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A Study on the Conceptual Metaphor of News Reports on COVID-19 in Mainstream English Media in China — A Case Study of *China Daily*

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Abstract: Traditional metaphor regards metaphor as a rhetorical device, and believes that metaphor is merely an embellishment or decoration in the form of language, and its main metaphorical function is to beautify the language, and to enhance the effect of language expression. Conceptual Metaphor Theory, put forward by the famous linguist Lakoff in 1980, enables the study of metaphor to realize a cognitive turn. In recent years, the study of conceptual metaphor has not only been applied to the analysis of word meaning and general text, but also extended to news discourse. The study of conceptual metaphor in news discourse has become one of the important hot topics of current research. At the beginning of 2020, the outbreak and spread of the new crown pneumonia epidemic is testing people all over the world. As China's mainstream English-language media, *China Daily* frequently reports on this hot social event. This study intends to collect reports on COVID-19 in *China Daily* from January 1, 2020 to December 31, 2020 and establish a corpus to study further its conceptual metaphors. Finally, this study finds eight main kinds of conceptual metaphors, including war metaphors, journey metaphors, building metaphors, human metaphors, light metaphors, book metaphors, plant metaphors and evil metaphors. The metaphors reflect China's values of courage, struggle and harmony as well as its social awareness of actively building a community with a shared future for mankind.

Keywords: COVID-19, News Discourse, Conceptual Metaphor, Corpus, Social Consciousness

1. Introduction

The western study of metaphor could be traced back to Aristotle's comparison theory in the ancient Greek era. Aristotle [1] defined the metaphor as the transference either from genus to species, or from genus, or from species to species, or analogy. It can be seen that he regards metaphor as a rhetorical device. However, with the development of pragmatics, scholars have realized that metaphor cannot be understood well only by words or sentences [5, 11, 17]. With the publication of *Metaphors We Live By* written by Lakoff and Johnson in 1980, metaphor research has got rid of the shackles of the traditional metaphor theory based on literature and rhetoric, formally incorporating into the new field of cognitive science. Lakoff & Johnson [5] used the mapping between source domain and target domain and image schema to reveal the phenomenon of metaphor in the

book, believing that "metaphor is fundamentally conceptual, not linguistic, in nature." [5]. Since then, the conceptual metaphor theory has flourished and many scholars began to study conceptual metaphor further.

As the theory of conceptual metaphor has gradually gained a foothold, empirical researches on conceptual metaphor have been carried out based on different types of discourses. In recent years, more and more scholars have focused on the study of conceptual metaphor in news discourse [2, 7, 18], analyzing conceptual metaphor in news from different angles. Among them, a large number of scholars inquire into the characteristics of conceptual metaphors in news discourses. Among them, scholars mainly focus on several types of news discourses, such as financial news, sports news, political news and social news.

Through literature analysis and statistics, it is found that there are also a small number of scholars focusing on social

news, especially social hot events as their main research objects. Mukhortikova [10] interprets the terrorist attacks perpetrated in Madrid in three newspapers from the perspective of conceptual metaphor. Islentyeva [4] analyses the metaphors in the contemporary British press related to migration. However, compared with researches on other types of reports, few studies take news related to public health emergencies, such as COVID-19, as the research object. Tetyana and Taylor respectively investigate conceptual metaphors in collected COVID-19 reports from oversea English media. Tetyana deals with particular cases of metaphoric representations of COVID-19 news selected from The Financial Times and points out that metaphors help to understand difficult situations, efficiently communicate ideas and influence the audience [15]. While Taylor and Kidgell probes into metaphors in the UK press, constructing the epidemiological metaphoric framework [14]. A few scholars study conceptual metaphors in reports from domestic Chinese media. Li Wei examines war metaphors in Chinese media coverage of COVID-19 and finds that war metaphor can effectively guide public opinion and build social emergency language ability [8]. Xu Xiang uses Xinhua News Agency's reports on COVID-19 from December 2019 to June 2020 as corpus to analyze the conceptual metaphor, revealing the Chinese stance towards the pandemic [16].

