

Language Manipulation in COVID-19: A Corpus-Based Critical Discourse Analysis of News Reports

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Abstract

The media uses language to manipulate its readers' opinions. The present study is a critical discourse analysis of two news reports in the New York Times about the spread of COVID-19 in China and the US, respectively. This study focuses on the ideological representation of the news reports about a global issue. The editor aims to frame the news report about China with the use of emotive lexical items with negative connotations to invoke the public's attention on a certain issue. While he frames the news report about the US with the use of lexical items with positive connotations to construct and present a positive image of the US. The study concludes that the news reports are pregnant with the ideologies of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. These ideologies of in-group and out-group polarization reveal the editor's vested interests and political inclinations, even as they claim to convey reality and purely neutral information to readers.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, media discourse, language and ideology, news reports

Introduction

The present study focuses on a critical discourse analysis of the presentation of COVID-19 in the news reports in the New York Times. The first COVID-19 outbreak was documented on 17th November 2019 in Wuhan, China, according to the South China Morning Post. The Chinese authorities reported to WHO officials that a mutated mystery virus became a social reality, with representation across various media, both linear and non-linear, contributing to the spread of globalised panic. This mysterious epidemic was first called 2019-nCoV, but later on, it was named COVID-19. On March 11th, 2020, the director-general of the UN declared it a

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pandemic. Nity and Singh (2017) claim that the media informs, educates, and keeps the public aware of what is happening locally and globally, while also entertaining the public. In the beginning, it spiked as a mystery virus with an unidentified cause, and by 11th May 2020, it had spread to six continents and more than 200 countries and states.

This study aims at investigating the presentation of COVID-19 in media discourses, particularly in newspapers. Various newspapers use particular language patterns to produce and reproduce discourses that mediate different ideologies, particularly when they write about specific social issues. These particular patterns of language also reflect the rhetorical organisation of sections of newspapers. In this era, whenever people encounter news discourse, they assume it is authentic and faithful reporting of the issue or event. They believe in unbiased reporting by journalists; it may be so, but it is not always the case. Habermas (1984) states that language, as a tool, serves the interests of individuals and society. Therefore, language cannot be accepted as an unbiased means of communication. Similarly, Taiwo (2007) describes that language is used to construct reality; that's why words can never be neutral. They reflect the power and ideologies of the people who use them. Therefore, the researcher aims to unfold the ideologies of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation in news reports published in the New York Times on the COVID-19 outbreak in China and the US on March 07, 2020, and March 10, 2020, respectively. As an understanding that drives this study, media discourse is ideological. It provides a platform for media houses to propagate particular ideologies. For the purpose to uncover embedded ideologies and hidden agendas, the framework of critical discourse analysis appears more suitable.

This study is structured as follows: first, it contextualises the concepts of ideology and power in the realm of CDA; then, it provides a detailed account of media discourse and newspapers. The literature review is done to identify the research gap and to provide a rationale for the study. The researcher provides a suitable theoretical framework that serves as a foundation for the study, keeping the research objectives in mind. The research methodology describes the critical and analytical approach towards language structure. The Analytical framework operates at two levels: the micro and macro levels. At the micro-level, it works within Fairclough's (2003) model, while at the macro-level, it is discussed within Van Dijk's (2008) Socio-cognitive approach to CDA. In the last section, data analysis is conducted at two levels: micro and macro. Analysis of the data reveals that the newspaper's

editors employed several strategies for positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. In the end, the study concludes that a systematic study under CDA helps uncover the hidden ideologies behind media discourse that would otherwise remain hidden.

