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A Comparative Study on Commencement Speeches by Chinese and American University Presidents from the Perspective of Critical Metaphor Analysis

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Abstract: With the advancement of cognitive linguistics, Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA) has been widely applied to political, economic, and news discourses to reveal speakers' hidden ideologies. However, cross-cultural comparative research on conceptual metaphors in

educational discourse remains limited. Based on the metaphor identification procedure (MIP) and metaphor identification of CMA, this study screens out candidate metaphors and metaphorical keywords. It conducts a comparative analysis of conceptual metaphors and educational philosophies by examining 20 commencement speeches delivered by Chinese and American university presidents between 2022 and 2023. The findings reveal that presidents from both countries frequently utilize war, journey, nature, building, and business metaphors. Human, light, and game metaphors appear exclusively in Chinese speeches, while orientational and religious metaphors are unique to American speeches. The analysis reveals that nature metaphors predominate in Chinese speeches (42.6%), whereas war metaphors are most prevalent in American speeches (28.2%). The study highlights that while both groups emphasize graduates' lifelong development and social responsibilities, American presidents place greater emphasis on independent thinking, competition, and self-fulfillment. In contrast, Chinese presidents underscore the relationship between individuals and the nation, promoting collectivism and cooperation. This research is among the first to systematically compare metaphorical frameworks in Chinese and American commencement speeches, highlighting culturally distinct conceptualizations of education and success. The findings can enhance cross-cultural understanding and inform the development of globally competitive educational models. This study offers original comparative insights into the use of educational metaphors, expanding CMA to encompass cross-cultural educational discourse. Future research should expand the corpus to include more diverse institutions and employ interdisciplinary approaches, such as cognitive psychology and cultural anthropology, to explore the motivations behind metaphor further.

Keywords: critical metaphor analysis, commencement speech, educational philosophy, comparative analysis

Introduction

With the rise of critical discourse analysis (CDA), which emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a response to structuralist and post-structuralist linguistic theories, researchers began to pay increasing attention to the role of metaphor in shaping discourse and ideology. Charteris-Black (2004) put forward CMA, aiming to uncover how metaphors are used to convey ideologies, shape attitudes, and influence social practices within specific contexts. Accordingly, approaches related to metaphor identification have emerged, such as Steen's (2011) Five-Step Identification of Metaphor, the Pragglejaz Group's MIP, and the Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit (MIPVU). The CMA framework has since been productively applied across diverse discourse domains. Kövecses and Benczes (2010) argue for the important role that metaphor plays in the field of cross-cultural studies. Semino (2008) emphasizes the exploration of how metaphors reflect and reinforce power relations or social concepts through discourse analysis in fields such as politics and medicine, based on real-world corpora. Gibbs (2017) offers an evaluation of the arguments and empirical evidence for and against conceptual metaphors, much

of which scholars on both sides of the wars fail to properly acknowledge. Recent studies have explored the role of metaphors in educational discourses (Ahmas & Yousaf, 2022; Bachryj, 2024; Bounegru & Forceville, 2011; Charteris-Black, 2011, 2019, 2021; Lee, 2015; Li, 2024; Ounis, 2023; Semino et al., 2016; Türker & Park, 2025; Wan & Low, 2015), political discourse (Howe, 1988; Neshkovska & Trajkova, 2021) and other kinds of discourses (Koller, 2005, 2006; Rojo López & Orts Llopis, 2010; Wu, 2025; Yang, 2023). However, the application of CMA to cross-cultural examinations of educational discourse has been a neglected area, and this study seeks to address that gap.

Research Problem

With the increasing globalization of higher education, commencement speeches have become a significant medium for transmitting cultural values and educational philosophies. In the globalized world, understanding the underlying ideologies in these speeches is important for enhancing cross-cultural communication and mutual learning. However, there are few comparative studies on conceptual metaphors in the field of education, particularly between Eastern and Western contexts. This study addresses this gap by examining conceptual metaphors in Chinese and American university commencement speeches to explore how these metaphors reflect and shape societal values.

The commencement speech plays a crucial role in marking the transition for graduates from campus to society and from theory to practice. Therefore, it is essential to explore the value of the commencement speech. However, previous studies on the commencement address have primarily been conducted from the perspectives of functional grammar, pragmatics, and rhetoric (Ivanova, 2017; Nur, 2016; Zhu, 2018). The study of conceptual metaphor from the perspective of CMA may help understand the president's intention and the university's educational philosophy.

