

## **A Critical Discourse Analysis of Competing Narratives on International Mother Tongue Day in Pakistani Print Media (2009 -2023)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The present study focused on International Mother Tongue Day (IMTD) on 21st February, which was celebrated worldwide as IMTD and critically analyzes how this is discursively produced in Pakistani English language newspapers. The study based on Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) of Ruth Wodak, utilized a purposive sampling of eight articles from Dawn and The Express Tribune, as they appeared from 2009 to 2023. This study examined the rhetorical and linguistic approaches that contribute to the reconstruction of the Bengali Language Movement of 1952 in the contemporary print media, targeting at how collective memory, National identity and historical guilt are interrelated in the print media. The results of analysis show that there is no uniform stance of Pakistani newspapers, rather there are competing discourses that range from careful historical revisionism to minimization of state responsibility, while the counter-discourses are rare but have significant impact on directly challenging the linguistic repression of East Pakistan. Some use the concept of unity versus diversity of the nation to depoliticize the day and others question the mono-nationalistic views of Pakistan and the implications they carry with them in terms of federalism and identity. The results shed light on the ongoing contestation over a common yet contested historical event as it is negotiated through media language in a postcolonial context in Pakistan and how February 21 is still a space of contestation between official amnesia and a new critical discourse.

**Keywords:** International Mother Tongue Day, Critical Discourse Analysis, Discourse Historical Approach, language politics, Pakistan, national identity, collective memory, linguistic nationalism

## INTRODUCTION

The use of language has always been an expression of identity and a political battleground in the postcolonial South Asia. This is more apparent in Pakistan, where the Bengali Language Movement of 1952, which was one of the milestones in the early political history of the country, is still a source of discomfort in the minds of citizens and in the media. The movement, which was born out of protest against the policy of the state to impose Urdu as the sole national language in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) which was mostly Bengali speaking, eventually led to the political separation of the nation and the formation of Bangladesh in 1971. But, seventy plus years later, February 21, known as International Mother Tongue Day (IMTD) in the world, is almost an unknown day in the Pakistani national memory.

Previous studies have shown that the language policies in Pakistan are highly interrelated with issues of national integration and representation of the regions, as well as issues of ideological control. For example, Hussain et al. (2024) investigated the critical discourse analysis of Urdu and Punjabi to explore the politics of language over time, and how media, policy and institutional practices shape national and regional identity. Likewise, Hashmi et al. (2024) pointed out that the language policy of Pakistan has been influenced by historical power dynamics, colonial history as well as different concerns and constructions of national identity that have contributed to the movement of recognition of regional languages over the years in addition to Urdu and English. Political effects of the policy have also been clearly manifested in history as the enforcement of Urdu was a major reason behind the marginalization of Bengali speakers and was responsible for setting the foundation of Bengali nationalism and eventually East Pakistan's separation from Pakistan as shown by Butt et al. (2024).

Linguistic practices, in the micro-level, as in the case of rural Punjab, also perpetuate social stratification, linguistic capital and power relations, which are broadly embedded in language use, as revealed by Zulfiqar et al. (2024). In this context, International Mother Tongue Day has become a relevant discursive arena that has witnessed a struggle between multiple discourses on language rights, cultural and linguistic diversity, unity and national identity in Pakistan. While there is a growing scholarship on language politics and policy, there has been little focus on the representation and debates of IMTD in a wider array of public discourses. Hence, for the purpose of this study, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been adopted to analyze the conflicting discourses of international mother tongue day in Pakistan to understand the

negotiation of the language ideologies, power dynamics and constructions of identities through discourses.

This particular study is interested in the construction of and negotiation on the meaning of February 21 in the Pakistani English-language newspapers. While the day is an integral part of national identity and pride in Bangladesh, Pakistan's experience with this day is fraught with caution, selective memory and ideological divisions. Some articles in the Pakistani press see this day in a generalistic, depoliticized way, and reflect upon the issue of linguistic diversity and multilingualism in such a manner, while others are more critical of the history of the repression of the language and its implications for the current nation building language politics. There are a few voices, however, that tell different stories and demand a truthful introspection on Pakistan's linguistic history. But there are some voices that speak against the official state narratives and demand a more sincere introspection of the linguistic history of Pakistan.

Though this discursive complexity, an intra-national variation that is hardly been studied in the context of Pakistani media representations of February 21 has been largely ignored by comparative scholarship. There are a number of current studies which discuss Bangladesh's view on discourse or consider Pakistani discourse as monolithic, which is about avoidance or negativity (Salman, 2024; Butt et al., 2024). This study aims to fill that void by systematically analysing the Pakistani newspaper articles using the Wodak's Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) that helps to analyse the impact of the historical context, ideological positioning and rhetorical strategy on the emergence of a competing and multiple story around a single commemorative date.

