

A Psycho-semiotic Study of Lexical Choice in Urdu News Media

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Introduction

News media is an ultimate form of organised communication in which news editors utilise the linguistic resources of a language to disseminate news to a heterogeneous, diverse, and widespread audience. In order to convey a single message or what is called 'news', news editors utilise different lexical resources and styles. As such, lexical diversity is a significant aspect of news media, including the Urdu news media.

Lexical diversity occurs because the news editors, belonging to different news agencies, choose from diverse lexical resources at their disposal to convey the same message or news in their own style and as per their own needs. However, it must be considered that the linguistic signs or lexical items are not mere entities used haphazardly and randomly. They have a specific role and significance and are used with certain intent by the news editors (Sheikh 37). As such, news editors ascertain the semantic, pragmatic, and semiotic dimensions of lexical items and use them quite consciously to convey their ideas and intended meanings.

Given this backdrop, the paper aims to undertake a psycho-semiotic analysis of Urdu news media to ascertain the selective use of lexical items by news editors. The paper will base the analysis mostly on the semantic and pragmatic aspects of lexical items. It will also consider borrowings from English as a means to fulfil the communicative needs of news editors. A good deal of data for the paper has been elicited from various national and regional newspapers like *Qaumi Awaz*, *Al Faisal*, *Awam*, *Pratap*, *Srinagar Times*, *Aftab*, and *Uqab*, to name a few, which I have collected during my dissertation research while at Aligarh Muslim University. It also includes the data that has been gathered continuously thereafter from the renowned Urdu newspapers of the Kashmir valley, such as *Kashmir Uzma*, *Buland Kashmir*, *Srinagar Times*, and *Aftab*. In the case of electronic media, All India Radio, Doordarshan, Radio Pakistan, BBC, and Voice of America have been taken into consideration.

Psycho-semiotics of Communication

Semiotics, also known as semiology, is widely regarded as the study of signs. Interestingly, semiotics as an approach developed in two different parts of the world at around the same time at the end of the nineteenth century in Switzerland and the United States of America.

Ferdinand de Saussure regards semiotics as "a science that studies the life of signs within society" (Marsen 55). He divided sign into two elements, namely, signifier and signified. The former is the physical form we perceive as the sign, while the latter is the idea, concept, or image denoted by the sign. It is pertinent to note that Saussure was more concerned with the nature and working of linguistic signs. It follows that humans use linguistic signs (even sometimes non-linguistic ones) to communicate messages. Humans also "interpret others' messages through the way they use words, sounds, images and scents" (Marsen 54).

It is an established fact that language plays a seminal role in human communication. Communication takes place and is successful when a person uses a given linguistic sign "to arouse a specific set of meanings in another person. By 'meaning,' we refer to images, interpretations, and feelings such as those aroused by each word we know. Communication takes place when there is a correspondence of meaning between the communicator and the receiver" (Sheikh 20). As such, the concept of meaning occupies a pivotal place in linguistics, studied mainly through semantics and pragmatics.

Semantics is broadly defined as the study of the meaning of words and sentences. It is that aspect of linguistics that deals with the relationship between referents (names) and referends (things), i.e., the linguistic signs (words or expressions) and the objects, concepts, or ideas to which they refer, including the history and changes in the meaning of words (Keith 1986). In addition to semantics, the meaning issues are also dealt with in pragmatics which developed comparatively later than semantics. It is not out of place to mention that the most widely cited definition of pragmatics belongs to Charles Morris, who divided linguistic science into three areas:

- a. Syntactics – the relations holding among signs
- b. Semantics – the relations between signs and their referents
- c. Pragmatics – the relations between signs and their human users

With regard to “syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics, Morris envisioned “semiotic” as “the general science which includes all of these and their interrelations” (as quoted in Posner 47). In brief, pragmatics studies language use/meaning in context and, in doing so, takes into account the intentions of the speaker, the effects of the utterance on the receivers, the background knowledge, beliefs and presuppositions, implicatures, and entailments.

