

# COVID-19 in the U.S. and Chinese Media: A Contrastive Analysis of Metaphors Across Languages

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Various metaphorical expressions of the COVID-19 have emerged in the media around the world. Based on Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual metaphor theory, this paper studies the use of metaphors in the media reports of China and the United States fighting against the COVID-19. The data come from the self-built metaphorical corpus of Chinese and American media reports on the COVID-19. Our analysis focuses on describing the common metaphors used by the two countries in conceptualizing the COVID-19, and analyzing the similarities and differences between the two languages in conceptualizing the COVID-19. This paper also reveals the ideological motivation behind the media's use of these metaphors, that is, metaphor has become a carrier for the Chinese and American media to express their political views and attitudes, and a powerful tool to strengthen the government's political propaganda and shape the national image.

*Keywords:* conceptual metaphor, corpus, COVID-19, media

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is raging around the world, and people's material production and social life are affected by this public health emergency. The global media coverage of COVID-19 is overwhelming. However, the metaphorical expressions related to the fight against the COVID-19 are different in different languages and cultures. Even the same metaphor does not resonate with people all over the world.

According to cognitive linguistics, metaphor is widely used in everyday speech and has even become a basic way of thinking (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003). In fact, a form of language is a way of life. However, in the use of conceptual metaphor, people often blurt it out without thinking, but they do not realize that it is the different ways of thinking and life created by different languages.

Based on the objective corpus, it is an important topic of metaphor research to discover the hidden human discourse mechanism and cognitive model through metaphorical discourse. In this context, many scholars have made beneficial explorations. Many disciplines, such as communication studies, linguistics, psychology, and sociology have investigated media framings of illness (Gui, 2021). The research of Xie Qin and Kuang Fangtao (2021) mainly focused on multimodal metaphors in Chinese "COVID-19" news cartoons, and uses conceptual integration to analyze people's understanding of social hot issues. Dong Yan (2020) focused on the discourse of COVID-19 in western media discussions, providing a reference for choosing appropriate metaphors in specific

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contexts. Kazemian and Hatamzadeh (2022) established a pandemic related discourse corpus to study the conceptual metaphors of the novel coronavirus in American English and Persian, explore the source fields of conceptual metaphors, and describe the most common conceptual metaphors in these languages.

Media discourse has generally persuasive power, in the sense that the media discourse mainly has the potential to influence the minds and actions of viewers or readers (Van Dijk, 1996). However, looking at previous studies, most of the research corpus of metaphors for combating the COVID-19 came from the reports of domestic or national media, and few of them used corpus to analyze the use of metaphors related to fighting the epidemic in different languages or East and West countries.

Conceptual metaphor theory was first proposed by Lakoff and Johnson, who propose that “our ordinary conceptual system is fundamentally metaphorical in nature”. With metaphor, we can understand complex things in a simpler way, which will expand our ability to recognize complex areas. And our understanding of COVID-19 is also gradually constructed in metaphors. According to Fairclough (1992), metaphor constructs the way of thinking and action, and constructs the system of our knowledge and belief. Therefore, the metaphors used by the media are likely to influence our understanding of the concept of COVID-19 imperceptibly.

Considering the incompleteness of the previous corpus, it is of great significance to study the metaphorical expressions of fighting against epidemic diseases under the cross languages. The corpus of this paper is selected from the reports related to the fight against the COVID-19 released by the mainstream media in China and the United States. We use corpus software to retrieve and count the similarities and differences in the use of metaphors in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic between China and the United States, and reveal the ideological characteristics and purposes behind the media’s metaphorical reports.

### **Data and Methodology**

The data of this study come from the self-built COVID-19 corpus with 50,052 English words and 51,863 Chinese characters. The corpus is a random collection of mainstream media reports from China and the United States from January 23, 2020 to October 13, 2022. Considering the homogeneity of the corpus, we choose private media, Sina News for Chinese media, and Cable News Network (CNN) for American media.

Metaphor extraction mainly depends on the retrieval and statistics of corpus software AntConc 4.1.1. The specific operation methods are described as follows (Chen & Deng, 2012; Praggeljaz Group, 2007): (1) Read the full text of the corpus and record all metaphorical subject words; (2) Speculate the target domain of potential metaphors and retrieve some metaphors; and (3) Input the search list into the corpus software to search and classify the English and Chinese corpus respectively. After contextualization and confirmation, the statistical data of various metaphor types are recorded.

