The Role of Language during the Pandemic: A Mixed-method Exploration of Discourse of Fear and Sinophobia

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Among the media outlets, the newspapers were an important source of information about the COVID-19 lockdown; however, the language chosen to see the pandemic world cascaded surreal psychological feelings. Fewer scholarly studies are available which have investigated the role of language during the pandemic and its implications. This study explores primarily the pandemic language and its contribution to the discourse of fear and anti-Chinese sentiments. Data was collected from English newspaper articles and university students' responses to the questionnaires. The discursive themes were assessed, evaluated, and described by codifying the qualitative data. These themes were further analyzed and correlated through quantitative data to seek the goodness-of-fit. Findings revealed that the language used to report the infection perpetuated fear, Sinophobia, and certain psychological ripples. The study posits that linguists must come forward and work with journalists to introduce the language to control fear and encourage empathy and pluralism during the crisis.

Keywords. COVID-19 language, discourse of fear, discrimination, sinophobia, Chinese virus

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the media has bombarded people with frightening images and stories. Journalists labeled the public spaces as 'ghost towns.' They uncovered COVID-19 stories along with quite disturbing images of people thronging malls to store

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food and gathering at the major international terminals waiting for repatriation flights. The world was built on linguistic resources that could be linked with fear. Researchers (see e.g., Zheng, Goh & Wen, 2020; Gao, 2022; Tahmasbi et al., 2021, Zhang & Xu, 2020; Burgos, 2021; Mandl & Reis, 2022; Sahar, 2022) found that the virus produced versions and visions of fear as surreal codes and forms, which were embedded within the local and international newspapers.

Much of the discourse of fear was linked to anti-Chinese sentiments. Various newspapers published content that perpetuated these feelings. For example, *The Jutland Post* published a cartoon replacing the stars on the Chinese national flag with coronavirus pictograms (Oelze, 2020). *The Wall Street Journal* called China "the real sick man of Asia" (Yam, 2020). *Courrier Picard* headlined the tragedy as "Yellow Alert" (Haque, 2020). *Der Spiegel* described COVID-19 as being made in China (Zand & Hackenbroch, 2020). *The Washington Times* speculated that the virus was China's secret biological weapon (Gertz, 2020). *Foreign Policy* linked the global spread of the infection with the Belt and Road Initiative (Babones, 2020). Many newspapers ascribed the virus to Chinese eating habits. Instead of promoting equity, inclusion, and access during the peak of the pandemic, these newspapers, among others, brewed with language that promoted discrimination.

The Pakistani leading English newspaper, "The Express Tribune", and its partner, "The New York Times" an international addition for Pakistan, covered stories about how the Chinese were othered by the world. The stories that we read in newspapers have an imprint on us. Cap (2017) has argued that words with frightening connotations, though appealing to our psychology, are considered consequential. Eventually, people buy into the fear and could change their behavior toward others, especially when newspapers support the source of information.

There is a growing literature that explores the socio-psychological implications of language utilized to illustrate the pandemic. Burgos (2021) found several words, and concepts, relating to the pandemic, which crept into languages and dialects across the world and sprouted fear. Rovino et al., (2021) related some linguistic cues with COVID-19 fear by analyzing three Indonesian English newspapers. Gill and Lennon (2022) found that governments used fear-evoking semiotic interactions in their COVID-19 communication campaigns to encourage and seek compliance (Gill & Lennon, 2022). Mandl and Reis (2022) correlated pandemic intensity and typical stress-related linguistic signals. They found that government officials used tougher language when giving instructions, more negation to

support their decisions, and more intense descriptive adjectives. There are studies (see, e.g., Gao, 2022; Zhang, 2020; Cheah et al., 2020) that have positively correlated COVID-19 language with mental health and racism.

Yet it needs to be investigated, *inter alia*, the role of language in exacerbating fear and social exclusion during the pandemic in Pakistan. The study underscores the importance of linguistic strategies to address discriminatory discourses in future crises. The study offers rich, interdisciplinary perspectives on the interplay of language, society, health, and politics. Furthermore, the study contributes to a variety of academic fields, including linguistics, social psychology, public health, and political science.

We have framed the following research questions and hypotheses to achieve the abovementioned objectives and contribute to the growing literature on the psychological implications of the pandemic language.

1. Whether the language used by English newspapers to report on COVID-19 constituted fear and Sinophobia?

2. The answer to the above-mentioned research question led us to seek a quantifiable explanation for the language used in the discourse surrounding COVID-19. We formulated the following hypothesis to support our qualitative findings.

3. There is no positive correlation between the language used for COVID-19 reporting, the discourse of fear, and Sinophobia.