❖ Ideology, Power, and Critical Discourse Analysis

Van Dijk (1997) defines the term ‘discourse’ in terms of text and talk’ that refers to the use of language in both spoken and written forms. Richardson (2007) suggests that the term ‘discourse’ is the most fashionable notion across various academic disciplines in the present era, which’s why it has diverse definitions that vary from discipline to discipline. Mill (2004) states that researchers from different disciplines study the same phenomenon from different perspectives. Moreover, when a discourse is studied and analysed in any academic discipline, it is called discourse analysis. A famous linguist, Zellig Harris, coined and used this term first in 1952 (Paltridge, 2006:2). According to Wodak and Meyer (2008), critical discourse analysis is an interdisciplinary and eclectic paradigm. It has problem-oriented approaches. The most common interest of CDA is to explore the embedded ideologies through a discourse that might otherwise go unnoticed. Antonie de Tracey coined the term ‘ideology’ after the French Revolution. It refers to a new science of ideas’ (McLellan, 1986:6). Linguistic ideology, on the other hand, implies that a particular way of using language to construct a text or talk carries moral, social, and political values to influence and control the public’s behavior. That’s why biased language is used with vested moral, social, and political interests of a particular group. That specific ideology, then, reflects the attitudes and the actions of the people. Therefore, the role of CDA is to explore hidden and embedded ideologies within texts. The present study explores the ideologies of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation in news discourse, and the social construction of two societies through it.

❖ Media Discourse and Newspaper

Van Dijk (1988) suggests that the media discourse in general and news reports, in particular, are constructed through a particular use of language and carry specific types of socio-cultural practices, that’s why these should be interpreted and taken their rights. He claims that the media has irrefutable power and has inspired researchers in various academic disciplines to conduct critical studies (Van Dijk,

1993). He, further explores various concepts of media, such as news items about events or persons, how news items are presented on radio or TV programs, and news reports as texts and discourses in a newspaper or on the radio (Van Dijk, 1988). This study aims to analyse recent newspaper reports. Reah (2002) describes news as information about current events that a majority of people take an interest in or that may affect a significant group of people. Mostly, linear media such as Radio, television, and newspapers are used to report news and the public consumes it. However, in this research, newspaper articles are examined to explore embedded ideologies. According to Elmore (1992), a newspaper comprises news, features, editorials, opinions, advertising, and so on. Some newspapers are printed and distributed daily, while the others are weekly. The newspaper publishes news reports based on its publication policy, which varies by type. The popular newspaper tends to publish soft news by using striking language and eye-catching vocabulary to capture the readers' attention. In contrast, the quality newspaper uses informative, indirect, and difficult language to publish hard news that a reader cannot understand without background knowledge. However, Fowler (1991) states that news reports do not reflect reality; rather, different social, economic, political, and cultural forces construct and shape them to propagate their ideologies. Therefore, he suggests that speech acts, modality, and transitivity analysis are tools for linguistic analysis. Van Dijk (1988) shares similar views about news reports, describing them as a frame through which the social world is created.

Review of the Literature

In recent years the CDA of newspapers has attracted the attention of many linguists. Al-Rawi and Groshek (2022) analysed the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to China, focusing on the language used in major newspapers in the west, and they found that the language used was systematically negative and politicised in their coverage of China's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, which created a discourse of governmental failure and opacity. In their study, they showed that the use of lexical choices in digital news headlines helped reinforce pre-established geopolitical narratives and amplify ideological bias. Likewise, Choudhary and Zahid (2023) conducted an analysis of the international coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war in English newspapers using corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis and concluded that the western block newspapers consistently used evaluative language to blame Ukraine and legitimise Russia. They found that the ideology used in such news reports is in line with the media's editorial policy and geopolitical orientation.

Hassan and Malik (2021) have studied the ideological images of Afghan Taliban in the editorials of British and American newspapers after the fall of Kabul. They applied Van Dijk's CDA model and concluded that these editorial representations consistently employed negative lexicalisation and delegitimisation strategies to portray the Taliban as a threat to Western liberal values. The researchers concluded that the selected newspapers constructed ideological circles of 'us' (the democratic West) and 'them' (the Taliban) with positive, threatening and negative attributes. In the same way, Iqbal and Mahmood (2022) studied news reports pertaining to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict published in international English newspapers. In that article, they looked at the depiction of Palestinian resistance and concluded that Western newspapers consistently portrayed Palestinian acts negatively while Israeli reactions were "measured and legitimate." The researchers used Van Dijk's (2008) ideological square model to examine the ideologies underlying in-group and out-group presentations in the CDA of the news reports, and they found that editors reproduced dominant geopolitical ideologies in the news through discursive strategies.

Rehman and Aziz (2022) conducted a comparative critical discourse analysis of headlines on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) from local Urdu newspapers, local English newspapers, and international English newspapers. This was to examine how the same development project was covered in different types of newspapers, with a focus on whether it was viewed nationally or internationally. They found that headlines are discursively produced to influence public opinion on geopolitical and economic matters, and that international newspapers always portray the project in the context of strategic rivalry rather than developmental cooperation.

