

A Cognitive Construal of English News Headlines: Prominence Dimension*

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Abstract—As windows through which people get in touch with the world, English news headlines are extensively studied in both journalistic and linguistic fields. However, little literature has been found to approach their demonstrations and motivations behind. Cognitive Linguistics devotes itself to find out the motivations behind language demonstrations. From the perspective of prominence, one dimension of cognitive construal, this paper discusses the demonstrations and motivations of the news headlines of five different e-papers reporting the same news events. It is concluded that (1) different headlines in different e-papers give prominence to different parts of news events. (2) e-papers' different attitudes towards the news events cognitively motivate the different demonstrations in terms of prominence.

Index Terms—English news headline, cognitive construal, prominence, demonstration, cognitive motivation

I. INTRODUCTION

Very often, news is seen as the “window” from which people see the world in that news plays an essential role in keeping touch with the world. Being the “eye” of news, news headlines are certainly of greater importance in this regard. As Ungerer (2000, p. 48) put, “a headline describes the essence of a complicated news story in a few words”. In other words, a news headline quickly informs the readers of what the news is about. It can therefore be said that the importance of a news headline is that it can help the readers to decide whether or not to go on reading it by presenting the news in certain demonstrations. Due to the importance of English news headlines, they have been extensively studied in both journalistic and linguistic fields. However, little literature has been found to approach their demonstrations and motivations behind.

Cognitive Linguistics is “an approach to language that is based on our experience of the world and the way we perceive and conceptualize it” (Ungerer & Schmid, 2001, p. 36). One key hypothesis is that language ability is part of general cognitive abilities. Therefore, Cognitive Linguistics devotes itself to find out the motivations behind language demonstrations. Construal, a core concept of Cognitive Linguistics, is a human cognitive ability, which means people tend to see the same scene in different ways. Construal distinguishes itself into four dimensions. The present paper attempts to approach English news headlines from one construal dimension: prominence, specifically devoted to the following two questions: (1) How are the news headlines demonstrated? (2) What are the cognitive motivations of their demonstrations? This paper identifies itself as a combination of qualitative, quantitative and comparative study. The data sources are the English news headlines about China's five news events in 2015 from five e-papers: *The Washington Post*, *CNN*, *The Times*, *China Daily* and *The Independent*.

II. PROMINENCE DIMENSION OF COGNITIVE CONSTRUAL

This part presents the theoretical framework of the study, starting with an overview of the notion of Construal in general, and then discussing prominence, the construal dimension to be employed in this paper, in particular.

A. Notion of Construal

As one essential concept of Cognitive Linguistics, Construal was first proposed in Langacker (1987). He defines Construal as “the relation between a speaker (or hearer) and the situation that he conceptualizes or portrays as an important parameter of linguistic meaning” (Langacker, 1987, p. 78). Langacker (1991, p. 4) refines the definition of Construal, pointing out that people's abilities to perceive and describe the same situation in different ways are what Construal refers to. In the meantime, other scholars (Taylor, 2002, p. 11; Hamawand, 2005, p. 194; Langacker, 2008, p.55) all discuss the concepts in one way or another. All these discussions can be boiled down to the idea that construal is a human ability to interact with the world, and accordingly finds expression in language demonstrations. To put it

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more straightforwardly, construal means that different people tend to perceive and conceptualize a situation in different ways, which results in different language demonstrations. In the words of Taylor (2002, p. 11), “the very wording we choose in order to linguistically encode a situation rests on the manner in which the situation has been mentally construed”.

Cognitive Construal can distinguish itself in different dimensions. According to Langacker (2008, p.55), it finds expression in four dimensions: specificity, focusing, prominence and perspective. The following section presents the dimension, prominence, the one this paper employs to approach English news headlines.

B. Prominence

To express the same meaning, language users may use many different language structures which display numerous kinds of asymmetries that are reasonably considered matters of prominence (Langacker, 2008, p. 66). Prominence refers to the selection of a certain body of conceptual content in an expression to be on stage as the focus of attention in order to make this component salient. Whether a certain component is given some salience or not relates not only to the conventional semantic values, but also to the Construal employed by different language users. In Cognitive Construal, there are two particular sorts of prominence: profiling and trajector/ landmark alignment (Langacker, 2008, p. 66), which is to be discussed in the following part.