Method

The Data

The exploratory sequential design was used to collect and analyze the data. The qualitative datasets were reduced to illustrative quotations, codes, categories, and themes. The qualitative analysis was compounded with quantitative data to overcome the limitations of subjective experiences of specific individuals about the role of language in cascading fear and Sinophobia during the pandemic. Combining these two paradigms helped construct comprehensive account to address the research question and test the hypothesis.

The data was collected in two phases. In the first phase, the researchers selected sample illustrations from factual and opinion-based articles published in "The Express Tribune" and "The New

York Times" from the official announcement of the virus in China from December 2019 to April 2020. The articles were sampled from the initial and peak periods of the pandemic. In doing so, the diachronic and synchronic perspectives were considered to foreground the linguistic codes used to describe the virus. The rationale behind the selection of the abovementioned newspapers was that they had a wide coverage and readership in Pakistan. Also, "The New York Times" was a partner with "The Express Tribune", which included a free copy of "The New York Times" international edition for Pakistani readers. Both newspapers published reports and stories on the virus from the perspective of their correspondents based in Pakistan and elsewhere. However, most of the articles were written by correspondents initially based in the worst virus hit countries. They did, however, primarily a discursive reconstruction of the pandemic while embedding their lived experiences. The reports were from ethnically diverse correspondents who unfolded various aspects of the pandemic along with new words. Although all the reports were edited by non-native/native like English speakers, there was a fair chance of codeswitched and cultural connotations. These expressions were manually translated to maintain linguistic diversity in the data.

The linguistic resources used to report on the disease helped draw excerpts from newspapers. These excerpts were from various genres such as narratives, descriptions, and memoirs. The selected newspapers also used graphic images to amplify the news, but these were excluded from the data as the focus was on the texts used to report on COVID-19 and its impact on fear and Sinophobia. In addition to the interpretation of a discursive reconstruction of the pandemic by journalists, 30 university students of linguistics major volunteered to participate in the study as well. While they were staying and studying from home, the sample newspapers were their source of information, among other things, about the spread of disease. Some participants were from different parts of the country; however, most of them were from Lahore, the capital city of Punjab, Pakistan. They were asked primarily two open-ended questions: (i) what has been the most challenging aspect of living through the pandemic for you? and (ii) Have you experienced any positive changes in your life since the pandemic began? They narrated their lived experience about the virus and shared new words that added to their vocabulary. The diversity of views about COVID-19 language, fear, and Sinophobia were combined with quantitative data to seek more robust inferences.

In the second phase, we designed a Likert scale questionnaire based on an independent variable (COVID-19 language) and two

dependent variables (fear and Sinophobia). The questionnaire can be accessed at this link: 10.6084/m9.figshare.26037181. The analysis of qualitative data provided us with specific categories that guided the construction of the questionnaire while maintaining its content validity. There were six statements each for the independent and dependent variables. The questionnaire comprised 18 affirmative statements. These statements were shuffled to reduce predictable responses. Four graduate students of English linguistics participated in a focused group study to improve the questionnaire's face and content validity. Cronbach Alpha value of 0.82 determined that the survey was reliable to administer on a large scale. A sample of 103 undergraduate and graduate students majoring in English linguistics from a large private university in Lahore was purposively selected to respond to the questionnaire. The purpose of selecting the respondents with the English linguistic background was their better understanding of certain jargons used in the survey than any other population cohort. They were from different age groups (18-22, 23-27, 28-32, 33-37, 38-42, and 43 and above) with a range of four-year.

Ethical Considerations

There was open access to the newspaper data; however, all sources used were adequately disclosed with their URLs at the link: 10.6084/m9.figshare.26037181. Each illustrative quotation selected for the analysis was labeled with an abbreviation of the newspaper (e.g., NYT and TET) and date of the month. Since the data was archived on websites and available publicly, it posed a challenge to ensure the identity of journalists while reproducing excerpts from their articles. Although we did not disclose their names, we might not rule out the option Internet provided to readers of this research to trace the excerpts back to the original authors. Walther (2002) argues that it may be odd for someone to expect privacy if they choose a publicly available communication system.

While administering the questionnaire, the researchers interacted with the respondents virtually and debriefed them about the survey and the data handling procedure. The respondents were informed that the data collected from them would be used solely for this study. They were given assurances regarding confidentiality, security of information, and authorized access to the data. The data was collected, arranged, and analyzed to the extent that their identities might not be revealed as endorsed by the Association of Internet Researchers (Franzke et al., 2020).

Data Analysis

The discourse analysis was carried out to describe the production, composition, and reception of newspaper texts on COVID-19. The analysis began with selecting the discursive construction of the virus in journalistic texts to account for the coding frame. The focus of the data segments was on headlines and texts. Headlines were examined to determine the preferred reading of the article endorsed by van Dijk (1993). The methodological approach of Clarke and Braun (2017) served as the basis for conceptualizing categories in the qualitative data. Attention was paid to the words, grammar, and rhetoric to define the coding frame. The similarities and differences among codes helped us create fine-grained multiple categories. The discursive categories were combined to formulate specific themes. Each theme was analyzed under certain discursive categories to connect with the illustrative quotations and diversity of the datasets.

