

Metaphors on Fire: A Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies of 2025 California Wildfires News in *VOA* and *USA Today*

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Abstract

This study examines how metaphors are employed to construct wildfire discourse in two U.S. news media, Voice of America (VOA) and USA Today. The research aims to identify dominant metaphorical patterns and explain how these patterns reflect differing institutional orientations in wildfire reporting. The study adopts a descriptive research design with an integrated quantitative and qualitative approach within the framework of Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS). The data consist of wildfire-related news articles published between January 1 and January 31, 2025, collected from the official websites of both media outlets. The corpus analysis was conducted using AntConc 4.2.4 to examine collocational patterns and Key Word in Context (KWIC) of the fire-related lexical items, while metaphorical expressions were identified using the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP), interpreted through Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA), and categorized into conceptual domains grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). The findings indicate that VOA predominantly frames fire through metaphors such as fire as mechanical breakdown, fire as economic inferno, and fire as war zone, whereas USA Today mainly employs metaphors such as fire as living creature and fire as war zone. The analysis highlights that metaphor functions as a central discursive resource in shaping media representations of climate-related issues.

Keywords: corpus-assisted discourse studies; metaphor; USA Today; VOA; wildfire

Introduction

News media constitute a major force in constructing public perceptions and informing institutional responses to particular issues. Media coverage does more than report facts - it frames events, influencing how they are interpreted, emotionally processed, and ideologically positioned (Entman, 1993). One of the most powerful tools in this framing

process is metaphor. According to Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, metaphors are not just figures of speech but fundamental cognitive mechanisms that structure how people think, reason, and act. In environmental reporting, metaphors allow complex, uncertain, and large-scale issues, such as climate change and wildfires - to be understood through more familiar domains like warfare, disease, or monsters (Burgers et al., 2016; Flusberg et al., 2017; Semino, 2021). As

climate-induced disasters increase in intensity and frequency, the role of the media in shaping crisis discourse becomes even more critical.

A recent example - in January 2025, a series of massive wildfires swept through Southern California, marking one of the most destructive environmental disasters in recent U.S. history, specifically California. The scale and intensity of the crisis fueled by prolonged drought, record-breaking heat, and intensified wind conditions - prompted not only emergency response efforts but also widespread media coverage and public discourse. As Erokhin (2025) notes, the 2025 California wildfires triggered unprecedented digital engagement, with thousands of news reports, opinion pieces, and social media reactions shaping the public's understanding of the event. These wildfires were not merely ecological occurrences; they became discursively constructed crises, whose meaning was mediated and amplified through language, images, and narratives produced by the media.

The functions of language used by the media shaped more than just factual awareness, but influenced public reasoning, emotional response, and perceived responsibility. For example, the use of metaphorical framing offers a fundamental mechanism through which journalists and institutions frame environmental and health-related issues (Fadhilah & Suhandono, 2024). Liu and Huang (2022), demonstrate how the terms “climate change” and “global warming” are differentially framed across political and scientific contexts in *The New York Times*. Similarly, Yu et al. (2021) show that Chinese and British media adopt contrasting tones in reporting the Covid-19 pandemic, with *China Daily* employing a factual, cooperative style and *The Guardian* favoring more emotionally expressive and critical language. These studies highlight how media outlets not only report but actively construct social reality.

Several recent studies have demonstrated how metaphorical language in news reporting frames such issues using Critical Discourse

Analysis (CDA) with Corpus Linguistics (CL). CDA provides a methodological framework for revealing the ideological underpinnings of language in media discourse. It aims to uncover how power, dominance, and inequality are enacted and reproduced through language. The integration of CDA with CL has led to the emergence of Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS), which combines the qualitative strengths of CDA with the quantitative robustness of corpus methods (Baker et al., 2008).

Baker (2014) emphasizes that corpus-based approaches enhance objectivity, ensure broader linguistic coverage, and increase the generalizability of discourse findings. Karlina (2023) demonstrates the efficacy of CADS in identifying ideologically loaded patterns in the representation of women with disabilities. In relation, Isti'anah et al. (2023) used CADS to examine how environmental discourse is constructed on Indonesian tourism platforms. Unlike traditional linguistics methods, CADS also enable the identification of frequent metaphorical or evaluative patterns that might be overlooked in smaller-scale qualitative studies (Karlina, 2023). As such, CADS offers a comprehensive toolkit for analyzing the subtle and systematic ways media shape meaning.

CADS has been widely applied to study representations of various social groups and issues in news discourse. Scholars such as Samaie & Malmir (2017), Al Fajri (2019), and Li & Zhang (2022) have examined the portrayal of Islam and Muslims in American and international media, revealing patterns of stigmatization and ideological bias. Fahad and Roselani (2025) extended this line of inquiry to representations of “jihad” and “shahid” in Indonesian news discourse. Likewise, the representation of people with disabilities has been critically investigated by Al Fajri et al. (2024), who found that Indonesian online news reports often reinforce stereotypical narratives. The depiction of refugees has also received attention in corpus-based studies. Omidian Sijani (2023), for instance, analyzed the

portrayal of Syrian refugees in Canadian newspapers and identified thematic patterns reflecting national ideologies and security discourses.

Health and environmental crises are another major focus of recent discourse studies. Wang (2018) analyzed air pollution reporting in China's state media, Zhang et al. (2022) examined how Covid-19 was metaphorically framed in Chinese online editorials. In the Indonesian context, Istianah & Suhandano (2022) conducted a corpus-assisted ecolinguistic analysis of how "climate change" and "global warming" are framed across different news platforms. Pinontoan & Wahid (2020) further analyzed the representation of Jakarta floods in two national news media. Political discourse has also been analyzed - for instance, in the framing of Trump's statements during the 2020 U.S. presidential debates (Zhu, 2021).