Research Aim and Questions

The study selects 20 commencement speeches of presidents from 5 Chinese and 5 American universities. Based on MIP, the conceptual metaphors are identified and counted, and the three steps of CMA, namely metaphor identification, metaphor interpretation, and metaphor explanation, are adopted to answer the following questions:

- 1) What types of conceptual metaphors are used in Chinese and American commencement speeches?
- 2) What are the similarities and differences of these conceptual metaphors?
- 3) What are the similarities and differences of their educational philosophies?

This research extends the scope of CMA research and provides a new perspective for the study of commencement speeches. It helps readers understand the speaker's intention and enhances their comprehension and application of conceptual metaphors. The comparative analysis identifies areas where Chinese and American universities can mutually benefit from each other's metaphorical representations of educational values, informing the development of

culturally-responsive pedagogies. It also contributes to the fields of cognitive linguistics, intercultural communication, and educational policy.

Literature Review

This part will briefly review the research status of CMA and commencement speeches, from which the research gap of these studies can be identified.

Studies on Critical Metaphor Analysis

The emergence of CDA in the 1970s marked a paradigm shift in metaphor studies, as scholars increasingly adopted critical perspectives to examine how metaphors construct and reflect power relations, ideologies, and social structures (Charteris-Black, 2004). This critical turn led to the development of CMA, a methodological framework that encompasses three analytical stages: metaphor identification, metaphor interpretation, and metaphor explanation. Charteris-Black's (2004) seminal work underscored the significance of corpus linguistics in this approach, establishing CMA as an effective tool for analyzing political discourse, media texts (Goatly, 2007), and other institutional communications.

The application of CMA has proven to generate significant insights in various domains of discourse analysis. In political communication, Carver and Pikalo (2008) illuminated how metaphors subtly shape public perceptions of political events and power dynamics, while Musolff (2016) advanced this line of inquiry through his examination of metaphor scenarios in political discourse, offering fresh analytical perspectives for investigating political rhetoric. Contemporary research has further broadened CMA's scope, as evidenced by Nartey's (2019) analysis of anti-colonial rhetoric in Kwame Nkrumah's speeches and Efeoğluz's (2022) study of metaphorical framing in government COVID-19 communications. These studies illustrate CMA's versatility in revealing the ideological functions of metaphor across different contexts.

Beyond political discourse, CMA has been productively applied to diverse fields including business communication (Koller, 2005, 2006), educational practice (Gatti & Catalano, 2015), legal discourse (Liu & Chen, 2022), and advertising (Kelly, 2016). Koller's (2005) work on gender metaphors in business language and Kelly's (2016) analysis of cosmetic advertising slogans exemplified CMA's capacity to uncover hidden values and beliefs in commercial discourse. Similarly, Gatti and Catalano's (2015) investigation of teaching metaphors and Liu and Chen's (2022) study of legal education discourse demonstrated the relevance of CMA to institutional contexts.

Despite these advancements, CMA methodology faces several significant challenges. Gibbs (2017) has identified persistent issues with metaphor identification procedures, noting the subjective element of differentiating between literal and metaphorical meanings. This methodological issue is compounded by the constraints of corpus-based approaches, which Cameron and Maslen (2010) argue may give undue prominence to conventional metaphors at the expense of more creative expressions. Additionally, Musolff (2016) critiques CMA's theoretical

foundations, particularly its heavy reliance on Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) conceptual metaphor theory, which often falls short in explaining culture-specific metaphorical mappings.

These methodological limitations are especially evident in cross-cultural research. Although Kövecses and Benczes (2010) and Yu (2009) have made important contributions to comprehending universal versus culture-specific metaphors, few studies have incorporated these insights into educational discourse. The existing research (e.g., Zhu, 2018) tends to focus on rhetorical strategies while overlooking the cultural aspects of metaphorical framing. This gap is especially evident in the lack of comparative studies between Chinese and American educational metaphors, despite the potential for such research to illuminate how collectivist (Liu & Chen, 2022) and individualist (Partch & Kinnier, 2011) ideologies shape institutional messaging through distinct metaphorical patterns.

The current state of CMA research reveals both its considerable achievements and important limitations. While the framework has proven valuable in various discourse domains, its applications have focused on political and institutional contexts in Western settings. This uneven distribution, combined with the methodological difficulties identified by Gibbs (2017), Cameron and Maslen (2010), and Musolff (2016), highlights the need for more culturally sensitive and methodologically rigorous approaches to metaphor analysis, particularly in underexplored fields such as cross-cultural educational discourse.