It should be emphasized that all these researches take oversea English or domestic Chinese media discourses as the research object, while nearly ignoring the domestic English media ones. Therefore, this study takes *China Daily*, a mainstream English-language media in China, as the corpus source to collect news reports on COVID-19 from January 1, 2020 to December 31, 2020, exploring the types of conceptual metaphors in them, so as to probe into the social consciousness and mainstream values implied by each conceptual metaphor.

2. Research Design

2.1. Corpus Construction

As one of the mainstream English-language news media in China, *China Daily* focuses on reporting major events at home and abroad. With high reliability and validity, it is the main Chinese newspaper that has effectively entered the international mainstream society, playing an indispensable role in conveying national social consciousness, values and national image. In this study, we searched *China Daily* with *COVID-19, coronavirus* and *virus* as keywords, and collected related news reports from January 1, 2020 to December 31, 2020. Since this study is a single-modal study of news discourse, the headlines, graphs, and graph introduction words in the report were deleted. The news corpus is numbered and named according to the date, such as 20200301 (March 1, 2020), etc. If there are multiple related reports on the day, the numbers are 2020030101 (the first report on March 1, 2020), 2020030102 (the second report on March 1, 2020), etc. Irrelevant reports were removed through

manual screening and a total of 646 reports were finally collected, thus establishing a corpus. According to AntConc 3.4.3, the corpus has a total of 450,939 tokens.

2.2. Research Questions

This study takes *China Daily* as the corpus source to collect news reports on COVID-19 and discusses the following questions:
1. What are the main categories of conceptual metaphors used in the collected COVID-19 reports from *China Daily*?
2. What is the distribution of conceptual metaphors in the collected COVID-19 reports from *China Daily*?
3. What kind of social awareness is reflected in the conceptual metaphors in the collected COVID-19 reports from *China Daily*?

2.3. Research Methods

Based on the self-compiled corpus and guided by the Critical Metaphor Analysis put forward by Charteris-Black [2], this study conducted a three-step process of "identification, interpretation and interpretation" of metaphors in collated COVID-19 news reports, so as to probe into the conceptual metaphors in the corpus. The specific steps are as follows: Firstly, we extract some reports and read them in detail to dig out candidate metaphors, and then determine whether they are metaphors based on the context of the text, so as to determine the metaphor keywords; Secondly, these keywords are searched in the corpus to determine whether they are metaphorical in combination with the context, and the frequency of keywords is recorded. Thus, qualitative and quantitative research methods are combined to achieve a more comprehensive study of conceptual metaphors in the corpus. In the research process mentioned above, we chose AntCon3.4.3 as a corpus retrieval tool, Excel as a data statistical tool and graphing tool in order to explore the conceptual metaphors in COVID-19 news reports and the social consciousness hidden behind the metaphors by integrating the knowledge of pragmatics, semantics and discourse analysis.

3. Analysis and Discussion

3.1. Overview of the Conceptual Metaphors

According to statistics, in China's mainstream English media news reports on COVID-19, there are eight dominant conceptual metaphors, including war metaphors, journey metaphors, building metaphors, human metaphors, light metaphors, book metaphors, plant metaphors and evil metaphors, as shown in Figure 1. Among them, war metaphors (65%) account for the highest proportion, followed by journey metaphors (11%) and building metaphors (11%), while human metaphors, light metaphors, book metaphors, plant metaphors and evil metaphors account for only 13%. It can be seen that war metaphors are most often used to convey information and build national social awareness in China's

anti-epidemic publicity. Compared to other scholar's related research, this study finds that the statistics is not a special case. Several scholars study the domestic publicity related to COVID-19 and find a large number of the use of war metaphors, for example, Li Xue and Zhang Xin pointed out that above 70% of the war metaphors which occupy an important position with absolute superiority appear in

