

US-China Trade War: Grammatical Cohesion in Malaysian Editorials of *The Star*

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how media institutions construct international economic narratives through hard news reporting, focusing on the deployment of grammatical cohesion within newspaper editorials published in Malaysia's *The Star* regarding the US-China trade war in October 2025. Grounded in Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), the research examines how specific grammatical cohesive devices, namely reference, conjunction, substitution, and ellipsis, contribute to textual coherence and event-framing. Utilizing a targeted corpus of selected news reports from this critical temporal window, the analysis maps out the distribution and functional deployment of cohesive ties within the discourse of global trade conflict. The study argues that despite the informational register and perceived objectivity characteristic of news reporting, cohesive choices are not value-neutral features of textual organization. Instead, they function as active discursive resources that trace structural event chains, connect economic incidents to specific causal relations, and implicitly frame the geopolitical roles of the United States, China, Malaysia, and ASEAN. Ultimately, the findings demonstrate that grammatical cohesion operates as a latent structural mechanism in print journalism, transforming standard sentence-level lexicogrammatical options into a vehicle for constructing socio-political and economic meaning under the guise of objective information delivery.

Keywords: Grammatical Cohesion, Systemic Functional Linguistics, US-China Trade Dispute, Media Discourse, Opinion Columns.

INTRODUCTION

In print journalism, hard news reports are conventionally operationalized as value-neutral channels of factual transmission. However, contemporary discourse and framing research demonstrates that mediated political communication is systematically structured through interpretive choices rather than transparent, unmediated relay alone (Roslyng & Dindler, 2022). Critical discourse studies treat news language as a contested site where institutional ideology is encoded through patterned linguistic selection, systematically foregrounding specific geopolitical meanings while backgrounding or obscuring alternative interpretations (Ofogebu, 2025).

October 2025 serves as a critical historical anchor point for examining these discursive practices within the Malaysian press. This specific temporal window marked the climax and subsequent stabilization of a severe "tit-for-tat" economic conflict between the United States and China. The dispute manifested as an intense critical-minerals standoff in early October, when Beijing imposed sweeping export controls on rare earth metals and semiconductor materials, sparking widespread industrial anxiety given China's global dominance in rare earth extraction. This maneuver operated as a direct counter-strategy to the expansion of the U.S. Pentagon blacklist targeting Chinese technology firms, which had prompted symmetric Chinese counter-sanctions against U.S. defense contractors.

High-level diplomatic consultations were subsequently convened within Malaysia to broker an "October Truce." This regional mediation culminated on October 30, 2025, in South Korea, where President Donald Trump and President Xi Jinping finalized a one-year agreement to suspend rare earth export controls and

resume agricultural purchases alongside a temporary pause on further technology bans and tariffs. Research on trade-conflict coverage shows that news outlets construct such macroeconomic disputes through localized topics, discursive strategies, and linguistic means that are tightly bound to domestic political systems, regional economic interests, and institutional contexts (Zhang & Zhang, 2025).

Comparative framing studies further demonstrate that trade-war reporting shifts aggressively toward strategy framing as conflict intensifies, prioritizing the brinksmanship of the conflict process over substantive policy explanations (Liu et al., 2022). Media frames within the Sino-US trade dispute can actively legitimize ideological stances, construct national identity, and recategorize conflict actors within broader narratives of global interdependence or economic stability (Zhu, 2022; Zhang & Zhang, 2026). Within this framework, hard news reporting in *The Star* utilizes complex lexicogrammatical patterning to trace international event chains, allocate economic agency, and navigate national alignment within a sensitive geopolitical landscape.

Within Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), these structural configurations carry profound ideological weight because language operates as a strategic meaning-making resource. SFL posits that the ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions of language simultaneously organize the representation of events, index the positioning of institutional actors, and establish textual coherence (Ofogebu, 2025). This study analyzes the functional distribution of the textual metafunction's primary resource: the lexicogrammatical system of grammatical cohesion, specifically focusing on reference, conjunction, substitution, and ellipsis (Qasim et al., 2020; Fang, 2020). Far from operating as mere mechanical organizers of sentence-level flow, these features serve as active semantic and discursive resources that construct textual unity, manage information scannability, and implicitly shape the reader's understanding of causal and political relations (Jinam, 2023).

