EDU AKOMMEDIA : JURNAL ILMU PENDIDIKAN
E-ISSN: 3046-4927
Vol. 3, No. 2, Maret 2026

A Critical Discourse Analysis of Corporate Response to Trump's Tariff Policy in CNN Coverage

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Abstract

This research investigates the prompt reaction of corporation to the renewed tariff regulations enacted by president Trump in 2025, contentrating on presing adjustment tactics actoss different industy categories. By examining publik discosures and finansial report from leading US firms, we record notable price hikes impacting consumer products, automotive items, and retail goods. Our results indicate that firms such as Walmart, ferrari, Ford, Best Bay, Mattel, and Prokter & Gameble have diclared or initiated price in creases between 5% & 10% due to tariff rates escalating to 25-145% o nan assortment of imported items. The study reveals that the costs associated with tariffs arlargely transferred to consumers instead of being absorbed by the bussinesses, with projected increases in household expenses estimeted at $1,155 to $1,397 each year. The polotical pressure from the administration urging companies to “absorb” the tariff costs has fostered conflict between economic realities and governmental demands. This study enhences the comprehension of the microeconomic pathwais of trade policy and offers practical evidence of the impacts of tariffs in modern US market.

Keywords: tariffs, trade policy, price transmission, corporate strategy, consumer impact

1. Introduction

In today's media environment, the manner in which economic stories are constructed and delivered significantly influences how the public perceives governmental policies and corporate actions. When news outlets cover intricate topics like how trade tariffs affect consumer pricing, the selection of words, story organization, and portrayal of key players carry inherent bias. These components embody specific worldviews and possess the capacity to mold public sentiment through nuanced yet influential mechanisms (Prahallad & Mamidi, 2025; Fairclough, 2023).

This issue gains particular importance when examining media reports about trade policies implemented during Trump's presidency and their effects on large American corporations including Walmart and Target. Journalistic pieces that address pricing adjustments following import duties do more than simply present information—they actively create social understanding through deliberate discourse strategies (Meng, 2025; Salim, 2023).

To comprehend this process of meaning creation, Theo van Leeuwen's (2008) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) methodology provides an extensive theoretical structure. Van Leeuwen's framework examines how social participants are portrayed in media narratives, how specific behaviors gain acceptance through legitimization mechanisms, and what language are employed to contextualize public matters. Using this perspective, we can expose how news reporting extends beyond mere event documentation to actively influence our comprehension of accountability, acceptable conduct, and which viewpoints receive emphasis (van Leeuwen, 2008; Machin & Mayr, 2024).

This study will examine CNN's reporting on retail price adjustments by major companies following tariff implementation, employing three central elements of van Leeuwen's framework: social actor representation, legitimization strategies, and language techniques with contextual framing. The research seeks to reveal how media narratives can shape public understanding of economic and political accountability, along with the broader consequences for democratic processes and public responsibility (Richardson, 2023; Prahallad & Mamidi, 2025).

2. Literature Review

a. Critical Discourse Analysis: Theoretical Foundations

Critical Discourse Analysis has emerged as a significant methodological approach for examining the relationship between language, power, and ideology in various forms of communication. Van Dijk (2001) established CDA as an interdisciplinary approach that examines how discourse reproduces social dominance and inequality. This foundation has been further developed by scholars who recognize that discourse is not merely descriptive but constitutive of social reality.

Theo van Leeuwen's contribution to CDA theory, particularly his framework for analyzing social actor representation, has become instrumental in media studies. Van Leeuwen (2008) argues that the ways social actors are represented in discourse reflect and reinforce particular power relations and ideological positions. His taxonomy of social actor representation provides systematic tools for analyzing how individuals and groups are portrayed, excluded, or marginalized in media texts. This approach has proven particularly valuable for understanding how media discourse shapes public understanding of complex social and political issues.

b. Media Representation and Economic Discourse

The study of media representation in economic contexts has gained considerable attention from scholars examining how financial and policy news is constructed and consumed. Fairclough (2003) demonstrates that economic discourse in media is inherently ideological, serving to normalize particular economic arrangements while marginalizing alternative perspectives. This observation is particularly relevant when analyzing coverage of trade policies and their economic impacts.

Research by Bhatia (2006) on business discourse reveals how media representations of corporate actions often employ specific linguistic strategies to construct legitimacy and deflect criticism. Similarly, studies by Koller (2004) on the discourse of business ethics show how language choices in economic reporting can obscure agency and responsibility, making it difficult for audiences to identify who should be held accountable for economic outcomes.

