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# A Micro-Diachronic Corpus Investigation of Violence-Related Metaphors Used to Frame China during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

The article explores Sinophobic discourses during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing specifically on violence-related metaphors used to frame China in American and Australian newspapers from January to June 2020. Specifically, the analysis aims to investigate the extent to which violence-related metaphors were used to frame China in a micro-diachronic perspective and the functions they performed in the dataset. The investigation was conducted by combining corpus linguistics and discourse analysis approaches to analyse the semantic domain of violence. The results revealed that violence-related metaphors were extensively used to negatively frame China and its institutions in both corpora, although they were more frequent in the Australian corpus. From a micro-diachronic perspective, in the American corpus, violence-related metaphors were less recurrent and evenly distributed over time, whereas they peaked in May 2020 in the Australian corpus, a time that coincided with China's imposition of substantial tariffs on Australian barley. This seemed to suggest that the use of such metaphors was highly influenced by socioeconomic factors rather than by the spread of COVID-19.

*Keywords:* corpus-assisted discourse analysis; framing; metaphor; Sinophobia; war metaphors.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic and the increase of hate incidents against people with East-Asian appearances around the world (e.g., NYPD *Hate Crime Reports* 2020) have raised interest in possible COVID-19-related Sinophobia. Sinophobic discourses and ‘Yellow Peril’ narratives are not novel to Western media as the concept of ‘Yellow Peril’ dates back to the late 19th and early 20th century (Kawai 2005) and was found to be pervasive in different media sources across time (Shim 1998).

More specifically, diachronic studies on representations of China in Western media have revealed slightly different attitudes. A study conducted by Peng (2004) showed that in the 80s China tended to be framed as a promising economic partner due to its economic growth and hence, an overall positive representation of China seemed to prevail in Western news discourses (Mackerras 1999). However, after the protests that took place in Tiananmen Square, China tended to be portrayed as an “authoritarian communist regime whose brutality could not be overstated” (Goldstein 2005, 2) and its representations in news media seemed to have remained overall negative ever since (Peng 2004). Furthermore, the spread of SARS and COVID-19, both acknowledged to have originated in China, seemed to have enhanced the presence of Sinophobic discourses in Western media (Leong 2003; *Le et al.* 2020).

Recent studies investigating Sinophobic discourses during the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the presence of belligerent metaphorical frames in media representations of China. Specifically, they explored the use of war-like narratives to frame economic tensions between the U.S. and China (Chen and Wang 2022). Furthermore, Frauen (2021) found that war narratives seemed to be linked to imagery of threat which contributed to portraying China as an evil entity in the U.S. public sphere. Despite this recurrence of war frames, little attention has been paid in the literature to how **WAR** and **VIOLENCE** frames vary across media from different countries.

Accordingly, the analysis aims to provide a further contribution to the studies of Sinophobic discourses during the COVID-19 pandemic by exploring the extent to which violence-related metaphors, namely metaphors involving **WAR** and **VIOLENCE** scenarios, were used in West-

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<sup>1</sup> Small capitals are used throughout the article to represent conceptual levels of metaphorical interpretations (e.g., frames, scenarios, and conceptual metaphors) following the convention often seen in metaphor studies. Linguistic metaphors are underlined.

ern media to convey a negative image of China<sup>2</sup> during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, this paper focuses on violence-related metaphors, an over-arching term used to encompass metaphorical expressions involving the concepts of violence and aggression, which were used to frame China in the most widely read American and Australian newspapers during the first six months of 2020. Additionally, since the diachronic studies mentioned above (e.g., Peng 2004) showed that representations of China in Western media have predominantly remained unfavourable over time, a micro-diachronic perspective is added to detect whether the distribution of such metaphors varied throughout the first stages of the spread of COVID-19. Specifically, the analysis addresses the following research questions:

- (i) To what extent are violence-related metaphors used to frame China in American and Australian newspapers?
- (ii) What functions do such metaphors perform?
- (iii) What insights can the micro-diachronic perspective add to the use of such metaphors?

