

# A Critical Cognitive Discourse Analysis of CSIS's China-related Technological Discourse Based on Proximization Theory

Yating Zhang

School of Foreign Studies, Nanjing University of Science and Technology, Nanjing, China  
zhangyatingchris@163.com

**Abstract:** As China's technological strength forms competition with America, CSIS has published a series of China-related technological commentary articles. The study conducts a critical cognitive discourse analysis on these articles based on proximization theory. The study finds that among three major proximization strategies, spatial proximization strategy is dominant, followed by axiological and temporal proximization strategy. Through spatial proximization, CSIS identifies the Chinese side as the ODCs and the American side as the IDCs, highlighting that the Chinese side threatens or has already harmed America's interests, mainly via its growing global influence and power as well as some "illegal" practices. In terms of temporal proximization, CSIS shows the continuous efforts of China in developing its technology, China's benefits licitly and illicitly gained from America in the history, and the possible adverse situations that may be created by China. At the dimension of axiological proximization, CSIS draws a contrast between the America's positive values and China's negative values, highlighting the ideological conflicts between the two sides. By producing technological discourse, CSIS delivers the idea of "China threat" to suppress China's development and maintain America's leading technological position.

**Keywords:** Proximization theory; CSIS; China-related technological discourse

## 1. Introduction

Throughout the changes of the current international situation, technology has become a key variable that affects and changes the global competition pattern. In recent years, China's rapid development in emerging technologies such as 5G, artificial intelligence, and new energy vehicle manufacturing has challenged America's leadership of the international order that was established after the Second World War<sup>[1]</sup>. Therefore, America has launched an unprecedented technology war against China, in an attempt to choke the development momentum of China's technology through its dominance in the established international technology order, and trigger a series of international conflicts. But such conflicts are often accompanied by distorted perceptions that exaggerate the threat posed by adversaries<sup>[2]</sup>. American think tanks, known as "shadow cabinet", greatly influence decisions of American authority<sup>[3]</sup> by producing and disseminating professional knowledge discourse. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) is a high-ranking policy think tank in America, focusing on foreign policy and national security issues, and developing policy initiatives that focus on the future<sup>[6]</sup>. The study of ideologies embedded in CSIS's technological discourse is, therefore, beneficial for the understanding of America's policy of science and technology towards China. In this study, China-related technological discourse produced by CSIS will be analyzed based on Proximization theory developed by Cap<sup>[4]</sup>.

## 2. Theoretical Foundation

Proximization theory was proposed by Cap<sup>[4]</sup> which studies how peripheral entities encroach or penetrate the central entities from spatial, temporal and axiological dimensions. The peripheral entities, referred to as "outside-the-deictic-center" (ODCs), are usually construed as carriers of negative values such as rivals and enemies, representing "other". In contrast, the central entities are "inside-the-deictic-center" (IDCs), representing "self"<sup>[4][5]</sup>. From the perspective of lexico-grammatical items, proximization theory presents the proximizing threat by narrowing the symbolic distance between the ODCs and IDCs, playing up people's fearful mood or constructing value conflict, thereby providing legitimate basis for the corresponding measures proposed by discourse producers. Table 1 presents three

proximization strategies and their respective key items.

*Table 1: Proximization framework.*<sup>[4]</sup>

Category		Key items
Spatial	S1	Noun phrases (NPs) construed as elements of the deictic center of the DS (IDCs)
	S2	Noun phrases (NPs) construed as elements outside the deictic center of the DS (ODCs)
	S3	Verb phrases (VPs) of motion and directionality construed as markers of movement of ODCs towards the deictic center
	S4	Verb phrases (VPs) of action construed as markers of impact of ODCs upon IDCs
	S5	Noun phrases (NPs) denoting abstract concepts construed as anticipations of impact of ODCs upon IDCs
	S6	Noun phrases (NPs) denoting abstract concepts construed as effects of impact of ODCs upon IDCs
Temporal	T1	Noun phrases (NPs) involving indefinite descriptions construing ODC actual impact acts in alternative temporal frames
	T2	Discourse forms involving contrastive use of the simple past and the present perfect construing threatening future extending infinitely from a past instant
	T3	Verb phrases (VPs) involving modal auxiliaries construing conditions for ODC impact as existing continually between the now and the infinite future
	T4	Noun phrases (NPs) involving nominalizations construing presupposition of conditions for ODC impact to arise anytime in the future
	T5	Discourse forms involving parallel contrastive construals of oppositional and privileged futures extending from the now
Axiological	A1	Noun phrases (NPs) construed as IDC positive values or value sets (ideologies)
	A2	Noun phrases (NPs) construed as ODC negative values or value sets (ideologies)
	A3	Discourse forms no longer than one sentence or two consecutive sentences involving linear arrangement of lexico-grammatical phrases construing materialization in the IDC space of the ODC negative ideologies

### 3. Research Methods

#### 3.1. Research Questions

The study aims to address two questions:

(1) What proximization strategies are used in CSIS's China-related technological commentary articles? And what is the distribution of these strategies in these commentary articles?