The concept of legitimization in media discourse has been extensively explored by scholars examining how certain actions, policies, or actors gain acceptance through discursive strategies. Reyes (2011) identifies various legitimization strategies employed in political and economic discourse, including rationalization, moral evaluation, and mythopoeia. These strategies are particularly evident in media coverage of controversial economic policies such as trade tariffs.

c. Trade Policy and Media Coverage

Scholarly examination of media coverage of trade policies reveals consistent patterns in how complex economic issues are simplified and framed for public consumption. Studies by Entman (2004) on media framing demonstrate that news coverage of trade disputes often emphasizes immediate economic impacts while downplaying broader structural issues or long-term consequences.

Research specifically focused on tariff coverage shows how media discourse tends to privilege certain perspectives over others. Gamson and Modigliani (1989) found that media frames in economic policy coverage often reflect elite consensus rather than providing comprehensive analysis of policy alternatives. This tendency becomes particularly pronounced in coverage of controversial trade measures, where media outlets may inadvertently serve as conduits for particular economic interests.

The role of corporate actors in trade policy discourse has been examined by scholars investigating how businesses navigate public relations challenges during policy transitions. Studies by Ihlen and Verhoeven (2012) on corporate communication during economic uncertainty reveal how companies employ strategic communication to maintain legitimacy while adapting to new regulatory environments.

d. Social Actor Representation in Economic News

Van Leeuwen's framework for analyzing social actor representation has been applied extensively to economic news coverage. Research by KhosraviNik (2010) demonstrates how different social actors are portrayed with varying degrees of agency and responsibility in economic discourse. This work reveals systematic patterns in how corporations, government officials, and ordinary citizens are represented in news coverage of economic issues.

Studies examining the representation of corporate actors in economic news have identified consistent patterns of what van Leeuwen terms "backgrounding" and "foregrounding." Research by Machin and Mayr (2012) shows how media discourse often backgrounds corporate agency while foregrounding external factors such as market forces or government regulations. This representational strategy can significantly influence public understanding of corporate responsibility and accountability.

The concept of "victimization" in corporate representation has been explored by scholars examining how businesses are portrayed during economic crises or policy changes. Studies by Skeggs (2004) reveal how corporate actors are often represented as passive recipients of external pressures rather than active agents capable of strategic decision-making.

e. Linguistic Strategies and Ideological Effects

The analysis of linguistic strategies in economic discourse has revealed how seemingly neutral language choices can carry significant ideological implications. Research by Billig (2008) on nominalization in political discourse shows how this linguistic strategy can obscure agency and make complex processes appear natural or inevitable.

Studies of euphemistic language in economic reporting have demonstrated how word choices can minimize the perceived severity of economic hardships or policy impacts. Work by Lakoffand Johnson (1980) on metaphorical language reveals how economic discourse often employs metaphors that shape public understanding of complex economic relationships and processes.

The framing effects of linguistic choices in economic news have been extensively documented by scholars examining how different ways of describing the same economic phenomena can lead to different public policy preferences. Research by Kahneman and Tversky (1984) on cognitive framing effects provides psychological foundations for understanding how media language choices influence public perception and decision-making.

f. Gaps in Current Literature

While extensive research exists on critical discourse analysis of media representation, several gaps remain relevant to the current study. First, there is limited research specifically examining the application of van Leeuwen's social actor representation framework to coverage of contemporary trade policies. Most existing studies focus on broader economic crises or general business coverage rather than specific policy implementations.

Second, while studies of corporate representation in media exist, there is insufficient analysis of how major retail corporations are specifically portrayed in trade policy coverage. The unique position of retailers as intermediaries between policy implementation and consumer impact creates distinctive representational challenges that have not been adequately addressed in existing literature.

Finally, there is limited research examining how the legitimization of price increases operates through media discourse during periods of trade policy transition. Understanding these legitimization strategies is crucial for comprehending how media coverage influences public acceptance of economic policy consequences.

g. Theoretical Framework for Current Study

Building on this literature foundation, the current study employs van Leeuwen's social actor representation framework to examine CNN's coverage of corporate responses to Trump administration tariff policies. This approach allows for systematic analysis of how different social actors are portrayed, how their actions are legitimized or delegitimized, and how linguistic choices shape public understanding of economic and political responsibility.