Naveed and Hameed (2023) conducted a comparative study of Al Jazeera English and the BBC using critical discourse analysis to examine the representation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in these international news channels. The researchers found that both media outlets sought to position their respective audiences differently: Al Jazeera adopted a more neutral tone, while the BBC consistently employed vocabulary aligned with Western geopolitical interests. The researchers employed Van Dijk's macrostrategies of positive self-representation and negative other presentation. They concluded that media discourse does not reflect reality objectively, but rather social reality is constructed through strategic discursive

choices and lexical preferences that reflect the ideological orientation of the media house.

Likewise, Umar and Siddiqui (2021) studied the portrayal of the Afghan refugee situation in articles from Western and Pakistani newspapers. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the language used in the construction and presentation of Afghan refugees in both sets of newspapers. They discovered that the articles from western newspapers like The Guardian invariably depicted refugees as a burden and security threat while the Pakistani newspapers highlighted the fact that there are humanitarian responsibilities and shared cultural affinity between the two countries. The researchers concluded that the various newspapers created contrasting social realities of the same humanitarian crisis, revealing the interests and editorial ideologies of the countries.

In another study, Zhang and Li (2021) critically examined news coverage of China's COVID-19 response in major Western print outlets. The study aimed to examine the ideologically oriented representation of China in Western media discourse. The researchers chose Fairclough's three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis (CDA) to conduct critical analysis of the editorials on China's pandemic management, and used Halliday's (1985) Systemic Functional Grammar as a discursive and analytical tool for the text analysis of the editorials. They discovered that, objectively speaking, China's containment measures have been acknowledged as effective; however, the Western media has seized on some elements of governmental opacity to discredit them, portray them negatively and cast doubt on China's institutional credibility on the international stage.

A number of academics have also explored the influence of media discourse on health crises and pandemics in recent years. Krzyżanowski (2021) posits that, in crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic, media institutions become more extreme in their ideological framing, employing evaluative language to establish a hierarchy of responsibility among countries and/or to assign blame to particular actors. Likewise, Macgilchrist (2021) argues that crisis discourse is especially illustrative of power dynamics and can show to what extent dominant media companies dominate representations of crises and frame what people know about them. These observations are particularly pertinent to the COVID-19 pandemic, which generated unprecedented media coverage worldwide and served as a central battleground of geopolitical contestation.

COVID-19 and Media Discourse

During the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars had a unique opportunity to study how media institutions used language to depict a global health crisis. Rashid and Qureshi (2020) conducted a study of Pakistani newspaper coverage of COVID-19 and found that English-language newspapers used more alarmist language in reports about China than about Pakistan's government actions. They found that their results aligned with the present study's observations and propose that the polarisation of ideas noted in the American media was not unique but part of a pattern of Sino-Western media contestation on the global stage during the pandemic.

In 2022, Ahmad and Shah conducted a study on the role of evaluative language in news discourse, showing how it ideologically shapes interpretations of events related to the COVID-19 pandemic. They claimed that an important procedure in what Van Dijk (2008) calls the ideological square is the selection of negative evaluative lexis for the target nations and positive evaluative lexis for the home nation. The framework is directly applicable to the current study and to the example of COVID-19 news texts, where there is lexical asymmetry between the two texts, which is a clear sign of ideological positioning.

Ali and Qureshi (2021) conducted a study on the othering and fear amplification of COVID-19 in online and print media through metaphors and concluded that metaphors played an important role. They found that 'war metaphors' were commonly used when reacting to outbreaks in other countries, but that the metaphors of 'expertise' and 'control' were used when reacting to outbreaks in their own country. The present study is in line with this finding, as the NYT uses militaristic and coercive language to describe China's actions, like 'blunt force strategy' and 'aggressive quarantine measures', while reserving 'deliberate' and 'expert-led' for the US.

In a comparison between newspaper coverage of the COVID-19 outbreak in Western and Chinese newspapers, Tian and Fan (2020) showed, indeed, how both sides systematically ideologically frame the issue, with the Western side framing the Chinese government responses as opaque and authoritarian, and the Chinese side framing the Western ones as inefficient and individualistic. The current study adds to these by specifically examining one Western newspaper's internal incongruence when two countries confront the same pandemic. This intra-newspaper comparison

is an under-researched aspect of COVID-19 media studies, and constitutes the main contribution of the present study.