The discursive construction of natural disasters, particularly wildfires, has become an important subject of inquiry. Several studies have addressed how local and national media frame wildfires and their causes. For instance, Ardhana & Ismandianto (2022), Cabucci & Maulina (2021), and Ramli et al. (2021) analyzed news coverage of forest fires in Indonesia and Malaysia, identifying tendencies to deflect responsibility or dramatize the events. Munandar & Basuki (2021) argue that the use of dramatic visuals and metaphors in U.S. media reporting on storms and wildfires may hinder effective disaster response by evoking fear rather than preparedness. Similar conclusions are drawn by Fauzan et al. (2025), who observed how such a fire event was framed differently depending on media ownership and regional orientation.

While metaphorical framing and CADS have been fruitfully applied to numerous topics, including environmental issues, religious identities, health crises, and marginalized populations - limited research has addressed how wildfires are metaphorically framed in U.S. media with differing institutional

affiliations. Prior studies have often relied on monolithic sources such as *The New York Times* (e.g., Liu & Huang, 2022), without engaging in comparative analysis.

To address this gap, the present study investigates the metaphorical framing of the 2025 California wildfires in two ideologically distinct U.S. news media: *Voice of America (VOA)* - a government-funded international broadcaster, and *USA Today* - a privately owned, commercially driven news media. Comparing their wildfire news coverage allows for a deeper understanding of how institutional context influences metaphor selection and discursive strategies in climate crisis reporting.

This study adopts a Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) approach (Baker et al., 2008; Baker, 2014), combining quantitative corpus analysis with qualitative discourse interpretation. Employing *AntConc 4.2.4*, the study identifies metaphorical expressions related to wildfires in *VOA* and *USA Today* news articles. Conceptual domains are developed using Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and further interpreted through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (Van Dijk in (Bell & Garrett, 1998) which leads to Critical Metaphor Analysis (Charteris-Black, 2004). By analyzing how metaphors construct wildfires, this research seeks to uncover how different ideological orientations influence metaphor use in wildfire discourse, highlighting how institutional affiliations mediate the ideological functions of metaphor in times of crisis.

Research Method

This study adopts a descriptive research design with an integrated quantitative and qualitative approach, situated within the framework of Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS). Rather than treating quantitative and qualitative methods as separate analytical stages, the study integrates both functions in a complementary and sequential manner (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The quantitative component primarily

supports data retrieval, frequency measurement, and distributional patterning, while the qualitative component dominates the interpretation of linguistic meaning and metaphorical representation.

The data consist of wildfire-related news articles published by *Voice of America (VOA)* and *USA Today* between January 1 and January 31, 2025, a period marked by intensive media coverage of the Southern California wildfires. These two outlets were selected due to their contrasting institutional affiliations and communicative orientations, providing valuable grounds for comparison in how metaphors are used to frame climate-related events. *VOA* as a government-funded international broadcaster under the U.S. Agency for Global Media with a policy-oriented perspective, and *USA Today* as a commercially driven news outlet emphasizing immediacy and public engagement. Articles were retrieved from the official websites of both media, converted into plain text (.txt) format, and compiled into two corpora: the *VOA* corpus (approximately 23,138 tokens) and the *USA Today* corpus (approximately 48,190 tokens).

Quantitative analysis was conducted using *AntConc 4.2.4* to identify collocational patterns and generate Key Word in Context (KWIC) lines for the lexical items *fire* and *wildfire*. The lexical items *fire* and *wildfire* were selected as node words as they represent complementary levels of reference to the same phenomenon. *Fire* functions as a high-frequency and semantically flexible term that captures immediate events, emergency response, and institutional action, while *wildfire* is a more specific and domain-bound term associated with large-scale environmental risk and disaster contexts. Analyzing both items allows the study to compare general and specialized discursive framings, identify differences in collocational behavior and semantic prosody, and more comprehensively examine how wildfire events are linguistically constructed across media outlets. This stage served to reveal descriptive statistical patterns, including word frequency, co-occurrence

tendencies, and distributional regularities. These quantitative findings functioned for qualitative discourse and metaphor analysis.

The qualitative analysis built directly upon the corpus findings to interpret how *fire* and *wildfire* are discursively and metaphorically constructed. Metaphorical expressions were identified using the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) developed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007) with principles from Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA) by Charteris-Black (2004). MIP was applied to determine whether lexical units were used metaphorically or literally in context, ensuring systematic and replicable metaphor detection. Each lexical item was evaluated by comparing its contextual meaning with its more basic meaning, and metaphorical usage was identified where semantic contrast was observed. In relation, CMA informed the identification of recurrent metaphorical patterns through frequency, collocation, and semantic prosody, particularly where such patterns carried evaluative or ideological significance. Identified metaphorical expressions were subsequently categorized into conceptual domains grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) by Lakoff & Johnson (1980), such as *FIRE AS WAR ZONE*. The identified metaphorical patterns were mapped based on systematic correlations in everyday embodied experience, which facilitates conceptual organization and interpretation (Haula, 2020). The categorization process was verified through inter-rater review to enhance analytical reliability.

In the final analytical stage, the metaphorical patterns were interpreted through a discourse analytic lens informed by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA). This interpretive stage examined how metaphor use reflects institutional stance, ideological positioning, and communicative goals in each media outlet. The findings are presented through an integrated combination of quantitative tables for collocation and KWIC patterns, and qualitative interpretation, enabling a systematic

comparison of how *VOA* and *USA Today* construct wildfire narratives through metaphor and discourse.

Result and Discussion

Collocation Analysis of Fire in *VOA* and *USA Today*

Collocation analysis provides insight into the words that typically appear near core lexical

items such as *fire* and *wildfire*, revealing the discursive patterns and metaphorical framings that characterize wildfire reporting. In this study, collocates were examined within a five-word span (± 5), and those with high log-likelihood and effect size were analyzed for their metaphorical and discursive significance.

Tables 1-2 present the collocational patterns of *fire* and *wildfire* in *VOA* which followed by its elaboration.

