

Headline Hooks: Corpus Patterns of High Frequency Adjectives in Pakistani English Newspaper Front Pages

Amna Alvi¹, Muhammad Asim Khan²

¹MS Scholar, Visiting faculty, NED University of Engineering & Technology, Karachi, Pakistan.

²Assistant Professor, English Linguistics & Allied Studies Department, NED University of Engineering & Technology, Karachi, Pakistan.

Correspondence: asimkhan@neduet.edu.pk²

ABSTRACT

Aim of the study: Linguistic features of newspaper headlines are carefully used to capture reader's attention in reporting various news including politics, terrorism, economy, climate change, foreign relations, human rights, terrorism, sports, and technological advancements. This study aims to explore the linguistic features, specifically the use of adjectives in the front-page headlines of a leading Pakistani newspaper, The Dawn, in the year 2024, for reporting domestic and international events that were central to public discourse during this period.

Methodology: This study employs corpus techniques to explore the adjectives use in media discourse. The corpus was developed by collecting all the front-page headlines of the year 2024 from The Dawn newspaper. The data was generated from front-page headlines published over 366 days during the year 2024, totaling a corpus of 2,040 headlines. The data was analyzed through the Sketch Engine software for frequency analysis to uncover high-frequency adjectives used in front-page headlines to engage readers.

Findings: Findings shows that different categories of adjectives were identified with high frequency of evaluative and descriptive adjectives suggesting an editorial strategy aiming at creating engaging and emotionally resonant headlines. The descriptive adjective is the most frequent type of adjective in the headlines, with 86% (e.g, new, reserved, chief, first, top), indicating that people prefer to read exaggerated and descriptive content in Pakistan. Most of these adjectives were found in relation to politics, law, and foreign affairs. A few were related to the military and economics. Moreover, very few adjectives were related to technology and the economy.

Conclusion: The study indicate that Pakistani newspapers' front-page headlines are dominated by political news with high frequency of descriptive adjectives as a means to creating emotional appeal to the readers.

Keywords: Newspaper, Corpus Analysis, Pakistan, Headlines, Newspaper, Linguistic Features, Adjectives.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The influence of media in the contemporary world is undeniable, particularly because discourse plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' beliefs and perceptions (Arshad & Khan, 2021, p. 180). According to Develotte and Rechniewski (2001), newspaper headlines exert a significant impact on readers due to their distinctive linguistic features. Headlines occupy a central position in newspapers, as they function as concise summaries of the news story or article (Gamboa & Cayabyab, 2023). At first glance, they capture the audience's attention and shape the initial impression of the news. Scacco and Mudiman (2015) contend that headlines serve as an overview of current events while simultaneously providing a compelling hook that encourages readers to engage with the news content. In addition, headlines can evoke emotions among readers and often act as a form of foreshadowing, guiding audience expectations about the information that follows. Recognizing the influence of prominent headlines, governments have, at times, attempted both explicitly and implicitly to control them in ways that favor the ruling regime (Haque & Sheikh, 2021).

Taber and Fieze (2018), through a discourse analysis of public and private newspaper headlines, observed that rhetorical devices and specific lexical choices frequently convey themes of imposition, burden, tension, and dialogue. The functions of news headlines include summarizing the story, generating reader interest, satisfying the need for immediate information, and directing audience attention (Gamboa & Cayabyab, 2023). Typically brief and positioned at the beginning of an article, headlines are closely linked with the information that follows in the news report (Gamboa & Cayabyab, 2023). Zamanian and Heydari (2012) further highlight the challenges faced by campus journalists in news writing, noting difficulties in crafting effective headlines, carefully selecting words with potentially controversial implications, and adhering to grammatical and syntactic conventions, particularly regarding transitions. Scacco and Mudiman (2015) also note that headlines can take diverse forms; while some remain conventional and restrained, others employ creative language, sensationalize the story, or stimulate curiosity through innovative narrative techniques.

News content is disseminated through various platforms, including television, radio, the internet, and social media (Arshad & Khan, 2021, p. 180). In this context, headlines function as an efficient informational tool for individuals who lack the time to read full articles (Taiwo, 2007). However, a headline is not merely a summary; rather, it is a strategically crafted text designed to maximize reader engagement (Zhu, 2025). Consequently, headlines significantly influence public perceptions of a news story and often shape the tone through which the accompanying article is interpreted (Zhu, 2025). Due to their concise and immediate communicative function, headlines represent one of the most prominent features of a newspaper (Aqsa & Qureshi, 2022).