Studies on Commencement Speeches

Researchers have explored the function and purpose, discourse strategies, social significance, and cultural contexts of commencement speeches from different perspectives. Partch and Kinnier (2011) analyzed the values reflected in the commencement speeches of 90 American universities. They found that these values were largely influenced by the prevailing values and gender expectations of the American society at that time. Jaroenkitboworn (2021) employed multimodal discourse analysis to examine Mark Zuckerberg's commencement speech at Harvard University, investigating how the speaker employed discourse strategies to convey messages and resonate with the audience. These studies mainly focus on the values conveyed by speeches and the effects of speeches from the perspectives of rhetoric and discourse analysis.

Recent years have witnessed a growing interest in applying CMA to educational discourse, particularly in institutional settings such as policy documents, classroom interactions, and academic speeches. Semino et al. (2016) and Wan and Low (2015) demonstrated how metaphors in educational contexts serve as cognitive tools to frame educational philosophies, student-teacher relationships, and institutional missions. For instance, Türker and Park (2025) examined multimodal metaphors in university advertisements, revealing how visual and textual metaphors construct idealized images of global education. Similarly, Gatti & Catalano (2015) analyzed teacher narratives, demonstrating how metaphors like "teaching as a journey" or "education as business" reflect conflicting institutional ideologies.

However, research tends to focus more on Western contexts, with limited exploration of non-English educational discourses (Wan & Low, 2015). Additionally, most studies focus on metaphors in policy or classroom discourse, leaving ceremonial speeches, such as commencement addresses, underexplored.

Research on metaphor analysis in educational discourse has developed three primary methodological approaches. The cognitive-linguistic approach focuses on universal conceptual mappings such as “education as building” (Kövecses, 2020; Littlemore, 2019) but neglects cultural variations in metaphorical interpretation. Critical-discursive methods (Charteris-Black, 2019) reveal power relations embedded in metaphors but lack numerical validation. The corpus-based method (Deignan, 2005) systematically tracks metaphor frequency and context, but misses unconventional, creative expressions.

The fragmentation characterizing existing methodological approaches in metaphor analysis highlights the need for mixed-methods frameworks. These frameworks should incorporate cognitive insights, critical perspectives, and quantitative rigor, thereby enabling researchers to understand the intricate functioning of metaphors in diverse educational contexts. In this study, integrated approaches will be employed to investigate conceptual metaphors in Chinese and American commencement speeches, providing more nuanced insights into the cultural dimensions of metaphorical discourse in education.

Research Methodology

Sample

Based on the latest ranking of the best comprehensive universities released by the authoritative college ranking organization U.S. News in the United States, ABC University Rankings in China, Times Higher Education University Rankings in China and the specific situation of the channels to obtain the presidents’ commencement speeches, this research selected 20 commencement speeches (10 from China and 10 from the United States) from 5 universities in China and 5 in the United States from 2022 to 2023 as the data.

These universities are Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Stanford University, Columbia University, Yale University, Peking University, Tsinghua University, Zhejiang University, Fudan University, and Shanghai Jiao Tong University. These universities achieve remarkable excellence in academic reputation, educational quality, research level, internationalization, and have high visibility and influence worldwide. Therefore, they can represent the higher education and educational philosophy of the two nations, thereby ensuring the reliability and credibility of this research.

Data was gathered from January 2022 to December 2023. We obtained the texts or videos of the commencement speeches from the official websites of these universities through search engines such as Baidu and Bing, and then transcribed all the speech videos. The English data amounts to 17,404 words, while the Chinese data comprises 26,867 characters.

Instruments and Procedure

EmEditor and Ancon were used for text processing and metaphor retrieval, respectively. TreeTagger and CorpuswordParser ensured accurate tokenization for English and Chinese texts.

Two researchers collaborated on a pilot study to refine the coding framework, ensuring consistency in the identification and classification of metaphors. A small corpus of four speeches (two Chinese and two American) from top universities (2022-2023) was selected based on accessibility, length, and thematic diversity. During testing, MIP and corpus tools, such as AntConc and TreeTagger, were used for metaphor extraction. Inter-coder reliability was high (Cohen's Kappa = 0.78).

The pilot revealed the need for technical refinements (e.g., adjusting AntConc settings). Challenges such as Chinese metaphor ambiguity and overlooked low-frequency metaphors were addressed using a dual-coder system and corpus expansion.

The study confirmed the utility of CMA but emphasized the need for a cultural context layer. Insights informed the final design, including sample expansion and balanced categorization, ensuring methodological rigor and cultural sensitivity.

Methods

This study uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, carrying out the research with the help of relevant tools for self-built corpus and corpus retrieval.

