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Beyond the Battlefield: A Comparative Linguistic Analysis of Pak-Indian Military Narratives in the May 2025 Conflict

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the linguistic construction of victory and national identity in military narratives by conducting a comparative linguistic analysis of press briefings from Pakistan's Inter-Services Public Relations and India's Press Information Bureau following the 2025 Indo-Pak military clash. Both institutions held press conferences during the conflict and after the ceasefire on May 11, 2025, aiming to frame the national triumph and justify their military stance. Through the lens of Systemic Functional Linguistics and Appraisal Theory, the study investigates how rhetorical strategies are employed to project national identity, legitimise military actions, and delegitimise the opponent. Findings reveal that Pakistan's Inter-Services Public Relations uses assertive language, active voice, and war metaphors to portray a decisive victory to reinforce national unity, while India's Press Information Bureau adopts a more cautious tone, favouring passive constructions and diplomatic appeals to construct moral superiority and global responsibility. Both narratives heavily rely on inclusive pronouns "we" and strategic ambiguity around the ceasefire to safeguard institutional reputation and sustain public support. This research contributes to conflict communication and peacebuilding studies by showing how military discourse shapes collective memory, nationalist sentiment, and perceptions of legitimacy in military conflicts. The analysis emphasises the pivotal role of language in identity formation and ideological framing. Future research should expand this inquiry to include audience reception and the evolving influence of digital media on military narratives.

KEYWORDS: Military, Battlefield, Linguistic Analysis, Pak-Indian Military Narratives, Inter-Services Public Relations

Introduction

Military discourse is vital in projecting a war narrative by providing details about the nature of military actions and state policies. Through formal military discourse, images of allies and enemies are created, moral justifications for the use of force are articulated, and criteria for heroism or treachery are established (Sadurski, 2022). In the aftermath of conflict, communication often relies on euphemism and ambiguity to mitigate reputational costs and support either national healing or division. Analysing South Asian military narratives, such as those disseminated by Pakistan's Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) and India's Press

Information Bureau (PIB), reveals their role in sustaining nationalism and shaping political perspectives (Ahmed, 2017). Military discourse plays a crucial role in constructing political legitimacy and collective memory, rendering it a compelling subject for discursive analysis.

Background and Context

Large-scale clashes between India and Pakistan took place in 2025. The cause leading to the escalation was the Pahalgam attack in April 2025 and India's erroneous allegations against Pakistan that worsened the situation. On the night of May 7-8, India assaulted Pakistan, which led to a greater military standoff. However, following days of heavy fighting, both countries agreed to a ceasefire on May 10, which opened the way for diplomatic talks. During this period, press conferences were held by Pakistan's ISPR and India's in order to give details about the war proceedings to their people, respectively. These press briefings were helpful in taking the nation in confidence by projecting military victory while being moral and righteous, and denying legitimacy to the opponent. The main aim of these briefings was to establish authority and a positive image of the military in national and international media.

Statement of Problem

In contemporary geopolitical conflicts, language functions not merely as a vehicle for conveying information but as a powerful tool for constructing public perception, shaping national identity, and reinforcing ideological positions. Military organisations play a central role in this process by producing official narratives that frame the nature of conflict, justify state actions, and claim national legitimacy. During the May 2025 Pak-India conflict, both Pakistan and India employed militarised discourse through their official media arms to frame the events of the conflict, rationalise their military actions, and influence public sentiment. While these narratives play a powerful role in influencing public sentiment and state legitimacy, there remains a limited understanding of how such discourse is linguistically constructed and strategically framed across opposing national contexts. This gap raises concerns about the unexamined influence of militarised language on public consciousness, national unity, and the escalation or resolution of conflict, highlighting the need to critically explore how language functions as a tool of power in wartime communication.

Research Objectives

1. To explore how language was used by Pakistan's ISPR and India's PIB to frame a claim of victory.
2. To identify the rhetorical strategies employed by both media arms to construct national identity and delegitimise the opposing side.
3. To examine how the ceasefire is differently represented, justified, and prioritised within each government's official narrative.

