



Research Article

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

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Abstract

This qualitative research explored the language use of Philippine media on China and the West Philippine Sea (WPS) conflict through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The 51 news reports that served as the corpus for this study were sourced from five major Philippine online news publications. Using CDA, the study identified dominant themes through Reisigl and Wodak's (2017) discursive strategies, while Halliday's transitivity system was employed to examine how processes and agency portray China, the Philippines, and the conflict. Furthermore, van Dijk's Ideological Square was used to uncover the power relations and ideological positions embedded in the discourse. Results revealed that news reports employed strategies such as nomination, perspectivization, predication, argumentation, and intensification. In terms of linguistic features, material, verbal, mental, and relational processes were identified as central to the construction of representations of China, the Philippines and the WPS conflict. These patterns construct asymmetrical power relations, portraying China as militarily dominant yet normatively illegitimate through negative-other presentation, and the Philippines as legitimate and defensively justified through strategic positive-self presentation.

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1. Introduction

Language use in news media refers to the strategic deployment of linguistic features and discursive strategies to achieve communicative and ideological goals within journalism (Farooq, 2022). On this basis, news institutions do not merely report events; they function as powerful mechanisms that shape public perception, often constructing negative presentations of out-groups while legitimizing in-groups (Mai & Jokuns, 2023; Yu & Zheng, 2022). Moreover, scholars have argued that media discourse can distort realities, perpetuate ideological biases, and reinforce propagandistic narratives (Shi & Fan, 2019; Wheatley, 2024). Thus, news discourse functions not merely as a vehicle of information but as a mechanism that reproduces power asymmetries and entrenches antagonistic group boundaries.

Empirical studies demonstrate how linguistic maneuvers shape representations in news discourse. In Nigeria, Eyang and Ebim (2021) found that insurgents were portrayed as “faceless enemies” while government forces were represented as humane and collective actors, reflecting clear ideological positioning. In the Philippine context, Robiego and Talde (2024) showed that linguistic features in headlines framed narratives about President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. in ways that could influence readers’ perceptions. Similarly, Ladrido and Ponce (2022) revealed that discursive constructions in news coverage represented Mindanao as neglected and violent. These studies collectively illustrate how language use functions as an instrument of ideological representation.

Within the field of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), scholars have proposed various theoretical frameworks that examine how discourse constructs social realities and power relations. Fairclough’s three-dimensional model, for instance, conceptualizes discourse as a dialectical relationship among text, discursive practice, and social practice, highlighting how

language use can shape and legitimize ideological meanings surrounding social actors and geopolitical conflicts. Meanwhile, van Dijk’s socio-cognitive approach foregrounds ideological operations that influence public perceptions of social actors and events. This perspective further reveals how news media may exercise symbolic power by shaping polarizations and ideological positions in society. Additionally, Wodak’s Discourse-Historical Approach offers a systematic account of linguistic strategies through which social actors and events are linguistically constructed.

In particular, the present study banked on DHA’s typology of strategies to examine how Philippine news reports represent China and the West Philippine Sea conflict. Taken together, these CDA perspectives provide complementary analytical lenses for understanding how media discourse constructs representations, legitimizes power relations, and shapes social implications of geopolitical tensions.

Despite growing studies on language use in Philippine media, limited research has critically examined how Philippine news discourse represents China and the West Philippine Sea conflict from a CDA perspective.

Addressing this gap, the present study investigated how selected linguistic features and discursive framing contribute to the construction of representations of China and the geopolitical dispute in the West Philippine Sea. It further examined the ideological orientations and power relations embedded in news coverage, as well as the broader social implications these discursive constructions may produce.

Research Questions

1. What dominant themes and discursive strategies are employed in Philippine news reports about China and the West Philippine Sea conflict?

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2. How do linguistic features construct representations of China, the Philippines, and the conflict?

3. What power relations and ideological positions exist in the context of the West Philippine Sea issues?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design following Creswell's (2009, 2022) framework to explore how language constructs representations, power relations, and ideological positions. Qualitative research is interpretive and descriptive, enabling the examination of meanings, patterns, and social processes within their socio-cultural and institutional contexts. Consistent with this orientation, the study adopted Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its methodological approach. CDA examines written and spoken discourse to uncover the discursive sources of power, bias, and ideology embedded in language use (Al-Radhi, 2020). Grounded in relevant theoretical frameworks that view reality as socially constructed through language, this study conceptualizes discourse as a social practice that both reflects and shapes ideological formations and power relations. Given that media texts often contain layered meanings and subtle connotations that influence public perception (Montejo & Adriano, 2018), CDA provides a systematic framework for analyzing how language positions social actors and constructs identities within broader structures of dominance. Accordingly, this approach enabled the study to examine how Philippine news media represent China, the Philippines, and the West Philippine Sea conflict, while revealing the power relations and ideological orientations embedded in such representations.