According to the researcher's best knowledge, as well as the above review, no study has been conducted to date to critically analyse news reports from the same newspaper on the same pandemic situation, using contrasting national perspectives within a single analytical framework. This study analyses how a newspaper discursively constructs and frames the social realities of 'us' (the West) and 'them' (China). The present study aims to examine how lexical choices and macro-strategies are used to portray the in-group positively and the out-group negatively.

Theoretical Framework

According to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and Jürgen Habermas' (1984) social theory, language structures are loaded with ideologies; that is why a critical stance is required in the analysis of discourse. Accordingly, in a society, powerful sections use language as a tool to serve their vested interests. This critical theory is heavily influenced by Michel Foucault, who views discourse as a manifestation of social actions in terms of power and resistance. He theorises that "the interpretation and meaning construction of objects and events relies on discursive structures" (Mills, 2002, pp. 50). Therefore, this study is based on critical discourse analysis. Since this study is a critical discourse analysis of media discourse, it therefore requires theoretical support from media theory. McCombs and Shaw (1972; 2017) theorise that media houses play a significant role in shaping political reality, particularly through framing and presenting news. They claim that the media sets an agenda for a given issue and attaches importance to that particular issue. For the CDA of news reports, the current study draws on McCombs and Shaw's (2017; 1972) agenda-setting theory, Michel Foucault's (1982) critical theory of power and resistance, and Habermas' (1984) social action theory. According to Van Dijk (1993), CDA is not a homogeneous model or paradigm, but rather a comprehensive spectrum of approaches from linguistics, semiotics, and discourse analysis. The main proponents who have contributed to the development of critical discourse analysis are Fairclough (2003), Van Dijk (2008), and Wodak (1999).

The researcher analysed the news reports at two levels: macro and micro. At the macro level, the researcher employed Van Dijk's (2008) model, which appeared more relevant to the study. This analytical framework employs two macro-

strategies: positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. Van Dijk (2008) identifies four evaluative moves for detecting ideologies. These evaluative principles are: emphasise our good things, emphasise their bad things, de-emphasise our bad things, and de-emphasise their good things. At the micro-level analysis, the researcher finds Fairclough's (2003:27) framework the most relevant to this study. This approach analyses how lexical items and grammar are employed within a discourse. Three discursive tools: action, representation, and identification are used to categorise the types of meaning.

Methodology

This study is qualitative and analytical in nature. The sample was selected through a purposive sampling technique. The data consist of two news reports published in the New York Times on 07th March 2020, and 10th March 2020 respectively. Since the data were retrieved from publicly accessible online e-papers, no formal ethical clearance was required for their use. The present study adopts a corpus-based methodology to systematically examine how ideological meanings are encoded in the language of news discourse. The two news reports were processed as a small specialised corpus, enabling the identification of recurrent lexical patterns, keyword frequencies, and evaluative vocabulary through corpus-assisted discourse analysis. AntConc (version 3.5.9), a widely used freeware corpus analysis toolkit developed by Laurence Anthony (2019), was employed as the primary tool for keyword extraction and frequency analysis. The keyword lists generated by AntConc allowed for a systematic comparison of the two sub-corpora — the China report and the US report — thereby providing an empirically grounded basis for the subsequent qualitative analysis. The corpus-based findings were further interpreted through the dual analytical framework of Fairclough's (2003) micro-level model and Van Dijk's (2008) socio-cognitive macro-level model of critical discourse analysis. This integration of corpus methods with CDA reflects current best practice in media discourse studies, enabling both quantitative pattern recognition and qualitative interpretive depth. The analysis is presented in the following sections.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Data analysis was done in two sections. The first section analyses the micro-level, whereas the second analyses the macro-level of two New York Times news reports covering the same pandemic situation in China and the US.