The discursive strategies such as nominalization (e.g., referring to certain regions, people, and cultures) legitimization (e.g., persuasive forms to construct fear and Sinophobia) wielded by journalists were utilized to interpret specific themes. We considered a plurality of views to keep the analysis free from blame and discrimination to bring truism to the forefront. Therefore, the participants' lived experiences were also analyzed while aiming at intertextuality – linking their perceptions with the newspapers' datasets. The word cloud was generated through Pro Word Cloud to demonstrate the most recurrent words associated with the spread of the virus. Although the qualitative data inarguably contributed to a better understanding of the role of language during the pandemic and its implications, there was a need to seek scientific explanations to find the impact of COVID-19 language on fear and Sinophobia.

The quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS and AMOS. Independent sample *t*-tests and one-way ANOVA were used to find statistically significant differences between genders and among various age groups. Multi-regression was calculated to investigate the impact of COVID-19 language on the discourse of fear and Sinophobia. Structural Equation Modeling was also used to study the goodness of model fit.

Results

This section provides an answer to the research question from the perspectives of journalists and students majoring in English linguistics. The section draws on the linguistic resources wielded by

Pakistani and foreign journalists to report on the first wave of COVID-19. This section also includes the lived experiences of university students. Thus, the section provides representative datasets from the virus's worst, moderate, and low-hit regions

COVID-19 language and discourse of fear

Several categories surfaced in the data helped formulate two broader themes: (i) COVID-19 language and (ii) discourse of fear (see Table 1). These categories demonstrated the public sphere that was diametrically opposite to pre-covid life. The lexicons, e.g., silent, empty, and vulnerable, were frequently used to report about the shuttered public sphere in the virus-hit countries. A strange silence and emptiness in city squares and streets were noted by various reporters. They used the metaphor 'ghost town' to picture the city squares. The following commentary has elaborated on each category that emerged in the datasets.

Table 1

Language of Public Sphere and Discourse of Fear in the Selected Newspapers' Reporting During the First Wave of COVID-19

Text	Codes	Categories	Themes
…the numbers of those infected with the coronavirus, and those who have died, are growing **(NYT15Mar20),** Spain…. with about 8,000 people infected and almost 300 dead **(NYT15Mar20),** Nationwide tally of novel coronavirus cases stands at 17,699 with 408 deaths **(TET01May20)**, After the first case was reported in Wuhan in December, the virus quickly spread to more than 300 cities in the country, infecting at least 80,000 people **(TET30Mar20)** President Trump on Friday signed an emergency declaration over the coronavirus pandemic, unlocking certain government powers to deal with the public health challenge **(NYT13Mar20),** May has proved	numbers of infected are growing, 8,000 people infected, almost 300 dead, Nationwide coronavirus cases, virus quickly spread signed an emergency declaration, warned the country, outbreak, Covid-19 deaths, deadliest month	Spread of virus Public security emergency	COVID-19 language Discourse of fear

Continued…

Text	Codes	Categories	Themes
to be the deadliest month so far in terms of Covid-19 deaths,remarked Sindh Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah on Sunday **(TET13Mar20)**, Under quarantine, the city was overtaken by an extraordinary sound: silence **(NYT30Mar20)**			
Even as new coronavirus infections appear to slow, a backlog is forcing doctors to make increasingly tough choices about treatment **(NYT23Mar20),** Over 90,000 health workers 'infected with Covid-19 worldwide' **(TET06May20),** 97 health workers have also lost their lives due to contagion **(TET22Nov20),** After the outbreak of novel coronavirus, the health sector of Punjab faced the worst crisis of resources during the outgoing year **(TET23Dec20),** A senior dispenser in Sandeman Civil Hospital, Quetta has passed away due to coronavirus **(TET20Feb23)**	backlog forces doctors to make tough choices, health workers 'infected, health workers lost their lives, health sector faced the worst crisis	Pressure on health care system	
…. government came to power promising to curtail the authority of the police to control public gatherings **(NYT15Mar20)**, In an order issued ……. a complete ban has been imposed on public gatherings, including weddings, processions, jalsas, majlis, Urs, anniversaries, ijtima and sport events **(TET23Mar20),** Spain's Prime Minister….to fight the coronavirus, forcing people to stay indoors, with exemptions only for so-called exceptional circumstances **(NYT15Mar20),** Muttahida Qaumi Movement's leader: "There is no traffic on the streets…." **(TET23Mar20)**	control public gatherings, a complete ban on public gatherings, forcing people to stay indoor, no traffic on the street	Restricted socialization/ movement	

Continued...

