

A Comparative Investigation on the Metaphors in Chinese and American Mainstream Media

Jiaxing Liu* & Wan Farah Wani Wan Fakhruddin
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Since COVID-19 outbreak in December 2019, there is a “narrative battle” between China and the US. Through rhetorical devices, such as metaphors, mainstream media plays a significant role in society in shaping public opinions. Although scholars have started to explore the metaphors employed between Chinese and American media during the pandemic, there is less information about a systematic comparative study on the COVID-19 related metaphors in Chinese and American media. This study provides a comparison of the metaphors in the COVID-19 editorials in the China Daily (CD) and the New York Times (NYT) through grounded theory. In general, it determines CD employs more metaphors than that in the NYT. In addition, the employment of war metaphor in NYT to describe the coronavirus is way more less than that in CD. Also, both CD and NYT tries to evoke the public through the employment of impressive historical issues.

Keywords: Covid-19, Editorial, Crisis, Metaphor

INTRODUCTION

Since the first COVID-19 outbreak hit China in December 2019, there is a “narrative battle” between China and the US. Misleading and prejudicial coverages of the respective countries have risen, further affecting the public’s opinion and leading to discrimination. According to Ahmad (2022), Many people were alarmed and perplexed by the virus' intricacy and rapid spread, which sparked moral panic and hostility toward some groups (Arumugam, 2020; Haynes, 2020), for instance, there have been various tales of a xenophobic bent in the news where certain ethnic groups were blamed for the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic (Haynes, 2020). Similar racist language was employed by several western media outlets to disparage China and people of Chinese heritage, including "Chinese virus pandemonium," "yellow alert," and "China kids stay home" (Wen *et al.*, 2020:1). In Chinese media, a nationalist discourse is likewise becoming increasingly serious. Due to the significant role of media plays in shaping public opinion and then leads to social changing (Goffman, 1974; Das,2009), comparative investigations on the media contents from the mainstream media is inevitable and necessary. Hence, the rhetorical devices in the mainstream media in both countries are widely studied by scholars worldwide. According to Yu (2022), metaphor is a rhetorical device that is frequently used in cognitive linguistics. Metaphor is viewed as "a method of cognition" that is used to conceptualize and communicate abstract ideas by making allusions to more specific or well-known ideas (Lakeoff, 1993:209; Lakeoff and Johnson, 2003).

*Correspondence to: Jiaxing Liu (email: jiaxing@graduate.utm.my)

Although scholars have started to explore the rhetorical devices employed in the editorials between Chinese and American media during the pandemic, there is less information about a comparative study on the COVID-19 related metaphors in Chinese and American media. This study provides a comparison of the metaphors in the COVID-19 editorials in the China Daily (CD) and the New York Times (NYT) through grounded theory. In general, it determines CD employs more metaphors than that in the NYT. In addition, CD prefers to employ war metaphor to describe coronavirus. Although this metaphor also appears in the NYT, but the employment of war metaphor to describe the coronavirus is way more less than that in CD. In the meantime, NYT also employs fire to portrays the coronavirus. Also, both CD and NYT tries to evoke the public through the impressive historical issues, such as the invasion history in China and the Cold War in the US.

DATA COLLECTION AND METHODOLOGY

The media reports to be analyzed in this study are selected from two mainstream media, namely NYT and CD, because both CD and NYT are influential media, which could greatly impact on the perception and choice of the public, political stance or policy implementation, and the view of peer media organizations. A study published in *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* (Denham, 2014), finds that NYT “may affect how news organizations characterize issues and events” (ibid). On the other hand, CD, as a bridge for the political, economic, social, and cultural exchange between China and outside world, is managed by the Communist Party of China’s Publicity Department.

