LEXICAL SEMANTICS OF HONOR AND SHAME IN SOUTH ASIAN LANGUAGES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Honor and shame are core elements of moral and cultural systems across South Asia, shaping societal norms, gender expectations, and interpersonal dynamics. This study offers a comparative lexical-semantic analysis of these concepts across four major South Asian languages—Hindi-Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali, and Nepali—focusing on the linguistic manifestations of *izzat* (honor), *sharam* (shame), *ghairat* (self-respect), *lajja* (modesty), and *latthṇa* (to fall, as metaphor). Drawing upon corpus linguistics, ethnolinguistic field interviews, and conceptual metaphor theory, the research explores how these lexemes function not merely as words but as tools of moral governance. Findings reveal both shared metaphorical frameworks (e.g., shame as physical weight, honor as spatial elevation) and culturally specific constructions shaped by gender, caste, and regional variation. The paper also discusses the implications of these semantic structures for policy and education, particularly in the domains of gender equity, mental health, and culturally sensitive language pedagogy.

Keywords: lexical semantics, izzat, sharam, ghairat, honor, shame, South Asia, gender, euphemism, metaphor, Punjabi, Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, Nepali

Research Questions
1. What lexical markers convey honor and shame across varied South Asian languages?
2. How do semantic nuances differ culturally and historically?
3. What is the status of these terms in contemporary usage and policy discourse?
4. How do arguments around honor and shame inform gender and educational policy?

Objectives
*   Map lexemes denoting honor/shame across languages
*   Contextualize their semantic shifts historically
*   Evaluate analogous metaphorical uses (e.g., moral "falling")
*   Examine policy implications in education and gender discourse

Introduction

Language is a fundamental medium through which societies express and enforce moral codes. Nowhere is this more evident than in the domains of **honor** and **shame**—concepts that are semantically rich, culturally loaded, and deeply embedded in the lexicons of South Asian languages. In this region, where familial reputation and communal identity often supersede individual autonomy, terms such as *izzat*, *sharam*, *ghairat*, and *lajja* serve as more than descriptors—they function as linguistic instruments of social control, gender discipline, and intergenerational transmission of values (Kakar, 1996; Pask & Rouf, 2018).

The significance of these lexemes is evident in both everyday discourse and in extreme social phenomena, such as honor killings, marital restrictions, and gender-based violence. In Pakistan and

northern India, the phrase *izzat ka sawal hai* ("It is a matter of honor") is commonly invoked to justify decisions affecting women's mobility, marriage, and speech. Similarly, the use of *sharam* (shame/modesty) in educational and domestic contexts enforces a moralizing language of fear and conformity, particularly among girls and young women (Ali et al., 2021).

Despite the socio-cultural salience of honor and shame in South Asia, there is a lack of comprehensive semantic studies that analyze how these concepts are encoded across languages. Much of the current literature tends to treat honor and shame as anthropological or sociological constructs, often overlooking their linguistic instantiation. Moreover, the few existing linguistic studies are typically language-specific and do not offer a comparative perspective across the major South Asian linguistic families. This paper seeks to fill that scholarly gap by offering a cross-linguistic analysis grounded in lexical semantics, cognitive linguistics, and discourse theory.

In this paper, we analyze how four major South Asian languages—Hindi-Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali, and Nepali—lexicalize and semantically nuance concepts of honor and shame. We explore metaphorical expressions, euphemistic strategies, and taboo avoidance across these languages to understand how morality is encoded, reinforced, and reproduced through language. By combining corpus analysis with ethnographic interviews and theoretical models like Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003), Natural Semantic Metalanguage (Wierzbicka, 1999), and Cognitive Sociolinguistics (Geeraerts, 2010), this study provides an in-depth account of honor and shame as semantic fields rooted in social realities.

Literature Review

Honor and Shame in South Asian Moral Economies

The centrality of honor and shame in South Asian societies has been well-documented by sociologists, anthropologists, and feminists (Kandiyoti, 1991; Chakrabarty, 1992). In most caste-based and patriarchal communities, *izzat* is not an individual trait but a collective family asset, one that can be increased, protected, or lost through the actions—particularly of female members. *Sharam* and *lajja* serve as internalized moral boundaries, conditioning behavior and speech in accordance with social expectations. These values are often reinforced through parental language, religious rhetoric, and communal surveillance, making them ideal subjects for semantic analysis.

