

A Comparative Critical Metaphor Analysis of News Reports on the China–US Trade Conflict

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Abstract

The renewed escalation of the China-US trade conflict in 2025 has sparked widespread global discussion. To explore this phenomenon, this study examines 90 reports published between February and December 2025 from each of two highly representative newspapers in China and the United States: *People's Daily* and *The New York Times*. Drawing on Charteris-Black's Critical Metaphor Analysis framework, it compares their conceptual metaphor usage and the underlying motivations. Findings reveal that both media extensively utilize nine major metaphor types (war, threat, motion, building, body, natural force, tool, business, and game), with war metaphors dominating both corpora. Nevertheless, *People's Daily* emphasizes body, building, threat, and defensive war metaphors to construct China as a rule defender and order restorer, thereby legitimizing its countermeasures and multilateralist stance. Conversely, *The New York Times* highlights competitive war, motion, business, and tool metaphors, framing the conflict as strategic rivalry and commercial competition to legitimize U.S. tariff policies and the logic of great-power competition. We argue that media metaphors do not merely reflect the trade conflict; rather, they actively attribute responsibility and shape audiences' understanding and affective evaluations across different institutional roles, audience presuppositions, and ideological frames.

Keywords: China–US trade conflict, News reports, Critical Metaphor Analysis, Political stance, Role relations

1. Introduction

Since 2018, there have been repeated rounds of trade disputes between China and the US, including trade imbalances, barriers to market access, divergent industrial policies, and intensifying technological competition. Following Donald Trump's return to the presidency in 2025, his imposition of additional tariffs on Chinese goods has further escalated the dispute. Now, the conflict between the two countries has exerted a far-reaching influence on global political and economic development and has become a central issue worldwide. News discourse, as put by Fowler (1991), is closely related to the ideology, beliefs, evaluative systems, and values of its society. Under these circumstances, Critical Metaphor Analysis can be an extremely powerful method to interpret news reports. It not only examines the cognitive mechanisms of metaphor but also uncovers the social power relations and ideological assumptions embedded in metaphorical language with the integration of cognitive linguistics and critical discourse analysis.

There have been systematic and in-depth investigations into the specific discursive field of the China-US trade conflict, which develops along several lines. To begin with, the mechanisms through which metaphors are constructed in political and economic discourse have been a main focus. Wu et al. (2022), for example, reveal that the US government frequently employs metaphors such as war, game, and building to reinforce its policy legitimacy based on their analysis of the discourse used by the US government in China-US trade negotiations. Ma & Gao (2020) approach the issue from a multimodal perspective and explore the visual-verbal co-construction of metaphors in American political cartoons. Song & Wang (2024), adopting a diachronic approach to critical metaphor analysis, further trace the evolution of US economic reporting on China and reveal a tendency in the American media to represent China's economic image in increasingly antagonistic terms. Besides, another group of studies has employed Critical Metaphor Analysis to uncover the construction of national images and ideologies in media discourse. Wang & Xin (2019), in their study of reports on the US withdrawal from the TPP, find that US media tend to depict China through negative metaphorical images such as "threat," "giant," and "rule breaker," thereby stigmatizing China through discursive practices. Li & Yang (2019) also demonstrate through historical comparison that US anti-Chinese discourse, both historically and in contemporary trade conflicts, has repeatedly relied on metaphorical resources to construct and reinforce a negative image of China. With the deepening of interdisciplinary integration, Critical Metaphor Analysis has gradually expanded toward comparative studies across contexts and fields. Qiu & Wang (2025), for instance, compare Chinese and US news reports on climate change and identify significant differences in metaphor types and preferences, which reflect distinct national positions and environmental-governance concepts. And Wu et al. (2020) provide a diachronic perspective for understanding US discursive strategies in the trade conflict based on their analysis of political metaphors in Trump's speeches. In addition, with the rise of multimodal discourse analysis, there has also been a tendency that Critical Metaphor Analysis is extending toward multimodal data. Researchers have begun to examine the role of images, cartoons, and other semiotic resources in the co-construction of metaphorical meaning (Ma & Gao, 2020), thereby enriching both the theoretical scope and the methodological system of metaphor

studies.