SFL-based media research underscores that linguistic choices systematically frame narratives and highlight shifting power relations even within reporting styles that appear formally impersonal, neutral, or objective (Arain & Akram, 2025; Muhammad, 2024). Research on hard news and headlines likewise confirms that the selection of processes, participant positioning, and textual organization determine how institutional actors are legitimized or marginalized (Ofogebu, 2025; Muhammad, 2024). Media discourse constructs trade disputes through linguistic means that directly reflect institutional alignments and broader macroeconomic hegemonies (Zhang & Zhang, 2025).

Existing cohesion scholarship has established the baseline utility of grammatical ties for text preservation and comprehension; however, it often confines these devices to non-ideological textual organization rather than evaluating them as active rhetorical resources in hard news discourse (Jinam, 2023; Maulana et al., 2025; Bang, 2003). This study addresses this theoretical deficiency by examining how grammatical cohesion in *The Star*'s hard news reports organizes international event chains, allocates sovereign agency, and naturalizes localized understandings of international trade conflict under the appearance of absolute journalistic objectivity (Nurwahidah et al., 2022; Ofogebu, 2025).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Institutional media networks deploy distinct linguistic mechanisms to construct state-sanctioned ideologies, achieve legitimation, and manage political positioning during international conflicts. Chen (2021) demonstrates how newspapers utilize polarized othering and stance-taking strategies to establish nationalist perspectives, showing that Western publications routinely pathologize foreign economic behaviors as market-distorting, while domestic state media projects abstract macro-doctrines such as unilateralism, hegemonism, and protectionism to legitimize defensive policies. This ideological mapping is corroborated by Hadi et al. (2024), whose lexical cohesion analysis reveals that narrative framing via repetition and collocation corresponds directly to state alignment; media embedded within participating nations aggressively marginalize external actors through negative evaluation, whereas unentangled regional media preserve institutional neutrality.

Within public-contributed commentary and letters to the editor (LTE), this interpersonal functional dimension is further reinforced through functional networks of modality. As Nor Diyana Saupi et al. (2025) observe,

public writers strategically select high-value modulation markers to naturalize socio-political or religious obligations, converting subjective stance into an absolute collective duty to influence audience perception within politically sensitive landscapes. While Nor Diyana Saupi et al. (2025) explicate the interpersonal metafunction through explicit modal verbs to map solidarity in regional press spaces, a critical gap remains regarding how the textual metafunction covertly achieves a similar ideological framing in hard news reports, where overt evaluation is stylistically prohibited.

Beyond explicit ideological critique, the underlying texture, scannability, and semantic continuity of journalistic textuality depend on the structural configuration of internal cohesive devices. Robert (2019) argues that text-making devices and meaning comprehension rely fundamentally on the agglutinating effects of lexical cohesion, proving that same-word repetition systematically dominates over synonymy to foreground central subjects, stabilize thematic developments, and mitigate interpretative ambiguity within press commentary. However, the distribution of text-ties varies across distinct journalistic landscapes, shaped by structural and institutional priorities. Rahmawati et al. (2024) demonstrate an alternative configuration within digital journalism platforms, showing that grammatical cohesion can heavily outnumber lexical choices. In this space, personal reference markers emerge as a dominant tool for specifying institutional actors and tracking variables, maximizing structural economy, and providing clausal variation across connected sentences to guide the reader's interpretive trajectory.

The structural tension between explicit lexical reiteration and streamlined grammatical tracking, highlighted by Robert (2019), underscores the latent power of the text designer: choosing whether to explicitly repeat an actor or subsume their identity into anaphoric references determines how corporate and national agency is tracked across long narrative arcs.

The transition from native institutional registers to learner prose and translation trajectories introduces profound pedagogical friction, underwritten by cross-linguistic variations in target-language typologies. Wang et al. (2023) argue that while English operates within a subject-prominent, hypotactic network that relies on explicit surface connectives, Chinese is characterized by topic prominence and paratactic linear coordination, in which logical relationships remain implicit. This structural asymmetry generates negative transfer and unwanted explicitation; Li & Yao (2022) note that English-to-Chinese translation trainees frequently operate under source-text captivity, overusing explicit personal references and overt additive conjunctions where domestic norms dictate subject omission, zero-anaphora, or nominal ellipsis.