CD is typical and representative, firmly reflects and expresses the national interest, and is congruent with party and government stances (Liu, Y.Q. *et al*, 2018). Hence, CD and NYT deserve to be examined as the source of data for this proposed study. Apart from media source, genre of the data is another considerable factor for data collection. This study will focus on the editorials related to COVID-19. Newspaper editorials, according to Connor (1996), present the newspaper’s views on recent problems of social or political importance. Additionally, the data to be collected are from the first day of COVID-19 (Dec. 31, 2019) to 2 month later after the crisis in each country. Since the coronavirus outbreaking time are different in both countries, so the ending date of the scope is different. In China, since Jan. 23, 2020, the lockdown of Wuhan, it indicates the start of the unprecedented heath crisis. Hence, the time scope in China is from Dec. 31, 2019 to 2 months later after the crisis: Mar. 23, 2020. On the other hand, due to the US former president Trump declared a national emergency concerning COVID-19 pandemic on Mar. 13, 2020, which is the dividing timeline between American pre-crisis and crisis period. So the time scope in the US is from Dec. 31, 2019 to 2 months later after the crisis: May. 13, 2020. Within the scope, researchers select 36 editorials as the research data purposively from CD and NYT.

In the next step, researcher groups the data into two corpuses, and then analyse each data qualitatively through the practice of grounded theory. Many research projects use the well-known methodology known as grounded theory. Grounded theory, which aims to find or develop theory from data that is systematically collected and analyzed, can use both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Ylona *et al*, 2019).

Through analyzing the data, researcher found out CD employs more metaphor than that of NYT. And both media employs different metaphor to convey their “mode of thought” for conceptualizing and conveying ideological inclination.

METAPHOR ANALYSIS

Against the backdrop of COVID-19, there is a wide use of metaphors in CD and NYT. After analyzing the editorials in both media, researcher finds out generally CD employs more metaphors than that in NYT. Also, the most popular metaphor in both media is the metaphors of “war”. In addition, both media also employs metaphor to evoke the public’s historical memory, which enable them to connect the ideological presentation with the Sino-US bilateral relations, for example, CD uses “invasion”, and NYT employs “Cold War” to describe the relation, which could lead to the rising hatred towards each other. More details about the metaphors in both media illustrates in the following sections.

Metaphors in China Daily

Figure 1 shows the metaphors employed in CD. Generally, the metaphor of “war” accounts for 62%, with a value of 35, which is the most popular metaphor in CD. Hereby, it views the pandemic containing actions as a “war”, the medical professionals, and the public are the “fighters” or “front-line soldiers”, the outbreaking area and infected people are the “frontline” and “battle field”, and the virus is the “enemy” or “threat”. Hence, the pandemic containing actions is regarded as the “fighters fight against a threat in the frontline” in a metaphor framework. In addition, the next popular metaphor is the metaphor of “invasion”, which includes “aggressors” and “victims”, ideologically reminds the public of the Chinese humiliated century, and easily arise the sympathy to China. Hereby, China describes the western China-bashers as the “aggressors”, and portrays China as the “victims”. Also, CD employs some metaphors of “animals” to construct a positive image of itself and negative image of the US, for example, CD describes China as the “scapegoat” when China was accused by the US for the global spread. Additionally, it also portrays pandemic periods as “storming weather”; and it describe the social economy as a “train” “cliff” and “wounds”.

Metaphor 1: The Metaphors of “War”

According to Seixas (2021), political and media communicative practices have long used militaristic metaphors to describe health crises, particularly in relation to previous epidemics like the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and the Avian flu (de la Rosa, 2007, p. 18–26; de la Rosa, 2008, p. 91–94), as well as cancer and AIDS (Chiang and Duann, 2007, p. 587–597; Joye, 2010, p. 594). From the beginning of the emergence of the Covid-19, people have seen the proliferation of militaristic metaphors of “war” and “battle”, with the severity situation being frequently described as a “war,” health professionals and Chinese people being painted as the “front-line soldiers” or “fighters”. The target of the war is to protect public health of China and the world, which shows a heroic image of virus fighters.

As Figure 1 shows, the metaphor of “war” in CD accounts for 62%, CD employs the militaristic words and phrases, such as “fight against the war” “battle” “battle field” “frontline” “mobilization” “stronghold”, to boost the public’s morale for containing the virus. According to Seixas (2021), war metaphors were useful for: preparing the population for difficult times; demonstrating compassion, concern, and empathy; persuading citizens to change their behavior, ensuring their acceptance of unusual rules and sacrifices; boosting national sentiments and resilience; and, finally, constructing enemies and shifting responsibility. The following samples employed “war” metaphor in CD:

Sample 1: “they realize that it is the Chinese people's combat on the front line that has served to keep the virus largely from crossing other countries' borders.” (CD, 2020-02-09)

Analysis: Hereby, the words “combat” “front line” indicates the metaphor of “war”. As noted, the outbreak area is regarded as the “front line”, and the virus is the common enemy of the world, and the fighters are “Chinese people”, in addition, the aim of the combat is to keep the virus from crossing other countries' borders. CD employs the “war” metaphor here is to expose the heroic image of Chinese people, and China’s responsibility for protecting the world.

