A Study of American News Reports on the Belt and Road Initiative from the Perspective of “Language Game” Constructivism

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Abstract. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a global development plan proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, has attracted widespread attention in China and abroad since it was first proposed. To explore attitudes of the U.S. press towards the initiative and views of China illustrated in these media, the present work adopts Karin Fierke’s “Language Game” Constructivism to study news reports on the BRI collected from The New York Times. Qualitative and quantitative approaches are combined to illustrate language strategies used by the media with the help of corpus software. The study shows that derogatory terms and five language game strategies have been used to report on the initiative to discredit China’s image and the initiative from different angles. Overall negative and suspicious attitudes illustrated by the press can be identified. The analysis shows that strategies adopted by the American side for slander are based on differences in collective memories and knowledge shared by China and the United States. The cultural gap between these two nations has created different national ideological models, which has led to varied identities and interests in the international system. The present research is intended to enrich the application of “language game” constructivism to news discourse by combining “language games” with image construction. More importantly, the author expects the results of this study to help the Chinese side respond to future policy misunderstandings.

1. Introduction

1.1. Study Background

The Belt and Road Initiative, a global development plan proposed by the Chinese government in 2013, refers to the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road. “The initiative is a program whose goal is to maintain an open world economic system and achieve diversified, independent, balanced, and sustainable development and also a Chinese proposal intended to advance regional cooperation, strengthen communications between civilizations, and safeguard world peace and stability” (Net. 1.). All of these objectives showcase China’s responsibilities as the largest developing country and the world’s second largest economy. However, American media sources such as The New York Times, the country’s most influential news media outlet, regard this mutually beneficial strategy as a challenge to the global economic order and to colonialism in a new era, even arguing that it may limit countries’ sovereignty, creating opaque investment funds and onerous debts.

1.2. Study Objectives

The present research analyses reports published by The New York Times on the BRI from the perspective of “language game” constructivism. The aim of this study is to identify language game strategies used by The New York Times in describing the BRI and how these strategies help the US mainstream media construct certain views of the Belt and Road Initiative and of China.
1.3. Research Questions

For this thesis, under the guidance of “language game” constructivism, the researcher collected New York Times reports on the Belt and Road Initiative and analyzed how these reports describe the BRI and China.

This study addresses the following two questions:

1) What views of the Belt and Road Initiative are communicated in New York Times articles?

2) What language strategies does The New York Times employ to demonstrate such attitudes?

2. Language Game and “Language Game” Constructivism

2.1. Language Game Definition

The language game concept was first mentioned by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his compilation Wittgenstein's Lectures: Cambridge, 1932-1935. The theory is regarded as foundational to his later philosophies. He combined Kant’s concepts of logical delimitation with his implicit criticisms to explain the language game and provided numerous examples proving his theories in his books Philosophical Investigations (1953) and Blue and Brown Books (1958). Due to Wittgenstein’s anti-essentialist qualities, he provided a vague definition of the language game: “I shall also call the whole [of language], consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the ‘language-game’” (Net. 2.). His later philosophies can be summarized as follows: “language games, through use and rules, help people integrate into their life forms” [1]. Therefore, solving problems related to relationships between language, the world, and people has been the main goal of Wittgenstein's theories and of his successors.

2.2. “Language Game” Constructivism

Debates on realism and reflectivism have occurred since the mid-1980s. The end of the Cold War further stimulated evolving debates over materials and ideas. From then on, scholars have tried to find a reasonable compromise between these two factors.

Nicholas Greenwood Onuf was the first to break the deadlock. He proposed the concept of “Constructivism” and his theory on “Rule Constructivism”, which can be summarized as follows: “Actors and structures are mutually constituted and actors develop their relations with, and understanding of, others through the media of norms and practices” [2]. This means that exercises of power and actions are meaningless without the existence of nomos or rules [3]. People make rules to construct societies and social rules, forcing people to act in a certain way. In addition, Onuf’s theory argues that some specific forms of verbal behaviour can be translated into rules, including assertive, directive and commissive rules. His view confirms that language, as an indispensable aspect of international relations, should be given adequate academic attention during social events.