The paper presents the following structure: a review of pertinent literature to the field of language politics, media discourse, and national identity in Pakistan; presentation of the theoretical framework and methodology; a detailed analysis based on the DHA of eight newspaper articles and a conclusion that builds on the findings and discusses the questions of collective memory, postcolonial identity, and the politics of historical acknowledgement in Pakistan.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

This study contributes to the field of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and South Asian media studies as it only examines the competing intra-national discourses and their portrayal within

the Pakistani English language print media in the context of International Mother Tongue Day. So far, existing scholarship has been focused upon the ideological clash between the Bangladeshi and Pakistani discourses, but few researchers have been studying the internal diversity and heterogeneity of the Pakistani discourse itself, namely the presence of critical and self-reflexive discourses and voices alongside the depoliticizing discourses of a state apparatus. Using Wodak's Discourse Historical Approach, the research highlights the ways that historical memory, national identity and political ideology are negotiated in the level of media language, providing new insights in the ways that postcolonial societies negotiate contested events with discourse. The results have broader implications for the understanding of the politics of language in multilingual states in which the politics of language is not settled.

### **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Although the International Mother Tongue Day is celebrated on 21st February throughout the world, the print media in Pakistan has not formed a coherent and consistent discourse around the day, despite the fact that the origins of the day are directly linked with the language policies of the early postcolonial Pakistan. In contrast, the day in Bangladesh is institutionalized as a reminder of national sacrifice, and linguistic pride, whereas Pakistani newspapers either appear reluctant or try to revisit history or focus on a non-political aspect of multilingualism and cultural diversity. This discursive ambivalence is not just an issue of journalistic style, but it brings to fore the unresolved ambivalences in the Pakistani national identity, especially the Urdu-centric nationalism, memory of 1971 and the continued marginalization of the regional languages. This study highlights that the nature (literature), scope (extent) and ideology (meaning) of the conflicting narratives in which Pakistani English language newspapers form and negotiate and sometimes negate the historical importance of 21st February is a problem this study seeks to address.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. What linguistic and rhetorical strategies do Pakistani English-language newspapers employ to legitimize, delegitimize, or depoliticize the commemoration of February 21 as International Mother Tongue Day?
2. In what ways do Pakistani newspaper discourses on February 21 reflect broader socio-political ideologies, historical tensions, and competing constructions of national identity?

3. How do mainstream and counter-discursive voices in Pakistani print media differently construct the historical significance of the 1952 Bengali Language Movement in relation to current language politics and identity formation?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE LANGUAGE CONFLICT**

The language controversy in Pakistan can be traced back to the settlement of Pakistan in 1947 when Urdu was declared as the sole national language, but Bengali was the language of majority population in the eastern part of Pakistan from East Pakistan onwards. This policy of 'one state, one language' oblivious of language demography sparked off an instant opposition (Musa 1996). The story of how the state's linguistic homogenization policy widened the political and cultural fissure between East and West Pakistan is outlined by Jabeen, Chandio and Qasim (2020). Rahman (1998) suggests that in this context language was more than just a medium of communication; it was a symbol of ethnic identity and political belonging and hence denials of it were powerful agents of resistance. A defining moment of collective memory and eventually of nationhood for Bangladesh, is the 1952 Language Movement during which students were killed during protests in Dhaka.

But from a Pakistani point of view, the predominant historiographical and political narrative has been to focus on the foreign-inspired conspiracy or misguided separatist episode of the Language Movement, rather than viewing it as the legitimate claim for cultural recognition (Salman, 2024; Oldenburg, 1985). As the Butt et al. (2024) illustrate in their own discourse-historical analysis this has influenced the public memory and representation of the events of 1952 and the aftermath in the Pakistani public discourse. West Pakistanis' political elites considered Bengali identity as a threat to national unity and Urdu played an important role as an indicator of Muslim nationhood from ideology (Fazal, 1999; Kokab & Hussain, 2016).

### **LANGUAGE, NATIONALISM, AND IDENTITY IN PAKISTAN**

Historically, the national identity of Pakistan has been built around the two principles of Islam and Urdu which in combination rendered regional language and the cultural identity of the non-Punjabi and non-Urdu speaking others problematic. (Rahman 2010) The introduction of Urdu in East Pakistan was not only a language policy, but also an articulation of a certain kind of Muslim nationalism which discouraged diversity in language and culture in favor of cultural

uniformity. Alam (1991) explains that Bengali speakers were able to counter the model using the language movement as a counter-hegemonic move – demanding language recognition as a part of their struggle for justice, dignity and political autonomy.

The language issue is politically sensitive in the post-1971 scenario in Pakistan. The state's initial language policies, though, have left a lasting impact, as revealed by Bengalis who remain in Pakistan who continue to suffer from cultural exclusion and political marginalization (Abbas, Hassan, & Lashari, 2024). According to Rahman (2005) language policies in Pakistan have always been instruments of power having worked to the benefit of the dominant groups and to the detriment of the subaltern groups. In this perspective, failure to do so is a symptom as well as a cause of the country's current federalism issues are unresolved.