❖ **Micro Analysis of news reports**

While two news reports published in the New York Times address the same COVID-19 pandemic in China and the US, they frame the social world differently. Micro-analysis (linguistic structures) was done by employing Fairclough's (2003) model to look at the differences between the two news reports in terms of linguistic structures. The analytical tools are action, representation, and identification. According to Fairclough (2003:29), "understanding of the discourse is possible by linking each of three aspects of meaning with a variety of categories in social theories." As, he states that text analysis is an interplay of action, representation, and identification.

• **Action**

According to Fairclough (2003:27), action describes the text in terms of acting or interacting in social events. It is close to Halliday's 'interpersonal function'. Action is a way that determines how a text works in social relations; therefore, informing, promising, advising, and warning are ways of acting that focus on the structures or formats of the text, such as declarative, persuasive, interrogative, and implicative.

Since the first news report (text 1), which is selected for analysis, reports a critical situation in China amid COVID-19. This news report is an action, as it implies social relations. The editor of the newspaper is reporting. He is providing readers with information about the critical situation in China in the wake of the pandemic. On a broad level, action implies the relationship between the person who knows everything about a social event and the one who does not know anything. In this text, most sentences are declarative and assertive, stating the critical situation in China, where officials are coping with pandemics at the cost of people's livelihoods and liberties. In interrogative sentences, the editor questions the credibility of management's performance and the data on infected patients in China. In the latter part of the news report, the editor uses persuasive language that implies readers should doubt China's handling of COVID-19's spread.

In contrast, the second news report (text 2) is about the spread of COVID-19 in the US. This new report is also social action. The editor uses mostly declarative sentences, with a few persuasive ones. In declarative sentences, the editor tries to draw a very better situation in the wake of COVID-19. The editor states that US

officials are handling the pandemic very efficiently. In persuasive sentences, the editor tries to persuade readers and argues that if US officials take strict action to control a pandemic, it is a matter of urgent need to save people from infection.

- **Representation**

Fairclough (2003:27) states that ‘representation involves the relation between entities in terms of the description of individuals, things, and places. Representation takes details about the people, things, and actions in the text. Representation involves vocabulary, quoted sources, and representation of the location.

- **Vocabulary**

Vocabulary is how new reports are framed differently. As the news report about China begins with the headline,

“China May Be Beating the Coronavirus, at a Painful Cost”.

Readers draw a gloomy picture of China amid a pandemic in a very short period. In the news report, the choice of lexical items presented the events in a controversial manner.

In contrast to this, the news report about the US begins with the headline,

“U.S. Health Experts Say Stricter Measures are Required to Limit Coronavirus’s Spread”. The use of the phrase ‘Health Experts’ implies that strict measures are need of the hour, as health experts recommend them, and it helps the readers a sense that there is a critical problem, that’s why it needs to fix it.

The description of the event in China		The description of the event in the US.	
Vocabulary	Frequency	Vocabulary	Frequency
painful cost	2	Work from home	1

heavy-handed	2	Schools, universities shut down, but moving online classes	1
battling	1	State department advised the American not to travel	1
cutting off global travel	1	Appropriate action to mitigate the outbreak	1
suspending school	1	The spectre of isolation-telling people from the affected area not to go out	1
desperate	1	Voluntary social distancing	1
conceal	1	Attend the meeting virtually	1
mismanage	1	Evacuees from China	1
strict quarantine	1	Advance medical teams	1

travel restrictions	1	Telework	1
Promoting its propaganda	1	Comprehensive plan	1
Flawed and incomplete	1	Ramp up its testing capabilities	1
Blunt force strategy	1	For goodness sake	1
At great cost to people's livelihood and personal liberty	1		
Aggressive quarantine measures	1		
Shortage of testing kits	1		
Ghost towns	1		
Physical abuse	1		
Fake	3		

Table 1: Vocabulary for the description of events

Note: The keywords and their frequencies presented in Table 1 were extracted using AntConc (Version 3.5.9), a corpus analysis toolkit developed by Laurence Anthony (2019). The keyword list function in AntConc was applied to both news report texts to identify evaluatively significant lexical items and their frequency of occurrence. The frequency data provide an empirical basis for the qualitative analysis of ideological representation that follows.

