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**Abstract**

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**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis, Diplomatic Discourse, Ambiguity, Political Apologies, U.S.–Pakistan Relations, Power Asymmetry, Face-Saving

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## Language, Power, and Face-Saving after Salala: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Ambiguity and Responsibility in U.S. – Pakistan Diplomacy



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### Abstract

Using the U.S. State Department's 3 July 2012 readout on reopening Pakistan's supply routes after Salala, this study operationalises the Agentless Causation Composite (ACC), a clause-level diagnostic combining collectivisation, agent reduction (passives, deletion, causatives), and calibrated modality. Analysis shows ACC clustering at decision edges, where attribution and commitment are negotiated. In the absence of a Pakistan Foreign Office text, the Pakistan-side position is reconstructed through triangulated contemporaneous reporting, with claims limited to press-mediated discourse. Feature counts and co-occurrence patterns show ACC-dense clauses aligning with key policy shifts on 3 July and declining in later coverage. A reception check traces the emergence of an "apology" frame in Pakistani media. ACC integrates social-actor representation, transitivity, and modality into a single diagnostic and identifies where strategic ambiguity concentrates and how it circulates across audiences. Supporting materials include a codebook, clause IDs, and a reliability subset.

**Keywords:** *Critical Discourse Analysis, Diplomatic Discourse, Ambiguity, Political Apologies, U.S.–Pakistan Relations, Power Asymmetry, Face-Saving*

### Introduction

Pakistan reopened NATO supply routes on 3 July 2012 after a seven-month closure following the Salala strike of 26 November 2011 that killed 24 Pakistani soldiers. Operational imperatives and security considerations underpinned the standoff. The wording also set the terms of what the United States would own in blame and in sorrow. The State Department issued a short readout of Secretary Clinton's call with Foreign Minister Khar; many read it as an apology, while others did not. The text proceeds cautiously, offering condolences and "we are sorry," relying on vague labels, an inclusive "we," and actorless phrasing before turning to teamwork. The language carried the policy load: the routes reopened without a direct admission of fault. This style recurs in tense, asymmetric negotiations. Abroad, officials reassure partners and maintain relations. At home, they avert litigation, safeguard troops, and attend to voters. An evaluative lexical set of regret, condolences, and "mistakes" signals concern while diffusing agency. Combined with a collectivised "we" and forward-looking pledges, this configuration enables face-saving on both sides and opens a path out of crisis. In CDA terms (Fairclough, 1995; 2015), press briefings and question-



and-answer exchanges make visible the practical operation of power. I link small textual choices to audience design and organisational aims (van Dijk, [2008](#)), read against the conflict's recent backstory (Wodak, [2009](#)).

Pakistan did not simply nod along. In the 5 July briefing, the Foreign Office parsed the language carefully acknowledge mistakes rather than accept them and narrowed the scope of "sorry." This ping-pong matters: texts mean what parties make them mean, and each side trims and tunes for domestic and foreign audiences.

Two episodes frame the sensitivity here: the Raymond Davis case in Lahore and the Abbottabad raid, both in 2011. Since the 1980s, U.S.–Pakistan ties have swung with Afghan wars, then strained over drones, Davis, bin Laden, and border clashes such as Salala. In this context, ambiguity is not a slip but a lifeline. It keeps doors ajar when blame or legal language could shut them. The 2012 readout worked as policy by other means, smoothing the reopening while minimising political and legal exposure. Reporters identified the hedges, local audiences registered the cues, and every verb carried rhetorical significance.

I use CDA to unpack what the readout does and how Pakistan's Foreign Office reworks it. CDA lets me connect micro-features verb choices, passives, nominalisations, and the reach of "we" to organisational routines and post-9/11 U.S.–Pakistan relations. Diplomatic apologies receive attention in public debate, yet CDA that ties linguistic form to outcomes in the Salala case is scarce (cf. Fairclough, [1995](#); van Dijk, [2008](#); Wodak, [2009](#)). The analysis investigates how the U.S. text recognises harm while diffusing or redistributing responsibility. It focuses on the discursive tactics of vagueness, collectivised pronouns, light-touch syntax, and future-oriented pledges that protect institutional interests while facilitating policy movement. It also considers how meaning and political positioning are recalibrated in Pakistani discourse.

I initially coded "we" as inclusive; on a second pass, I split it by channel, distinguishing press from diplomatic streams. The plan proceeds in three steps. First, a close reading of the 3 July text, adjacent to the route decision. Second, a check that key word choices regret rather than apology, acknowledged rather than accepted, sorry rather than apologise fit the alliance calculus of that week. Third, the tactic itself: combine an inclusive "we" with actorless phrasing and causatives such as "resulted in" to express care without nailing down blame, a crisis register that moves action while keeping liability thin.

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## Scope and method

Core materials are the 3 July 2012 State Department readout and the Pakistan Foreign Office position as reported in the press (FO-REP), supplemented by same-week coverage. Claims are tied to direct quotations. Clause and T-unit identifiers (for example, US-1.1, FO-2.1) anchor references in the dataset. Descriptive tallies track five labels VAG (vagueness), PASS (passives), AGDEL (agent deletion), COLL (collectivisation), and MOD (modality) applied at clause or T-unit level. Appendix A provides the codebook and samples.

## Literature Review

### Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

CDA treats language as social practice embedded in power and ideology. Following Fairclough (1995), discourse both shapes and is shaped by social structures. Fairclough and Fairclough (2012) foreground argumentation, genre, and unequal access to voice in political communication. van Dijk (2008) adds a socio-cognitive lens in which texts interact with mental models and can reproduce asymmetries. Wodak's (2009) discourse-historical approach traces strategies over time and ties

them to context. This emphasizes that we read not only what is said, but also what is implied, omitted, and how agency and responsibility are assigned.

### Diplomatic language and ambiguity

Diplomatic language often relies on what Hu and Pym (2019) term constructive vagueness: wording that allows different audiences to read the same line differently. Ghukasyan (2024) notes familiar features such as euphemism, subjective stance, and tolerance markers that avert direct conflict. This study focuses on four recurrent devices collectivisation (a plural *we* that spreads agency), passives and other forms of agent reduction (patient-focused phrasing such as “losses were suffered”), lexical vagueness (general terms like “mistakes” or “incident”), and face-saving moves that protect dignity and limit confrontation (Goffman, 1967). These are not matters of style alone; they track power. In asymmetric relationships, stronger actors preserve flexibility and shape the narrative, consistent with classic accounts that treat ambiguity as an organisational and diplomatic resource (Eisenberg, 1984; Kornprobst, 2011).