1. Profiling

A particular conception in an expression, which is a basis for the meaning of the expression, is called the conceptual base. This base can be broadly identified as the maximal scope and narrowly the immediate scope which is put onstage as the main area of viewing attention. All around the onstage region, a particular substructure that attracts most of the attention is called the profile (Langacker, 2008, p. 66).

Elbow and *hand* illustrated in figure 1 share the same maximal scope, the overall shape of the human body and the immediate scope, the conception of an arm. However, the two words undoubtedly refer to different parts of the arm. The two words are picked out within the immediate scope to be the profile or referent that is drawn with bold lines in figure 1 below.

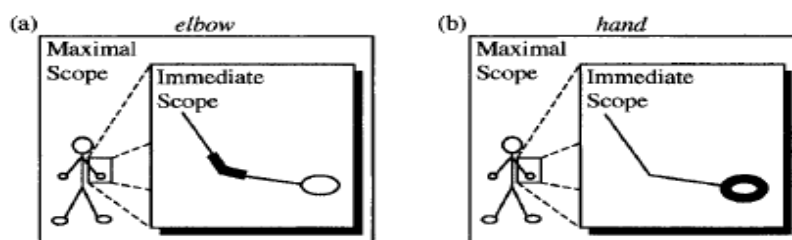


Figure 1 ‘Elbow’ and ‘hand’ (Langacker, 2008, p. 64)

Just like *elbow* and *hand* here that share the same maximal and immediate scope but different profiles, this situation is true of many other expressions. For instance, *January*, *February*, *March*, etc. evoke the same conceptual content, the year months, but the meanings are different for their profiling different substructures, the distinct parts of a year.

An expression cannot only profile a thing, but also a relationship. A thing usually refers to a noun that specifies an area which is an abstract description of a group of interconnected entities, and a relationship embodies the interconnection between them. As is shown in Figure 2, the four expressions all evoke kinship relations.

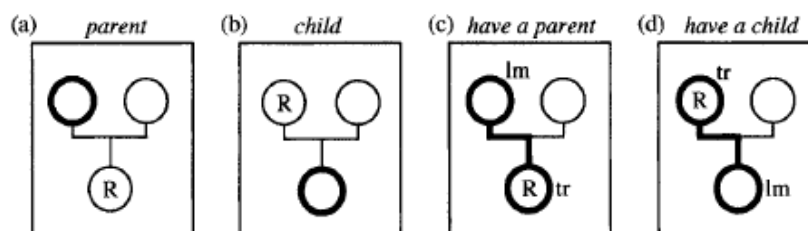


Figure 2 ‘Have a parent’ and ‘have a child’ (Langacker, 2008, p. 69)

The bold circle in Figure 2 is the profiled part, with *parent* and *child* in (a) and (b) both profiling a “thing”, while *have a parent* and *have a child* in (c) and (d) a “relationship”. And R refers to the reference individual. Although *have a parent* and *have a child* in (c) and (d) contrast in directionality, they share the same profiles. The two expressions are contrast residing in that *have a parent* describes a child, while *have a child* is the description of a parents. The trajector and landmark shown in Figure 2 is discussed in the next section.

2. Trajector/ Landmark Alignment

Trajector and landmark are needed here to make distinctions between expressions with different meanings but

sharing the same conceptual base and profiling the same relationship within it. The most prominent participant, called the trajectory, is the primary focus within the profiled relationship. While some other participant that is made prominent as a secondary focus is called a landmark (Langacker, 2008, p. 70).

To use the two prepositions *in front of* and *behind* that are different in the trajector/ landmark alignment as an example, we can easily find out that the two prepositions have the same content: each manifests the relative spatial location of two things. Besides, the situation is true of the profiled relationship: *X in front of Y* embody the same referential relationship as *Y behind X*. The semantic meanings of the two expressions are different as a result of their different degrees of prominence conferred on the relational participants. *X in front of Y* is used to determine the position of X (the former participant), while *Y behind X* is an obvious reveal of the location of Y (the latter participant). For example:

- (1) a. Henry is in front of Helen.
b. Helen is behind Henry.