Fighting COVID-19 China in Action [9]; Si Jianguo studied the COVID-19 news in *Shenzhen Special Zone Daily* and found that war metaphors are the most frequent, far exceeding other commonly used metaphors [13]. Therefore, it can be seen from the above scholars' studies that war metaphors are frequently used in both internal and external publicity of "fighting the epidemic" in Chinese media.
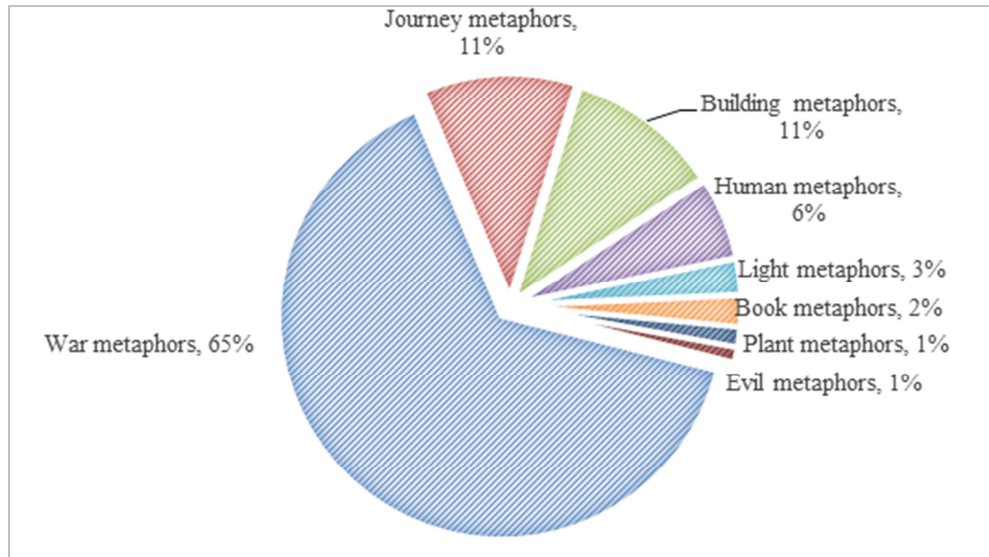

Figure 1. Distribution of conceptual metaphors.

After further analysis, a total of 70 metaphorical keywords were identified in the COVID-19 news corpus in this study, with a total frequency of 1,522 metaphors, as shown in Table 1. In order to more scientifically study the distribution of conceptual metaphors in COVID-19 news reports, this study takes "the resonance of source domains" proposed by Charteris-Black (2004) to calculate the frequency of the occurrence of each metaphor in the source domain of the

COVID-19 corpus, so as to determine the universality of each source domain. As can be seen from Table 1, war metaphors (86.06%) are the most frequently used in COVID-19 news reports, and the number is more than half, followed by journey metaphors (7.10%). However, building metaphors (2.72%), human metaphors (2.62%), light metaphors (0.63%), book metaphors (0.43%), plant metaphors (0.34%) and evil metaphors (0.10%) appear less frequently.

Table 1. Overview of conceptual metaphors in COVID-19 news.

Types	Total number of keywords	Frequency	Resonance
War metaphors	27	986	86.06%
Journey metaphors	13	169	7.10%
Building metaphors	5	168	2.72%
Human metaphors	9	90	2.62%
Light metaphors	5	39	0.63%
Book metaphors	4	33	0.43%
Plant metaphors	5	21	0.34%
Evil metaphors	2	16	0.10%
Total	70	1522	100.00%

3.2. Conceptual Metaphor Analysis

In the news reports on COVID-19, the sum of the four metaphors, namely war metaphors, journey metaphors, building metaphors and human metaphors, accounts for as high as 98.5% of the source domain resonance, which plays a key role in conveying meaning and highlighting national social awareness and mainstream values. Therefore, this paper will focus on the analysis of these four types of high-frequency metaphorical expressions.

3.2.1. War Metaphors (Prevention and Control of the Novel Coronavirus Pneumonia Is a War)

China has experienced many wars from ancient times to the present, and such experience has shaped the Chinese people's fighting strategy, fighting spirit and fighting ability. Due to the general understanding of war, war metaphors are also widely used in various discourses, and news discourse is no exception. Through in-depth analysis, it is found that the characteristics of the concept of "war" are projected into the event structure

of the national response to COVID-19, thus constructing the conceptual representation system of "Prevention and control of the novel coronavirus pneumonia is a war", and this kind of metaphors come into sight frequently. War metaphor keywords such as *fight, battle, win, challenge, war, victory, the front line, battlefront* and *weapons* often appear. In order to explore the views and values contained in the metaphor, this study will combine the specific text for analysis.