Table 1 Collocation of *Fire* in *VOA*

	Collocate	Rank	Freq. (Scaled)	FreqLR	FreqL	FreqR	Range	Likelihood
1	cal	1	280	46	38	8	1	156.342
2	contained	2	590	53	14	39	1	118.802
3	protection	3	160	24	8	16	1	77.027
4	palisades	4	970	49	42	7	1	62.286
5	eaton	5	550	36	26	10	1	60.680
6	forestry	6	180	20	20	0	1	52.520
7	the	7	14320	286	171	115	1	50.838
8	department	8	450	27	17	10	1	41.576
9	known	9	80	12	6	6	1	38.473
10	hughes	10	100	13	10	3	1	38.021
11	chief	11	240	18	3	15	1	34.441
12	according	12	490	25	16	9	1	32.049
13	fire	13	3000	76	38	38	1	28.546
14	was	14	1230	41	11	30	1	28.058
15	fires	15	1640	3	2	1	1	25.096
16	drops	16	40	7	4	3	1	24.614
17	crowley	17	80	9	3	6	1	23.819
18	laguna	18	30	6	3	3	1	22.758
19	largest	19	230	14	9	5	1	21.849
20	second	20	120	10	8	2	1	20.964
21	fighting	21	100	9	5	4	1	20.106
22	retardant	22	30	5	2	3	1	17.081

Table 2 Collocation of *Wildfire* in *VOA*

	Collocate	Rank	Freq. (Scaled)	FreqLR	FreqL	FreqR	Range	Likelihood
1	face	1	30	3	3	0	1	22.615
2	brave	2	40	3	0	3	1	20.827
3	victims	3	60	3	0	3	1	18.351
4	juniper	4	20	2	1	1	1	15.067
5	modern	5	30	2	0	2	1	13.392

The collocation profile of *fire* in *VOA* is heavily dominated by location-bound identifiers, such as *Cal*, *Palisades*, *Eaton*, *Hughes*, and *Angeles*. These items function as narrative anchors, tying *fire* to named, geographically specific incidents. Such naming practices indicate a discourse frame that conceptualizes wildfire as a discrete, locatable event, reinforcing an event-reporting

style characteristic of institutional news coverage.

Equally prominent are collocates associated with institutional management and operational control, including *contained*, *protection*, *forestry*, and *department*. These items contribute to a semantic prosody of technicality, authority, and procedural

management, suggesting that *VOA* positions wildfire within bureaucratic and operational processes. The co-occurrence of *known* further indicates the role of fire classification and official naming conventions, which reinforces an administrative orientation. Overall, the prosody surrounding *fire* in *VOA* is bureaucratic, controlled, and institution-centered, generating a discourse frame of *wildfire-as-managed-hazard*.

Furthermore, *VOA* displays fewer collocates for *wildfire*, yet the items present such as *force*, *brave*, *victims*, *modern*, *jump* signal a more affective register. These collocates highlight risk escalation, human bravery, and victimhood, pointing to a narrative that foregrounds the human and emotional

dimensions of wildfire experiences while still maintaining the event-specific character observed in the analysis of *fire*. Compared to the technical prosody of *fire*, *wildfire* exhibits a more human-centered semantic prosody, reflecting evaluative and experiential meanings.

Nevertheless, the overarching discourse remains consistent with *VOA*'s institutional orientation: wildfire is framed primarily as a contained incident, embedded within official operations, occasionally punctuated by human impact.

Following the presentation of collocational patterns in *VOA*, tables 3-4 presents the corresponding collocational patterns of fire and wildfire in *USA Today*, alongside its elaboration.

Table 3 Collocation of *Fire* in *USA Today*

	Collocate	Rank	Freq. (Scaled)	FreqLR	FreqL	FreqR	Range	Likelihood
1	cal	1	950	123	106	17	1	292.859
2	eaton	2	1040	108	91	17	1	213.563
3	palisades	3	1820	127	105	22	1	166.657
4	the	4	28700	744	510	234	1	109.177
5	hurst	5	300	41	32	9	1	101.485
6	contained	6	480	42	21	21	1	70.365
7	according	7	1330	66	47	19	1	53.487
8	extreme	8	340	28	25	3	1	44.039
9	hughes	9	240	23	21	2	1	42.081
10	behavior	10	160	19	2	17	1	42.020
11	department	11	800	43	8	35	1	39.502
12	kenneth	12	160	18	16	2	1	38.036
13	acres	13	920	46	12	34	1	37.699
14	started	14	370	27	5	22	1	37.156
15	crews	15	390	27	6	21	1	34.914
16	fires	16	2550	12	8	4	1	34.492
17	brush	17	290	22	20	2	1	31.637
18	season	18	250	19	5	14	1	27.374
19	map	19	180	16	10	6	1	27.200
20	near	20	540	29	6	23	1	26.584
21	containment	21	320	21	7	14	1	25.410
22	lidia	22	110	12	9	3	1	24.687
23	reported	23	510	26	9	17	1	21.964
24	deaths	24	130	12	4	8	1	21.169
25	chief	25	210	15	0	15	1	20.121
26	favorable	26	30	6	3	3	1	19.338
27	border	27	80	9	7	2	1	19.011
28	began	28	210	14	3	11	1	17.272

Table 4 Collocation of *Wildfire* in *USA Today*

	Collocate	Rank	Freq. (Scaled)	FreqLR	FreqL	FreqR	Range	Likelihood
1	relief	1	190	11	2	9	1	55.475
2	victims	2	210	8	3	5	1	33.720
3	season	3	250	8	1	7	1	31.025

4	recovery	4	120	6	1	5	1	28.478
5	la	5	780	11	9	2	1	26.044
6	fund	6	80	5	1	4	1	25.950
7	smoke	7	360	8	1	7	1	25.510
8	response	8	130	5	0	5	1	21.152
9	historically	9	20	3	2	1	1	20.997
10	california	10	2380	16	8	8	1	18.611
11	faith	11	10	2	1	1	1	15.248
12	globalgiving	11	10	2	1	1	1	15.248
13	pollutes	11	10	2	1	1	1	15.248

The collocational pattern of *fire* in *USA Today* reveals a discourse patterned around geographic specificity, institutional authority, and operational management of wildfire events. High-frequency place names such as *Cal*, *Eaton*, *Palisades*, *Hurst*, *Hughes*, and *Lidia* mark a strongly localized reporting frame, positioning fires as spatially anchored incidents rather than environmental phenomena. This spatialisation is reinforced by *acres* and *map*, which foreground the quantification and cartographic monitoring of burned areas.

