersonalize the living beings reduced to passive objects of violence.

The phrase “continues in Karachi” illustrates trace-level erasure of context, since rapid urbanization, waste management failure and lack of veterinary infrastructure are never invoked to explain persistence. By omitting preventive measures, humane alternatives and community engagement, the discourse normalizes cruelty and constrains the imagination of more compassionate solutions.

##### **“Rising numbers of stray dogs in Karachi make citizens’ lives unbearable”**

*Dawn. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1948460>*

Massification refers to the dogs collectively, reducing individual animals to an undifferentiated category and obscuring their welfare and experience. Agent erasure operates through reversal: the

animals cause the problem, whereas municipal authorities, urban planning and animal control policy are absent. The mask replaces complex social reality with a simplistic naturalized cause-and-effect narrative, and the trace leaves the animals' needs faintly implied at best.

The ideology is human-centred urban determinism, seeking to impose the convenience of humans over the lives of other species. By prioritizing human inconvenience and presenting dogs as the autonomous source of the problem, the discourse positions animals as antagonistic to life and downplays structural and policy failure. Attributing their presence to inadequate waste management and municipal shelters would restore the ethical and ecological complexity the headline removes.

#### **“Stray animals to be dealt with humanely”**

*Dawn. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1969071>*

Massification reduces a diverse animal population to the generalized category “stray animals”, abstracting individual lives into an impersonal group, whereas the passive phrasing “to be dealt with” eliminates policymakers, authorities and enforcing agencies responsible for humane treatment. The mask replaces complex social, legal and ethical decision-making with a depersonalized abstract process, and the trace leaves the animals' lived experience only faintly implied. The evaluative adverb “humanely” signals moral intention without specifying how such treatment will be realized, evaluated or enforced.

The ideology is a human-centred ethical interventionism in which welfare becomes a neutral procedural task and population management appears bureaucratic rather than a complex interaction between humans, animals and the environment. Specifying shelters, medical care and community outreach would demonstrate that humane treatment is a set of practices rather than a declared disposition.

The animal cluster is the only part of the corpus in which non-human beings occupy the grammatical subject position, and it is instructive that they do so as threats rather than as sensors. Across all four headlines the dogs are represented either as objects to be eliminated or as agents of human discomfort, never as beings with experience. This is erasure in Stibbe's (2015) strongest sense, since the participants whose wellbeing is at stake are systematically excluded from the roles that would allow suffering to be predicated of them. The cluster resonates with Dragas's (2012) demonstration that media discourse encodes hierarchies of value through routine representational choice, and it extends that insight across the species boundary.

#### **4.1.8 Climate Change as a Policy Object**

##### **“Climate Change — Why Action Is Imperative Now”**

*Dawn. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1890909>*

The phrase “action is imperative” calls for action in general but specifies no actor, whether government, corporations, communities or individuals, a void erasure in which climate change requires intervention but no one is identified as responsible for causing or mitigating it. Nominalization compresses rising temperatures, extreme weather, glacial melt and biodiversity loss into the abstraction “climate change”, masking specific processes and local vulnerabilities, whereas “imperative” conveys moral weight without detailing consequence, a trace-level erasure of both human and environmental experience.

The temporal framing “now” emphasizes immediacy while masking long-term systemic causation, since historical emissions, industrial practice and global inequality in responsibility are unmentioned. Urgency is thereby detached from accountability and from the structural change required, and the headline foregrounds a moral imperative while withholding the information that would make moral judgement actionable.

### **“Global warming is security threat, says experts”**

*Dawn. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1906049>*

The abstraction “security threat” names a consequence without identifying who is responsible for mitigating or exacerbating the risk, and industrial polluters, policymakers and global governance are absent, a void erasure situating the problem within an impersonal framework. “Global warming” and “security threat” together reduce complex environmental and social processes to conceptual categories, masking displacement, resource scarcity, agricultural loss and geopolitical conflict. The attribution “says experts” functions simultaneously as legitimisation and as mask, invoking authority while obscuring the diversity of expert perspective and the range of recommended action.

Framing global warming solely as a security concern prioritises human geopolitical interest while erasing ecological relationship, biodiversity loss and obligation towards the planet. Environmental degradation becomes a strategic problem rather than a moral one, and the scope of public understanding and action is accordingly constrained.