Quantitative research

According to the corpus design principles (representativeness, balance, sampling methods) and metadata standards mentioned by McEnery and Hardie (2011), combined with the six major standards proposed by Building a written corpus (2010) for self-built corpora: research goal-driven, diversity of text sources, feasibility of scale, integrity of metadata, ethical compliance, and scalability, this research selected 20 commencement speeches (10 from China and 10 from America) from 5 universities in China and 5 in America from 2022 to 2023 as the data. The sufficiency of the corpus was ensured in terms of data scale, diversity, completeness and representativeness of sources.

The first step is to proofread and denoise the texts, which are copied from the website or keyboarded with the help of EmEditor software, cleaning up the garbled code in the text. Second, since the subsequent corpus retrieval tool Antconc cannot automatically tokenize a Chinese corpus, we use CorpuswordParser to tokenize and annotate the Chinese corpus. For precise English corpus retrieval, we also use TreeTagger to tokenize and annotate the English corpus. Finally, the English corpus and Chinese corpus are saved in .txt format. Ultimately, an English corpus with 10 samples, 3,291 types, and 17,248 tokens, and a Chinese corpus with 10 samples, 4,339 types, and 12,490 tokens are obtained.

Then, drawing on the corpus retrieval tool of Anthony (2022) and the part-of-speech tagging method of Schmid (2013), the study uses the corpus retrieval tool Antconc 4.2.4 to calculate the occurrence frequency of the metaphorical keyword, that is, the token of the metaphorical keyword. Then the number of metaphorical keywords in the same metaphor type is counted, that is, the type of metaphorical keyword. The resonance of the metaphor type is obtained by multiplying type by token, that is, $\text{token} \times \text{type} = \text{resonance}$. This process is repeated to determine the resonance of all metaphor types, enabling the identification of the use and distribution of different metaphor types.

Qualitative research

Qualitative research encompasses two key aspects: metaphor recognition and classification.

This study uses the MIP proposed by Group (2007) and metaphor identification of CMA to screen out candidate metaphors and metaphorical keywords.

Then, candidate metaphors are further identified. First, it is necessary to check if there is tension between the source domain and the target domain of a word and whether there are conditions for mapping. Then, it needs to be determined whether the linguistic representation of the source domain and the target domain are inconsistent, and whether there is concept transfer from the source domain to the target domain. In this way, metaphorical keywords can be selected.

Finally, the metaphorical keywords are entered into Antconc for retrieval, and combined with the specific context, the mapping process between the source domain and the target domain of these words is rechecked. After the words that do not fit the criteria are excluded, the proper metaphorical keywords can be identified.

In terms of metaphor classification, all metaphorical keywords are categorized according to Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) criteria for conceptual metaphors: orientational metaphor, structural metaphor, and ontological metaphor.

Based on this, we divide conceptual metaphors in Chinese speeches into 8 categories and conceptual metaphors in American speeches into 7 categories.

Results

As shown in Table 1, Chinese commencement speeches primarily contain eight types of conceptual metaphors, comprising a total of 135 metaphorical keywords that occur 432 times. Nature metaphors constitute the most prevalent category, accounting for 42.6% of all identified metaphors. War metaphors (24.3%) rank as the second most prevalent type, followed by journey metaphors (13.4%), building metaphors (9.6%), and human metaphors (6.6%). The remaining categories –light metaphors (1.8%), business metaphors (1.1%), and game metaphors (0.6%) – are significantly less common.

Table 1*Conceptual Metaphors in Chinese Commencement Speeches*

Categories	Metaphor type	Type	Token	Resonance	Percentage
Structural	War Metaphor	22	109	2398	24.3%
Metaphor	Journey Metaphor	20	66	1320	13.4%
	Nature Metaphor	39	108	4212	42.6%
	Building Metaphor	16	59	944	9.6%
Ontological	Human Metaphor	16	41	656	6.6%
Metaphor	Light Metaphor	10	18	180	1.8%
	Business Metaphor	5	22	110	1.1%
	Game Metaphor	7	9	63	0.6%
Total		135	432	9883	100%

Source: Authors' own development.

Table 2 shows that American university commencement speeches mainly contain 7 types of conceptual metaphors, with a total of 97 metaphorical keywords that occur 262 times. War metaphors constitute 28.2%, representing the most prevalent type of metaphor. Journey metaphors (23.1%) rank second, followed by nature metaphors (19.9%), building metaphors (14.9%), and orientational metaphors (8.2%). The remaining categories, business metaphors (3.2%) and religious metaphors (2.6%), appear less frequently.