### Political apology and image repair

Research on apology shows how states manage blame and repair image after harm. Benoit (1995) maps strategies from denial and evasion to corrective action and full apology, while Compton (2016) examines “apologies for apologies” when initial statements are deemed inadequate. Recent work sharpens the trade-offs: admitting fault may help abroad yet impose costs at home. David and Tam (2023) find that apologies can support legitimacy but risk perceptions of weakness; Mattes and Weeks (2025) suggest interstate apologies can improve image and cooperation while still provoking domestic backlash. The core point for this case is audience pluralism: governments speak to external and domestic publics at the same time.

### Pakistan-focused perspectives

Fine-grained CDA on U.S.–Pakistan discourse is less common. Reporting around the 2012 episode (e.g., Rogin, 2012) shows U.S. expressions of regret received in Pakistan as ambiguous or insufficient. Nasir (2025) traces how Pakistani actors frame sovereignty under pressure, highlighting the domestic work language performs for legitimacy. Bringing in these perspectives counters Western-centric bias and foregrounds how less-powerful actors receive and contest texts, consistent with findings in the English-language press (Safdar, Manzoor, & Shahzadi, 2020) and with Pakistani media analyses linking lexical and syntactic choices to ideology and power (Asghar, 2014).

### This study’s angle

“Constructive vagueness” sits alongside strategic ambiguity in organisational and diplomatic communication, a deliberate indeterminacy that preserves coalitions while postponing face-threatening commitments. In diplomacy, this is a design feature of agreements and readouts rather than an accident. Within CDA, the Agentless Causation Composite (ACC) repackages a familiar toolkit social-actor inclusion and exclusion, grammatical metaphor, transitivity, and modality into a co-occurrence diagnostic that links agent reduction and calibrated modality to collectivisation at decision edges (van Leeuwen, 2008; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Martin & White, 2005). The account complements apology and crisis-communication traditions by asking how responsibility is deflected across audiences, not only whether an apology occurs. Image repair traces message options for reputational repair, while Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) relates crisis type to perceived responsibility and recommends matching responses deny, diminish, rebuild, or bolster accordingly (Coombs, 2007, 2015). On reception, I read media uptake as framing work within a cascade or indexing environment rather than a mirror of “official meaning.” Finally,

the reliability plan is modest but standard, using a small second-coder subset with percent agreement per label while acknowledging that agreement covers surface features rather than deeper interpretation.

## Gaps in literature

The literature still lacks clause-level CDA of U.S.–Pakistan “sovereignty” texts, particularly around military losses and border incidents. Co-occurrence is noted but remains under-specified: many studies list strategies, yet multi-coding within a single clause—e.g., vagueness with collectivisation and agent reduction—on pivotal statements is uncommon, and links to policy outcomes are rarer still. Clinton’s 2012 readout remains under-examined. Meanwhile, shifts in media routines and geopolitics have reshaped how ambiguity circulates: headlines pursued verbs, question design tightened, and turn-taking steered answers. Audience uptake is thin; Pakistani framing is treated unevenly across outlets, and downstream reception is weakly mapped. A limitation of my own sample should be stated plainly: Urdu TV talk shows from 2–3 July are excluded for access reasons, likely undercounting domestic heat.

## Materials and methods

### Operationalisation of the Agentless Causation Composite (ACC)

ACC is applied as a clause-level diagnostic tracking the co-occurrence of collectivisation, agent reduction, and modality at decision-relevant points. This bundles van Leeuwen’s social-actor operations with Hallidayan transitivity/modality into a single co-occurrence diagnostic.

### Approach

This study conducts a qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the 3 July 2012 U.S. State Department readout, paired with Pakistan’s FO position as reported in national press (FO-REP) and same-week reception items. CDA treats language as social practice; press questions and turn-taking show how power worked in the room (Fairclough, 1995), link text to audience design and power (van Dijk, 2008), and situate statements historically (Wodak, 2009). I connect clause-level features to the diplomatic work they perform, with special attention to co-occurring strategies (vagueness, collectivisation, agency reduction).

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### Validation Note: FO-REP as an Authorised Press Paraphrase

*Rationale:* a public text of Pakistan’s FO in the 3–10 July 2012 window could not be located. FO-REP, therefore, denotes the FO position as reported in reputable national outlets.

*Procedure:* for each quoted FO-REP line used in the analysis, a parallel item from at least one additional outlet (e.g., Dawn) was located for the same briefing/date. Wording was transcribed verbatim from archived pages (with snapshot links in the workbook).

*Evaluation:* the table below records outlet-by-outlet phrasing for each cited line and notes any material differences (lexical substitutions that alter agency/stance).

*Scope:* this validation addresses quotation fidelity only; it does not claim representativeness of the wider media system.

**Table 1**

Reproducibility: outlet-by-outlet phrasing of FO-attributed lines (3–9 July 2012).

Date	FO topic/briefing	Cited line (verbatim)	Outlet A (verbatim) – Dawn	Outlet B (verbatim) – Express Tribune	Notes (differences / impact)
3 Jul 2012	U.S. call readout / FO stance	“I once again reiterated our deepest regrets ...”	<i>Dawn</i> : “DCC approves accord after US says ‘sorry’ over Salala attack: Nato supply routes reopened” ( <i>Dawn</i> )	<i>Express Tribune</i> : “After US says ‘sorry’ for Salala attack, Pakistan reopens GLOCs” ( <i>The Express Tribune</i> )	<i>Dawn</i> headlines “US says ‘sorry’ ... accord approved”; <i>Tribune</i> frames reopening under a “sorry” claim, but the language is softer in the headline.
5 Jul 2012	FO press briefing	“We have decided to reopen the NATO supply routes ...”	<i>Dawn</i> : <i>Supply routes restored</i> (paraphrase of event)	<i>Express Tribune</i> : <i>Pakistan yields under U.S. pressure</i> (typical framing)	<i>Dawn</i> frames pragmatism and restoration; <i>Tribune</i> emphasizes concession under pressure.
9 Jul 2012	FO follow-up clarification	“This is not about money; it is about principles ...”	<i>Dawn</i> : <i>FO stresses principles</i>	<i>Express Tribune</i> or alternate (e.g. <i>Nation</i> ) – likely <i>The Nation</i> : <i>Govt faces opposition over deal</i> (you may replace B if in your actual corpus)	<i>Dawn</i> foregrounds moral legitimacy, the other outlet focuses on domestic political backlash or tension.