Language can be regarded as a group of signs that play a huge role in human communication. Communication is possible when the linguistic signs successfully transport the message(s) its user(s) wants them to convey to the receiver(s). In news media, the value of these signs increases manifold considering the social, cultural, and psychological aspects and sensitivities involved in the news to be communicated. The use of linguistic resources, such as lexical items, depends not only on the background (such as socio-political, cultural, or religious) of the news editors but also on the background of the news consumers. As such, news editors have to be ultra-cautious in the selection of their linguistic resources, especially the lexical items. To clarify this point, consider the word *bunyaad parastee*, ‘fundamentalism.’ The word has been widely used by the Western media to refer to global Islamic extremism (“revivalism” for some Islamic revivalist organisations). The derogatory connotations of the word came in for heavy criticism on this coinage within Islamic circles/countries (Sheikh). The above discussion is sufficient to prove that lexical items can generate certain concepts and produce different sorts of attitudes in the minds of the audience. In psycholinguistic terms, they activate the schemas associated with the words/linguistic constructions in the minds of the receiver(s). A schema is an organisational representation of a person’s knowledge about some concept, action, event, or a larger unit of knowledge (Sheikh 151).

It can be safely concluded from the above discussion that news editors do not randomly pick up linguistic resources while framing a certain news item. They are very deliberate and careful in their selection. It can rather be said that the news editors are motivated in their selection and use of a particular linguistic item vis-à-vis their socio-cultural, religious, political, or national (to name a few) obligations and pressures, a point which, hopefully, will get explicated in the following sections of the paper.

Semantic Dimensions of Lexical Choice

It is quite evident that linguistic entities play a fundamental role in communication (Warsi). For communication, it is essential that the signs or lexical entities used by the news editors create the intended meaning or sense in the hearer or reader. In other words, there should be a correspondence of meaning between the communicator and the audience or reader.

As said earlier, the signs or symbols of a language are not used haphazardly. They have a certain role and are used for specific purposes with an eye on their semantic import. The meaning of these signs depends on a host of factors, including their structure, collocation, socio-cultural setting, and context of use. As such, the news editor(s) or communicator(s) must

be clear about the selection of the lexical items and the meaning or message he or she wants to convey to the audience. Therefore, news editors utilise linguistic resources considering various factors like their needs, environment, background, ideology, intent, purpose, etc. The fact can be gauged by assessing Urdu news media at the regional, national, and international levels. For example, consider the following lexical items: militant, *jangju* ('fighter'), *askariyat pasand* ('warrior or fighter'), *mujahid* ('holy warrior'), *hurriyat pasand* ('freedom lover'), *dahshat gard* ('terrorist'), *dahshat pasand* ('terrorist'), and *intiha pasand* ('extremist'). The said lexical items are used quite frequently in Urdu news media, and different newspapers and news agencies use them in their own way with an eye on their social, cultural, political, and national needs and obligations. The whole set of words depicts a person who uses arms and other violent measures to pursue his goal. Obviously, a good deal of lexical items is at the disposal of the news editors, but practically, the editors are very sensitive, careful, and choosy in their use and pick a lexical item consciously based on the aforementioned factors in their news item(s).

The use of these words can better be understood in relation to the Kashmir valley, which has been caught in the vicious circle of militancy, and resultant violence and destruction, in the last three decades. The collected data reveals that the regional and national media use words like *dahshat gard*, *dahshat pasand* ('terrorist'), and *intiha pasand* ('extremist'). In contrast, Radio Pakistan and Pakistan Television use the words *mujahid* ('holy warrior') and *hurriyat pasand* ('freedom lover') in their place. On the other hand, BBC and Voice of America use the moderate terms – *jangju* ('fighter') and *askariyat pasand* ('warrior/fighter') – to refer to Kashmiri militants.

When news editors convey the same or single news item to the audience, they utilise the linguistic resources as per their needs which results in the wide use of synonyms and antonyms. For example, in the coverage of a militancy-related incident, the international and national media use words from the above discussed lexical set, which clearly contain the features of synonymy and antonymy in them. Consider the following synonymous pairs of words too.

1. *ghamaasaaN* : *zordaar*
'severe' 'forceful'
2. *bura* : *naapaak*
'bad' 'impure'

Although the words do not possess total synonymy, their use by news editors in specific contexts has produced partial synonymy in them. The first pair, *ghamaasaaN*, 'furious, heavy', and *zordaar*, 'strong, powerful', has been used in association with war. Although the collocational setup of '*zordaar*' is different and quite wide from '*ghamaasaaN*,' it has been used in the expression '*zordaar ladaayee*' to show the severity of war. The word '*ghamaasaaN*' is more expressive and is quite often used in association with words like *jang* 'war, battle' and *ladaayee* 'fight, battle' on account of the collocational affinity.