Significance of the Study

The article examines the use of military language during war and its impact on shaping the country's ideology. An examination of both Pakistan's ISPR and India's PIB Defence May 2025 conflict briefings reveals how language can contribute to the construction of national identity, lend legitimacy to military operations, and shape public opinion. It advances narrative framing and ideological theory, offering some beneficial insights

on how to manage reputation and opinion in conflict zones. Developing a comparative perspective, it situates competing and overlapping rhetorical postures that inform the discourse of policymakers, media, and scholars dealing with peacebuilding and nation-building. This paper has implications for both researchers and practitioners. It illustrates how the official military narrative is formed and disseminated in the media to influence public opinion and foster patriotic sentiment. The research demonstrates that military discourse is part of a strategic practice aimed at legitimising, controlling, and manipulating political and psychological relations in post-conflict societies. It makes a contribution to peace and conflict studies, too, showing how the stories can either enable reconciliation or further entrench division. An understanding of these dynamics is also crucial for policymakers, diplomats, and peace workers. In summary, the study interconnects peace studies, military communication, and media discourse, illustrating the influential role of language in shaping conflict representations.

Delimitation of Study

The study focuses solely on military statements made by Pakistan's and India's public relations bodies in May 2025. The paper relies on press conferences from the ISPR and PIB Defence rather than unofficial sources, social media, or interviews. Instead of addressing broad-spectrum beliefs about the period or its causes, the analysis focuses solely on how both countries perceived victory and national pride.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative case study design to examine military discourse as constructed in the press conferences delivered by ISPR and India's PIB during the May 2025 conflict. Drawing on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Martin and White's Appraisal Theory, the research analyses how language is strategically used to construct narratives of victory, moral legitimacy, and national unity.

Data Collection

Purposive sampling technique has been employed in the study. The data focuses on the military press conferences conducted by Pakistan's ISPR and India's PIB during the recent Pak-India conflict. The military press conferences by both sides (Pakistan and India) during the period 7th to 11th May 2025 have been considered they were the primary source of information during the conflict and kept people updated about the potential outcomes of the conflict.

Theoretical Framework

The study is based on CDA as the broader epistemological approach, while using Halliday's SFL Analysis and Martin and White's Appraisal Theory as an analytical tool to study the Pakistan-India military conflict in May 2025 military narrative to unravel the use of language in building power, identity, and ideological discourse.

SFL by Halliday (1994) looks at the performative value of language by analysing how it is used in enacting different social functions. It is based on three linguistic metafunctions: ideational metafunction, interpersonal metafunction, and textual metafunction. All three metafunctions are crucial in the analysis of this study. Framing of the military actions and seeing the construction of agency, framing, and legitimacy will be done

through Ideational Metafunction. Interpersonal Metafunctional analysis will be done by utilising the Appraisal Theory. And thematic metafunction will help in revealing how thematic structures are foregrounded in military narratives to highlight what each actor wants. Framing is a crucial aspect of military narratives, shaping how events are interpreted by highlighting certain aspects while de-emphasising others. Military institutions employ linguistic strategies, such as metaphors, modality, evaluative language, and sentence structures, to shape public understanding and legitimise their actions. Through these linguistic metafunctions, Halliday's SFL focuses on the transitivity system, modality, and thematic structures. Transitivity assists in examining the role of agency as the actor or recipient of actions. Modality helps in seeking clarity about the legitimisation of actions and how threats are framed in military narratives or briefings (Eggins, 2004).

