Critical Discourse Analysis of News Reports on the New Round of the US-China Tariff War from the Perspective of Proximization Theory

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Abstract: Using news reports from mainstream Chinese and American media on the latest round of the tariff war between China and the US as data, this study applies proximization theory to analyze the discourse strategies employed by the media. The study investigates how each side constructs the legitimacy of its own actions while delegitimizing the actions of the other. The results show that Chinese media mainly focuses on highlighting the negative impact of the US's unilateral actions on the global economy, emphasizes China's defensive role, and critiques the legitimacy of US policies. In contrast, American media portrays China as a direct threat, emphasizing China's economic harm to the US and the potential security crisis. By providing a comparative perspective on media coverage of the same event, the study highlights the role of discourse in shaping public perception and political power dynamics. This study contributes to filling the gap in the discourse analysis of the US-China trade conflict and the application of proximization theory in political discourse.

Keywords: Proximization theory, Spatial-temporal-axiological proximization model, New US tariffs, News reports

1. Introduction

Starting from March 4th, the US announced that it would impose a 20% tariff on Chinese imports, citing issues such as fentanyl. China strongly expressed its dissatisfaction and firmly opposed these actions, releasing a series of countermeasures on March 4th. This move by the US represents the continuation of the decades-long economic and trade tensions between the two nations. [1] Every escalation of trade friction between China and the US not only involves a contest of economic interests but also a struggle for international discourse power.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA, henceforth), as an important theoretical tool for studying the relationship between language and power, provides an interpretive framework for analyzing how news reports reinforce or undermine certain ideologies through specific discourse strategies. CDA posits that discourse is not merely a form of linguistic expression, but also an integral part of social practice, deeply embedded in power relations and the construction of ideologies [2]. As one of the latest theories in critical discourse analysis, proximization theory is a discourse strategy that condenses discourse space into three dimensions: time, space, and values. By analyzing lexical and grammatical resources, it enables readers to enhance their awareness of defense, seek the legitimization of policies or actions, or delegitimize peripheral entities [3]. In recent years, the

research domain of proximization theory has gradually expanded from war discourse [4] to immigration discourse [5], healthcare discourse [6], energy discourse [7], and other areas.

This paper uses news reports from mainstream Chinese and American media on the US's tariff imposition as data and applies proximization theory to analyze the different proximization strategies used in the process of the US constructing its legitimacy and China delegitimizing the US's actions. The findings of this study contribute to enriching the explanatory scope of proximization theory, provide insights for the in-depth interpretation and analysis of news media reports, and reveal the ideological competition between different positions on the same event.

2. Literature review

2.1. Proximization theory

Proximization theory is a recent development within discourse space theory. Chilton [8] was the first to introduce the concept of "proximize/proximizing" and constructed a visual model encompassing the dimensions of space, time, and value to reveal how humans map discourse content onto cognitive representations [9]. Cap pointed out that while discourse space theory focuses on deictic elements in discourse, such as noun phrases and pronouns, it has paid insufficient attention to the verbs that play a key role in the process of conceptual shift [10]. Based on this, Cap further condensed discourse space into three core dimensions: time, space, and values, analyzing lexical and grammatical resources to present a threatening scenario that is spatially imminent, temporally continuous, and value-opposed. This, in turn, arouses the reader's alertness, triggers claims for the legitimacy of policies or actions, or denies and criticizes the legitimacy of peripheral entities. This framework also helps to reveal the complex ideological alignments and potential conflicts in political discourse [4]. It is important to emphasize that whether an external entity constitutes a threat does not entirely depend on its objective temporal or spatial characteristics, but more on the subjective intentions of the discourse producer. This characteristic indicates that proximization not only has a cognitive psychological basis but is also deeply driven by social contexts and pragmatic motivations.

2.2. Empirical studies of proximization theory

In terms of empirical studies of proximization theory, previous discourse studies have primarily followed two paths: comparative and non-comparative discourse research. Comparative discourse analysis typically focuses on ideological differences and oppositions between different entities in discourse [11]. Non-comparative discourse research, on the other hand, is more concerned with analyzing the intrinsic logic and cognitive structures within the same discourse space, focusing on the internal cognitive frameworks and symbolic systems of discourse [3][5].

Comparative discourse research includes various types of comparative discourse, such as comparisons between two countries, between different leaders within the same country, and between original texts and their translations. For example, Zhang & Yan [11] applied discourse space theory and proximization theory to conduct a comparative analysis of the discourse of the US, Syria, and China in the Syrian War. The study found that both the US and Syria extensively used spatial proximization strategies, supplemented by strong value proximization strategies, constructing the external entities as approaching the referential center. China, in contrast, emphasized sympathy for Syria, criticized US military actions, and proposed resolving conflicts through political consultation. These comparisons revealed the different linguistic strategies employed by the three parties in political discourse, as well as the ideological and political stance differences.