Text	Codes	Categories	Themes
"There's no more hugging, no more kissing" (**NYT20Feb20**), But he (the Korean doctor) kept his mask on, and he stopped himself from hugging them (his daughters) (**NYT20Feb20**), On the future of handshakes, fist bumps and even footshakes (**NYT20Aug20**), The tradition of singing around a birthday cake and blowing out the candles could fade (**NYT20Aug20**), Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the country's leading infectious disease expert, has called for the end of handshakes, as hands can pick up germs from surfaces (**NYT11Aug20**),	no more hugging, no more kissing, stopped hugging, fist bumps, foot-shakes	Change in social behaviour and practices	

The first category that emerged in the data was the spread of the virus in the public sphere. The author compared the silence of the once bustling capital city of Italy with an alpine mountainside. Pope Francis's speech was quoted to amplify the fear and to picture that the virus had taken over our lives and seized Vatican City. The rhetoric used, though engaging, added to the discourse of fear. The use of similes, e.g., as quiet as Alpine mountainside, and certain metaphors, e.g., afraid and lost under the thick clouds, could intensify human emotions. Including inclusive pronouns, e.g., we, ourselves, and our in the Pope's speech might have demonstrated collective fear. The role of the virus was elevated to an active agent and made invincible. The impact of the word 'asymptomatic' forced people to avoid each other. The word, 'anxiety', was embedded to reflect the mental state and possible vulnerability of people, which could evoke an unpleasant trail of emotions.

   a. When even those sounds faded, the city was as quiet as that Alpine mountainside. (New York Times; March 19, 2020).

   b. "We find ourselves afraid and lost under the thick clouds that are hovering over our squares, streets, and cities. We live as if in seclusion." (New York Times; March 27, 2020).

   c. What is clear is that a new anxiety has seized Vatican City (New York Times; March 27, 2020).

The second category in the data was public security emergency. The newspapers published stories as if the usual certainties of our daily life had gone. The virus was so rampant that we could be infected if we had dared to step outside our homes. The reports highlighted that soldiers were called in many countries to ensure the safety and security of citizens, help build field hospitals, bury the dead in mass graves, and punish the offenders of lockdown regulations. WHO announced a security emergency in many countries, which deserted the cities. The Express Tribune, Pakistan, covered stories of people being beaten up by police on the streets during the lockdown emergency. Even a citizen was killed over violation of COVID-19 SOPs. The word 'fight' was deployed in the reports to symbolize as there was a war going on. Many reporters compared the crisis with World War II ravages, and others pulled out anecdotal references that the coronavirus had recycled throughout human history and killed millions of people. So did Covid-19.

a. More than 3,000 National Guard troops, rotating in 12-hour shifts, will provide security in and around the Capitol at any given time, (New York Times; January 13, 2021).

b. The state of New York pleaded for help from the Army Corps of Engineers to quickly build hospitals (New York Times; March17, 2020).

c. In some retirement homes, soldiers deployed to disinfect the premises found elderly people abandoned, or dead in their beds (New York Times; March 24, 2020).

d. Nationwide with Pakistan confirming seven new novel coronavirus cases, the World Health Organization has warned that the country faces great challenge ahead to contain the viral outbreak (The express Tribune; March 13, 2020).

e. Bogotá's Cacophony Is Hushed by Virus as Congested Streets Empty Out (New York Times; March 30, 2020).

f. Citizen killed 'over Covid SOPs violation' in Karachi (The Express Tribune; May 19, 2021).

The use of phrases, e.g., left deserted, cacophony was hushed by the virus, and behind the wall, picturized a surreal public discourse and depicted people were not involved in any outdoor activity and confined to their homes. The negative expressions, including no visits from the outside and no going out, repleted the war-like scenario. Although lockdowns varied, total silence was reported from certain corners across the globe. While portraying silence and

emptiness, the author in portrayed a proliferation of total wilderness in the public squares.

The third category in the data was pressure on the health care system. The calmness of public spaces was contrasted with the 'tough fight' of doctors and nurses against a 'deadly virus' within the hospitals. The metaphor, e.g., overwhelmed, was used to portray the pressure on hospitals. It was reported that the healthcare professionals who were so exposed to the virus in hospitals caught themselves and had to self-isolate. Journalists mostly used the adjective phrases, e.g., tough choices and tough fight, to describe pressure on the healthcare system. They nominalized health workers who were treating patients without protective gear contracted the contagion and died. They designated the virus as an armed attack (c.f. Spadaro, 2020). They frequently used the allegory of 'war' and 'fight' to describe the struggle against illness by hospitals. They synonymized healthcare workers with the frontline soldiers against the invisible enemy. Pakistani citizens, together with celebrities, raised white flags to support psychologically the frontline soldiers. The whole discourse was created to portray as being on a war.

a. Doctors, paramedics, other health department staff have been urging the government to provide them with basic protective gear to fight against the deadly virus (The Express Tribune; May 1, 2023).