Computational corpus metrics substantiate this divergence in second-language academic writing. Yuan (2024) identifies an artificial over-incidence of local personal pronouns among Chinese English learners, driven by mother-tongue interference and rigid pedagogical writing templates, while You Yi (2024) isolates an unnuanced concentration of basic additive conjunctions, alongside severe causal overabundance and contrastive omission errors. Qualitative diagnostics by Bui (2022) track these surface structural errors to deep-seated cognitive misconceptions, where learners rigidly treat distinct grammatical units as functional synonyms, such as misapplying the pronoun *it* for the clausal/idea-referencing demonstrative *this*, or substituting the coordinator *so* with the adverb conjunct *therefore*, thereby disrupting textual coherence and argument development.

While these typological and translation-based studies by Wang et al. (2023), Li & Yao (2022), and You Yi (2024) expose how cross-linguistic friction disrupts standard text syntax, they primarily frame these choices through the lens of structural accuracy or error analysis. This study departs from this purely descriptive paradigm by re-centering the investigation on professional native-English production within a localized post-colonial press environment. By analyzing how *The Star* deploys these precise SFL mechanisms, such as using causal conjunctions rather than simple additive links, or selecting demonstrative references to establish epistemic distance, this project unmask how the structural mechanics of grammar systematically serve institutional alignment and macro-level persuasion in international economic disputes.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive, corpus-based research design to systematically map the distribution and functional deployment of lexicogrammatical systems in hard news discourse. The temporal boundaries of the sampling frame are strictly bounded between October 16 and October 30, 2025, a critical window that encapsulates the definitive climax and subsequent diplomatic stabilization of the severe "tit-for-tat" economic confrontation between the United States and China over critical mineral controls and technology blacklists. The activation parameter of this two-week window is anchored to October 16, 2025, the date when U.S. President Donald Trump confirmed the intensification of the trade dispute during a news conference, bluntly stating to a reporter, "Well, you're in one now," and validating the severe geopolitical clash over rare earth minerals and retaliatory export bans (Flatley & Dlouhy, 2025). This statement immediately catalyzed macro-level regional media reporting. Data collection was conducted via the digital archives of Malaysia's premier English-language national daily, *The Star*, using targeted Boolean queries such as "US-China" AND "Trade War." The sampling frame was applied uniformly across the general news and insight sections rather than being strictly limited to the specialized business or financial pages, ensuring a comprehensive capture of the publication's overarching institutional narrative register. A total of 25 hard news reports directly addressing the trade war within this continuous temporal matrix were extracted starting from October 17 to October 30, 2025, transferred into standardized text documents for corpus containment, and labeled sequentially as Data 1 through Data 25 for chronological tracking.

The textual analysis is theoretically grounded in Halliday's framework of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), specifically employing Halliday and Hasan's (1976) model of Cohesion Theory to examine the underlying text logic and rhetorical configurations of the compiled media reports. Cohesion theory treats a text as an interconnected semantic unit, in which the interpretation of any given lexicogrammatical element depends fundamentally on its relation to an antecedent or subsequent element, thereby establishing a unified texture across connected stretches of language. To critically evaluate how *The Star* structures these international economic narratives, the analysis focuses on the four foundational subsystems of grammatical cohesion: reference, conjunction, substitution, and ellipsis. Reference systems, comprising personal, demonstrative, and comparative ties, are tracked to determine how corporate, national, and regional actors are positioned and maintained across long narrative arcs. Conjunctions are classified into additive, adversative, causal, and temporal connectors to evaluate how discrete economic incidents are linked into specific logical and historical sequences. Substitution and ellipsis are coded as strategic grammatical mechanisms that maximize structural economy, regulate informational scannability, and avoid redundancy by deliberately replacing or omitting retrievable clausal constituents. This SFL taxonomy allows the study to move beyond a superficial sentence-level description, positioning grammar as an active discursive practice that structures textual unity under the guise of neutral reportage.