2.2. Data Sources

This study employed purposive criterion-based sampling to compile a corpus of 51 online straight news reports focusing on China and the West Philippine Sea conflict. Articles published between 2022 and 2025 were systematically retrieved from the official websites of five major Philippine news organizations: Inquirer.net,

GMA News Online, Philstar.com, ABS-CBN News Online, and Manila Bulletin Online. The selected time frame was intended to capture contemporary media representations during a period of intensified diplomatic and geopolitical developments.

Article retrieval was conducted through a structured keyword search using terms such as "West Philippine Sea", "South China Sea", "China-Philippines conflict", and related geopolitical descriptors. Searches were conducted using each news platform's internal search engine and external search tools to ensure comprehensive coverage. Retrieved articles were subsequently screened using predefined inclusion criteria: direct relevance to the West Philippine Sea conflict, classification as straight news reporting rather than opinion or editorial content, prominence as lead or top stories, and public accessibility on the official websites of the selected media organizations.

Following the initial retrieval stage, duplicate entries and non-relevant materials were removed through manual verification. The remaining articles were compiled into a research corpus organized by news outlet to facilitate systematic discourse analysis. This purposive corpus construction ensured that the dataset represented dominant mainstream media narratives that shape public interpretations of the West Philippine Sea conflict.

2.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis proceeded through three interconnected and theoretically grounded phases, each addressing a specific research question and contributing to a layered interpretation of representation and ideology in the corpus. In the first phase, discursive strategies in news reports were examined using

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the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) framework proposed by Reisigl and Wodak (2017). Strategies such as nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, and intensification were identified to analyze how maritime actors were linguistically constructed and how dominant thematic patterns emerged across the texts.

The coding process followed an iterative procedure. Reports were initially read multiple times to facilitate familiarization with recurring linguistic features and narrative orientations. Coding decisions were guided by operational definitions of discursive strategies and supported by textual indicators including lexical selection, evaluative language, and patterns of representation. Emerging themes were developed inductively and refined through constant comparison across the dataset. To strengthen analytical rigor, coding interpretations were reviewed through peer debriefing and expert consultation, which helped clarify category boundaries and resolve ambiguous instances. The results were subsequently organized in tabular form, presenting the headline, dominant theme, identified strategy, excerpt, and analytical interpretation to ensure transparency and systematic cross-text comparison.

The second phase employed the transitivity framework in Systemic Functional Linguistics developed by Halliday and further elaborated in Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) to conduct a clause-level grammatical analysis of the corpus. This phase focused on four process types—material, verbal, relational, and mental—and the corresponding roles of the participants. By examining how agency, responsibility, and evaluation were distributed through grammatical structures, the analysis revealed how China and the Philippines were

discursively constructed in terms of action, authority, cognition, and attribution.

Similar to the first phase, coding decisions in this stage were guided by clearly defined analytical categories and were subjected to iterative review and peer validation to ensure consistency and interpretive credibility. This micro-level linguistic analysis complemented the broader discursive patterns identified in the first phase by demonstrating how ideological positioning is embedded within grammatical choices.

The final phase employed van Dijk's (1998) Ideological Square to interpret the macro-level ideological organization of the discourse. This framework facilitated the examination of polarized representations through strategies of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. The analysis identified how evaluative emphasis and lexical selection reinforced in-group and out-group distinctions, thereby constructing discursively mediated power asymmetries. Results were synthesized in tabular format, detailing linguistic evidence, dominant ideological operations, power relations, identified ideology, and broader social implications. Interpretations at this stage were likewise reviewed through the previously established peer debriefing process to ensure analytical coherence across the phases.

2.4. Trustworthiness

The rigor of the study was strengthened through methodological triangulation, systematic documentation of analytic procedures through an audit trail and peer debriefing.

In addition, the research was guided by Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for establishing trustworthiness, emphasizing credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability.

3. Results

This section presents the findings of the critical analysis of the selected news articles,

highlighting the dominant themes, discursive strategies, and linguistic features that

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characterize China, the Philippines, and the West Philippine Sea conflict. The findings are organized sequentially: first, the dominant themes and representational strategies identified across the corpus; second, the key linguistic

features that shape these representations at the grammatical level; and finally, the power relations and ideological positions embedded in the discourse on the West Philippine Sea issue.

3.1. Dominant Themes and Discursive Strategies Employed in Philippine News Reports

Table 1 presents the news headlines, corresponding dominant themes, identified

strategies, excerpts, and analytical interpretations. The strategies were categorized based on the five principal strategies proposed by Reisigl and Wodak (2017): nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, and intensification/mitigation.