Table 1 presents the frequency data for the lexical choices the New York Times uses in its coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in China and the United States. It's a report that is focused exclusively on China, and that features a wide range of negatively loaded terms to paint a picture of governmental ineptitude, authoritarianism, and public afflictions: 'painful cost', 'heavy-handed', 'mismanage', 'conceal', 'blunt force strategy', 'fake' (three times). By contrast, every term in the U.S.-themed report is either neutral or positively toned, including 'work from home', 'comprehensive plan', 'advance medical teams' and 'voluntary social distancing', which in total depict the U.S. response as measured, expert-led, and respectful of freedoms. This is not an incidental lexical divergence but an intentional choice by the newspaper to promote positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation, as revealed by AntConc keyword analysis.

Vocabulary-wise, the editor consistently uses more benign, soothing terms to describe the pandemic situation in the United States, thereby creating the impression of a government working professionally and competently on the pandemic. In contrast, the language is consistently negative when describing the situation in China, and connotes state coercion, institutional failure and human suffering. The differential use of evaluative language is a significant means by which ideologies of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation are materialised in the text.

- **Identification**

Fairclough (2003:27) defines that 'representation used by the writers when they intend to draw an overall picture of the event'. He states that identification means how people identify themselves through the texts.

The news report about the description of the event in China opens with the headline 'China May Be Beating the Coronavirus, at a Painful Cost'. It catches the attention

of the reader with the use of the words 'Painful Cost'. The editor has used the verb 'May' for an evaluative stance. The headline follows a lead that gives detail about and appears as a narrative in which the writer presents a gloomy picture of China, particularly, he uses the phrase 'heavy-handed measures' anaphorically. The writer further highlights the critical situation through the use of direct and indirect quotes. In an indirect quote, he states the shouting of one inhabitant at delegation 'fake! Everything is fake!'. In a direct quote, for example, the writer points out how 'Wang Zhonglin' orders to teach the locals to be obliged to the party for helping them. In another example, the writer quotes 'Guo Jing' a feminist activist who talks about physical abuse. This use of authorial voice along with reported voice makes the readers identify China as a country where there is a shortage of medical facilities and the Chinese government is unable to handle the pandemic, while the officials are spreading propaganda through social media that the government has controlled the pandemic.

While, on the other hand, the news report about the description of the event in the US opens with the headline 'US. Health Experts Say Stricter Measures Are Required to Limit Coronavirus' Spread'. The writer states that US experts recommend stricter measures; that's why the government has to follow the recommendations of the experts to control infections. The first sentence after the headline implies that the government has already taken the initiative to control the infection at the start of its spread. The writer does not mention any lack of facilities or testing capacity. While he highlights the positive aspects of the government which has taken appropriate actions to minimise the death tolls, as advanced medical teams are working efficiently. The government does not force people; rather, it advises them not to go to overcrowded places. Therefore, in the US, no one uses the word 'lockdown'; instead, everyone voluntarily follows social distancing guidelines. All this detail gives readers a positive impression of the US, and both news reports have been laid out differently.

❖ Macro Analysis of news reports

At the macro level, the researcher employed Van Dijk's (2008) model, which appeared more relevant to the study. This analytical framework employs two macro-strategies: positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. Van Dijk (2008) identifies four evaluative moves for detecting ideologies. These evaluative principles are: emphasise our good things, emphasise their bad things, de-

emphasise our bad things, and de-emphasise their good things. The editor materialises ideologies of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation, both implicitly and explicitly, through various discursive moves, such as game number, disclaimer, self-glorification, lexicalisation, and hyperbole.

In the news report on the pandemic in China, the editor emphasises the negative aspects, and negative other-presentation is materialised through various discursive moves. The writer uses numbers and statistics to support a claim and make it more reliable and credible, thereby discrediting China's efforts to control the pandemic in the country. As, the writer states that more than 80000 cases of infection are staggering in the country, whereas 827000 people have been placed under quarantine in Beijing. Based on the statistics, the writer claims that there are flaws and fluctuations in the data of reported cases. By the use of lexicalisation, discursive move, the writer uses the words with negative connotations for China, for example, 'blunt force strategy', 'cutting off global travel', 'suspending school for hundreds of millions of children, and 'desperate'.

In a news report about the pandemic in the US, the editor emphasises our good points and downplays our bad points to advance a strategy of positive self-presentation. The editor uses statistics or numbers to construct the claim that the pandemic is under control in the US. As, he mentions that 'more than 500 cases of coronavirus have been reported in almost three dozen states, while the officials are worried about containment efforts. This discursive move is used for positive self-presentation. When the writer points out the importance of stricter measures to control the infection, he employs the discursive move of 'authority, as he mentions 'US Health Experts, for example, Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the NIAID who recommends stricter measures to keep people apart for the larger interest of the public.