Alexander Wendt agreed with Onuf’s perspectives and he believed that “the actors create structures through human association, which are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces” [4]. On this basis, he studied the national scale and put forward that cultural anarchy is what states make of it rather than constituting some kind of external given. This means that the politics of countries and state interests are closely related to inter-subjective beliefs, which cannot be separated from human associations and verbal communication. However, Wendt did not highlight the role of language during the construction of national identity and international systems as Onuf did.

The language game, as a philosophical term relating language, people, and reality, has been applied to international relations by Karin Fierke, who developed the theory of “‘Language Game” Constructivism as the core concept of Fierke’s theory. Her ultimate goal is to identify a “middle
way” between rationalism and post-structuralism (or reflectivism in Wendt’s book). In her opinion, Wendtian Constructivism is unable to select a connective approach from rationalism and combine social ontology with objective epistemology, making it impossible to identify the constructive role of collective memories in identity and benefits. She recommends that scholars find a way from post-structuralism as a bridge between the two extremes. In this case, the language game, as a product of post-structuralism, is the chosen approach. On the one hand, Fierke (1998) found that actors (nations) use language to construct games (events) and that game rules can give meaning to their actions. On the other hand, actors can choose to continue their original games or construct a new game.

2.3. Karin Fierke’s Five Language Game Strategies

Karin Fierke is regarded as the representative of Critic Constructivism among American and European scholars. In her book *Changing Games, Changing Strategies* (1998), she first approaches language use as a form of action in itself that cannot be isolated in the description of discrete objects: “agents, actions, and objects are given meaning within the context of game, that is, a set of practices based on rules within which they are constituted in relation to one another.” In her view, language straddles the physical world, actions, and agents and weaves them into the same social fabric, precipitating social and international events. Fierke further showed that both Wendt’s theory of cultural internalization and Onuf’s three forms of ruling cannot elucidate the transformation of different events; however, language game theory can solve this research dilemma. The language game, as a theoretical weapon, not only emphasizes the function of rules but also focuses on changes in rules and can help researchers better interpret social events throughout ongoing processes.

Fierke defined international politics as a language game. Four points related to the definition of the language game in constructivism are worth mentioning. First, within the context of the international system, the most important function of language is to construct social reality and provide meaning for players’ identities, actions, and interests. Second, language and action reinforce each other to form language games and create monism between language and action. In language game theory, action is considered a part of language. Third, the language game is an intersubjective game that uses common language, which means that the results of threats or hegemony cannot be established by one side and that “a particular outcome is constituted by ongoing process and the cumulative acts.” Finally, the language game can be altered by a player’s actions. The relationships between countries are not static. Sometimes, a zero-sum game can transform into a non-zero-sum game. For example, the end of the Cold War did not mark the end of a zero-sum game between the United States and the Soviet Union, but the advent of a non-zero-sum game between the United States and Russia.

2.4. Definitions of Key Terms

Karin Fierke combined the idea of rhetoric in the philosophical language game with the concept of constructivism to propose five language game strategies as a theoretical framework from which researchers can interpret international affairs: naming, analogy, metaphor, trauma, and besting. This thesis will now present definitions and specific examples determined and given by Fierke for each.

The first means, which involves constructing an image of an event, is naming. “Naming of a context is an act in itself which establishes a set of distinctions and the boundaries of action.” George W. Bush used this strategy to determine how to define the 9/11 terrorist attack. He called the September 11 attack an act of war, denoting intense armed conflict between states in the traditional sense. In using language game naming to refer to this event, Bush defined states as the actors and basic units engaged in interactions, establishing the rules of legitimate violence for revenge and specifying a counterattack with a state-led model, ultimately leading to a war in Afghanistan.