A second prominent semantic grouping indexes institutional and procedural discourse. Collocates such as *department*, *crews*, *chief*, *according*, and *reported* situate fire within a civic-administrative network of responders, official statements, and bureaucratic oversight. Words like *contained*, *containment*, *started*, and *began* construct the fire as a manageable, sequential event, amenable to operational control and technical intervention. This supports a semantic prosody of procedural rationality, where fires are narrated through stages of assessment, containment, and response.

A third discourse frame involves environmental and hazard intensification. Collocates such as *extreme*, *behaviour*, and *brush* highlight the ecological conditions and dynamic behaviour of fires. The presence of *season* and *near* links fire occurrence to seasonal cycles and locational proximity, producing a framing of wildfires as recurrent, predictable climatic events rather than anomalies.

Finally, the collocate *deaths* introduces an evaluative dimension of human impact, though

this negative prosody is comparatively marginal in *USA Today's* *fire* reporting. Overall, the semantic prosody of *fire* in *USA Today* skews toward administrative control, technical management, and spatial precision, with only limited emphasis on human loss or emotional narratives.

In further, the collocational profile of *wildfire* in *USA Today* constructs a strikingly different discourse orientation, foregrounding human consequences, community vulnerability, and recovery-oriented narratives. High likelihood collocates such as *relief*, *victims*, *recovery*, and *fund* reveal a strongly humanitarian semantic prosody, framing wildfires not merely as environmental events but as crises requiring financial aid, moral support, and community rebuilding. This humanitarian frame is complemented by *response*, which emphasizes institutional reaction but in a context of emergency management, rather than the routine operational management seen in the collocates of *fire*. Collocates like *smoke* and *pollutes* introduce a public health and environmental quality perspective, extending the impact of wildfires beyond burned terrain toward atmospheric and long-term ecological effects.

Geographic indexing remains present through *la* (*LA*) and *California*, but unlike the locality names in the *fire* dataset, these collocates point to broader regional or state-level identification, reinforcing a discourse of large scale and socially disruptive events. The appearance of *season* again frames wildfires as cyclical phenomena, yet within a narrative of intensifying conditions and cumulative harm.

Notably, collocates such as *faith* and *global giving* further underscore a discourse of moral solidarity and philanthropy, strengthening the humanitarian prosody of *wildfire* reporting in *USA Today*.

Taken together, these collocational patterns reveal a clear discursive distinction: *USA Today* associates *fire* with technical management and localized control, whereas *wildfire* is linked to human impact, community loss, and recovery efforts. This bifurcation suggests a media logic in which smaller or contained fire events are framed as

administratively solvable, whereas large-scale wildfires are constructed as socio-environmental crises demanding collective, political, and humanitarian response.

Key Words in Context (KWIC) Analysis of *Fire* in *VOA* and *USA Today*

Figures 1-2 present the KWIC - concordance mapping of the target words *fire*, while figures 3-4 present the concordance mapping of the target words *wildfire* in *VOA* and *USA Today*

File	Left Context	Hit	Right Context
1 VOA ...	a fire left rows of homes in ashes. The Palisades	Fire	is about 77% contained and has burned through nearly 9,500 hectares
2 VOA ...	you see it," Trump said after the tour. The Palisades	Fire	is about 77% contained and has burned through nearly 9,500 hectares
3 VOA ...	official Todd Hopkins told reporters Saturday that 11% of the Palisades	Fire	is contained. The second-largest blaze, the Eaton fire,
4 VOA ...	by wildfires, leaving rows of homes in ashes. The Palisades	Fire	is currently 77% contained and has burned through nearly 9,500 hectares
5 VOA ...	credit rating agency Moody's. The cause of the Palisades	Fire	is still under investigation. The department has not yet
6 VOA ...	after breaking out during powerful winds on Jan. 7. The Palisades	Fire,	the largest of the blazes that destroyed thousands of
7 VOA ...	to the Los Angeles Times. The shift of the Palisades	Fire,	the largest of five, prompted evacuation orders, including the
8 VOA ...	and 76% contained but the other two only 11- and 15%. The Palisades	fire,	the largest and only 11% contained, is threatening to jump
9 VOA ...	the art collections and buildings remain safe from the Palisades	fire,"	the museum said Friday, hours before the evacuation warning. "
10 VOA ...	properly manage water supplies critical to fighting the deadly Palisades	Fire,	which has killed at least eight people and destroyed
11 VOA ...	to properly manage water supplies critical to fighting the Palisades	Fire,	which has killed at least eight people and destroyed
12 VOA ...	week. The strongest winds are expected Tuesday night. The Palisades	fire,	which has burned through nearly 10,000 hectares, is now 31% contained.
13 VOA ...	predict they will pick up again next week. The Palisades	fire,	which broke out more than a week ago on

Figure 1 Sample of *Fire* KWIC Lines in *VOA*

File	Left Context	Hit	Right Context
1 USA Toda...	there's so much dry fuel between us and the	fire	and the wind is picking up, it is possible
2 USA Toda...	throughout the interview as he recalled the events of the	fire	and the destruction of his home, which he had
3 USA Toda...	had not identified its equipment as the source of the	fire	and added that its transmission lines experienced "no operational
4 USA Toda...	and that firefighters were working overnight to "fully extinguish the	fire	and any hot spots." Over 1,100 firefighters had been "strategically
5 USA Toda...	Firefighters completed the hose line around the perimeter of the	fire	and it is fully contained," read a summary of
6 USA Toda...	Sylmar, Cal Fire has not identified a cause of the	fire	and officials have reiterated that it is under investigation.
7 USA Toda...	who said he lives a mile away, peered at the	fire	and smoke through binoculars. "I felt pretty safe, and
8 USA Toda...	and his family were in the "exact epicenter of the	fire"	and were forced to evacuate with the "clothes on
9 USA Toda...	focusing on a ridgeline in western Los Angeles where the	fire	is believed to have started, in the same area
10 USA Toda...	in on a ridgeline in western Los Angeles where the	fire	is believed to have started. The area is popular
11 USA Toda...	incident report. "The fuel is heavy and dense, and the	fire	is burning at a slow rate of spread." Latest
12 USA Toda...	having right now is we can't tell where the	fire	is going to be in 30 minutes." Cal Fire Battalion
13 USA Toda...	famous Hollywood Sign. The stretch of Sunset Boulevard near the	fire	is lined with well-known tourist destinations and landmarks,

