

Reading Between the Lines: Critical Discourse Analysis of Philippine Media on China and the West Philippine Sea

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Abstract

News media strategically use language to achieve journalistic goals, making discourse susceptible to manipulation. As a powerful institution, the media may construct biased representations that distort reality, reinforce power relations, and perpetuate ideological positions. This study examines how the use of language in news reports shapes representations of China as a maritime actor in the West Philippine Sea, highlighting how credible linguistic practices may mitigate misrepresentations and promote balanced and objective perspectives. Specifically, this study investigated the linguistic features and discursive strategies through which news media reflect power relations and prevailing ideologies that shape public perceptions of the maritime issues in the Philippines. Using Critical Discourse Analysis, this study examined 51 news reports on China and the West Philippine Sea to identify dominant themes and linguistic patterns that construct representations. Reisigl and Wodak's (2017) discursive strategies guided the identification of the themes within the reports, while Halliday's transitivity system was employed to analyze how processes and agency shape these representations. Furthermore, Van Dijk's Ideological Square was applied to uncover the power relations and ideological positions embedded in the discourse. The findings indicate that news reports strategically deploy discursive strategies such as nomination, perspectivization, predication, argumentation, and intensification. Additionally, material, verbal, relational, and mental processes play a central role in constructing representations of maritime actors. These patterns construct asymmetrical power relations, portraying China as militarily dominant yet normatively illegitimate through negative-other presentation, and the Philippines as legally legitimate and defensively justified through systematic positive-self presentation. Overall, the study highlights the importance of critical media literacy and responsible journalistic language practices in fostering nuanced understandings of maritime disputes and preventing the uncritical reproduction of ideological bias in public and educational discourse.

Keywords: Applied linguistics, language use, critical discourse analysis, Philippines