Bell (1991, p. 189) describes headlines as a component of news rhetoric whose primary purpose is to attract the reader's attention. Similarly, Bednarek and Caple (2012) identify several key functions of headlines: an informative function that summarizes or abstracts the story; an interpersonal function that engages readers; a framing function that signals the stance or perspective of the story; and a news value function that highlights the newsworthiness of the content. Moreover, headlines often reach a wider audience than the full news articles themselves, as many readers glance at headlines even if they do not read the entire story (Arshad & Khan, 2021, p. 180). Among all elements of a newspaper, the main headline is particularly significant (Haque & Sheikh, 2021). Typically presented in the largest and boldest font, its visual prominence reflects its importance. The main headline and its accompanying article often reveal the priorities of editors or newspaper owners, and historically, influential media proprietors such as William Randolph Hearst have utilized headlines to advance political agendas and gain strategic advantages (Haque & Sheikh, 2021).

Brief and concise sentences are characteristic of English news headlines. The main function of a news headline is to inform, yet it must also be engaging enough to capture the reader's attention (Zhu, 2025). These short sentences help convey the core message quickly, allowing the reader to grasp the information

at a glance (Zhu, 2025). In some cases, headlines consist of just a single phrase, such as "Vaccine Breakthrough Offers Hope," which is both direct and easy to understand (Zhu, 2025). The brevity of the sentence structure allows the headline to remain impactful while conserving space (Zhu, 2025). According to Reah (2002, p. 13), it is "a unique type of text that consists of a range of functions that specifically dictate its shape, content, and structure, and it operates within a range of restrictions that limit the freedom of the writer".

Pakistani media has undergone substantial transformation over the past decade and a half (Hassan, 2008). However, representing reality through media remains a complex task, both in Pakistan and globally. In this regard, Fairclough (1995) argues that because media institutions are susceptible to influence from various societal actors, media content cannot be regarded as an objective depiction of reality; rather, it constitutes "representations of reality." Within Pakistan, the media is often regarded as the fourth pillar of the state, following the parliament, the executive, and the judiciary. Furthermore, the Constitution of Pakistan safeguards the right to access and disseminate information, thereby providing a legislative framework for media operations. At the same time, it places certain limitations by prohibiting content that contradicts Islamic principles, threatens national security, or violates public morality (Hassan, 2008).

Haque and Sheikh (2021) conducted an examination of Pakistani newspapers, focusing specifically on headlines due to their significant influence on public perception. Their study analyzed lead stories and categorized them according to thematic content. The findings indicate a strong tendency among Pakistani editors to prioritize international news and political statements in lead headlines, accounting for approximately 35% and 33% of headline coverage, respectively. This substantial emphasis on international developments possibly exceeding conventional editorial norms and on political discourse raises questions regarding potential governmental influence or perceived institutional advantages. In contrast, local social issues receive moderate attention, comprising about 27% of headline space, while economic and judicial matters remain relatively underrepresented.

In light of these observations, the present study aims to examine the use of high-frequency adjectives in the front-page headlines of a Pakistani English-language newspaper. Specifically, it seeks to address the research question: *What types of adjectives are most frequently employed by editors to construct attention-grabbing headlines on the front page of the Dawn newspaper?*

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Linguistic Features of Newspaper Headlines

The linguistic features in news headlines are essential because they organize the information, highlight key points, improve readability, and trigger the emotions and sentiments of the readers. These features include aspects such as grammar, punctuation, word choice, and rhetorical techniques (Zhu, 2025). The use of alliteration, puns, exaggeration, and other rhetorical devices can evoke a stronger emotional response from readers. Stylistic features also contribute to the overall tone and sentiment of the headline, ranging from neutral and factual to sensational or dramatic (Zhu, 2025). The present study is targeting two linguistic features; Lexical features and Rhetorical features. For instance, the catchy headlines influence readers' emotions. For instance, headlines like "Devastating Earthquake Strikes City" evoke a sense of disaster and distress, directly appealing to the reader's emotions; meanwhile other headlines may express a more positive emotion, evoking feelings of joy or anticipation (Zhu, 2025).