Figure 2 Sample of *Fire* KWIC Lines in *USA Today*

The KWIC search for *fire* revealed a substantial contrast in distribution across the two corpora, with 846 hits in *USA Today* and 300 hits in

VOA, indicating that *USA Today* reports on fire-related events nearly three times more frequently. This quantitative disparity correlates

with distinct discourse orientations evident in the KWIC patterns. In *USA Today*, *fire* is consistently embedded in event-driven, hyper-localized descriptions, often naming particular fires (e.g., Eaton Fire, Palisades Fire) and providing numerical updates on acres burned, containment percentages, operational responses and immediate impacts. For example, lines such as “*The fire has burned **nearly 9,500 acres...***,” “*The Eaton Fire had burned **14,021 acres** and was at **89% containment***” and “*The Palisades Fire became **the most destructive** in Los Angeles...*” exemplify how the outlet foregrounds measurable damage, evolving conditions, and community-level consequences. In relation, formulations like “*The Palisades Fire was **first reported on the morning...***” reinforce a breaking-news narrative, prioritizing sequence, timing, and responsiveness. These patterns contribute to a semantic prosody of urgency, escalation, and operational intensity which align with *USA Today*’s collocational profile dominated by terms such as *contained*, *acres*, *near*, *crews*, positioning wildfire as an evolving crisis within local communities.

In relation, the 300 *VOA* concordance lines also display *fire* within institutional, systemic, and explanatory frames, and even referencing the same named events. Examples such as “*The Palisades Fire is **about 77% contained and has burned through nearly 9,500 hectares of land***,” followed by “*The Eaton fire is **99% contained, followed by the Hughes...***” illustrate an emphasis on

aggregated reporting, technical metrics, and comparative assessments. On the other hand, KWIC lines such as “*the Eaton fire, is now **65% contained, according to the forestry department***,” and “*Five of the new total were from the Palisades Fire and 11 from the Eaton Fire, **according to the coroner’s office statement***,” highlight institutional sources of authority and the role of meteorological or governmental actors in interpreting fire behaviour. This positioning constructs fire as part of a governance system, where containment stages, federal or state reporting, and structural causes (e.g., weather patterns, terrain, dryness) receive more discursive prominence than individual community experiences. As a result, *VOA*’s semantic prosody leans toward structural causality, administrative oversight, and environmental explanation.

As a whole, most of the concordance line in both *VOA* and *USA Today* also includes specific containment percentages (e.g., “*9,500 acres*” “*99% contained*,” “*65% contained*,”), framing the fire as a manageable threat being actively subdued. This aligns with the metaphor of “fire as a force to be controlled” in such situation like war setting, emphasizing technical management, progress, and institutional authority. The following figures (3-4) present the KWIC of *wildfire* in *VOA* and *USA Today*.

File	Left Context	Hit	Right Context
1 VOA ...	and a slap in the face to the Southern California	wildfire	victims and to our brave first responders," Representative Young
2 VOA ...	and a slap in the face to the Southern California	wildfire	victims and to our brave first responders," Representative Young
3 VOA ...	and a slap in the face to the southern California	wildfire	victims and to our brave first responders," Representative Young
4 VOA ...	erwork," Newsom said, _____ Firefighters battle new southern California	wildfire	Firefighters battled multiple wildfires Thursday in southern California, including
5 VOA ...	Coffey Park neighborhood became a symbol for how quickly a	wildfire	can reach a populated area. Some 53 years prior, another
6 VOA ...	Who wants to cut down their juniper? But come a	wildfire,	your juniper is a torch," said Gollner. Ecologists suggest
7 VOA ...	at between \$135 billion and \$150 billion. "This will be the costliest	wildfire	in California modern history and also very likely the
8 VOA ...	in California modern history and also very likely the costliest	wildfire	in U.S. modern history, because of the fires
9 VOA ...	ly to burn," said Mahmoud. _____ California winds increase, posing new	wildfire	threats Winds are expected to increase early Wednesday morning
10 VOA ...	growth." Millions of people across the region faced the new	wildfire	warnings on Tuesday, as electricity was shut off for
11 VOA ...	Angeles, while the Pentagon will send eight large planes and 500	wildfire	clearance personnel. Meanwhile, Biden sought to debunk claims pushed
12 VOA ...	nsurers out of California _____ 30,000 ordered to flee Los Angeles-area	wildfire; 13,000	structures threatened LOS ANGELES — Firefighters scrambled to corral a
13 VOA ...	them more panache," said Alexandra Syphard, a San Diego-based	wildfire	ecologist at the Conservation Biology Institute. For Hussam Mahmoud,
14 VOA ...	S. President Donald Trump, investment of California's demand for	wildfire,	as firefighters in the Los Angeles area continued to