## 2. METAPHORS IN MEDIA DISCOURSES

Metaphors can be defined as “the phenomenon whereby we talk and, potentially, think about something in terms of something else” (Semino 2008, 1). This definition presupposes a cognitive view of metaphor according to which metaphors do not only occur at a linguistic level but also at a cognitive one (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Accordingly, linguistic metaphors identified in discourse can be considered linguistic realisations of conceptual metaphors (e.g., *she is in high spirit* is a lexical realisation of the conceptual metaphor HAPPY IS UP). Discourse analysis scholars have emphasised the role of metaphors in conveying certain ideologies and evaluations (Fairclough 1995; Liu and Li 2022), specifically focusing on their framing effect, defined as emphasising “some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman 1993, 52).

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<sup>2</sup> The word China is used throughout the article to refer to People’s Republic of China.

News media play a crucial role in shaping public opinion (Baker, Gabrielatos, and McEney 2013). The way news is framed, or presented, can greatly influence how people perceive issues and their causes (Entman 2004). Furthermore, news media can contribute to building a particular image of a country (Kleppe, Mossberg, and Grønhaug 2014) and disseminating ideologies. Accordingly, several studies on metaphorical framings were conducted to explore the use of metaphors in news stories, focusing on the representations of topics such as climate change (e.g., Atanasova and Koteyko 2017) and migrants (e.g., Musolff 2015), hence shedding light on how metaphors may impact public understanding and discourses.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of hate incidents against people with East-Asian appearance has raised interest in how media discourses may have influenced their target audience by disseminating Sinophobic discourses in different countries (e.g., Gong *et al.* 2022). Studies on Australian media have found that more reliable media outlets have predominantly portrayed China's efforts against COVID-19 in political and ideological terms rather than as a matter of public health, while tabloids have relied on conspiratorial, racist, and Sinophobic narratives (Sun 2021). Furthermore, investigations on Australian political discourses have witnessed a revival of Sinophobia, which seemed to be rooted in the racist conception of 'Yellow Peril' (Ang and Colic-Peisker 2022), a stereotype that can be defined as the West's fear of people with East Asian descent (Kimura 2021). As regards American media, China has often been framed as a rival to the U.S. in economic terms (Chen and Wang 2022). Specifically, trade between the U.S. and China has often been conceptualised in terms of war (Boylan, McBeath, and Wang 2021). Specifically, the rivalry between the U.S. and China has not only been represented as a trade war but also as a technological competition for leadership in technological innovation (Nguyen and Hekman 2022). Such belligerent metaphors have a crucial role in the construction of two juxtaposed groups of social actors (Kellner 1995) and can possibly emphasise both the positive aspects of an in-group, metaphorically constructed as the allies, and the negative aspects of the out-group, framed as the enemies. This frame can potentially lead to discriminatory discourses when it highlights the positives of the in-group and negatives of the out-group (van Dijk 1999).

### 3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The studies mentioned in the previous sections suggested that the use of war frames in news media may be connected to economic tensions with China (Peng 2004; Chen and Wang 2022). Hence, two countries holding strong economic connections with China<sup>3</sup>, namely Australia and the United States, were selected for the analysis. Newspapers were chosen considering their readership and long-standing tradition<sup>4</sup>. Accordingly, The American Corpus (AmCorp) comprised articles from *The New York Times* (NYT) and the *Los Angeles Times* (LAT), while the Australian Corpus (AusCorp) included articles from the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) and the *Daily Telegraph* (DT). To ensure the dataset adequately reflected potential shifts in discourses on China over time, the first six months of 2020 were selected. This time frame encompassed the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the first waves of its spread in both countries<sup>5</sup>. During this period, all articles related to China in the newspapers under inquiry were compiled to create an ad-hoc corpus for the analysis. The collection resulted in two corpora of 1,701,511 (AmCorp) and 1,114,750 (AusCorp) tokens in total.

The analysis aimed to analyse violence-related metaphors framing China. The over-arching term ‘violence-related’ was used throughout the article to define metaphorical expressions that drew upon the concept of violence, aggression, or physical harm and conveyed abstract or non-physical ideas and situations. Within this definition, WAR metaphors referred to situations involving conflicts and battles, and were realised by means of linguistic metaphors such as *battle*, *attack*, etc., while VIOLENCE metaphors encompassed a wider range of violent acts and physical harm which were not just limited to war-like situations and were expressed through linguistic instances such as *brutal*, *aggressive*, etc.