Example one: During a working consultation with Estonian officials in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, a senior official from the Chinese foreign ministry introduced China's progress in prevention and control of the COVID-19, saying China has confidence, ability and certainty to *win* the *battle against* the epidemic. (2020040703)

Example two: That's why President Xi Jinping issued "an order of *war*" on Saturday, instructing all leading local officials to put people's health first and lead the *fight against* the virus on *the front line*. (2020012603)

In the above examples, the source domain is war, and the target domain is epidemic prevention and control. The purpose of this war is to control the spread of the epidemic and protect the lives of Chinese people. Ding Ying once proposed that war metaphor can achieve the established purpose of persuasion, mobilization and cohesion [3]. The war metaphor highlights the urgency of the fight against the epidemic, mobilizing people to do everything they can to contain the spread of the disease and keep them safe. In both example one and two, the actions of *battle against* and *fight against* are all initiated by China, which reflects China's active and proactive fight against the epidemic and the common values of Chinese people who are fearless and courageous to struggle. At the same time, these two phrases also show the difficulty of fighting against the virus and highlight the heroic fighting spirit of the Chinese people. The word *win* shows the distinct position of the media, that is, China will eventually win the war, instill the ideology it advocates into the general public and achieve the purpose of journalism. In addition, government officials are not afraid of the virus and fight on the front line, which reflects the Chinese mainstream value that rise and fall of a nation rests with every one of its citizens.

3.2.2. Journey Metaphors (Prevention and Control of Novel Coronavirus Pneumonia Is a Journey)

Lakoff described journey metaphor as PURPOSEFUL ACTIVITY IS TRAVELING ALONG A PATH TOWARDS A DESTINATION [6], which not only emphasizes the state of motion, but also highlights goal orientation. In the journey metaphor, the country's valuable activity purpose is conceptualized as the destination, and the country, as a traveler, will make efforts to reach the destination. There will be obstacles along the way, but the state will try its best to overcome them in order to achieve a worthy social purpose. In this corpus, the prevention and control of the epidemic as an activity to ensure national security is like a journey, in which the civilians and the government go hand in hand. Although people may encounter various things that are not

conducive to the control of the epidemic on the way, they will continue to overcome all difficulties and forge ahead towards the goal of successfully fighting against the epidemic. Metaphorical keywords with the nature of journey such as *way, step, guide, move, path, put forward* and *milestone* appear frequently in the corpus. The following will be studied in combination with texts.

Example three: General Secretary Xi Jinping has taken personal command, planned the response, overseen the general situation and acted decisively, pointing the *way* forward in the fight against the epidemic. (2020060702)

Example four: China won a critical battle in defending Wuhan and Hubei against COVID-19, which was a major *step* forward in the nationwide virus control effort. (2020060702)

"epidemic prevention and control" is seen as a journey in example three, with travelers, destinations, roads and obstacles as the source domains, and countries and people, successful epidemic prevention, progress of epidemic prevention, and difficulties encountered in epidemic prevention as the target domains. In response to the sudden epidemic, the Party Central Committee with General Secretary Xi Jinping at the core quickly took effective measures, monitored the overall situation, and made important deployments, *pointing the way* for the prevention and control of the epidemic, and ensuring that the epidemic prevention and control work can be directed in the right direction. It shows the decisive action of the Chinese government and the fearlessness of the crisis, and also highlights the importance of the government's correct guidance. In contrast, some Western countries lack correct and powerful leadership, and miss the critical period of epidemic prevention and control, resulting in the continuous spread of the epidemic and endangering people's lives. The example four illustrates that China's effective epidemic prevention in Wuhan and Hubei is an important *step* in the nationwide virus prevention and control work. The word *step* shows the progress of my country's epidemic prevention and control, and reveals that the country and the people need to be down-to-earth in order to win the fight against the epidemic.

