Literature, Language and Cultural Studies
ISSN Print: 3079-5095
ISSN Online: 3079-5109
https://doi.org/10.63313/LLCS.9233

# Action, Attribution, and Apparent Neutrality: An Exploratory Transitivity Analysis of CNN's 2025 Reporting on the U.S.-China Trade Conflict

**Zijun Li**
School of International Studies, Hangzhou Normal University, Hangzhou, China

**How to cite this paper:** Li, Z. (2026). Action, attribution, and apparent neutrality: An exploratory transitivity analysis of CNN's 2025 reporting on the U.S.-China trade conflict. Literature, Language and Cultural Studies, 7(2), 22–27. ISSN Print: 3079-5095, ISSN Online: 3079-5109.
https://doi.org/10.63313/LLCS.9233
**Published: 2026-11-09**

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Erytis Publishing Limited.
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).
http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

## Abstract

This study examines how experiential meanings are organized in CNN's English-language reporting on the renewed U.S.-China trade conflict in early 2025. Drawing on systemic functional linguistics and critical discourse studies, it analyzes an author-compiled corpus of 20 CNN reports published between February 3 and June 19, 2025. Clause-level coding produced 2,315 instances across five reported process categories: material, relational, verbal, mental, and existential. Material processes account for 62.89% of the coded instances, followed by relational (13.91%), verbal (13.69%), mental (8.55%), and existential processes (0.95%). The quantitative pattern is interpreted through close analysis of representative clauses. Material clauses foreground tariffs, retaliation, negotiation, and supply-chain intervention as sequences of action; relational clauses stabilize provisional evaluations as attributes; and verbal clauses distribute authority through selective sourcing. Mental and existential clauses are comparatively limited, reducing attention to felt experience and indeterminate states. These patterns do not, by themselves, demonstrate political bias or authorial intent. They do, however, show how apparently factual reporting can privilege eventfulness, institutional actors, and attributed speech over human consequences and structural uncertainty. The article therefore argues for treating transitivity as one layer of news framing that must be read alongside lexical choice, sourcing, genre, and context.

## Keywords

Critical Discourse Studies; CNN; News Discourse; Systemic Functional Linguistics; Transitivity; U.S.-China Trade Conflict

## 1. Introduction

News discourse does more than transmit events. It selects actors, sequences causes, and attributes speech, making some participants and relations more salient than others, especially in coverage of distant conflict (Bednarek & Caple, 2012; van Dijk, 1988).

The U.S.-China trade conflict, involving tariffs, export controls, bargaining, and

supply-chain restrictions, must be converted into narratable events. The trade war label and grammar together organize who acts, who is affected, and what is treated as fact (Fairclough, 1989, 1992, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

This study examines 20 CNN texts published from February to June 2025 and asks how the five process types are distributed and how recurrent choices shape agency, evaluation, and evidential authority.

It makes three contributions. First, it corrects the corpus statistics: the counts total 2,315 rather than 2,325, and percentages are recalculated from that denominator. Second, it separates transitivity from modality, which belongs to the interpersonal metafunction and is not a substitute for the behavioral process (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Third, it adopts a cautious standard: frequencies identify tendencies but cannot independently prove bias or intent.

## 2. Transitivity, News Representation, and Ideology

### 2.1. Transitivity as a grammar of experience

In systemic functional linguistics, language realizes ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions. Transitivity belongs to the ideational metafunction and construes experience through processes, participants, and circumstances: material clauses represent doing, mental clauses sensing, relational clauses being and having, verbal clauses saying, and existential clauses existence, with behavioral clauses at a boundary (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). These categories are semantic and context-dependent, so analysis attends to complete clauses rather than verb lists.

### 2.2. Critical discourse studies and news framing

CDS treats discourse as socially situated practice (van Dijk, 1993). Fairclough links textual features to production and social structures, while news is institutionally shaped by routines and relevance (Bell, 1991; Richardson, 2007). News values and stance are discursively constructed through recurrent attribution and positioning (Bednarek & Caple, 2012; Martin & White, 2005). Such choices are not inherently manipulative; the question is how they cluster and which actors occupy key roles.