Lexicalization of Honor

Urdu and Punjabi are particularly rich in honor-related lexemes. *Izzat* conveys a broad spectrum of meanings including dignity, prestige, and worth. Its derivatives—*izzatdar* (honorable), *beizzat* (dishonored), and *izzat afzaai* (giving honor)—demonstrate high morphological productivity (Hashmi et al., 2019). In Punjabi, expressions like *izzat latth gayi* (honor is lost) utilize the verb

latthṇa ("to fall"), showing a metaphor of spatial descent to conceptualize moral loss.

Ghairat, more common in Islamic discourse, emphasizes self-respect and moral courage, particularly in defense of female relatives. In Pashto and Urdu-speaking communities, *ghairatmand* (one with honor) is an esteemed identity marker. Notably, *ghairat* overlaps with *izzat* semantically but differs in agentivity, highlighting the bearer's moral responsibility (Ali et al., 2021).

Shame and Euphemism

In contrast, *sharam* (Urdu-Hindi), *lajja* (Sanskrit-derived, used in Bengali and Nepali), and their euphemistic variants reflect negative affect, often linked to violation of social norms. Niraula et al. (2020) identify twelve euphemistic constructions in Nepali used to refer to shame-related topics such as menstruation, sexual abuse, and extramarital relationships. These include metaphorical phrases (e.g., "the red guest" for menstruation) and evasive syntactic structures. The linguistic avoidance of shame lexemes reflects their status as social taboos that simultaneously stigmatize and regulate behavior.

Gender, Language, and Power

Feminist linguistic studies consistently show that honor and shame lexemes are gendered in both function and frequency (Pask & Rouf, 2018). Women are more likely to be spoken about in terms of *izzat* and *sharam*, whereas men are expected to act as custodians of familial *ghairat*. This asymmetry is evident in honor violence discourse, marriage practices, and everyday communication. For instance, a British-Pakistani woman's education or clothing choices may be described as "bringing shame" (*sharam laana*) to the family, reflecting the linguistic encoding of gender surveillance (Ali et al., 2021).

Theoretical Foundations in Lexical Semantics

This study employs lexical semantics as a theoretical foundation to analyze meaning at the level of lexeme structure and usage. Wierzbicka (1999) advocates for cross-cultural analysis using Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM), a framework that enables the decomposition of complex cultural terms into universal semantic primes. *Izzat*, for example, may be semantically rendered as "people think this person is good because they follow rules." Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) further supports our exploration of idiomatic expressions such as *izzat gir gayi* ("honor has fallen") or *munh kala kar diya* ("you have blackened our face"), demonstrating metaphorical mappings of moral status onto spatial orientation and facial symbolism.

Methodology

Research Design

The study employs a mixed-methods comparative semantic approach, integrating corpus-based quantitative analysis with qualitative ethnographic interviews. This dual strategy enables the triangulation of linguistic usage, contextual meaning, and culturally situated interpretations.

Data Sources

Corpus Construction

For the corpus-based component of this study, diverse and representative textual datasets were assembled across the four target languages. For Punjabi (Shahmukhi), we employed a 2 million-word corpus compiled by Hashmi, Mahmood, and Mahmood (2019), which includes 846 semantically annotated nouns, covering relations such as synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, and meronymy, sourced from academic platforms including Academia.edu, ResearchGate, and CCSENet. In the case of Hindi-Urdu and Bengali, approximately one million words per language were extracted from the EMILLE corpus alongside major newspaper archives, ensuring socio-demographic balance and lexical diversity across formal and informal registers. For Nepali, a 500,000-word corpus was constructed using Tatoeba sentence banks, Wikipedia discussion pages, and selected informal blog content. Key lexemes in the Nepali corpus were systematically cross-referenced with euphemistic and taboo-related terms identified by Niraula et al. (2020), with supplementary material drawn from Academia.edu. Together, these corpora provided the empirical basis for frequency analysis, collocation studies, and semantic field mapping in the lexical domains of honor and shame.

Interviews

Conducted semi-structured interviews (N = 60; ~15 per language community), stratified by gender (male/female), age (18–65), and urban/rural residence. Participants were asked to discuss scenarios involving honor/shame, eliciting natural usage of key terms.

Secondary Literature

Qualitative findings from Ali et al. (2017) on shame discourse among British South Asian women were used to inform the design and content of interview prompts, particularly in relation to gendered experiences of moral regulation. These insights provided a culturally grounded framework for understanding how lexemes like *sharam* and *izzat* are invoked in familial and communal settings. Additional analytical depth was drawn from the work of Robinson and Singh (2020), which examines the role of *izzat* within forced marriage contexts in the UK. Their study highlights how honor-based discourse functions as both a linguistic and ideological tool to constrain individual agency, particularly among young women. These sources collectively shaped the qualitative strand of this research, allowing for contextually sensitive interpretation of semantic patterns and social implications.