### **Discussion and Results**

In accordance with the above approach, we have extracted all metaphors related to the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic from English and Chinese corpora. Then, we classify and count the main conceptual metaphors based on these corpora, as shown in Table 1. As representatives of different cultures and ideologies in the Eastern and Western worlds, China and the United States have both similarities and differences in the use of metaphors in the reports of combating coronavirus.

The data show that: (1) Most kinds of metaphors related to the COVID-19 are widely used in media

reports in China and the United States, and the overall frequency of use of Chinese media is higher than that of American media; (2) War metaphors play a dominant role in the reports of COVID-19 pandemic in China and the United States; and (3) The media in both countries have adopted a variety of metaphorical frameworks, some of which are shared, while others only appear in specific countries. Following part, we use examples in the corpus to compare the metaphors of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Chinese and American media (see Table 1). Chinese examples have also been translated into English.

Table 1

*The Frequency of Some Main Metaphors in Two Languages*

Different metaphors	Chinese media	The U.S. media	Total frequency
War	87	97	184
Disaster	20	10	30
Game	20	3	23
Test	15	5	20
Fire	0	19	19

**COVID-19 Is War**

The COVID-19 is fierce, with a wide range of infection and huge loss of life and property. Therefore, it is easy to link the characteristics of war when people conceptualize the COVID-19. The war requires soldiers to break into battle, and we also see many “heroes in harm’s way” in the news reports of the Chinese media, such as Example 1. The war metaphor highlights our inner nationalism, bravery, and loyalty, enabling people to fight with the pandemic. Therefore, both Chinese and American media frequently use the powerful appeal of war metaphor to serve the country’s epidemic prevention measures. These effective, powerful, and frequent metaphors are also used strategically by governments to achieve certain goals such as gaining acceptance and support of legislative measures (Gillis, 2020).

Example 1: 有这样一群人，面对突如其来的疫情，他们勇当“逆行者”，义无反顾奔赴“战场”；他们争分夺秒，只为跑出抗疫“加速度”（新浪新闻，2022. 9. 21）。

There is such a group of people who, in the face of the sudden pandemic, bravely become “heroes in harm’s way” and go to the “battlefield” without hesitation; they are racing against time to get the “acceleration” of the epidemic (Sina News, September 21, 2022).

However, some metaphorical expressions only appear in specific linguistic environments due to historical and cultural differences. In Example 2, we found that the Chinese media called the fighting epidemic action the “whole people’s war”, expanded the scope and influence of the war to everyone, and emphasized the strong role of the people. Similar metaphors include “total war” and “people’s war”. In fact, the “people’s war” is one of the cores of Mao Zedong’s military thought, and the wisdom achievements of resisting foreign aggression since modern Chinese history. Without a similar history, the United States will not have similar experience, nor will it conceptualize the process of fighting COVID-19 in this way.

Example 2: 疫情防控，这是一场“全民战争”，我们每个人都勇敢，值得为之自豪（新浪新闻，2022. 1. 29）。

Epidemic prevention and control, this is the “whole people’s war”, and we are all very brave and proud of it (Sina News, January 29, 2022).

Similarly, some metaphors can only be found in the corpus of American media. In Example 3, CNN reported that President Biden of the United States described the United States as “arsenal of vaccines”, and

compared the status of the United States in the COVID-19 pandemic with World War II. The use of this metaphor is closely related to the history of the United States, and also implies that the outcome of the United States' fight against the epidemic will be as successful as it was in World War II. This metaphorical expression related to national history has become the experience of understanding the new situation and is not shared by other countries.

Example 3: "Just as in World War II, America was the arsenal of democracy in the battle against COVID-19 pandemic, our nation is going to be the arsenal of vaccines for the rest of the world", Biden said (CNN, May 17, 2021).

### **COVID-19 Is a Disaster**

There are a lot of metaphors related to disasters in China and the United States. The disasters we discuss here mainly include natural disasters and imaginary places of suffering, such as the conceptualization of COVID-19 as "storm", "disaster", and "havoc". The Chinese have long tried to find the balance point of peaceful coexistence with nature, and have rich experience of coexistence with nature. Therefore, China and the United States are very similar in this metaphor. We regard COVID-19 as a natural disaster, which may be because COVID-19 also comes from the natural foundation. Nature is not under the control of human beings, and many times human beings must yield to and conform to nature. For example, in Example 4, it was mentioned that the storm had just emerged, and the struggle between human beings and nature was far from over, which reflected that the struggle between human beings and COVID-19 would continue for a long time. Disaster metaphor often involves the duration and scope of influence, which is similar to the characteristics of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Example 4: While nationally, new cases have plateaued or slightly dipped as worst-hit epicenters such as New York and New Jersey emerge from the storm, there are plenty of reasons to believe that the fight against COVID-19 is still far from its endgame (CNN, June 11, 2020).