Table 1. Dominant Themes and Discursive Strategies Employed in Philippine News Reports

Headline	Dominant Theme	Discursive Strategy	Excerpt	Interpretation
China ships harass Philippines Navy vessel in West Philippine Sea	<i>China as an Aggressive and Provocative Maritime Actor</i>	Nomination	<i>Two Chinese warships and a coast guard vessel sailed dangerously close to the Philippine Navy's BRP Emilio Jacinto (PSN7)</i>	Nomination, predication, and perspectivization affirm China's role as aggressor toward the Philippines. This aggression and provocation are validated through China's overt harassment, intimidation through warship deployments and aggressive maneuvers against Philippine forces and civilian vessels.
China blocks PH mission to Panatag Shoal		Predication	<i>China has flexed its muscles yet again, illegally blocking a Philippine maritime mission and chasing away Filipino fishermen in the area. (GMAN1)</i>	
Chinese frigates perform 'aggressive' maneuvers on PH warship		Perspectivization	<i>The Armed Forces of the Philippines on Thursday said BRP Emilio Jacinto encountered "aggressive and unsafe maneuvers" by two People's Liberation-Army Navy vessels Jiangkai II-class frigates (INQ10)</i>	

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PH Navy to China: We are authorized to challenge ships in West PH Sea	<i>The Philippines as a Law-Abiding, Legitimate, and Defensive State</i>	Nomination	<i>Philippine authorities monitored the movements of Chinese Coast Guard vessels “unlawfully operating” within the Philippines’ exclusive economic zone. (INQN6)</i>	Nomination, predication, and perspectivization confirm the Philippines’ role as a law-abiding and defensive maritime actor. These portrayals are verified through actions such as monitoring Chinese vessels in its waters, asserting sovereign rights over the WPS, and issuing condemnations as diplomatic rather than aggressive responses to provocations.
PCG: China’s bullying in West Philippine Sea undermines international law		Predication	<i>The Philippines has been asserting sovereign rights over the West Philippine Sea (PSN4)</i>	
PCG lauds 'bravery' of crew in latest encounter with China ships in West PH Sea		Perspectivization	<i>PCG spokesperson for WPS Commodore Jay Tarriela condemned the remarks given by China’s Ministry of Defense Wu Qian (MBN8)</i>	

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Disputed PH Sea reef: Manila slams 'irresponsible' Chinese report	West reef: slams	<i>Escalation and Militarization of the West Philippine Sea Conflict</i>	Nomination	<i>Chinese warships</i> have been spotted in Philippine waters since those bilateral "Balikatan" exercises kicked off last week (INQ4)	Nomination, predication, perspectivization, and intensification declare the WPS conflict as increasingly escalatory and militarized. This trajectory is verified through portrayals of warship deployments, armed assets, portrayals of disproportionate confrontations and strategic maneuvers that signal heightened confrontation and instability.
China's 'Monster' coast guard ship back in WPS			Predication	Chinese personnel <i>were recently seen carrying what seemed to be advanced weapons</i> while aboard a RHIB, which could mean they are preparing to take over the Ayungin Shoal. (ABSN2)	
Philippines alarmed by Chinese ships moving closer to shore			Perspectivization	"It's getting closer to the Philippine coastline... and that is alarming," <i>National Security Council spokesman Jonathan Malaya told</i> journalists. (PSN1)	
PCG ship faces daunting task of guarding WPS shoal from Chinese attempt at building 'nature reserve'			Intensification	<i>A single Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) ship faced 22 Chinese vessels</i> in Bajo de Masinloc (Scarborough or Panatag Shoal) in the WPS on Friday, Sept. 19. (MBN3)	

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UN should tell China to 'behave' in West Philippine Sea – Hontiveros	<i>International Support and Alignment in Favor of the Philippine</i>	Nomination	<i>Several of the Philippines' allies have expressed grave concern over China's recent use of water cannons and a sideswiping maneuver against a Philippine vessel. (INQN9)</i>	Nomination, predication, and perspectivization validate international support for the Philippines in the West Philippine Sea. This backing is confirmed through portrayals of global institutions, allied states, and collective condemnation of China's coercive and aggressive actions.
PH allies decry China's aggression near Sandy Cay in West PH Sea		Predication	Foreign ambassadors <i>condemned the incident, describing it as "reckless."</i> (INQN9)	
Philippines is 'not causing problem' in West Philippine Sea, says defense chief		Perspectivization	<i>United States Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III lauded Marcos and the Philippines' continuing efforts to defend its territorial integrity and sovereignty</i> (MBN4)	
Marcos: Lack of progress on West Philippine Sea 'unfortunate'	<i>Violation of International Law and the Rules-Based Maritime Order</i>	Nomination	<i>The WPS is part of the Philippines' exclusive economic zone. (INQN1)</i>	Nomination, predication, perspectivization, and argumentation confirm China as a violator of international law and the rules-based maritime order. This breach is verified through portrayals of China's disregard for the 2016 arbitral ruling, illegal presence in Philippine waters, and persistent challenges to legally recognized maritime entitlements.
PCG says China flag raising at Panatag Shoal 'unlawful'		Predication	<i>Panatag Shoal is situated within the Philippines' 200-nautical mile EEZ that also makes up the WPS. (PSN2)</i>	