Exaggeration and metaphors are key rhetorical devices and are frequently employed in English news headlines to engage readers and create a memorable impact in headlines (Zhu, 2025). Exaggeration and metaphor are commonly employed to intensify the perceived significance or drama of a situation, increasing the chances that the reader will be engaged with the article. For instance, "World's Largest Hurricane Hits Coast" uses exaggeration and metaphorical expression to increase the sense of urgency and scale, even if the hurricane might not be the absolute largest (Zhu, 2025). This approach is intended

to enhance the significance of the event being reported, making sure it captures attention in a competitive news landscape.

Headlines are composed of high and low-frequency words. High-frequency words often capture readers' attention because they are familiar to readers (Zhu, 2025). The high-frequency words are usually part of a common vocabulary in news reporting. By relying on these high-frequency terms, news organizations ensure that their headlines are instantly recognizable and understandable (Zhu, 2025). Whereas, keywords play an significant role in delivering the sense of the whole headlines and topic. Keywords often reflect the core of the story, providing clues to its subject matter, for instance, in a headline like "China's Economy Faces Slowdown," the keywords "China," "economy," and "slowdown" convey the main topic and urgency of the situation (Zhu, 2025). These keywords are chosen not only for their relevance but also because they trigger specific associations in the reader's mind, prompting them to engage with the story (Zhu, 2025).

2.2 Importance of Adjectives in Headlines

A wide range of adjectives are employed in newspaper headlines, and their usage can exert a notable influence on readers' perceptions and interpretations of news content (KarunaKaran & Ang, 2023). Adjectives play a significant role in shaping the opinions of news consumers and directing readers' attention toward particular issues. For instance, evaluative adjectives are frequently utilized for promotional purposes, whereas descriptive adjectives are commonly used in contexts such as tourism discourse (Al-Issawi, 2020). Writers often incorporate adjectives strategically to evoke emotions and shape readers' responses to news narratives (Faiz et al., 2018).

Furthermore, Jitpranee (2017) found that science-related articles frequently employ descriptive adjectives to influence readers' understanding and interpretation of the discourse. The study identified ten types of adjectives commonly used in written texts: descriptive, proper, quantitative, numeral, demonstrative, possessive, distributive, emphasizing, exclamatory, and relative adjectives. These findings highlight the diverse functional roles adjectives perform in shaping meaning and influencing audience engagement in journalistic writing.

2.3 Newspaper Headlines as Attention Grabbing Strategy

The lexical choices employed in newspaper headlines articulate the central content of an article while simultaneously revealing the ideological orientations embedded within the language used. Yasmeen et al. (2014) demonstrated that ideology plays a significant role in the construction of newspaper headlines. Similarly, each headline is typically associated with a particular issue or perspective, thereby reflecting the editorial stance of the publication (Aqsa & Qureshi, 2022). Duanprakhon (2012), in a study examining youth crime news headlines in Thailand, highlighted how journalists construct specific images in readers' minds through strategic linguistic choices. The study revealed that readers may develop an ideological perception of a criminal solely from the wording of headlines, even without engaging with the complete news article.

For many years, newspaper headlines have played a crucial role in attracting readers' attention. They are deliberately crafted to capture interest and draw readers toward the topic being discussed (Arshad & Khan, 2021). Traditionally, readers would purchase newspapers and browse them from cover to cover, scanning headlines and selecting articles that captured their interest (Holmqvist et al., 2003). Headlines thus function as a decision-making guide, enabling readers to determine which articles merit their attention. To achieve this effect, journalists employ particular vocabulary and grammatical structures that enhance the attractiveness and impact of headlines (Aqsa & Qureshi, 2022). In many cases, linguistic features are strategically used to amplify the prominence and newsworthiness of headlines (Grabe et al., 2001). Sari (2010) further notes that writers often incorporate figurative language to increase reader engagement. In pursuit of attention, journalists may also craft headlines that provide shocking or provocative hints, potentially generating tension or emotional responses among the public.

Duanprakhon (2012) further investigated the linguistic characteristics of front-page headlines in prominent Thai newspapers using Fairclough’s theoretical framework of critical discourse analysis. The findings revealed the presence of distinctive discursive features in headline construction. Moreover, the study indicated that the language used in headlines can reflect negative journalistic perspectives and contribute to the formation of unfavorable social identities within public discourse.