Non-comparative discourse is also an important part of empirical research on proximization theory, covering a wide range of discourse studies in various fields, such as immigration discourse, crisis discourse, court mediation discourse, environmental discourse, healthcare discourse, and pandemic

response discourse. For instance, Wu & Niu [5], using Trump's immigration policies as data, combined Cap's proximization theory with van Dijk's social cognition model to analyze the discourse features and legitimization strategies of immigration discourse. This study found that immigration discourse emphasized the opposition between Americans and foreigners, and through proximization, brought "their" negative behaviors closer to "us," thereby creating a strong sense of conflict.

3. Research corpus

The data for this study were selected from China's mainstream media, China Daily, and the US's mainstream media, The New York Times. The Chinese news comes from the official website of China Daily (https://www.chinadaily.com.cn), while the American news is sourced from the news corpus LexisNexis. The news selected for both parties covers the period from February 1st, 2025, when the event began, to March 11th, 2025, one week after the latest round of confrontation, during which news reports were fully published. A small-scale corpus was constructed, consisting of a total of 7,170 words from the Chinese news and 7,129 words from the American news, amounting to 14,299 words in total.

4. Research findings

4.1. Spatial proximization

Spatial proximization refers to the gradual physical intrusion of elements outside the deictic center (ODC) into the recognition process of elements inside the deictic center (IDC) in the discourse space [3]. The distinction between the deictic center and the periphery is reflected not only in geographic and geopolitical distance but also in ideological differences. Through spatial proximization, the speaker urges the listener to recognize the threat posed by external entities in the physical space.

4.1.1. Noun phrases construed as IDCs and ODCs in the discourse space

Table 1: IDCs and ODCs of China and the US

	China	US
IDC	China, China's contributions, Chinese enterprises; Members (of WTO), Trans-Pacific Partnership; Canada and Mexico, poorer households (of the US), working families (of the US)	The United States, President Trump, U.S. tariffs, American exports, U.S. companies, American consumers; western dominance, the world, trade
ODC	Additional US tariffs, the US, US president Donald Trump, the Trump administration the trade war, expanded tariffs	Wang Yi, China, Mr. Xi, the Chinese government, China's Ministry of Commerce, China's National People's Congress, the Chinese Communist Party; president Biden, The W.T.O., illegal labs in Mexico, fentanyl

As shown in Table 1, the IDCs in the Chinese corpus mainly include three categories: Core IDC members such as China and China's own interests; key parts of IDCs, including international organizations or international relations that share China's position and involve China's participation; and entities that do not include China but are also negatively affected by the US tariff war, representing more peripheral members of the IDC. The ODC in the Chinese corpus refers to American

members, such as additional US tariffs, the US, and Donald Trump, in relation to the US imposing tariffs on China. The scope of the IDC in the Chinese corpus is broader than that of the ODC, as it incorporates other countries into its position, thereby expanding its influence and creating a sense of isolation for the ODC. This reflects China's positioning from a global perspective, demonstrating China's pursuit of global common interests. In contrast, the ODC focuses on the US, portraying the trade war as being instigated by the US. It also highlights that the loss of interests for countries worldwide is directly or indirectly caused by the US's unilateral actions, further isolating the ODC.

From Table 1, it can also be seen that the IDC in the US corpus predominantly consists of core US members. Unlike China, the concentration of the IDC in the US corpus reflects the US's stronger focus on its own interests. At the same time, the US uses the ODC more frequently and provides more detailed constructions of the ODC camp. It breaks down China into parts, emphasizing that China has comprehensively threatened US interests and intends to divide China from within, weakening the power of the ODC. The US also includes other countries and even the Biden administration as part of the ODC, attempting to show that the threats faced by the US today are multidimensional. The US is not only targeted by China but also faces attacks from other countries, the severe harm of drug abuse, and even the counterbalance of issues left by the previous administration, aiming to deepen the perception of harm to the IDC and alert the readers.

4.1.2. VPs of motion and directionality construed as the movement of ODCs toward the deictic center

Example 1 (China): The US's practice ODC seriously damages the rules-based multilateral trading system IDC and disrupts the stability of the global industry and supply chains IDC, whose repercussions will ripple across the whole global economic system IDC affecting other major economies IDC.

Example 2 (the US): Chinese industrial policy ODC has flooded the world IDC with Chinese goods and fueled massive trade imbalances.