The second means, which gives meaning to something unfamiliar, is analogy. “Analogy
establishes a playing field populated by certain types of identity which can manoeuvre in a variety of ways, providing a way to make sense of a context by identifying a family resemblance with the past” [6]. For example, American elites have often likened foreign leaders such as Slobodan Milosevic to Hitler. Understanding of this threat relies on historical memory of who Hitler was and of what he did; rather, he tried to dominate Europe and rounded up Jews and others, threw them into concentration camps and gassed them. When Hitler is referenced as part of an analogy, actors are constructing a game centred on aggression and genocide.

The third tactic, which likens international affairs to real life, involves the use of metaphor. “Metaphor is an essential means for bringing the structure of processes at this level down to a place where there are understandable for decisionmakers, because of structural similarity between two types of context” [6]. For example, the relationship between the United States and Western Europe may be compared to the relationship of an old couple that has been married for 40 years. With the end of the Cold War, whether they should divorce becomes a subject of contestation, establishing a rational strategy of cooperation for the unbreakable relationship between two regions.

The fourth approach, which can shape major events, is trauma. “Trauma refers to the toxic effect (highly vigilant) of fear and violence that players experience after being shocked during interactions” [8]. The main function of trauma is to shape collective identity and shared memory, which is internalized over time. Germany, for example, experienced its defeat in World War I as “utterly traumatic” [8]. The country’s unwillingness to accept defeat contributed to an interpretation of the loss as a betrayal by others. It was within this context that Hitler constructed his power, promising to avenge the loss of life in World War I and to make German great again. The Nazis in turn shaped a coherent German identity, which gave rise to World War II.

The fifth means, which is used to reverse setbacks within a given context, is besting. “Besting is a tactic designed to provoke a positive counteraction in the opponent, to demonstrate that your win is also his win” [6]. Gandhian’s principles of nonviolent resistance serve as a typical example of besting. He adopted the “acting as if” strategy of the language game to diminish the legitimacy of the colonial system and to struggle for new rules of independence. Under these circumstances, English colonizers could not resort to military force to maintain control, as this would expose the hypocrisy of Civilization Theory and The White Man’s Burden.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This research combines qualitative and quantitative approaches in its analysis of news discourse from the perspective of “language game” constructivism, examining 30 news articles with a total of 4941 word types and 32617 word tokens on the Belt and Road Initiative published in The New York Times in the first half of 2019. The articles were respectively selected from different sections and columns of The New York Times (e.g., Business, Opinion, Asia Pacific, etc.). Based on the theoretical framework of Fierke’s five language strategies, this thesis will analyse attitudes expressed in The New York Times towards the BRI and how writers have used different strategies to construct an image of China.

3.2. Data Collection

Between April 25th and 27th, 2019, the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation was held in Beijing. The forum is the Belt and Road Initiative’s most high-profile activity and attracts widespread attention from countries around the world. As the leaders of 40 countries and international organizations attended the forum, news reports from the United States published in the first half of 2019 can be assumed to reflect American attitudes towards the initiative. The New York Times, as a representative source of mainstream media in the United States with global influence
and readership, reported intensively on the forum. Due to time and scope limitations, news from *The New York Times* published in the first half of 2019 (from January 1st to June 30th) served as the object of this case study.

3.3. Research Tools

The quantitative component of the study was realized by using two corpus software programmes: BFSU Collocator 1.0 and AntConc 3.5.7.