An effective headline provides sufficient information for readers to grasp the essence of the news story while simultaneously stimulating curiosity or interest (Zhu, 2025). Through carefully selected words, headlines communicate the core message of the article and reveal underlying ideological meanings (Aqsa & Qureshi, 2022). Over time, however, the function of headlines has evolved. Rather than merely summarizing the content of an article, contemporary headlines increasingly aim to arouse curiosity and encourage readers to explore the full story. Arshad and Khan (2021) argue that a reader’s level of interest significantly determines their decision to continue reading a news article.

Historically, the primary purpose of a headline was to provide readers who were scanning a newspaper with a clear understanding of the article’s content (Van Dijk, 1988). In contrast, modern headlines are designed primarily to attract attention and provoke curiosity, thereby encouraging readers to open and read the article in detail (Chen et al., 2015). Interestingly, although the headline is usually the first element encountered by readers, it is typically the last component written by journalists (Bell, 1991). This process provides news publishers with an opportunity to embed their ideological perspectives directly into the headline (Arshad & Khan, 2021). While headlines are crafted to attract readers’ attention to the topic under discussion, Morrish (2003) describes them as the condensed essence of a news article.

From a critical discourse perspective, Fairclough (2006a) asserts that media discourse should be understood as containing complex and sometimes conflicting ideological constructions that are not fixed but continuously shaped by social contexts. He further argues that the relationship between language and power often remains obscure to the public, making audiences susceptible to subtle forms of influence and manipulation through media discourse.

3. METHODOLOGY

The corpus was developed by collecting the front-page headlines of the year 2024 from The Dawn newspaper. The data was collected through the purposive sampling technique as only the front page of the newspaper was selected for data collection since the main news are featured on these pages. The year 2024 had 366 days, as it was a leap year. Frequency analysis is used to uncover high-frequency adjectives used on front pages. On average, 5 to 6 headlines were published each day on the front pages. 170 headlines were selected and published over 366 days totaling 2,040 headlines in the corpus. Through trial error, the total word count was estimated by analyzing the months of January and November 2024’s headlines. The data was analyzed through the Sketch Engine software. Different categories of adjectives based on Khymying (2007) framework consisting of descriptive, proper, quantitative, numeral, demonstrative, possessive, distributive, emphasizing, exclamatory, and relative were identified.

Table 1: Percentages on the frequency of different classes of adjectives based on Khymying, 2007

S.no	Adjective Type	Count	Percentage
01	Descriptive	342	66.9%
02	Quantitative	58	11.3%
03	Proper	47	9.2%
04	Numeral	62	12.1%
05	Demonstrative	1	0.2%
06	Possessive	1	0.2%
07	Distributive	0	0
08	Interrogative/Relative	0	0
	Total	511	100%

Table 1 shows eight classes of adjectives and the percentage of their occurrence in the targeted corpus. The highest percentage was marked by descriptive adjectives 66.9% with 342 occurrences, followed by quantitative adjectives with 11.3% and 58 occurrences. Numeral adjectives occurred 12.1% with 62 frequency and Proper adjectives showing 9.2% with 47 occurrences. Similarly, Demonstrative adjectives and Possessive adjectives secured 0.2% with only 1 word each. However, Distributive and Interrogative/Relative adjectives were not present in the targeted corpus.

4. FINDINGS

The high frequency of evaluative and descriptive adjectives suggests an editorial strategy aimed at creating engaging and emotionally resonant headlines. The descriptive adjective is the most used type of adjective in the headlines, with 66.9%. Indicating that people prefer to read exaggerated and descriptive content in Pakistan. Since 2024 was an election year, most of the adjectives used on the front page were related to politics, health, foreign affairs, terrorism/violence, and the economy. A few were related to military, sports, weather, and technology. Four common types of Adjectives were found: Descriptive, Quantitative, Proper, and Numeral. Most of the adjectives are related to: Health, politics, foreign affairs, violence, economy and other current affairs, including sports, weather, and technology.

