Book Review

A Corpus-Based Analysis of Discourses on the Belt and Road Initiative: Corpora and the Belt and Road Initiative by Muhammad Afzaal, 2023, Springer, pp., 147, price £105.78. ISBN 978-9811996184.

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Conceived to catalyse connectivity and economic cooperation across the span of Asia, Africa as well as Europe, China’s colossal Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents, amongst other things, the country’s efforts to step up to its role as a global economic leader. Despite China’s projection of BRI as a benign and altruistic initiative to bring about global prosperity, in some quarters, a perception persists that ‘BRI could be a Trojan horse for China-led regional development and military expansion’. Since its launch, the Belt and Road Initiative has drawn massive international attention (Niu and Relly 2021) and given rise to a plethora of polarized opinions and narratives on the nature of BRI (Afzaal 2019).

Given that media and news coverage of BRI plays an influential role in shaping public opinions of the project, the volume under review- A Corpus-Based Analysis of Discourses on the Belt and Road Initiative-is a timely contribution to how CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) under the umbrella of BRI is perceived regionally and internationally. Aimed at providing China with a sea corridor through the Arabian Sea and linking it with the Middle East and Eurasia, CPEC serves as a key cornerstone of China’s vision to revive the legendary Silk Route of Sino trade and create global connectivity via the implementation of BRI. A ‘$62 billion connectivity project envisioned to stretch from the western Chinese city of Kashgar to Pakistan’s Arabian Sea port of Gwadar, located near Iran and Persian Gulf shipping lanes’ (Wilson Center 2017), CPEC is a project that has attracted a swath of conflicting sentiments, depending on how the perceivers are positioned in relation to CPEC. From India’s apprehensions that CPEC is an ‘instrument of influence rather than an integrating development strategy’ (Eriksson 2017), USA’s wariness regarding the initiative from the geostrategic perspective and Pakistan’s view of CPEC as being
a ‘gamechanger’ (Shah 2018), CPEC has provided much food for thought amongst the analysts, academics, media and policymakers. Against this backdrop, *A Corpus-Based Analysis of Discourses on the Belt and Road Initiative* furnishes key insights into how Indian and Pakistani media portrayals of CPEC are driven by the respective positions and agendas of the two countries. Corpus based critical discourse analysis has gained greater traction in investigations aimed at comparing the positions taken by China and other key players such as the USA (Teo and Xu 2023), the United Kingdom (Zhang and Wu 2017), Russia (Kuteleva and Vasiliev 2021) as well as Australia (Jiang 2021) as such a methodological approach provides valuable empirical insights on a significant topic.

The volume *A Corpus-Based Analysis of Discourses on the Belt and Road Initiative*, by Muhammad Afzaal amalgamates corpus-based discourse analysis to probe the attitudes towards the CPEC project evidenced Pakistan and India, neighbours to China, rivals to each other and respectively centre stage and peripheral stakeholders in the context of CPEC. Adopting a corpus-based critical discourse analysis, Afzaal examines media discourses which frame the CPEC issue and project within leading Indian and Pakistani English language publications. The overarching aim of the volume is to use a robust empirical approach to investigate how media within Pakistan and India led by their respective agendas position CPEC.

Consisting of seven chapters, the volume commences by mapping the conceptual evolution, historical trajectory of BRI and CPEC as well as the neighbouring countries’ perceptions of the project, particularly through the prism of a utilitarian lens (Sharma 2019) in Chapter one. Chapter one is also used to explore the innovative corpus-based critical discourse analytical approach adopted in the volume to identify the framing of CPEC within Pakistani and Indian newspaper discourses. The chapter closes with the research questions and objectives underpinning the study reported in the volume.

Exploring the theoretical foundations of the research, Chapter two begins by introducing BRI briefly before progressing to a review of related literature on CDA (critical discourse analysis) and CL (corpus linguistics) and their assimilation in the form of corpus-based critical discourse analysis. Delineating theorizations of CDA by leading theorists on the subject (e.g., Wodak, Fairclough, and Van Dijk 1995), Chapter two examines key studies focusing on language, ideology and the power of media. The chapter then sheds light on Faircloughian CDA and the integration of this analytical approach with language-related and sociological variables supported by the CL tools. Next, the chapter traces historical and geographical context of Pakistan and China’s relationship, with specific reference to the Iron Brothers metaphor used to characterize the relationship of the two neighbouring countries, One Belt
One Road (OBOR) which stands as precursor to BRI and the Gwadar Port. Such background information provides important context for the contrary stances towards China and CPEC adopted by Pakistan and India in chapters to follow.