BFSU Collocator 1.0 is a statistical tool developed by the Beijing Foreign Language University for corpus-based studies. For this study, it was used to explore emotional bias in news towards the BRI. By using the ostensibly neutral term “BRI” as a node word and setting a range of -5 to 5, data on a word’s collocational strength, including MI (mutual information), MI3, Z-Score, T-Score, Log-log, and Log-likelihood values, can be presented and the semantic prosody of the news can be determined. First, the value of MI reflects mutual attraction between a node word and collocates. The higher the value of MI, the stronger the relationship between two words becomes. The threshold for strong and weak collocates is 3 MI. Second, “semantic prosody, also discourse prosody, describes the way in which certain seemingly neutral words can be perceived with positive or negative associations through frequent occurrences with particular collocations” [9]. It is typically divided into positive semantic prosody, neutral semantic prosody, and negative or mixed semantic prosody. By checking collocates with MI values of higher than 3 MI, the semantic atmosphere and emotional bias of a specific neutral word in the news can be measured.

Analytical software programme AntConc 3.5.7 were also employed. AntConc is a freeware concordance programme developed by Laurence Anthony for text mining. The tool offers functions for generating concordance lines, word lists, etc. In the present study, it was used to count the number of times each strategy was used in the studied media.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Data Results and Analysis of Attitudes

Emotional bias is defined as the effect of dispositional emotionality that an individual experiences during object perception [10]. Generally, attitudinal distortion due to emotional factors happens in the writer’s mind and is reflected in his or her text. Such hidden attitudes in articles can be described by the theory of semantic prosody in linguistics, which states that certain seemingly neutral words can be subjectively perceived by human beings and further digitized and quantified by researchers with the help of BFSU Collocator 1.0. By searching for frequently mentioned neutral words (e.g., “BRI”) as node words, the emotions behind words used can be determined from their collocational strength. As function words are often highly repetitive and contribute little to meaning, they were excluded from the analysis.

Results for node word “BRI” are listed as follows based on MI in descending order:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Collocate</th>
<th>MI</th>
<th>MI3</th>
<th>Z-Score</th>
<th>T-Score</th>
<th>Log-log</th>
<th>Log-likelihood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>mirage</td>
<td>8.4822</td>
<td>10.4822</td>
<td>26.6609</td>
<td>1.4103</td>
<td>3.0844</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>onerous</td>
<td>8.4822</td>
<td>10.4822</td>
<td>26.6609</td>
<td>1.4103</td>
<td>3.0844</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>blowback</td>
<td>7.4822</td>
<td>7.4822</td>
<td>13.2931</td>
<td>0.9944</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>haphazard</td>
<td>7.4822</td>
<td>7.4822</td>
<td>13.2931</td>
<td>0.9944</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>promotion</td>
<td>7.4822</td>
<td>7.4822</td>
<td>13.2931</td>
<td>0.9944</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.1.1. Collocates of the “BRI”

The top 10 collocates for “BRI” are presented in Table 5-1. All twelve words are strong collocates with MI with values of greater than 3 and reflect writers’ negative views of the initiative with strong levels of emotional bias in their reports.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Collocate</th>
<th>MI1</th>
<th>MI2</th>
<th>MI3</th>
<th>MI4</th>
<th>MI5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>negative</td>
<td>7.4822</td>
<td>7.4822</td>
<td>13.2931</td>
<td>0.9944</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>branding</td>
<td>6.4822</td>
<td>6.4822</td>
<td>9.3469</td>
<td>0.9888</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>strong</td>
<td>5.8972</td>
<td>5.8972</td>
<td>7.5886</td>
<td>0.9832</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>aggressive</td>
<td>5.1602</td>
<td>5.1602</td>
<td>5.8114</td>
<td>0.9720</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>ambitious</td>
<td>5.1602</td>
<td>5.1602</td>
<td>5.8114</td>
<td>0.9720</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>resources</td>
<td>5.1602</td>
<td>5.1602</td>
<td>5.8114</td>
<td>0.9720</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>predatory</td>
<td>4.4822</td>
<td>4.4822</td>
<td>4.5152</td>
<td>0.9553</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ranking first in the collocate list, a “mirage” means that something is not real or true even though it may seem to be. The BRI’s image as “a delusion” and “ostentation” is constructed from this word, and this image negates the advantages that the BRI can offer contracting countries and the policy’s objectives for win-win cooperation. It also implies that major power responsibilities are impossible to meet under the policy’s deceptive conditions. “Haphazard” ranks fourth in the collocate list. The use of word with the seventh term “branding”, which refers to the practice of marketing products, further shows that the essential content or sale points of the BRI have been fabricated by the Chinese government to boast. It further suggests that Chinese people’s hopes and dreams for the New Silk Road, which aims to revive traditional culture around the world and return it to the centre of the world stage in the new age, cannot be realized through the initiative’s implementation (see example 1).