Martin and White's Appraisal Theory is an extension of Halliday's SFL, specifically elaborating on the interpersonal metafunction. Halliday's interpersonal metafunction focuses on how language enacts social relationships, expressing attitudes, judgments, and emotional positioning. Building on this, Appraisal Theory offers a detailed framework for analysing how speakers or writers evaluate people, actions, and events (Attitude), align with or challenge alternative viewpoints (Engagement), and amplify or soften the strength of their evaluations (Gradation) (Martin & White, 2005). In the context of conflict discourse, Appraisal Theory provides valuable tools for examining how language is used not only to inform and persuade, but also to reinforce state narratives and legitimise military actions. The construction of identity within military narratives involves the strategic use of evaluative language to establish and maintain national, institutional, or moral identities. Military institutions often construct a collective self-image by foregrounding attributes such as heroism, resilience, legitimacy, and moral superiority, while simultaneously portraying the adversary as illegitimate, cowardly, or morally deficient.

The study aims to demonstrate how military institutions in both countries utilised language to construct ideology, morality, and national purpose and to frame the other. The conceptual framework will facilitate a comparative analysis of both sides to examine how national identity and purpose are constructed through military discourse.

Data Analysis

India termed its 7th May Operation Sindoor as "focused, measured and non-escalatory," only aiming to target terrorist organizations and establishing the fact that no Pakistani military establishments had been targeted. Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri stated: "Operation Sindoor, initiated on 7 May 2025, in the aftermath of the Pahalgam terror attack … was a calibrated, tri-services response that embodied precision, professionalism, and purpose… Operational ethics were central to the mission, and restraint was exercised to avoid civilian harm." Analysed from Halliday's Ideational metafunction lens, which focuses on how language is used to construct experiences based on processes, participants, and circumstances, background agency is employed through passive constructions and the use of material processes, such as "initiated" and "was exercised," to draw a calculated and strategic picture of the military operation. The phrase "Operation Sindoor, initiated on 7 May 2025, in the aftermath of the Pahalgam terror attack" is consequential, showing the fact that Indian actions were reactive. The omission of the actor of the action shifts the focus to the action and establishes its legitimacy. The phrase "in the aftermath of" connects the actions with a previous incident (Pahalgam Attack) and foregrounds the operation as a discursive necessity. The legitimacy of the action is established through

the use of adjectives like "calibrated," "precision," and "professionalism." In terms of Halliday's SFL, the modality of obligation and value is followed in the phrase “operational ethics were central to the mission, and restraint was exercised to avoid civilian harm,” showing that the action was strategic and not impulsive. Additionally, through this phrase, the military, as the actor, is backgrounded, and ethical action is foregrounded. In another press brief on May 8, India reinforced its commitment to keep its actions non-escalatory in nature, "provided it is respected by the Pakistan military.” This was done to highlight India's cautiously reactive side by showing how deliberate and calculated the strikes were without crossing any limits.

During the 10th May 2025 briefing, DG ISPR stated, "We will give a befitting response to Indian aggression. That response will come at a time, place, and through methods of our choosing." This statement is a perfect depiction of strategic military discourse. Pakistan is projected as an active agent in the conflict through the use of material process verbs like "will give," will come," and "will hit back," which are in perfect alignment with Halliday's transitivity system. The inevitable nature of the context is reflected through the usage of future-tense modality "will," which refers to a planned retaliatory response. The repetitive and triadic structure "time, place, and method of our own choosing" is the linguistic highlight of this statement. The phrase asserts Pakistan's military temporal, spatial, and tactical restraint and control. A sense of collective ownership and shared sense of identity is reflected through the use of first-person plural possessive pronouns like "our own." A national self is drawn through these personal pronouns, which helps in identifying Pakistan's calculated and controlled response and alleged aggression by India. Such constructions are affirmative with the notion of national pride and identity, and also block any potential alternative interpretation.

In response to India’s unprovoked strikes, DG ISPR announced Operation Bunyanum Marsoos during a press briefing in the early hours of May 10, 2025. This operation was reported as "launched in retaliation for Indian military provocations," which shows the agentive linguistic use to show the decisiveness of Pakistan's armed forces. Moreover, Pakistan’s assertiveness is reflected in the grammatical framing of India's plea for a ceasefire; “India requested [one]... Pakistan gave a very clear response.” This puts Pakistan on a superior moral ground and in control of its narrative. It reflects Pakistan as an active defender and puts India into a passive seat, seeking a ceasefire.