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China can't stop PH from asserting rights in WPS —Palace	Perspectivization	"We cannot stop China from making its own narrative. But they cannot also stop us from fighting for our rights based on laws, UNCLOS, arbitral ruling, and for our being [an] independent country," <i>Castro</i> <i>said.</i> (GMAN6)
Marcos: PH claim on West Philippine Sea based on international law, not imagination	Argumentation	President Marcos stressed the Philippines' claim on the disputed portions of the South China Sea, saying <i>the lines that the country draws on its waters are not derived from imagination but from international law.</i> (MBN9)

3.2. *Linguistic Features that Construct Representations of China, the Philippines, and the Conflict*

Table 2 presents the linguistic features identified in the Philippine news reports based on

Halliday's Transitivity System, including sample sentences and the representations constructed. The analysis covers material, verbal, mental, and relational processes, focusing on how participants are positioned and represented within these grammatical structures.

Table 2. Linguistic Features that Construct Representations of China, the Philippines, and the Conflict

Linguistic Features	Sample Sentence	Representation Constructed
Material Process	China ships <i>harass</i> Philippines Navy vessel in WPS. (PSN7)	
Material Process	The China Coast Guard (CGG) <i>fired</i> water cannon against two more vessels (GMAN7)	China is represented as <i>aggressive and provocative.</i>

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Material Process	China <i>has flexed</i> its muscles yet again, illegally <i>blocking</i> a Philippine maritime mission and <i>chasing away</i> Filipino fishermen in the area. (GMAN7)	
Verbal Process	The AFP <i>said</i> such reckless actions were a violation of the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea or COLREG. (PSN7)	
Verbal Process	The Philippine Navy on Monday <i>slammed</i> China's claim that a Philippine frigate had "illegally intruded" in Scarborough Shoal "unlawfully operating" within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone. (INQN6)	The Philippines is represented as a <i>defensive maritime actor</i> .
Verbal Process	The Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) <i>criticized</i> China's Ministry of Defense for allegedly "bullying" Filipino fishermen in the WPS. (MBN8)	
Relational Process	The WPS <i>is part</i> of the Philippines' exclusive economic zone. (INQN1)	
Relational Process	Manila's claims in the South China Sea <i>are derived</i> not from imagination, but from international law. (INQN5)	The Philippines is represented as a <i>legitimate maritime authority</i> .
Relational Process	Philippine law enforcement ships <i>are authorized</i> to challenge any vessels in the WPS (INQ6)	
Mental Process	defense and security officials <i>believe</i> was part of intimidation tactics to personnel manning the BRP Sierra Madre post (MBN5)	
Mental Process	The Philippine Coast Guard on Tuesday <i>recognized</i> the "bravery" of its crew and other for upholding safety and security during a recent encounter with Chinese vessels in the West Philippine Sea. (ABSN10)	The Philippines is represented as a <i>victim of aggression</i> that responds through <i>diplomatic protest</i> rather than escalation.

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Mental Process Filipino fishermen *are hoping* that the PCG will continue to guard them so they are able to do their fish in the waters. (GMAN4)

3.3. Power Relations and Ideological Positions Exist in the Context of the West Philippine Sea Issues

Table 3 presents linguistic evidence of the construction of power relations and ideological positions, and their social implications, through the analysis of dominant ideological operations

in van Dijk's (1998) Ideological Square framework. The analysis reveals asymmetrical power relations in which China is constructed as militarily dominant yet normatively illegitimate through negative-other representation, while the Philippines is positioned as legitimate and defensively justified through systematic positive-self representation.

Table 3. Power Relations and Ideological Positions Exist in the Context of the WPS Issues

Linguistic evidence	Power Relation	Dominant Operation	Identified Ideology	Social Implication
Focus on <i>harassment, aggression, deployment militarized assets</i>	China's military superiority and escalatory power	Emphasize the negative of the 'Other'	China as aggressor	Reinforces public view of China as security threat, heightening public concern and justifying the need for strengthened Philippine defense
Focus on <i>non-compliance with the 2016 arbitral ruling, references to violations of international law</i>	Philippines' normative and legal claims to legitimacy	Emphasize the negative of the 'Other'	China as Violator	Accentuates the image of China as a non-compliant maritime actor, reinforcing public distrust and legitimizing stronger appeals to international legal enforcement
Focus on <i>asserting sovereign rights, focus on Philippine recognized maritime labels, non-aggressive response, and diplomatic protests</i>	Philippines' legally grounded sovereign authority	Emphasize the positive of the 'Self'	The Philippines as Diplomatic Defensive State	Reinforces public perception of the Philippines as a lawful and restrained actor, legitimizing diplomatic engagement and defensive measures as justified responses to external pressures.
Focus on <i>official authoritative voices, official assessments</i>	The Philippines' institutionally grounded power	Emphasize the positive of the 'Self'	The Philippines as Rational and Institutionally Legitimate	Strengthens the perceived credibility of Philippine institutions and normalizes reliance on official state narratives in interpreting the maritime dispute.