Table 2*Conceptual Metaphors in American Commencement Speeches*

Categories	Metaphor type	Type	Token	Resonance	Percentage
Structural	War Metaphor	20	58	1,160	28.2%
Metaphor	Journey Metaphor	17	56	952	23.1%
Orientational Metaphor	Up-Down	12	28	336	8.2%
	Internal-Exterior				
	Center-Edge				
	Nature Metaphor	20	41	820	19.9%
Ontological	Building Metaphor	17	36	612	14.9%
Metaphor	Business Metaphor	6	22	132	3.2%
	Religious Metaphor	5	21	105	2.6%
Total		97	262	4,117	100%

Source: Authors' own development.

A chi-square test of independence revealed significant distributional differences between the two corpora ($\chi^2(7)=31.93$, $p<0.001$). Standardized residuals indicated significant overrepresentation of nature metaphors in Chinese speeches (residual=+3.2, $p<0.01$) and war

metaphors in American speeches (residual = +2.1, $p < 0.05$). The effect size was moderate (Cramer's $V = 0.21$).

When analyzing only the five shared metaphor types, the chi-square test remained significant but with reduced magnitude ($\chi^2(4) = 13.24$, $p = 0.010$; Cramer's $V = 0.15$). The frequency disparity was most pronounced for nature metaphors (China: 108 vs US: 41) and war metaphors (US: 58 vs China: 105).

Discussion

The section provides a comparative analysis of conceptual metaphors in Chinese and American commencement speeches and analyzes the similarities and differences of the educational philosophy reflected by these metaphors.

Similarities and Differences of Conceptual Metaphors Identified

The quantitative analysis shows notable differences in conceptual metaphor distribution between the corpora. Chinese commencement speeches employ eight distinct categories of conceptual metaphors, which are instantiated through 134 metaphorical keywords, resulting in a total frequency of 428 occurrences. By contrast, American counterparts employ 7 conceptual metaphor types, realized through 97 metaphorical keywords, totaling 262 instances.

Similarities

Commencement addresses in both countries employ 5 primary conceptual metaphors: war, journey, nature, building, and business metaphors.

Both groups employ war metaphors to construct a three-dimensional conceptual framework: (1) framing societal challenges as battlefields to mobilize graduates' combative ethos, (2) reconfiguring academic struggles as military campaigns to validate their perseverance, and (3) prefiguring future obstacles as combat zones requiring tactical resilience. These war metaphors work on an ideological dimension to make the struggle seem normal and natural. At the same time, they help people develop strategies to cope with life's complexities.

Journey metaphors serve as an effective conceptual framework for characterizing graduates' university experiences. While facing various academic challenges, which are similar to unexpected detours in a journey, students demonstrated resilience and adaptive coping strategies. Journey metaphors highlight the transformative nature of undergraduate education, extending to post-graduation trajectories, where each new stage presents developmental opportunities. Thus, graduation constitutes both a transitional endpoint and a starting point for the next stage, which needs strategic planning and a willingness to learn from experiences.

As for nature metaphors, the growth or cultivation of plants is often used metaphorically to represent the growth of graduates. Similarly, the way humans cultivate plants is analogous to how universities nurture graduates. Natural phenomena are used to symbolize the obstacles encountered in both the growth of graduates and the development of the country and the world.

Additionally, the structure of plants is employed to describe the status of certain things. Nature metaphors are used to send positive messages to graduates, encouraging them to remain optimistic, resilient and yearning in their life journey, bravely face the difficulties of the future, and pursue their goals and dreams.

Regarding building metaphors, presidents from both nations employ construction-related verbs to conceptualize graduates' life planning and dream realization. This metaphorical framework posits that building a future is akin to architectural construction, which necessitates solid foundations (basic competencies) and gradual advancement (step-by-step development). Presidents in both countries utilize the structure of the building to emphasize the crucial role that a specific spiritual quality or ability plays in the future development of graduates. Such discourse ultimately seeks to cultivate graduates' meta-awareness of competences and character development.

Presidential addresses in both nations employ business metaphors, such as financial terms like "profit margins" and "investment returns", to conceptualize self-development as quantifiable outcomes of educational exertion. This strategy embodies the cultural maxim that "diligence yields dividends", thereby constructing graduates as ongoing enterprises that require strategic self-investment.

Differences

Chinese and American university presidents demonstrate distinct patterns in both the selection and application of conceptual metaphors in their speeches.

Firstly, university presidents of the two countries use the same metaphor in different ways to achieve different purposes.