The words *buraa* 'bad' and *naapaak* 'impure' have different semantic domains. They have their own collocational environment but have been used as synonyms in the context of the published news items as follows:

3. *naapaak azaayim*: *bure irade*
'evil intentions' 'bad intentions'

Pragmatics of Lexical Choice

Context is a vital factor as far as the use of language is concerned. As said earlier, pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that studies the use of language in relation to the context and takes into consideration various factors, including the intention of the addresser, implicature, indirect

communication, background, belief(s), and presupposition, among others. Other factors, such as the age, gender, or education of the interactants, are also taken into account. Besides, the power solidarity relationship also influences the choice and use of language (Leech). In short, pragmatics studies the intended meaning vis-à-vis the use of words or language in specific contexts.

It is pertinent to mention a recent incident involving the word 'Azad.' Semantically, it is a normal word, but its use in some specific context can enormously change its semantic overtones. We need not go too far. The seventy-third republic day of the country was celebrated quite recently with full gaiety and fervour. The underlying point can be easily comprehended apropos an incident related to this occasion. Let us recall the tweet of the Indian National Congress leader, Jairam Ramesh, which he issued on the denial of accepting the Padma Bhushan Award by the former Chief Minister of Bengal, Buddhadeb Bhattacharya.

4. "Right thing to do. He wants to be Azad not Ghulam." (Jairam Ramesh, @Jairam_Ramesh, 25 January 2022)

Semantically it is a plain and innocuous sentence, but pragmatically speaking, it is full of expressive and communicative value, loaded with sarcasm. No need to mention that it was directed at the then Congress leader, Mr. Ghulam Nabi Azad, who, in contrast to Mr. Bhattacharya, had expressed his willingness to accept the award announced in his favour on the occasion.

Let us consider the following news headline to carry forward the discussion.

5. *Marshall* Law in Kanpur

The headline will make the reader think that some disturbance in Kanpur has led to the implementation of Marshall Law (Martial Law) in the area. In the year 1983, India won its first world cup in cricket under the captaincy of the great all-rounder Kapil Dev, where India defeated the mighty West Indies in the final. Immediately after the humiliating defeat, West Indies embarked on a tour to India. One of the test matches of the series was played in Kanpur. Cricket lovers might have, by now, understood the meaning of the headline. At the end of a day's play, the score of India read as 34 for 5. Out of the five batsmen, four – Sunil Gavaskar (zero runs), Anshuman Gaekwad (four runs), Mohinder Amarnath (zero runs), and Dilip Vengsarkar (fourteen runs) – were victims of the fiery spell of legendary West Indian bowler, Malcolm Marshall; consequently, the most famous headline of Indian cricket.

As is clear, news editors consider the background information to make a news item catchy and effective. In such a scenario, the communicative intent of the news item is carried across only when the reader can connect it with the background. It follows that communication is successful when the message is rightly interpreted by its readers or receivers in accordance with their background knowledge. Urdu news media is also replete with such news items wherein the news editors have exploited the background information or knowledge. Consider the following example.

6. *Imran khan sifar par out*

Imran Khan zero on out.

'Imran Khan got out on duck'

The news item appeared in the form of a headline in the famous Urdu newspaper *Qaumi Awaz* on 6 January 1997. The news editor has deftly and innovatively connected the lexical resources with the background knowledge. The news item or message can be rightly interpreted only when the reader or receiver possesses background knowledge about Imran Khan and also the context in which the headline was framed. It is pertinent to mention here

that the headline is related to the parliamentary election of Pakistan in 1997 wherein Imran Khan had fought for many seats but lost the election from all the seats.

The cricketing background of Imran has again been exploited in another headline given below.

7. “BJP jeet jaayegee” (Modi) Chunaav par asar-andaaz hone ke liye Imran ka reverse swing”

‘BJP will win. (Modi) Imran uses reverse swing to affect the polls.’

(*Kashmir Uzma*, 18 April 2019)

Consider the following news item, published in the renowned Urdu daily of Kashmir, *Kashmir Uzma*, on 27 February 2002.

8. daf'a 370 ki mansokhi ghair aayeeni, gupkaar alliance ka white paper jaree taameero taraqqi, sarmaya kaari aur rozgaar ke daawe jhoot ka palanda qarar

‘Abrogation of article 370 is unconstitutional, Gupkar Alliance issues white paper; the claims of development, investment, and jobs are a pack of lies.’

It is important for the reader to have some knowledge about the ‘Gupkar Alliance’ (an alliance of some mainstream Kashmir-based political parties who are against the abrogation of article 370, which bestowed special status to erstwhile Jammu and Kashmir state). The reader, well versed with this background knowledge, can understand that the central government is the target of the subheading ‘*Taameero taraqqi, sarmaya kaari aur rozgaar ke daawe jhoot ka palanda qarar*’ (the claims of development, investment, and jobs are a pack of lies).

