

Linguistic Strategies and Power Struggles: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Sino-U.S. News Reports on the Houston Consulate Closure*

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This study examines the linguistic strategies used in Sino-U.S. news reports on the 2020 closure of the Chinese Consulate in Houston to construct verbal attacks and criticisms within political discourse. Drawing on a corpus of 18 articles from *China Daily* and *The New York Times*, we analyze how passivization and nominalization are employed as indirect strategies to attribute blame and challenge the legitimacy of the opposing nation's actions. The research findings reveal that both media outlets use these linguistic features to obscure the agent of actions, yet with distinct rhetorical goals: *China Daily* uses them to criticize the U.S. for its "unjustified provocation", while *The New York Times* uses them to justify the U.S. response to alleged Chinese "espionage activities". This article argues that these linguistic strategies are not neutral but serve as powerful media for conducting verbal attacks in a globally interconnected political landscape, where direct confrontation is often avoided in favor of more subtle discursive practices.

Keywords: verbal attacks, political discourse, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), passivization, nominalization, Sino-U.S. relations

Introduction

In an era of global inter-connectedness, political discourse is increasingly conducted through media channels, where nations seek to influence international public opinion and gain the upper hand in diplomatic

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conflicts (van Dijk, 1993). Verbal attacks and criticisms are common features of such discourse, yet they are often expressed indirectly through subtle linguistic strategies rather than overt confrontation. This study focuses on the 2020 closure of the Chinese Consulate in Houston, a significant event in Sino-U.S. relations, to examine how news media from both countries use linguistic features to construct verbal attacks and criticisms in their reporting.

By analyzing a parallel corpus of articles from *China Daily* and *The New York Times*, this study aims to shed light on the complexities of verbal attacks in political discourse and contribute to a better understanding of how political discussions are shaped in a globally interconnected world.

To establish the theoretical foundation for this investigation, the following section reviews existing literature on verbal attacks in political discourse and the linguistic mechanisms that enable such discursive practices.

Literature Review

The literature review section synthesizes existing research to contextualize the study's focus on verbal attacks in political discourse and identify gaps that this research aims to address.

Verbal Attacks in Political Discourse

First, we examine the conceptualization of verbal attacks in political discourse and their role in international diplomatic conflicts.

Verbal attacks in political discourse can take many forms, from direct insults to more subtle forms of criticism and blame attribution (Wodak, 2011). In international relations, such attacks are often used to challenge the legitimacy of another nation's actions, and undermine its international standing, and rally domestic and international support (van Dijk, 1993).

Linguistic Strategies for Indirect Attacks

Building on the conceptual understanding of verbal attacks, we next explore the linguistic features that enable indirect forms of criticism and blame in political discourse.

Linguistic features such as passivization and nominalization are often used to construct indirect verbal attacks by obscuring the agent of an action and focusing attention on the action itself or its consequences (Halliday, 1978). This allows speakers or writers to criticize or blame without explicitly taking responsibility or engaging in direct confrontation.

Sino-U.S. News Discourse as a Site of Verbal Conflict

Finally, we contextualize these theoretical insights within the specific context of Sino-U.S. news discourse to identify the need for targeted analysis of the Houston consulate closure event.

Previous studies have shown that Sino-U.S. news discourse is often characterized by competing narratives and verbal conflicts, reflecting the broader power struggles between the two nations (Lee & Maslog, 2005; Zhang & Bennett, 2015). This study builds on this research by focusing on the specific linguistic strategies used to construct verbal attacks in the context of a significant diplomatic event.

With the theoretical and contextual groundwork established, the following section outlines the research design and analytical framework used to empirically investigate the research questions.

Research Design

The research design section details the methodological approach employed to systematically analyze the linguistic strategies of verbal attacks in the selected news corpus.

Research Questions

To guide the empirical analysis, three core research questions were formulated to address the study's primary objectives.

1. What linguistic strategies are used in *China Daily* and *The New York Times* reports on the Houston Consulate Closure to construct verbal attacks?
2. How do these strategies differ between the two media outlets?
3. What do these differences reveal about the nature of verbal attacks in Sino-U.S. political discourse?

Data Collection

To answer these research questions, a parallel corpus was constructed to ensure the analysis is based on relevant and representative news coverage of the event.