(1) This camp also does not think that BRI is the development of some radical alternative order. For them, the top-line figures of BRI funding are mostly a mirage. The branding of BRI has been too haphazard. (Net. 3.)

The concordant use of “onerous” (second) and “predatory” (twelfth) is found in descriptions of negative effects of the BRI on its contracting states such as Sri Lanka and Pakistan. According to most reports from The New York Times, when countries join the China-led alliance, they must face onerous debts caused by infrastructure construction and predatory acquisitions of ports or other natural resources. By illustrating this supposedly awkward situation that contracting states face, a negative image of the BRI as a means for “aggression” is constructed in readers’ minds (see examples 2 and 3).

(2) Pakistan gripes about high costs and onerous debt. (Net. 4.)

(3) Italy, he said, had expanded its legal powers to defend against Chinese predatory acquisitions, especially in sectors of national security. (Net. 5.)

The term “blowback” ranks third among the collocates, suggesting that Chinese people will pay for the evil deeds they have done to poor countries in the future. Some reports indicate that the “aggressive promotion” of the BRI may have negative consequences, including notoriety in the international system and criticism from nationals at home. It is a policy caught “in the middle”. In addition, due to the uniqueness of China’s socialist system, stereotypes of autocracy and dictatorship are prevalent, which may be reinforced in accounts of the initiative (see example 4).

(4) BRI blowback. This camp, which consists of an awful lot of China watchers, points out the
myriad ways in which China’s aggressive promotion of BRI has had negative feedback effects. (Net. 3.)

The terms “strong”, “ambitious”, and “resources” are three collocates that have been used by writers to tarnish the image of the BRI and to slander the mutually beneficial policy with malicious intentions from the start. First, writers point out that the main purpose of the ambitious project is not to help developing countries address poverty but to export China’s idle industrial capacity to sustain its domestic economic growth through infrastructure construction overseas (see examples 5 and 6). However, most costs of construction projects are borne by poor countries. Second, opponents of the initiative to some extent believe that shaping the interests of other countries through the BRI can distract international attention away from sensitive issues such as human rights abuses and security concerns related to Huawei. From the above two perspectives, an image of China as a country with ulterior motives has been constructed (see example 7).

(5) The East Coast Rail Link project in Bentong, Malaysia, part of China’s Belt and Road Initiative, an ambitious global infrastructure programme. (Net. 4.)

(6) Italy became the first of the Group of 7 nations that once dominated the global economy to take part in China’s “One Belt One Road” project, which makes enormous infrastructure investments to move Chinese goods and resources throughout Asia, Africa and Europe. (Net. 5.)

(7) The BRI “is intended to develop strong economic ties with other countries, shape their interests to align with China’s, and deter confrontation or criticism of China’s approach to sensitive issues.” (Net. 3.)


A close reading of the above news texts shows that in general, writers for The New York Times are pessimistic about what the BRI can achieve. In describing the BRI, they focus on the national unit by using words such as “branding”, “mirage”, and “promotion” to construct an overall impression of the BRI’s boastfulness. Writers also quote the poor public to illustrate issues of poverty and disputes over land and other natural resource rights between the Chinese government and farmers from contracting states, in turn describing the policy as irrational and corrupt. Articles analyzing the policy from an objective perspective are relatively uncommon.