Figure 3 Sample of *Wildfire* KWIC Lines in *VOA*

File	Left Context	Hit	Right Context
1 USA Toda...	they had tools they could have used to mitigate the	wildfire	risk," said Iglesias' attorney, Ali Moghaddas of the Edelson
2 USA Toda...	they had tools they could have used to mitigate the	wildfire	risk," said Iglesias' attorney Ali Moghaddas of the Edelson
3 USA Toda...	and the California Community Colleges have partnered to create the	Wildfire	and Disaster Relief program. Donations to the fund will
4 USA Toda...	of the tower at 6:21 p.m., six minutes after the	wildfire	began. The lawsuit also includes accounts from witnesses who
5 USA Toda...	dry hills surrounding Castaic Lake north of the city. The	wildfire	is threatening to set ablaze suburban neighborhoods in a
6 USA Toda...	need," he said during a White House briefing on the	wildfire	response. At the end of the briefing, a reporter
7 USA Toda...	donations to help provide urgent aid and supplies to the	wildfire	survivors. The global humanitarian organization has been working on
8 USA Toda...	in the Pacific Palisades, an affluent community ravaged by a	wildfire	that authorities said overwhelmed the local water system. Officials
9 USA Toda...	Year's Day, that area was the site of a	wildfire	that was ignited by fireworks, multiple news outlets reported.
10 USA Toda...	area. Be careful with fire sources." What causes wildfires? A	wildfire,	an uncontrolled blaze that occurs on open land with
11 USA Toda...	common cause of ignition, especially in the face of a	wildfire	ember storm. "Embers can be the size of your
12 USA Toda...	to strong gusts accompanied by low humidity," Todd Steelman, a	wildfire	expert at Duke University, told USA TODAY on Monday. "
13 USA Toda...	at a press conference that day. "We're fighting a	wildfire	with urban water systems, and that is really challenging."
14 USA Toda...	Therefore, that the federal government will cause the cost of	wildfire,	economic measures necessary to protect lives, including debris removal

Figure 4 Sample of *Wildfire* KWIC Lines in *USA Today*

The KWIC analysis of *wildfire* further reinforces the distinct discourse orientations found earlier in the collocation findings. The patterns from both corpora show that while *wildfire* is associated with destruction and environmental danger in both media, the narrative emphasis and discursive framing differ considerably. *USA Today* presents *wildfire* within a humanitarian impact and recovery-centered frame, whereas *VOA* frames *wildfire* through institutional, scientific, and policy-driven lenses.

The KWIC lines from *USA Today* show that *wildfire* frequently appears alongside terms related to smoke, public health, victims, relief efforts, risk mitigation, and community impact. Many concordance lines explicitly describe

wildfire smoke as a public health hazard, such as “*air quality advisories extended as wildfire smoke pollutes LA region*” and “*wildfire smoke has been linked to increased risk of asthma*”. This pattern strengthens the collocational evidence where *smoke*, *victims*, *relief*, and *fund* ranked among the strongest collocates, signalling a health-oriented and humanitarian semantic prosody.

Another prominent pattern is narrative dramatization, highlighting wildfire as a catastrophic, fast-moving phenomenon. For instance, “*the wildfire is threatening to set ablaze suburban neighbourhoods*,” “*the Hughes wildfire goes from brush blaze to 9,000+ acre conflagration*,” and descriptions of “*wildfire-driven suburban conflagrations*” reflect a discourse of escalating danger. *USA*

Today also emphasizes climatic and environmental vulnerability as present in “*with climate change, these kinds of wildfire events are also changing constantly.*”

USA Today’s KWIC lines also foreground economic and emotional consequences for affected communities. Lines such as “*wildfire victims... losing their own home,*” “*organizations taking donations to help victims of the wildfires,*” or “*federal government will cover the cost of wildfire response measures*” demonstrate a sustained emphasis on loss, displacement, and financial assistance. This aligns with the collocates *relief, victims, fund,* and *recovery*, which collectively frame wildfires as extended crises requiring coordinated recovery infrastructures and social support. The focus shifts from fire as a natural force to its social aftermath, reinforcing a framing of wildfire as human crisis/economic inferno.

Taken together, *USA Today* constructs a semantic prosody of danger, health threat, humanitarian need, and community vulnerability, portraying wildfires as social crises that produce victims, require relief resources, and expose systemic vulnerabilities. The KWIC lines thus integrate with collocational patterns to form a coherent discourse frame of wildfire as humanitarian and environmental crisis.

VOA’s KWIC lines, on the other hand, present markedly different patterns. While *wildfire* also appears in monster-like destructive contexts, the surrounding context places greater emphasis on institutional actors, scientific expertise, regulatory concerns, and long-term structural risk. Examples include statements such as “*Firefighters scrambled to corral a fast-moving wildfire in the Los Angeles hillsides,*” followed by institutional references like “*the Pentagon will send eight large planes and 500 wildfire clearance personnel*”. These lines highlight governmental coordination and multi-agency response structures rather than individual community experiences.

Several lines also connect *wildfire* to economic and infrastructural evaluations, such as “*This will be the costliest wildfire in California modern history*” and “*wildfire exposure... can have a significant impact on human morbidity and mortality,*” framing wildfire in terms of policy relevance, infrastructural vulnerability, and economic consequences. Scientific and technical voices appear prominently in *VOA*’s KWIC lines. Examples such as “*a San Diego-based wildfire ecologist,*” “*wildfire smoke... is a mixture of air pollutants,*” and “*wind patterns pose new wildfire threats*” place wildfire within a scientific and environmental knowledge system. This match collocates like *season, behaviour, extreme,* and *threats*, which reflect a discourse of structural forces that shape wildfire risk.

Unlike *USA Today*, which emphasizes victims, emotions, and grassroots relief efforts, *VOA* links wildfire events to national disaster costs, federal aid, regulatory failures, and energy infrastructure issues. Overall, *VOA* produces a semantic prosody of institutional authority, scientific evaluation, and environmental governance, treating wildfire as a structurally produced hazard requiring coordinated policy and infrastructural responses rather than solely a community-centered disaster.

The Analysis of Metaphors of Fire in *Voice of America (VOA)*

Fire as Mechanical Breakdown

Wildfires are metaphorically linked to systemic malfunction - an infrastructure under strain. The cause and impact of fires are described through the lens of technological failure. This metaphorical framing places emphasis on human error, planning deficiencies, and institutional accountability.

