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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON THE DISCOURSE OF COVID-19 REPORTS FROM CHINESE AND AMERICAN MAJOR NEWSPAPERS

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ABSTRACT

Coronavirus (COVID-19) has caused more than millions of death globally. All sorts of media are of significant concern about current news, perceptions, and opinions on the pandemic. It is found that Chinese news reports focused on describing the Chinese government's attitude and measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the wording was objective and neutral. However, the American media adopts language strategies, and the low modality value in the report content is used more frequently, with uncertainty. Part of the word selection is non-neutral. The different social cultures of China and the United States, China's rising international status, and the U.S. election are all crucial factors affecting news discourse on the outbreak. Based on a self-built small corpus, this paper combines the two dimensions of the vocabulary classification system and the systemic functional grammar modal system to compare and analyze the Chinese and American mainstream media reports on the COVID-19 pandemic. The article explores news discourse and the ideological differences behind it and examines the reasons behind it.

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 virus was first reported in China in January 2020. As of mid-November 2020, over fifty million people have been confirmed with COVID-19 worldwide, already causing millions of deaths (World Health Organization, 2020). In the past year, the loss of life and the resulting economic losses have increased exponentially. The global spread of the virus led the WHO to classify the infectious disease as a pandemic on March 11, 2020. Covid pandemic has also become the focus of news reports and online public opinion around the world. As the most penetrating and disseminating medium, news has objectivity and social attributes and is an essential source of information for the public. News media plays a vital role in disseminating valuable information, conveying honesty, and guiding and supervising public opinion. The daily press is responsible for shaping the mainstream cultural, social and political landscape of society. As we all know, in the anti-virus period, the independence of the media is essential.

In this study, the novel coronavirus news reports of the two online newspapers will be taken as the research object. Relevant disciplines such as communication, linguistics, and semiotics will be used for reference to make up for the deficiencies in the current academic research media discourse. Therefore, the discourse style of news reports and the ideology hidden behind the discourse are worth exploring. This article collects news reports from mainstream media in China and the United States about ten months after the outbreak. This paper analyzes specific texts from two aspects: a vocabulary classification system and modality system using corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis. The multi-angle research aims to explore the way in which media discourse forms its opinions and the ideology behind the differences in discourse characteristics.

Literature Review: In 1952, the American linguist Harris published an article in the journal *Language*, and put forward the concept of discourse analysis for the first time. Since then, discourse analysis has come into the field of scholars.

In the field of journalism and communication, discourse analysis is widely used in the study of political speech and news reports. With the deepening of research, scholars gradually focus on the social background of news writing and the hidden ideology behind it. In the mass communication field, most studies deal with purely sociological and social-psychological theories of mass media institutions, news production process news effects on readers or audience, or relations between media on one hand and society and culture on the other hand. For example, Friedland and McLeod (1999) examine the relationship between news and community integration. System functional linguistics (SFL) regards language as a social sign, a sign system, and it has meant not because of its meaning but because it is rooted in society. (Halliday, 1985). As a linguist who began to study CDA in its earlier developing stage, Fowler has contributed to CDA's development. He first put forward "Critical Linguistics" with another two linguists Kress & Hodge, in the book "Language and Control" in 1979.

In 1988, the Dutch scholar Van Dijk published the book "News as Discourse," which analyzed the structure, production, and interpretation of news from discourse. It was first proposed that news is a kind of discourse that runs through the reporter's personality, social context, and cognition. The British scholar Fairclough is also a representative in the field of critical discourse analysis. In 1993, he published his masterpiece "Discourse and Social Change," which proposed to analyze discourse from three dimensions. Fairclough's book *Media Discourse* (1995) focused on changing media discourse processes with social and cultural change processes by drawing on examples from TV, newspapers, and radio. Furthermore, his three-dimensional model is applied widely in the CDA study.

Scholars from various countries have done a lot of research on the application of critical discourse analysis in news discourse, proving the feasibility of using critical discourse analysis to analyze multiple news reports. However, existing linguistics-related documents primarily focus on research fields such as medicine, management, economics, and pedagogy. However, the volume of documents studying the pandemic reports of various countries' media from the perspective of discourse analysis is relatively small.

Through reviewing the literature, we can find that the application of CDA in news discourse studies of have focused on the following aspects: construction of news values (Makki, M., 2020; Onay-Coker, D., 2019); mass media research (van Dijk, T. A. (Ed.), 2011; Mampaey, J. etc., 2019; Putri, A. G., 2018); image/identity construction (Saddhono, K., 2020; McGannon, K. R. etc, 2016); feminism (Mendes, K., 2011; Marling, R., 2010; Dalton, E., 2019); climate change (Carvalho, A., & Burgess, J., 2005; Wang, G., 2018); political discourse (Aslani, M., & Salmani, B., 2015; Krzyżanowski, M., 2019). In addition, as a new trend of critical discourse analysis, corpus-based methods are effective in news discourse analysis. However, sometimes it is difficult for corpus tools to perform hierarchical vocabulary and grammatical analysis, and the meaning of some complex words cannot be processed by corpus alone. Therefore, this article combines the quantitative analysis of corpus linguistics with the qualitative analysis of Fairclough's three-dimensional model and Halliday's systematic functional linguistics.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study built two corpora of selected English newspaper articles that were published between 7 January and 31 October in 2020 (see Table 1), which are Chinese News corpus (CN) and American News corpus (AN). The four media outlets are selected for reporting because of their reputation, authority, and comprehensive coverage. They can represent the political positions and ideologies of the United States and China, respectively, and have a broad readership and influence. These newspapers are the leading national newspapers that set the news agenda and influence the profile of public opinion in foreign affairs. The New York Times (NYT) is an American daily newspaper headquartered in New York, with a wide range of influence and readership worldwide. The Los Angeles Times is one of the largest circulation newspapers in the United States. The Los Angeles Times is a daily newspaper issued for the Los Angeles area of California, USA, covering entertainment, sports, politics and other aspects. China Daily (CD) is an English-language daily newspaper's propaganda department of the Communist Party of China. Xinhua News Agency (XH) is the official news agency of the People's Republic of China. Xinhua News Agency is China's largest and most influential media organization and the news agency with the most foreign correspondents in the world. In all cases, the two self-built corpora were compiled from news articles in the LexisNexis Academic database, setting "virus\coronavirus\COVID" as keywords search under the "Combined Search" settings filters limited to the four newspapers sources. In terms of the collection of news discourses, this research uses "Covid," "coronavirus," and "Virus" as search keywords to report separately. Try to be as close as possible to the number of overall discourse choices so that the results are comparable. The corpus of CN includes 678 texts from China Daily (CD) and Xinhua News Agency (XH) with 469145-word tokens, whereas the corpus of AN featured in The New York Times (NYT) and The Los Angeles Times (LAT) contains 678 texts with 961372-word tokens.