### **“Floods, heatwaves shaped climate response in 2025”**

*Dawn. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1964320>*

Agent erasure is structurally unusual here, since the extreme weather events are framed as the active forces shaping policy while policymakers, scientists and communities are omitted entirely. Massification and abstraction reduce affected populations to a faint trace and generalize “climate response” into an impersonal metric rather than a socially and politically mediated process. The mask replaces decision-making, governance and technological intervention with autonomous natural phenomena, and the verb “shaped” assigns causal power to floods and heatwaves over the institutions that in fact deliberated and decided.

The ideology combines environmental determinism with the naturalization of climate change: nature becomes the autonomous driver of policy, abstracting responsibility from institutions and reinforcing the perception that climate action is reactive rather than chosen. Naming implemented flood defences, heat-related illness and parliamentary debate over strategy would restore human agency and the ethical dimension of climate governance.

The climate cluster reveals the most consequential paradox in the corpus. These are the headlines most explicitly committed to environmental concern, yet they are also among the most thoroughly agentless. Urgency is asserted, responsibility is withheld, and the effect is a discourse of concern without addressee. This finding closely parallels Sadiq et al. (2025), who concluded that Pakistani media function as a conduit for environmental issues while politically and economically shaped messaging undermines their responsibility towards nature, and it identifies the grammatical mechanism, namely agentless nominalization, through which that undermining is accomplished.

## **4.2 The Express Tribune**

A single headline was analysed from The Express Tribune. Although the sample does not permit generalisation about the newspaper's editorial practice, the item is analytically valuable because it is the only headline in the corpus in which non-human life is the explicit object of concern rather than a threat, a resource or a casualty statistic.

### **“Floods ravage fragile wildlife habitats”**

*The Express Tribune. Retrieved from <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2570825/floods-ravage-fragile-wildlife-habitats>*

The headline foregrounds environmental damage and thereby partially restores ecological concern to a discourse that elsewhere subordinates it to economics, yet it still constructs a trace rather than a full representation of non-human life. Wildlife appears only indirectly through the abstraction “habitats”, while individual species, animals and ecological relationships are erased. The



superordinate noun phrase subsumes diverse species into a single generalized entity, suppressing the agency of animals and erasing them as sensors capable of suffering, while the verb “ravage” assigns destructive agency exclusively to the floods and excludes human actors from the causal chain.

The ideological position is conservationist but depersonalized. Nature is framed as vulnerable, which invites sympathy, but it is acted upon by natural forces rather than shaped by human responsibility, so that climate change, land-use practice and governance failure disappear from the account of why these habitats were vulnerable. The headline acknowledges environmental fragility without restoring ecological presence.

Read against the Dawn corpus, this headline is significant for what it demonstrates about the limits of ecological sympathy. It is the item most clearly oriented towards non-human welfare, and yet the same devices operate: abstraction removes the animals, transitivity installs the flood as agent, and human causation is absent. This supports Stibbe’s (2015) contention that erasure is a property of discursive convention rather than of authorial intention, since a writer evidently concerned about wildlife nonetheless reproduces the grammar that renders wildlife unimaginable.

### 4.3 Supplementary Policy and Archival Sources

Two further texts were analyzed. Neither is a newspaper headline, and they are therefore reported separately; they were retained because each addresses an environmental event also covered by the newspaper corpus and thus permits a comparison between journalistic and academic framing of the same crisis. The comparison is instructive, since it indicates that erasure is not a peculiarity of journalistic brevity.

#### **“Locust Attack in Pakistan: Assessing and Dealing with the Threat”**

*Policy article indexed on JSTOR. Retrieved from  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/polipers.18.1.0109>*

The title presents itself as rational and policy-oriented, yet its managerial vocabulary produces its own erasures. “Assessing” and “dealing with” frame the outbreak as an object of expert control and implicitly position institutions, policymakers and scientists as the primary actors, while small-scale farmers, agricultural labourers and food-insecure households are entirely absent, a void erasure of the vulnerable participants whose suffering and agency are excluded. The nominalization “locust attack” removes attention from the climatic variability, land-use practice and coordination failure that enable infestation.

The superordinate “threat” lacks specificity, since it does not clarify what is threatened or distinguish varying degrees of vulnerability, so consequences appear only as a trace. Locusts are represented solely as hostile agents devoid of ecological context, reinforcing a human–nature binary and encouraging instrumental response while sidelining justice and ecological interdependence.