- (1) “*During wildfires, utility companies can cut electricity amid fears that faulty power lines could spark more fires.*”

- (2) *"Caused by a tree branch falling on **power lines**, that **fire** burned 300 hectares and destroyed 10 homes."*
- (3) *"Pasadena Water and Power issued a **Do-Not-Drink** Water order for Pasadena and evacuated areas of the Eaton **Fire**, noting that the **water system** may have been impacted by **"debris and elevated turbidity."**"*

Linguistic patterns in the data above link the cause and impact of wildfires to the language of technological failure and engineering dysfunction. For instance, the fear that faulty *power lines* could spark additional fires led utility companies to cut electricity preemptively in vulnerable areas. Such actions reflect a mechanical causality frame, wherein failures in infrastructure-power grids, *water systems*, or public utilities-are foregrounded as both triggers and amplifiers of disaster. A representative example includes reports attributing one fire to a tree branch falling on power lines, which subsequently burned 300 hectares and destroyed 10 homes. Here, the ignition source is framed not as a random natural occurrence, but as the breakdown of a managed technological interface between nature and human systems.

In addition, this framing extends beyond ignition to encompass the collateral degradation of public services during wildfire events. For example, Pasadena Water and Power issued a "Do-Not-Drink" advisory following the Eaton Fire, citing concerns that the water system was compromised by "debris and elevated turbidity." Such descriptions reinforce the image of a networked infrastructure pushed to the point of collapse, portraying wildfire as both symptom and cause of mechanical disorder.

Crucially, the mechanical breakdown metaphor foregrounds human agency-particularly issues of institutional accountability, urban planning, and risk management. Rather than presenting wildfires as purely natural disasters, this metaphor suggests that their severity and spread are exacerbated by human failures, including underinvestment in infrastructure, poor

vegetation management near utility lines, and inadequate disaster preparedness. In doing so, this metaphorical frame invites readers to consider structural reform and policy intervention rather than passive acceptance or fatalism. This also emphasizes preventability, governance, and the interconnectedness of ecological and technological systems.

Fire as Economic Inferno

Another salient metaphorical framing identified in the corpus is that of wildfire as an economic inferno - a conceptual metaphor that maps the physical destruction caused by fire onto broader systems of financial collapse, market instability, and economic burden. This framing shifts attention from environmental or ecological devastation toward the monetary repercussions of wildfire, emphasizing how the crisis "burns through" not only natural landscapes and residential areas, but also individual livelihoods, public budgets, and legal systems.

- (4) *"...the federal government will cover the **cost** of **wildfire** response measures necessary to **protect lives**, including **debris removal, shelter and first responder salaries for 180 days.**"*
- (5) *"...Michael Kreiner blames the utility for starting the **fire** that destroyed his **property** at his rental unit."*
- (6) *"GlobalGiving's California **Wildfire** Relief Fund is **taking donations** that the organization says will go directly toward **supporting wildfire relief and recovery efforts** in the state. The **fund** aims to **provide food, water and shelter to victims through vetted nonprofits.**"*
- (7) *"More than a dozen victims of the Pacific Palisades **wildfire** are **suing** the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power for water supply failures they say contributed to the devastation of the Los Angeles inferno."*

This metaphor constructs wildfire not only as a destructive force of nature, but as a catalyst for cascading economic distress. In this frame, the fire metaphorically spreads through bank accounts, insurance claims, legal settlements,

and government relief programs, consuming financial resources in much the same way it consumes vegetation and property. Such language suggests that the damage is not limited to tangible loss but includes the erosion of economic security and institutional stability.

This economic inferno metaphor thus performs multiple discursive functions: it dramatizes the financial scale of destruction, personalized economic loss through individual legal narratives, and underscores the systemic vulnerabilities exposed by the fires. It positions wildfire not only as an environmental issue but as a threat to socio-economic order, making space for discussions around insurance gaps, public-private accountability, and resource allocation. Ultimately, by framing fire as an economic inferno, the media foregrounds financial suffering and institutional strain, recontextualizing wildfire from a purely ecological disaster to a multidimensional crisis that reverberates across markets, legal systems, and humanitarian aid networks.

Fire as War Zone

Wildfires are framed through militaristic metaphors, portraying them as hostile forces and the response as a battle.

- (8) “The Pentagon, at Biden’s direction, is **rushing firefighting equipment and personnel to battle** the wildfires in California, including aircraft to help **suppress** the blazes.”
- (9) “The Palisades Fire, which **has killed** five people, grew another roughly 1,000 acres on Saturday.”
- (10) “The Palisades Fire **has destroyed** over 23,000 homes and is the most destructive wildfire in the area, USA TODAY’s previously reported.”
- (11) “Clay Fire in Riverside County is **under control**, officials say.”

Such metaphors resonate with findings by Flusberg et al. (2017) and Zeng & Ahrens (2023), who show that war metaphors in climate or disaster discourse tend to emphasize conflict, urgency, and heroism, while sometimes

obscuring the systemic or human-driven roots of the crisis. Terms like *battle*, *suppress*, and *firefighting equipment and personnel* position firefighting as a military operation, with aircraft acting as combat tools.

Personification of the fire as an advancing enemy force that *kills* and *destroys*, suggesting a territorial incursion reminiscent of armed conflict. The growth of the fire is framed not as a natural progression but as strategic escalation, similar to a military campaign expanding its frontlines. The reference to homes as being “destroyed” rather than “burned” also reinforces the sense of intentional aggression.

In further, the phrase *under control* suggests that the battlefield has been stabilized, at least temporarily, by competent authorities. This aligns with war metaphors that portray fire as a force to be subdued, contained, or neutralized, affirming institutional competence and reinforcing narratives of recovery and order.

The Analysis of Metaphors of Fire in USA Today

Fire as Living Creature

Wildfire, on a biochemical level, is a distributed process of chemical combustion. However, when a wildfire arises, it is often framed otherwise in public discourse as a living creature. This framing re-conceptualizes a distributed chemical process in terms of a cohesive organism that has agency. Framing a wildfire as a living creature highlights its need to sustain itself, the need to grow and the need to consume food.

- (12) “The fires **have consumed** about 38,000 acres of land total, according to Cal Fire.”
- (13) “Why California fires **are growing** larger and more destructive?”

The use of the verb *consumed* maps the act of combustion onto biological ingestion, implying that the fire feeds on land as though it were alive, growing stronger through sustenance. In

this metaphor, the fire becomes a predatory organism, one that requires fuel-trees, homes, entire landscapes-to survive. Similarly, headlines like “Why California fires are **growing larger** and more destructive?” frame wildfires as entities that grow, paralleling the life cycle of biological beings. Growth here is not passive spread; it is purposeful expansion, as though the fire seeks to thrive.