To investigate these expressions, the analysis combined corpus approaches to the study of metaphors in discourse (e.g., Semino 2008;

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<sup>3</sup> Strong economic relations were based on import and export data retrieved from the website of the Centre d'études prospectives et d'informations internationales (CEPII), from <http://visualdata.cepii.fr/CountryProfiles/fr/?country=Etats-Unis> and <http://visualdata.cepii.fr/CountryProfiles/fr/?country=Australie> on the 21st of June 2023.

<sup>4</sup> To identify the most read newspapers in the United States and Australia, the Alliance for Audited Media (AAM) and Enhanced Media Metrics Australia (EMMA) were consulted respectively, whereas the long-standing tradition was determined referring to the dates of foundation of the newspapers.

<sup>5</sup> Data retrieved from <https://covid19.who.int/explorer> on the 20th of June 2023.

Cameron and Maslen 2010) and hence can be regarded as a corpus-assisted discourse study (Partington 2013). Given the large size of the corpus, the semantic annotation tool WMatrix 5 (Rayson 2008) was used to extract word types and multi-word expressions<sup>6</sup> which belonged to the semantic field of violence in the two corpora. Specifically, WMatrix 5 relies on the UCREL Semantic Analysis System (USAS), a tagging programme created to automatically assign a semantic category label, or semantic tag, to every word or phrase within a corpus (Semino *et al.* 2018). Specifically, in this study, the USAS tag *E3- Violent/Angry* was selected, as it was proved to provide a list of words potentially conveying belligerent metaphors (Semino *et al.* 2018). Additionally, this USAS tag was also a key semantic domain in both corpora (according to Log-Likelihood statistics) if compared to the default British National Sampler (BNC Sampler Written) available in WMatrix 5.

WMatrix 5 was used to produce two wordlists of all words and multi-words (e.g., phrasal verbs and compounds) tagged with the semantic label of *E3- Violent/Angry* in the two corpora under inquiry. Specifically, it identified 613 and 529 word types belonging to the semantic domain of violence in the AmCorp and AusCorp, respectively. Once the lists of words were extracted, their concordances (150-span on WMatrix) were closely investigated to detect both indirect and direct metaphors (Steen *et al.* 2010) at a lexical level. To recognise metaphors, an adapted version of the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) (Pragglejaz Group 2007) was followed. Similes were also included in the analyses as they were considered direct metaphors referring to the definition provided in the Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit (MIPVU) (Steen *et al.* 2010). Accordingly, single words and phrasal verbs were regarded as individual lexical units, and their contextual and basic meanings were identified by referencing the *MacMillan Dictionary* and the *Longman Dictionary*, which are traditionally used when applying the MIP (Pragglejaz Group 2007) and MIPVU (Steen *et al.* 2010). Following the MIP (Pragglejaz Group 2007), when the contextual meaning of a lexical unit contrasted with its basic meaning, the word was marked as metaphorical. For instance, in the metaphorical expression *China is now hitting back*, the basic definition of *hit back* implies a physical aggression. However, the contextual meaning of *hit back* does not imply an actual physical aggression and hence contrasts with the basic meaning. When the comparison

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<sup>6</sup> See Archer *et al.* 2002 for a full description of how lexical units are recognised in the UCREL Semantic Analysis System.



of the two domains was nonliteral and involved two distinct domains, like in the case of similes, the units were considered direct metaphors as in the following example *it is like kicking a ball from here to there*. In cases where the concordances did not provide sufficient contextual information to understand the meaning of the lexical units, the whole texts were read. Furthermore, only the concordances of the content words of the wordlists provided by WMatrix were analysed, while auxiliary verbs (e.g., *do*) and proper names (e.g., *Belt and Road*) of any kind were excluded from the analysis.

After recognising metaphorically used words, a cognitive level of analysis was added to interpret source and target domains referring to the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Specifically, the source domain is defined as the more concrete concept that serves as the basis for creating a metaphor, while the target domain is described as the more abstract domain that is being framed and described through the source one. For instance, in the conceptual metaphor TIME IS MONEY, TIME is the target domain being described in terms of the source domain MONEY (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Only metaphors which encompassed China, Chinese people and their actions in their target domains were included in the analysis (e.g., conceptual metaphor: A NATION/CHINA BEHAVIOUR IS A BULLY BEHAVIOUR; lexical realisation: *Hong Kong has accused China of using “mafia”-style tactics to bully banks*, SMH, June 2020). This cognitive step was added to ensure that the metaphors selected for the analysis framed China, its institutions, and Chinese social actors.