Table 2: Six leading contexts for concordance and expanded concordance

S. No	Context	Expanded Concordance
01	Health	Rs4.13 per unit more in Jan PTI turns to apex court to secure its 'bat' KP landmine blast kills three children Govt to buy more Covid vaccines amid resurgence CJP Isa regrets disqualification clauses thrust on parliament Verdict on 'enigmatic
02	Politics	was 'hottest year on record' Campaigning on hold as PML-N sorts out ticket dilemma Imprisoned PTI boss 'arrested' in more cases ECP to make its move today amid 'bat-and-forth' Tribunals turn down Imran's appeals on two NA seats No let-up are
03	Foreign Affairs	' issue UN rights body demands halt in arms sales to Israel Cop escorting polio workers martyred in South Waziristan More judges receive letters with 'toxic' powder PM takes charge of security amid spike in terrorism Pakistan capable of
04	Violence	to address bilateral concerns Iran twin blasts kill 103 near Qasem Soleimani's tomb Power users to pay Rs4.13 per unit more in Jan PTI turns to apex court to secure its 'bat' KP landmine blast kills three children Govt to buy more Covid vaccines
05	Economy	talks Urban flooding emergency declared in Balochistan Petrol price up by Rs4.53, diesel rises by Rs8.14 Don't need more policy prescriptions, says Finance Minister Aurangzeb Dharna commission suggests laws to regulate spy agencies ‘
06	Others:(Sports/ weather/ technology):	Opposition alliance's ranks swelling, claims PTI One Pakistani killed, another injured in Sydney attack Dozen more die in heavy rains, lightning Situationer: Tehran's move 'more chess than a show of strength' Saudi team in Pakistan to

Table 2 shows six leading contexts of adjectives for concordance and expanded concordance, as these are the leading contexts for front-page newspaper headlines (Amaokohene & Osei, 2023). The quantitative

adjective ‘More’ is portrayed to show the use of adjectives in different contexts, due to its highest frequency in the top ten adjectives of the targeted corpus, shown in Table 3. By analyzing different news headline contexts, it can be observed that adjectives are a part of every news story, and they logically highlight and enhance the major issues of different contexts.

Table 3: *Top 10 highly used adjectives*

S.No	Adjective	Type of Adjective	Frequency
1	More	Quantitative Adjective	40
2	New	Descriptive adjective	32
3	Reserved	Descriptive adjective	28
4	Constitutional	Descriptive adjective	24
5	Military	Descriptive adjective	23
6	Chief	Descriptive adjective	20
7	First	Descriptive adjective	18
8	Top	Descriptive adjective	18
9	Social	Limiting/demonstrative/ordinal-like adjective	16
10	Next	Limiting/demonstrative/ordinal-like adjective	16

Table 3 is the list of the top ten highly used adjectives used in the targeted corpus. Most adjectives including new, reserved, constitutional, military, chief, first, and top fall into the category of descriptive adjectives. The words like Social and Next belongs to limiting/demonstrative/ordinal-like adjectives. However, the Quantitative adjective ‘More’ alone secured the highest frequency than all other individual adjectives in the list.

Table 4: *Concordance Health and Politics*

Left Context	Adjectives	Right Context
in PPP-PML-N 'paradise' Two	More	polio cases reported from Karachi, Qila
Power users to pay Rs4.13 per unit	More	in Jan PTI turns to apex court to secure its 'bat'
peaceful polls on 8th, says minister	New	political order prevails as tribal districts head
Sindh reports two suspected cases of	New	Covid variant Big relief for PTI as scores
Rana Sanauallah to steer talks on	Social	media law Analysis: The defamation
cybercrime law to tighten noose on	Social	media Three more polio cases take tally to 59

The concordance is shown in Table 4, highlights the use of the top three adjectives more, new, and social, from the top ten adjectives from the targeted corpus. The concordance is shown in two news headline categories (health and politics) among the six categories presented in Table 2. It can be seen that the usage of adjectives is providing clarity and details to the main headline.

