

A Comparative Analysis of Conceptual Metaphors in Chinese and American News Discourses from the Ecolinguistic Perspective

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Abstract

This study adopts an ecolinguistic framework to compare conceptual metaphors in Sino-US environmental news discourses. It explores the distributional features, ecological orientations and underlying cultural and institutional causes of cross-border metaphor differences. The results reveal distinct cognitive tendencies between the two countries' environmental narratives, providing practical implications for ecological discourse construction and cross-national environmental communication.

Keywords: Ecolinguistics, News Discourse, Conceptual Metaphor.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Conceptual metaphor, defined as a cross-domain mapping within the conceptual system, subtly shapes public understanding of and attitudes toward the ecological environment. It not only reveals discourse producers' conceptualizations but also reflects their underlying stances and values. Ecolinguistics originally aimed to expose and critique the metaphors humans live by while identifying those that contribute to ecosystem protection. Jacob L. Mey further proposed an integrated paradigm combining conceptual metaphor theory and ecolinguistics, thereby demonstrating the feasibility of conducting ecological research on metaphorical language.

As two globally influential economies, China and the United States bear significant responsibilities in global ecological governance. The conceptual metaphors employed in their news discourse reflect both universal patterns of human cognition regarding environmental issues and distinct national ecological philosophies. Therefore, an in-depth comparative analysis of these metaphors is of great significance for understanding the two countries' ecological orientations, advancing the ecologization of language, and promoting international cooperation in environmental governance.

This study adopts an ecolinguistic perspective and constructs a self-built corpus of ecological news reports from China Daily and The New York Times. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines

qualitative and quantitative analyses, the study addresses three core research questions: (1) What conceptual metaphors are employed in Chinese and American news discourse, and how do their distribution patterns differ? (2) What ecological orientations are reflected in these metaphors in each country? (3) What underlying ecological philosophies do these metaphors reveal, and what socio-cultural factors shape these differences?

2. Corpus Collection and Processing

This study first comprehensively evaluated factors such as the influence, authority, and circulation of news media and selected China Daily and The New York Times as the sources of the corpora. Second, texts were manually collected from the official websites of the two newspapers using the keywords "climate change" and "environment." Finally, the collected texts were reviewed, and news discourse closely related to environmental change and environmental protection was selected, resulting in the construction of two small corpora: one consisting of Chinese ecological environment news reports (8 texts, 7,453 words) and the other consisting of American ecological environment news reports (8 texts, 7,158 words). The two corpora are broadly comparable in terms of the number of texts, word count, and time period covered, thereby providing a solid foundation for subsequent analysis.

Due to the manageable size of the corpora, manual identification and annotation were employed and further verified by peers. Following the metaphor

identification procedure proposed by Gerard Steen *et al.*, and drawing on George Lakoff's basic source-domain categories and Alice Deignan's semantic classifications of source domains, this study identified the metaphor types and their manifestations in the Chinese and American news discourse corpora. Expressions with similar semantic meanings were subsequently categorized under the same conceptual metaphor.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Top Metaphor Types and Densities in Chinese and American Corpora

China		America	
Types	Density	Types	Density
THREAT (12)	16.09	WAR (9)	12.57
WAR (7)	9.39	THREAT (12)	16.76
FORCE (16)	21.47	FORCE (11)	15.37
JOURNEY (9)	12.08	MOVEMENT AND DIRECTION (6)	8.38
MOVEMENT AND DIRECTION (8)	10.73	BUSINESS (6)	8.38

A comparison of the data presented in Table 1 reveals the following findings: (1) THREAT metaphors are prevalent in both corpora, reflecting a shared recognition of the importance of the environment and the urgency of proactive environmental protection. (2) Chinese reports exhibit a 6.1% higher density of FORCE metaphors, whereas American reports demonstrate a 3.18% higher density of WAR metaphors, the underlying causes of which require further exploration. (3) The JOURNEY metaphor, which ranks third in the Chinese discourse corpus, frames environmental protection as a long-term and collaborative process directed toward a common goal. (4) The BUSINESS metaphor, which ranks fifth in the American discourse corpus, conceptualizes environmental issues in terms of commercial activities and capital operations, thereby seeking an optimal balance between economic development and environmental protection.

3.2 Comparative Interpretation of Metaphor Types in Chinese and American Environmental News Reports

The above findings indicate that the Chinese and American ecological environment news report corpora share similarities but also exhibit differences in metaphor types and densities.