Pakistan’s military press briefings were marked by a prominent use of epistemic and deontic modality, both of which serve as key linguistic resources in constructing authority, certainty, and obligation. As Suhadi (2011) explains, epistemic modality reflects a speaker’s degree of confidence in the truth of a proposition, while deontic modality expresses necessity, obligation, or permission in relation to actions. The frequent use of assertive statements such as “Pakistan never requested a ceasefire,” “we will communicate back only after we have given the response this act deserves,” and “our forces are always alert” illustrates the strategic clarity and self-assured stance projected by Pakistan’s military. These expressions are not incidental; rather, they reflect a calculated use of modality to construct legitimacy, assert moral authority, and reinforce operational preparedness. Phrases such as “fulfilling promises” and “retaliatory actions” further support a national image grounded in ethical action and righteous intent, portraying Pakistan’s military responses as both justified and necessary within the context of conflict.

Conversely, India's PIB narrative frequently employs moderating and cautious modality, relying on expressions of probability and conditionality that suggest a more tentative stance. Such linguistic choices,

including hedging verbs, modal auxiliaries, and conditional constructions, can signal reduced speaker commitment to the truth-value of a proposition (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). This is evident in statements like “if provoked,” “provided it is respected,” “targeted only terrorist sites,” and “would respond,” which rely on hypothetical or qualified assertions. The use of these forms reflects a less assertive rhetorical posture, characterised by strategic ambiguity and emphasis on conditional justification. This discursive approach influences how the public perceives the legitimacy of India’s military actions, portraying them as reactive and restrained rather than proactive or morally framed.

In the post-cease-fire military press briefing, India claimed to have shot down one Pakistani aircraft by releasing a video titled *“Destroy the Enemy in the Sky.”* However, there is a lack of response upon being asked the number of Indian jets shot down by Pakistan. The answer lacks numerical precision and is diverted with statements like *“losses are a part of combat”* and that *“all pilots had returned safely.”* This lack of clarity reflects India's discursive strategy of employing controlled ambiguity to establish a certain narrative without taking any risk of exposing the vulnerabilities. A minimised response strategy is used to save reputation while maintaining diplomatic space. In contrast, DG ISPR on May 11, 2025, gave the exact number and details of Indian jets shot down by the Pakistan Air Force, stating clarity and precision. Through the use of passive constructions, "fighter jets were shot down", the focus is shifted from the actor to outcomes. Military competence and precision are established by using phrases like "six-nil ratio."

Both India and Pakistan assigned religiously inspired names to their military operations. India named its operation Operation Sindoor, while Pakistan referred to its campaign as Operation Bunyan-un-Marsoos, reflecting the strategic use of religious symbolism in framing national military narratives. As per Appraisal Theory, the naming works as a strong indication of communal affinity and positive judgement. Sindoor is a sacred red powder used by married women in Hindu tradition, symbolising devotion, loyalty, and sacrifice. Sindoor thus aligns the military operations as morally righteous and sacred loyalty linked to cultural identity. Such naming positions the populace towards dominant nationalistic identities, pushing for ideological unity and collective moral obligation. At the same time, it normalises state violence as an extension of divine and spiritual decree, thus reducing public scrutiny. As per Halliday’s ideational meta function, the naming encodes cultural practices that repackaged aggressive military action as a spiritual and moral duty. On the other hand, the naming of “Operation Bunyan-un-Marsoos” by Pakistan is a reference to a Quranic verse 61:4, which describes believers standing in ranks equivalent to a “lead-infused walled structure”. It links the operation explicitly with religious text for legitimacy. This alignment appeals to the Muslim populace’s belief system and increases the Pakistan armed forces’ moral righteousness. The religious undertone builds a national identity by combining religious duty with patriotism, suggesting that the operation is divinely inspired and not merely a defensive military action.