3.2.3. Building Metaphors (Prevention and Control of the Pandemic Is Building)

Charteris-black once proposed that WORTHWHILE ACTIVITY IS BUILDING [2], which means that worthwhile activity is to build a construction. The ultimate goal of valuable activities is building a construction, and the people and the government are the builders in the process of building, and finally through the efforts of all the people successfully completed. In the corpus, the conceptual metaphor of "prevention and control of the pandemic is building" appears many times. The national epidemic prevention behavior is regarded as the activity of building a house. The builders (the masses and the government) strive to add bricks and tiles for it (prevent and control the epidemic through various ways), and finally build a complete

house (successfully control the epidemic and protect national health). There are many building metaphorical keywords as the source domain in news reports, including *build, framework, foundation, structure, threshold,* etc. The following will analyze the use of building metaphors in combination with the corpus:

Example five: China has shared the genetic sequence of the virus with the WHO and relevant countries and regions, which has helped *lay the foundation* for international efforts to develop a vaccine and effective treatments. (2020020101)

Example six:... we will be able to overcome all our current difficulties and challenges, and *build* a better world for all. (2020060702)

In example five, the building metaphor is used to explain that China has shared the genetic sequence of the novel coronavirus with other countries, which has *laid the foundation* for the joint development of vaccines and effective treatments all over the world. This feat, on the one hand, highlights the importance of this initiative to the success of the epidemic prevention and control, and on the other hand, it reflects Chinese values of harmony and cooperation which is the most vital cultural core and factors in Chinese traditional ideology and culture. In the face of the epidemic, only through cooperation among countries can we defeat the virus and promote the building of a community with a shared future for mankind. In Example six, *build* is used to conceptualize the development process of the country and construct a better vision of the future--overcoming all difficulties to advance the overall development of the country and build a better world. The media speakers attempt to use building metaphors to arouse people's yearning for a better life in the future, and then mobilize people to actively participate in epidemic prevention and control activities. While highlighting the enthusiasm of media discourse, it also reflects the optimistic spirit of Chinese people in the face of difficulties.

3.2.4. Human Metaphors (A country Is a Man)

People often take personal cognition results of the human body as the source domain, and map it to the target domain of some unfamiliar or even abstract things, thus forming an understanding, and then better understanding the world, which is the human body metaphor. In addition, some scholars believe that human body metaphor is the external materialized form of people's cognition of the world, and it is the result of long-term interaction between human beings and the external world [12]. In the report of the pneumonia, the state is endowed with the characteristics of a human being. Metaphorical keywords such as *join hands, confident, contributor, protect, heart, foot, path-breaker,* and *safeguard* appear frequently.

Example seven: Chinese President Xi Jinping held talks with Pakistani President Arif Alvi in Beijing, noting that the COVID-19 epidemic is erupting in many places around the world at present, and all countries should *join hands* to fight the epidemic. (2020040703)

Example eight: China is *confident* in its ability to end the novel coronavirus outbreak at a lower cost and a faster speed, health minister Ma Xiaowei said on Sunday. (2020012602)

In example seven, the state is conceptualized as a human being, endowed with human thoughts and actions. The whole world is facing the challenge of the novel coronavirus pneumonia. China has repeatedly called for a joint response and encouraged all countries in the world to *join hands* to overcome all difficulties and ensure the safety of its citizens, fully demonstrating the awareness of a community with a shared future for mankind advocated by China. As for example eight, China is seen as a thoughtful person, showing sufficient confidence in the plan to end the outbreak of the epidemic, reflecting the Chinese people's ability to maintain a positive and optimistic attitude despite adversity.

4. Conclusion

Conceptual metaphor can conceptualize abstract things and make them better understood by the public. Therefore, conceptual metaphor is often used in news discourse to achieve the purpose of complete expression, advocacy and praise. This paper explores conceptual metaphors based on COVID-19 news reports in *China Daily*. This study found that there are eight conceptual metaphors in the collected corpus: war metaphors, journey metaphors, building metaphors, human metaphors, light metaphors, book metaphors, plant metaphors and evil metaphors. Among them, the top three are war metaphors, journey metaphors and building metaphors. The metaphors used in COVID-19 coverage have played an important role in inspiring people to take active actions in the fight against COVID-19 and demonstrating China's contribution to the prevention and control of the epidemic, reflecting China's values of courage, struggle and harmony and the social consciousness of actively building a community with a shared future for mankind. In addition, this study calls on scholars to pay more attention to domestic English-language media discourse analysis, as it will help shape the national image and spread the country's social consciousness and culture widely abroad.

Acknowledgements

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