### **MEDIA DISCOURSE, COLLECTIVE MEMORY, AND NATIONAL IDENTITY**

This aspect of mass media has been much theorized in communication and discourse studies in relation to other aspects of shaping collective memory and building national identity. Media is not just a reportive medium, it also frames, interprets and reinterprets historic events which reinforce or challenge the dominant ideology (Wodak & Meyer, 2016; Rahman, 2010). Print media, and English language newspapers like Dawn and The Express Tribune in particular, in Pakistan has for long been in a complicated situation as it was pegged to the agenda of the elite nationalism and yet gave space to liberal, critical and dissent voices.

In Pakistan, Butt et al. (2024) have used Wodak's DHA to explore the historical context in which the politics of language has been constructed in the Pakistani context and the fall of Dhaka, identifying regular mitigation, selective memory and recontextualization. Al-Mubarak (2015) talks about commemorative amnesia in the public discourse on IMTD in Pakistan, and Abbas et al. (2024) report the context of the Bengali identity remaining suppressed in the current socio-institutional environment of Pakistan. Internally, however, Pakistani newspaper ways of talking about February 21 vary from celebration of linguistic diversity with no political content to the actual criticism of historical injustice. The internal diversity of Pakistani newspaper talk, though, is still largely under-explored; from depoliticized celebration of linguistic diversity to direct engagement with historical injustice. To fill this void, this study has been undertaken.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The research is based on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) that combines two approaches as proposed by Ruth Wodak, namely Discourse Historical Approach (DHA). For Wodak and Meyer (2016) CDA is an approach to analysis that focusses on the processes of constructing, validating, and challenging social and political meanings in the use of language. In this research, DHA is particularly well suited as it brings historical context into discourse analysis, allowing a specific socio-political and institutional landscape to be examined and how this has shaped, sustained and contested the narratives about February 21 over time.

According to DHA discourse is socially constituted and socially constitutive, since it helps to constitute social reality, but it is also constituted by social reality. The method will utilize multiple analytically-based dimensions, each of which are applied in this situation. Content analysis is used to delineate main themes and topics in media narratives, as well as frames, such as 'linguistic rights', 'national unity', 'historical misjudgment' and 'cultural diversity'. The nominalization (nomenclator) of actors, events and groups, the predication of qualities and attributes of these and the argumentation (topoi and logical structures used to substantiate or question a specific position) are also discursive means. Intertextuality explores the ways in which articles cite historical speeches, record of parliamentary proceedings and archival sources to build authority and meaning. Interdiscursivity is the approach that seeks to understand the intersection of the February 21 discourse and other discourse fields nationalistic, federalist, human rights, and postcolonial identity. Contextualization places the text in its own historical, political and institutional period.

The ability to re-contextualize is an ideal quality of DHA that can be eminently useful in the study of contested memory and identity politics, which focuses on the re-framing of historical events in different discursive contexts and time periods (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). This enables the study to explore the evolution of the meaning of February 21 from texts that regard it as a policy failure of the past to texts that see February 21 as a place of political and moral responsibility.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The qualitative research design was used for the critical analysis of International Mother Tongue Day (February 21) in Pakistan's English language media. The analytical method is in

line with the study by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in the form of Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

### **DATA COLLECTION AND SAMPLING**

The purposeful sampling of newspaper articles was carried out, which included eight articles from Dawn and The Express Tribune newspapers published in the span of 2009-2023. The two newspapers were chosen as the most widely read and most influential English language newspapers in Pakistan. The articles were retrieved by using the manual method of keyword searching, by using the terms such as 'Language Movement', 'February 21', 'International Mother Language Day', 'Bengali', 'Urdu' and 'mother tongue'. Articles had to specifically address the language rights issue and/or the historical memory of the 1952 movement or the larger socio-political context of February 21. The sample represents various genres such as opinion pieces, editorials, commemorative reports and historical reflections, and represents positions.

### **CORPUS OF PAKISTANI NEWSPAPER ARTICLES**

- Dawn. (2023, February 10). Time to revisit Jinnah and the issue of language.
- Dawn. (2023, February 26). From the past pages of Dawn: 1948: Seventy-five years ago: Language controversy.
- Dawn. (2022, August 14). What went wrong in 1971? The language issue.
- Dawn. (2018, January 29). This week 50 years ago: Bengali language college and books' exhibition.
- Hullio, S. A. (2009, February 22). As languages disappear. Dawn.
- The Express Tribune. (2014, February 24). Mother Language Day: Understanding linguistic diversity.
- Torwali, Z. (2014, July 23). The national language conundrum. The Express Tribune.
- Tirmizi, F. (2011, February 21). The sad history of International Mother Tongue Day. The Express Tribune.

