https://doi.org/10.29140/9781763711686-12

Conceptual Metaphors in Vietnam–China Diplomatic Discourse: Evidence from a Policy Speech at Tsinghua University

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the conceptual metaphors in a policy speech delivered by Vietnam's General Secretary and President Tô Lâm at Tsinghua University, where Vietnam–China relations are expressed in the contexts of education, scientific cooperation, technological innovation, and youth exchange. Drawing on Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory, metaphorical tokens were identified using MIP/MIPVU processes before being interpreted using principles of Charteris-Black's (2004) Critical Metaphor Analysis. These metaphor systems are strategically organised to construct a diplomatic narrative, progressing from shared historical foundations and present-day connectivity and cooperation to a cooperative future driven by youth, education, and innovation. In total, 120 tokens were identified across the domains of JOURNEY (18.3%), SPACE (16.7%), CONNECTION (13.3%), BUILDING (10.8%), LIVING ORGANISM (10.8%), FORCE (10.0%), CREATION (5.8%), VALUE (4.2%), INHERITANCE (3.3%), and one residual OTHER category (6.7%). This progression demonstrates that conceptual metaphors perform important diplomatic functions by legitimising bilateral relations, strengthening mutual trust, promoting people-to-people connectivity, and positioning younger generations as active co-creators of future Vietnam–China cooperation. The study contributes to research on metaphor in diplomatic discourse by show-

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In Y. Wang, J. Matthews, & B. Zou (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 2nd International Applied Linguistics Research Conference, 2026* (pp. 91–98). Castledown.

ing that conceptual metaphors are most meaningfully understood as an integrated system of meaning-making rather than as isolated cognitive mappings.

Keywords: conceptual metaphor theory; diplomatic discourse; metaphor analysis; Vietnam–China relations; political communication

Background

The role of metaphors in political discourse goes beyond their rhetorical registers, functioning as a cognitive and discursive resource to conceptualise and frame political realities. Through the lens of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), metaphor is understood as the systematic mappings that project concrete source domains onto more abstract target domains (Kövecses, 2010; Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Particularly in political communication, metaphors also serve persuasive and ideological functions to foreground particular interpretations of events, relationships, and policy priorities (Charteris-Black, 2004, 2011; Musolff, 2004). This duality reinforces the relevance of metaphor in diplomatic discourse for the strategic representation and projection of cross-national relations.

Previous works (e.g., Ahrens & Zeng, 2022; Cheng & Chen, 2019; Lu & Ahrens, 2008) have identified common metaphorical domains, such as JOURNEY and BUILDING, in political and diplomatic discourse. While evidence has been gathered on the construction of national identities, international cooperation, and political friendships, this literature is still mostly concentrated in major political powerhouses, leaving the Vietnamese counterparts unexplored. This landscape has shifted with recent scholarship exploring Vietnam's foreign-policy narratives through "bamboo diplomacy" (Trinh & Vu, 2024), though little is known about the interplay between conceptual metaphors and the construction of bilateral relations in these contexts.

The present study aims to address this gap by analysing General Secretary and President Tô Lâm's political speech at Tsinghua University. Metaphorical expressions are identified using established metaphor-identification principles developed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007) and Steen et al. (2010) to reveal (1) which conceptual metaphors occur in the speech, (2) how they construct Vietnam–China relations, youth cooperation, and technological development, and (3) what diplomatic functions these metaphorical framings perform. In doing so, it moves beyond identifying isolated metaphors to examine how multiple metaphorical patterns collectively organise diplomatic meaning.

Methodology

This study analyses the English version of the policy speech delivered by General Secretary and President Tô Lâm at Tsinghua University in 2026 during his visit to China (Nguyễn, 2026; VietnamPlus, 2026). The 3,280-word speech was delivered to an academic audience of university leaders, professors, researchers, and students. Situated within a high-level diplomatic visit, the address articulates Vietnam's perspectives on the historical foundations and contemporary development of Vietnam–China relations while projecting priorities for their future cooperation.