Chapter 3 elaborates on the approach adopted to integrate CDA with CL. Taking stock of the tri-dimensional CDA framework grounded in the Faircloughian perspective, Chapter 3 provides a comparison of Faircloughian CDA with the corpus-based CDA approach advocated by Baker and McEnery. Subsequently, the chapter examines research exemplifying the integration of CDA and CL, and explicates how CDA which is essentially a qualitative approach can be successfully merged with statistical data analysis by means of corpus-based critical discourse analysis as suggested by Baker (2006) and deployed in the study reported within the volume. The chapter provides details of the scope of data collection and the dataset comprising newspaper corpora in the form of the Pakistan English Newspaper Corpus and Indian English Newspaper Corpus drawn from newspapers published over the span of 2012–2019. Chapter 3 also presents details of the corpus software AntConc and a range of corpus techniques (e.g., concordance lines, ngrams, as well as keyword analysis) deployed within the investigation reported in the volume.

Chapter 4 discusses the application of corpus-based CDA to the analysis of selected English newspapers in Pakistan. Tabulated word frequencies as well as collocates of key terms calculated on the basis of the T-score are used to delineate the perceptions of CPEC and BRI in Pakistani publications. Beyond statistics, the chapter also presents analysis based on the analysis of concordance lines consisting of key terms defining BRI in the chosen publications, (e.g., “CPEC”, “BRI”, “China”, “We”). Probing the positive and negative attitudes manifested through the use of “we” in the concordance lines, the chapter indexes some negative media coverage in domestic media within Pakistan which represents divergence from the complete support to the initiative offered by the Pakistani government (Afzaal 2023).

Chapter 5 progresses to examine the Indian media’s perceptions of BRI and CPEC within the selected publications. Analysis based on frequency, prevalent bigrams, and concordance analysis pertaining to key words explored in analysis of Pakistani English newspapers, (is presented in Chapter 5). To showcase the challenging perceptions of BRI in Indian media, the chapter shows how the word “threat”, and its modifiers dominate the discourses within the Indian corpus of English newspapers examined within the study reported herein. Given the importance of ‘we’ as a key markers marker of ‘institutional identity’, and in-group identity (p. 98), the analysis also focuses on an examination of ‘we’ dominant sentences in the Indian English Newspaper Corpus. Based on analysis of the data, the chapter reveals
that the Indian media tends to position BRI negatively, transforming what is essentially an ‘economic project into political dimension’ (p. 103).

Subsequent to standalone analysis and examination of the two newspaper corpora, Chapter 6 first contrasts the keyword list in the corpora to showcase the diverging perceptions of BRI and CPEC within Pakistani and Indian media. Moving past the discursive practices evident in the newspaper discourses, the chapter probes social and cultural behaviours to unpack the underpinning political motivations for positioning the negative or positive portrayals of BRI and CPEC. After taking into account the geo-political factors and the dynamics of Pakistan-India relations, Chapter 6 examines the influence of the US, a major global player, on the media discourses analysed within the present volume. At the end, CPEC, a colossal economic project aimed at catalyzing economic revival in Pakistan, is selected as prism for understanding the prevalent attitudes and feelings towards BRI in Pakistan and India.

Chapter 7 concludes the volume by going over the key findings of the research including how BRI and CPEC are perceived and portrayed within Pakistani and Indian newspaper discourses. This chapter also discusses the limitations of the study in relation to the scope of the corpus and the analytical procedures. It flags the need to extend the analysis by including more publications in vernacular languages as well as data from interviews carried out with political figures in order to better gauge perceptions of BRI and CPEC from different vantage points.

Across the span of seven chapters, A Corpus-Based Analysis of Discourses on the Belt and Road Initiative not only provides an in-depth examination of the depiction of BRI in Pakistani and Indian news discourses but also reveals the political factors driving these portrayals. Methodologically, the volume offers an insightful and useful guide for applying corpus tools integrated with critical discourse analysis. While the volume serves as a good exemplar of CDA integrated CL investigation of newspaper discourses, it has some limitations. For example, the datasets are based on corpora drawn from English publications in Pakistan and India and therefore do not take into account portrayals of BRI in vernacular publications popular amongst the readership in both countries. Therefore, the findings drawn from the analysis of only English newspapers may not offer a complete account of how BRI is perceived and portrayed across the span of Pakistani and Indian publications published in local languages likely to enjoy a larger readership. Further, the addition of sentiment analysis which has already been deployed to gauge perceptions of significant events may be a value addition to the corpus-based analysis tools employed in the present study.

Nevertheless, the volume under review is accessible and showcases the writer’s wide-ranging insights on the implementation of BRI in South Asia, thus
allowing the audience to capture how media portrayals frame issues and initiatives to promote particular stances and attitudes towards the latter. The plethora of examples and extended analysis within the volume make it a sound resource for social studies researchers and the adoption of innovative methodology foster a move towards the blending of qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate complex issues. Thus, this book is more than a valuable resource for researchers interested in large-scale and significant public events, their ramifications and the motivations and dynamics of key stakeholders.

References

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