To guarantee absolute contextual fidelity and minimize algorithmic data loss, the data extraction and coding procedures were executed through close reading and manual text analysis rather than fully automated computational parsers. Data collection and archival gathering were managed using the *IceWeb2* tool (Weisser, 2017), selected for its specific capacity to integrate newspaper hyperlinks directly into an editable interface for systematic text annotation. The extraction process involved systematically identifying relevant hard news items from *The Star*, inputting the newspaper URLs into the *IceWeb2* platform, and downloading the reports in strict chronological order of their publication to preserve narrative continuity. The 25 compiled news reports were sequentially labeled as Data 1 through Data 25 to establish a clear tracking system for chronological analysis.

Following the collection, the extracted corpus underwent a rigorous two-stage analytical protocol that combined quantitative profiles with qualitative critical discourse interpretations. The first stage involved a structural mapping of absolute frequencies and percentage distributions to characterize the statistical profile of individual grammatical cohesive devices across the 25 distinct data nodes. In the second stage, a manual linguistic coding protocol was applied at the clause boundaries to critically interpret the rhetorical and ideological implications of these cohesive ties. Specifically, the analysis scrutinizes instances in which reporting structures substitute for or omit standard nominal subjects through subject ellipsis, or select causal conjunctions over simple additive links, thereby determining how national responsibility and agency are

allocated among the United States, China, Malaysia, and ASEAN. By methodically coordinating sentence-level lexicogrammatical choices with macro-structural political alignments, this manual methodology provides a rigorous, replicable framework for identifying how print journalism naturalizes institutional ideologies during global trade crises.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The empirical tracking of the corpus, comprising 25 hard news reports from *The Star* documenting the peak phase of the October 2025 US-China trade dispute, found 1,420 discrete instances of grammatical cohesive devices. The absolute distribution and structural weight of these lexicogrammatical options within the textual metafunction are systematically categorized in Table 1.

Table 1: Lexicogrammatical Profile of Grammatical Cohesion Subsystems

Grammatical Cohesion Subsystem	Frequency (f)	Relative Frequency (%)	Log-Ideological Target in Media Register
Reference	664	46.76%	Geopolitical actor tracking, agency configuration, epistemic distancing.
Conjunction	528	37.18%	Construction of deterministic causal chains, logical counter-balancing.
Ellipsis	198	13.94%	Subject omission, ideological velocity, structural economy.
Substitution	30	2.12%	Standoff normalization, clausal condensation, taxonomy compression.
Total	1,420	100.00%	Latent mechanism for structural legitimization.

The quantitative hierarchy reveals that reference and conjunction together account for 83.94% of the total cohesive infrastructure in the corpus. This pronounced configuration indexes the operational constraints of the hard news register, which demands continuous tracking of shifting macroeconomic variables alongside the logical sequencing of rapid international events.

The Reference System: Ideopolitical Anaphora and Actor Tracking

Accounting for 46.76% of the total corpus, the system of reference operates as the primary lexicogrammatical device for tracking corporate and national agents and establishing agency asymmetries between global powers and localized economies.

a) Personal Anaphora and the Centralization of Imperial Agency

The empirical data demonstrate a stark structural imbalance in how third-person pronouns allocate historical accountability. The singular masculine anaphoric tokens (*he*, *his*, *him*) are strictly concentrated around individual U.S. institutional actors, specifically President Donald Trump and Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent.

Excerpt 1 (Data 1): "President Donald Trump said **he** saw the United States as locked in a trade war with China... **He** floated the idea of scrapping a planned meeting with President Xi Jinping and warned the United States could cut off trade..."

This dense configuration of singular masculine reference chains individualizes and humanizes Western executive agency. Macroeconomic systemic disruption is grammatically configured as the direct consequence of personalized choice, foregrounding U.S. executive statecraft as the primary dynamic engine of global

commerce. Conversely, the geopolitical actions of China, Malaysia, and ASEAN are systematically managed through plural anaphora (*they, their*) or obscured via corporate passive nominalizations.

Excerpt 2 (Data 1): "...if the world's two largest economies are in for a sustained trade war if **they** cannot reach a trade deal."

By employing the plural *they* to refer to the "two largest economies," the text's logic flattens the structural power asymmetry of the trade war. The unique regulatory compulsions of the respective states are merged into a single, shared state of conflict, thereby backgrounding the initial instigator of the tariff escalation.

Excerpt 3 (Data 7): "**I don't want them to play the rare earth game with us,**" Trump said...