b. Health workers in Igualada are overwhelmed (New York Times; March 23, 2020).

c. In Italy, France and Spain, more than 30 health care professionals have died of the coronavirus, and thousands of others have had to self-isolate (New York Times; March 24, 2020).

d. Even as new coronavirus infections *appear* to slow, a backlog *is* forcing doctors to make increasingly tough choices about treatment (New York Times; March 23, 2020).

e. Balochistan is currently witnessing a sharp rise in the Covid-19 cases and healthcare workers are among the most affected The Express Tribune; December 19, 2020).

f. Journalists reported from different parts of Pakistan about the death toll of health workers due to close contact to Covid patients (The Express Tribune; December 19, 2020).

g. (Farhan) Saeed also paid tribute to all the healthcare professionals that served the country during the Covid-19 pandemic (The Express Tribune; September 06, 2020).

h. Ali Zafar---"Today we salute those who gave their lives to protect ours. Those, who will never be forgotten", (The Express Tribune; September 06, 2020).

The fourth category in the data was restricted socialization. It was reported that many countries discouraged or banned social and religious gatherings. Marriage ceremonies were confined to limited gatherings within homes. All kinds of religious and cultural gatherings were restricted. The phrase, e.g., complete ban, amplified already prevailing discourse of fear. Eventually, people felt imprisoned and panicked. They were restricted from meeting and greeting. The author in described the experience of doctor parents who were in social isolation, as no more hugging, no more kissing. The brand-new terms, e.g., social distancing, physical distancing, and social isolation, were coined to restrict social cohesion which was perhaps needed the most. The elbow/fist bumps and ankle/foot shakes were introduced to greet others. Apparently, a new normal took over the public discourse. 2020 was the year when the language employed to describe the public sphere evoked redefinition. People started borrowing frightening expressions and severe words to describe the spread of infection.

One of the participants expressed his fear of living alone. Another showed a strict lockdown situation. The severity of the virus reported by people was further highlighted when they were not allowed to see their loved ones because they were bound to stay inside. A frequent use of the words, e.g., cage, lockdown, and lockdown within lockdown, restricted socialization but exacerbated the discourse of fear. The phrasal verb, e.g., gave up in, highlighted people helplessness and added to their emotional warmth. Similarly, the hyperbolic statement, e.g., all over the world is inside, cascaded the discourse of fear.

In an order issued ……. a complete ban has been imposed on public gatherings, including weddings, processions, jalsas, majlis, Urs, anniversaries, ijtima and sport events (The Express Tribune; March 23, 2020)

a. Even though people knew grocery stores and pharmacies would still be open, they were rushing to the markets as if they would be shut down indefinitely (The Express Tribune; March 19, 2020)

b. "I am a prisoner at home," (New York Times; March 19, 2020)

c. The Haj pilgrimage is being held in the country with attendance drastically reduced (The Express Tribune; July 31, 2020)

d. After the district government shut marriage halls and barred gatherings of more than 50 people, many people decided to hold traditional wedding rituals within the confines of their houses (The Express Tribune; June 26, 2020)

e. No More Hugging, No More Kissing. At Home in Hong Kong with 2 Frontline Doctors by Tiffany (New York Times; February 20, 2020)

f. "We are in a cage, and we are learning how to stop trying to control everything," (New York Times; March 31, 2020)

g. "I am in a cage and learning new ways to live." (New York Times; March 31, 2020)

h. "I am in lockdown within a lockdown." (New York Times; March 31, 2020)

i. My mother gave up "Riverdance" and could not visit my father in the recovery room (New York Times;

March 19, 2020).

j. People all over the world are staying inside (New York Times; March 19, 2020).

The fifth category in the data was a change in social behaviour and practices. The participants admitted that their conversations with their parents had changed. They mentioned that their lives had transformed, and they were adapting to new realities of the pandemic world. They narrated that under the vigilance of their COVID-19 obsessed parents, they had to strictly follow a new set of rules. Most of the participants narrated that their parents kept them exhausted psychologically by repeatedly enquiring whether they had washed their hands, used hand sanitizer, and took vitamins to boost their immunity. Parents mostly, if not always, regurgitated imperative structures, e.g., wash your hands for 20 seconds, use hand sanitizer, stay hydrated and stay home, and stay safe. The participants used the word, e.g., panicked for their parents. Most of them said, "they feel so powerless and frightened."

a. Nowadays, conversation with my parents has changed to a great extent. My parents were never worried about my outings, but now they don't even let me step outside. They were never conscious whether I have washed my hands or not, but soon after every hour, my mama confirms whether I have washed my

hands or not. There was a time when I never bothered to buy sanitizers and masks, but now, I have purchased a pack of masks and even sanitizers. I am in a cage and adapting to new ways of life.

b. My parents are so much panicked, and they said, "these are the signs that the day of judgment is coming." They have strictly prohibited from shaking hands and are advised to maintain social distance, wear masks and gloves all the time.

c. My father is always talking about COVID-19 with so many details and sloppy analysis.