4.2. Data Results and Analysis of Language Strategies

To explore the use of Karin’s five language game strategies in New York Times reports on the Belt and Road Initiative, from an intensive review, strategies were coded to determine the number of times each strategy was used. Then, specific phrases and sentences using language game strategies were selected from the text to analyse how these strategies have constructed an image of the BRI. The frequency with which each strategy was used was measured using corpus software programme AntConc 3.5.7.

The frequency results are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language Game Strategy</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Naming</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analogy</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphor</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In general, naming (37) and besting (29) strategies are used most. Metaphor and analogy follow in the third and the fourth place with 29 and 11 instances, respectively, while trauma is used much less. The following sections elaborate on each strategy with specific examples taken from the studied text.

4.2.1. “Naming” in News Reports

Naming is a strategy used to define the nature of an event. “When the naming of a context is settled, rules are followed as a ‘matter of course’” [6]. This means that after the naming process, actors can construct rules drawn from the past use of a word for definition and further delimit the boundaries of rational actions for a given event.

(8) Leaders of the European Union in Brussels have also raised fears that Italy—saddled by debt, and tempted by promises of hundreds of millions of euros in infrastructure investment—could fall prey to a Chinese divide-and-conquer strategy. (Net. 6.)

(9) ..., yet other world powers such as Japan and the U.S. remain skeptical about its stated aims and even more worried about unspoken ones, especially those hinting at military expansion. (Net. 7.)

As shown by the two examples above, the naming of a context has been established by agents, providing a set of distinctions and boundaries relating to the BRI. Despite some differing interpretations of terms such as “divide-and-conquer strategy” and “military expansion”, the general sense of ruthlessness that these two terms convey does not change much as a cultural by-product and collective public memory etched in people’s minds. Through the use of naming, the BRI’s image as an “incursion” policy aiming to impair the integrity of other countries’ territory and sovereignty has been constructed. In turn, interpretations of a broader public to some extent form the rules due to the experience of forming a national identity and a resemblance between the past and present. Naming distorts the nature of the initiative and helps the American people, a group of nationals previously conquered by the British Empire, understand the policy “better” from their social perspective.

(10) There is growing concern, in fact, that China has arrived in Europe not as an economic collaborator, but as a conqueror. (Net. 6.)

(11) ..., and that his opposition to the deal was motivated by his distrust of what he called China’s Communist dictatorship. (Net. 8.)

If the American media wish to hinder cooperation in the initiative, it is not enough to merely criticize the policy. Rather, writers of The New York Times must also construct China as a “systemic rival” of Western countries. Through the use of words such as “conqueror” and “dictatorship”, some readers without sufficient understanding of the initiative and of China beforehand may believe that the Chinese political system is autocratic (see examples 10 and 11). Misunderstandings between capitalist and socialist countries should thus be a central focus of the initiative’s future implementation.

4.2.2. “Analogy” in News Reports

The strategy of analogy is used to situate a new event within a familiar context to give it meaning. Most analogous objects are popular because they resonate with the public and form a general
impression of new events. In example 12, a former White House official likens measures of China’s BRI policy to those of the British East India Company. The analogy aims to identify certain features of the company in retrospect, including its expansion and conquest and colonial monopoly, which more closely reflect the workings of an imperialist state rather than those of a trading company. Within such a context, the policy’s image as “a product of predatory capitalism” has been constructed. Even though the official does not provide any logical examples for why the two entities are similar, readers may believe in the validity of the analogy because a false resemblance between the two concepts is outlined by the writers.

(12) Mr. Bannon said that he had warned his Italian allies in the League against what he called China’s “British East India Company model of predatory capitalism.” (Net. 8.)