Analytical Methods

Lexical Annotation & Semantic Coding

Lexemes for honor (*izzat*, *ghairat*) and shame (*sharam*, *lajja*, euphemisms) were manually extracted. Following Wierzbicka's NSM framework, each lexeme was coded for denotation, metaphor, taboo avoidance, agentivity, and gender reference.

Frequency & Collocation Analysis

Using AntConc (v3.5.8) and custom Python scripts, we computed normalized frequencies (per million words) and analyzed collocational patterns—e.g., *izzat ka*, *sharam se*, *lajja lagna*—to identify metaphorical extensions and semantic roles.

Qualitative Thematic Analysis

NVivo (v12) was employed to code interview transcripts for thematic clusters: cultural definitions, gendered enforcement, shame resistance, and mental health references. Inter-coder reliability achieved Cohen's κ ≥ 0.80.

Cross-Linguistic Validation

Native speaker reviewers from each language community vetted the semantic annotations for cultural validity. Comparative workshops ensured alignment across language-specific lexemes and semantic domains.

Limitations

While corpora are robust for Hindi-Urdu and Punjabi, Bengali and Nepali corpora are less extensive, which may underrepresent rarer idiomatic usages. Interview sample sizes provide rich qualitative insight but are limited in geographic scope.

Results & Main Body

Hindi-Urdu: *Izzat* and *Sharam*

Semantic Field of *Izzat*

In the Hindi-Urdu corpus, *izzat* appears at 45 occurrences per million words. Collocates include *ghirā*, *bhīṭ*, *harām*, reflecting spatial metaphors ("surrounding honor," "eating honor," "praise"). Notable idioms: *izzat girna* ("honor falls"), *izzat ke sawaal* ("question/issue of honor"), illustrating conceptual metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003).

Interview excerpts:

"Parivār kī izzat sabse zarūrī hai—hum har kaam isliye karte hain."

("Family's honor is most important—everything we do is because of it.")

Semantic Field of *Sharam*

Sharam records 30 pmw frequency; collocates such as *lajja*, *nafrat*, *muh kala* appear, underscoring shame as internalized moral emotion. Interviews reveal its use to enforce social compliance, particularly among women.

Punjabi: *Izzat*, *Ghairat*, and *Latthṇa*

Corpus Evidence

In the Punjabi Shahmukhi corpus, the term *izzat* appears with a frequency of 38 occurrences per million words (pmw), while *ghairat* occurs at 22 pmw. Notably, both lexemes frequently co-occur with the verb *latthṇa* ("to fall") in approximately 15% of cases, as seen in expressions such as *latth gayi izzat* ("honor has fallen"), which reflect a spatial metaphor of moral descent. Hashmi et al. (2019) have demonstrated that these verbs are embedded within broader semantic frames that involve notions of agency, affect, and moral judgment. In this semantic network, *izzat* primarily denotes

social prestige or dignity, reflecting external validation of status, while *ghairat* emphasizes internalized moral boundaries and self-respect, particularly in relation to the conduct of female family members. The verb *latthṇa* serves as a powerful metaphorical device that encodes the loss of status in terms of physical collapse or descent, invoking bodily imagery. Interview data reinforced this framing; for example, one participant recounted, *"Beṭī ne ghar se baahar der se aayi, tab gharwaṅgāne ne likheya ke 'ghairat gir gayi'"* ("When my daughter came home late, the relatives wrote that 'self-respect has fallen'"). This illustrates how language not only reflects but also perpetuates deeply ingrained cultural expectations and gendered moral surveillance.

Bengali & Nepali: *Lajja*, Euphemism, and Taboo Avoidance
Nepali Euphemisms

Niraula et al. (2020) identify twelve euphemistic substitutes for shame-related expressions in Nepali, highlighting the cultural tendency to avoid direct references to socially sensitive topics. Among these, *laal mehmaan* ("red guest") is commonly used to refer to menstruation, and the term *lajja* (shame/modesty) is frequently avoided in mixed-gender contexts due to its perceived impropriety. Corpus analysis supports this observation: the frequency of direct usage of *lajja* is relatively low at 7 occurrences per million words (pmw), whereas euphemistic expressions collectively appear at a higher rate of approximately 12 pmw, suggesting a preference for indirect references when addressing topics associated with shame.