In Example 1, the verb "ripple" reflects the impact of the US on the global economic system. By using "ripple," the Chinese side not only alludes to the US's influence on the global economy but also conveys that this impact is neither singular nor direct, but rather expansive and hierarchical. This gradual spreading process suggests that US actions may affect other major economies in the short term, and over time, this impact could extend to various global levels, deepening China's concerns about potential threats to global stability. In Example 2, the verb "flood" signals China's strong intrusion into the US and global economy. This allows US listeners to fully perceive Chinese goods sweeping across the globe like a flood, bringing intense external effects. Meanwhile, "flood" emphasizes both the magnitude and speed of China's impact on the global economy, making the listener aware of the physical invasion from the periphery to the center. Subconsciously, this evokes vigilance and anxiety about the expansion of the ODC.

4.1.3. VPs of action construed as the influence of ODCs on IDCs

Example 3 (China): The Ministry of Commerce also had every reason to include the PVH Group and Illumina in the unreliable entity list that day, since there is plenty of evidence that proves they ODC (the companies) violated normal market trading principles IDC, interrupted normal transactions with Chinese companies IDC, took discriminatory measures against Chinese enterprises IDC, and seriously damaged the legitimate rights and interests of Chinese entities IDC.

Example 4 (the US): China is inflicting as much pain and turmoil on America as possible without crossing the line into outright war. It hacks and steals from us IDC (the US), embeds malware into our electric and water infrastructure IDC, sets up fake police stations, buys American farmland.

In Example 3, several verb phrases are construed as the negative influence exerted by ODCs (the US) on IDCs (China). The word "violate" depicts the actions of the US in violating normal market transaction principles, indicating the infringement of market rules by US companies. Additionally, by using "interrupt," the Chinese side emphasizes that US actions are destabilizing factors in the global economic system. "Take discriminatory measures against" reflects the ideological hostility of the US towards China. Finally, "damage" further strengthens the sense of oppression. Through these verbs, the discourse portrays the process of the ODCs continuously applying negative influence on IDCs, intensifying the urgency of the threat, and effectively illustrating the invasion of IDCs by ODCs. In Example 4, several verb phrases are also construed as the influence exerted by ODCs (China) on IDCs (the US). Through these verbs, the discourse demonstrates the US accusation that China gradually infiltrates and influences America's political, economic, and social structures. First, the verb "inflict" describes China's actions of causing turmoil in the US, emphasizing that the peripheral entity imposes harm on the center entity in a coercive and deliberate manner. The verbs "hack," "steal," and "embed malware" indicate the illegality of China's actions. These not only describe specific illegal actions but also imply China's violation of the US and the potential threats posed to US infrastructure through technological means, further deepening the sense of threat posed by ODCs.

4.1.4. Abstract nouns construed as the influence or result exerted by ODCs on IDCs

Example 5: Given its large consumer market and trade deficit, the US ODC can impose more economic pain on its trading partners IDC than they can inflict in return.

Example 6: Yet Mr. Wang's depiction ODC of China's role conveniently downplayed the frictions it, too, has caused. Chinese industrial policy ODC has flooded the world with Chinese goods and fueled massive trade imbalances.

In Example 5, the abstract noun "economic pain" marks the negative economic impact brought by the US through its massive consumer market and trade deficits. This concept illustrates the effect of the US on various IDCs through trade and economic means, further strengthening the US's dominant position in the global economic system. In Example 6, the abstract nouns "frictions" and "imbalances" reveal the negative effects of China's actions, while also emphasizing the potential threat posed to the US. "Frictions" indicates that China has caused a certain level of conflict within the global economic system, implying geopolitical tensions with China. "Imbalances" directly criticizes the significant impact of China's industrial policies on the global economy.

4.2. Temporal proximization

Temporal proximization is a strong interpretation of the "present." For IDCs, the anticipated contradiction or conflict is imminent, and resolving this contradiction or conflict will have historical significance, thus requiring an immediate response and the implementation of effective preventive measures [5]. This contradiction or conflict has not yet actually occurred, but it represents the speaker's presupposition of events that may happen. This shift can be divided into "past-to-present" and "future-to-present," with the main goal of activating the listener's sense of urgency regarding safety and legitimizing the measures proposed by the speaker. Therefore, the main task for the speaker is to use representations of events from the past or future to activate the listener's "present" framework.

4.2.1. Using non-restrictive descriptive noun phrases to construct the impact of ODCs' actions within other temporal frameworks

Example 7: In recent years, fentanyl abuse has become a severe crisis in the US. With less than 5% of the world's population, the country consumes over 80% of the global opioid supply.