### **ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE**

The analysis was done in accordance with the five-stage model of analysis developed by Wodak (2001) known as the DHA model. Articles were first contextualized in terms of their socio-political and historical contexts, which encompass the anniversary context of IMTD, the

political climate at the time of the writing of the articles and the institutional context of the newspaper. Secondly, the content analysis was used to determine the key themes and topics. Third, the lexical and syntactic aspects of discursive strategies (nomination, predication and argumentation) were systematically discussed. Fourth, intertextual and interdiscursive relationships were followed both among the different articles and between the newspaper discourse and other discourse fields. Fifth, each article was categorized for its positioning of the ideology of the dominant narratives regarding the national identity of Pakistan with reference to February 21. Fifth, the ideological positioning of every article was assessed in terms of how it constructs or challenges the dominant narratives about the national identity of Pakistan in relation to February 21. The information from every article was then collated and analysed to look for any patterns of mainstream and counter-discourse within the corpus.

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

This section provides a systematic analysis of eight Pakistan newspapers articles using DHA based approach, then cross-article discussions are carried out. The analysis shows that there are two main discursive features: a first one is the prevalence of a mainstream discourse of mitigation, depoliticization, and historical revisionism and a second one is the prevalence of a counter-discursive discourse of critical self-reflection, direct acknowledgement of historical injustice, and call for institutional reform. The post-patriarchy and patriarchy tendencies exist together in the same newspaper outlets which indicate the ideology of multiplicity of Pakistani English-language print media.

**Table 1:** Dawn (February 10, 2023): “Time to Revisit Jinnah and the Issue of Language”

DHA Dimension	Analysis
Content Analysis (Themes)	The article revisits the linguistic crisis in Pakistan’s early years, centring on Jinnah’s insistence on Urdu as the sole national language and the political consequences of that decision. Key themes include leadership legacy, language policy as historical misjudgment, national integration versus alienation, and the need for critical reflection on foundational state decisions.
Discursive Strategies	Nomination: Jinnah is named with full honorific (‘Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah’), signalling institutional reverence. Predication: His linguistic policy is simultaneously described as a ‘profound misjudgment’ and an act of ‘unthinking insensitivity’, generating a rare combination of respect and critique. Argumentation: The topos of consequence is employed: language imposition caused ‘growing discontent’, protests, and political estrangement.
Intertextuality	References Jinnah’s March 1948 Dhaka speeches and constitutional changes of 1956 to ground the argument in historical evidence.
Interdiscursivity	Intersects with postcolonial state-formation discourse, ethnic identity politics, and contemporary debates on historical revisionism within Pakistani nationalism.
Contextual Framing	The article uses a retrospective lens to situate early language policy within the dynamics of a fragile new state, re-evaluating national unity strategies against their actual outcomes.

For the first time a mainstream newspaper openly attacks a founding father of Pakistan. In answering the first research question, the process of reverential nomination and critical predication results in a discourse which neither totally condemns nor excused Jinnah's stance but leaves scope for responsibility. The language policy caused directly to political estrangement in East Pakistan, justifies the February 21 as a historical moment, without actually commemorating it. As for the second research question, the article is enveloped in the ideological conflict that developed between the two dominant ideologies nationalism and ethno-linguistic pluralism—that were prevalent during the inception of Pakistan. Intertextually, Dhaka speeches are used in the third question to establish a cause and effect relationship between early decisions of language and the fragmentation of the nation, thus positioning February 21 as a result of a policy mistake, but not as political justification for the Bengali movement. In the third question, the Dhaka speeches are used intertextually to prove the cause and effect relationship between the early language choice and national fragmentation, thus

leaving the impression of historical reality while not fully politicalizing the cause of the Bengali movement.

**Table 2:** Dawn (February 26, 2023): “From the Past Pages of Dawn: 1948: Seventy-Five Years Ago: Language Controversy”

DHA Dimension	Analysis
Content Analysis (Themes)	The article revisits the 1948 Constituent Assembly debate over the national language, foregrounding the early suppression of Bengali political demands. Themes include majoritarian nationalism, the construction of Muslim identity through Urdu, and the silencing of minority linguistic voices in state-building.
Discursive Strategies	Nomination: Dharendra Nath Dutta is positioned as speaking for the ‘voiceless Bengali-speaking millions’; Liaquat Ali Khan uses Urdu to signify Muslim nationhood. Predication: Dutta’s motion is described as ‘unsuccessful’, rhetorically erasing Bengali political agency. Argumentation: Liaquat’s topos of origin asserts that Pakistan’s identity demands a single Muslim language.
Intertextuality	Draws directly from 1948 parliamentary proceedings and political speeches, lending archival authority to the narrative.
Interdiscursivity	Intersects with discourses of minority representation, Muslim nationalism, and the colonial-to-postcolonial linguistic transition.
Contextual Framing	The retrospective tone frames 1948 language debates as early fault-lines whose implications were realized in 1952 and, ultimately, in 1971.