Although substantial research has been conducted on metaphors and their ideological motivations in the discourse of China–US trade disputes, existing studies still leave room for further development. Much of the current literature focuses on US political speeches, negotiation texts, or media reports from a single country, hence, the research perspective is relatively limited. What's more, current research concentrates more on how US media construct China's national image, while systematic comparisons of cross-national media metaphor mechanisms remain insufficient.

In view of this gap, the present study takes news reports on the new round of the China–US trade conflict in 2025 as its research data. Drawing on the theoretical framework of critical metaphor analysis, it identifies and compares the central metaphors used in *People's Daily* and *The New York Times*. Further, the study examines how the two media outlets use metaphorical frames to define the trade conflict, construct the images of the two nations, attribute responsibility, and justify their respective positions. Accordingly, this study addresses the following questions:

- (1) What types of conceptual metaphors are used in *People's Daily* and *The New York Times* in their reports on the China–US trade conflict?
- (2) What similarities and differences can be observed in the distribution and patterns of use of these conceptual metaphors?
- (3) How do these metaphors construct the role relations between China and the United States, and how do they serve the legitimation or delegitimation of each side's position?

2. Theoretical Framework

Conceptual metaphor refers to a series of systematic mappings from one cognitive domain to another, that is, from a source domain to a target domain (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The former is usually a concrete and familiar conceptual field, whereas the latter is usually abstract and difficult to understand directly; therefore, the latter is often understood with the help of the former. As a significant approach to understanding the world, metaphor is rooted in everyday language, thought, and action, and it reflects people's underlying cognitive orientations and patterns of thinking (Yang & Zhang, 2024).

Conceptual Metaphor Theory has undoubtedly promoted the cognitive turn in metaphor studies. However, it does not take sufficient account of the social context of metaphor use or the speaker's intentions, nor is it adequate for revealing the dimensions of social power and ideology embedded in metaphor (Song & Wang, 2024). In 2004, Charteris-Black (2004), building on Fairclough (1995)'s three-dimensional model of discourse analysis and Cameron and Low (1999)'s three-stage procedure for metaphor analysis, proposed Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA), thereby incorporating ideological dimensions into metaphor research. He emphasizes that metaphor use is neither unconscious nor random. Rather, it is a purposive choice made by discourse producers on the basis of their communicative intentions and through the combined mobilization of individual resources, such as personal ideas, emotions,

and experiences, and social resources, such as political, historical, and cultural factors (Charteris, 2004). Accordingly, an adequate understanding of metaphor requires attention to semantic, pragmatic, and cognitive dimensions at the same time.

According to Charteris-Black, there are three stages in the framework of Critical Metaphor Analysis, namely, metaphor identification, metaphor interpretation, and metaphor explanation. Metaphor identification refers to the process that identifies, through close reading, candidate metaphors according to semantic meaning, unconventional collocation, and contextual comparison. Then, at the cognitive level, the conceptual metaphors underlying these expressions are generalized. Finally, at the social level, metaphors are interpreted in relation to sociocultural history and ideology to reveal how the power relations and ideologies embedded in texts are gradually disseminated, consolidated, and ultimately maintained through linguistic choices (Wu & Li, 2023).

3. Methodology

The day, February 1, 2025, when the Trump administration announced an additional 10 percent tariff on Chinese goods, marked the beginning of the 2025 China–US trade conflict. Taking this iconic event as the starting point for data retrieval, this research is going to examine related news reports of *People's Daily* and *The New York Times* through the time span from February to December 2025. In the *People's Daily* database, this study searched for related news reports using the Chinese keywords “贸易” (trade) and “关税” (tariff). In the LexisNexis database, relevant reports from *The New York Times* were retrieved with the English keywords “trade” and “tariff.” After manual screening, 90 eligible *People's Daily* reports, totaling 93,213 Chinese characters, and 90 relevant *The New York Times* reports, totaling 110,119 English words, were collected. On this basis, two specialized micro corpora of Chinese and US news reports on the trade conflict were established.