The editor uses different strategies to promote positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation through news reports.

Discussion

The results of the present research show that language was strategically used systematically to form an ideologically counter-mapping of China and the USA in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings not only support the theories of

Van Dijk (2008) and Fairclough (2003), but are also similar to those of earlier empirical studies in media and critical discourse analysis analysed in Section 2.

At the micro level, it is found that one of the most noticeable indicators of ideological bias is the use of words. The report looking at China uses highly negative, emotionally charged language like ‘ghost towns’, ‘physical abuse’, ‘fake’ and ‘blunt force strategy’ (Table 1), while the report looking at the U.S. has neutral to positive language like ‘work from home’, ‘comprehensive plan’, and ‘advance medical teams’. The asymmetry corroborates the findings of Ahmad and Shah (2022) that news reports do not merely represent but rather systematically strategically create social reality through lexical choices during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results also corroborate Hassan and Malik’s (2021) analysis of British and American newspaper editorials on the Afghan Taliban that revealed the use of systematic negative lexicalisation in the construction of the ‘other’ as threatening or incompetent. China is again represented as an incompetent, authoritarian regime, which poses a threat to its own population and to the rest of the world, and the US as an expert-led democracy that is responsible.

The micro-level analysis also shows that there are differences in the sentence types used in the two news reports, which relate to the ideological functions of the sentences. The interrogative and implicative sentences in the China report cast doubt on the competence of China’s authorities, whereas the declarative sentences in the US report present an unambiguous claim of the competence of America’s authorities. This is in accord with Fairclough’s (2003) view that all the grammatical choices made in a text are never innocent, but they reflect and reinforce the relations of social and power that are present in the text. Like Naveed and Hameed (2023) ’s assertion in their study on the media discourses of the Russia-Ukraine war, which noted that the interrogative sentence was used to delegitimise China’s governance, the use of such sentences to question China’s data performs an ideological function. The use of the macro-level model (Van Dijk, 2008) of the ideological square yields clear results. The editor of the New York Times regularly uses three of the four evaluative moves: using negative statistics to emphasise their bad points, heavy criticism of the quarantine measures, and allegations of data concealment; and de-emphasising their good points by mostly ignoring China’s containment successes. The US report uses mirror strategies, highlighting good news by means of highly qualified endorsement and positive framing of governmental action, and downplaying bad news – for instance the number of tests performed is low,

containment failures are vague and quantified. This aligns with Umar and Siddiqui's (2021) observation that the western and Pakistani media had opposite macro-strategic orientations in their reporting of Afghan refugees, suggesting that the ideologisation of media discourse is a cross-cultural phenomenon.

The analysis's identification dimension further illustrates these conclusions. The China report is titled 'China May Be Beating the Coronavirus, at a Painful Cost' which introduces an epistemic uncertainty about China's success, and also brings to the forefront the human cost. This is an ideological manoeuvre, deliberately and subtly meant to take away the praise owed to China's containment measures. In contrast, the US headlines state the issue as a problem that experts are working hard to control, and the US government as rational and responsive. This is similar to the practices revealed by Zhang and Li (2021) in their study of Western media's portrayal of China's COVID-19 response, which found that the Western press sought to use the problem of opacity to paint a broader picture of Chinese institutional failure. The present study extends and confirms this finding, indicating that this pattern of negative framing of China is not incidental but rather systemic in relation to Western media practice.

Significantly, there is also a difference in the way in which the two reports use quoted sources. The editor's own voice is given added weight by direct quotations from dissidents and activists in the China report, and by authoritative institutional ones in the US report, such as Dr. Anthony Fauci of the NIAID. This selective choice of sources illustrates what Choudhary and Zahid (2023) call selective intertextual framing—a framing strategy that includes the voices of those who support the desired ideology while excluding those who oppose it. The selection of sources is thus not only journalistic but also ideological, shaping readers' perceptions of the credibility and legitimacy of the two governments' approaches to the pandemic.