Bengali Patterns

In the Bengali corpus, although somewhat limited in size, the data indicates similar trends. The term *lajja* occurs at around 15 pmw and *sharam* at 25 pmw, but more telling is the prevalence of syntactic avoidance strategies. For instance, phrases like *taar kachhe bolo ni* ("did not tell her directly") suggest a reluctance to speak openly about shame-inducing subjects. Interviews further confirm that such indirectness is especially pronounced among women, who reported using euphemisms or avoiding explicit terms altogether to prevent family embarrassment or to maintain modesty in public discourse. These findings reflect the intersection of linguistic form, social taboo, and gendered expectations in South Asian communication practices.

Discussion
Shared Metaphors & Cultural Frames

All four languages utilize spatial metaphors: falling, darkening, contamination. They share the conceptual mapping HONOR IS UP / SHAME IS DOWN/DIRTY across cultural contexts, using idioms like *izzat girna*, *muh kala kar dena*.

Gendered Semantic Patterns

- Women are frequent referents of shame lexemes (*sharam*, *lajja*), while men are invoked as *ghairatmand* (self-respecting/custodians).

- Euphemism strategies are stronger in feminine speech domains, indicating intersectional control.

Cultural Variation
- Punjabi distinguishes *izzat* vs *ghairat* more sharply than Hindi-Urdu.
- Nepali and Bengali rely more on taboo avoidance mechanisms.

Social Implications
Lexical frames often re-entrench patriarchal norms—honor policing reinforces gender inequality. Yet, community defense of *ghairat* can also provide solidarity in contexts vulnerable to external marginalization.

Policy Implications
The centrality of honor and shame lexemes in South Asian communities has significant social policy implications, particularly in the areas of **mental health**, **gender equity**, and **language education**.

Mental Health Services
Shame-based linguistic conditioning can exacerbate psychological distress among women and marginalized groups. Cultural linguists and community psychologists have found that indiscriminate use of shame lexemes (*sharam*, *lajja*) in clinical and family settings leads to internalizing disorders such as depression and anxiety (Ali et al., 2021; Pask & Rouf, 2018). Mental health service providers in urban centers like Lahore and Dhaka should:

1. Integrate **semantically sensitive counseling protocols**, avoiding moralizing lexemes that reinforce shame.
2. Raise awareness among practitioners to **reframe therapy language** using culturally resonant but non-stigmatizing terminology.
3. Train community health workers in **de-stigmatizing discourse**, especially when addressing issues like menstrual health or domestic abuse, where euphemisms are common.

Gender-Sensitive Education Policy
Honor/shame lexemes often constrain girls' behavior in school settings. Teachers, parents, and policy-makers must:
- Recognize the **pedagogical impact** of shame-based language on girls' self-esteem and school participation.
- Develop **gender-equity training** for educators to avoid chastising female students using lexemes associated with loss of *izzat* or *lajja*.
- Incorporate **critical discourse activities** that enable students to reflect on the social functions of honor/shame in language.

Legal and Social Reform
In communities where *ghairat* is used to justify violence—such as honor killings or "corrective" forms of domestic coercion—it is critical to:
- Enact and enforce laws that **criminalize honor-based violence**, while eliminating loopholes that permit such language to be used as justification.

- Launch **public awareness campaigns** that challenge discourses like "izzat ka sawal" using **counter-narratives** in local language media.

Language Policy and Mother-Tongue Pedagogy

Including semantic awareness in curriculum is vital to promote language as a tool for empowerment, not constraint:

- Integrate modules on **lexical pragmatics** and **cultural semantics** in teacher training.
- Encourage students to **critically reflect** on idioms such as *izzat girna* or *sharam karwana*, helping them understand implicit gender values encoded in language use.

Conclusion

This paper presents a cross-linguistic lexical semantic analysis of honor and shame lexemes in Hindi-Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali, and Nepali, utilizing a mixed-method approach that combines corpus analytics with ethnographic interviews. The findings reveal that spatial and physical metaphors of moral states, such as falling from honor or carrying shame, are consistently mapped across all four languages, indicating shared conceptual structures. At the same time, distinct cultural nuances are evident in the lexical inventories and usage patterns of terms like *izzat* and *ghairat*, with Bengali and Nepali exhibiting particularly complex euphemistic strategies to navigate social taboos. The analysis further shows a marked gendered asymmetry, whereby women are more frequently targeted by shame lexemes, while men position themselves as guardians of familial or communal honor. These patterns underscore the need for policy-level semantic sensitivity in mental health, education, legal, and media frameworks to challenge and reform language-based enforcement of hierarchical and gendered norms. Future research should extend this work through large-scale diachronic corpus analysis and applied linguistic fieldwork to trace evolving media discourse and support culturally grounded language policy interventions.

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