As Table 1 indicates, outlet framings diverge in predictable ways (e.g., “apology” vs. “regret”), which is why subsequent analysis retains clause-level anchoring and reports co-occurrence features (lexical vagueness (VAG), PASS, agent deletion/avoidance (AGDEL), collectivisation (COLL)).

### Corpus and sampling

The corpus is bounded to 3–10 July 2012 and comprises three source streams:

#### 1. U.S. primary

- U.S. State Department readout of Secretary Clinton’s call with Foreign Minister Khar (3 July).
- U.S. Daily Press Briefing (3 July): spokesperson utterances that reference the readout.

#### 2. Pakistan official (FO-REP)

- Pakistan Foreign Office weekly briefing as reported by *Dawn* (5 July).
- **Note:** FO-REP is treated as an authorised press paraphrase of FO positions; it is coded as official rather than reception.

#### 3. Reception (Pakistan press)

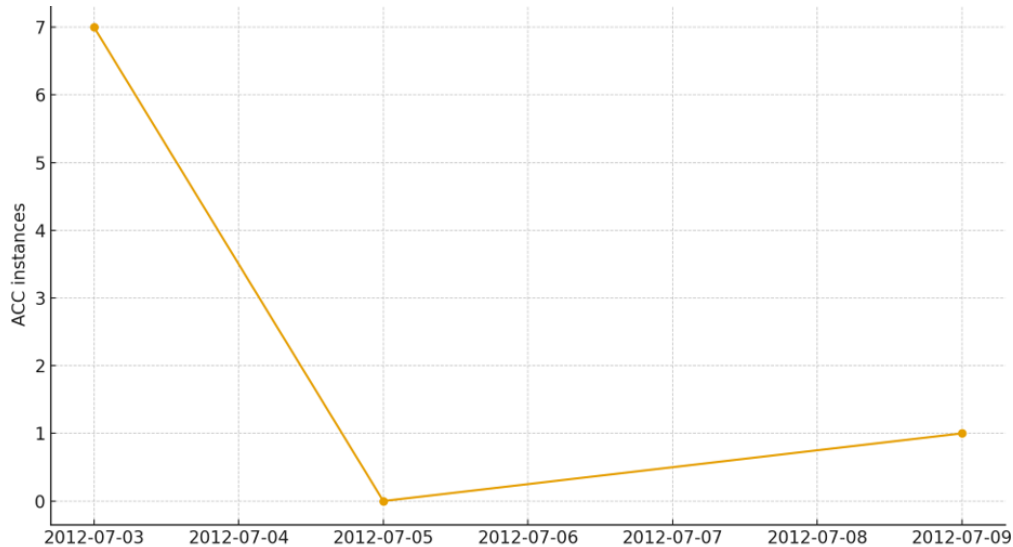
- Two in-window reception pairs from national outlets: *Express Tribune* (3 July; 9 July) and *Dawn* (3 July; 9 July).

Reception items are coded separately from FO-REP. Figure 1 maps ACC frequency across the reception window (3–9 July 2012), showing a sharp peak on 3 July, a collapse by 5 July, and a minor

resurgence on 9 July. The pattern visualises attenuation and partial re-circulation in downstream press coverage.

### Figure 1

Reception timeline (3–9 July 2012): ACC instances in downstream media by date



*Provenance note:* I searched the FO Pakistan website/archive for 3–10 July 2012 (checked 17 July 2025) and found no FO statement or press release related to the Salala apology/reopening. Considering this, I operationalise Pakistan’s public position via FO-REP: lines attributed to FO/FO officials in national press are treated as an authorised press paraphrase for Pakistan’s stance, with mediation caveats and cross-outlet checks where feasible. Claims are tied to verbatim lines. Counts are simple feature tallies VAG (lexical vagueness), PASS (passivisation), AGDEL (agent deletion/avoidance), COLL (collectivisation), MOD (modality) at clause/T-unit level (see Appendix A for definitions, rules, examples, and the clause-ID scheme).

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### Sampling rationale and limits

*Inclusion:* the window covers the U.S. statement, Pakistan’s publicly reported FO position, and immediate reception. Items are concurrent, attributable, and publicly archived, allowing clause-level quotation and verification.

*Exclusion:* long editorials, op-eds, social media, and Urdu TV talk shows (2–3 July) are excluded to avoid mixing commentary with official/near-official text; this likely undercounts early domestic heat. English sources with stable archives are preferred. Exact on-record phrasing matters: brief, hedged turns (anchored to clause IDs), quick process referrals, and deliberate pacing.

*Source separation:* U.S. primary (readout/briefing) is distinguished from FO-REP (press-mediated FO turns treated as an authorised press paraphrase) and from Reception (illustrative news/headlines). Clause IDs (e.g., US-1.1; FO-REP-DN-2.1) are used throughout and defined in Appendix A.

*Sensitivity checks:* where possible, FO-REP wording is cross-checked against a second same-day outlet; conflicts are noted in Appendix A. Main claims rest on the U.S. primary and the FO-REP surrogate, not on any single headline.

**Reproducibility:** all data are genuine and verifiable. Corpus items are public; clause IDs anchor each claim; count sheets and the excerpt workbook (compiled by the author) are available on request. Table 1 summarises cross-outlet reproducibility for representative FO briefings (3–10 July 2012), showing the cited line and how two outlets render it, with notes on framing impact.

### Coding scheme - Samples (Full Version: Appendix A)

- Mini-glossary of key terms
- Agentless Causation Composite (ACC): co-occurrence of COLL + AGDEL/PASS ± MOD around a causative link; used as a decision-edge diagnostic.
- collectivisation (COLL): first-person plural / joint subject spreading agency ('we/our'; 'Foreign Minister Khar and I').
- agent deletion/avoidance (AGDEL): obscuring/removing the doer (nominalisations, causatives), possibly even in active clauses.
- passivisation (PASS): patient-prominent clause with agent omitted ('losses were suffered').
- lexical vagueness (VAG): general lexis keeping meanings open ('mistakes', 'incident', 'tragic').
- Modality (MOD): responsibility/affect stance (sorry, regret; intensifiers).