The two sentences here are profiling the same relationship, that is to say, *Henry is in front of Helen* and *Helen is behind Henry* show us the same position of the two participants. However, the semantic contract lies in the asymmetries between the two: (a) is positioning *Henry* while (b) gives the position of *Helen*. As a result, the trajector and landmark in the two sentences are switched, with (a) regarding *Henry* as trajector and *Helen* landmark and (b) the opposite.

Not only can the person that has been discussed in the preceding part be the trajector or landmark in focal prominence, a relationship shown by some prepositions can also do a lot to the identifying of trajector and landmark. And they share the same way of analyzing. For example:

- (2) a. He closed the door before I arrive.
b. I arrive after he closed the door.

The two prepositions *before* and *after* both profile a relationship of temporal precedence between the two events that are also called the relational participants. *Before* and *after* specify the same referential relationship, but the semantic contents of the two sentences have changed. In (a), the trajector is *He closed the door*, while in (b), it is *I arrive* that acts as trajector.

Actually, semantic contrast derives from their choice of trajector and landmark rather than the content or profiling. These expressions prove that “how prominent a particular entity is—whether it functions as profile, trajector, landmark, or none of the above—depends on the Construal imposed by the linguistic elements employed, in accordance with their conventional semantic values” (Langacker, 2008, p. 73). It means that different ways of Construal to a situation are the reasons for different prominence of a sentence.

III. COGNITIVE CONSTRUAL OF ENGLISH NEWS HEADLINES: PROMINENCE

This part elaborates on the demonstrations of English news headlines and the cognitive motivations behind from the dimension of prominence discussed above. The data are collected from the news headlines reporting *70th anniversary of end of WWII* from the five e-papers.

A. Demonstrations

A news headline is a summary of the whole news and to attract readers' attention, e-papers try to give prominence to certain parts, which are construed as the profiled part or trajector in a headline. The following are demonstrations of news headlines on the event of *70th anniversary of end of WWII* by the five e-papers. Table 1 shows the news headlines from *The Washington Post*

TABLE 1
NEWS HEADLINES ABOUT 70TH ANNIVERSARY OF END OF WWII FROM THE WASHINGTON POST

News Headlines	Time
<i>China showcases advanced ballistic missiles at military parade</i>	Sep. 3, 2015
<i>China's Xi uses parade to show he's in charge and pursuing national revival</i>	Sep. 3, 2015
<i>China's military parade was a 'peaceful' show of force</i>	Sep. 3, 2015
<i>China to cut 300,000 soldiers, speed up military modernization</i>	Sep. 3, 2015
<i>China sends warships into Bering Sea as Obama concludes Alaska visit</i>	Sep. 3, 2015

There are altogether five headlines here, and by analyzing the content of them, especially the third and fifth ones, the author finds out that many words and expressions are used differently from their usual usage. *'Peaceful'* in the third one appearing with a single quotation mark is showing the opposite opinion of the e-paper. *Warships* in the fifth one is a provocation of the relation between China and US.

Following the display of news headlines from *The Washington Post*, the trajectors and landmarks are listed in Table 2 so that their analysis can be more easily and intuitively.

TABLE 2
PROMINENCE IN 70TH ANNIVERSARY OF END OF WWII FROM THE WASHINGTON POST

Trajector	<i>China</i>	<i>China's Xi</i>	<i>China's military parade</i>	<i>China</i>	<i>China sends... Sea</i>
Primary landmark	<i>advanced ballistic missiles</i>	<i>parade</i>	<i>a 'peaceful' show of force</i>	<i>300,000 soldiers</i>	<i>as Obama ... visit</i>
Secondary landmark	<i>at military parade</i>	<i>show ... revival</i>		<i>speed ... modernization</i>	

Besides the trajector, the secondary landmark is also what the e-paper wants to give prominence to. Because some headlines do not have secondary landmark, the blank space in the table is inevitable. So are the following tables concerning over this problem. The trajectors of the headlines are all China and the thing related to China and the landmarks are mostly the purpose of the action. *At military parade* in the first headline is added to show the formality of this show. Following the display and analysis of the headlines from *The Washington Post*, the ones from *CNN* are listed in Table 4.26.