### **COVID-19 Is a Game**

Our description of COVID-19 can also be conceptualized from various forms of games, such as gambling, catching, fighting, defense, theatre game, and other games. In Example 5, we can see that Sina News regards the human immune system's capture of mutant viruses as a capture game between cats and mice. The Chinese media highlight the cunning of the game characters and the repetition of the game scenes, and emphasize that fighting against the epidemic is a long-term work by setting the fun of the game in the background. It is the external difficulties that have seriously hindered the fight against the epidemic, and this implication has helped to alleviate the contradiction between the people and the government to a certain extent. Unlike China, the American media conceptualized the COVID-19 as a "theatre game without playbook" in Example 6, which may be derived from American drama culture. However, in Chinese culture, fighting against the epidemic is a matter that needs to be taken seriously and cannot be expressed casually through humorous dramas. Therefore, these are two different kinds of experiential cognition, and naturally there will be no mapping relationship.

Example 5: 病毒变异逃逸人体的免疫系统就是一场永恒的“猫鼠游戏”（新浪新闻，2020.5.19）。

The virus mutation that escapes the body's immune system is a perpetual "cat-and-mouse game" (Sina News, May 19, 2020).

Example 6: There was no playbook for dealing with a public health disaster of this magnitude in Trump's America (CNN, April 14, 2020).

### COVID-19 Is a Test/Big Test

The media sometimes conceptualize the COVID-19 as a variety of texts. Each country has a competitive relationship. The characteristic of this metaphor is to highlight the spread speed of the virus. People must kill the virus faster than the virus spread speed to win. In China, the COVID-19 is often called the “big test” by media, such as Example 7. Whether the epidemic prevention materials are sufficient, whether the government’s epidemic prevention measures are appropriate, and whether the epidemic scope is expanded are all questions. The performance of countries during the epidemic is the answer. However, as in Example 8, the metaphorical expression called “test” in the United States has no special historical connotation and can be replaced by “challenge”. The Chinese media inherited the “big test” metaphor from Mao Zedong who once called the entry of the Central Committee of the Communist Party into Beijing came to power and established a new China “a big test to get into Beijing”. And this metaphor implies that China will also win the big test to fight against the epidemic.

Example 7: 在全球抗疫这场“大考”中，显然交出了一份“负分答卷”（新浪新闻，2022.1.29）。

In the “big test” of global fight against COVID-19, it is obvious that the United States has handed in a “failed answer sheet” (Sina News, January 29, 2022).

Example 8: The COVID-19 crisis has been a relentless test for every citizen—One that encompassed the entire American population (CNN, May 25, 2021).

### COVID-19 Is Fire

We also found a culturally loaded metaphor in English and Chinese, namely, fire metaphor. The frequency of conceptualizing the COVID-19 as fire is very different between China and the United States. In our corpus, no fire metaphor is found in Sina News. However, fire metaphors are widespread in talking about the coronavirus in English (Semino, 2021). In Example 9, former President Trump of the United States requested that the fire be extinguished when it appeared, in order to prevent a wider range of disasters. It seems to be talking about a fire, but in fact it is an instruction for the prevention and control of COVID-19 epidemic. By using the metaphor of fire, the American media reflect the American government’s efforts to control the epidemic in the minimum range, achieve precise prevention and control, and shape the image of a responsible big country that actively fights against the epidemic. The spreading speed and destructive power of fire may be another reasonable reason to describe COVID-19 as fire. Moreover, the god of fire in Western mythology, Prometheus, who suffered torture after bringing fire to mankind, seems to have strengthened the mapping relationship between fire and suffering in English speaking countries, which may also be one of the reasons why the United States used fire to conceptualize the COVID-19 epidemic.

Example 9: “We may have some embers or some ashes, or we may have some flames coming, but we’ll put them out. We’ll stomp them out,” Trump said Friday (CNN, June 11, 2020).

### Conclusion

Metaphor, as a cognitive way, plays an important role in building people’s cognitive system by reducing complexity to simplicity and turning abstraction into concrete. Based on the reports of the Chinese and American mainstream media on the fight against the COVID-19, this paper examines the common metaphors used by the two countries in conceptualizing the COVID-19, and analyzes the similarities and differences between the two languages in conceptualizing the coronavirus. In addition, this paper also discusses how

metaphor can be used by the media to build a national image online. Our research results show that metaphor has become a carrier for the Chinese and American media to express their political views and attitudes, and a powerful tool to strengthen the government's political propaganda and shape the national image.

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