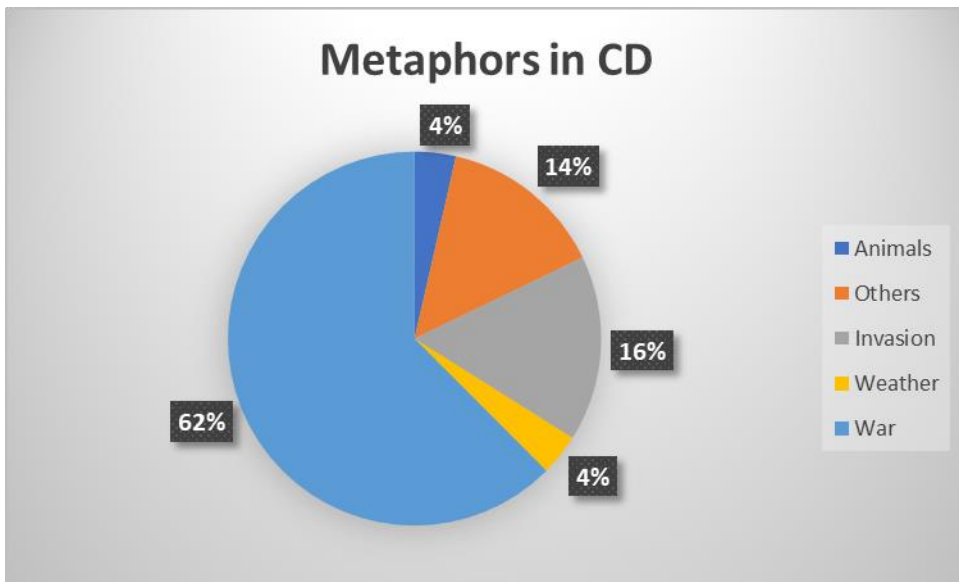


Figure 1 Metaphors Employed in CD

Metaphor 2: The Metaphors of “Invasion”

Apart from “war” metaphor, “invasion” metaphor was also widely employed in CD. The China-bashers in the west are painted as the “aggressors”, and China is of course the “victims”. China was portrayed as a figure who sacrifice himself to protect the world in this “war”, however, the western China-bashers “opens fire to China”. Hence, the China-bashers are the “aggressors”, and China is the “victims”, ideologically reminds the public of the Chinese humiliated century, and easily arise the sympathy to China. The China bashing action is regarded as the “invasion” to China.

Sample 2: “...the number of people infected outside of China is less than 1 percent the number in China. But that hard-earned result is nothing in the eyes of some, who always have an axe to grind when it comes to China. Although the death rate dropped from 2.1 percent to below 2 percent late last week, after the growth in the number of people infected outside of Hubei province, the center of the epidemic, decelerated five days in a row, the continuing epidemic has simply provided them with fresh ammunition with which to target China.” (CD, 2020-02-09)

Analysis: Hereby, CD employs the “invasion” metaphor to describe the China-bashing actions in the west. The China-bashers are painted as the “aggressors”, and China is the “victim”. The China-bashers “grind the axes” before invading into China, and uses “fresh ammunition” for preparing to “open fire to China”. This pictorial image reminds the public of the Chinese humiliated century, and easily arise the sympathy to China, also indicate the China-bashers are the new invader for China in modern times.

Metaphor 3: The Metaphors of “Animals”

CD employs the metaphor of “animals” twice; one is to view China as the “scapegoat” when China was accused by the US during the pandemic, which reflect the image of China as a victim. Another metaphor is to regard Trump as “a flea on a hot griddle”, which aims to present the anxiety of President Trump, and implicitly present Trump’s eagerness of shrinking his responsibility for the spread of the virus and illustrate the reason why Trump stigmatize China.