(2) How are proximization strategies employed in CSIS's China-related technological discourse?

#### 3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected from the official website of CSIS (<https://www.csis.org>). The articles were filtered through the following parameter: region (China), topic (technology), type (article), article type (commentary). Seven articles were randomly chosen after filtration.

#### 3.3. Data Analysis

Proximization theory will be used to conduct a qualitative and quantitative analysis on CSIS's China-related technological commentary articles. The lexico-grammatical items representing three proximization strategies in technological commentary articles will be counted with the help of UAM Corpus Tool 3.3x, and how items in each category embody proximization will be explored. Cap<sup>[4]</sup> established a keyness frequency threshold which was set at 0.1% to ensure members of a particular category was representative. The threshold will be adopted in this study.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Spatial Proximization

Spatial proximization is “forced construal of the discourse space (DS) peripheral entities (ODCs) encroaching physically upon the DS central entities (IDCs) located in the deictic center of the space”<sup>[4]</sup>. The frequency and key items of the six categories of spatial proximization strategies are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Counts of key lexico-grammatical items of the spatial proximization framework.

Category	Key items	Frequency
S1	the United States, U.S. companies, U.S. company operations, U.S. producers, U.S. auto industry, Trump administration, U.S. investors, Google, U.S. chip firm Nvidia, car makers such as GM, Ford and Tesla	1.21%
	Europe, Japan, allies, European allies, Western markets, WTO, the global industry, those from other market economies, other economies, foreign companies, western companies, the west	
S2	China, Chinese state, China’s state-fueled EV industry, Beijing, Chinese companies, Chinese competitors, Chinese media, Xi, the Chinese government, the Chinese side, China’s rulers, China’s leaders, the ruling Party, Huawei	1.43%
	the Soviets, Russia, Putin, Soviets agents	
S3	expand its control over companies, advance, move “closer than ever to the center of the global stage”, venture out into the world, buy its way into Silicon Valley, pull ahead, export	0.12%
	aim to, attempt to	
S4	distort, threat, have...stolen, have...poached, scoop up, extract, cost, block, hurt, wreak havoc on, complicate, hollow, displace, exploit, undermine, damage, impose, act aggressively abroad, flout, hack	0.33%
S5	potential risks, the worst risks, challenges, retribution, “backdoor” retaliation, recent warnings from...	0.27%
S6	negative consequences, revenue losses, an effect on employment, effects	0.10%
Total spatial proximization		3.46%

#### 4.1.1. NPs Construed as IDCs and ODCs

According to Table 2, among the six categories of spatial proximization strategies, S1 and S2 are the most frequent employed. CSIS frequently construes two groups at the deictic center. The first group includes the American entities such as the United States, its government and American companies. The second group consists of other countries, companies, and international organizations. In contrast, Chinese entities as well as Russia and the Soviet Union are treated as ODCs.

(1) The bargain was based on access to China’s giant market and included an acceptance of the theft the intellectual property by **China**, and a tolerance by **the United States, Europe, and Japan** of China’s predatory trade Practices, where it exploited **Western markets** and ignored rules for international trade and finance.

(2) The failure to call **China** to account for its behavior helped undermine the fabric of globalization and with it, the legitimacy of **institutions like the WTO**.

China is identified as the major member of ODCs, and is usually brought up as the wrongdoer in a world of rule of law. In the above two examples, China is portrayed as the country which undermines the interests of other countries and the world. In terms of IDCs, CSIS positions not only America in the deictic center, but also other regions, countries and even the whole world as IDCs. The strategic positioning of IDCs and ODCs can achieve two functions. First, highlighting that America is on the side of other regions and countries, including the west, the Europe, its key allies such as Japan. Second, emphasizing that impact that will be exerted by China is huge and extensive. Through this technique, the exclusion and suppression of China from the west world is legitimized.

#### 4.1.2. VPs Construed as ODCs' Movement towards, Impact upon IDCs

According to Table 2, S3 mainly concerns VPs conveying China's development and the expansion its influence, while S4 is related to the harm China has done to other countries. The two categories of spatial proximization strategies help arouse readers' the negative feelings towards the rising China, constructing it as the one which hurts IDCs in various ways.

(3) China is clear in what it wants, as it **moves** “**closer** than ever to the center of the global stage.”