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Taken together, the findings demonstrate that the discourse construct polarized ideological positions consistent with van Dijk's Ideological Square. Through the strategic interplay of linguistic features and strategies, the news

4. Discussion

This section presents the critical analysis of Philippine media coverage of China and the West Philippine Sea. The integration of the theoretical frameworks outlined earlier enabled a multi-layered interpretation of the findings. Collectively, these frameworks bridged clause-level linguistic analysis and broader ideological critique, providing a coherent analytical lens for understanding how news discourse constructs power relations and ideological positions.

4.1. Dominant Themes and Discursive Strategies Employed in Philippine News Reports

The analysis identified five dominant themes emerging from the patterned use of textual strategies. Consistent with Said and AlMamoory (2025), who demonstrated how recurring techniques generate thematic formations in media discourse, the present findings show that repeated linguistic realizations systematically construct polarized representations of actors in the West Philippine Sea (WPS) conflict. Each theme reflects how discourse organizes evaluation, agency, and legitimacy along ideological lines.

Beginning with the first dominant theme, Philippine news discourse consistently constructs China as an Aggressive and Provocative Maritime Actor through negative other-presentation realized in nomination, predication, and perspectivization. The recurrent use of militarized labels (e.g., references to warships and missile systems), force-implying predicates (e.g., “harassed” “fired water cannon” “tailed”), and the foregrounding of Beijing as a centralized agent collectively frame China as deliberate and provocative. Also, by privileging

reports construct a systematic dichotomy between aggressor and defender, violator and law-abiding state, thereby shaping public perception of the conflict and the involved maritime actors.

Philippine official sources as primary evaluators, the reports institutionalize these negative assessments and present them as factual rather than interpretive. This pattern aligns with prior studies (Gildore & Syting, 2022; Li, 2025) showing that evaluative lexicalization and strategic sourcing construct China as aggressive in maritime disputes. The repeated portrayals of China as an antagonistic actor may cultivate audience perceptions of enduring external danger, potentially reinforcing public support for assertive diplomatic positioning and strengthened defense preparedness. Through such ideological structuring, media discourse not only reports tension but actively participates in shaping the geopolitical consciousness surrounding the WPS conflict.

In contrast, the Philippines is portrayed through strategic positive self-presentation as lawful and defensively justified, leading to the emergence of the theme The Philippines as a Law-Abiding, Legitimate, and Defensive State. Nomination strategies such as repeated references to the “2016 arbitral ruling” and the “West Philippine Sea” embed Philippine claims within a recognized legal framework, normalizing territorial entitlement. Meanwhile, predication patterns (e.g., “would not yield,” “acting within international law,” “on guard”) convey firmness while emphasizing restraint and legality. On the other hand, perspectivization further reinforces legitimacy by privileging authoritative voices as credible evaluators of events. Consistent with Li et al. (2024) and Ragrario (2025), this reliance on official sources constructs the Philippines as a sovereign in-group actor committed to a rules-based order. The binary opposition—lawful defender versus aggressive violator—demonstrates how discourse sustains

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polarization. Such portrayals may reinforce a collective national self-image centered on legitimacy and defensive sovereignty, while also shaping audience perceptions that diplomatic firmness and security cooperation are justified responses to external threat. Thus, media narratives extend beyond reporting events by reinforcing ideological distinctions that shape public interpretations of power relations and moral responsibility in the disputed space.

Another theme found is the Escalation and Militarization of the WPS conflict constructed through detailed nomination of military assets, security-oriented predication, perspectivization, and lexical intensification. References to specific vessels, weapon systems, and numerical disparities amplify perceptions of imbalance and threat, while verbs such as “deploy” “harass” and “intimidate” frame encounters within a militarized register. Intensifiers highlighting proximity, scale, and capability further intensify the situation, positioning the WPS as an escalating conflict zone. Meanwhile, perspectivization through national security officials and analysts legitimizes interpretations of the dispute as a matter of national defense rather than routine maritime interaction. This discursive pattern aligns with the findings of Mohammed (2024) and Gildore and Syting (2022), who note that militarized lexical choices heighten perceptions of urgency and confrontation. This linguistic pattern may influence audience impressions of the conflict as a continuing security concern, potentially reinforcing public acceptance of stronger defense coordination and more assertive policy responses. Such framing positions the dispute within a broader narrative of geopolitical vulnerability and strategic urgency.