A parallel corpus was constructed consisting of 10 articles from *China Daily* and eight articles from *The New York Times*, published between July and August 2020, focusing on the closure of the Chinese Consulate in Houston. The corpus totals approximately 15,081 words (Liu, 2025).

Analytical Framework

To systematically analyze the corpus data, a theoretical analytical framework was adopted that combines linguistic feature analysis with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) principles.

The analysis focuses on two key linguistic features: passivization and nominalization. These features were analyzed qualitatively to determine their function in constructing verbal attacks and criticisms. The analysis was guided by Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model of CDA, which connects textual features to their discursive and social implications.

The following section presents the findings of the analysis, including a visual representation of the data and an interpretation of the theoretical framework.

The following section presents the key findings of the empirical analysis, including quantitative data visualization and theoretical interpretation of the linguistic strategies identified.

Research Results and Discussion

The results and discussion section integrates quantitative data and qualitative analysis to interpret the linguistic strategies of verbal attacks used by the two media outlets.

Frequency of Passivization and Nominalization

We begin with a quantitative overview of the frequency of the key linguistic features, providing empirical evidence of their usage patterns across the two corpora.

Table 1 shows the comparative frequency of passivization and nominalization in the themes of sentences across the two corpora. The data reveal that both *China Daily* and *The New York Times* frequently used these features, with *The New York Times* exhibiting a higher overall frequency.

Table 1

Comparative Frequency of Nominalization and Passive-Voice Themes in China Daily and The New York Times Reports

Frequency of features	
The New York Times	
■ Nominalization:	18 (32.1%)
■ Passive voice:	25 (44.6%)
China Daily	
□ Nominalization:	15 (23.4%)
□ Passive voice:	22 (34.4%)
Linguistic Features	

Note. Data adapted from Liu (2025, p. 43).

Theoretical Framework: Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model

To interpret the quantitative findings within a broader theoretical context, we now outline how Fairclough's three-dimensional model was applied to analyze the discursive functions of these linguistic features.

Table 2 illustrates how Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model was applied in this study to analyze the linguistic strategies of verbal attacks. The model posits that discourse is a three-dimensional construct consisting of text, discursive practice, and social practice. In this study, the textual analysis focused on the use of passivization and nominalization; the discursive practice analysis examined how these features were used to construct verbal attacks; and the social practice analysis connected these discursive practices to the broader power relations between China and the U.S.

Table 2

Application of Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model to the Analysis of Verbal Attacks in Sino-U.S. News Discourse

Social practice	Discursive practice	Text
Power relations	Production	Passivization
Ideologies	Distribution	Nominalization
Social structures	Consumption	Lexical choice

Note. Model adapted from Fairclough (1995).

Functional Differences in Verbal Attacks

Building on the quantitative data and theoretical framework, we now analyze the functional differences in how these linguistic features are used to construct verbal attacks by the two media outlets.

While both outlets used passivization and nominalization to obscure the agent of actions, their functional use in constructing verbal attacks differed. *China Daily* employed these features to criticize the U.S. for its "unjustified provocation" and to portray China as a victim of U.S. aggression. For example, the passive construction "The consulate was closed by the U.S. government" emphasizes the U.S. as the agent of the action and frames it as an aggressive act.

In contrast, *The New York Times* used these features to justify the U.S. response to alleged Chinese "espionage activities" and to portray China as a security threat. For example, the nominalization "The closure of the consulate was ordered" focuses on the action itself and avoids explicitly naming the U.S. as the agent, thereby maintaining a sense of objectivity while still conveying the message that the action was necessary.

These findings demonstrate how linguistic features are used as strategic media for conducting verbal attacks in political discourse, allowing nations to criticize and blame without engaging in direct confrontation.

Conclusion

This study has shown how *China Daily* and *The New York Times* use passivization and nominalization as linguistic strategies to construct verbal attacks and criticisms in their coverage of the Houston Consulate Closure. The findings reveal that these features are not neutral but serve as powerful tools for challenging the legitimacy of another nation's actions and shaping public opinion in a globally interconnected political landscape.

The study contributes to a better understanding of the complexities of verbal attacks in political discourse and highlights the importance of critical media literacy in identifying and analyzing such strategies. Future research could extend this analysis to include a wider range of linguistic features and explore the impact of these strategies on public opinion and foreign policy.

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