#### **“Quake-hit areas: in the throes of ecological changes”**

*Conference abstract, NASA Astrophysics Data System. Retrieved from  
<https://ui.adsabs.harvard.edu/abs/2017EGUGA..19.3884M/abstract>*

The phrase “ecological changes” is presented as an abstract ongoing condition with no indication of the forces driving it. Reconstruction practice, deforestation, unregulated mining and poorly planned infrastructure development are absent, a void erasure allowing ecological transformation to appear as an inevitable consequence of the earthquake rather than a process shaped by post-disaster policy. “Quake-hit areas” compresses the loss of homes, livelihoods and social networks into a spatial descriptor, so that affected communities are silently embedded in the landscape rather than named as participants.

The dramatising expression “in the throes of” masks specificity, since the nature of the changes, whether landslide, soil degradation or biodiversity loss, remains undefined, and a generalized sense of turmoil replaces concrete environmental reality. The discourse risks naturalizing post-disaster degradation and encouraging passive observation rather than engagement with the decisions shaping recovery.

The two supplementary texts matter because they refute an obvious objection to the study’s findings. It might be supposed that erasure in headlines is an artefact of the compression that headline writing demands. These texts, produced under academic rather than journalistic constraints and with no comparable pressure towards brevity, exhibit the same voids, masks and traces, and in the case of the policy article the managerial register arguably intensifies them. Erasure is therefore better understood, following Stibbe (2015), as a feature of the discourse community’s shared ways of construing environmental crisis than as a by-product of limited space.

#### 4.4 Discussion

The findings converge with earlier critical discourse research on headlines in three respects and diverge from it in one. The first convergence concerns the ideological density of the headline itself. Montejo and Adriano (2018) established that headline writers employ identifiable discursive devices that encode ideology while appearing merely to inform, and the present corpus confirms this in an environmental register: devices such as nominalisation, agent deletion and personification operate with sufficient regularity across unrelated events and dates to constitute a house grammar rather than a series of local choices.

The second convergence concerns agency and the allocation of blame. Badawi and Najjar (2021) demonstrated that systematic alternation between active and passive voice controlled the visibility of perpetrator and victim in coverage of the Christchurch attack, while Isti’annah (2019) showed that South-East Asian newspapers differed principally in how they distributed responsibility for the Rohingya crisis. The present study finds the same mechanism operating with a crucial difference: because the ostensible agent in environmental reporting is a natural force, the effect is not the reallocation of responsibility from one party to another but its dissolution altogether. Where political discourse shifts blame, environmental discourse in this corpus evaporates it.

The third convergence concerns ideological function. Shojaei et al. (2013) identified lexicalisation, presupposition and modality as instruments through which ideological bias is naturalised, and Jamila et al. (2022) found Pakistani headlines to be deeply polarised and ideologically invested. The present findings suggest that environmental headlines are ideologically invested in a different manner: they are not polarised between competing political positions but unified around a shared set of assumptions concerning nature, inevitability and technical management. The absence of polarisation is itself the finding, since it indicates that no competing environmental framing is available in the discourse for readers to encounter.

The point of divergence concerns previous ecolinguistic work. Saleem and Khattak (2025) found anthropocentric framing to predominate in Western weather reporting but also identified ecocentric narratives that foregrounded ecological integrity and non-human agency. The present corpus contains almost none of the latter discourse type. The single item most oriented towards non-human welfare, the Express Tribune headline on wildlife habitats, reproduces the erasures of the surrounding discourse. Similarly, Mukminin (2025) identified both destructive and beneficial ecological discourse in NU Online, and the Cameroonian study reported by Kajian Linguistik dan Sastra (2023) found the press effectively deploying linguistic categories that reflect ecological ideals through adjective, hedging, metaphor and intertextuality. The Pakistani environmental headline corpus examined here shows a markedly narrower repertoire, in which the beneficial pole is largely

unoccupied. Sadiq et al. (2025) reached a compatible conclusion at the level of full articles, and the present study locates the mechanism in the grammar of the headline itself.

Stibbe's (2015) tripartite account of erasure proved analytically productive but required refinement in application. The void, the mask and the trace did not operate as discrete categories so much as layers within a single clause. A characteristic headline in this corpus voids the responsible institution, masks the process behind a nominalization or a metaphor, and reduces the affected population to a trace, all within seven or eight words. The economy of the headline makes it an unusually efficient erasure device, since every participant that is not grammatically necessary can be omitted without violating any norm of well-formedness.