The tone of Pakistan's military press briefings invoked intense emotional language, especially on May 11. According to Appraisal Theory, attitudinal resources are used in highly affective phrases like "avenging martyrs." "reserved the right to respond," and "fulfilling promises to the nation", effectively expressing shared sentiment and grievance of the nation. The phrase "avenging martyrs" shows the moral responsibility and great resolve of the military & accentuates the necessity & fairness of their response. Likewise, "fulfilling promises to the nation" exhibits army leadership that is both trustworthy and accountable, presenting a

posture of reliability. These expressions promote armed forces as protectors of the nation's pride and accomplishers of the people's will. It helped instill a sense of national unity based on moral duty and collective action. In contrast, the Indian tone was affect-neutral. The briefings were mostly focused on the logic and correctness of the procedural actions, and statements like "focus," "measure", and "non-escalatory" lacked any emotional resonance. The use of emotionally neutral language signifies high professionalism and restraint and is more systematic and detached compared to Pakistan's discourse.

ISPR constructs a strategic sense of national success in its 11th May briefing by using assertive and dominating linguistic choices. A sense of national identity is reinforced, and language is used as a significant tool to influence and shape public opinion regarding the conflict's outcome through discursive framing. The use of statements like "our forces neutralised the enemy" aptly employs Halliday's transitivity model, with Pakistan being the agent or actor and the enemy being the affected recipient (Goal) of the action. This establishes Pakistan's military command and competence and helps legitimise the nature of the military actions. Additionally, using words like "decisively" and "unquestionably" reflects the outcome as absolute and conclusive, conveying high modality. These expressions are aligned with Halliday's modality framework and show the speaker's resilience and ideological certainty. The strategic use of such linguistic expressions boosts domestic morale, sparks a spirit of collective responsibility, and validates and authorises the military's authority, leaving little room for speculation.

The adjectives "precise," "professional," and "restrained" used by ISPR help raise the military's moral standards by portraying it as well-disciplined and moral. By following this strategy, military organisations emphasise the importance of addressing any unprofessional or unethical behaviour on the part of military members. Positioning the military as a professional strengthens people's confidence in the state and gives its actions in the military field worldwide legitimacy. Using "fortress of resilience" and "shield of the motherland" as metaphors creates a vivid picture of real strength, evoking a sense of patriotism and increased confidence in the military. They emphasise the military's role in defending the nation and highlight it as a defender. Such metaphors not only make the talk more emotional but also rely on stories from history and culture to reinforce the view of the military as the nation's primary defender.

On May 11, 2025, Pakistan's ISPR and India's PIB rely on pronouns, metaphors, and lexemes to construct national identity and undermine the enemy as a means of reinforcing the polarisation. Both employ inclusive "we" to build solidarity and "they" to demarcate the other. ISPR presents Pakistan as a "shield" and "fortress" and dubs the adversary "invaders" and "terrorists". PIB introduces itself as "guardians of peace", and inquires if the enemy would be anything other than "destabilisers" and "provocative". Both assert moral superiority by presenting their actions as limited and justifiable self-defence: modal verbs like "must" and "had to" emphasise legitimacy, and euphemisms like "collateral damage" downplay adverse effects. They use international law and diplomacy to bolster their moral standing by framing the enemy as the aggressor and sustaining postwar political narratives.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article presents a comparative analysis of the narratives constructed by Pakistan's ISPR and India's PIB during and after the 2025 ceasefire. It examines how both institutions meticulously constituted themselves

as both victors and victims, employing cautious rhetoric. By observing linguistic features such as pronouns, metaphors, modality, transitivity, and face-saving mechanisms, the study shows how these components work together to argue and maintain national identity, optimise legitimacy, and challenge the enemy (Fairclough, 1995; Dijk, 1998).