The use of first and third person singular pronouns (*I, he, his*) places a heavy narrative focus on Trump's individual movements and choices. Macroeconomic sanctions are grammatically configured as the direct byproduct of personal psychological states, "*his frustration*", naturalizing state-level threats as personal defensive actions. Conversely, the foreign state apparatus is tracked collectively via the plural anaphora *them*. This structural choice flattens the institutional complexity of a sovereign nation's regulatory bureaus into a single, faceless, adversarial bloc, reinforcing a clear ideological boundary between the in-group and the *out-group*.

b) Demonstrative Reference and Extended Text Packaging

Demonstrative tokens (*this, that, these*) are deployed across the corpus not merely for simple nominal retrieval, but as extended text-packaging devices that encapsulate complex, multi-clause historical maneuvers into singular, naturalized variables.

Excerpt 4 (Data 2): "China announced sweeping export controls on rare earth elements (REEs)... **These** measures, which take effect on Nov 8, require export licences..."

Through the instantiation of the noun phrase *these measures*, the text logic immediately strips Beijing's regulatory intervention of its ongoing contingency. The grammar transforms a volatile, unfolding diplomatic strategy into a static, historical object of analysis, ready for domestic economic evaluation.

Excerpt 5 (Data 9): "US tariffs, supply chain disruptions and the potential escalation of the US-China trade war will continue to weigh on Malaysia's export performance... As a result of **this environmental change**, trade policy and international relations policy will have to become increasingly coordinated..."

The proximal demonstrative adjective *this* functions as an extended text-packaging strategy by instantly condensing three distinct macro-economic threats, unilateral U.S. tariffs, localized supply chain disruptions, and superpower escalation, into a singular nominal phrase *this environmental change*. This lexicogrammatical choice strips highly chaotic, politically motivated acts of international economic warfare of their ongoing human contingency. By packaging these fluid geopolitical threats into a stable, naturalized *environment*, the text logic implies that protectionist crises are objective, inevitable conditions to which domestic state policy must automatically and non-ideologically adapt.

The Conjunction System: Structural Grids and Causal Normalization

Conjunctions constitute 37.18% of the grammatical cohesive network, serving as the primary logical-semantic grid through which *The Star* constructs cause-and-effect and institutional resilience under the guise of neutral information distribution.

a) Adversative Conjunctions as Rhetorical Shock Absorbers

The Malaysian daily leverages adversative links (*although, however, still, nonetheless*) to build a consistent narrative of domestic industrial durability. The register routinely introduces severe international trade shocks, only to immediately counter them with local adaptation vectors.

Excerpt 6 (Data 2): "The re-escalation of the United States (US)-China trade war will have an impact on the Malaysian economy *although* most economists are hopeful..."

Excerpt 7 (Data 11): "While September's stronger trade performance has lifted short-term sentiment, analysts warn that structural risks... could limit the pace of export recovery... *Still*, the brokerage warned of persistent uncertainty..."

The systematic deployment of these adversative devices at clausal boundaries isolates the domestic market from external shocks. By ensuring that every instance of geopolitical crisis is grammatically paired with a counter-balancing trajectory of national opportunity or adaptation, the text structures a reassuring framework that manages regional economic anxiety.

b) Causal Determinism and Market Inevitability

Causal and resultative conjunctions (*because, hence, therefore, as a result*) are systematically operationalized to construct an unassailable framework of objective market laws, effectively masking protectionist political maneuvers as neutral economic logic.

Excerpt 8 (Data 9): "As a result of this environmental change, trade policy and international relations policy will have to become increasingly coordinated... *hence* the importance to continue building supply chain durability..."

Linking these clauses via *as a result* and *hence* removes the element of political choice from state actions. The coordination of international trade policy is framed not as an ideological intervention, but as an inevitable, mandatory response to an unalterable external environment.

Ellipsis and Substitution: Structural Omission and Trivialization

Although they display lower relative frequencies, the systems of ellipsis (13.94%) and substitution (2.12%) play vital roles in information compression and actor positioning within the hard news register.

a) Subject Ellipsis and Narrative Velocity

In coordinate clause complexes, The Star consistently uses subject ellipsis [Ø] within the sentence to maintain focus on primary Western political actors while accelerating the narrative delivery of their actions.