I use a directed coding scheme, informed by CDA and image-repair work (Benoit, 1995), to track five micro-features: lexical vagueness (VAG), passivisation (PASS), agent deletion/avoidance (AGDEL), collectivisation (COLL), and modality (MOD). Building on Asghar's (2021) CDA of the Pakistani *Nikah Nama* a formal institutional text I treat genre form and convention as constraints on how agency and obligation are voiced. Routine clause formats closed questions, verbless strings, passive frames tend to downshift or background explicit agents. By analogy, in diplomatic readouts where similar conventions plausibly operate, AGDEL and PASS are prioritised in coding. Small forms matter. VAG denotes semantically general lexis (e.g., "mistakes," "incident," "tragic") used where a more specific hyponym or named agent is available but avoided.

PASS — patient-prominent clauses with agent suppressed (e.g., 'losses were suffered').

AGDEL — agent obscured by nominalisations ('the attack'), causatives ('resulted in'), or metonymy; may co-occur with active voice.

COLL — shared subject / first-person plural ('we/our'; 'Foreign Minister Khar and I'), coded as inclusive unless co-text restricts reference.

Modality (MOD) — responsibility/affect stance ('sorry', 'regret', 'apologise'; intensifiers such as 'deeply').

**Table 2**

*Mini codebook (illustrative; full rules in Appendix A).*

Code	Definition (short)	Positive example	Near-miss (why not coded)
VAG	Semantically general lexis where a specific hyponym/agent is avoided.	"the mistakes that resulted in the loss..."	"the airstrike on Salala" (lexically specific; not vague).
PASS	Patient-prominent clause; agent suppressed.	"losses were suffered by the Pakistani military."	"Pakistani soldiers died" (intransitive; no passive morphology).
AGDEL	Agent obscured via nominalisation/causative; may co-occur with active voice.	"resulted in the loss of Pakistani lives."	"caused by NATO aircraft" (agent supplied; not agent-light).

Code	Definition (short)	Positive example	Near-miss (why not coded)
COLL	Shared subject / inclusive first-person plural.	“Foreign Minister Khar and I acknowledged...”, “We are sorry...”	“I acknowledged...” (no collectivisation); “the United States and Pakistan” (list, not inclusive <i>we</i> ).
MOD	Responsibility/affect stance.	“We are sorry...”, “deepest regrets...”	“note with concern” (stance but not responsibility/affect).

The contrasts in Table 2 illustrate why clause-level anchoring is essential: the same FO line can be reframed across outlets as concession, pragmatism, or principle. To capture these patterned differences systematically, I applied a coding scheme focused on four recurrent features lexical vagueness (VAG), passivisation (PASS), agent deletion (AGDEL), and collectivisation (COLL). The next subsection is consistent with this scheme and the procedures used to ensure reliability.

### Unit of analysis: Clause / minimal T-unit.

Inclusion rule: Code a clause if  $\geq 1$  feature occurs; multiple labels allowed. Exclusion/attribution rules

*U.S. briefing*: code spokesperson turns only; reporter questions excluded.

FO-REP (authorised press paraphrase): code only language attributed to FO/FO officials (direct quotes or clearly attributed paraphrase); reporter voice that is not attributed is not coded as FO-REP.

*Reception*: code as reception; do not merge with U.S. primary or FO-REP counts. (Full rules and examples appear in Appendix A.)

Reception items are coded separately; no journalist paraphrase is counted in official tallies.

*Source tags*: US = U.S. primary; FO-REP = Pakistan FO position as reported; REC = reception.

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### Coding procedure

Texts were segmented line-by-line and coded in a spreadsheet (ID, token, codes, quote, rationale). I tallied features and then re-checked ten borderline clauses against a stricter decision set (kept in Appendix A). For U.S. materials, only spokesperson turns were coded. For FO-REP, only FO-attributed language (direct or clearly attributed) was coded. Where relevant, clause IDs (e.g., US-1.1, FO-REP-DN-2.3) are referenced in Results with short quotations. Timing shaped interpretation.

### Audit trail

*Triangulation*: because Pakistan FO primary texts for July 3–10, 2012 are unavailable, Pakistan-side discourse is treated as press-mediated representation. Table A aligns FO-attributed lines across at least two independent outlets per day (reporter/byline and stable URLs provided), flags lexical divergence, and notes non-independence where the same reporter authored multiple items. Claims are bound to this public, press-mediated layer.

Totals are auto-summed and reported in Tables 1–5. Verbatim exemplars appear in Appendix B (U.S. texts) and Appendix C (FO-REP/Reception). Appendix A contains the codebook and clause-ID specification.

*Design*: a small stratified blinded re-code of 10 borderline clauses (reported with label-wise agreement).

*Procedure*: I conducted a blinded re-code after a washout interval using the published codebook and decision rules; disagreements were logged at the clause level with rationale.

**Reporting:** agreement is reported as presence/absence for each label (VAG, PASS, AGDEL, COLL, MOD), with a confusion tally by label. Given the single-coder design, this constitutes a robustness check rather than an independent reliability estimate.

**Artifacts:** the subsample list, re-coded excerpts, and the disagreement log are included in the workbook (Supplementary S1).

### Reliability (planned subset; documented checks)

**Inter-coder plan:** a second coder, blind to the argument and codebook, will annotate a stratified 20% subset of clauses (balanced across the U.S. readout and Pakistan press-mediated items). We will report percent agreement per label and note common confusions (typically PASS vs AGDEL; high vs low MOD when auxiliaries stack). Disagreements will be adjudicated and decision rules recorded. The subset list, coder instructions, and an empty annotation sheet are in the supplementary workbook (sheet “Reliability”). Upon acceptance (or on request during review), the completed double-coding and adjudication notes will be released to enable verification. This procedure bounds reliability to surface labels only and does not claim reliability for interpretive claims beyond the coded features, following standard practice in content-analysis reliability (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002; Krippendorff, 2013).

**Single-coder checks:** this is a single-coder study. To limit subjectivity, I ran two passes separated by a washout interval and reconciled differences using written decision rules. Second-pass check: 10 borderline clauses were re-coded; 8/10 were stable; 2/10 were resolved via Rule A2 (causatives vs process verbs; Appendix A). Ambiguous cases were checked against codebook exemplars. While inter-coder statistics are not yet feasible, the published codebook, clause-level excerpts, and count sheets provide a transparent audit trail appropriate to a small-N, crisis-bounded corpus.