This is an archival-style article that is a measured form of counter-memory in Dawn, and yet, a historically significant one. First, while the naming of Dharendra Nath Dutta as the voice of the linguistically disenfranchised is to some extent a form of acceptance of the Bengali demand, the predication of this demand as politically ‘unsuccessful’ renders it politically suspicious. This establishes something of a discursive tension – a historical recognition of the movement, while its political validity is rhetorically held in check. As far as the second research question is concerned, the article chronicles the ideologization of early Pakistani nationalism as a project of Urdu as a symbol of unity of the Muslim ummah, at the cost of Bengali language identity. In the third question, although the date of February 21 is not mentioned, the author makes it seem to be one of the most important ones in history, and creates the 1948 assembly debates

as a stepping stone to the 1952 movement, giving the date a certain emotional and political weight without ever really discussing it.

**Table 3:** Dawn (August 14, 2022): “What Went Wrong in 1971? The Language Issue”

DHA Dimension	Analysis
Content Analysis (Themes)	The article examines the Bengali language controversy as a central cause of the 1971 separation of East Pakistan. Key themes include elite decision-making, the denial of demographic linguistic reality, national disintegration, and the tragic consequences of centralized language policy.
Discursive Strategies	Nomination: Jinnah and Nazimuddin are positioned as authority figures imposing Urdu; Bengalis are framed as the ‘pressing majority’. Predication: Jinnah’s stance is described as ‘rigid’ and ‘unilateral’. Argumentation: Topoi of history and consequence build the case that linguistic repression directly contributed to national collapse. Mitigation: Elite intentions are partially excused as ‘well-meaning but mistaken’.
Intertextuality	References Jinnah’s 1948 Dhaka speeches, creating a temporal bridge between the foundational language decision and the eventual rupture of 1971.
Interdiscursivity	Language is positioned as an axis of political legitimacy, cultural belonging, and democratic representation, not merely communication.
Contextual Framing	The 1947–1971 period is retrospectively analysed as a sequence of compounding policy errors, with linguistic exclusion as the central variable in national fragmentation.

This article, which came out of Pakistan's freedom day, is a very candid introspection of the Pakistani nation. In the first research question, the critical predication ('rigid', 'unilateral') and mitigating framing ('good intentions') yields a type of revisionist story that is cautious in its acceptance of historical sin, but not overly critical of the founding leaders. The language suppression, alienation, and 1971 are its main parts. In responding to the second research question, the article reveals the conflict between the Urdu-Muslim project of centralization and linguistic diversity of the state in the Pakistani nationalist discourse. In the third question, February 21 is made all the more tragic by the fact that it had been an inevitability, that the path toward it could have been blocked, but wasn't, making it a historical moment rather than a political one.

**Table 4:** Dawn (January 29, 2018): “This Week 50 Years Ago: Bengali Language College and Books’ Exhibition”

DHA Dimension	Analysis
Content Analysis (Themes)	The article revisits East Pakistani Bengali student activism of the 1960s, focusing on demands for Bengali-medium education and representation. Themes include linguistic marginalization, educational rights, student identity politics, and governmental indifference.
Discursive Strategies	Nomination: Bengali students are identified as a distinct, organized community (East Pakistan Students Association) fighting for rights. Predication: Their activism is described as ‘persistent’, framing them as victims of systemic neglect. Argumentation: The topos of justice supports the demand for Bengali-medium education as both a demographic right and a question of equal citizenship. Mitigation: The government minister’s partial response is framed as bureaucratic appeasement.
Intertextuality	Implicitly connects to the broader Bengali language movement and anticipates the political dynamics leading to 1971.
Interdiscursivity	Intersects with discourses of educational equity, federalism, minority identity, and centralized governance.
Contextual Framing	The article presents the 1960s language activism as part of a continuous trajectory of Bengali resistance to linguistic marginalization within Pakistan.

It is an archival piece, having a counter-memory function, of bringing a mostly forgotten moment of LNG (Linguistic Nationalism of Bengali) back to the public memory. In the case of the first research question, nomination and predication function in a complementary manner, making Bengali students legitimate rights-claimants whose activism is legitimate not only from a justice perspective, but also from a demographical point of view. This is the mitigation of the state's response as ‘bureaucratic appeasement’ which de-legitimizes the government's situation but also doesn't have an overtly confrontational tone. In the second research question, the article brings back the post-Partition conception of the centre imposing its language requirements on the regions which was followed by the eventual realization of the consequences of this in 1971. In the third question, the article draws an intra-Pakistani history of Bengali resistance, tracing it back to February 21, from a history of the assertion of the Bengali identity, which the Pakistani state has never been able to accommodate.