The fourth theme, International Support and Alignment in Favor of the Philippines situates the dispute within a broader geopolitical framework by foregrounding international support for the Philippines. Through the nomination of allied states and institutions such as the United States, Japan, Australia, and the

European Union, the discourse embeds the Philippines within a coalition of supportive actors. Predicates expressing concern, condemnation, or commitment to joint patrols linguistically align these voices with the Philippine position. Perspectivization through ambassadors and officials enhances the authority and global reach of these evaluations. As observed in related studies such as Li et al. (2020) and Suprayogi et al. (2021), naming and sourcing strategies construct collective legitimacy and reinforce institutional validation. This similar pattern supports a narrative of international support that presents the dispute as a shared global concern rather than a purely bilateral issue. This similar pattern supports a narrative of international support, presenting the dispute as a shared global concern rather than a purely bilateral issue. Such framing legitimizes the Philippines’ geopolitical position while normalizing reliance on external alliances as a practical response to regional power imbalances.

Finally, the news reports framed a theme Violation of International Law and the Rules-Based Maritime Order. Recurrent references to the “2016 arbitral ruling” “Philippine exclusive economic zone” and the “rules-based maritime order” anchor the narrative in judicial legitimacy. Similarly, predication choices such as “illegal” “unlawful” and “has no legal basis” assign explicit moral and legal evaluations, while argumentation strategies invoke legal reasoning to substantiate claims of non-compliance. Perspectivization through institutional authorities further consolidates the Philippines’ position as a credible interpreter of maritime legality. Consistent with Wijaya (2023) and Said and AlMamoory (2025), these strategies show how naming, legal reasoning, and authoritative sourcing construct claims to ownership, sovereignty, and normative judgment. This pattern contributes to a moralized geopolitical narrative that frames the conflict as a struggle between lawful order and normative transgression. Such portrayals may shape public views by reinforcing that defending maritime

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rights represents not only a national interest but also a principled commitment to global legal norms. Consequently, news discourse helps shape shared understandings of legitimacy and accountability while sustaining ideological polarization between a lawful in-group and an unlawful out-group in the WPS dispute.

Together, these themes illustrate how Philippine news discourse systematically organizes representation through polarized ideological structures, reinforcing van Dijk's Ideological Square at the thematic level.

4.2. Linguistic Features that Construct Representations of China, the Philippines, and the Conflict

The analysis of linguistic features in the corpus was grounded in Halliday's transitivity system to examine how agency, responsibility, and evaluation are grammatically constructed in Philippine news reports. Transitivity, as the grammar of experience, reveals how events and actors are represented through process types. The findings indicate that material, verbal, relational, and mental processes predominantly shape representations of China, the Philippines, and the conflict. Behavioral and existential processes were not observed, consistent with prior research suggesting that news discourse foregrounds observable actions and institutional evaluations and that physiological and psychological behaviors are rarely foregrounded in China-related narratives (Dai & Hassan, 2023; Zhou & Qin, 2020).

Among the processes, material processes emerge as the most dominant linguistic feature, systematically assigning China the role of Actor in actions occurring within the disputed waters, while positioning the Philippines as Goal or affected participant. High-impact verbs such as "fired" "rammed" and "tailed" construct China as performing concrete and forceful actions, thereby reinforcing an aggressor-victim dynamic. This patterned allocation of agency produces an asymmetrical representation in which China appears as the initiator of hostile

events and the Philippines as the recipient of coercion. Importantly, this ideological positioning is achieved through grammatical structure rather than overt commentary, creating an appearance of neutrality while shaping interpretation. This finding aligns with Zhang et al. (2023) who similarly observed that material processes in maritime reporting foreground China's agency in conflict-related actions. Through this patterned attribution of agency, material processes subtly naturalize a narrative of unequal power relations and reinforce interpretations of the maritime dispute as a conflict driven by unilateral coercion. By associating China with verbs that imply aggression and coercion, news discourse linguistically reinforces an antagonistic image that frames its involvement as disruptive. This patterned attribution of agency guides readers to interpret maritime tensions as primarily driven by the out-group's assertive conduct, strengthening perceptions of strategic hostility and moral imbalance in the conflict.

Furthermore, verbal processes reinforce the asymmetry by consistently positioning the Philippines as the primary Sayer and China as the target of accusations and criticisms. Reporting verbs such as "condemned" "vowed" and "criticized" frame Philippine authorities as actively defending sovereignty through lawful and diplomatic channels. The privileging of institutional voices constructs the Philippines as a credible and legitimate narrator of events. At the same time, China is frequently portrayed as the accused and dismissed, reinforcing its portrayal as a violator of norms. This configuration transforms the dispute into a contest of legitimacy mediated through authoritative speech. Similar patterns were identified by Ding and Dong (2022), who found that verbal processes in news discourse establish authority and moral positioning through selective sourcing. The prominence given to state and allied voices frames the conflict as one negotiated through legal argumentation and international recognition. With this, readers are guided to interpret the tensions as a clash

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between a government portrayed as articulating justified legal claims and an opposing actor depicted as resisting established norms, highlighting perceptions of unequal moral standing in the WPS dispute.