(4) China is “more confident and able than ever to realize this goal,” which is to **displace** the United States in economic and technological leadership.

In (3), China's expansion of its sphere of influence is described. The VP “move ‘closer than ever to the center of the global stage’” constructs China as exerting unprecedented influence on the world, implicitly conveying that China may challenge the standing of America as the only superpower. In (4), the verb “displace” highlights that China's advancement constitutes a danger to the America's dominant position in the world economy and technology.

#### 4.1.3. NPs Denoting Abstract Concepts

S5 and S6 mainly concerns the impact of the Chinese side on the American side, which can be anticipated or already realized.

(5) At the same time, the United States needs to mitigate **risks** from being part of a global industry in which Chinese firms are advancing and the Chinese government is expanding its control over companies at home and acting aggressively abroad.

(6) Any estimate has to take into account that some stolen IP cannot be turned into products, making the loss in these instances zero. In other cases, however, the victim company suffers **revenue losses** for years to come.

(7) For some companies, the cost of Chinese IP theft can be fatal (when combined with other business problems). There is also **an effect on employment**.

Technological discourse is often intertwined with the economic discourse. The above examples presents NPs denoting abstract concepts construed as economic impact of China upon America. In (5), CSIS assumes that America may suffer loss if it continues to connect with China, with the blame ascribed to the Chinese government which is portrayed as manipulative and aggressive. In (6) and (7), through the NPs “revenue losses” and “an effect on employment”, CSIS highlights that China can exert multifaceted economic impact on America, including direct revenue losses and other indirect economic factors such as employment.

## 4.2. Temporal Proximization

Temporal proximization is “a forced construal of ‘now’, the speaker's present, as the central point and event frame on the time ‘axis’”<sup>[4]</sup>. Temporal proximization strategy includes five categories, and the key items of the three categories and their frequency are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Counts of key lexico-grammatical items of the temporal proximization framework.

Category	Key items	Frequency
T1	in the first eight months of 2021, in 2017 and 2018, in early 2021, by 2025, over the past five years, a decade ago, for decades, in the past few years, for years, from the start of the opening of their market, between 2000 and 2016, from the 1930s to 1950s	0.22%
T2	has been doing, have (has) done, has been, if...had not, there would be...	0.14%
T3	could, would, may, can, will	0.19%
Total temporal proximization		0.55%

#### 4.2.1. NPs Involving Indefinite Descriptions

T1 involves the use of indefinite descriptions of China's impact in alternative temporal frames, which is, according to Table 3, the most frequently employed among three categories of temporal proximization strategies identified in this study. The following examples show how CSIS constructs the threat of China by narrating past periods of time.

(8) Yes, the Chinese licitly and illicitly acquired American IP **from the start of the opening of their**

**market**, and it reached a fever pitch through cyber espionage **between 2000 and 2016** (more a reflection of our inattention and lax defenses than of Chinese skill).

One technique for CSIS to convince readers of the huge damage caused by China to America is to describe the duration of China's activities as very long. For instance, in (8), CSIS portrays China as the one which has exploited America's intellectual achievements by employing an indefinite description of time "from the start of the opening of their market", which denotes the time when China embarked on reform and opening up. The sense of impact is further strengthened by using a general period of time "between 2000 and 2016" to describe China's cyber espionage as having been in an extremely active state, implying that American has suffered a great loss from China.

#### 4.2.2. Discourse Forms Involving Contrastive Use of the Simple Past and the Present Perfect

T2 involves the use of simple past tense and present perfect to construct the threat posed by China, which can extend from the past to future. America has been concerned about China's development in the automatic vehicle sector. On May 14, 2024, the American government announced to increase the tariff on Chinese automatic vehicles from 25% to 100%. CSIS constructs the threat from China's fast-growing automatic vehicle sector by highlighting its government's support for the automatic vehicle sector through the simple past and the present perfect tense.

(9) China **issued** broad plans for intelligent and connected vehicles in 2017 and 2018. Since then it **has provided** substantial state support via subsidies and government guidance funds for companies to carry out R&D, testing, and manufacturing and provide related services, such as robo-taxis.

(10) Although there **have been** severe restrictions on road testing due to safety concerns, regulations in early 2021 **expanded** approval for such activity.

In (9), "issued" and "has provided" are used together to convey that the plans issued by China in 2017 and 2018 led to the government's continued state support for this sector, which may extend to future. In (10), the use of "have been" followed by "expanded" highlights that the previous severe restrictions on road testing was already reduced, indicating that that China's support for the automatic vehicle sector has been further enhanced.

#### 4.2.3. VPs Involving Modal Auxiliaries.

T3 concerns verb phrases involving modal auxiliaries construing conditions for China's impact as existing continually between the now and the infinite future.