The study first used the corpus software AntConc 4.3.1 to extract all concordance lines containing “trade,” “tariff,” and their Chinese equivalents, respectively, from the two corpora. It then identified candidate metaphorical expressions through Gerard Steen's (2010) MIPVU procedure for metaphor identification based on the surrounding context. Subsequently, the expressions were classified according to the characteristics of their source domains. Finally, the metaphorical realizations were determined, semantically similar realizations were grouped together, and metaphor density was calculated.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 A Comparison of Metaphor Types in News Reports on the China-US Trade Conflict

Through the procedures described above, the study finds that the metaphor types in the Chinese and US trade-conflict news corpora are broadly consistent. Both corpora contain nine major metaphor types: war, threat, motion, building, body, natural force, tool, business, and game metaphors. However, the density and ranking of these nine types differ between the two corpora. Overall, the most frequent metaphor categories in the *People's Daily* corpus are war metaphor, body metaphor, threat metaphor, motion metaphor, and building metaphor. In *The New York Times*, the leading categories are war metaphor, threat metaphor, motion

metaphor, business metaphor, and tool metaphor. Table 1 lists the five metaphor types with the highest density in each corpus.

Table 1. Major Metaphor Types and Densities in *People's Daily* and *The New York Times*

Top Five Metaphor Types in Chinese News Reports			Top Five Metaphor Types in US News Reports		
Metaphor type	Typical metaphorical realizations	Metaphor density (%)	Metaphor type	Typical metaphorical realizations	Metaphor density (%)
War metaphor	贸易战 (trade war), 对抗 (confrontation), 捍卫 (defend)...	23.60	War metaphor	trade war, fight, struck back...	34.71
Body metaphor	损害 (damage), 反噬 (backfire), 恶化 (worsen)...	17.02	Threat metaphor	threat, risk, pressure...	15.98
Threat metaphor	威胁 (threat), 霸凌 (bullying), 施压 (pressure)...	12.80	Motion metaphor	escalate, pause, roll back...	15.98
Motion metaphor	方向 (direction), 进程 (process), 轨道 (track)...	10.43	Business metaphor	cost, price, bill...	12.95
Building metaphor	架构 (architecture), 基础 (foundation), 修复 (repair)...	10.06	Tool metaphor	leverage, tool, toolbox...	7.44
Total		73.91	Total		87.06

As shown in Table 1, war metaphors rank first in metaphor density in both the Chinese and US news corpora. This suggests that both Chinese and US media construct the trade conflict as a confrontational war marked by enemy–friend distinctions and serious destruction. Expressions such as “对抗” (confrontation), “捍卫” (defend), and “贸易战” (trade war) in *People's Daily*, together with “trade war,” “retaliate,” “hit back,” and “truce” in *The New York Times*, all highlight the tense atmosphere between the two countries. Threat metaphors also occupy a prominent position in both corpora. In the Chinese corpus, terms such as “威胁” (threat), “霸凌” (bullying), and “施压” (pressure) consider the United States as a bully that disregards consequences and coerces other countries. Similarly, in the US corpus, expressions such as “threat,” “risk,” and “pressure” construct China as a threatening force to the United States. In addition, both media outlets make frequent use of motion metaphors, treating the conflict as a long-term dynamic process full of twists and turns.

As mentioned before, the two corpora contain the same broad types of metaphors, and war metaphors have the highest density in both. That being said, however, a closer analysis shows

that the density of each metaphor type and the main information conveyed through these metaphors is considerably different between the two corpora.

