

Metaphorical Construction of China High-speed Rail Images in News Report—Taking People's Daily and Its Overseas Edition as an Example

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Abstract: China's high-speed rail (HSR) is a prominent symbol of the country's technological prowess and innovative capabilities, playing a crucial role in promoting social and economic development as well as improving the quality of life for its people. This study focuses on 55 news articles related to China's HSR, selected from *People's Daily* and its overseas edition, to construct a small-scale corpus. Utilizing Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the research explores the conceptual metaphors frequently employed in these reports and examines how they contribute to constructing the image of China HSR. The findings reveal that the most commonly used metaphor is the journey metaphor, followed by organism metaphor and building metaphor, with respective frequencies of 43.43%, 35.76%, and 33.82%. The journey metaphor constructs an image of China's HSR as technologically advanced and driven by independent innovation, and organism metaphor presents it as a mature and powerful technological system and building metaphor collectively builds an image of a mutually beneficial, collaborative, and progressive China HSR.

1. Introduction

China's increasing economic strength has accelerated the development and innovation of its transportation systems. By the end of 2023, the total operational mileage of China's railways will reach 159,000 kilometers, with HSR accounting for 45,000 kilometers. Today, China possesses the largest HSR network in the world. As one of the country's most representative technological achievements, HSR technology plays an indispensable role. However, research on the image of China's HSR from a linguistic perspective is relatively scarce, with most studies focusing on economics and other fields. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the metaphorical construction of the image of China's HSR from a linguistic standpoint, incorporating Conceptual Metaphor Theory to analyze how these metaphors shape the perception of China's HSR.

2. Framework

2.1 Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Building upon the work of earlier scholars such as Aristotle^[1] and Richards^[2] in the study of

metaphors, Lakoff and Johnson^[3] proposed the theory of conceptual metaphors, which posits that metaphors are pervasive in everyday life, not only in language but also in thought and action. They categorized conceptual metaphors into three types based on their source domains: structural metaphors, ontological metaphors, and orientational metaphors. Structural metaphors refer to cases where "one concept metaphorically structures another concept^[3]", and they are the most commonly used type of metaphor. The second type, orientational metaphors, arise from our spatial orientations, such as up-down, in-out, front-back, etc. The third type, ontological metaphors, are defined as "treating events, activities, ideas, etc., as entities or substances^[3]".

2.2 Critical Metaphor Analysis

Critical metaphor analysis (CMA), introduced by Charteris-Black^[4], is a novel approach that integrates critical discourse analysis, cognitive linguistics, corpus linguistics, and pragmatics. It is used to explore the implicit value orientations and ideologies of language users and to identify the intentions behind the selection of metaphors in specific texts. This approach serves as a new and effective method for studying the relationship between language, thought, and society.

CMA consists of three stages: metaphor identification, metaphor interpretation, and metaphor explanation. The first stage involves identifying and selecting candidate metaphors. Metaphor interpretation is the process of evaluating the relationships between metaphors, as well as examining the pragmatic and cognitive factors that validate the metaphors, in order to determine the social relationships they construct. The final stage, metaphor explanation, seeks to uncover the generative and persuasive functions of metaphors in achieving social goals.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Corpus

Based on the development goals outlined in the Medium- and Long-Term Railway Network Plan, this study selects a corpus derived from 55 news reports on China's HSR from two major editions of *People's Daily*: 25 articles from the domestic version and 30 from the overseas edition. The time span of the selected reports ranges from May 2022 to April 2024.

3.2 Research Questions

This study adopts a quantitative and qualitative approach based on Conceptual Metaphor Theory to analyze articles from *People's Daily* and its overseas edition. The primary research questions addressed are:

- (1) What conceptual metaphors are frequently adopted in news reports?
- (2) What kind of images of China's HSR constructed?

3.3 Research Methodology

The initial step involves retrieving articles from *People's Daily* and its overseas edition using search terms such as "Zhongguo Gaotie" and "Gaotie." A small-scale corpus is built for analysis. The next step follows Pragglejaz Group's^[5] MIP to detect conceptual metaphors. However, not all parts of the database are selected for analysis—only those that are relevant to the domain of China's HSR are included in the study.