**Table 5:** Dawn (February 22, 2009): “As Languages Disappear” (Sikandar Ali Hullio)

DHA Dimension	Analysis
Content Analysis (Themes)	The editorial addresses the global crisis of language endangerment, drawing on UNESCO data to argue for state-level action in preserving linguistic diversity. Themes include cultural loss, minority language rights, the role of media and education in language preservation, and the responsibilities of multilingual states.
Discursive Strategies	Nomination: Languages are personified as ‘endangered entities’ facing ‘extinction’. Predication: UNESCO is framed as proactive and authoritative; states are implicitly positioned as negligent. Argumentation: A problem-solution structure is used, with statistical evidence (‘96% of the world’s languages are spoken by 4% of its population’) supporting the call for educational and policy reform.
Intertextuality	References UNESCO’s 1999 declaration of February 21 as IMTD, aligning Pakistani discourse with an international human rights framework.
Interdiscursivity	Intersects with discourses of human rights, postcolonial cultural preservation, education policy, and the homogenizing effects of globalization.
Contextual Framing	Published on February 22, 2009, the article engages the IMTD context indirectly, universalizing the language rights issue while implicitly critiquing Pakistan’s own multilingual neglect.

This editorial is an example of the depoliticizing approach of Pakistani IMTD discourse, which tries to situate the day in a global humanitarian context of failure of language, rather than connecting with the specific history of Pakistani-Bengalis. The personification and statistical argumentation in the first question evokes emotional and intellectual urgency without identification of the movement or its martyrs of 1952. The second research question is interesting in that the article's implicit criticism of the neglect of the state in multilingual representation mirrors the experience of Pakistan in language exclusion, but this connection is left to the reader to find. For the third question, the relation with the IMTD framework by UNESCO sanctifies the date of 21st February as a day of linguistic justice globally and at the same time attempts to skirt the politically charged history of its inception in East Pakistan, a day which simultaneously celebrates and circumscribes the historical significance of 21st February.

**Table 6:** The Express Tribune (February 24, 2014): “Mother Language Day: Understanding Linguistic Diversity”

DHA Dimension	Analysis
Content Analysis (Themes)	The article covers events marking IMTD in Pakistan, focusing on demands by linguistic groups for state recognition of regional languages. Themes include linguistic diversity, cultural rights, educational reform, and regional empowerment in a post-18th Amendment context.
Discursive Strategies	Nomination: Regional languages are framed as ‘Pakistani languages’, asserting their national belonging. Predication: The government is described as lacking ‘political will’, implying current negligence. Argumentation: Topoi of justice and cultural heritage support the demand for linguistic equality. Intensification: Reference to an ‘11-point resolution’ and ‘15 linguistic groups’ lends collective weight to the demand.
Intertextuality	Implicitly references UNESCO’s IMTD and the broader language rights framework; the 1952 Bengali Language Movement is conspicuously absent.
Interdiscursivity	Intersects with discourses of national integration, minority rights, education policy, and post-devolution federalism.
Contextual Framing	Set within the post-18th Amendment political context, the article positions linguistic diversity as a domestic policy issue while avoiding the colonial and historical dimensions of language repression.

This article is the most depoliticizing in the corpus; it concentrates on the present-day local needs for the recognition of languages, making it possible to separate February 21 from its Bengali-Pakistani history. In relation to the first research question, the nomination of regional languages as ‘Pakistani languages’ is an inclusive rhetorical move which not only establishes linguistic plurality but also steers away from more political queries about the fate of Bengali. It is possible that there is a certain selective amnesia, omitting 1952 or the Language Movement in the process of delegitimization. The second question is answered in this article, which describes the reconfiguration of the Pakistani national identity after 1971 that increasingly sees linguistic diversity as a problem of governance, while eschewing its entanglement with the breakup of Pakistan. The article proposes February 21 as a new beginning for language reform in the country but not a time to confront injustice.

**Table 7:** The Express Tribune (July 23, 2014): “The National Language Conundrum” (Zubair Torwali)

DHA Dimension	Analysis
Content Analysis (Themes)	The opinion piece critiques Pakistan’s state language policy, challenging official misrepresentations of the Bengali Language Movement and arguing for genuine multilingualism. Themes include historical revisionism, the marginalization of regional languages, elite politics, and the ongoing legacy of the 1971 separation.
Discursive Strategies	Nomination: Regional languages are termed ‘Pakistani languages’; state officials are positioned as ‘uninformed’ or dismissive. Predication: Official remarks are labelled ‘simplistic and uninformed’. Argumentation: Topoi of history and justice, referencing the Bhasha Andolon (1952) and 1971, challenge dominant political narratives. Intensification: The phrase ‘imperialist thesis’ frames state language policy as ideologically oppressive.
Intertextuality	Directly references the 1952 Bengali Language Movement and the 1971 separation; connects parliamentary debate to historical evidence.
Interdiscursivity	Intersects with postcolonial nationalism, linguistic identity, resistance to centralization, and grassroots language activism.
Contextual Framing	Situated within Pakistan’s ongoing monolingual identity project, the article critiques how language has been instrumentalized politically from 1947 to the present.