TABLE 3
NEWS HEADLINES ABOUT 70TH ANNIVERSARY OF END OF WWII FROM CNN

News Headlines	Time
<i>Forgotten ally? China's unsung role in World War II</i>	Sep. 1, 2015
<i>China celebrates World War II victory</i>	Sep. 3, 2015
<i>Massive military parade to begin in Beijing shortly</i>	Sep. 2, 2015
<i>China flexes muscles with WWII military extravaganza</i>	Sep. 3, 2015
<i>Blue sky vanishes after Beijing's big parade</i>	Sep. 4, 2015

In the five headlines, two of them are nominals and three are simple sentences, so the prominent part is at the beginning of each headline. The first four ones give prominence to China and the parade, while the *blue sky vanishes* in last one shows that the e-paper turns its attention to the environment in China. The specific analysis of them is shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4
PROMINENCE IN 70TH ANNIVERSARY OF END OF WWII FROM CNN

Trajector	<i>Forgotten ally</i>	<i>China</i>	<i>Massive military parade</i>	<i>China</i>	<i>Blue sky</i>
Primary landmark	<i>China's unsung role</i>	<i>World War II</i>	<i>in Beijing</i>	<i>muscles</i>	<i>Beijing's big parade</i>
Secondary landmark	<i>in World War II</i>	<i>victory</i>	<i>shortly</i>	<i>With ...extravaganza</i>	

The trajectors of the five headlines are China, parade and environment condition. And with these parts being their prominence, the editor shows readers with information that can attract their attention. Taking the secondary landmark into consideration, the author finds out that the reason for the parade and ways of its celebration are also what the editor pays most attention to.

TABLE 5
NEWS HEADLINES ABOUT 70TH ANNIVERSARY OF END OF WWII FROM CHINA DAILY

News Headlines	Time
<i>Foreign troops marching in unity in Beijing parade</i>	Sep. 4, 2015
<i>Criticism of parade addressed</i>	Sep. 3, 2015
<i>A watershed moment in China's history</i>	Sep. 4, 2015
<i>China to cut troops by 300,000: President Xi</i>	Sep. 3, 2015
<i>V-Day Parade: Reassurance to world of China's peaceful trend</i>	Sep. 3, 2015
<i>Xi attends the ceremony with other leaders</i>	Sep. 3, 2015
<i>China holds epic V-Day parade</i>	Sep. 3, 2015
<i>Veterans honored for heroism in war</i>	Sep. 3, 2015

The eight headlines use nominals and simple sentences only and the editor shows readers with different prominence by using different parts as subjects. Instead of showing only the news event, the editor here pays attention to many other aspects which act as trajectors in Table 6.

TABLE 6
PROMINENCE IN 70TH ANNIVERSARY OF END OF WWII FROM CHINA DAILY

Trajector	<i>Foreign troops</i>	<i>Criticism</i>	<i>A watershed moment</i>
Primary landmark	<i>in unity</i>	<i>parade addressed</i>	<i>in China's history</i>
Secondary landmark	<i>in Beijing parade</i>		

Trajector	<i>China</i>	<i>Reassurance</i>	<i>Xi</i>	<i>China</i>	<i>Veterans</i>
Primary landmark	<i>troops</i>	<i>world</i>	<i>the ceremony</i>	<i>Epic V-Day parade</i>	<i>heroism</i>
Secondary landmark	<i>President Xi</i>	<i>China's ...trend</i>	<i>with other leaders</i>		<i>in war</i>

By examining the eight headlines, the editor finds out that the topics involved are various. *China Daily* belongs to China, so the editor would focus on many aspects of the news to meet the need of the readers.

B. Motivations

After a detailed study on the demonstrations of prominence shown in the previous part, the author concluded that the prominent parts in different e-papers are different most of the time.

And in order to find out the motivations of their demonstrations, five typical headlines reporting the same news from the five e-papers are selected from the headlines displayed in the previous part. The five headlines here are all talking about the 70th anniversary of end of WWII, and different sentence structures do a lot to the different prominence of them.

TABLE 7
TYPICAL NEWS HEADLINES ABOUT 70TH ANNIVERSARY OF END OF WWII

E-paper	News Headlines	Time
<i>The Washington Post</i>	<i>China showcases advanced ballistic missiles at military parade</i>	Sep. 3, 2015
<i>CNN</i>	<i>China flexes muscles with WWII military extravaganza</i>	Sep. 3, 2015
<i>The Times</i>	<i>Beijing shows off carrier-killer missile that challenges US</i>	Sep. 4, 2015
<i>China Daily</i>	<i>Veterans honored for heroism in war</i>	Sep. 4, 2015

The five headlines in Table 7 are the typical ones under this topic from the five e-papers. And the theory of trajector/landmarks alignment leads readers to pay attention not only to the trajector but also to the secondary landmark which carries some new information. So only by examining the trajectors and the secondary landmarks in the five news headlines in detail in Table 8, can we find out the reasons for giving different parts prominence.