Presidents in both countries use war metaphors to describe graduates' struggles during their university life. But American university presidents use war metaphors 3.9% more often than Chinese presidents to emphasize personal endeavours of graduates to pursue their academic achievements, while Chinese university presidents place greater emphasis on acknowledging graduates' contributions to the university, society, and country. This divergence may stem from the fact that war metaphors hold special meaning and impact in their historical, political, and cultural contexts, and can effectively convey complex concepts and emotions. In America, a nation marked by frequent wars, war metaphors are pervasive in political discourse, highlighting the intensity of electoral contests, partisan conflicts, and policy struggles. In consequence, war becomes a normalized conceptual framework that is readily applicable to other domains. In contrast, Chinese leaders use war metaphors not to downplay conflict but to commemorate collective struggle. For example, university presidents evoke wartime sacrifices to encourage graduates to contribute to national rejuvenation. This distinction mirrors cultural priorities: American metaphor usage prioritizes individualism and competition, while Chinese metaphor usage centers on unity and historical continuity.

Chinese university presidents use nature metaphors twice as frequently as their American counterparts, with greater diversity in their metaphorical usage. Although presidents in both cultures make comparisons between plant growth and student development, Chinese speeches uniquely connect graduate success to national progress. The nation is metaphorically described as the fertile soil that nurtures graduates' growth. This metaphoric framing emphasizes the close connection between graduates and the country's destiny. In contrast, American addresses focus more on individual vitality, likening student growth to organic flourishing. Chinese speakers further enrich their speeches with man-made hybrid metaphors, such as "barometers" and "greenhouses", a conceptual approach absent from American commencement addresses.

Chinese university presidents employ building metaphors with distinctive cultural dimensions. While both Chinese and American leaders liken constructing buildings to shaping graduates' futures, Chinese leaders uniquely extend this metaphor to nation-building. This strategy serves two purposes: illustrating how national development, like architectural construction, requires generations of dedicated and hard work, and highlighting the key role graduates play in the continuous process. Terms like "mainstay" and "pillar" strategically place graduates as crucial structural elements, fostering their awareness of responsibility in national rejuvenation. This approach effectively sparks patriotism while mapping personal development onto national progress.

American university presidents use business metaphors 2.1% more often than their Chinese equivalents when discussing graduate benefits, particularly emphasizing personal achievement through hard work. However, Chinese commencement speeches adopt business metaphors to serve two purposes: while acknowledging individual benefits, they primarily highlight graduates' roles in advancing national development. This distinctive perspective encourages graduates to harmonize individual ambitions with national priorities, reflecting a collectivist orientation in higher education discourse in China.

Secondly, university presidents of the two nations choose different metaphor types for different purposes.

In addition to the common metaphorical patterns, Chinese university presidents uniquely employ human, light, and game metaphors in their commencement addresses, while their American equivalents predominantly use orientational and religious metaphors.

Through human metaphors, Chinese university presidents endow the university with emotional qualities, which fosters a profound sense of belonging among graduates while encouraging enduring alumni connections and highlighting graduates' developmental responsibilities to the nation. This metaphoric framing also serves to remind graduates of their developmental obligations to national progress. The application of light metaphors serves to honor exemplary patriots whose dedication shines a light on their respective fields. It also motivates graduates to become new role models by continuously improving themselves and serving the country. Additionally, game metaphors are skillfully employed to reshape the

perception of post-graduation life, transforming uncertainties into captivating challenges and obstacles into opportunities for individual growth.

American university presidents adopt orientational metaphors, such as Up-Down, Inside-Outside, Center-Periphery, to help graduates navigate their lives after graduation. These metaphors are also employed to encourage graduates to actively confront challenges, engage in self-improvement, and build supportive networks. Given the deep religious tradition in American society, Christianity plays a significant role in shaping American culture and values. The application of religious metaphors rooted in shared faith traditions is used to inspire graduates to uphold moral principles when confronting challenges, persevere through adversity with spiritual resilience, and derive courage from culturally embedded narratives of hope and redemption.

Similarities and Differences of Educational Philosophy Reflected

The different selections and implementations of conceptual metaphors by Chinese and American university presidents serve different communicative purposes in their addresses. These variations reveal both convergences and divergences in the university educational philosophy of the two countries.

Similarities

First, university commencement addresses in both China and the United States share a common emphasis on graduates' lifelong development, employing similar metaphorical frameworks of journey, plant, and building to conceptualize continuous personal growth. These cross-cultural comparisons highlight how university education equips students with foundational knowledge and skills for ongoing personal and professional growth, while fostering the fundamental values of lifelong learning. Both educational traditions explicitly inspire graduates to nurture intellectual curiosity, critical thinking, and autonomous learning competencies to reach their full potential. Furthermore, these metaphors are used to emphasize the importance of developing adaptive competencies and self-management skills, which are essential for graduates to address forthcoming societal challenges.