The sixth category in the data was shuttered businesses and the closure of educational institutes. The collocation of 'silence ruled' has been reported as a personification to intensify the situation of business places. Because of the shutter businesses everywhere, people were deprived of food. The author in expressed a disruption in homeless people's lives through the metaphors of negation, e.g., 'no charity', 'no food' 'no shelter', and 'no access to washrooms'. S/he employed a superlative degree, including other journalists, to narrate the situation as 'the most fragile' and 'most exposed' member of the population. The possessive phrase 'India's coronavirus' shows India's vulnerable situation during the pandemic and its serious consequences. The sudden closure of schools, colleges, and universities during the peak period of coronavirus also gave rise to the discourse of fear.

a. Silence ruled the city's business and commercial areas (The Express Tribune; August 01, 2021).

b. With businesses shut down in cities across the country, vast numbers of migrants — many of whom lived and ate where they worked — were suddenly without food and shelter (New York Times; March 29, 2020).

c. Rome's Homeless Don't Have the Luxury of Staying Home by Elisabetta Povoledo, March 24, 2020.

d. India's Coronavirus Lockdown Leaves Vast Numbers Stranded and Hungry, by Maria Abi-Habib and Sameer Yasir, March 29, 2020.

e. Top civil-military leadership also decides to shut all educational institutions in the country till April 5.

(The Express Tribune; March 13, 2020).

The seventh and last category in the data was the linguistic new normal. The word cloud in figure 1 is an illustration of how the selected newspapers' reporting on the virus took over the participants' lives. It is evident from figure 1, table 1 and excerpts in that new words, e.g., war rhetoric, adjective phrase, adverbs to mitigate the verb (action), negation markers, medical terms, were overwhelmingly used by journalists and borrowed by the participants which expressed fear and social exclusion. Figure 1 shows lexicons, such as COVID-19, social-distancing, fear, and panic, among others, in descending order that overwhelmed the participants' narratives. It is evident from their responses that the language used to report about COVID-19 forced them to borrow certain expressions to describe the frightening implications of the virus. The words that were seeded into their heads contributed to the discourse of fear and a generalization that the Chinese might be behind the virus's spread. The use of the word 'China' in the literature on COVID-19, although small, perpetuated anti-Chinese sentiments. To further our investigation, the next section specifically explores the literature covering anti-Chinese sentiments.

Figure 1

Most Frequently Used Words by the Participants to Describe Their Lived Experiences During the First Wave of COVID-19

Sinophobia

The first part of this section unfolds qualitative findings about the anti-Chinese sentiments reported in the selected newspapers. This is followed by quantitative data to correlate language of COVID-19 with the discourse of fear and Sinophobia. The coding frame in Table 2 showcases three, yet overlapping, categories such as Chinese virus, racism, and discrimination, under the theme of Sinophobia. We have

morphed these categories with illustrations of how the Chinese were othered, particularly during the first wave of the virus.

Table 2

Anti-Chinese Sentiments in the Literature on COVID-19

Text	Codes	Categories	Theme
On Twitter in Japan, where there has long been unease about the conduct of Chinese tourists, commenters have labelled them "dirty" and "insensitive" and have called them "bioterrorists" (NYT30Jan20), A much-viewed YouTube video in South Korea claims that a biochemical weapons facility in China leaked the coronavirus, a theory that has gained currency in other corners of the globe (NYT30Jan20), Mr. Trump… has pressed American intelligence agencies to find the source of the virus, suggesting it might have emerged accidentally from a Wuhan weapons lab (NYT03May20), Across the globe a backlash is building against China for its initial mishandling of the crisis that helped loose the coronavirus on the world, creating a deeply polarizing battle of narratives (NYT03May20),… Speculation emerged early in the pandemic that the virus could have accidentally leaked	Chinese tourists labelled as "dirty", "insensitive" and "bioterrorists", biochemical weapons facility in China leaked the coronavirus, emerged accidentally from a Wuhan weapons lab, mishandling of the crisis that helped loose the coronavirus on the world, virus accidentally leaked from the lab in Wuhan,	Chinese virus	Sinophobia