On the other hand, relational processes contribute to the construction of legitimacy by attaching legal and spatial attributes to the Philippines through identifying and attributive clauses. Expressions such as claims being “based on international law” or waters being “part of the Philippine exclusive economic zone” assign institutional and judicial attributes that present territorial entitlement as factual and rule-grounded. By functioning through attribution rather than accusation, relational clauses naturalize these claims as established realities. This aligns with Dai and Hassan’s (2023) observation that relational processes shape national image by assigning values and characteristics to actors. Through these constructions, the Philippines is discursively stabilized as a lawful sovereign actor. By repeatedly attributing legality and spatial ownership to the Philippines, this shifts the interpretive focus from geopolitical rivalry to normative entitlement, positioning the conflict as a matter of lawful jurisdiction rather than strategic competition. Relational processes shape a geopolitical storyline in which adherence to international law serves as the primary basis for evaluating state conduct and determining the perceived credibility of competing territorial claims.

Also, mental processes, although less frequent than the other types of processes, reinforce the victim–aggressor narrative by positioning the Philippines as the Sensor experiencing concern, hope, and alarm in response to China’s actions. By foregrounding cognitive and affective reactions particularly among fishermen and state officials, the discourse emphasizes psychological impact and perceived threat. This representation frames the Philippines as reacting defensively to external provocation rather than initiating confrontation. Similar to Zhang’s

(2024) findings, which show that mental processes express ideological orientation through emotional evaluation, the present analysis shows how affective constructions heighten perceptions of insecurity and vulnerability. Such mental constructions contribute to a geopolitical narrative that emphasizes national insecurity and the need for protective state action. By highlighting fear, vigilance, and anticipatory concern, mental processes may influence interpretations of the dispute as an enduring threat to livelihood and sovereignty, thereby reinforcing public sympathy for defensive policies and heightened security awareness.

Overall, the transitivity patterns demonstrate how linguistic structure shapes ideological meaning. Through the systematic allocation of agency, voice, attributes, and perception, the reports construct a coherent narrative in which China is associated with action and provocation, while the Philippines is aligned with legality, defense, and legitimate authority.

4.3. Power Relations and Ideological Positions Exist in the Context of the WPS Issues

Anchored in van Dijk’s Ideological Square, the recurrent foregrounding of harassment, aggression, and militarized deployment operates as a strategy of negative-other representation.

Through negative predication and the consistent attribution of agency to China in material processes, the discourse reinforces an asymmetrical power dynamic that frames China as militarily dominant and prone to escalation. This pattern does not merely recount events but shapes cognition by reinforcing a polarized in-group/out-group dichotomy that associates the out-group with threat and illegitimacy.

Similarly, Zhang (2019) demonstrates how negative representation functions through delegitimization, showing that Chinese media portray the Philippines as a violator of international law by emphasizing its alleged unlawful presence in contested maritime space.

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This negative portrayal of others is also evident in the study by Marquez and Gochuico (2024), which found that Chinese online news articles consistently portray Philippine maritime activities negatively, framing them as unlawful and provocative. This strategy can be interpreted as a pattern of negative other-representation through van Dijk's lens in which the Philippines is assigned as the out-group highlighted as social actor manifesting unfavorable and threatening attributes.

Moreover, the construction of the Philippines' normative-legal legitimacy simultaneously enacts negative-other representation by foregrounding China's non-compliance with the 2016 arbitral ruling, alleged violations of international law, and the attribution of legality through the "WPS" label. This portrayal reinforced image of China as a violator of the rules-based order and redefines power in judicial rather than military terms, presenting the conflict as a contest over legal authority. These findings align with Li et al. (2025), who demonstrate that strategic language use and agency attribution in media discourse construct China's negative national image by repeatedly associating it with accusatory and transgressive actions, thereby reinforcing asymmetrical power dynamics.

In a comparable study, Raj and Ahembe (2021) also demonstrated that the long-standing "us-versus-them" polarization between in-groups and out-groups was reinforced by the utilization of narrative positioning strategies in online news articles in Nigeria through negative other-presentation. This approach of reporting demonstrates how media perpetuates existing ideologies and fosters divisions among groups.

In contrast to how China is presented, the discourse constructs Philippine power through references to diplomatic assertions of sovereign rights and to official assessments that ground authority in legitimacy and sovereign entitlement. Through perspectivization, nomination strategies, and relational and verbal processes, the Philippines is framed as lawful

and justified within recognized maritime frameworks, reflecting positive self-representation. This pattern reinforces public trust and normalizes state actions as legitimate responses to external pressures. This aligns to the finding of Zhang (2019) who demonstrates how media discourse employs positive self-representation to legitimize national policy, showing that linguistic strategies not only reflect prevailing ideology but actively shape perceptions of political actors and conflicts.