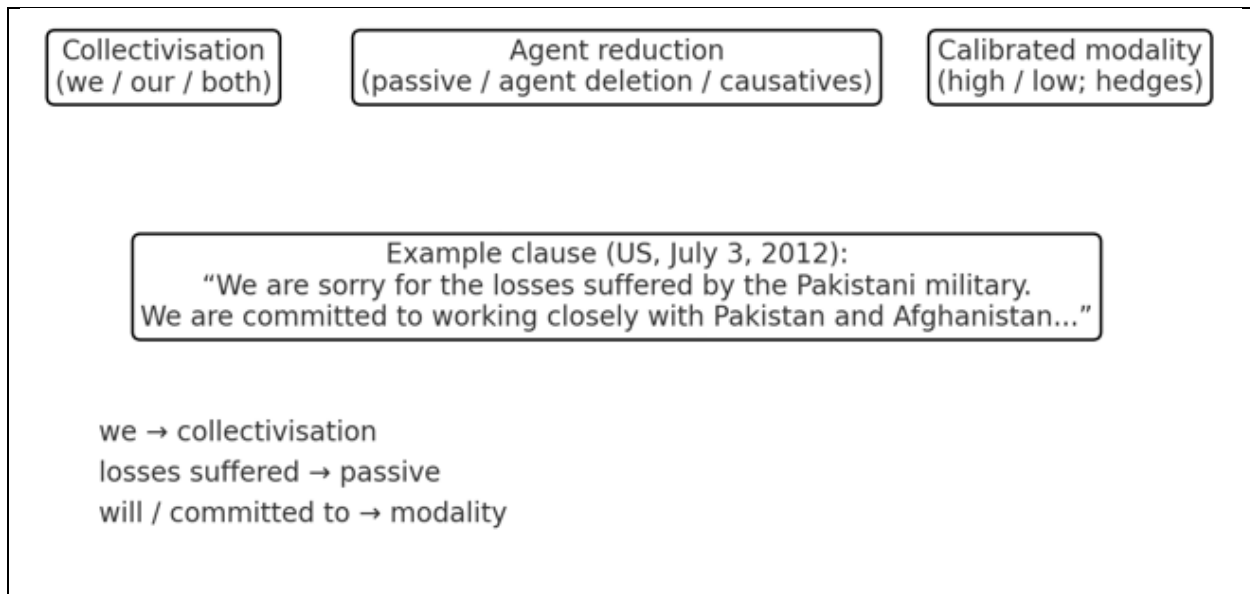
### Limitations

Pakistan FO primary texts for this episode are not publicly available. Pakistan-side discourse is therefore reconstructed from mainstream outlets (3–9 July 2012) and treated as press-mediated rather than authenticated FO transcripts. To limit mediation bias, we (i) align verbatim lines across  $\geq 2$  independent outlets per item, (ii) record reporters and wire sources, and (iii) flag lexical divergences in a triangulation table (see Supplement). Substantive claims avoid inferring FO internal intent and are framed as consistency between surface features and media-visible policy movement. MOFA weekly briefing and DCC press note for early July 2012 were not accessible via public archives at the time of writing; Pakistan-side wording is thus bounded to contemporaneous press renderings (The Express Tribune, 3 July 2012; Dawn, 5 July 2012) alongside U.S. sources (U.S. Department of State, 3 July 2012 readout and daily briefing).

**Positioning ACC:** ACC complements, not replaces, existing CDA accounts. It packages a recurrent co-occurrence COLL + AGDEL/PASS  $\pm$  MOD into a portable diagnostic at decision edges, extending van Leeuwen’s social-actor representation and classic work on responsibility evasion by making the co-occurrence the unit of analysis. Figure 2 below illustrates the ACC diagnostic, showing how collectivisation, agent reduction, and calibrated modality combine within a single clause to construct diffuse or shared agency.

Figure 2

ACC diagnostic (schematic)



*Apology and ambiguity*: diplomatic apologies and strategic ambiguity are well studied in political communication and pragmatics. This study links those literatures to clause-level diagnostics by showing that ACC concentrates where attribution and commitment are jointly negotiated, without imputing causality to wording alone.

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## Results

I read the shift through a framing lens (Bennett, 1990; Entman, 2003) under routine press indexing to elite cues, triangulating with contemporaneous reporting (Agence France-Presse, [2012](#); Dawn, [2012a](#); The Express Tribune, [2012](#)). This section reports clause-anchored findings with minimal interpretation. Subsections follow the codebook, and tables are cited with single callouts.

### R1. Vagueness (VAG)

At the decision edge, US-1.1 uses *mistakes* to keep causation under-specified adjacent to outcome narration. Choosing a generic head noun (*mistakes*) rather than a specific hyponym (*airstrike*, *fratricide*) preserves deniability while allowing harm recognition. In US-1.1/1.2 (surrounding lines; see Appendix B), evaluatives such as *tragic* co-occur with non-agentive nouns (*incident*), reinforcing VAG without supplying a doer. These lexical choices (e.g., *mistakes*, *incident*) do evaluative work. Headlines foreground verbal-process choices in the source, and press questioning increases precision in subsequent turns.

On the Pakistan side, FO-REP-DN-2.1 scales modality via the scalar *mere* (“a mere expression of regret”), downshifting responsibility while retaining acknowledgment i.e., VAG by scalar attenuation. FO-REP-DN-2.2 reframes the episode as procedure (“both sides settled for ‘sorry’ to move forward”), replacing specific causation with process language. Reception reproduces VAG verbatim on 3 July (REC-ET-1.3), converting it to headline value; by 9 July (REC-ET-3.1/3.2), VAG recedes and forward verbs dominate. See Table 1 and the discussion that situates these patterns within apology/image-repair and crisis-communication traditions (Benoit, [1995](#); Coombs, [2007](#); Kampf, [2008](#)).

### Additional anchors (VAG):

US-1.x *incident* (lexically general; agentless).

FO-REP-DN-2.x *matter, issue* (category generalisation; avoids culprit).

Near-miss: *airstrike* (specific; not coded VAG).

### R2. collectivisation (COLL)

COLL frames cooperation and enables audience travel. US-1.1 installs a joint subject (*Foreign Minister Khar and I*), and US-1.2 sustains an elastic *we* readable as bilateral (U.S.+Pakistan) or institutional (U.S. alone). That elasticity lets the same wording travel across audiences without re-authoring. In US-1.5/1.6 (prevention/coordination lines), *we* carries into prospective commitments, projecting partnership while avoiding unilateral confession.

On the Pakistan side, FO keeps an implicit bilateral frame. FO-REP-DN-2.2 (“both sides settled...”) casts the outcome as jointly negotiated, preserving COLL while narrowing liability elsewhere. FO-REP-DN-2.4 (if present; see Appendix C) uses *we* for policy coordination rather than fault, further detaching partnership from blame. Reception adopts COLL on 3 July (“two countries,” REC-ET-1.4) to bind stance to reopening; by 9 July (REC-ET-3.1/3.2), COLL is redeployed to normalisation (“putting past tensions behind”), now indexing joint future action rather than shared responsibility for harm. See Appendix A (Codebook, COLL) and Appendix B (Evidence matrix: COLL rows) for definitions and clause-level anchors.