Continued…

Text	Codes	Categories	Theme
from the lab in Wuhan (TET04Feb21)			
South Korean protesters calling for a ban on Chinese visitors (NYT30Jan20), In Hong Kong, South Korea and Vietnam, businesses have posted signs saying that mainland Chinese customers are not welcome (NYT30Jan20), ….in a suburb of Toronto, parents demanded that a school district keep children of a family that had recently returned from China out of classes for 17 days (NYT30Jan20)	protesters calling for a ban on Chinese visitors, businesses posted signs saying Chinese customers not welcome, a Chinese discriminated against at bank and police station	Racism, discrimination	
In Singapore, tens of thousands of residents have signed a petition calling for the government to ban Chinese nationals from entering the country (NYT30Jan20). The World Health Organization declared a global health emergency and the State Department issued a "do not travel" to China advisory — fears over the dangerous outbreak have fueled xenophobia (NYT30Jan20). Airlines are cancelling flights to Wuhan, the center of the epidemic, and other Chinese cities... (NYT30Jan20), Although Indonesia has suspended flights from Wuhan, the	signed a petition to ban Chinese from entering the country, "do not travel" to China advisory, Airlines cancelling flights to Wuhan, Indonesia suspended flights from Wuhan	which controlled our rational impulses to regress	

Text	Codes	Categories	Theme
governor of West Sumatra, Irwan Prayitno, ignored a plea from a citizens group to reject all Chinese tourists (NYT30Jan20)			
The first round of free trade agreement (FTA) between Pakistan and China resulted in shutdown of most of Pakistan's industry (TET05Jul21)	FTA between Pakistan and China resulted in shutdown of Pakistan's industry	Ban on trade with China	

Since the outbreak, the Chinese have been linked with the virus directly or indirectly. The phrase 'foreign threat' was employed to other Chinses. It was reported that the president of the USA defended his statement for using the term 'Chinese Virus'. The State Department advised all Americans to "don't travel to China" (Oliveira, 2020). Journalists covered stories about the proliferation of Sinophobia in the world. Airlines from many countries temporarily suspended flights to the Hubei province of China. Japanese hashtag # Chinese don't come to Japan went viral on social media. Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Russia, and Vietnam, among others, closed business with the Chinese. The information that the virus was created in China's secret laboratory and that the Chinese Red Bull drink contained the virus was so rampant on social media. The authors recycled information about a much-viewed YouTube video that correlated biochemical weapons facility in China with the leakage of the virus. The impact of this video could be noticed from the fact that WHO inspectors discussed with Chinese scientists about the source of the virus. The phrase, e.g., "very frank" in collocating with discussion further raised the suspension that the virus might have been from a Chinese lab. Pakistani people started avoiding malls that were popular among the Chinese and temporarily banned imports from China. An intensive verb, e.g., slapped, was used to suspend Chinese goods import, implying a punishment to the Chinese industry.

    a. Trump Defends Using 'Chinese Virus' Label, Ignoring Growing Criticism (New York Times; March 18, 2020)

b. As Coronavirus Spreads, So Does Anti-Chinese Sentiment (New York Times; January 30, 2020).

c. Airlines are suspending flights to mainland China, and on Monday, the United States Centres for Disease Control and Prevention advised avoiding all nonessential travel to China (New York Times; March 9, 2020).

d. In Japan, the hashtag #ChineseDon'tComeToJapan has been trending on Twitter (New York Times; February 13, 2020).

e. In Hong Kong, South Korea and Vietnam, businesses have posted signs saying that mainland Chinese customers are not welcome (New York Times; February 13, 2020).

f. Instagram warned that shops in Sydney containing items like fortune cookies, rice and "Chinese Red Bull" were contaminated (New York Times; February 13, 2020).

g. A much-viewed YouTube video in South Korea claims that a biochemical weapons facility in China leaked the coronavirus, a theory that has gained currency in other corners of the globe (New York Times; February 13, 2020).

h. World Health Organization inspectors had "very frank" discussions with Chinese scientists about the source of the pandemic, including theories it leaked from a laboratory, the head of the probe in Wuhan told AFP Thursday (The express Tribune; February 4, 2021).

i. A ban on imports from China, slapped by the government to prevent the spread of coronavirus to Pakistan (The Express Tribune; February 25, 2020).

The author in shared the experience of a Thai taxi driver who nominalized a Chinese customer intuitively for infecting him with the virus. In, Tiffany May, a self-identified Hong Kong student, disclosed how she was discriminated in Italy. Similarly, another author covered a story how a Chinese national, Ciara Lo, was discriminated. She got 'hard long stares' when she was at Bologna airport. Furthermore, the author narrated how she was othered at the police station while filing a report against her stolen wallet because she was from the infection zone. The author in covered stories of Chinese nationals who faced racist remarks in the virus-hit countries. The newspapers were washed with stories of how badly the Chinese were treated by people outside mainland China.

a. He Drove Her (Chinese) to the Hospital. She Gave Him the Coronavirus, Hannah Beech February 28, 2020.

   b. 'The Face of the Coronavirus': A Hong Kong Student Shunned in Italy, Tiffany May, March 2, 2020.

   c. Since arriving in Bologna, Ciara Lo has been discriminated against at a bank and a police station because she is Chinese (New York Times; March 17, 2020).

   d. 'A Slap in the Face': Chinese Readers Share Their Coronavirus Stories (New York Times; March 4, 2020).