Since the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) does not really account for naturally occurring metaphors in their context of use (Kövecses 2020), many scholars tried to combine the CMT with critical analysis perspectives (e.g., Charteris-Black 2004; Koller 2004) to investigate metaphors in discourse. Accordingly, this study partly drew on the integrated approach to metaphor analysis provided by Semino, Demjén, and Demmen (2018) and included lexical, cognitive, and discourse perspectives. Accordingly, after having interpreted metaphors at a conceptual level and in order to address their discursive implications, the analysis referred to the concept of scenarios introduced by Musolff (2006) who defined them as “a set of assumptions made by competent members of a discourse community about ‘typical’ aspects of a source-situation” (*ibid.*, 28). For instance, in the source domain MARRIAGE/LOVE different specific sub-domains can be recognised such as the END-OF-HONEYMOON scenario. Similarly, referring to the previous example of the BULLY

BEHAVIOUR, a related scenario could be the SCHOOLYARD scenario, which recalls playground dynamics involving bullies and implies that within the SCHOOLYARD frame, various social actors are involved (e.g., kids being bullied, kids who torment other presumably smaller kids). These target concepts are also reflected in the source situation, which is that of international relations among countries. Hence, in the example, China is represented as a kid tormenting smaller weaker kids, namely other countries. This level of analysis refers to more specific contexts of use of metaphors and is particularly helpful for analysing their specific implications in discourse.

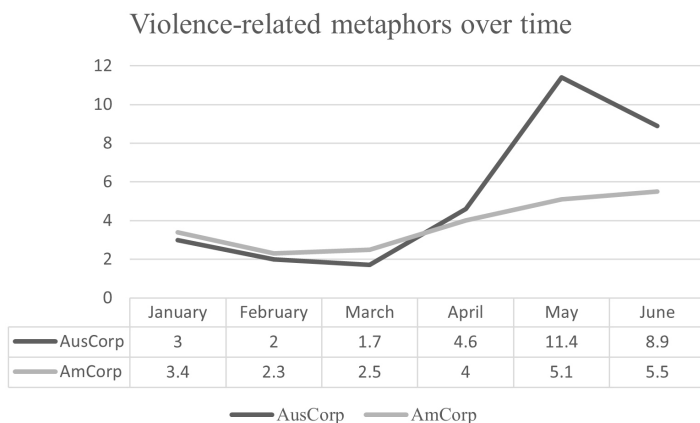
The result section shows the distribution of violence-related metaphors in the January-June 2020 period and discusses metaphors used to frame China, Chinese social actors and their actions in discourse. Specifically, results are divided into two sections corresponding to the most recurrent types of social actors or actions involved in the target domains of such metaphors. Specifically, the first section focuses on metaphors used to frame China and its institutions (frequently referred to as Beijing or China in the corpora). These metaphors mainly involve violent personifications or THREAT metaphors used to frame both China and people working for Chinese institutions. A second section of results includes metaphors used to frame actions and measures taken by the Chinese government to contain the spread of the virus. These metaphors mainly involve health measures or campaigns conceptualised in terms of violent actions. All frequencies presented in the article are normalised per 10,000 words.

#### 4. VIOLENCE-RELATED METAPHORS IN THE JANUARY-JUNE 2020 PERIOD

The analysis of the concordances uncovered 608 and 578 metaphorically used words in the AusCorp and AmCorp, respectively. These correspond to a metaphorical use of 7% in the AusCorp and 4% in the AmCorp. Although the Australian newspapers analysed seemed to rely more heavily on violent metaphors when representing China, both the AmCorp and AusCorp made an extensive use of violence-related metaphors to frame China during a time when it was the receptacle of hatred for being the initial location where COVID-19 started to spread. Although violence-related metaphors are commonly used by news media to frame international relations among countries (e.g., Nguyen and Hekman

2022), representing China and its social actors engaging in violent behaviours may have contributed to a negative perception of them.

To interpret the data in a broader context, it was crucial to consider significant real-world events. Firstly, one would expect that the use of those metaphors may have varied with the spread of the disease in the countries under inquiry. According to the World Health Organization (2020a), the first cases were initially identified in China in December 2019 and quickly spread throughout the world. Although the first cases in the United States and Australia were registered in January (World Health Organization 2020b), both countries saw a considerable increase in new cases in March, when the WHO officially classified the outbreak as a pandemic. Surprisingly, it appeared that the usage of violence-related metaphors to frame China decreased during the initial peaks of spread of the virus instead of increasing.