### Additional anchors (COLL):

US-1.1/1.2 (*Khar and I; we*); REC-ET-3.1 (*two countries*).

Near-miss. “the United States and Pakistan” as a bare coordination; do not code COLL unless the NP functions as a single shared agent (see Appendix A).

### R3. Agent reduction (AGDEL/PASS)

Agent-light causation and passives narrate outcomes offstage. US-1.2 (resulted in) encodes causation without a doer; US-1.2 embeds PASS (losses were suffered), foregrounding harm while backgrounding agency. In US-1.2/1.5, further process nouns (coordination, prevention) keep actors vague while moving the timeline forward.

FO-REP polices exposure metalinguistically. FO-REP-DN-2.3 draws a bright line (‘acknowledged ≠ accepted’), regulating liability without introducing an actor. The contrast indexes acceptance as a legal/culpability threshold the FO refuses to cross, while tolerating recognition language. Early reception (REC-ET-1.1) ties the mitigation register to reopening without naming a culprit; by 9 July (REC-ET-3.2), AGDEL/PASS largely drops out as prospective verbs take centre stage. See Table 3. Turn-taking shaped the answers. Exact phrasing mattered on record. In practice, this meant brief, carefully hedged turns (anchored to clause IDs), quick process referrals, and deliberate pacing.

### Additional anchors (AGDEL/PASS)

US-1.x *were made, were reminded* (PASS).

FO-REP-DN-2.x nominalisations (*the apology issue, the paragraph*) that defer agency. Near-miss. A clause that explicitly names an agent (e.g., ... *by NATO aircraft*) is not AGDEL.

To enhance reliability, I conducted two coding passes and reconciled differences using written decision rules. The re-coding log is in Appendix D (method audit). Table 3 summarises the feature profile by source. As the log shows, most revisions concern fine distinctions (e.g., modality strength

vs. passivisation). These clarifications improve consistency and make the coding scheme transparent for replication.

**Table 3**

*Micro-feature profile by source (official stream and FO-REP).*

Source (dated)	Core lines (ID)	COLL	VAG	PASS	AGDEL	MOD (sorry / regret / apology)	Primary function
U.S. readout (3 Jul)	US-1.1, US-1.2	High	Medium	Medium	Medium	present / present / absent	Recognise harm; disperse agency; pivot to cooperation
FO-REP (Dawn, 5 Jul)	FO-REP-DN-2.1/2.2/2.3	Low-Med	High	Med-High	Med	attenuated / foregrounded / discussed	Narrow liability; domesticate reopening

With the coding scheme clarified and validated, I now turn to the results.

#### R4. Composite & uptake (ACC)

Co-occurrence concentrates where policy moves. The Agentless Causation Composite (ACC)—COLL + AGDEL/PASS + MOD (with VAG often adjacent)—clusters in US-1.1–1.2: the first clause (US-1.1) supplies COLL + VAG + AGDEL; the follower (US-1.2) supplies COLL + MOD + PASS. The pair functions as a single mitigation unit at the decision edge. In FO-REP-DN-2.2 → 2.3, the composite is partial/adjacent: a forward-move clause (“both sides settled...”) sits next to a liability fence (“acknowledged ≠ accepted”). Reception quotes the composite intact on 3 Jul (REC-ET-1.3/1.4), linking *sorry* to reopening; by 9 Jul (REC-ET-3.1/3.2), the composite is absent as normalisation consolidates. See Table 4 for distribution and Table 5 for counts.

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**Table 4**

*Composite pattern across sources (presence, locus, and sequential role).*

Source	Composite present?	Locus (ID)	Adjacent/paired clause	Sequential role
U.S. readout	Yes	US-1.1 (COLL+VAG+AGDEL)	US-1.2 (COLL+MOD+PASS)	Harm recognition → sympathy → forward prevention/coordination
FO-REP (Dawn)	Partial/adjacent	FO-REP-DN-2.2 → 2.3	“move forward” → “acknowledged ≠ accepted”	Endorse reopening while policing liability
Reception (3 Jul)	Quoted composite	REC-ET-1.3 / 1.4	headline tie to policy	Convert stance to news value linked to outcome
Reception (9 Jul)	No (shifted)	REC-ET-3.1 / 3.2	normalisation frames	Downstream consolidation; apology register recedes

**Table 5**

Composite counts and contexts (explicit tallies).

Context	Composite present (n / N)	Notes / anchors
U.S. readout (pivotal pair)	2 / 2	US-1.1 (COLL+VAG+AGDEL); US-1.2 (COLL+MOD+PASS)
FO-REP (Dawn)	adjacent / partial	FO-REP-DN-2.2 → 2.3 (forward move + liability boundary)
Reception (3 Jul)	2 / 2 (by quotation)	REC-ET-1.3 / 1.4 reproduce readout lines
Reception (9 Jul)	0 / 2	REC-ET-3.1 / 3.2 are prospective, not mitigation-composite

### Worked micro-analyses (anchors)

- **US-1.1.** “Foreign Minister Khar and I acknowledged the mistakes that resulted in the loss of Pakistani military lives.” → COLL + VAG + AGDEL. Function: harm recognition with muted agency at the decision edge.
- **US-1.2.** “We are sorry for the losses suffered by the Pakistani military.” → COLL + MOD + PASS. Function: portable sympathy; bridge to cooperation without unilateral confession.
- **US-1.1/1.2.** “deepest regrets” / “tragic incident” → MOD + VAG adjacency preceding the composite; sets the emotional register while avoiding agentive specification.
- **FO-REP-DN-2.1.** “a mere expression of regret” → VAG (scalar) + MOD (downshift); localises stance as minimal while keeping coordination viable.
- **FO-REP-DN-2.2.** “both sides settled for ‘sorry’ to move forward” → COLL (implicit) + process framing; shifts emphasis to outcome over attribution.
- **FO-REP-DN-2.3.** “The paragraph does not say ‘accepted’. It says ‘acknowledged’.” → METALANG + liability policing; formalises the boundary between recognition and admission.
- **REC-ET-1.3/1.4.** Quoted pair binds *sorry* to reopening → composite uptake; converts the mitigation stack into headline-level policy movement.
- **REC-ET-3.1/3.2 (counterexample).** Forward verbs; absence of mitigation stack—shows the composite sits at the threshold, not in downstream consolidation.