Sample 1: “Hopping around like a flea on a hot griddle looking for someone to blame for his administration's belated and sloppy response to the pandemic, the US president called the novel coronavirus the "Chinese virus" in a tweet.” (CD, 2020-03-18)

Analysis: This metaphor regards President Trump as a “flea” who is “hopping around”. It aims to describe Trump’s anxiety when faced with the domestic blames for his inaction during the pandemic. This metaphor enlarges the responsibility of Trump administration and himself for the spread of the virus.

Metaphor 4: The Metaphors of “Weather” in CD

It is largely accepted that the "weather" affects people's moods. For instance, the majority of people believe they are happier on sunny days than on cloudy and rainy days (Denissen& Butalid & Penke & Aken, 2008). Against the backdrop of coronavirus, “weather” is also used to connect with the psychological activities and social situations, such as CD uses the “storm” to portray the economic difficulties during pandemic.

Sample 4: “The economic struggle, particularly to help medium and small-sized enterprises weather the storm, has always been an invisible, but integral, part of the fight against the virus.” (CD, 2020-02-18)

Analysis: Hereby, “storm” means economic difficulties; to “weather the storm” means to tackle the difficulties. This metaphor views the economic difficulties as a “storm”, to make reader feel an urgent and strong crisis.

Metaphors in the New York Times

Figure 2 reflect the proportion of different metaphors employed in NYT. As noted, the largest proportion is taken by the metaphor of “war”, which is followed the metaphor of “Cold War” and “medical treatment”, additionally, the metaphor of “firefighting” and “animals” take some proportion as well. The following section will demonstrate the most frequently metaphors in NYT.

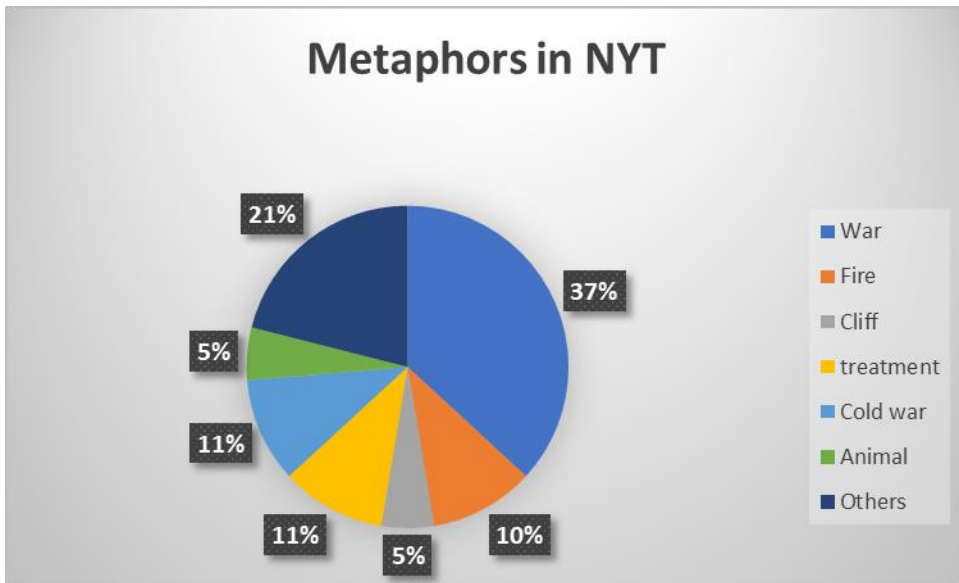


Figure 2 Metaphors Employed in NYT

Metaphor 6: The Metaphors of “War”

In NYT, the metaphor of war is not only referring to fighting against the virus, but also describes Trump's challenge to the value of democracy, such as “Mr. Trump’s War on Accountability”. In contrast to CD, the NYT reports utilizes much less war-related phrases, with a value of 7. Xiao (2021) asserts that the use of these war related terms was more closely tied to the election, the trade war, etc. This was in line with NYT's emphasis, which was primarily on COVID-19's effects on politics and the economy.

Sample 5: “Wartime Production” Front-Line Fighters” (NYT,2020-03-17)

Analysis: Most of the content in NYT regards the “virus containment actions” as a “war”, which is very similar with that in CD. The aim is to prepare the public for hard times and to boost national sentiments and resilience. Hereby, NYT employs “wartime production” and “front-line fighters” to remind the public of the potential crisis, and to boost the morale of the people to overcome the epidemic.