*Figure 1. – Normalised frequencies of violence-related metaphors in the January-June 2020 period.*

Specifically, *Figure 1* shows the normalised frequencies of violence-related metaphors in the dataset and their distribution in the January-June 2020 period. To provide a practical example of the metaphors shown in *Figure 1*, in the AusCorp, China was repeatedly represented as an aggressor in a WAR scenario in which Australia was presented as a passive recipient of China’s attacks (e.g., *China would prefer to buy us than to fight us, ultimately it does want to dominate us*, DT, June 2020). As the graph shows, in the AusCorp, such metaphors were used with the normalised frequency of 3 in January which decreased to 2 in February and

1.7 in March. In April, the number of metaphor occurrences increased to 4.6 and reached a peak in May (11.4), and a slight decline in June (8.9). In the AmCorp, violence-related metaphors occurred with a frequency of 3.4 in January and decreased to 2.3 in February. Similarly to the AusCorp, the AmCorp witnessed an increase in the use of violence-related metaphors in the last three months of the analysis, with an increase to 4 in April, 5.1 in May and 5.5 in June. Therefore, a significant rise in the presence of violence-related metaphors was registered in both corpora in May and June.

In the AmCorp, the steady increase in the use of violence-related metaphors may be connected to both the social unrest that mounted in Hong Kong with the protests against the national security law that was later approved on the 30th of June (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government 2020) and the steady increase of new cases of COVID-19 in June 2020<sup>7</sup>. However, several articles on Hong Kong were published in April, May and June, which were also the three months when the use of violence-related metaphors increased in the AmCorp. Furthermore, such metaphors seemed to be used mainly to report and frame the national security law and China's response to the social unrest as violent attacks on Hong Kong's freedom (e.g., *violating Hong Kong's autonomy*; *brutish assaults on key institutions of Hong Kong*; *attacks on the civil rights of Hong Kongers*). Although war metaphors were also frequently employed throughout the whole corpus to frame the trade war between the U.S. and China (e.g., *frictions between Washington and Beijing over trade*), it seems that in the AmCorp, the steady increase in the use of violence-related metaphors may be related more to the social turmoil in Hong Kong than to the increase in COVID-19 cases.

In the AusCorp, the distribution of violence-related metaphors was slightly different. As *Figure 1* shows, a significant increase in the use of such metaphors was registered in May. In this month, Australia was not experiencing high numbers of new cases of COVID-19<sup>8</sup>. In fact, new cases seemed to have decreased compared to March and April. However, in May, China imposed tariffs on Australian barley (Cao and Greenville 2020). Furthermore, in the AusCorp, violence-related metaphors were used to describe how those tariffs and other Chinese economic poli-

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<sup>7</sup> Data retrieved from <https://covid19.who.int/region/amro/country/us> on the 20th of October 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Data retrieved from <https://covid19.who.int/region/wpro/country/au> on the 20th of October 2023.

cies were *bitting* or *attacking* Australia and its economy (e.g., *China hit Australian barley producers*; *China can't explode the Australian iron ore trade*). Therefore, the increase in the use of violence-related metaphors in the AusCorp seemed to be related to the economic issues between the two countries rather than the spread of COVID-19.

As seen in the previous sections, many studies attribute Sinophobic discourses in news media primarily to the spread of COVID-19 and label them as COVID-19-related Sinophobia (e.g., Gong *et al.* 2022). The increase in new cases of COVID-19 can partially account for the presence of such metaphors in the AmCorp. However, the use of violent metaphors in the dataset seems also to depend on political or economic divergences, as well as socioeconomic factors (Sun 2021), and, as Kimura (2021) highlighted, negative representations of China may be connected more to ideological differences rather than public health concerns.