Although both Chinese and American ecological environment news reports involve Threat, War, Force, and Movement/Direction metaphors, the densities of Threat and War metaphors differ significantly. Furthermore, the objects and modes of representation for each metaphor type also vary. Moreover, the uniquely Chinese Journey metaphor and the uniquely American Business metaphor require

3.1 Identification of Metaphor Types in Chinese and American Ecological Environment News Reports

Through metaphor identification and source-domain semantic classification of the corpora, the conceptual metaphor types and metaphor densities in Chinese and American ecological environment news reports were identified. The news discourse corpora contained nine metaphor types: THREAT metaphor, WAR metaphor, FORCE metaphor, JOURNEY metaphor, MOVEMENT/DIRECTION metaphor, DISEASE metaphor, ENTITY metaphor, BUILDING metaphor, and COLOR metaphor. Table 1 presents only the five metaphor types with the highest densities and some of their linguistic manifestations.

discussion. Therefore, the following sections will discuss representative metaphor types in Chinese and American environmental news reports separately.

3.2.1 Representative Metaphor Types in Chinese Ecological Environment News Reports

(1) Force Metaphor

"More effective measures should be taken to curb soil erosion and unregulated sand mining."

This sentence employs the force metaphor, framing "soil erosion" and "unregulated sand mining" as negative forces requiring external containment. It implies the logic that humans address ecological threats through proactive intervention. This metaphor has a beneficial ecological orientation, representing explicit ecological restoration measures aimed at environmental improvement.

(2) Threat Metaphor

"The hazards of wind-sand disasters have been well controlled."

This is a Threat metaphor that frames wind-sand disasters as threatening entities. The word "hazards" vividly encapsulates their multifaceted harms to ecosystems, agriculture, human health, and infrastructure. While this metaphor effectively raises public vigilance, it carries a destructive ecological orientation. It tends to frame environmental issues as purely confrontational problems to be eliminated, shifting focus to short-term disaster control outcomes rather than long-term ecosystem balance. This may lead to overreliance on engineering solutions over natural ecosystem regulation and sustainable development.

(3) Journey Metaphor

“Steer economic growth onto a path that is both carbon-neutral and economically sustainable.”

This sentence employs the Journey metaphor, framing the transition to a carbon-neutral and economically sustainable growth model as a “path”. The verb “steer” reinforces this metaphor by implying that policies and strategies act as the “driver” guiding economic development. This is a beneficial metaphor that positively frames green development as an opportunity rather than merely an environmental obligation.

(4) Movement/Direction Metaphor

“The transition to zero-carbon industrial parks presents a valuable opportunity for the large-scale renewal and modernization of existing facilities.”

This is a Movement/Direction metaphor where “transition” frames the development of zero-carbon industrial parks as a directional shift in motion, metaphorically representing the dynamic transformation of traditional industries toward a low-carbon model. As a beneficial metaphor, it emphasizes the proactivity of green development, aligning with China’s “transformation through development” policy approach and avoiding framing decarbonization as a passive response to threats.

(5) War Metaphor

“....., form an innovative synergy and combat climate crisis in concerted efforts.”

This is a War metaphor triggered by the word “combat”, which frames addressing the ecological crisis as military confrontation and the climate crisis as a common enemy to be defeated collectively. It leverages war-associated crisis awareness to emphasize the urgency of cross-border global cooperation. As a beneficial metaphor, it departs from traditional adversarial war framing by embedding “combat” within a global cooperation framework, redefining confrontation as joint action and aligning with multilateral governance principles.

3.2.2 Representative Metaphor Types in American Environmental News Reports

(1) Threat Metaphor

“A devastating blow to the state’s tourism, skiing, mining and real estate industries.”

This is a Threat metaphor using the vivid negative imagery of “devastating blow”. It highlights the urgency of the ecological crisis, prevents public neglect, and clarifies the inextricable link between ecology and economy. As a beneficial metaphor, it promotes multi-stakeholder collaboration by issuing warnings, guiding

governments to reconcile economic and ecological conflicts through capital investment and policy adjustments.

(2) Force Metaphor

“The organization seeks to help a generation that has grown up under the threat of climate change channel their fears into concrete action.”

This is a Force metaphor triggered by the verb “channel”, which frames young people’s climate-related fears as a guidable fluid and transforms abstract emotional energy into concrete environmental action. As a beneficial metaphor, it actively converts negative emotions into positive force, perfectly aligning with the environmental philosophy of finding hope through proactive action.

(3) Entity Metaphor

“The Green Crew has grown into a network of about 50 students.”

This is an Entity metaphor that frames the Green Crew’s organizational structure as a “network”. It metaphorically represents the organization’s evolution from a startup team to a three-dimensional structure featuring multi-node collaboration and resource sharing, highlighting its scalability and collaborative nature. As a beneficial metaphor, it fosters complementary partnerships among youth, research institutions and communities, preventing isolated efforts by individual entities.

(4) War Metaphor

“The depleted lake was an ‘environmental nuclear bomb’.”

This is a War metaphor that compares the depleted lake to an “environmental nuclear bomb”, borrowing the extreme destructive power of nuclear weapons to frame the lake’s desiccation as a civilizational-level threat. As a destructive metaphor, it overemphasizes the irreversibility of the ecological crisis. Rather than motivating collaborative societal responses, it is more likely to evoke public fear and despair.