Excerpt 9 (Data 1): "Trump responded by threatening to impose an additional 100% tariff on Chinese goods by Nov 1. [Ø] He floated the idea of scrapping a planned meeting with President Xi Jinping and [Ø] warned the United States could cut off trade in cooking oil..."

The absolute omission of the nominal head in successive coordinate clauses ([Ø] floated, [Ø] warned) creates an unbroken narrative chain. The grammar anchors multiple aggressive international interventions to a single source of power without structural fragmentation, foregrounding executive dominance under the appearance of factual reporting.

b) Nominal Substitution and the Compression of Standoffs

Nominal substitution, realized through cohesive tokens such as *one* and *such*, is strategically deployed to categorize unprecedented international conflicts into familiar industrial frameworks, stripping unique geopolitical crises of their ideological specificity.

Excerpt 10 (Data 1): "'Well, you're in *one* now," Trump said Wednesday when asked by a reporter if the world's two largest economies are in for a sustained trade war..."

Excerpt 11 (Data 6): "While semiconductors are reportedly on the radar, Malaysia has so far avoided *such* tariffs."

In Excerpt 10, the pronoun substitute *one* replaces the extensive nominal group *sustained trade war*, condensing a global economic standoff into a brief conversational counter. In Excerpt 11, the deployment of *such tariffs* matches hypothetical U.S. protectionist measures against Malaysia with standard, pre-existing categories, normalizing international brinksmanship as a routine feature of global commerce.

The interaction among these four grammatical subsystems in *The Star's* news reports confirms that the mechanics of text organization are fundamentally ideological. By deploying reference chains that individualize Western agency, adversative conjunctions that protect the domestic ecosystem from international trade shocks, and causal links that present state protectionism as objective law, the text constructs a specific, institutional understanding of global conflict. Ultimately, this SFG-driven critique demonstrates that grammatical cohesion operates as a latent discursive practice in print journalism, turning standard sentence-level syntax into a structural vehicle for socio-political and macroeconomic persuasion.

The quantitative and qualitative distribution of grammatical cohesion within the corpus is profoundly significant because it systematically unmask the ideological work performed by grammar in a linguistic register explicitly configured to project absolute factual objectivity. In news reportage, institutional print media conventionally strip the discourse of overt interpersonal evaluations, such as explicit evaluative adjectives or direct stance-taking markers, to maintain the institutional illusion of value-neutral information delivery. However, critical text linguistics reveals that ideology is simply displaced from the surface text into the latent structural mechanics of the textual metafunction. By showing how specific grammatical cohesive devices establish an internal logic of the text, these findings demonstrate that sentence-level syntax serves as a covert site for the instantiation of institutional bias, actively steering the reader's tracking of historical causation and political accountability without resorting to overt polemics.

Specifically, the structural configuration of the reference system (46.76%) provides crucial empirical evidence of how media institutions manipulate participant positioning and allocate geopolitical agency during international crises. The dense localization of singular third-person masculine anaphoric pronouns around Western executive figures systematically individualizes and humanizes imperial agency, portraying global macroeconomic shifts as the direct consequence of Western statecraft. Conversely, the tracking of Eastern state actors and regional bodies through plural anaphora or corporate nominalizations flattens deep-seated power asymmetries, syntactically collapsing unequal protectionist maneuvers into a single, shared condition of conflict. This structural imbalance in actor tracking allows the newspaper to navigate the high-stakes brinksmanship of the conflict process while managing institutional alignments and regional dependencies.

Furthermore, the calculated deployment of the conjunction system (37.18%) carries deep sociological significance for the political economy of non-aligned nations navigating superpower rivalries. Operating within the Malaysian post-colonial media ecosystem, *The Star* uses adversative conjunctions as linguistic shock absorbers to mitigate regional economic anxiety by systematically balancing global trade threats with localized opportunities or vectors for industrial adaptation. Simultaneously, the heavy reliance on causal and resultative connectives establishes a deterministic framework of market inevitability. By linking highly charged political decisions directly to automatic commercial outcomes, the text logic naturalizes state protectionism and resource weaponization as unassailable macroeconomic laws rather than ideological choices, thereby legitimizing Malaysia's strategic neutral positioning and regional centrality within ASEAN.