TABLE 8
PROMINENCE IN TYPICAL NEWS HEADLINES

E-papers	<i>The Washington Post</i>	<i>CNN</i>	<i>The Times</i>	<i>China Daily</i>
Trajector	China	China	Beijing	Veterans
Primary landmark	advanced ballistic missiles	muscles	carrier-killer ... US	heroism
Secondary landmark	at military parade	with ... extravaganza		In war

From the table above, we find out that in a news headline, every component is essential and the order of the components is of greater importance in showing the e-papers' special intentions. Although the headlines selected are all talking about the same news event, the e-papers still show their different inclinations by giving different components salience. And the motivation for the different demonstrations of prominence is the e-papers' different attitudes towards the news event.

Firstly, *The Washington Post* shows its prejudice towards China by intentionally informing readers of China's comprehensive national strength. The headline involves three entities, *China*, *advanced ballistic missiles* and *military parade*, and it is more likely to be analyzed by the usage of trajector and landmark so as to explain the part of the news headline that receives higher degree of prominence. *China*, being the subject, is definitely the most essential part of the headline, that is to say, the trajector. And *showcase* profiles the relationship between the trajector *China* and the primary landmark *advanced ballistic missiles*, the place adverbial *at military parade* informs us of the situation in which these important weapons are showcased. Although the place adverbial here acts only as a secondary landmark, this part is of greater importance not only to the e-paper but also to the content of the news.

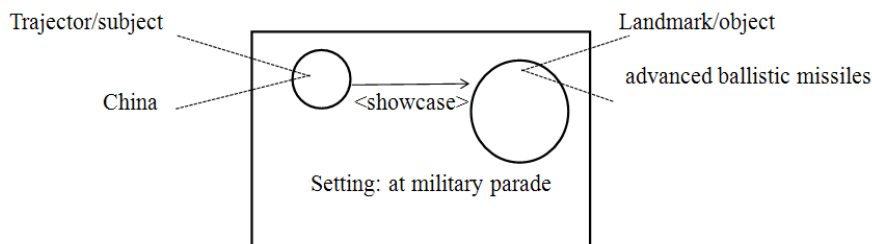


Figure 3 China showcases advanced ballistic missiles at military parade

Actually the headline can be illustrated by an action chain with *China* being the agent and *advanced ballistic missiles* the patient. But the setting *at military parade* acting as the secondary landmark attracts readers' attention. The circle on the left in Figure 3 is the trajector *China*, and that on the right is the landmark *advanced ballistic missiles*. The box here is the setting in which the action is taking place.

Without the secondary landmark, the sentence *China showcases advanced ballistic missiles* is also coherent and can be understood clearly by the readers. Therefore, we can treat this part as a showing of e-papers' special intention. Appearing at the end of the headline, the place adverbial is regarded as the information focus and attracts the reader's attention by telling us it is *at military parade* and nowhere else that the *advanced ballistic missiles* were shown. Only in this kind of formal situation, can people get the authoritative information of China's military force. If the situation is not mentioned, the message before it becomes nonsense immediately. So this arrangement of information can show e-papers' prejudice towards China and want the world to know that China is becoming more and more powerful which should arouse their attention.

The second headline listed here is from *CNN*, and the e-paper here adopts a sarcastic attitude towards the news event. The headline involves also three entities, with *China* being the trajector, *muscles* the primary landmark and *with WWII military extravaganza* the secondary landmark. There is no doubt that *China* receives more salience and is definitely the most prominent part. The relationship of the three entities here can be illustrated in action chain by the Figure 4.