#### 4.1. *Violent metaphors and representations of China*

##### 4.1.1. China and its institutions as violent and threatening entities

China and its institutions were frequently portrayed as violent and threatening entities in both corpora. This tendency was also observed in previous studies which saw China being represented as a violent and brutal entity (e.g., Sautman 2021). This analysis confirmed this trend and found that metaphors framing China and its institutions correspond to 69% in the AmCorp and 91% in the AusCorp. Specifically, such metaphors were used in the dataset to repeatedly portray China and its institutions as violent people. Personifications can be insightful when they attribute specific human characteristics to the target elements they frame. In both corpora, China's governmental bodies, often referred to as Beijing and China, were metaphorically represented as people with negative human traits and conveyed imagery of threat. While the AusCorp seemed to make larger use of metaphors drawing from the source domain of PEOPLE, both corpora shared a tendency to depict China as a violent person using different lexical realisations, such as *brute*, *tyrant*, and *bully*. The underlying conceptual metaphor for these linguistic occurrences could be summarised as A NATION/CHINA BEHAVIOUR IS A BULLY BEHAVIOUR which can recall different discursive scenarios, such as a SCHOOLYARD scenario in which a bully torments smaller kids. Let us consider the following examples extracted from the AmCorp:

- (1) *Instead, Beijing is described, accurately, as a habitual and aggressive violator of that order – a domestic tyrant, international bully and economic bandit that systematically robs companies of their intellectual property, countries of their sovereign authorities, and its own people of their natural rights. (NYT, May 2020)*
- (2) *This election is going to be about who can stand up to China, the world's communist bully. (NYT, June 2020)*

In the AmCorp, the word *bully* was used metaphorically with a normalised frequency of 0.04. The most basic definition of *bully* in the *MacMillan Dictionary* is someone who frightens or hurts another person, especially over a period. Its contextual meaning was not specified in the dictionary but could be defined as an organisation or governmental body that uses its influence to threaten someone else to get what they want. In example (1), the BULLY metaphor was reinforced by the use of other metaphors referring to violent or socially unacceptable behaviours, such as domestic *tyrant*, and economic *bandit*. These metaphors depicted a highly negative representation of Beijing's actions and behaviour. Specifically, they framed China either as an aggressive person or as a criminal who engaged in oppressive behaviours by infringing on the intellectual property of companies, undermining the sovereignty of nations, and depriving its own citizens of their fundamental rights. Similarly, example (2) shows an instance of a reported BULLY metaphor where the addition of the adjective *communist* seemed to add a political dimension to the metaphor, possibly implying that China's political ideology is part of what is perceived as a bullying behaviour. This interpretation would align with Del Visco's (2019) argument, suggesting that negative framings of China may be driven by ideological divergences.

BULLY metaphors were also widely used in the AusCorp where they occurred with a normalised frequency of 0.5 and were particularly recurrent in May. Examples (3), (4), and (5) show some instances of this metaphor:

- (3) *But behind the charm China remains a bully-boy regime that will brutally squash those who do not toe its line. (SMH, May 2020)*
- (4) *Behind the charm, China is a bully – and we need to sell our wares elsewhere [...]. (SMH, May 2020)*
- (5) *Recent trade threats against Australia for calling an independent inquiry into the origins of COVID-19 just confirm the nation is a thug and a bully. (DT, May 2020)*

In example (3), the word *bully-boy* was used to compare China's behaviour to that of a bully, resorting to aggressive and oppressive tactics when

dealing with those who do not share the same views. In the examples above, lexical metaphors, such as *bully-boy*, *bully*, *thug*, and *brutally squash*, portrayed China in a highly negative perspective, suggesting that China's actions were perceived as oppressive and violent. Furthermore, the use of *behind the charm* in examples (3) and (4) implied that despite China's appealing appearance as a trade partner its negative actions persist. All the examples above seemed to suggest that violence-related metaphors might be connected to trade disputes, such as the tariffs imposed on Australian barley (see Cao and Greenville 2020). Furthermore, they also represented those tariffs as China's intimidating and aggressive reaction to Australia's call for an inquiry into the origins of COVID-19 by specifically framing it as an aggressive behaviour typical of a *thug* or *bully* in example (5).

Other violent personifications of China included those implying physical actions and attacks which conveyed WAR scenarios as in the case of *hit back* which was metaphorically used with a frequency of 0.03 in the AmCorp and 0.07 in the AusCorp as in the following examples:

- (6) *China is now hitting back – it has expelled foreign journalists, attacked displays of racism [...].* (NYT, March 2020)
- (7) *China is a ruthless communist nation that will hit back hard if any other nation is perceived to be antagonistic.* (SMH, May 2020)

Both examples shaped China's behaviour as aggressive and ready to respond forcefully to various situations. In example (6), the action of expelling foreign journalists was portrayed as a physical act of aggression. Furthermore, the term *ruthless* in example (7) added a dimension of cruelty to the portrayal of China, which was also defined as a *communist nation*, a specification which seemed to link the violent metaphor to China's political ideology.