Finally, the functional operationalization of ellipsis (13.94%) and substitution (2.12%) advances the critical utility of SFG by relocating it from a purely descriptive pedagogical framework to a rigorous diagnostic tool for media critique. The strategic use of subject ellipsis within coordinate clause complexes maintains narrative velocity, continuously chaining multiple aggressive state actions to a single executive head without structural fragmentation. By demonstrating that the mechanical choices of syntax, such as omitting retrievable nominal subjects or substituting massive structural standoffs with minimalist grammatical pointers, directly govern the distribution of national responsibility, this research challenges traditional frameworks that treat grammatical cohesion as a non-ideological feature of textual organization. Ultimately, these four dimensions collectively demonstrate that linguistic connectivity functions as an active discursive practice, transforming standard syntax into a structural mechanism for socio-political persuasion in global trade disputes.

CONCLUSION

This study has investigated the systemic deployment of grammatical cohesion within the hard news coverage of Malaysia's *The Star* during the critical escalation and subsequent stabilization phase of the US-China trade war in October 2025. Grounded in Halliday's framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the analysis deconstructs the conventional journalistic paradigm that treats hard news texts as transparent, value-neutral vehicles for factual relay. By analyzing a targeted corpus of 25 newspaper reports spanning the critical rare-earth element standoff and the eventual Trump-Xi South Korea deal, this research demonstrates that media institutions rely on the internal mechanisms of the textual metafunction to organize ideological meanings. The lexicogrammatical patterning of reference, conjunction, ellipsis, and substitution operates covertly to trace event chains, allocate sovereign agency, and establish an institutional epistemic stance under the formal guise of absolute informational objectivity.

The empirical metrics derived from the two-stage analytical protocol found a highly stratified distribution of 1,420 cohesive devices, confirming that sentence-level syntax is fundamentally ideological. The system of reference (46.76%) serves as a primary site for agential configuration, where singular third-person masculine anaphora strictly centralize historical agency within individual Western executives, while plural reference chains flatly obscure the power asymmetries characterizing superpower brinksmanship. Simultaneously, the conjunction system (37.18%) serves as a calculated logical-semantic grid; adversative connectors function systematically as rhetorical shock absorbers, insulating the narrative of the domestic macroeconomic ecosystem from global trade friction, while causal linkages naturalize state protectionism and tech blacklists as objective market inevitabilities rather than highly volatile political choices. Finally, the subsystems of ellipsis (13.94%) and substitution (2.12%) compress textual structure, maintaining narrative velocity over aggressive state maneuvers and normalising unprecedented international trade standoffs into routine, corporate typologies.

These findings offer a significant theoretical and empirical contribution by re-centering Halliday and Hasan's (1976) Cohesion Theory within the critical paradigm of media discourse analysis. While baseline text linguistics frequently treats cohesive ties as non-ideological organizers of structural scannability or reading comprehension, and cross-linguistic scholarship predominantly evaluates connectives through the descriptive lens of mother-tongue interference or translation errors, this study relocates grammatical cohesion to the realm of political economy and institutional legitimation. This study expands on contemporary SFL media critique by proving that even when a journalistic register is explicitly stripped of overt interpersonal markers, the mechanical configurations of grammar systematically serve macro-level institutional alignments. For a regional, non-aligned press system navigating intense geopolitical conflict, grammatical cohesion serves as a latent structural vehicle for managing domestic economic anxiety and validating regional neutrality within ASEAN.

Despite the critical depth of these insights, certain parameters of the current research design index clear limitations that outline future pathways for discourse scholarship. The compiled corpus is strictly bounded within a highly specific two-week temporal window (October 16 to October 30, 2025) and remains confined to the print register of a single premier English-language daily in Malaysia. Consequently, future research trajectories should expand the text matrix to incorporate long-term longitudinal corpora across multi-platform digital journalism ecosystems, enabling a broader comparative critique of non-aligned press behaviors. Furthermore, given the increasing reliance of contemporary print journalism on visual assets, integrating these SFL lexicogrammatical metrics with Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) would systematically clarify how typographic layouts, digital hyperlinks, and visual graphs co-construct textual unity alongside grammatical ties. Ultimately, by maintaining a strict methodic connection between micro-linguistic syntax and macro-sociological practices, discourse analysis can continue to unmask how global structures of hegemony are quietly secured within the routine grammar of everyday information.

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