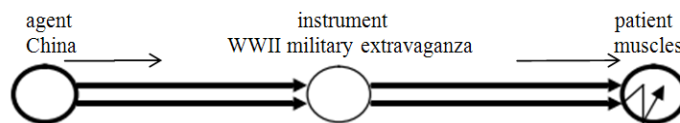


Figure 4 China flexes muscles with WWII military extravaganza

In the action chain, the agent *China* is the energetic head and is thus the most prominent part, the patient *muscles* the tail, and the instrument an indispensable part for the headline because of the transitive verb. From the content of the headline, it expresses almost the same opinion as the one from *The Washington Post*, but the sentence structures are different and thus profile different sentence elements. *China flexes muscles* is already a complete sentence with subject, verb and object, but the adverbial *with WWII military extravaganza* is emphasized here to show the e-papers' special intention that it is by *the military extravaganza* that China shows its military force. The thing worth mentioning here is the meaning of *extravaganza*. According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary* (2009, p. 709) by the Commercial Press, *extravaganza* refers to "a large, expensive and impressive entertainment". And its adjective form *extravagant* tells us more. Also from the *Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary* (ibid), we find that *extravagant* is a derogatory term and it mainly refers to "spending a lot more money or using a lot more of something than you can afford and than it is necessary". By using this particular word in the end of the headline, the editor may want to show his sarcasm towards China's anniversary.

What is more, *The Times* expresses its vicious provocation by relating China's *carrier-killer missile* with US. To be specific, this headline makes *Beijing* serve as the trajector and *carrier-killer missile* the landmark. Also the verb which relates the trajector to the landmark here shows us some of its prejudice. According to the principle of end focus, the attributive clause *that challenges US* gives readers more information. Actually the military parade held is to show that China is not the "sick man of the Asia" as it was one hundred years ago. It has become a modernized country with quiet powerful military force. But the main target of this parade cannot be the USA as *The Times* reported in this headline. This headline leads readers to think about the relationship between China and US instead of the military parade itself. As a result, because of the e-papers' special wording and sequence, the readers' attention has been distracted to the relationship between China and US.

Different from the other three, the one from *China Daily* is paying attention to various aspects of China and the objective attitude of the e-paper in any of its headline. The typical one selected here is a nominal. There are three elements here, with the head of the nominal *veterans* being the trajector, *heroism* the primary landmark and *in war* the secondary landmark. Moreover, the headline is presented with the structure of passive voice, which gives prominence to the patient in the action chain. Being a structure adopting passive voice, there are certainly other unexpressed elements, for example, by whom, in where or with what. But the elements are omitted on purpose which can be good evidence to show the e-papers' intentional prominence. Without mentioning the agent, the interaction between agent and patient is listed below in Figure 5.

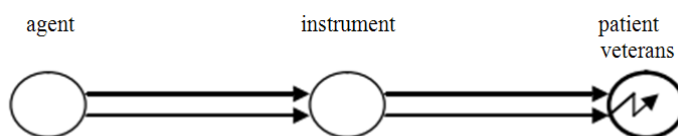


Figure 5 Veterans honored for heroism in war

From Figure 5, we find out that the agent and the instrument have not been pointed out and the patient here is the only part in the action chain. Putting at the beginning of the sentence, the patient gains the prominent place and acts as the prominent part. The using of passive voice can put the patient on the most prominent position and attract the readers' attention when they see the headline at the first sight, which also shows the e-papers' special intention of objectively praising the veterans and confirming their irreplaceable position in WWII.

IV. CONCLUSION

From the dimension of prominence within the framework of cognitive construal, this paper discusses the English news headlines about China's five news events in 2015, focusing on the demonstrations of five different e-papers, *The Washington Post*, *CNN*, *The Times*, *China Daily* and *The Independent*, and the cognitive motivations behind the different demonstrations. The findings are summarized as follows. First, different headlines in different e-papers give prominence to different parts of news events which are used as trajectors and secondary landmarks. The trajectors are always the subjects of news headlines. All the e-papers pay most attention to China, but different e-papers show their

different prominence besides China. *The Washington Post* gives prominence to the purpose of the military parade. *CNN* pays most of its attention to the news itself and the environmental condition in China. *The Times* relates the military parade in China with US. The prominent parts in *China Daily* are various with many topics of the news event talked about. Second, it is the e-papers' different attitudes towards the news event that affect greatly the motivation of different demonstrations in terms of prominence. *The Washington Post* shows its prejudice, and *CNN* is obviously showing its sarcasm towards the news event. *The Times* reports this event negatively. In *China Daily*, various topics about this news event are involved which shows that its high attention is objectively paid to this news event itself.

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