Example 8: Earlier this year, China's premier, the second-highest official after Mr. Xi, tried to project confidence in the country's economy by setting an ambitious growth target.

In Example 7, the non-restrictive descriptive noun phrase "in recent years" indicates that, although the fentanyl abuse crisis did not form overnight, its effects have gradually emerged in recent years and have become a severe and ongoing economic and social problem. In Example 8, "earlier this year" tightly links past events with the present. By using this phrase, the discourse places the economic growth targets set by President Xi within a recent temporal framework, emphasizing the timeliness of this event and its impact on the current context.

4.2.2. Using simple past tense and present perfect tense to generate comparative discourse, constructing the threat of past events to the future

Example 9: While trade between the US and China was brisk last year, since 2018, the original round of tariffs ODC imposed on China IDC by the Trump administration ODC and those kept and extended by President Joe Biden's administration ODC have altered the relationship.

Example 10: He (Wang Yi) ODC made no mention of China's own muscle flexing ODC, which has fueled tensions in the region. Chinese Coast Guard ships, for instance, enforce Beijing's disputed claims to wide swaths of the South China Sea by sometimes ramming and swiping Philippine vessels. (Mr. Wang described China's activity in the region as defensive and portrayed the Philippines as a Western pawn.)

In Example 9, the phrase "was brisk" describes the state of active Sino-US trade in the previous year. "Extended" indicates that after the Trump administration initially imposed tariffs, the impact of these actions is not confined to the past but has extended into the present. The phrase "have altered" emphasizes that the changes brought about by these tariff policies have already occurred and their ongoing effects. Overall, this contrast suggests that the once-active trade state has undergone fundamental changes due to the US's escalating tariff measures, thereby posing a potential negative impact on China's economic interests. In Example 10, the use of "made no mention" and "has fueled tensions" illustrates the potential threat of China's past actions on future situations. First, "made no mention," in past tense, indicates that Chinese officials did not address their actions in the South China Sea, implying China's attempt to conceal or avoid acknowledging its illegal behavior, thus evoking hostile sentiments toward China in the present. The present perfect tense "has fueled tensions" shows that China's past actions have already exacerbated regional tensions, and these tensions continue to impact the stability of the region.

4.2.3. Using nominalization phrases to presume the potential impact of ODCs' actions in the future

Example 11: While the US administration claims it is protecting domestic industries and safeguarding jobs with such protectionist measures, the reality is that the tariffs and trade barriers ODC will only harm its own consumers and businesses and escalate tensions with the US's major trading partners.

Example 12: China's counterpunches ODC suggested an effort to hurt American businesses IDC and send a warning to the Trump administration IDC, while holding in reserve measures that could do even more serious damage to trade between the world's two biggest economies IDC.

In Example 11, the nominalization of "tensions" transforms this abstract concept from a dynamic process into a static, pre-set outcome, implying that the tension is not a temporary fluctuation but a long-term issue that is gradually accumulating and may expand. In Example 12, the nominalized abstract concept "damage" is transformed into a concrete and long-standing result, implying that this damage is not a short-term phenomenon, but something that could occur at any time and have a more serious impact on the economies of both countries.

4.2.4. Using modal verbs to construct the ongoing impact of ODCs on the present and future

Example 13: Experts said the move ODC, which comes while trade between the United States and China remains robust, could result in significant changes in global trade.

Example 14: China's counterpunches ODC suggested an effort to hurt American businesses IDC and send a warning to the Trump administration IDC, while holding in reserve measures that could do even more serious damage to trade between the world's two biggest economies IDC.

In Example 13, "could" is used to construct the potential ongoing impact of ODCs (the US) on global trade in the future. "Could" here emphasizes the possibility of external factors (such as changes in US policies) affecting China and the global economy in the future, even though it has not yet occurred. The discourse not only presupposes future events but also deepens the listener's crisis awareness of ODCs, encouraging them to recognize the necessity and legitimacy of taking measures. In Example 14, the US also uses the modal verb "could" to construct the potential threat China poses to itself, emphasizing the persistence and possibility of this threat in the future. While conveying uncertainty, it also implies the power and consequences of such potential actions, highlighting that China may have a lasting impact on the US.

4.2.5. Using parallel discourse to construct a future alienated world

Example 15: But rather than embracing the efficient global supply chains, the US leadership views the import of goods as an economic liability.

Example 16: China's Ministry of Commerce said it would file a legal case at the World Trade Organization, but signaled it still wanted a stable relationship with the US.