Torwali is one of the most explicitly counter-discursive in the Pakistani corpus, so opposite to official discourses on the Language Movement. The mix of historical referencing, critical predication of official discourse and the use, for example, of the term ‘imperialist thesis’ questions the dominant rhetorical frame of state-protective mitigation for the first research question. The article specifically mentions Bhasha Andolon and 1971, thus giving politically important dates to Bangladesh, especially to Pakistan. The second question is discussed in the same light as the one in 1952; according to the article, the lack of linguistic diversity awareness is not a coincidence, but rather an intrinsic part of the Pakistani state ideology. The Bengali Language Movement is built not around the concept of Bangladesh, but is a warning to Pakistan that it did not listen to – and still does not listen to – its treatment of minority languages like the Torwali Language.

**Table 8:** The Express Tribune (February 21, 2011): “The Sad History of International Mother Tongue Day” (Farooq Tirmizi)

DHA Dimension	Analysis
Content Analysis (Themes)	The article directly recounts the 1952 Dhaka protest and the state’s violent response, critiquing Pakistan’s collective amnesia about these events. Themes include historical repression, state violence, the politics of memory, and the exclusion of Bengali voices from Pakistani historiography.
Discursive Strategies	Nomination: The victims are referred to as ‘four students’, establishing their innocence and the disproportionate nature of state response. Predication: The protest is described as ‘peaceful’; the shootings as ‘state violence’. Argumentation: The topos of justice demands moral acknowledgement of a historical wrong. Intensification: The phrase ‘most Pakistanis are unaware’ indicts collective forgetfulness as a form of ongoing injustice.
Intertextuality	Directly references the 1952 Dhaka protest and UNESCO’s recognition of February 21 as IMTD, connecting Pakistani history to international human rights discourse.
Interdiscursivity	Intersects with discourses of human rights, colonial legacies, post-partition national identity, and the politics of educational memory.
Contextual Framing	Published on February 21, the article deliberately situates itself within the commemorative occasion, using IMTD as a platform for historical reckoning.

The most clearly counter-discursive text in the corpus is an article by Tirmizi, which on February 21 commemorates the event in a Pakistani newspaper and explicitly refers to it as a day of Pakistani state violence towards its citizens. In the first research question, the martyrs are referred to as ‘four students’ and the protest as ‘peaceful’ – an atmosphere of moral frame is created here and the state is clearly blamed as a perpetrator. It is a critical mission of the article, as the intensification strategy is made clear: to break the silence, not just to inform, which makes the ‘most Pakistanis are unaware’ part of the article's title. In the second question, the article directly links February 21 to the wider socio-political context of the Pakistani nationalism, and argues that the repression of the Bengali voices in 1952 and in later history are both part of the same ‘repressive project’. February 21 is made to be a date that is a part of both Bangladesh and Pakistani history – a shared trauma that Pakistan has failed to recognize, remember or mourn properly.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **COMPETING NARRATIVES: MAINSTREAM AND COUNTER-DISOURSE**

Analysis of eight Pakistani newspaper articles shows that there is no homogeneous Pakistani discourse on 21st February, rather there is a differentiated discourse within Pakistan. There are two general discursive patterns that can be found in the corpus. The main stream attitude, which is reflected in the articles like 'As Languages Disappear' (2009, Hullo) and 'Mother Language Day: Understanding Linguistic Diversity' (2014, Express Tribune) is to depoliticize and universalize the language rights in humanistic or cultural diversity issues; to remove the history of the Bengali Language Movement or keep it at a distance, and to highlight the importance of February 21 as an opportunity for future-oriented linguistic inclusiveness and not for historical analysis. It's a mainstream tendency which does not negate the significance of the day itself, but rather takes it away from the martyrdom narrative of 1952, its historical starting point.

Tirmizi (2011), Torwali (2014) and others make bold claims of counter-discourse that directly confront the suppressed history of Bengali language rights in Pakistan. These articles call the martyrs, accept the violence by the state, question the official history and shape the day of 21st February as a duty of Pakistan not a cultural event of Bangladesh. The Dawn articles on Jinnah (2023), language controversy (2023) and 1971 question (2022) fall somewhere between the extremes – they admit that the policies and outcomes of the past were and are wrong, but take mitigation measures, such as 'profound misjudgment', 'good intentions' and 'tragic irony', that do not go as far as political accountability.

### **DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES: MITIGATION, REVISIONISM, AND CRITICAL NOMINATION**

The rhetorical strategies identified in the main texts and semi-critical texts are found in the greatest numbers in the corpus in the texts which use mitigation. These articles do not label early language policies as 'misjudgements' or 'unfortunate outcomes' as a form of political repression but perform a sort of 'ideological containment' in that it recognizes what has happened as a fact while simultaneously maintaining the legitimacy of Pakistani state nationalism. The same pattern is observed in the findings by Butt et al. (2024) and Salman (2024) which consider historical revisionism and mitigation as some characteristic elements of the Pakistani discourse on the language conflict.