In addition to the stigmatization of the BRI, China’s image has been tarnished in the press. Adherence to the one-China principle forms the basis of diplomatic relationships between China and other states (see example 13). However, many Western countries claim that China follows a double standard in treating its unification problem and the European Community, as Italy was the first Group of 7 nation to participate in China’s infrastructure projects. Italy’s accession symbolizes China’s drive to destabilize the economic alliance that once dominated the globe and is interpreted to deliver a major blow to the Trump administration. Therefore, through the use of an analogy between “One China” and “One Europe”, writers for The New York Times try to depict China as “double-dealing”.

(13) Mr. Li used the summit meeting to push back against those who accuse China of not playing by the same set of rules as other nations, demanding that Europe respect Beijing’s “One China” policy as it relates to Taiwan, while China does not respect the idea of “One Europe.” (Net. 9.)

4.2.3. “Metaphor” in News Reports

One of the most important conditions required for the identification of metaphor is the presence of structural similarities between two types of contexts. States and persons are both composed of self-organized internal structures; a state is constructed by social structures and a person is constituted of biological structures. Therefore, in American news reports, writers always use metaphor by treating a state as a single actor or person that among other qualities, possesses emotions that can inform state behaviour.

(14) China once boasted about its global economic plans. That swagger has faded a bit. (Net. 9.)

(15) “It’s like the world champion in chess playing with a couple of guys who play for fun at the Caffè Degli Specchi,” he said ... (Net. 8.)

The above two examples show that writers use personal verbs and nouns to describe China’s behaviour (e.g., “boasted” and “world champion in chess”). These words effectively prompt American readers to view a “dull” political policy from the other side of the ocean, catching their attention by describing Chinese “evil motives” towards contracting states. When states follow the internal processes of human beings, they, as referent objects, actually have human characteristics, exhibiting interests, making decisions, and acting in the world. All of these traits lay the foundations and legitimacy of Hobbesian Culture, which advocates for placing “enemies” at the centre of relationships and international systems.

4.2.4. “Trauma” in News Reports

In the 19th century, the Qing Dynasty was forced to cede Hong Kong Island to the United Kingdom in the aftermath of the war and Britain obtained a 99-year lease of the New Territories in 1898. With the expiration of that lease in 1997, the island returned to the Chinese motherland. Some New York
*Times* reports point out that what happened in Sri Lanka in 2017 showed historical echoes with the Chinese cession (see example 16). The word “humiliating” is used by writers to describe Chinese attitudes towards that disgraced historical period; however, writers demonstrate that in the 21st century, the Chinese government inflicts “the same pain” on the people of Sri Lanka. By linking the two events, national trauma shaped by the Hong Kong cession is identified as an important factor spurring the port hand-over in 2017, depicting China as “vengeful”.

(16) China hit a public relations quagmire in late 2017 when Sri Lanka, struggling to make debt payments, handed control over a port and swath of territory for 99 years to China. The concession carried historical echoes of China’s humiliating transfer of Hong Kong to colonial Britain in the 19th century, and reinforced U.S. claims that China is a new colonial power in the making. (Net. 10.)

4.2.5. “Besting” in News Reports

Since the end of the Cold War, China’s image among Western audiences has primarily been shaped by a view of the “China Threat” through the media, especially among the American people. This exaggerated view highlights the superiority of China’s political system and position in the international order, future placing the country at the centre of Europe and the USA. According to this view, the American media use an “acting as if” strategy to describe China as an advantaged party and the USA in a disadvantaged party, framing the basic mental conditions for illusory “besting”.

(17) The Trump administration has accused China of engaging in predatory lending aimed at trapping countries in debt, acquiring strategic assets like ports, and spreading corruption and authoritarian values. (Net.11.)

In example 17 extracted from *The New York Times*, writers resort to the soft power of language to throw mud at the initiative, describing it as a military plan to intervene with phrases such as “trapping countries in debt”, “acquiring strategic assets”, and “spreading values”, in turn circulating rumours of the difficulties that poor countries of the initiative have faced at the hands of the Chinese government. The American media hope to use besting to tarnish China’s image, warn other countries against joining the China-led initiative, and injure China’s interests and blunt its edges, though these edges are purposely constructed by the American media based on theory of the “China Threat”.