4. Results and Discussion

Based on the classification of conceptual metaphors, the study identifies various source domains and their associated properties in relation to the target domain of “Zhongguo Gaotie.” The identified metaphors are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: The main types of conceptual metaphor

Subtypes of conceptual metaphor	Number	Percentage
Journey metaphor	334	43.43%
Organism metaphor	275	35.76%
Building metaphor	160	33.81%

From Table 1, it is evident that the most frequently used metaphor types are journey metaphors, organism metaphors, and building metaphors, which account for 43.43%, 35.76%, and 33.81%, respectively.

4.1 Journey Metaphors

Journey metaphors are a common conceptual metaphor in news reporting. Lakoff^[6] defines journey metaphors as purposeful activities that involve traveling along a path towards a goal, with spatial displacement from the starting point to the destination. In a journey, the development direction involves factors such as the direction and speed of travel, both of which can significantly influence the outcome of the journey. The specific example in Table 2.

Table 2: The example 1 of journey metaphor

Example column 1: guǎng xī gāo tiě jiāng jìn yí bù xiàng zhōng yuè biān jìng yán shēn , zhí tōng kǒu àn chéng shì dōng xīng shì , jié shù dǎng dì wú tiě lù jiāo tōng de lì shǐ.(overseas editioon,20231216)
Example text 1: jìn yí bù

In Example 1, the reporter projects the term "jìn yí bù" from the source domain into the target domain of "the speed of China's HSR development in Guangxi," symbolizing the expansion of China's rail network towards the Sino-Vietnamese border and into overseas markets, thereby accelerating the resolution of the historical absence of railway transportation in the region.

Besides, a journey is a purposeful activity aimed at moving towards a goal along a path. The example in Table 3 illustrates it.

Table 3: The example 2 of journey metaphor

Example column 2:zhōng tài gāo tiě xiàng mù de dì èr jiē duàn , cóng hē lè dào láng kāi , zhōng tài gāo sù tiě lù jiāng yǔ zhōng lǎo tiě lù xiāng lián , zuì zhōng jiāng lián jiē zhōng guó kūn míng.(overseas edition, 20231030)
Example text2: zuì zhōng

In Example 2, the reporter maps the metaphorical keyword "zuì zhōng" from the source domain onto the target domain of "the goal of the second phase of the China-Thailand HSR project."This initiative connects the China-Thailand rail project, the China-Laos railway, and Kunming in China, enabling interregional construction and exchanges.

Table 4: The example 3 of journey metaphor

Example column 3: j ìzh èng g āo ti ě p ú y áng zh ì zh èng zh ōu du àn de k āi t ōng y ùn y íng , b āng zh ù h én án sh íx i àn 17g è dì j í sh ì quán bù t ōng g āo ti ě , b ū q í le “m ǐ ”z ì xíng g āo ti ě w ǎng de zu ì hòu y ì b ǐ , tí sh ēng le zh èng zh ōu ti ě l ù de f ú sh è l ì , d ǎ d ōng l ì. (<i>People's Daily</i> ,20231209)
Example text 3: zu ì hòu y ì b ǐ

Similarly, as showed Example 3 in Table 4, with the opening of the Jizheng HSR, the reporter uses "zu ì hòu y ì b ǐ" as a source domain metaphor projected onto the target domain of "the goal of the development of China's HSR network. "This action not only completes the planning of the Jizheng rail but also extends the operational scope of the "China's 'M'-shaped" HSR network, thereby promoting the overall regional development.

In summary, the reporter depicts China's HSR as embarking on an exploratory journey, continuously advancing in a positive development direction and ultimately achieving its goals. Such these journey metaphors constructs an image of China's HSR as technologically advanced and innovative.

4.2 Organism Metaphor

All living entities, such as animals and plants, can be collectively referred to as organisms. Organism metaphors involve mapping inanimate objects to animate ones, such as plants, humans, and animals. The specific examples is followed in Table 5.

Table 5: The example 1 and 2 of organism metaphor

Example column 1: zh èt i áo g āo ti ě sh ì zh ǎng sān ji ǎo dì q ū ch éng j ì gu ǐ dào ji āo t ōng w ǎng de g ŭ g àn xi àn l ù , y ū j īng h ù g āo ti ě , h ù n íng ch éng j ì ti ě l ù g òng t óng g òu ch éng zh ǎng sān ji ǎo dì q ū x i àng x ī f ú sh è de g āo ti ě dà d ōng mài.(overseas edition,20230817)
Example text 1: g ŭ g àn
Example column 2: ch āng j īng hu áng g āo ti ě j īng n án ch āng sh ū ni ǔ k ǎ xi án ji ē j īng g ǎng , h ù k ūn g āo ti ě , j īng hu áng sh ān k ǎ li án t ōng hé f ú , h áng hu áng g āo ti ě , x íng ch éng ch ǎng ji āng zh ōng y óu ch éng sh ì q ún li án t ōng zh ǎng sān ji ǎo de y óu y ì ti áo g āo ti ě dà d ōng mài.(<i>People's Daily</i> ,20230913)
Example text 2: d ōng mài