All metaphors mentioned above contributed to a negative portrayal of China by framing its behaviour as violent and hence conveying an image of threat. The domain of THREAT seemed to be highly connected to the representations of China in both corpora. This is not surprising, since previous studies already found threat scenarios in discourses on China (e.g., Lyman 2000; Philip 2010). Several lexical realisations of threat metaphors could be found in both the AmCorp and AusCorp, as in the following examples:

- (8) *Australia will acquire long-range missiles to protect overseas forces, allies and the mainland against rising threats including China.* (SMH, June 2020)



- (9) *But in recent months the Trump campaign has increasingly focused on its message of China as a villainous threat to American economic and security interests [...].* (NYT, May 2020)

As can be noted from examples (8) and (9), THREAT metaphors were mainly achieved through the lexical unit *threat*, which was metaphorically used with a normalised frequency of 0.9 and 0.3 in the AusCorp and AmCorp, respectively. In example (8), China was represented as a threat and recalled scenarios of POTENTIAL DANGER. The metaphorical use of *rising threats* implied an increase in perceived dangers related to China. example (9) reported a metaphor used in Trump's campaign where China was depicted as a *villainous threat* to American economic and security interests. Accordingly, such metaphors conveyed a sense of urgency and framed China as a malevolent entity that posed a significant danger to either Australian or American economic and security interests.

#### 4.1.2. Health measures as violent measures

As seen in the section above, the two corpora shared similar tendencies in terms of VIOLENCE and THREAT metaphors associated with China and its institutions. However, they presented significant differences in how they framed the measures taken by the Chinese government to contain the spread of the virus. Specifically, metaphors used to frame actions and measures taken by the Chinese government correspond to 21% in the AmCorp and 13% in the AusCorp. Furthermore, in the AmCorp, containment measures that limited individual liberties (e.g., *quarantine, tracking of contagion, etc.*) were framed as violent actions, and metaphors were mainly produced within the source domain of VIOLENCE. Specifically, the adjective *aggressive* was used to attribute a certain degree of assertiveness to China's containment measures and was found in both the AusCorp (0.01) and the AmCorp (0.11). Let us consider two examples of the VIOLENCE metaphor in the corpora:

- (10) *Some alarmed public health experts have described Beijing's approach as draconian or brutal, but the W.H.O. has referred to it simply as aggressive.* (NYT, March 2020)
- (11) *But while authorities know they can't necessarily dodge the impact of the virus, they have attempted to minimise the damage with aggressive testing [...].* (SMH, April 2020)

In the examples above, health procedures were labelled as aggressive, suggesting that the containment measures adopted by the Chinese govern-



ment were restrictive. In example (10), the World Health Organization (WHO) was described as referring to Beijing's approach as *aggressive*. While terms like *draconian* and *brutal* clearly carried negative connotations, *aggressive* implied a more nuanced stance, which may regard the measure as either effective or heavy-handed. In the AmCorp, there appeared to be a tendency toward a more negative view of these measures supported by various metaphor occurrences (e.g., *China's leaders want to sell their heavy-handed methods as exemplary; its heavy-handed measures are testing the patience of its citizens*). Therefore, the use of *aggressive* might lean more towards interpreting the measures as heavy-handed rather than effective. In example (11), the expression *aggressive testing* is employed to describe authorities' efforts to control the virus. Such metaphors seemed to highlight the coercive nature of the measures while downplaying their potential benefits in limiting the spread of contagion. Previous studies on media coverage of China's handling of the pandemic also acknowledged the representation of China's measures as heavy-handed (Jia and Lu 2021).