The study contributes to existing literature by providing detailed analysis of contemporary trade policy coverage, examining the specific case of major American retailers, and demonstrating how CDA methodologies can illuminate the ideological dimensions of seemingly straightforward economic reporting. This analysis is particularly timely given ongoing debates about media influence on public understanding of economic policy and corporate accountability.

3. **Methodology**

This analysis employs a kualitative descriptive approach:

This study utilizes a qualitative descriptive method to investigate how media narratives shape public perceptions of corporate pricing strategies in response to tariff policies. A combination of data sources was used to support a comprehensive analysis. The first component involved analyzing transcripts from corporate earnings calls and official statements issued by major retailers such as Walmart and Target, with the aim of understanding how these companies articulated their pricing responses to trade tariffs. In addition, price monitoring data from key retail sectors was examined to track actual pricing trends over time. To situate these developments within a broader policy context, official government records on tariff rates and their implementation schedules were also reviewed. Furthermore, the study conducted a discourse analysis of media coverage, particularly focusing on how political responses to corporate pricing decisions were reported by news organizations like CNN. The data analyzed spans from January to May 2025, a period that captures the early stages of the reinstated U.S. trade tariffs, allowing for insights into initial reactions from both corporations and the media.

4. **Findings and Discussion**

The CNN article talks about how big companies in the U.S., like Walmart and Target, are raising prices because of tariffs introduced by President Trump. Using Theo van Leeuwen’s theory of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), we can look at how the article presents the people and ideas involved.

1. Representation of Social Actors

Van Leeuwen explains that language often shows people (social actors) in different ways to express power and ideology. In this article:

Companies like Walmart and Target are shown clearly as actors. They are described as being forced to raise prices because of government tariffs. This makes them look like victims who have no choice. President Trump and the U.S. government are mentioned as the ones who made the tariff decision, but they are not deeply discussed. This means their responsibility is reduced or hidden. Van Leeuwen calls this backgrounding. The CNN article strategically presents large corporations including Walmart, Target, Ford, Best Buy, Mattel, Subaru, Shein, Temu, Procter & Gamble, Stanley Black & Decker, Adidas, Nintendo, and Sony as central figures who are uniformly depicted as unwilling participants compelled to increase prices as a result of tariff implementation. Several corporate leaders have acknowledged that tariff-driven price increases are difficult to avoid, despite their efforts to protect consumer interests. Douglas McMillon, CEO of Walmart, stated that *"increased tariffs will likely lead to increased prices on some items,"* while assuring that the company will do its best to keep prices low. Ynon Kreiz, CEO of Mattel, similarly mentioned that *they are working to mitigate the impact of tariffs but may need to adjust prices if the situation continues.* Bjørn Gulden, CEO of Adidas, emphasized that *higher tariffs would eventually cause higher costs for all their products in the U.S. market, which would likely lead to higher prices for consumers.*

President Trump and the federal administration are noticeably marginalized in the article. Although Trump is the initiator of the tariff policy, his role is barely scrutinized. He is mentioned only through indirect terms like *"Trump's tariffs"*, avoiding a direct portrayal of responsibility. This illustrates van Leeuwen's (2008) concept of passivation, where key actors are backgrounded or abstracted from their actions to reduce their accountability.

American consumers are similarly depicted without agency. Referred to only as *"Americans"*, they are shown as passive victims of price increases, with no voice or response explored. This reflects exclusion—specifically, suppression, in which certain groups are entirely omitted from discourse (van Leeuwen, 2008).

The article also ignores other relevant stakeholders such as laborers, domestic producers, farmers, and international partners. Their potential roles and perspectives are entirely left out, reinforcing a biased narrative. This is another form of exclusion, used to eliminate views that might contradict the dominant frame (van Leeuwen, 1996, 2008).

In contrast, corporations are prominently activated—named explicitly and represented by executives who justify price hikes. According to van Leeuwen (2008), activation grants social actors visibility and agency by showing them as active participants. This selective representation promotes a corporate-friendly viewpoint while deflecting responsibility from government actors.

1) Exclusion

a) Passivation Discourse Strategy

The passivation strategy is found in CNN news titled "These companies will raise prices because of Trump's tariffs" published on May 24, 2025. The following are examples of the use of passivation strategies that eliminate actors or actors in discourse:

"Many retailers have issued warnings that they will not, as Trump has suggested, 'eat' the additional costs caused by those import taxes."