In Example 1, the term "g ŭ g àn" is used as a metaphor. According to the Modern Chinese Dictionary^[7], " g ŭ g àn" refers to the central part of a long bone, which is connected to the ends and the bone marrow cavity. Here, "g ŭ g àn" is extended to represent the Shanghai-Nanjing High-speed Railway along the Yangtze River, emphasizing its pivotal role in the intercity rail network of the Yangtze River Delta region. In both Example 1 and Example 2, the reporter uses the term "d ōng m ǎi", mapping it onto the HSR. In the Modern Chinese Dictionary^[7], "d ōng m ǎi" originally refers to the aorta, which plays a crucial role in the human body. By likening the HSR to an artery, the reporter vividly highlights the central role of the Chang-Jing-Huang HSR in the urban development process, illustrating its indispensable status.

In conclusion, throughout its development, it exhibits vibrant life, with each structural component continuously functioning, playing a significant role in maintaining an optimistic life status, and ultimately achieving substantial success. This series of organism metaphors constructs an image of Chinese HSR as a mature, advanced technology with robust strength.

4.3 Building Metaphors

Building is a form of language that suggests its meaning through symbolic representation. The

use of metaphorical techniques enriches architecture, making it more approachable and familiar, while also imbuing it with deeper significance.

Table 6: The example 1 of building metaphor

Example column 1:zhōng guó gāo tiě de fēng fù jīng yàn shì yǎ wàn gāo tiě wèi lái ān quán yùn yíng de bǎo zhàng , wéi jīn hòu jiā qiáng zhǎo wā dào hù lián hù tōng dǎ xià jiān shí jī chǔ.(<i>People's Daily</i> ,20231018)
Example text 1:jī chǔ

As elucidated in Example 1 in Table 6, the term "jī chǔ" in the Modern Chinese Dictionary^[7] refers to the base of a building. This can be expanded metaphorically to represent the starting point of a process. The reporter uses "jī chǔ" as a source domain to project onto the target domain of the Chinese HSR, emphasizing its significance to Indonesia. It symbolizes the technological leap that China's HSR provides to Indonesia, while also fostering the development of local industries and supply chains.

Table 7: The example 2 of building metaphor

Example column 2:guǎng xī jué xīn dà lì tuī jìn gāo tiě xīn xiàn jiàn shè , jiāng gāo tiě lán tú biàn chéng xiàn shí , qu án l ìgǎi shàn zhuàng xiāng jiāo tōng tiáo jiàn.(overseas edition,20231216)
Example text 2:lán tú

In Example 2 in Table 7, "lán tú" originally refers to a type of photographic print, typically used for maps and others whose metaphorical meaning points to a detailed and coordinated plan or project. Before constructing a building, a blueprint is indispensable for designers. It ensures the smooth execution of construction by providing stability. Within the context, comparing HSR to a blueprint refers to the planned initiatives for its development, which will aid in significantly improving transportation in Guangxi.

In conclusion, the reporter' use of building metaphors portrays the foundational aspects, construction status, and goals involved in building projects. This aligns with a key trend in the development of China's HSR system. Such metaphorical portrayal of the HSR embodies the image of a mutually beneficial, collaborative endeavor, promoting shared development and sustained friendly relations.

5. Conclusions

This study adopts the perspective of conceptual metaphor theory to qualitatively and quantitatively analyze the news discourse of China’s mainstream media, namely *People's Daily* and its overseas edition, in constructing the image of China’s HSR. The findings reveal that the discourse in news reports, in which China’s HSR serves as the target domain, frequently utilizes journey metaphors, organism metaphors, and building metaphors. The analysis explores how these three types of metaphors contribute to the construction of meanings associated with China’s HSR, such as technological leadership, independent innovation, mutual benefit, collaboration, and win-win cooperation. However, due to the limited corpus used in this study, certain constraints exist, and future research could expand the analysis to include a broader range of reports from various Chinese mainstream media outlets to achieve a more comprehensive understanding and discovery.

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