A second theoretical observation concerns the relation between erasure and salience. Stibbe pairs erasure with salience as complementary constructs, the one removing participants from consideration and the other bringing them vividly into it. In this corpus salience is not absent but misdirected. Numbers are highly salient, whether magnitudes, temperatures, casualty counts or currency values, and their salience actively displaces the participants that ecological ethics would foreground. The salient element in "Mercury soars to 46°C" is a measurement; in "Three dead, 34 injured" it is arithmetic; in "billions of dollars" it is capital. Quantification therefore functions in this discourse as an instrument of erasure rather than as its opposite, and this constitutes a modest extension of the framework as ordinarily applied.

A third observation concerns ideology. Three ideological clusters were identified. Economistic anthropocentrism appeared principally in flood and monsoon reporting, where ecosystems were valued as inputs to production and recovery. Environmental determinism appeared most strongly in seismic, fog and heat reporting, where natural forces acted upon a passive society and human institutions had no causal role. Technocratic managerialism appeared in locust, smog and climate policy reporting, where crisis became an object of expert control and the vocabulary of assessment, strategy and response displaced the vocabulary of justice. These are not mutually exclusive, and several headlines drew on two of them simultaneously; what unites them is that each, in a different way, positions the reader as a spectator rather than as a participant.

Finally, the study's declared ecosophy provides the basis for evaluation. Under an ecosophy that holds human and non-human life to be interdependent, that refuses to render invisible those least responsible for ecological harm, that recognizes value in ecological systems beyond their market utility, and that treats the dissolution of accountability as itself ecologically destructive, the great majority of the headlines analyzed must be judged destructive discourse. Importantly, this judgement does not concern their factual accuracy. Almost every headline in the corpus is true. What the analysis demonstrates is that a discourse can be entirely accurate and simultaneously function to prevent its readers from understanding what it reports, and that the restorative reformulations offered throughout show the alternative to be available at no cost in either brevity or precision.

## 5. Conclusion

This study set out to identify the forms of erasure operating in the environmental news headlines of Pakistani English-language newspapers, to establish the linguistic devices through which those erasures are realised, and to examine the ecological ideologies they construct. Analysis of twenty-nine headlines through Stibbe's (2015) ecolinguistic framework found erasure to be systemic rather than occasional. Almost every headline enacted at least one form of erasure and the majority combined two or three, layering the void, the mask and the trace within a single clause.

In answer to the first research question, the erasures were realised through a consistent and limited set of devices. Nominalisation converted processes into entities and thereby detached them

from the actors who produced them. Agentless and passive constructions removed institutions from the causal chain. Transitivity choices installed natural forces, floods, quakes, heatwaves, fog and locusts, in the agent position of material processes, while human participants occupied the affected role or vanished. Massification collapsed individual animals and individual casualties into undifferentiated aggregates. Superordinate and abstract terms such as “rural economy,” “air quality,” “environment” and “climate response” substituted general categories for the specific realities they subsumed. Numerical quantification abstracted suffering into measurement. Metaphor, particularly the militarised construal of locusts and the personification of weather, masked ecological causation behind narratives of invasion and assault.

In answer to the second research question, these devices sustained three interlocking ideologies: an economistic anthropocentrism in which nature is an input to markets, an environmental determinism in which hazards act autonomously upon a passive society, and a technocratic managerialism in which ecological crisis becomes a problem of administrative control. Evaluated against the study's declared ecosophy of interdependence, justice and ecological limits, these ideologies constitute destructive discourse, since each removes from view the participants whose visibility would make ethical and political response possible.

The wider implication is that accuracy is not sufficient. The headlines examined here are, for the most part, factually correct, and this is precisely what makes their erasures difficult to contest. A reader cannot object to a statement that is true; the objection must be to what the true statement leaves unsaid. Environmental journalism in Pakistan therefore reports ecological crisis while systematically dissolving accountability for it, cultivating fatalism at the moment when civic pressure is most needed. Because Pakistan is among the countries most exposed to climate harm and least responsible for causing it, the consequences of a discourse that erases agency are not merely interpretive but material.

The study is limited by its corpus size and by its concentration on a single newspaper, and its findings should therefore be read as an account of a discernible pattern rather than as a representative characterisation of the Pakistani press. Future research might extend the analysis to Urdu-language headlines, where the grammatical resources for agent deletion differ, to broadcast and social media framing, and to comparative corpora from other climate-vulnerable states in the region. Longitudinal work would also establish whether erasure has intensified or diminished as climate reporting has expanded. Most usefully, the restorative reformulations proposed throughout this analysis could be developed into a practical protocol for sub-editors, since the evidence assembled here indicates that restoring people, living beings and institutions to the environmental headline requires no additional space, only a different set of habits.

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