In Example 15, "embracing the efficient global supply chains" presupposes an idealized, rationalized future, where an open and cooperative global trade framework is the correct path. However, in contrast, "views the import of goods as an economic liability" reveals the US's current policy negating and subverting this ideal state, suggesting a departure from global cooperation and a shift toward protectionism. In Example 16, the parallel discourse presents the contradictions and complexities China faces in dealing with its relationship with the US. "File a legal case at the World Trade Organization" implies that China has taken a formal and unfavorable legal action against the US, signaling the potential for future confrontation and conflict. In contrast, "signaled it still wanted a stable relationship with the US" shows China's potential desire to maintain stable relations. This contrasting expression highlights the two opposing potential future worlds.

4.3. Axiological proximization

Axiological proximization refers to the listener's interpretation of the antagonism between the value systems of elements inside the deictic center and those of elements outside the deictic center in the discourse space. Its mechanism involves increasingly intense ideological conflict, which ultimately materializes in the physical space of the elements inside the deictic center.

4.3.1. Noun phrases representing positive abstract concepts conceptualized as the value system or ideology of IDCs

Example 17: China IDC remains consistent in both its openness to promote the healthy development of Sino-US relations and its resoluteness to safeguard its core interests.

In Example 17, the noun phrases "openness," "healthy development," "resoluteness," and "core interests" are used to represent China's positive values and ideology, highlighting China's positive image on the international stage. The text emphasizes China's stability, cooperation, and independence in international affairs, shaping an influential and positive national image. In contrast,

the US news does not use noun phrases to represent positive abstract concepts to conceptualize its own values or ideology. This may be because US foreign discourse tends to focus on presenting its role as a global leader, emphasizing its dominant position in international affairs and its defense against external threats.

4.3.2. Noun phrases representing negative abstract concepts conceptualized as the value system or ideology of ODCs

Example 18: His governing style ODC thrives on disruption — introducing multiple changes simultaneously to keep opponents IDC off balance. His frequent statements ODC create uncertainty, making it difficult for businesses, markets, and even foreign governments to respond in a coordinated way. The cost of chaos is outweighed by the advantages of keeping adversaries IDC guessing and confused.

Example 19: China ODC, our enemy, is a double-crossing liar about its U.S.-bound killer drugs. The Chinese Communist Party ODC, essentially a criminal organization, invests an entire supply chain into shipping opioid chemicals to the notorious Mexican drug cartels, helping them ODC make and smuggle fentanyl across the border. And then a shameless China ODC denies it.

In Example 18, several noun phrases are interpreted as representing the negative values and ideologies of the US, highlighting the potential negative impact of its governance style and political actions on China and the global order. "Disruption" suggests that the US political style relies on undermining existing order and stability. "Uncertainty" further depicts the result of this governance style, making it difficult for global markets, businesses, and even foreign governments to cope. Finally, "chaos" materializes the negative concept of "disorder" as part of the US governance strategy, referring to the weakening of the opponent's ability to respond by continuously creating chaos. In Example 19, multiple noun phrases are used to construct China's negative values or ideology. First, "China" is directly associated with "enemy," emphasizing a strong antagonistic relationship and reinforcing negative sentiments towards China. Then, "double-crossing liar" not only attacks China's integrity but also suggests that its actions are deceptive, portraying China as a hypocritical figure. "Killer drugs" refers to fentanyl, criticizing the drug that China allegedly sells to the US for posing a significant threat to social health and safety. "Criminal organization" vilifies the Communist Party of China as an illegal entity, implying that it is not only a political adversary but also, on a moral and legal level, an unrestrained organization. Finally, "drug cartels" and "shameless" fabricate the relationship between China and Mexican drug trafficking groups.

5.   Conclusion

This paper uses news reports from China Daily and The New York Times regarding the new round of the tariff war between China and the US as data. Using proximization theory as the research framework, the paper analyzes how Chinese and American media employ proximization strategies to construct the legitimacy of their own actions while delegitimizing the actions of the other side. The study finds that China and the US exhibit differences in their application of proximization strategies. The Chinese side primarily focuses on the negative impact of US unilateral actions, emphasizes China's defensive role, and uses proximization strategies to highlight the legitimacy issues of US policies. In contrast, the American side more frequently employs spatial and temporal proximization strategies, portraying China as a threat and emphasizing China's actions as harming the US. As previous research has paid relatively little attention to the topic of the US tariff war, this study analyzes the discourse surrounding US tariff imposition, helping to fill the gap in CDA in this area while providing insights for future research. The limitations of this study include the lack of quantitative analysis and the relatively small size of the corpus, which fails to comprehensively cover

all possible contexts. Future research could further expand the corpus and incorporate quantitative methods to more precisely reveal the discourse strategies of both countries and their social cognitive impacts.

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