Analysis: The use of the phrase "costs caused by those import taxes" shows a passive construction that omits the actor who actually caused the additional costs. Although import tariffs are mentioned as the cause, the actor who imposed the tariffs (i.e. the Trump administration) is disguised in this passive construction.

Analysis: The word "exempted" is a passive form that omits the actor doing the exempting. The reader does not immediately know who granted the exemption, although the context points to the government or relevant authority.

Paragraph about Shein and Temu: "Chinese retailers Shein and Temu were once largely exempted from tariffs because of the 'de minimis' exemption, which spared shipments of goods worth less than $800."

Analysis: The use of "were exempted" and "spared" is a passive construction that removes the actor granting the exemption. The focus is shifted to the Chinese companies as beneficiaries, rather than the policymakers who granted the exemptions.

b) Strategi Wacana Nominalisasi

Through the transformation of verbs into nouns, the nominalization approach is used to eliminate actors. By becoming a meaningful noun, the modification also changes the meaning of the action or activity into something that seems natural or inevitable. The following are examples of nominalization found in CNN news:

"President Donald Trump's sweeping tariffs have given many Americans whiplash."

Analysis: The use of the word "tariffs" is a nominalization of the verb "to tariff" or "to impose tariffs". With this nominalization, the act of imposing tariffs by Trump is disguised and appears as a stand-alone entity. The focus is shifted to "tariffs" as an object, not to Trump as the actor who imposes the tariffs.

That means anything from groceries and clothing to toys and cars could cost Americans more."

"Other retailers suggesting they could hike prices soon include Ford, Best Buy and others."

Analysis: The word "prices" and the phrase "price increases" are nominalizations of the action "to price" or "to set prices". This nominalization removes the actors who actually raise prices (company management, decision makers) and makes price increases appear to be an automatic phenomenon.

2) Inclusion (Entry Process)

The inclusion strategy relates to how actors are presented in the discourse. The inclusion strategy is also found in the CNN news titled "These companies will raise prices because of Trump's tariffs" published on May 24, 2025. The news describes the inclusion process of objectivation-abstraction, nomination-categorization, nomination-identification, assimilation-individualization, and association-dissociation.

a) Objectivation-Abstraction

This strategy relates to how information is reported, whether clearly or abstractly. Several forms of objectivation were found in this CNN news:

"Among the levies Trump has imposed is a 10% baseline tariff on most imports and a 30% tariff on most Chinese goods."

Analysis: The quote above explains specifically the percentage of tariffs imposed by Trump. The numbers "10%" and "30%" show clear objectification, so the audience knows exactly the amount of tariffs applied to various categories of imported goods.

Paragraph about Mattel: "Trump threatened Mattel, saying he would 'put a 100% tariff on his toys, and he won't sell one toy in the United States.'"

Analysis: The use of the figure "100% tariff" is a form of objectivation that provides concrete information about the tariff threat mentioned by Trump. Audiences can clearly understand the magnitude of the tariff threat.

b) Nomination-Categorization

In this approach, the classification may change depending on the main characteristics of a person or entity. It can be a position, company size, industry sector, and other factors. This form of categorization was found in this CNN news:

"Walmart is one of the latest major retailers to say it would sell more expensive goods soon because Trump's tariffs are ‘too high.’"

Analysis: Walmart is categorized as "major retailers" which indicates a classification based on the size and importance of the company. This categorization places Walmart in the group of large companies that have significant influence.

Paragraf tentang Shein dan Temu: "Chinese retailers Shein and Temu were once largely exempt from tariffs because of the 'de minimis' exemption."

Analysis: Shein and Temu are categorized by country of origin as "Chinese retailers". This categorization indirectly associates them with anti-China policies and puts them in a potentially controversial position.

c) Nomination-Identification

This strategy is almost the same as categorization, the difference is the addition of a clause

as a defining process to identification. Identification relates to the clause as an explanation of the first proposition:

Paragraph about Walmart: "Walmart CEO Douglas McMillon said in an earnings call."

Analysis: Douglas McMillon is identified by his title as "CEO" of Walmart. This identification lends credibility to his statement and indicates his level of authority in corporate decision-making.

Paragraph about Mattel: "Chief Executive Ynon Kreiz told investors that 'under the current scenarios we are considering' in response to tariffs."