The most salient feature of the Chinese corpus is that it frequently metaphorizes the trade conflict as damage to the economic body and the institutional architecture. In doing so, it shifts the narrative focus from a bilateral contest over interests to the broader issue of disruption to the global governance order. Apart from war metaphors, body metaphors account for 17.02 percent of the Chinese corpus, far higher than the 3.76 percent found in *The New York Times*. Building metaphors account for 10.06 percent, also significantly higher than the 1.56 percent in the US corpus. For example, an article published in *People's Daily* on March 17, 2025, entitled “美国加征关税招致多方批评”(US Tariff Increases Draw Criticism from Multiple Parties) states that the US tariff measures would “反噬美国经济”(backfire on the US economy). Another report “美国加征关税，全球一片反对”(US reciprocal Tariffs Trigger Global Opposition) depicts the reciprocal tariffs of US as measures that would “进一步增加家庭用品开支，侵蚀家庭消费力，加剧家庭财务恶化，加重美国家庭负担”(further increase household expenditure on consumer goods, weaken consumption capacity, worsen household financial conditions, and increase burdens on American families). As for building metaphors, a commentary published on April 6 considers the multilateral trading system centered on the World Trade Organization as “the cornerstone of international trade”(以世界贸易组织为核心的多边贸易体制是国际贸易的基石), while US reciprocal tariffs is an action that “arbitrarily tears apart” the foundation of mutually beneficial cooperation. Such expressions not only position American consumers as the bearers of economic costs but also portray the global economy and multilateral mechanisms as organisms and institutional structures that can be injured, become unbalanced, and require repair. In this frame, “反制”(countermeasures) are no longer merely acts of retaliation. Rather, they are construed as necessary actions to prevent damage from spreading and to maintain systemic stability. By contrast, *The New York Times* gives greater prominence to motion and business metaphors. Motion metaphors account for 15.98 percent of its corpus, higher than the 10.43 percent in *People's Daily*, while business metaphors reach 12.95 percent, roughly twice the proportion in the Chinese corpus. As the trade tension between the two countries fluctuates, reports such as “China Retaliates Against Trump Tariffs as Super Trade War Escalates” and “Markets Surge After the U.S. and China Pause Tariffs” repeatedly employ expressions such as “escalate”, “pause” and “roll back” to describe the tension of the trade war between China and the US, constructing China-US interaction as a constantly competing game. Meanwhile, reports such as “Trump's Tariffs Will Pay Off, For China” using expressions like “the costs of an all-out trade war with China” vividly draw upon familiar concepts of profit, loss, cost, and economic calculation to represent the potential consequences of policy decisions. These business metaphors frame the trade conflict between China and America as market competition, which is clearly in line with capitalism's dominance in the US.

Although both corpora make extensive use of war metaphors to construct the trade conflict as a relationship of opposition and to position the two sides as adversaries, the messages conveyed by the two corpora are markedly different. In *People's Daily*, the shared information conveyed by war metaphors is that rather than actively launching any kind of war towards others, China

only takes reactive actions. For instance, the report, “如果美方执意打关税战、贸易战，中方必将奉陪到底”(If the US Insists on a Tariff War and Trade War, China Will Fight to the End), claims its position that pressure, threat and coercion are not the correct ways to deal with China and that if the US disregards the interests of both countries and the international community and insists on launching war, China will “奉陪到底”(fight to the end). The following day, another report “坚定维护国家利益，坚定维护多边贸易体制”(Firmly Safeguarding National Interests and the Multilateral Trading System) restates its attitude that “中方不得不进行正当反制”(China has no choice but to take legitimate countermeasures). Therefore, in the Chinese corpus, war metaphors mainly center on expressions such as “反制”(countermeasure), “奉陪到底”(to respond to the end), and “捍卫”(defend), emphasizing that China is making a necessary response under prior US pressure. Its “war” actions are thus represented as reasonable efforts to safeguard both itself and the broader world order. China is consequently constructed as an order defender forced to respond under the enemy’s aggressive attacks, hence its countermeasures are presented as legitimate and reasonable. By contrast, expressions in the US corpus such as “launch a trade war” and “all-out trade war” not only frame the trade conflict as an intense and zero-sum confrontation, but also represent tariffs and other economic measures as “weapons,” thereby providing cognitive legitimacy for its hard-line policy. Emphasizing the intensity, zero-sum nature, and strategic consequences of the trade conflict can heighten its confrontational character and weaken the perceived possibility of cooperation (Cai, 2023). The sentence “This time around, in Mr. Trump’s second term, the gloves are off” is an exactly powerful example. It comes from the news report “China Raises Tariffs on U.S. Imports to 125%, Calling Trump’s Policies a ‘Joke’” which demonstrates another turn of the escalated trade war. The term “the gloves are off” refers to preparing for an intense fight, thus directly framing the trade conflict between China and America as an unrestricted battle where America is an aggressive soldier daring to launch a war actively.