This study pairs frequency analysis with a qualitative single-text case study design to understand a speech grounded in context, yet thematically rich in Vietnamese diplomatic discourse. The content of this speech is relevant to Vietnam–China historical ties and revolutionary connections, which are entrenched in strategic political and economic cooperation, infrastructure connectivity, and regional integration. Developments in areas such as science and technology, education, and human resources are also highlighted, besides a focus on educational exchanges among the youth and students for increased bilateral relations. These further illustrate the need for conceptual metaphor analysis to contribute to the linguistic construction of relations between these two countries.

The identification tools, Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) and Metaphor Identification Procedure VU University Amsterdam (MIPVU), by the Pragglejaz Group (2007) and Steen et al. (2010), respectively, are used to correctly identify and compare the contextual meanings of metaphorical lexical units with their basic meanings. Only expressions that carry a contrast while maintaining their comprehensible comparison are coded as metaphors. These tokens are further annotated for their source and target domains and for conceptual mapping through CMT, as described by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Additional examinations are given to borderline cases, with those unable to form a contextual–basic contrast excluded from the analysis.

The post-identification dataset undergoes a category-assignment step to avoid double-counting metaphorical expressions. To assess the relative prominence of the categories, calculations are based on frequencies, while qualitative examination shows how the mappings can demonstrate the Vietnam–China relationship, collaboration in youth and education, and technological breakthroughs. Critical Metaphor Analysis (Charteris-Black, 2004) is thereafter applied to interpret the textual contexts, thereby revealing diplomatic functions and relationship-building strategies within the speech's broader discourse.

The analytical steps come in two distinct stages. The frequencies are used to assess relative prominence, before contextual functions are compared with respect to the constructs of historical legitimacy, present connectivity and progress, and future co-creation. This procedure is significant for examining the recurrence of domains rather than treating appearance frequency as the only sufficient evidence for interpreting diplomatic meaning and relationship-building.

Results

Careful analysis reveals 120 metaphorical tokens that can be categorised into nine domains and one residual group. Of these tokens, 80% belong to major domains such as JOURNEY, SPACE, or CONNECTION, while CREATION (7; 5.8%), VALUE (5; 4.2%), and INHERITANCE (4; 3.3%) appear much less frequently. Their distribution and contextual functions reveal three interconnected and important patterns: *historically grounded relations*, *expanding and progressive cooperation*, and *future-oriented agency*.

Historical Grounding: Stability, Continuity, and Relational Legitimacy

Metaphorical domains of BUILDING, LIVING ORGANISM, and CONNECTION are used to explain the established and continued nature of Vietnam–China relations. Specifically, by expressing *solid foundation*, *strategic framework*, and *political and social foundations*, the relationship is framed as structurally grounded, while *nurtured*, *cultivated*, *vibrant*, and *enduring* keep the two countries' friendship alive across generations. Expressions of CONNECTION found in *bound us together*, *linked us*, or *forged a very special bond* further portray historical relations as strengthened ties among these countries. Taken together, these mappings shape shared history within a context grounded in contemporary cooperation.

Present Cooperation: Movement, Connectivity, and Expanding Space

The most frequent JOURNEY domain is used with SPACE and CONNECTION to describe modern cooperation more dynamically. The speech's frequent use of *path*, *milestone*, *new stage*, *move forward*, and *steps in the right direction* conceptualises development as purposeful movement. The repeated references to *connectivity*, *development corridors*, *expansion*, and *development space* portray cooperation as increasingly interconnected and expanding. These are most commonly brought up in topics of infrastructure,

economic integration, educational exchange, and regional connectivity, showing a continuing process of advancement and expansion.

Table 1. Distribution and Discursive Functions of Metaphorical Domains in the Policy Speech

Domain	n	%	Representative expressions	Principal discursive construction
JOURNEY	22	18.3	path; milestone; new stage; move forward; steps	Progress and direction
SPACE	20	16.7	historical space; development space; expansion; depth	Expansion and opportunity
CONNECTION	16	13.3	bound; linked; bond; connectivity; bridge	Interconnectedness and integration
BUILDING	13	10.8	foundation; framework; pillars; solid	Stability and historical legitimacy
LIVING ORGANISM	13	10.8	nurtured; cultivated; vibrant; growth	Continuity and sustainability
FORCE	12	10.0	driving force; impetus; propel; breakthrough	Modernisation and acceleration
CREATION	7	5.8	chapter; write; shape	Future-making and shared agency
VALUE	5	4.2	enrich; investment	Human and educational value
INHERITANCE	4	3.3	legacy; successors; passed down	Intergenerational continuity
OTHER	8	6.7	Various secondary mappings	Peripheral metaphorical functions
Total	**120**	**100.0**	—	—