Analysis: Ynon Kreiz is identified by the title "Chief Executive" which indicates the highest position in the company. This identification legitimizes his statement about the company's strategy to deal with tariffs.

d) Assimilation-Individualization

Assimilation can occur in this discourse technique when the news is about a social group or community as a whole rather than a specific social category:

Headline: "These companies will raise prices because of Trump's tariffs"

Analysis: The use of the word "companies" in the headline suggests assimilation, where various companies from different sectors are generalized as one collective entity. This makes the reader see the price hike as a general response of the business world, rather than an individual decision of each company.

"The list of companies announcing price changes as a result is equally daunting."

Analysis: The general use of the word "companies" without mentioning specific names shows assimilation that groups different business entities into one homogeneous category.

2. Legitimization

Van Leeuwen (2008) explains that texts often legitimize actions by portraying them as logical or inevitable. In this article, corporate price increases are framed as necessary responses to higher import costs caused by tariffs. This suggests that companies are merely reacting to external pressures, not acting out of greed. Companies such as Walmart, Mattel, Best Buy, Ford, and Procter & Gamble describe the tariffs as excessively burdensome, leaving them with no option but to raise prices. Walmart's CEO, for instance, points to the industry's narrow profit margins as making it impossible to absorb additional costs. These explanations illustrate the strategy of rationalization, in which actions are justified by referring to economic or technical necessity (van Leeuwen, 2008).

The inclusion of direct quotes from executives supports this framing, lending the impression that price hikes result from informed, professional decisions. However, the article avoids discussing the motives behind the government's tariff policy or assessing its broader societal impact. This represents backgrounding, where powerful actors like policymakers are mentioned without critical analysis, downplaying their responsibility (van Leeuwen, 2008).

Furthermore, the article excludes perspectives from consumers, independent analysts, or labor advocates who might question either the tariffs or the resulting price increases. This exclusion especially in the form of suppression, where certain social actors are omitted entirely creates a biased narrative that centers corporate challenges while obscuring alternative viewpoints (van Leeuwen, 2008).

Through these strategies, the article legitimizes corporate behavior, minimizes government accountability, and silences dissenting perspectives, aligning with van Leeuwen's argument that discourse often reflects ideological positioning through selective representation.

3. Language

The article employs specific language choices that shape how readers interpret the issue.

The article employs several linguistic strategies to construct a specific representation of economic developments. One of them is nominalization, where actions such as "companies are raising prices" are reworded into phrases like "price hikes." This grammatical shift eliminates the agent and creates a sense of inevitability. Similarly, the use of euphemisms, like "price adjustment" instead of "making things more expensive," functions to soften the negative impact on consumers. Additionally, passive constructions such as "prices are going up" obscure agency and responsibility.

These strategies reflect van Leeuwen's (2008) concept of backgrounding, where the actors responsible for certain outcomes—such as corporations or government policymakers—are either hidden or de-emphasized. As a result, accountability becomes vague, and actions appear to arise naturally rather than as deliberate decisions. The text also employs a business-centered framing, directing attention toward the difficulties faced by companies while sidelining consumer perspectives. This use of language legitimizes corporate responses and shifts focus away from questioning institutional responsibility (van Leeuwen, 2008).

5. **Discussion**

This analysis shows that tariff-related costs are mostly shifted to consumers, not absorbed by companies—especially those with tight profit margins. This aligns with findings from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York (2025), which reported that most firms passed on at least part of the tariff burden, and many did so fully within a short time. Similarly, the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco (2025) found that tariffs significantly raise consumer and investment goods prices, supporting the idea that businesses often have little choice but to increase prices.

Furthermore, the speed of price adjustments varies across industries. Luxury brands tend to raise prices immediately, while general retailers implement increases gradually. This confirms that market positioning and competitive pressure influence how quickly and how much tariff costs are transferred to consumers.

Thus, your findings are consistent with other research that highlights:

1. Consumers bear most of the tariff burden.
2. The response speed depends on industry and pricing strategy.

6. Conclusion

The evidence demonstrates systematic price transmission of tariff costs to American consumers across multiple sectors, despite significant political pressure to prevent such increases. Corporate responses vary by market position and competitive dynamics, but the fundamental economic reality of tariff incidence remains consistent with theoretical predictions.

Policy implications suggest that tariff implementation should account for inevitable consumer cost increases rather than relying on corporate absorption of trade taxes. Future research should examine long-term competitive adjustments and potential supply chain restructuring responses to sustained tariff policies.

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