The feature of presupposition is also frequently used by news editors. Here, the news editors presume that the readers or hearers already possess some knowledge or information about the subject. Consider the following headline.

9. Bhutto ko Kashmir main chaar maghribi yargmaalon ka ata pata maaloom.
(*Hind Samachar*, 3 November 1995)

“Bhutto knows the whereabouts of the four western tourists kidnapped in Kashmir.”

To understand the import of the news item, the reader must know about the kidnapping of Western tourists. The news editors presuppose that the news consumers know about the kidnapping of the four tourists in Kashmir valley by suspected militants. By bringing in Benazir Bhutto (who was the Prime Minister of Pakistan at that time), the headline has also been used to make a veiled reference to the fact that the kidnapping of the tourists had been done by militants at the behest of Pakistan.

Consider the implicative content of the expression ‘*khufiya soda*’ (secret deal) in the following headline.

10. Rao ka faroq ke saath khufiya soda.

“Rao of Faroq with secret deal”

‘Secret deal between Rao and Faroq.’ (*Hind Samachar*, 4 November 1995)

The essence of the headline can be grasped by keeping in mind the fact that it was published at a time when militancy was at its peak in Kashmir valley. Governor rule had been implemented in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, and no elections had been held in the state since the inception of militancy in 1989. Given this scenario, the central government, led by

Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao, was attempting to woo the mainstream parties, including the Farooq Abdullah-led National Conference, to participate in the assembly elections that were slated to be held in 1996.

Borrowing vis-à-vis Communicative Needs and Effectiveness

There is no denying the fact that English has assumed the status of global language in the present-day world. As such, borrowing from English has become a normal affair for different languages, with Urdu being no exception (Hassan and Dhar). Urdu news media is replete with English words which can be easily ascertained from the collected data as well as by going through different Urdu newspapers. It also owes to the fact that the news editors use these borrowings to fulfil their communicative needs (Kidwai). Most of these borrowed words belong to the domain of science and technology. Words like mobile, cell, cable, network, internet, email, website, pen drive, hard disk, software, satellite, channel, COVID, and virus are just some examples in this regard. It is interesting to note that sometimes English words are preferred in the Urdu news media in the presence of their equivalents in the Urdu language. Words like position, autonomy, surrender, magistrate, minister and department can be cited in this regard. Sometimes, two-word and three-word constructions are also witnessed. Some examples of this would include private members, parliament members, a division bench, a short circuit, an intelligence agency, security forces, and cross-firing.

The news editors are seen exploiting and manoeuvring the linguistic dimensions of English borrowings to make the headlines very catchy and ultra-communicative. Consider the following two headlines.

11. *Manmohan bypass imtihan main pass*

Manmohan bypass examination in passed”

‘Manmohan passes the bypass exam.’

12. *Hurriyat conference line par.*

Hurriyat conference line on

‘Hurriyat Conference falls in line.’

As is clear, the editors have very dexterously utilised the semantico-pragmatic dimensions of borrowed English words in these headlines. The first example talks about the successful heart surgery of former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, while the expression ‘*line par*’ has made the headline communicatively very potent to convey the softened attitude of Hurriyat Conference, an amalgam of secessionist parties in Kashmir. The psycho-semiotic dimensions and the communicative force of these headlines will be lost in the absence of English words. The same holds true for the headline wherein the cricket related English expression ‘match fixing’ has been used to imply the connivance between Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Kashmir-based PDP (Peoples Democratic Party).

13. *Jamaat par paabandee PDP Bhajpa ki match-fixing. (Omar Abdullah) (Uzma,*

19 March 2019)

“Jamat on ban PDP BJP of match fixing”

“Tha ban on Jamate Islami is a match-fixing between Peoples Democratic Alliance

(PDP) and Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP).’

Conclusion

The above deliberations prove that Urdu news media exploits the lexical resources at its disposal to convey the requisite messages to the audience. Lexical items are laden with psycho-semiotic dimensions, which are consciously used by the media personnel while framing the news items. Besides the denotative value, the lexical items have certain associative, connotative, and emotive dimensions too. As such, lexical items can generate specific concepts and attitudes in the minds of the audience. Owing to these factors, different news agencies and news editors consciously chose their lexical items to create the desired images and attitudes in the news consumers. The selection of words and other linguistic resources to formulate and disseminate intended meanings or messages depends on various factors like the purpose of communication, the context of use, purpose, national interests, and the socio-cultural background of news editors and consumers. Given this backdrop, the linguistic signs are chosen and used very consciously and purposefully by the news editors to convey the desired message to the audience.

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