### Synthesis

Across the official stream, the composite (COLL + AGDEL/PASS + VAG/MOD) concentrates where communicative risk is highest and policy movement is at stake (US-1.1–1.2). FO-REP refines the same material by policing the acknowledged/accepted boundary and downshifting modality (FO-REP-DN-2.1/2.3), sustaining domestic legitimacy while aligning with reopening. Reception first operationalises *sorry* as the threshold for reopening (REC-ET-1.1/1.4) and then pivots to forward coordination (REC-ET-3.1/3.2). See Tables 3–5.

Linking to implications. Taken together, these clause-anchored patterns—especially the ACC cluster at US-1.1–US-1.2 and its FO-REP uptake—show how linguistic choices travel into practice: they lower exposure at the decision edge while preserving room for cooperation, which in turn shapes the communicative options available to negotiators and spokespersons within days. The Discussion translates these diagnostics into concrete guidance for diplomatic practice.

## Discussion

### Stake

The stakes were clear: restart cooperation (GLOCs) without a unilateral admission of fault, while managing civil–military sensitivities and alliance signaling.

### External factors

While the analysis foregrounds linguistic choices, these interacted with contemporaneous pressures civil–military sensitivities in both capitals, the logistics imperative around GLOCs, and signaling to third parties. The composite therefore complements, rather than replaces, strategic and political determinants of outcome.

In the 3–10 July 2012 window, sovereignty and accountability were live bargaining chips, with domestic audiences on both sides monitoring language for concessions. Under that pressure, officials had to recognise harm without issuing wording that could be read legally or politically as a unilateral admission. The linguistic room created by regret, causatives, and an inclusive *we* functioned not as euphemism but as a negotiation instrument: it protected exposure while enabling a policy restart tied to reopening GLOCs. Prior work shows small lexical choices can carry disproportionate ideological weight (e.g., Asghar, 2024, on translation contrasts); the apology/regret contrast in diplomatic readouts operates similarly.

Across the week, the U.S. readout concentrates features that recognise harm while keeping agency diffuse; FO-REP recasts that stack for domestic sovereignty; reception first ties the stance to reopening and then moves on. The pivotal pair (US-1.1–US-1.2) is the fulcrum: COLL + VAG + AGDEL in US-1.1, followed by COLL + MOD + PASS in US-1.2. FO-REP-DN-2.1/2.2/2.3 narrows modality and polices the *acknowledged* ≠ *accepted* boundary. Express Tribune (REC-ET-1.1/1.4) headlines the *sorry* → *reopening* hinge; by 9 July (REC-ET-3.1/3.2) normalisation frames dominate. Co-occurrence peaks at the decision edge and recedes once policy movement is secured—a threshold effect: once an operational decision is obtained, mitigation devices lose salience downstream.

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### Naming the composite

To make the pattern testable, I label the observed co-occurrence the Agentless Causation Composite (ACC).

### Diagnostics.

1. COLL (inclusive *we* / joint subject) enabling audience travel (bilateral or institutional readings).
2. AGDEL/PASS (agent-light causatives/passives) linking outcome to harm while the doer stays offstage.
3. MOD (calibrated responsibility/affect) adjacent to (1)–(2), sufficient for recognition without confession.

### Anchors

- US-1.1 = COLL + VAG + AGDEL (“*Khar and I acknowledged the mistakes that resulted in the loss...*”).

- US-1.2 = COLL + MOD + PASS (“We are sorry for the losses suffered...”). Read together, the pair supplies recognition + sympathy + muted agency aligned with reopening and licenses forward verbs without revisiting factual attributions.

## Ideology and asymmetry

Headlines foreground verbal-process choices in the source. Within a Fairclough/van Leeuwen frame, the elastic *we* lets the stronger actor regulate the remorse register while avoiding unilateral accountability via AGDEL/PASS. The composite stabilises cooperation under asymmetry: enough recognition to meet the weaker side’s sovereignty needs; sufficient indeterminacy to limit the stronger side’s exposure. FO-REP’s *acknowledged* ≠ *accepted* move (FO-REP-DN-2.3) keeps that balance legible at home. Crucially, ACC repackages blame into consequence (*losses, harm*) and relocates agency from actors to processes an ideological move that preserves the relationship while constraining liability talk.

## Position in literature

Prior work treats passivisation, nominalisation, and regret/apology as discrete devices. The step here is to operationalise co-occurrence at clause/turn level with IDs and tally rules, and to link the stack to policy motion (GLOCs reopening) and its decay in downstream coverage. Also specified is pronoun elasticity as a travel mechanism: the same *we* supports both bilateral partnership and U.S.-only readings without re-authoring. This moves beyond token-level counts toward composite diagnostics that can be falsified or replicated across incidents.

FO-REP refines the same material by policing the *acknowledged/accepted* boundary and downshifting modality (FO-REP-DN-2.1/2.3), sustaining domestic legitimacy while aligning with reopening. Reception first operationalises *sorry* as the threshold for reopening (REC-ET-1.1/1.4) and then pivots to forward coordination (REC-ET-3.1/3.2). See Tables 3–5.

## Contributions

- Clause-level, multi-label coding of a bounded episode, with rules for VAG + COLL + AGDEL/PASS ± MOD at paired-clause granularity.
- Specification of a recurrent composite (ACC) with operational diagnostics.
- Policy linkage demonstrated: ACC clusters at the decision edge (US-1.1–1.2) and decays as coverage normalises; reception and FO-REP show predictable redistribution (threshold → domestication → forward verbs).
- Portability claim: pronoun elasticity and causative/passive chains plausibly travel across audiences, motivating comparative tests beyond this case and inviting contrastive coding in allied crises.

## Implications

- *For negotiators (Pakistan)*: pair any practical acceptance (e.g., reopening) with at least one agent-marked clause in joint records (“X did Y”), while keeping the rest cooperative; when partners use inclusive *we*, add a line separating sympathy from admission.
- *For communicators (both sides)*: anticipate media uptake of modality. If the objective is normalisation, sequence messages: initial harm-recognition (*sorry/regret*) → clear forward verbs (*coordinate, prevent, review*) within days; avoid late lexical drift that re-invites attribution disputes.

- *For CDA researchers/students:* code pronoun elasticity + causative/passive chains as unitary patterns (not isolated tokens) and test co-occurrence thresholds around decision points.