We can notice the use of biased phrases in the title of each article that demonstrates the verbal ploys such as metaphors (e.g., anti-Chinese sentiment, the face of coronavirus, and a slap in the face), alliterations (spread, so, sentiment, student, and shunned), articles (e.g., the face, a slap, and a Hong Kong student) primarily to catch up readers' attention about a surge in anti-Chinese sentiments. The author in formed a biased title by nominalizing Chinese in the parenthesis and asserting the implied meaning that people who were helping Chinese contracted the virus. The use of verbs, e.g., shunned, discriminated, and warned, demonstrated the discriminatory acts against Chinese.

The linguistic and rhetorical styles used to report on the experiences of Chinese victims of racist remarks created hatred against them. Some expressions were parroted by world leaders and copied by the press, as supported by Zheng, Goh, and Wen (2020). When such information invariably routes through the press, some members of the public may mistakenly believe in avoiding Chinese or attacking Chinese individuals in the worst cases (Zhao, 2020; Yong, 2020). To scientifically investigate whether the language used to report on COVID-19 generated a discourse of fear and Sinophobia, structural equation modeling was carried out.

Figure 2 shows a good partial correlation ($r = 0.61$) between the language for COVID-19 and the discourse of fear. However, there is a relatively low correlation ($r = 0.39$) between the discourse of fear and Sinophobia. Overall, the p-value of Chi-square and the indices indicate a good fit for the structural equation model. Multi-regression analysis predicts a statistically significant impact of language for COVID-19 on the discourse of fear and Sinophobia with a 95% confidence interval. The study found no significant difference in perceptions among male and female university students of various age groups (18-22, 23-27, 28-32, 33-37, 38-42, and 43 and above). Hence, we can note that the newspapers' language to describe COVID-19 has created unarguably the discourse of fear and seeded anti-Chinese sentiments. Since these findings are based on the data from the first

wave of COVID-19, there is a fair chance results may differ in the post-COVID context. However, an independent study needs to be carried out to investigate it further.

Figure 2

Structural Equation Modeling the impact of COVID-19 Language on Fear and Sinophobia
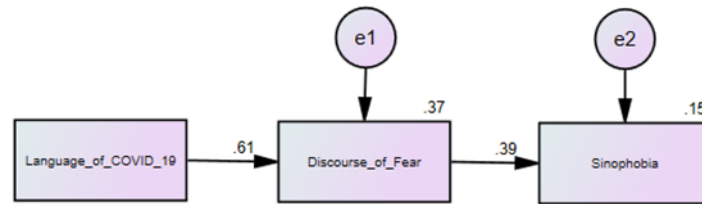
N = 103 *p* (Chi-square) = 0.968 > 0.05, RMSEA = 0.000 < 0.05, GFI = 1.000, CFI = 1.000 > 0.95, CMIN/DF = 0.002 < 0.05.

Conclusion

The study has broadly examined the role of language in creating discourse of fear and Sinophobia during the pandemic. The language used to report about COVID-19 was revealing as if the normal life had upended, and everything got topsy-turvy. Journalists used the war rhetoric, negative expressions, and intensifiers to report on COVID-19. The expressions for meeting and greeting were replaced with surreal linguistic forms, which controlled our rational impulses to regress towards irrational reactions of fear and bizarre psychological feelings. The language played a crucial role in the stereotypical production of positive in-group and negative out-group. The participants' communication with their parents was overwhelmed with virus-related words, which might have influenced them to submit to the pseudoscientific theories (c.f. Krause et al., 2020). The Structural Equation Modelling positively correlated language for COVID-19 with the discourse of fear and Sinophobia. This study is, however, an attempt to understand how the use of language can trigger panic and exacerbate the crisis. With only a small data, we should not obviously claim generalization of findings; however, it provides a snapshot that language can exacerbate fear and psychological social exclusion.

The study suggests sentimental analysis to determine positivity and negativity in the texts used to report a crisis as a direction for future research and preventive measures. While doing so, this study calls for an active presence of linguists to challenge irrational

impulses during the pandemic and, more practically, the need for linguists to work with scientists to manage the humanistic side of the crisis. Traced to the point of departure in response to the pandemic disaster, the study recommends using candid and positive words, which may foster fundamentally an understanding of the crisis. The war lexicons may be replaced by the medical terms to respond to the crisis as a temporary disruption. The health workers may not succeed just being hailed frontline soldiers and wartime heroes without the required medical supply. Also, increasing use of intensifiers, e.g., adjectives and adverbs, may be replaced with qualifiers/hedges to provide information and mellow the fearsome tone. While reporting about the crisis, journalists must use the language to appeal to people to take precautionary measures and foster a sense of support/ cooperation in this increasingly interdependent world.

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