The findings of this study, however, supported the theoretical assertion that media discourse is ideological in nature (Van Dijk, 1993; Habermas, 1984; Taiwo, 2007). In this regard, the New York Times, which is supposed to be an objective source of news, consistently employs rhetorical and discursive devices that benefit the in-group (the West) and harm the out-group (China). The results confirm McCombs and Shaw's (2017) agenda-setting theory, which holds that the media is not merely reflecting reality but, in fact, creating it by choosing which topics to focus on and which to exclude from the news. In this instance, the New York Times' editorial

decisions are as much a reflection of journalistic judgment as they are of a geopolitical conflict between the US and China that raged in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings of the current study also validate the findings of many previous studies which have been discussed in the literature review, such as the studies of Al-Rawi and Groshek (2022), Hassan and Malik (2021), Rehman and Aziz (2022), Zhang and Li (2021), Naveed and Hameed (2023), and Umar and Siddiqui (2021) about the lack of neutrality in media discourse, though the editors claim it.

Conclusion

In this study, the researcher investigated how the news report discourses are used to promote the ideologies of 'us' with positive connotations, and 'them' with negative connotations. This study concludes that the media discourses, such as news reports, help the editor construct and articulate different representations. The editors present the ideological groups as realities for readers. For an innocent reader, it is not easy to differentiate reality from mere representation. However, a systematic discourse study can explore embedded ideologies; in this study, the researcher employed CDA to examine the underlying ideologies of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation.

Limitations of the Study

Aware of the need for transparency in research, the current study has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. First and most importantly, the corpus analysed in this study is quite limited, comprising just two news reports from the New York Times. The selected groups were purposive and methodologically justifiable in view of the comparative nature of the study but it limits the generalizability of the results. Such a small textual sample cannot be confidently generalised to the overall practices of the NYT as an institution or to Western print media in general regarding ideological bias or discursive strategies. A more comprehensive body of reports, including more news reports over a longer period, would have provided stronger empirical support for the claims.

Second, it is only written print media in English that are studied; thus, it is a specific medium and a specific linguistic community. The patterns of ideas found in this

research can vary significantly across non-English-language media, broadcast, online and social media, as different conventions of news discourse exist. Third, the analysis is necessarily of an interpretative character. Even when using corpus-assisted tools like AntConc to identify keywords, the qualitative analysis of ideological meaning is still dependent on the researcher's positionality and analysis, and thus might introduce a certain level of subjectivity into the results. There is a need to include several analysts in future studies, and to use interrater reliability measures to increase the objectivity of the interpretive process. Lastly, this study only examines one snapshot in time: in the first few weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, and does not take into account potential changes in the discursive strategies of the newspaper during the course of the pandemic.

Research Gaps and Future Directions

Although the current study adds to the body of knowledge on critical discourse analysis of pandemic media, several areas could be the focus of future research. As for the knowledge gaps, the literature is mostly devoted to single newspapers or to single national media contexts regarding COVID-19 media discourse. Large-scale comparative studies that systematically investigate how newspapers from different countries narrated the same pandemic event over a prolonged period are especially absent. In this study, ideological patterns in the media have been identified, indicating that such comparisons would be profitable in the global context for understanding the relationship between media ownership, national interest and discursive practice. Also, as mentioned above, the CDA literature lacks research on editorial decision-making in the creation of ideological representation, and future research could use textual analysis in conjunction with interviews with journalists and editors to provide a more complete picture of the framing process.

Methodologically speaking, this study used a small purposive corpus and began with qualitative interpretation, followed by basic corpus-assisted keyword analysis. COVID-19 CDA research is marked by a lack of more sophisticated computational techniques, including sentiment analysis, automated tagging of the appraisal and machine learning-based classification of the discourse, that would allow more extensive corpora to be analysed more reliably and replicably. Also, this study has not taken into account the multimodal aspects of the news texts such as images, presentation and graphic design, which are essential to the ideological representation of meaning in print and digital news texts. Future research using

multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) could provide a more complete description of the communication of ideology across linguistic and visual modes. In addition, there is a context gap because the present study did not explore reader reception, that is, how actual readers interpret and respond to the ideological frames identified in the analysis. An analysis of audience responses to the survey or focus group would help close the divide between the production of text and the social consumption of ideologically charged media discourse.

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