Sample 6: “Mr. Trump’s War on Accountability” (NYT, May 4, 2020)

Analysis: Hereby, NYT uses “war” to describe the challenge to the US democracy that President Trump proposed due to a series of Trump’s actions undermine the democracy.

Metaphor 7: The Metaphors “Cold War”

In addition, “Cold War” is another metaphor NYT prones to paint the recent bilateral relations between China and the US. It tries to narrate China as Soviet Union, evoking the memory of the public on the

painful and unforgettable stories and the hate to China. More details about this metaphor will be illustrated in the following contents.

Sample 7: “The Soviet rulers during the Cold War, and China’s rulers today, either don’t understand that distinction or deliberately deny it to mislead their own public.” (NYT, Mar.17, 2020).

Analysis: NYT employs “Cold War” to illustrate the embarrassing relations between the US and China. By establishing China as an “imaginary enemy” and demonizing China, NYT transfers the responsibility to China ideologically due to the so-called China’s attack on the US free press, and China was viewed as Soviet Union.

Metaphor 8: The Metaphor of “Animals” in NYT

After analyzing the context, it is not difficult to know that President Trump suspended the WHO fiscal support in April, 2020 due to the so-called WHO’s slow response and its reverential attitude toward China. Against the backdrop of severe pandemic situation in the US and the rising blames on Trump, the President fiscal suspension on WHO is criticized globally. Hence, again, “scapegoat” is employed to describe the WHO, which is a victim for the failure of the US federal government.

Sample 8: “The W.H.O. was a natural scapegoat for the failings of the federal government” (Apr. 22, 2020)

Metaphor 9: The Metaphor of “Fire” in NYT

Metaphorical description of the pandemic as a “war” is a controversial rhetorical device academically; however, the metaphor of “fire” is “beneficial” rhetorical purposes (Semino, 2021). Semino (2021) called fires vivid or image-rich, because fires can be of numerous types (e.g., forest fires, house fires, dumpster fires), include many elements and participants (e.g., arsonists, trees, firefighters, victims, etc.), have several participants, and have a clear evolution (causes, beginnings, middles, ends, and aftermaths).

Fires are also an ideal source domain for any event that causes damage by “spreading” because they cause injury and devastation as they grow in size and intensity (Charteris-Black, 2017; Hart, 2017). This is especially true when it comes to a highly contagious virus to which people have no or just minimal immunity.

Sample 9: “Now, after many fire drills, the world may be facing a real fire.” (Feb. 29, 2020)

Analysis: This sentence employs “fire” to indicate the “COVID-19”, and use “fire drill” to paint the previous several of “viruses” or “diseases”, such as “swine flu” “SARS” or “Ebola”. And then it uses “the real fire” to emphasis the severity of COVID-19.

The above summarizes the main metaphors of the two media, among which the metaphor of “war” is the most popular metaphor in both media. In addition, CD prefers to employs the “invasion” metaphor to describe the China-bashing actions nowadays, and portrays the China-bashers as the “invader” and China as the “victim”. NYT, on the other hand, prefer to use “Cold War” to describe the embarrassing bilateral relations between China and the US, and borrows the “treatment” to describe the measures to tackle the crisis. Both media employs “animal” metaphor, such as the employment of “scapegoat” to illustrate the victims during the pandemic. In addition, there are some other metaphors in both media, such as the

metaphor of "nightmare", which is to paint the severe pandemic situation. Also, the infectious disease is described as the "catalysts" of social changes.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis before, it is not difficult to be conclude that against the backdrop of COVID-19, CD employs way more metaphors than that in the NYT. Among different metaphors, war metaphor is employed the most, which construct a confronted relations between public and coronavirus, and through the metaphor, it invoke the unity and strength of Chinese people, and implies the challenge of the fight. However, war related words were far less used in the NYT reports compared to CD, and the use of these words were more related to the election, trade war, etc. In addition, both media arose public's hatred towards each other through the metaphor of "invasion" and "Cold War", which lead to the ideological confrontation between the two powers. Apart from war metaphor, NYT also employs fire metaphor to describe coronavirus. Finally, CD employs animal metaphor to positivize "us" and negativize "them", while NYT also employs animal metaphor to describe the fause of Trump's policy.

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