In addition, although both media outlets use threat metaphors extensively, the underlying information conveyed are sharply different. In a Ministry of Foreign Affairs press conference reported by *People’s Daily*, the United States is criticized for “动辄以关税手段威胁他国”(always threaten other countries by increasing tariffs), where the US is portrayed as the agent of threatening behavior while other countries are positioned as the victims of such threats. Also, another report characterizes tariffs as “实施极限施压、谋取私利的武器”(a weapon used to exert pressure and threaten and pursue private interests), thereby associating threat metaphors with negative evaluations of rule violations and economic bullying. Accordingly, in the Chinese corpus, expressions such as “威胁”(threat), “霸凌”(bullying), and “讹诈”(blackmail) mainly refer to the damage caused by US unilateral tariffs to global supply chains and international interests. The United States is consequently constructed as a bully that exercises hegemony over the world and attempts to maintain its unilateral dominance. In *The New York Times*, by contrast, “threat” and “risk” are more often associated with recession risks, market pressure, consumer costs, and corporate profits. For instance, a report published on May 12, 2025 claims that “the White House backed off from the steepest levies, as the costs of an all-out trade war with China threatened global economic growth,” highlighting that the threat of the trade war mainly brings market pressure and national economic profits. What’s more, another article published on September 15 explicitly describes the trade conflict as a

“national security threat.” In other words, Chinese reports tend to treat “threat” as harm to the international order, whereas US reports tend to treat “threat” as pressure on the domestic economy and policy stability.

4.2 Role Relations and Legitimation/Delegitimation Functions Constructed by Metaphors in Chinese and US Reports

According to CMA, metaphor choice does not occur passively. Rather, it is related to the author’s value orientation, social role, and communicative purpose. Metaphor can legitimize certain power relations while obscuring other possible ways of understanding them (Xu, 2023). As China’s official mainstream newspaper, *People’s Daily* performs the functions of policy interpretation, position articulation, and international communication. Its metaphor choices are therefore not arbitrary but serve specific discursive tasks. For instance, its objective and accurate reporting on the “Belt and Road Initiative” has significantly enhanced public recognition of and trust in the initiative, thereby shaping the newspaper’s image as an authoritative, reliable, and trustworthy mainstream media outlet (Chen, 2025). On the one hand, the reports need to attribute responsibility for the US tariff increases and unilateralist practices, while highlighting their impact on China’s economic development, global economic stability, and the multilateral trade-rules system. For this reason, threat metaphors and war metaphors with a countermeasure-oriented meaning appear frequently. Conversely, China has long pursued a diplomatic orientation centered on peace and development, cultivating a national image that emphasizes dialogue and cooperation. As a result, Chinese economic news tends to construct a cooperative narrative that integrates competition with cooperation. (Cai, 2023). Accordingly, the reports repeatedly use motion metaphors to highlight China’s efforts to resolve disputes and to bring China–US trade relations “回到正轨”(back onto the right track) and “相向而行”(toward each other). Although *The New York Times* is a major US elite newspaper and has considerable influence in the US public opinion and policy debates, it is not an official media outlet. Its reports therefore cannot be simply equated with the position of the US government. Its metaphor choices do not primarily serve policy interpretation or official position statements. Instead, they are oriented more toward domestic US readers. As a result, the reports employ a large number of business, threat, and tool metaphors to evaluate, and at times criticize, the possible domestic economic consequences of Trump’s tariff policy and its effects on people’s livelihoods in the United States. In addition, as Cai (2023) notes, Anglo-American economic news tends to construct a competitive narrative. The reports frequently present the China–US trade dispute as a high-intensity competition with strategic significance and highlight its advances, retreats, escalation, and bargaining process. War and motion metaphors are thus frequently used to represent the outbreak, escalation, stalemate, and adjustment of the conflict.