ISPR's description exhibits a confident tone and a victorious narrative, employing positive, bold language and active voice constructions that underscore Pakistan's decisiveness. This is achieved by strongly utilising categorical modalities and material processes, which further emphasises moral clarity and dominance in the field. On the contrary, PIB constitutes a rather careful and diplomatically aware narrative. It is consistently presented in the passive voice and employs modal hedging to justify Indian actions and demonstrate compliance within the international framework. This demonstrates their preference for ethical correctness over military assertiveness (Martin & White, 2005). Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005) demonstrates that evaluative language communicates judgements and feelings in representing victory as both a factual and a moral triumph. Empirical work demonstrates that victory framing is a strategy for handling morale and legitimising force both during and after conflict (Koller, 2008; Wodak, 2009). In sum, the language of military victory is a language of ideology-informed, convoluted processes regarding public knowledge and national belonging. ISPR and PIB both base their rhetoric of the 2025 conflict on historical context, previous wars, and foreign invasions to create a broader national and international narrative. Historical referencing optimises the perceptions created and the importance of their respective roles in protecting national sovereignty and defending against external offence (Wodak, 2009).

Pakistan's ISPR presents the ceasefire as a strategic pause in the context of a military victory, highlighting authority and power. By contrast, India's PIB describes the ceasefire as a diplomatic, responsible position towards peace, framing agentless, modal-root passive constructions to emphasise shared induction of such a responsible position and disregard reputation costs. Both employ face-saving language and ambiguity. ISPR talks about a 'strategic pause' after a 'decisive blow', and PIB uses passive phrases like a ceasefire was agreed upon in order to preserve legitimacy and conceal stalemate and to balance the credibility of their respective claims with the tender shoot of ceasefire negotiations.

Both Pakistan's ISPR and India's PIB employ various forms of intertextual reference in their press conferences to encompass the war and the ceasefire within a broader scope of historical and political significance. They do so by invoking national memories, especially of war deaths. ISPR celebrates the spirit and sacrifice of Pakistani soldiers, and PIB notes casualties as a reason for restraint and peace. Each point to foreign mediation to posit the ceasefire as a measure of a responsible peace process. Such references relate the conflict to osmotic narratives, solidifying ideological positions and structural authority by situating 2025 within a larger history of resistance and resolution.

The military script is a significant ideological tool that constructs notions of success and morality, influencing national myth-building and political legitimacy in both wartime and peacetime. Koller (Wintermute, 2020) highlights rhetorical devices such as metaphor, euphemism, and evaluative, persuasive language to convey military operations as "necessary" and "ethical" and the enemy as "criminal" or "subhuman." This study shows how powerful rhetorical appeals and tools like metaphors, pronouns, transitivity, and affective language were used by both sides. ISPR linked the ceasefire with strategic victory and strength and developed

a discourse that reflected national integrity and military success. In contrast, PIB used heavy passive constructions to project a sense that all the war actions and decisions were taken after due consideration and with full responsibility. Meanwhile, through passivity, they also tried to link the ceasefire with peace and diplomacy.

Speech that accentuates winning and the idea of "Us versus Them" increases hostility, blocks any efforts towards peace, and supports the growth of more problems. In contrast, expressing mutual sadness, encouraging everyone to be involved, and presenting peace as a team effort can improve the situation and bring people closer together. When persuading people that ceasefires are mutual steps, rather than just their groups giving up, there is a greater potential for lasting peace (Chilton, 2004). Analyses of South Asian military rhetoric have shown a repetition of these very patterns, relying on "self/other" binaries, heroism, and victimhood to mobilise nationalism as well as legitimise wars (Ahmed, 2017). Reisigl & Wodak's (2009) analysis of the CDC reveals how military jargon upholds power, constructs collective memory, and employs face-saving strategies in a society involved in military conflict.

This study is specifically grounded in the official military press briefings delivered between 7 and 11 May 2025 during the recent Pak-India military conflict. As such, the findings are highly context-specific and should not be generalised beyond the immediate discourse examined. The study does not account for audience reception or broader media framing, which limits the scope of its conclusions. Future research could adopt a longitudinal design to trace how military narratives evolve in response to public sentiment and media discourse. Comparative cross-case studies could also provide insights into how different geopolitical contexts shape military communication. Additionally, further investigation is needed into the role of digital and social media platforms in shaping, amplifying, or contesting official military narratives.

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