Future-Oriented Agency: Innovation, Youth, and Shared Creation

Referring to the future, FORCE metaphors (such as *driving force*, *propel,* or *impetus*) frame science, technology, and innovation as active stimulants for development. CREATION and INHERITANCE also serve the same purpose, despite their much less frequent appearance. At the same time, the

younger generations are portrayed as torchbearers who *shape the future* and *write the next chapter* in the *legacy* of Vietnam–China friendship. This framing moves away from pure continuity, recognising the youth as active agents in the future development rather than passive inheritors.

These findings visualise a metaphorical progression of **historical legitimacy** that shapes **the present connectivity and progress**, while traversing towards a **future co-creation**. The identified domains thus operate cooperatively, rather than in isolation, to build an organised narrative of temporal diplomacy.

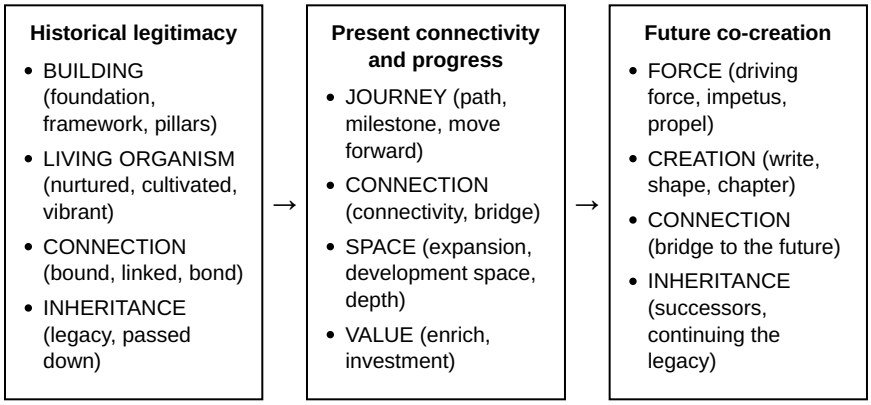

Figure 1. Temporal Progression of Metaphorical Constructions in the Speech

Discussion

In short, metaphorical expressions in the speech are used together to form a temporal diplomatic narrative. Firstly, BUILDING, LIVING ORGANISM, and CONNECTION metaphors establish the relations between the countries in shared history, highlighting a friendship that is established, enduring, and needing further cultivation. Metaphors thus serve the role of legitimising current ties in historical continuity, attached alongside their persuasive and ideological functions in political discourse (Charteris-Black, 2004, 2011; Musolff, 2004).

Tokens of JOURNEY, SPACE, and CONNECTION relate current cooperation with movement and interconnectedness. These domains account for 48.3% of those identified, suggesting the ongoing and widening nature of bilateral relations rather than a solitary condition. This expands on previous findings on the positions of JOURNEY and BUILDING metaphors in polit-

ical and diplomatic discourse (Ahrens & Zeng, 2022; Cheng & Chen, 2019; Lu & Ahrens, 2008).

Lastly, FORCE, INHERITANCE, and CREATION move the focus towards the future. While science and innovation become the drivers, the younger generations are the forces nurturing this friendship to *shape the future* and *write the next chapter*. The progression then moves from **historical legitimacy** to **present connectivity** and **future co-creation**, shaping a coherent orientation in diplomacy through metaphors.

Conclusion

This project examines how conceptual metaphors in a policy speech can collectively construct a diplomatic narrative that positions Vietnam–China relations against the historical backdrop, present cooperation, and future co-creation. It also demonstrates that youth, the education system, and future innovations are the agents for future collaboration instead of mere beneficiaries. Despite its limitation to a single-text design, this study still highlights the value of close examination of metaphorical domains and their cross-compatible interactions for understanding diplomatic meanings and orientations.

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