Political metaphors are usually rooted in specific ideological and cultural models and, because of their persuasive force, have the capacity to legitimize particular ideas and guide audiences’ understanding of reality (Bas, 2020). China emphasizes the concept of peaceful development and adheres to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. The value framework displayed in its reports therefore mainly points toward cooperative multilateralism. Accordingly, the reports often construct US tariff increases and unilateralist practices as “威胁” (threats) and “冲击”

(shocks) to the global economic and trade order, multilateral rules, and common interests. In this way, an event that could have been framed as a bilateral conflict of interests is elevated into a problem of damaged order and disrupted rules. Correspondingly, China's response is more often constructed as a necessary action in the sense of “反制” (countermeasure), “维护” (maintenance), and “救济” (remedy). The discourse does not primarily emphasize aggressiveness. Instead, it foregrounds the legitimacy, limitedness, and rule-based nature of China's actions. At the same time, the reports repeatedly draw on action metaphors such as “正道” (the right path), “出路” (a way out), “相向而行” (moving toward each other), and “行稳致远” (moving steadily toward long-term goals), directing the solution of the dispute toward dialogue, cooperation, and win-win outcomes. By comparison, under the influence of US multilateralist and hegemonic ideological framing, the value orientation of US reports is closer to a competitive strategic perspective. The reports are more inclined to use war and motion metaphors to intensify the confrontational, processual, and game-like character of the trade conflict. Expressions such as “trade war,” “gloves are off,” and “climb-down” highlight escalation, concession, and readjustment. Moreover, capitalism is inevitably attentive to market contexts and to the competitive and profit-oriented logic derived from them. US reports therefore often use business metaphors to understand the trade dispute as an issue of market competition and interest bargaining, thereby revealing calculations of gain and loss as well as warnings about risks to domestic market development.

In a word, differences in metaphor use also imply differences in role relations and directions of legitimation. Chigbu et al. (2025) argue that metaphors can establish political legitimacy by constructing opposing role representations. In *People's Daily*, China is more often represented as a defender of rules, a restorer of order, and a promoter of dialogue, whereas the United States is represented as a coercer, a bully, and a destroyer of the system. In *The New York Times*, the United States is more often constructed as a policy initiator, a negotiation leader, or a bearer of costs, while China is more often represented as a competitor, a counteracting actor, and a key node in the supply chain. The former metaphor system serves to justify the legitimacy of China's countermeasures and its multilateralist position, while the latter serves to continually evaluate the success or failure of US policy, the distribution of costs, and the dynamics of great-power competition.

5. Conclusion

Using the framework of Critical Metaphor Analysis, this study has compared conceptual metaphors in Chinese and US news reports on the trade conflict on the basis of the escalated China-US trade conflict in February 2025 as its starting point. It aims to reveal similarities and differences in conceptual metaphor use and to analyze how these differences construct the role relations between China and the United States while serving the legitimation of different positions. The findings show that, at the level of metaphor type, the two corpora share nine major metaphors: war, threat, motion, building, body, natural force, tool, business, and game metaphors. This indicates that, when reporting on the same trade-conflict event, both Chinese and US media tend to organize their reports through source domains that are highly imageable and strongly conflict-oriented. Nevertheless, *People's Daily* highlights body, building, threat, and defensive war metaphors, representing the trade conflict as a threat to the global economy

and the international order. *The New York Times*, by contrast, gives greater emphasis to competitive war, motion, business, and tool metaphors, highlighting the pressure exerted by the trade conflict on US markets, enterprises, and consumers.

These differences in metaphor use in these two news reports show the differences of the role positioning and directions of legitimation in the two countries. *People's Daily* constructs the United States as a bully and rule breaker and China as a defender of rules and restorer of order, thereby delegitimizing US unilateral tariffs and legitimizing China's countermeasures and multilateralist position. *The New York Times* constructs the United States as a negotiation leader or bearer of costs and China as a competitor, thereby continuously evaluating the effectiveness of tariff policy, the distribution of costs, and the logic of great-power competition. This study, therefore argues that media metaphors do not simply reflect the trade conflict. Rather, they actively attribute responsibility, guide audiences' understanding and affective evaluation within different institutional roles, audience presuppositions, and ideological frames.

Several limitations of this study should be addressed. First, the application of Critical Metaphor Analysis is inherently subjective; researchers' analytical assumptions, ideological predispositions, and context-sensitive judgments inevitably influence metaphor interpretation. Second, the corpus scope is relatively narrow, focusing exclusively on two primary news outlets within a specific timeframe. To build upon these findings, future research should expand the analysis to encompass a wider array of media outlets and genres.

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