(18) He has also asked his staff to forgo WhatsApp in favour of WeChat, a Chinese messaging app riddled with security loopholes. (Net.12.)

(19) Washington has warned that the networks could be used by Beijing to spy on communications networks. This week, Britain released a report critical of the security vulnerabilities presented by Huawei. (Net.13.)

In addition, writers of *The New York Times* not only analyse the dark side of the BRI but also mention other sensitive issues that the Chinese government has been confronted with such as security problems related to WeChat and Huawei. By bringing up past controversies, a view of China as “a controversial aggregation” with covert malice has been constructed. Some countries intending to cooperate with China may thus be dissuaded from doing so due to this negative view of China and from fears of so-called “conspiracies” behind these controversies. In conclusion, the above actions aim to disparage the legitimacy of BRI policy rules and interactions and the policy’s attempts to create new rules and transform the China-led game.

4.3. Discussion and Implications

The main task of the above five strategies of “language game” constructivism is to tell national
stories \[^{11}\]. The five strategies are developed from the common views of nationals and are mutually constructed by shared public memories and collective knowledge reflecting national rhetoric. Such strategies thus can be examined to research human understanding of the world through the use of wording and phrasing. In using such strategies, a state, similar to a single actor or person, can intentionality and directly create hostility between other countries \[^{12}\].

Some have argued that the gap between Chinese and American culture, forming the main premise from which the two countries’ interests and identities have been constructed, may hinder the development of friendly Sino-American relations. This is definitely false. First, “identity has four dimensions: alterity, fluidity, constructedness and multiplicity” \[^{8}\]. Thus, one cannot regard identity as a fix value that can predict the outcomes of a future relationship. Second, common game rules, which are quite necessary for a future Kantian culture, have already been established between the two nations. For example, when the two countries experience conflict, both tend to use negotiation or economic sanctions to settle their disputes rather than force or military power. A culture of rules with “cultural stability” as articulated by Alexander Wendt (e.g., “international time”) cannot be reverted \[^{4}\]. Therefore, the Sino-American relationship should be regarded as a construction of Lockean culture. Presently, some characteristics of Hobbesian culture are only a harbinger of Lockean culture.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Major Findings

The study’s two research questions can be addressed as follows.

(1) In general, New York Times reporters describe the BRI negatively by using emotionally charged words such as “mirage”, “onerous”, “blowback”, and “aggressive” to describe the policy’s disadvantages. Articles using an objective perspective to analyse the policy are relatively rare.

(2) The New York Times employs all of Fierke’s language game strategies in the selected 30 articles. Table 5-2 identifies naming, besting, and metaphor as the top 3 most frequently used strategies among the studied articles. In terms of naming, New York Times writers use negative terms such as “military expansion” and “dictatorship” to delimit the nature of the initiative and of China. Some writers also use besting to spread rumours related to Chinese security problems and human rights and to describe the policy as corrupt and authoritarian. In terms of metaphor, events related to the policy are described within the context of a biological structure (humanity) to render them more understandable to the general public. The tactics of analogy and trauma are used less in the studied reports. Analogy has been used to build relationships between new nouns and existing terms to create meaning and establish certain forms of identity. Trauma has been used to arouse memories of colonialism in the public and to endow current events with new rules.

5.2. Concluding Remarks

To internalize Kantian culture, the final phase of anarchy in international relations, and construct a community with a shared future for mankind, all states, as actors, should maintain and obey the rules of international order in the global age and insist on four “master variables” put forward by Alexander Wendt (interdependence, common fate, homogeneity, and self-restraint), which are prioritized in Chinese diplomatic policies \[^{4}\]. Sometimes, during conflicts, game theory strategies such as grim trigger and tit-for-tat tactics are used by international organizations to settle disputes.
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