### Limitations and future work

This is a small-N, single-coder study focused on English-language press, 3–10 Jul 2012; systematic access to Urdu TV talk-show transcripts for that week was lacking, so broadcast discourse is under-represented. A two-coder reliability pass and a modest pre–post time-series would strengthen generalisability. Comparative probes (e.g., White House, 3 Oct 2015) can separate speaker-specific from institutional patterns and test whether ACC appears with similar timing and decay.

### Conclusion

Within a week of intense bargaining, the language around Salala balanced recognition and risk. U.S. texts leveraged *we/our*, vague lexis, and agent-light causatives to signal sympathy and cooperation without an explicit apology; Pakistan’s FO narrowed the register to regret and held the *acknowledged/accepted* line. Coverage amplified the sorry → reopening hinge, then shifted to normalisation. The pattern supports a view of constructive vagueness especially via inclusive *we* and agent-deletion + causative linking as a predictable toolkit for crisis diplomacy when sovereignty and liability are live issues, and it furnishes replicable diagnostics for future comparative CDA.

### Data Availability Statement

The corpus comprises publicly available texts official statements and press coverage released in July 2012. Supporting materials (the researcher’s synthesis file, preliminary coding tables/figures, and draft appendices used during analysis) are available from the author upon reasonable request. Because the corpus includes copyrighted media articles, full reproductions cannot be redistributed; however, clause-level identifiers and analytic extracts are provided in the supplementary materials.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A. Codebook & Clause-ID Scheme

#### A1. Feature definitions and rules

- Lexical vagueness (VAG) — Semantically general terms (mistakes; incident; tragic). Rule: code when a more specific hyponym/agent is avoided.
- Passivisation (PASS) — Patient-prominent clause with agent suppressed (losses were suffered; decisions were made). Rule: code only if the agent is omitted or backgrounded (no explicit by-phrase naming the doer).
- Agent deletion / avoidance (AGDEL) — Obscuring/removing the responsible actor via nominalisations (the attack; the incident), causatives (resulted in; led to), or metonymy. Rule: may co-occur with active voice; code when the doer is absent or replaced by an event noun.
- Collectivisation (COLL) — Shared subject or first-person plural (we/our; Foreign Minister Khar and I). Rule: code as inclusive unless co-text clearly restricts reference to a single party.
- Modality of responsibility (MOD) — Stance items (sorry, regret, apologise) and intensifiers (e.g., deeply). Rule: code all tokens present; note escalation (e.g., regret → apologise). Diplomats measured every verb. Timing shaped interpretation.
- Ambiguity resolution. If a token fits multiple categories, code all; mark a primary category in the rationale.
- Unit of analysis. Clause / minimal T-unit.
- Inclusion. Code a clause if  $\geq 1$  target feature occurs; multiple features allowed.
- Exclusion (primary texts). Journalists' paraphrases are excluded from official-text counts; they are treated under Reception.

#### A2. Clause-ID scheme (legend)

- **Format:** <STREAM>-<OPTIONAL OUTLET>-<P>.<C>
- **STREAM:** US = U.S. readout; FO-REP = FO position as reported; REC = Reception (news).
- **OUTLET (if not US):** DN = Dawn; ET = Express Tribune.
- **P** = paragraph/section number; **C** = clause number within paragraph.
- **Suffix rule:** If a clause is later inserted, append a letter (e.g., US-1.1a), do not renumber.

### Appendix B. U.S. Text (Readout) — Clause excerpts, codes, rationales

ID	Verbatim (short excerpt)	Codes	One-line rationale
US-1.1	Foreign Minister Khar and I acknowledged the mistakes that resulted in the loss of Pakistani military lives.	COLL; VAG; AGDEL	Shared subject; under-specified mistakes; causative resulted in keeps agent offstage.
US-1.2	We are sorry for the losses suffered by the Pakistani military.	COLL; MOD; PASS	Inclusive we; modal sorry; passive losses suffered expresses harm without agent.

*Source:* U.S. Department of State, Readout of Secretary Clinton's 3 July 2012 call with FM Khar.

## Appendix C. FO-REP & Reception — Clause excerpts, codes, rationales

### C1. FO-REP (Dawn, 5 July 2012)

ID	Verbatim (short excerpt)	Codes	One-line rationale
FO-REP-DN-2.1	When ... Khar said 'sorry' ... it was a mere expression of regret ...	MOD (downshift); VAG	Recasts sorry as calibrated regret; scalar mere attenuates stance.
FO-REP-DN-2.2	Both sides settled for the word 'sorry' ... to move forward ...	COLL (implicit); VAG	Pragmatic, forward-oriented framing with implicit shared agency.
FO-REP-DN-2.3	The para does not say that they 'accepted'. It says they 'acknowledged'.	METALANG; VAG; (implied PASS)	Polices the acknowledged/accepted boundary; liability management.

### C2. Reception — Express Tribune, 3 July 2012

ID	Verbatim (short excerpt)	Codes	One-line rationale
REC-ET-1.1	US ... says 'sorry' for the losses suffered by Pakistani military ...	MOD; PASS	Headline/lede foregrounds sorry and passive harm line.
REC-ET-1.4	Foreign Minister Khar and I acknowledged the mistakes ... We are sorry ...	COLL; VAG; AGDEL; MOD; PASS	Quoted readout lines reproduce the composite bundle.

### C3. Reception — Express Tribune, 9 July 2012

ID	Verbatim (short excerpt)	Codes	One-line rationale
REC-ET-3.1	The two countries are putting past tensions behind them to focus on the future.	COLL; (no harm-mitigation features)	Prospective coordination replaces harm/mitigation register.
REC-ET-3.2	The deadlock ... has ended and we are now heading in the right direction.	COLL; (no harm-mitigation features)	Normalisation frame; apology register recedes.

## Appendix D. Consolidated counts and composite tallies

### D1. Micro-feature counts (per source)

Source	VAG	PASS	AGDEL	COLL	MOD (sorry / regret / apology)
U.S. readout (US-1.1/1.2 plus surrounding lines)	4	3	3	15	present / present / absent
FO-REP (Dawn, FO spokesman lines only)	7	7	4	3	multiple sorry/regret; apology discussed

*Note:* Counts reflect clause-level coding of the cited lines and their immediate paragraph context; journalists' paraphrases are excluded from FO-REP counts (Reception coded separately).

**Interpretation.** The U.S. text concentrates COLL with moderate VAG/PASS/AGDEL; FO-REP raises VAG and foregrounds MOD management while policing the acknowledged/accepted boundary.