Table 5: *Expanded Concordance Politics*

Adjective	Expanded Concordance
More	vote, NA dismisses US resolution as 'interference' Days after 'accord', trouble in PPP-PML-N 'paradise' Two more polio cases reported from Karachi, Qila Abdullah Parliament okays 'controversial' budget for FY25 LHC tells PM to
New	workers not to leave without Form-45 on polling day All set to hold free, fair, peaceful polls on 8th, says minister New political order prevails as tribal districts head to polls It rains on PPP's election parade Centre, provinces agree
Social	in missing poet's case Amid protests, Punjab Assembly passes defamation law PM picks Rana Sanauallah to steer talks on social media law Analysis: The defamation conundrum Senators Faisal Vawda, Irfan Siddiqui use privilege to 'attack'

Table 5 shows the expanded concordance, of the top three adjectives more, new, and social, among the top ten adjectives from the targeted corpus. Targeting the ‘Political category’ because most of the front-page headlines of the year 2024 were dominated by political news as it was an election year. It can be seen that the adjectives provide extra details and make the headlines more comprehensive.

5. DISCUSSION

News headlines serve as concise summaries that deliver essential information to readers without requiring them to engage with full articles (Taiwo, 2007). The main headline plays a pivotal role in shaping initial perceptions as the most prominent element of a newspaper (Haque & Sheikh, 2021). This study examined front-page headlines from 2024 for identifying high-frequency words that dominate these spaces. Such words capture readers' attention due to their familiarity, facilitating quick recognition and comprehension (Zhu, 2025).

The analysis revealed that 2024 headlines predominantly focused on politics, health, economy, and foreign affairs as recurring themes that align with established patterns in front-page journalism (Amoakohene & Osei, 2023). Haque and Sheikh (2021) analyzed Pakistani newspapers and found that editors allocate approximately 35% of headline space to international news and 33% to political statements to show their influence on public opinion. The present study extends this by scrutinizing the attention-seeking role of adjectives across categories like health, politics, foreign affairs, violence, economy, and current affairs. Results show a high frequency of descriptive adjectives, which editors deploy to evoke emotional appeal and persuade audiences (Ebaid, 2018).

Politics emerged as the dominant category, reflecting 2024's status as an election year. Headlines framed competition, persuasion, and power dynamics, amplifying political discourse to engage readers (Khaemba, 2024). This emphasis mirrors ongoing global scenarios, where headlines prioritize timely events to create memorable impacts (Zhu, 2025). Furthermore, high-frequency adjectives enhanced this strategy that makes headlines more vivid and relatable.

These patterns suggest intentional pattern where headlines leverage familiar lexis and emotive language to maximize readership in a competitive media landscape. From a framing theory perspective (Entman, 1993), such choices not only highlight salience but also subtly influence how readers interpret events, potentially reinforcing ideological biases. Future research could compare these trends across digital versus print media or explore cross-cultural variations in adjective use.

6. CONCLUSION

This study analyzed adjective usage in front-page headlines from *The Dawn* newspaper in 2024, employing the Sketch Engine corpus analyzer. The corpus comprised 62,220 headlines totaling 16,740 words, yielding 1,276 adjective tokens. On average, the total number of headings in the overall corpus was 62,220, with a word count of 16,740. Among them, 1,276 adjective frequencies were found. Descriptive adjectives dominated at 66.9%, underscoring readers' preference for emotionally engaging content. The findings revealed that the front-page headlines of the Dawn newspaper are mostly descriptive and quantitative, with a small number of limiting/demonstrative/ordinal-like adjectives. Indicating people's interest in reading descriptive content. These findings contribute a significant pointer in the analysis of Pakistani print media, that editors deploy high-frequency descriptive adjectives to craft catchy headlines, enhancing journalistic appeal through linguistic devices. This approach aligns with headlines' role in shaping public perceptions, as vivid adjectives capture attention and subtly persuade audiences. Despite the comprehensiveness corpus-driven analysis, limitations persist. The data is a comparatively small sample size, which bounds the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. The single-newspaper sample (n=62,220 headlines) restricts generalizability. Since the data was compiled from a single newspaper, the results may not reflect other newspapers' perspectives. Moreover, while the study adopts a corpus-driven framework, alternative frameworks such as construction grammar were not explored. Future studies could incorporate multi-newspaper corpora or

comparative digital/print analyses. Newspapers provide catchy headlines of the articles and those articles shape people's minds, thoughts, and opinions. Adjectives can be used to seek readers' attention on the front-page newspaper headlines. The correct use of adjectives can be used to create catchy, attention-seeking headlines to persuade and manipulate the readers.

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ORCID iDs

Amna Alvi ¹  <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-5578-2757>

Muhammad Asim Khan ²  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7261-5467>

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