Second, both Chinese and American presidents employ nature metaphors to convey to graduates the crises and challenges facing their countries and the world. They advocate that graduates should direct their attention to social issues, shoulder their social responsibilities, and strive to make constructive contributions to their countries and the world at large. By engaging in nature journeys, they encourage graduates to focus on social concerns, take on social responsibilities, and make a positive impact on their nations and the world.

Furthermore, both Chinese and American presidents have emphasized the critical relationship between theory and practice. Through building metaphors and journey metaphors, they highlight the significance of laying a solid foundation of theoretical knowledge and promoting development through practical application of what is learned during university education, and transforming acquired knowledge into real-world applications for sustainable

professional development. Graduates are encouraged to actively participate in practical projects, internship experiences and community-engaged work to develop practical problem-solving abilities and practical skills.

Ultimately, both Chinese and American presidents emphasize the importance of humanistic care and comprehensive development. Through human metaphors, they convey the concept of school as a home and a mother to graduates, and show their concern and humanistic consideration to graduates. In addition, they use different conceptual metaphors to emphasize the importance of spiritual qualities such as tenacious struggle, selfless dedication, and daring to question, seeking to nurture morally grounded, socially responsible graduates with mature spiritual-psychological qualities.

Differences

First, American presidents tend to highlight personal growth, self-fulfillment, and individual aspirations in their addresses. In contrast, Chinese presidents often focus more on the relationship between individuals and society, emphasizing collective welfare and civic duty. For instance, while presidents in both countries employ business metaphors in speeches, their focus diverges. American presidents typically frame skill development in terms of how it benefits graduates' personal and professional journeys. In contrast, Chinese presidents are more likely to discuss how these abilities enable graduates to contribute to national progress and societal advancement. American speeches place greater emphasis on empowering students to achieve self-defined success and realize their unique potential. Chinese speeches focus more on inspiring graduates to embrace their role in driving social advancement, shouldering responsibility for the nation's development, and accomplishing the mission of national rejuvenation.

Second, American university presidents emphasize independent thinking and the sense of competition, while Chinese counterparts emphasize collectivism and the concept of cooperation. American university presidents place a greater emphasis on cultivating students' independent thinking, innovative spirit, and autonomy, and encourage students to pursue their dreams and goals. They also emphasize the importance of competition, advocating that students strive for excellence in competition and ultimately achieve personal success and achievement. For example, the presidents of American universities use war metaphors most frequently, and the key words in these metaphors are mainly verbs related to battle and contention. Chinese equivalents emphasize teamwork, collectivism and social harmony, and focus on cultivating students' sense of teamwork and social responsibility. They emphasize the importance of cooperation and focus on cultivating students' teamwork spirit and sense of collective honor. For example, the Chinese presidents use the metaphor of fire to praise the selfless dedication and self-sacrifice of burning oneself to illuminate others.

Finally, American university presidents are paying more attention to developing innovative and adaptable talents, focusing on personality development and offering diversified career paths. Chinese equivalents, on the other hand, place more emphasis on cultivating professionals aligned with national priorities, stressing practical abilities and teamwork. American university presidents

use the "breakthrough" and "challenge" in war metaphors to convey the idea of daring to challenge and innovate, encouraging graduates to explore different fields and cultivate innovative thinking. Chinese university presidents use both natural and human metaphors to convey to students the critical role of a particular ability or quality in their future career development. This reflects that they pay more attention to cultivating students' professional skills, preparing graduates to excel in their chosen fields while advancing shared national goals.

Fundamentally, the differences in educational philosophies between China and the United States stem from distinct educational systems, social needs, and cultural contexts. It is crucial to emphasize that neither approach represents a superior model. These differences present valuable opportunities for cross-cultural pedagogical interaction and mutual enlightenment. Through mutual learning, both nations can develop educational paradigms that better address contemporary social needs and future-oriented development requirements. This cooperative approach will ultimately enhance overall educational quality, foster globally competent talents with international perspectives, and contribute to the progress of education and scientific research at national and global scales.

Summary

This comparative analysis of conceptual metaphors in Chinese and American university commencement speeches reveals a complex interaction between universal patterns and culture-specific manifestations in metaphorical framing. The findings offer empirical support for earlier observations by Charteris-Black (2004) and Semino (2008) regarding prevalent metaphor types in educational and political discourse, with war metaphors (28.2% in American speeches), journey metaphors (23.1% American vs 13.4% Chinese), and nature metaphors (42.6% in Chinese speeches) consistently used to convey fundamental commencement themes of challenge, growth, and societal contribution across both cultural settings. These patterns resonate with Hofstede's and Minkov's (2010) cultural dimensions theory while extending its application to academic ceremonial discourse.