Despite this shared tendency between the corpora, the AmCorp made larger use of different linguistic realisations to frame containment measures (e.g., *brutal*, *draconian*, and *hell*). For instance, in the AmCorp, the quarantine period in Wuhan was conceptualised in terms of HELL (0.02) as in the following examples:

- (12) *Wuhan in particular is still reeling from what one resident described as a "living hell".* (NYT, March 2020)
- (13) *Quarantine is one of the many waiting rooms of life, and its own special circle of hell for people raised with the illusion that we control our destinies.* (NYT, March 2020)
- (14) *Beijing has meanwhile made a hero out of Wuhan, the sacrificial city whose people struggled and died to stop a virus and save the nation. [...] "It was hell," Yang said.* (LAT, May 2020)

In example (12), a resident described Wuhan as a *living hell* emphasising the distressing picture of the conditions in Wuhan at the height of the pandemic, probably referring to the lockdowns and overwhelmed health-care systems. In example (13), quarantine was framed as a *circle of hell* and underscored the sense of helplessness experienced by people during quarantine. In example (14), the HELL scenario was also evoked by Wuhan being described as a *sacrificial city* which experienced hellish conditions while combating the virus. This framing highlighted the sacrifices made by the people of Wuhan during quarantine and represented their efforts

as heroic. HELL metaphors compared the living conditions of quarantine or quarantined cities to those of hell, emphasising the distress caused by restrictive containment measures. On the one hand, they highlighted the difficulties faced by residents in Wuhan during the pandemic, and on the other hand, they conveyed the gravity of the health situation. In the AusCorp, no instances of metaphors produced in the source domain of HELL could be found.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The results shed light on how violence-related metaphors were used to frame China in newspapers from two different countries. As regards the first research question concerning the extent to which violence-related metaphors were used to frame China in the newspapers, such metaphors were extensively used in both corpora. Furthermore, both countries tended to frame China and its institutions, or the containment measures taken by the government in terms of VIOLENCE. In particular, violence-related metaphors were more recurrent in the AusCorp if compared to the AmCorp.

Regarding the second research question on the functions these metaphors perform in discourse, violence-related metaphors in the dataset seemed to carry negative connotations and evaluations. Specifically, China and its institutions were frequently framed as violent and threatening entities, a tendency that was found also in previous studies on COVID-19-related Sinophobia (e.g., Sun 2021). Furthermore, China was portrayed as a violent person and was attributed negative human behaviours typically condemned in society, such as bullying and criminal behaviours. Additionally, THREAT metaphors used to frame China, already found in previous studies (e.g., Philip 2010), seemed to represent China and its economic policies as potential dangers in the dataset, creating imagery of urgency and hazard. Both corpora framed China's health measures as violent and heavy-handed, however, in the AmCorp, there was a stronger tendency to portray those measures in such a way as to highlight their restrictive nature, without considering the eventual benefits of them. Therefore, both corpora employed negatively connotated violent metaphors that seemed to reflect the newspapers' biases toward China, confirming a trend that was also observed by Jia and Lu (2021) in Western news media. Such metaphors depicted China as a violent and threatening entity and contributed to an overall negative portrayal of the

country. Previous studies highlighted the presence of negative representations of China in Western media (e.g., Lyman 2000; Peng 2004; Frauen 2021) and this investigation tried to underline the potential of metaphor analysis in examining recurrent framings in discourses on China which in the dataset, were mainly associated with imagery of threat and danger and discursively created a negative out-group.

Lastly, regarding the micro-diachronic perspective, the use of violence-related metaphors in the AmCorp seemed more equally distributed over time, although their use increased steadily over the last three months of the period, supposedly due to the news coverage of the protests in Hong Kong. In the AusCorp, the recurrence of violence-related metaphors reached a peak in May 2020, when China imposed substantial tariffs on Australian barley. Although the spread of diseases that originated in China, such as SARS and COVID-19, was found to enhance the presence of Sinophobic discourses in media (e.g., Leong 2003; Kimura 2021), the monthly distribution of violence-related metaphors in the corpora would suggest that the use of such metaphors was driven more by socioeconomic issues and ideological discrepancies rather than by the risk of contagion as highlighted by Del Visco (2019) and Sun (2021).

Although the study suggested that political divergencies may have a great impact on the use of such violent metaphors, the micro-diachronic perspective of the analysis is limited to a monthly standpoint. A diachronic study should be conducted in the future to explore the use of such metaphors in pre-pandemic times to consider the extent to which COVID-19 influenced the dissemination of Sinophobic discourses in news media. Furthermore, WMatrix 5 has limits in recognising all words related to the semantic field of violence, especially when violence is implicitly conveyed. Therefore, a close-reading analysis of a smaller sample of texts could be carried out in the future to expand this study and include those metaphorically used words that were missed by WMatrix 5.

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