### 2.3. Analytical cautions

Three cautions apply. Frequency is not interpretation, because significance depends on actor-goal patterns and context. Apparent objectivity is not neutrality, since attribution still privileges particular voices. And claims about ideology should be scalar, addressing what a pattern affords rather than what it intends. Li (2010) shows that transitivity can produce contrasting press representations, but a single-outlet corpus needs a reference corpus to establish distinctiveness.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Corpus and sampling frame

The dataset comprises 20 English-language CNN reports on the conflict published between February 3 and June 19, 2025. CNN was selected as a globally circulating U.S. outlet mixing news, analysis, and extensive quotation. The dataset is treated as an author-compiled exploratory corpus, and representative extracts cite verifiable items (CNN, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d).

### 3.2. Unit of analysis and coding

The clause was the unit of analysis. Coding was conducted in UAM CorpusTool 6 using an SFL-informed scheme (Baker, 2006). Five categories are reported; behavioral processes were not separately coded, and the erroneous zero-frequency modality row is removed because modality and transitivity belong to different systems. As one analyst did the coding with no second-coder results, intercoder reliability is not claimed.

### 3.3. Analytical procedure

Analysis proceeded in three stages: counts were summed and percentages recalculated with 2,315 as the denominator; representative clauses were examined for process, participants, voice, and lexis; and interpretations were related to attribution and framing, combining corpus linguistics with close reading (Baker et al., 2008).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Distribution of process types

Table 1 presents the corrected distribution. Material processes are dominant, at nearly two-thirds of coded instances; relational and verbal processes occur at similar rates, while mental processes are limited and existential processes rare.

**Table 1.** Corrected distribution of coded transitivity process types.

| Process type | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Material | 1,456 | 62.89 |
| Relational | 322 | 13.91 |
| Verbal | 317 | 13.69 |
| Mental | 198 | 8.55 |
| Existential | 22 | 0.95 |
| Total | 2,315 | 99.99 |

Percentages are calculated from the reported frequencies and may not total exactly 100 because of rounding. Behavioral processes were not separately coded in the source dataset.

### 4.2. Material processes: policy as a chain of action

The material dominance fits an event-centered genre, and lexical choices within material clauses intensify a conflict scenario. Consider the following clauses:

"Trump fired the latest tariff shot at China."
"Trump's shift in tone also went viral on the Chinese internet."
"Beijing slammed U.S. Vice President JD Vance."
In the first example, Trump is Actor, fired is the Process, and the tariff shot is Goal, with at China as circumstance. The metaphor fired … shot imports an armed-conflict frame into trade policy (Charteris-Black, 2004; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Neutral verbs such as imposed, authorized, and agreed also occur, but the recurring combination of institutional actors and kinetic verbs turns the dispute into state-centered initiatives, backgrounding slower structural effects.

### 4.3. Relational processes: stabilizing evaluation

Relational clauses assign attributes and identities. In "the urgency felt by the U.S. was clear," the carrier receives the attribute clear, presenting an interpretation as a property of the situation without naming the evaluator. Likewise, "the goal is to have a rebalancing of trade" converts a contested program into a definition. Such clauses condense and stabilize evaluation but do not support the stronger claim that every relational clause constructs a negative image of China.

### 4.4. Verbal processes: attribution and evidential access

The 317 verbal processes reflect journalism's dependence on quoted speech. "U.S. officials said they were not concerned" assigns the proposition to officials, "Bessent told investors" identifies sayer and receiver, and "Beijing has signaled its intention" personifies the government as sayer. Reporting verbs calibrate stance, with said relatively neutral and verbs such as admitted or warned cueing evaluation. Verbal processes thereby build authority through external voices (Fowler, 1991).

### 4.5. Mental and existential processes: limited interiority

Mental processes account for 8.55%. In "Beijing has enjoyed an unexpectedly warm start to Trump's second term," an institution functions as senser, interpreting a collective stance through inference. Existential processes are rare; "There has been no announcement of further trade talks" marks absence while withholding an actor. Their scarcity contributes to a detached register that gives little grammatical space to lived uncertainty.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. A grammar of eventfulness

Together, the results construe the conflict primarily as eventfulness: material processes move the narrative, relational processes define states, and verbal processes authorize information. Institutional actors and confrontation lexemes, where policies become shots and criticism slams a target, reinforce conflict framing. The effect arises not from transitivity alone but from configuration plus lexical

metaphor and article sequencing.