The nomination strategy foregrounds the Philippines' lawful claims through labels that construct it as a legitimate and defensive maritime actor. This serves as an indicator of positive self-presentation by emphasizing sovereignty and institutional authority, while ideologically legitimizing national claims and aligning them with international norms. This finding aligns with Al-Saedi (2020), who likewise observed that news publications used symbolic labels to construct favorable in-group representations and reinforce ideological positioning.

Furthermore, the discourse constructs a power dynamic by foregrounding official authoritative voices that legitimize Philippine claims through appeals to international law, UNCLOS, and the 2016 arbitral ruling. By privileging statements from people in authority, the narrative frames Philippine actions as lawful and grounded in recognized legal frameworks, articulating power through normative legitimacy rather than military strength. This positive self-representation positions the Philippines as a rule-abiding actor within international maritime governance. Likewise, Gildore and Syting (2022) observe that the media portrays the Philippines' resort to international arbitration and diplomatic initiatives as legitimate and responsible actions, reinforcing its image as non-aggressive and legally compliant despite escalating regional tensions.

These ideological operations discussed illustrate how discourse simultaneously accentuates the

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negative qualities of the out-group and the positive qualities of the in-group, thereby reproducing polarized power relations in the West Philippine Sea context. Through patterned emphasis, selective evaluation, and strategic sourcing, news reporting constructs a moral and legal binary in which China is associated with aggression and illegitimacy, while the

5. Conclusion

The findings show that discursive strategies and linguistic features in news reporting construct China as an aggressive and norm-violating actor while positioning the Philippines as a lawful defender of sovereign rights.

By revealing how grammatical patterns and lexical choices shape audience interpretations under the appearance of objectivity, the study highlights the role of media discourse in organizing geopolitical meanings and reinforcing ideological polarization.

Theoretically, the study contributes to Critical Discourse Analysis by extending discussions of

6. Recommendations

Media practitioners and journalism educators may draw on this study's findings to foster greater awareness of how linguistic strategies in news reporting construct representation, reproduce ideology, and shape public perception in geopolitical contexts. Integrating critical discourse awareness into journalism training and media literacy programs may help promote more reflective and ethically grounded reporting practices. In the field of education, language and social studies instructors may incorporate critical analysis of geopolitical news texts into classroom discussions to strengthen students' analytical skills and encourage responsible media consumption. Such applications may also support foreign language educators in addressing learners' perceptions shaped by political narratives, particularly in contexts where media

Philippines is aligned with legality, restraint, and justified defense. Consistent with van Dijk's framework, this structured polarization demonstrates that media discourse not only reflects geopolitical tensions but also actively shapes ideological understandings of the conflict.

geopolitical representation to the Southeast Asian media context and by demonstrating how mainstream news narratives construct polarized understandings of territorial conflict and national identity.

It also contributes to regional media discourse studies by providing empirical evidence of how Philippine news institutions shape public interpretations of geopolitical tensions. The integration of discursive strategy analysis, transitivity analysis, and ideological interpretation offers a multi-layered approach to examining the realization of ideology in news texts.

discourse influences attitudes toward languages associated with geopolitical tensions.

Future studies may expand the scope of analysis by examining a broader corpus of news reports across different Philippine and international media networks covering various geopolitical conflicts. Comparative analyses may reveal cross-national patterns in ideological framing and representation. Also, methodological expansions, such as mixed-method approaches combining discourse analysis with surveys or focus groups may provide deeper insight into how audiences interpret linguistic framing, agency assignment, and evaluative language.

These directions will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how media

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discourse, ideology, and educational practice shape social realities.

7. Limitations of the Study

While this study offers meaningful insights into the discursive construction of China and the Philippines in West Philippine Sea reporting, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the analysis was based on a relatively limited corpus of 51 news reports, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Although the selected articles were drawn from major online news platforms, they may not fully represent the breadth of perspectives across all Philippine media outlets, including regional, alternative, or independent sources. Second, the qualitative and discourse-analytic nature of the study

emphasizes in-depth interpretation rather than statistical measurement, and thus does not provide quantitative validation of linguistic frequency or pattern distribution. These limitations, however, do not diminish the study's contribution; rather, they highlight its exploratory scope and contextual focus. Future research may address these constraints by expanding the dataset, incorporating a wider range of media sources, and integrating quantitative or mixed-method approaches to enhance the robustness and generalizability of the findings.

Supplementary Details

Supplementary Materials & Data Availability Statement

The study does not have any supplementary materials and data availability statement.

Author Contributions

Chryzl Joy O. Deluao - introduction, interpretation of results, and discussion of findings; Dr. Baradillo - comprehensive review, validation, critical refinement of the entire manuscript.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and overall content of this work, in accordance with COPE guidelines

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