Framing fire as a creature with needs-to feed, to grow, to move-reconfigures the narrative from one of natural processes to one of agency-driven threat. This metaphor aligns with research by Semino (2021), who notes that metaphors attributing animacy and intentionality to abstract forces like disease or fire can amplify emotional salience and public concern. It resonates with broader ecological metaphors, where the landscape is dynamic and the fire is an actor within it, not a random event.

The personification of wildfire intensifies its perceived menace. It is no longer merely a reaction between heat, oxygen, and fuel; it becomes an autonomous predator, capable of decision-making, escalation, and strategic movement. This can elicit fear, awe, and a sense of human vulnerability-shifting wildfire discourse from discussions of environmental management toward more existential narratives of confrontation with a semi-sentient force.

Fire as War Zone

A dominant metaphorical framing that emerges across wildfire-related news discourse in *VOA* and *USA Today* is the conceptualization of wildfires as a war zone. In this case, *fire* functioning as an enemy combatant and *firefighting* efforts cast as acts of military defense or offense. This metaphor relies heavily on the language and imagery of warfare, including combat metaphors such as *fighting*, *battling*, *threatening*, *confronting*, and *surging*, thereby transforming environmental disaster into a conflict narrative.

- (14) “*Cal Fire is **fighting** five active wildfires in the Los Angeles area: the Palisades, Eaton, Hurst, Lidia and Kenneth fires.*”
- (15) “*At least 24 people have been **killed** in the fires, which have **destroyed** thousands of homes and businesses and are **threatening to burn** even more.*”
- (16) “*Fire crews in San Diego County **battled** several small brush fires that erupted Tuesday but were quickly extinguished.*”
- (17) “*U.S. President Donald Trump toured parts of California damaged by wildfire as **firefighters** in the Los Angeles area continued to **confront** multiple blazes amid high winds and dry conditions.*”
- (18) “*...continually reaching out to Washington for aid to **combat** the fires.*”
- (19) “*Biden said he was **surging 400 federal firefighters** and **30 firefighting planes and helicopters** to Los Angeles, while the Pentagon will send **eight large planes** and **500 wildfire clearance personnel**.*”

The verbs *fighting*, *battled*, and *combat* mirror military action, portraying fire as an adversary to be subdued through strength, coordination, and tactical response. These lexical choices transform *firefighters* into frontline defenders, heroic figures navigating hostile terrain. The fire is also personified as an advancing enemy through the verbs *killed* and *destroyed*.

This militarized framing is further intensified by references to presidential interventions and federal mobilization. Biden’s decision to surge 400 federal firefighters, 30 aircraft, and the Pentagon’s deployment of eight planes and 500 clearance personnel evokes the logistics of a military campaign. The use of the term *surge* - borrowed from military contexts such as troop escalation - emphasizes the urgency and scale of the effort. The metaphor positions the U.S. government not simply as a coordinator of disaster response, but as a commander-in-chief overseeing wartime operations.

The Implication of Metaphors of Fire Analysis in *VOA* and *USA Today*

The analysis of metaphorical framing in *VOA* and *USA Today* coverage of the 2025 California

wildfires reveals critical implications for both media discourse and public understanding of climate-related disasters. Metaphors such as wildfire as war, living creatures, mechanical breakdown, and economic inferno do more than describe the event - they frame how readers interpret its causes, consequences, and appropriate responses.

The findings show that each media's institutional affiliation plays a significant role in shaping metaphor usage. *VOA*, as a government-funded international broadcaster, tends to highlight themes of coordination, containment, and federal action, reinforcing narratives of control and state responsibility. In contrast, *USA Today*, as a commercially driven outlet, often amplifies the emotional and human dimensions of the disaster -emphasizing suffering, urgency, and community-level impact. These contrasts suggest that metaphors are not randomly used but are strategically aligned with each media's communicative goals, editorial priorities, and target audiences.

Moreover, the metaphors identified have meaningful consequences for climate communication and public perception. While war metaphors dramatize the crisis and inspire action, they risk oversimplifying wildfires as isolated battles rather than systemic issues tied to climate change and environmental mismanagement. On the other hand, metaphors such as mechanical breakdown or economic inferno invite audiences to consider human causality, institutional preparedness, and infrastructure vulnerability, prompting a more reflective and accountability-focused discourse.

These metaphorical framings also influence policy thinking and institutional responsibility. The imagery of combat and confrontation supports reactive measures, such as emergency deployment and suppression tactics, often sidelining discussions about prevention, mitigation, and long-term climate resilience. In contrast, metaphors rooted in systemic failure or economic disruption encourage critical engagement with governance

structures and the need for sustained investment in ecological and infrastructural reform.

Conclusion

The analysis reveals that wildfires are not merely reported as environmental events but are actively constructed through powerful metaphorical frames that shape public perception, emotional response, and perceived accountability. The comparative analysis of wildfires also suggests that institutional affiliation influences metaphor selection and framing strategies. *VOA* tends to emphasize national coordination, international diplomacy, and systemic perspective as it served as a national government-funded media though such metaphors like *fire as mechanical breakdown*, *fire as economic inferno*, and *fire as war zone* - whereas *USA Today* mainly employs metaphors such as *fire as living creature* and *fire as war zone*, to emphasize immediacy, human-centered crisis, and more emotionally charged and domestically focused framings. These differences reflect each media outlet's communicative goals and ideological orientation. By examining how *VOA* and *USA Today* construct wildfire narratives through distinct metaphorical lenses, this study offers a broader understanding of the media's role in shaping environmental discourse and highlights the need for more reflective and responsible communication in an era of escalating climate crises. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its relatively narrow temporal scope and its focus on two media outlets and selected node words, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Future research is therefore encouraged to extend the data range, include a wider variety of media sources, and incorporate complementary perspectives such as ecolinguistics or multimodal analysis to further illuminate media frame and constructions of environmental-related issues.

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