### 5.2. Apparent neutrality and discursive filtering

The notion of discursive filtering is useful because framing entails selection and salience rather than neutral reflection (Entman, 1993). A surface of factuality does not eliminate framing, since which action begins the causal chain and whose statement is quoted both shape interpretation. The findings therefore support apparent neutrality, not deception, consistent with ideology naturalized in routine discourse (Fairclough, 1995). Frequency alone does not measure bias; future work should cross-tabulate participants, use multiple coders, and compare outlets.

## 6. Conclusion

CNN's 2025 reporting is strongly action-centered: material processes make up 62.89%, with relational and verbal processes providing characterization and attribution, while mental and existential processes remain limited. The framing effect arises from grammar interacting with lexical metaphor, participant selection, and sourcing. The bounded claim is that transitivity makes a dynamic, state-centered, source-mediated version of the conflict available, but does not independently prove bias. By correcting the numerical record and separating transitivity from modality, the study provides a basis for future multi-coder, comparative research.

## Acknowledgements

I thank my supervisor for the guidance and feedback throughout this research, and my colleagues at the School of International Studies, Hangzhou Normal University, for their support. Any remaining errors are my own.

## References

[1] Baker, P. (2006). Using corpora in discourse analysis. Continuum.

[2] Baker, P., Gabrielatos, C., KhosraviNik, M., Krzyżanowski, M., McEnery, T., & Wodak, R. (2008). A useful methodological synergy? Combining critical discourse analysis and corpus linguistics to examine discourses of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK press. Discourse & Society, 19(3), 273–306. https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926508088962

[3] Bell, A. (1991). The language of news media. Blackwell.

[4] Bednarek, M., & Caple, H. (2012). News discourse. Continuum.

[5] Charteris-Black, J. (2004). Corpus approaches to critical metaphor analysis. Palgrave Macmillan.

[6] CNN. (2025a, February 4). Trump fired the latest tariff shot at China. Is Beijing prepared to make it a trade war? https://www.cnn.com/2025/02/03/china/trump-tariffs-china-response-intl-hnk

[7] CNN. (2025b, April 9). Connect the World: China slamming Vance for "peasant" comment [Television transcript]. https://transcripts.cnn.com/show/ctw/date/2025-04-09/segment/02

[8] CNN. (2025c, June 6). Trump-Xi call restores trade truce. But the supply chain war has

no end in sight. https://www.cnn.com/2025/06/06/business/trump-xi-call-trade-truce-supply-chains-intl-hnk

[9] CNN. (2025d, June 19). China learned a valuable lesson in U.S. trade talks: The value of its leverage. https://www.cnn.com/2025/06/19/business/china-negotiating-power-us-trade-talks

[10] Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. Journal of Communication, 43(4), 51–58. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x

[11] Fairclough, N. (1989). Language and power. Longman.

[12] Fairclough, N. (1992). Discourse and social change. Polity Press.

[13] Fairclough, N. (1995). Media discourse. Edward Arnold.

[14] Fowler, R. (1991). Language in the news: Discourse and ideology in the press. Routledge.

[15] Halliday, M. A. K., & Matthiessen, C. M. I. M. (2014). Halliday's introduction to functional grammar (4th ed.). Routledge.

[16] Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). Metaphors we live by. University of Chicago Press.

[17] Li, J. (2010). Transitivity and lexical cohesion: Press representations of a political disaster and its actors. Journal of Pragmatics, 42(12), 3444–3458. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2010.04.028

[18] Martin, J. R., & White, P. R. R. (2005). The language of evaluation: Appraisal in English. Palgrave Macmillan.

[19] Richardson, J. E. (2007). Analysing newspapers: An approach from critical discourse analysis. Palgrave Macmillan.

[20] van Dijk, T. A. (1988). News as discourse. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

[21] van Dijk, T. A. (1993). Principles of critical discourse analysis. Discourse & Society, 4(2), 249–283. https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926593004002006

[22] Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (Eds.). (2016). Methods of critical discourse studies.(3rd ed.) SAGE.