(5) Business Metaphor

“In theory, the transaction should be a win-win.”

This is a Business metaphor centered on the term “transaction”. It frames ecological conservation as a mutually beneficial business exchange, justifying environmental actions through business logic by using economic incentives to encourage private participation and converting environmental responsibility into business opportunities. As a beneficial metaphor, it

simplifies complex issues and reduces resistance to cross-stakeholder collaboration.

4.3 Explanation of Similarities and Differences in Conceptual Metaphor Types in Chinese and American News Discourses

4.3.1 Differences in Metaphor Use in Chinese and American Ecological Environment News Reports

China's ecological orientation is characterized by beneficial metaphors (e.g., "Journey metaphor" emphasizing sustainable development paths), supplemented by Threat metaphors (e.g., "hazards of wind-sand disasters"). Overall, it highlights harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature. Through metaphors like "strategic hub" and "green transition path," it emphasizes collective action and long-term planning, viewing ecological protection as an organic component of the social system.

America's ecological orientation features a coexistence of beneficial and destructive metaphors. The Business metaphor reflects the utilitarian view of "environmental protection as an economic tool." Through metaphors like "business transaction" and "entity network," it highlights market mechanisms and individual action, implicitly embodying the resource allocation logic of America First.

Influence of Economic and Cultural Factors

China's economic model is centered on government-led industrial upgrading, and its metaphors often reflect national strategies and collective goals. Influenced by the philosophy of "the unity of heaven and humanity," these metaphors tend to conceptualize nature and human activity as an integrated whole. In contrast, the United States' economic model is dominated by the market economy. BUSINESS metaphors reflect the involvement of capital in environmental protection and emphasize the balance between ecological conservation and economic interests. A culture characterized by individualism and pragmatism leads these metaphors to focus more on individual action and immediate benefits.

Influences of Social and Political Factors

China is driven by national strategies like the "dual carbon" goals. Metaphors often serve policy advocacy. War metaphors reinforce collective action awareness, aligning with the governance model of concentrating efforts on major tasks.

America has significant partisan divergence on environmental policy. Metaphors often carry a tone of crisis warning (e.g., environmental nuclear bomb highlights problem urgency) to build social consensus. The high frequency of Business metaphors reflects corporate influence on policy (e.g., commercialization of carbon assets serves capital interests).

Influences of Ecological Philosophical Differences:

China follows a "sustainable development" philosophy. Metaphors focus on the holistic restoration of ecosystems (e.g., "blue carbon ecosystem" emphasizes natural regulatory functions). America leans towards anthropocentrism. Metaphors often focus on crisis response and technological intervention (e.g., "War metaphor" treats nature as an object of confrontation).

The metaphorical differences in Chinese and American ecological environment news essentially reflect cultural values, economic models, and political systems: China constructs a "systemic governance" narrative through metaphors, while America emphasizes a "crisis response + market-driven" logic. This difference reflects the two countries' chosen paths for ecological governance and reveals the collision and integration of diverse philosophies within global environmental issues.

4.3.2 Similarities in Metaphor Use in Chinese and American Ecological Environment News Reports

In both Chinese and American news discourse, THREAT metaphors and WAR metaphors are frequently employed. Both countries conceptualize ecological phenomena as controllable forces. At the same time, both employ MOVEMENT metaphors such as "transition" and "path" to emphasize the directionality of ecological governance. In addition, both countries use metaphors to reduce cognitive barriers. For example, concrete images such as "war" and "threat" transform abstract ecological problems into crises that are more readily perceived by the public, thereby encouraging public action.

Both China and the US face global challenges like climate change, environmental degradation, and biodiversity loss. This shared reality of crisis prompts both to choose similar metaphorical frameworks to convey urgency. Scientific consensus on "system vulnerability" and "chain reactions" influences metaphor choice. For example, both countries use "Force metaphors" to describe the dynamic balance of ecosystems, reflecting a shared understanding of the objective laws governing ecological forces. News discourse needs to convey complex information within limited space; metaphors, as tools of cognitive compression, can quickly establish associations, serving the efficiency goal of information dissemination for both. As key players in global ecological governance, China and the US need to construct a shared responsibility narrative through similar metaphors.

4. SUMMARY

This paper presents a comparative analysis of conceptual metaphors in Chinese and American ecological environment news discourse from an ecolinguistic perspective. It aims to reveal both commonalities and differences in ecological cognition and discourse construction. In the context of global

ecological governance, it is necessary to acknowledge the cultural and cognitive differences underlying metaphors, to construct a discourse system that is both resonant and inclusive, and to promote the transformation from “crisis consensus” to “action synergy.” At the same time, this study calls for strengthening the ecologization of language by selecting beneficial metaphors to guide public cognition, thereby providing discursive support for constructing the ecological dimension of a community with a shared future for mankind.

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