There are other ideological processes shown in predication patterns. In articles that recognize the Bengali struggle partially in terms of the results of this struggle for 'national unity' the movement is positioned in terms of its effect on national unity (as an 'estranging force' and as a 'discontenting force'). The rhetorical frame of this movement is as a problem to be explained, not a right to be vindicated. The other logic of predication, however, is used in counter-discursive texts: 'The protest is 'peaceful'', the reaction is 'state violence', the martyrs are 'students', not 'agitators'. In this nomination and predication system, the responsibility is shifted to the state and not the protesters and a moral economy is set up.

### **IDEOLOGICAL TENSIONS: URDU NATIONALISM AND LINGUISTIC PLURALISM**

The competing discourses in the Pakistani newspaper coverage of February 21 are symptoms of a larger ideological conflict within Pakistani national identity; the conflict between Urdu-centric Muslim nationalism (of the Pakistan Movement) and the linguistic diversity of the Pakistani demographic and cultural landscape. As Rahman (2010) and Fazal (1999) have discussed, Pakistani nationalism has been built on Urdu as a symbol of the unity of Muslims which necessitates the denial and/or marginalization of regional languages. This construction is ideologically threatening to February 21, its direct product.

Responding to this threat in the mainstream discursive tendency of Pakistani newspapers, February 21 is domesticated in the context of language diversity and a recognition of Pakistan's multilingual history without challenging the issues of Bengali suppression. The counter-discursive tendency on the other hand is predicated on the reverse, that is, directly naming that history directly challenges the dominant narrative, calling for the need to engage with the legacy of Urdu-centric nationalism with a different manner. These tendencies are found in the same newspapers (Dawn and The Express Tribune), indicating that the Pakistani public discourse is not entirely closed to self-critique, but that the critique is at the fringes of the mainstream orientations of the editorials.

### **FEBRUARY 21 AS A SITE OF MEMORY AND IDENTITY NEGOTIATION**

The findings of the DHA analysis are in line with the discursive space as a 'site of memory', as Wodak and Meyer (2016) describe it and where different versions of the past are activated to serve different visions of national identity. The site is negotiated in mainstream Pakistani

discourse by containment: the event is recognized in general terms, any specific politics to it are neutralized and the implications it has for the contemporary identity are diffused. The site is activated as a space of moral and political accountability for the progressive and regressive political implications of the Urdu-based Pakistani nationalism and the claims of the linguistic minorities living in the state.

This discovery adds to the existing literature as it has shown that the discourse of the media in Pakistan is more internally differentiated on 21st February than it was believed in earlier studies. The overarching trend is undoubtedly one of historical avoidance and depoliticization as reported by Butt et al. (2024) and Salman (2024); however, there is also a counter-discourse which counteracts these tendencies within the same institutional media spaces. It is crucial to grasp this internal diversity beyond the academic discourse analysis and for determining the conditions of possibility for historical reconciliation and linguistic justice in Pakistan.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has identified the meaning-making, meaning-negotiating and meaning contesting processes employed by Pakistani English-language newspapers to construct, negotiate and contest the meaning of February 21 as International Mother Tongue Day (IMTD) using the discourse historical approach and a purposive sample of eight articles from Dawn and The Express Tribune published between 2009 and 2023. The findings indicate that Pakistani newspaper discourses are rather complex than merely avoiding or remaining silent on the same day (21 February) with internal differentiation.

Two opposing trends in discourse, noticeable throughout the corpus, can be identified. The strategies of depoliticization, mitigation and historical revisionism are used by the mainstream to recognize February 21 in generic linguistic rights or cultural diversity discourse, instead of directly engaging with the Bengali Language Movement of 1952 and its subsequent consequences for the Pakistani national identity. This sentiment is a continuation of the Urdu based nationalism and institutional unease of remembrance of East Pakistan. The tendency of counter-discourses, however, explicitly identifies the martyrs, admits the brutality of the state and questions the state history, while crafting the February 21 as a moral responsibility for the Pakistani state – a date that is intimately linked to the Pakistani history of linguistic repression, and its effects.

These conflicting narratives throw light on the underlying ideological divisions in the Pakistani national identity, between the tendency towards 'national unity' (based on Urdu) and 'pluralist' (recognition) identity. The events of February 21 are emblematic of these tensions as it represents a place of memory where various visions of the past and future of Pakistan are discursively negotiated. The results demonstrate the potential of using DHA in postcolonial contexts to analyze contentious commemorations of historical events, and add to the existing corpus of literature on language politics, national identity and media discourse in South Asia by providing a glimpse into the internal competition of Pakistan's print media over one of the most problematic historical moments.

Further studies could be conducted on Urdu language Pakistani press that might reflect differences in framing and positioning ideologies, and on social media as historical criticism and counter-memory are far more likely to be heard in the confines of social media than institutional printed media. Longitudinal studies on changes in Pakistani newspapers' discourse after major political events, such as the fiftieth anniversary of the Independence of Bangladesh in 2021, would also help in understanding the dynamics of the historical memory politics in the country in the context of changing national and international dynamics.

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