(11) Yet, if negotiations break down, and we enter a period of extended hostility, retaliation from Beijing **will** go beyond counter tariffs.

"Will" is a modal auxiliary denoting the possible situations of the future. In (11), CSIS believes that if a negotiation between China and America is not achieved, China will retaliate against America. The use of media-valued modal auxiliary creates the sense that China is likely to harm America in the future, which facilitates and legitimizes the American side to take actions to contain China's development.

### 4.3. Axiological Proximization

Axiological proximization is a forced construal of a gathering ideological conflict between the "home values" of the DS central entities, IDCs, and the "alien", antagonistic values of the ODCs, which occupy the conceptual periphery of the DS<sup>[4]</sup>. Table 3 shows the two categories of axiological proximization strategies.

Table 4: Counts of key lexico-grammatical items of the Axiological Proximization Framework.

Category	Key items	Frequency
A1	rules and norms of international trade, the strongest scientific base, leading technology companies, innovative culture, net contributor, tolerance, the lead in research and innovation	0.11%
A2	the heavy hand of the state, state-led push, Leninist orientation, Marxism, party-friendly narrative, IP theft, Tiananmen massacre, cyber espionage, theft of intellectual property (IP), economic espionage, economic inequality, mass surveillance, Chinese spying, cybercrime, illegal subsidy, maneuver, force, anti-Americanism, nationalist and anti-American sentiments, elite capture, cooption, predatory policies, trade war, policy of using unfair practices, protected domestic market	0.78%
Total axiological proximization		0.89%

#### 4.3.1. NPs Construed as IDC Positive Values or Value Sets

A1 concerns the attribution of positive values to the American side, which helps construct a positive image of America.

(12) The United States has innate advantages, with **the strongest scientific base** in the world, **leading technology companies** and an **innovative culture** that others find difficult to match.

(13) The United States was a **net contributor** to the world stock of knowledge in the nineteenth century, and its innovations spread to other countries, given the absence of international IP protections.

In (12), CSIS uses NPs “the strongest scientific base” “leading technology companies” “innovative culture” to describe the innate advantages of America’s technological strength, showing America’s dominant position in the world technological field. Besides, in (13), CSIS also employs NPs such as “net contributor” to show that America has contributed a lot to world stock of knowledge in the past, emphasizing that America plays a positive role in the world.

#### 4.3.2. NPs Construed as IDC Negative Values or Value Sets

According to Table 4, the frequency of A2 is much higher than A1, indicating that CSIS is more inclined to use negative value or value sets to represent the negative “other”. In contrast to the positive values that are attributed to America, the large amount of negative values are attributed to China, resulting in readers’ disagreeable feelings towards China.

(14) The long-term cost has been to create Chinese competitors supported by government subsidies, **predatory policies**, and **espionage**, who are free to compete in the global market.

(15) Given China’s ambitious **state-led push**, its clear effort to build a free-standing AV sector, and the potential risks from Chinese AVs collecting data in the United States, the decoupling option would seem to make a lot of sense.

In (14), CSIS attributes Chinese companies’ development to the practice of espionage and the government’s predatory policies, which aims to portray Chinese companies’ development as illegal, making the image of the Chinese companies negative. This is also evidenced in (15), CSIS ascribes the development of Chinese autonomous vehicle sector to the push of the government which they believe will pose potential risks of collecting data in America.

## 5. Conclusion

Taking proximization theory as the analytical framework, the study conducts qualitative and quantitative analysis on the CSIS China-related technological discourse. There are two major findings in this study. Firstly, In CSIS’s China-related technological commentary articles, spatial proximization is the most frequently employed strategy, accounting for 3.46%, followed by axiological and temporal proximization strategies, which account for 0.89% and 0.55% respectively. Secondly, through spatial proximization, CSIS identifies China, Chinese government, Chinese companies as ODCs, while puts America, American companies, their allies and sometimes even the whole world as the IDCs. CSIS places the American side in the position of victim and highlight that Chinese side may or has done harm to America’s interests because of its growing influence and “illegal” practices. With regard to temporal proximization, CSIS shows the continuous efforts of China in developing its technology such as automatic vehicles, China’s benefits licitly and illicitly obtained from America in the history, and the possible situations that may be created by China, demonstrating that as a rising technology power, China threatens America’s technological leadership. In terms of axiological proximization, CSIS emphasizes America’s power in technology, economy and innovation, etc. which forms contrast with the China’s practice of espionage, political pressure, etc. By producing technological discourse, CSIS tries to deliver an idea of “China threat” so as to suppress China’s development and maintain America’s leading technological position.

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