The Chinese preference for nature metaphors depicting collective growth is consistent with Yu's (2009) analysis of organic conceptualizations in Chinese cultural narratives, just as the American preference for war metaphors framing individual achievement confirms Koller's (2005) observations about competitive individualism in Western institutional setting. However, our analysis unveils previously underdocumented cultural specificities, particularly the distinctive Chinese usage of human metaphors (notably "backbone" representing national contributors), light metaphors (emphasizing enlightenment), and game metaphors (symbolizing communal endeavor). These patterns suggest unique cultural conceptualizations of patriotism and resilience that previous CMA studies in educational discourse have not sufficiently highlighted.

The absence of religious metaphors in Chinese speeches contrasts markedly with their consistent presence in American addresses (2.6%), lending empirical support to Musolff's (2016) observations about enduring Christian influences in American public discourse while revealing this secular-religious divide to be more pronounced in commencement speeches than in

previous comparative studies of educational discourse (Wan & Low, 2015). This finding suggests that ceremonial settings may magnify cultural differences in institutional rhetoric.

The results support Charteris-Black's (2004) fundamental premise about the ideological nature of metaphors. The American conceptualization of academic challenges as personal battles through war metaphors aligns with his analysis of political discourse. In contrast, the Chinese preference for nature metaphors is consistent with Liu and Chen's (2022) findings that natural imagery represents social harmony in educational discourse. However, the significantly lower frequency of journey metaphors in Chinese speeches (13.4% vs 23.1% American) challenges Kövecses' and Benczes' (2010) universalist claims about their dominance in motivational discourse, potentially reflecting deeper cultural differences in conceptualizing life transitions, linear progression models prevalent in American contexts versus more cyclical growth models in Chinese academic settings.

The high frequency of light metaphors in Chinese speeches (1.8%) contrasts sharply with Semino's (2008) documentation of their rarity in Western institutional settings, possibly indicating culture-specific emphasis on enlightenment ideals in Chinese academic traditions. Most strikingly, while both cultures employ war metaphors, Chinese speeches consistently frame struggle as a collective sacrifice for national development. In contrast, Americans predominantly conceptualize it as an individual triumph, a distinction that both aligns with Narrey's (2019) observations about postcolonial rhetorical strategies and extends their relevance to contemporary academic ceremonial discourse.

The finding that orientational metaphors are absent in the Chinese corpus does not align with Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) universalist assertions about spatial conceptualizations. It suggests that culture may play a fundamental role in shaping even the basic conceptual metaphor systems in institutional discourse settings. These findings highlight the need for more refined, culturally sensitive approaches to metaphor analysis. Such approaches should account for both universal cognitive patterns and culture-specific ways of speaking and expressing ideas.

Conclusion

By applying CMA, this study conducts a comparative analysis of conceptual metaphors in commencement speeches in China and the United States, identifying eight conceptual metaphor categories in Chinese speeches and seven in American addresses. Both groups use war, journey, nature, building and business metaphors. Notably, human, light, and game metaphors are unique to Chinese speeches, whereas American speeches feature distinctive metaphors related to orientation and religion. Based on these metaphors, it is found that both presidents emphasize the lifelong development of graduates and their social responsibilities, attach importance to practical application, and show humanistic care. However, American counterparts place greater emphasis on the personal development of graduates, emphasizing independent thinking and a sense of competition. At the same time, Chinese presidents focus more on the relationship between individuals and the country, highlighting collectivism and cooperation.

This study extends the CMA framework to commencement speeches, demonstrating its applicability in educational discourse. By comparing metaphors in Chinese and American commencement speeches, this study reveals cultural differences in educational values, thereby facilitating readers' cross-cultural understanding and enhancing language learners' intercultural communication skills. In addition, the findings promote mutual learning among universities, helping develop education models that nurture globally competitive talents while addressing societal needs.

Suggestions for Future Research

To further the study of CMA in commencement speeches and cross-cultural educational discourse, future research might consider the following directions:

Firstly, future studies should broaden the corpus to include universities from diverse regions, types (e.g., private vs. public, vocational vs. research-intensive), and cultural backgrounds. This expansion will enhance the representativeness of findings and promote more refined cross-cultural comparisons. Secondly, researchers should combine manual annotation with computational tools, such as natural language processing, to identify and categorize metaphors. This combined approach is likely to reduce subjectivity in interpretation.

By following these directions, scholars can deepen their understanding of conceptual metaphors in educational and cross-cultural contexts, thereby contributing to both theoretical and practical advancements in the field.

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