With the help of corpus software Antconc 3.5.8 's high-frequency word lists, Concordance Lines, and other analysis tools, the news reports in the four newspapers are analyzed the prominent features in the language form are extracted. Then use the classification system and modality system in system functional linguistics to interpret these characteristics, and explore the different meanings constructed by the discourse and the ideology behind the differences in discourse characteristics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Discourse analysis is a powerful research method used by researchers to explore the nature of message content in recent years, and it is also one of the methods commonly used by cultural scholars. Discourse analysis itself includes "all" discourses, and all written and oral texts can be used for discourse analysis. In research, discourse analysis approaches the text more from rhetoric, narrative, etc., to grasp the deep meaning of the text from the outside to the inside. This paper studies and sorts out the choice of words and modal values of the four newspapers to explore the different interpretations of meaning and the ideological power hidden in the text.

Table 1. The distribution of modal verbs

Values	CN	Percentage	AN	Percentage
Low	Can	568	1880	43.92%
	May	238	1407	
	Could	312	1358	
	Might	81	592	
Median	Will	1609	2239	43.03%
	Would	381	2026	
	Should	333	612	
	Won't	15	201	
	Shouldn't	29	88	
High	Must	169	234	15.05%
	Need	293	707	
	Have to	92	413	
	Can't	90	248	
	Couldn't	29	205	
Total	4239		12005	

According to Halliday, language as meaningful choice in social contexts to construe social meaning. Classification refers to the naming and construction meaning of news texts. The words used by the author convey meaning in the text so that the reader can clearly understand the relationship between all the ideas and information in the report.

Therefore, through the analysis of the vocabulary used by the four online newspaperperson reporting the pandemic, This also shows the positions and ideologies of China and the United States. Below are excerpts from some of the news corpus.

- New pneumonia-type virus can cause infection among humans, says expert. (CD, January 20, 2020)
- The China virus is the 800-pound gorilla in the room when it comes to the risks that the global economy faces," said Christopher Rupkey (LAT, January 30, 2020)
- The genome of that virus, Ms. Shi and her colleagues have now announced, is 96 percent identical to the Wuhan virus that has recently been found in humans. (NYT, January 28, 2020)
- Li Bin (C), deputy director of the National Health Commission, speaks at a press conference on new coronavirus pneumonia in Beijing (XH, January 22, 2020)
- The president has held China accountable for covering up the China virus, and allowing it to spread death and destruction in America and around the world,"(NYT, August 25, 2020)

The above sentences are related reports from China and the United States at the beginning of the outbreak in January. For the new coronavirus, the expression used by China Daily is a new pneumonia-type virus. Xinhua Agency uses new coronavirus pneumonia, which is more objective. And the word "new" informs the public is not the SARS virus of 2003.

The rumors are dispelled, and the main symptoms caused by the new virus are also pointed out. It is similar to atypical pneumonia and reminds the public to be vigilant. The New York Times quoted and relayed the new coronavirus as "Wuhan Coronavirus, " which stigmatized China. At the beginning of the pandemic, the origin of this new virus is still inconclusive. But the U.S. news media associates it with an area for naming. Such reports are non-neutral attitudes, have no substantive basis, fail to adhere to the accuracy of the reports, and do not meet the value standards of news reports.

After the official name of the disease and its causative virus was announced as early as February 11, 2020, the mainstream media in the United States often quoted or relayed inappropriate naming words about the virus in other social and political roles. For example, the expression "China virus" was used in the New York Times report on August 25. In the choice of vocabulary related to COVID-19, China Daily and Xinhua News Agency can be neutral and fair, reflecting the objectivity of news discourse. It can be seen that the American vocabulary choice is copied and constructed through the language skills of the report, which is non-neutral. Modal verbs can be used to express the speaker's views on certain things or states, as well as the speaker's own subjective assumptions. It mainly expresses "inevitability", "possibility", "necessity" and other aspects. In functional grammar, modality is an essential component that reflects interpersonal function and is a syntactic and semantic category used to remember the speaker's subjective attitude towards what he says. According to the degree of strength, modal verbs are divided into three categories: high value, median value, and low value.

This article separately counts the number and types of modal verbs used in the two countries' media news reports. The results are shown in Table 1. The statistical results show that at the modality level of text description, the median modal verbs representing objectivity are the most used modal verbs in the Chinese corpus, with a frequency of 55.84%. Relatively speaking, the median modal verbs accounted for 43.03% of the US news corpus. A large number of medium-value modal verbs "will" and "would" appear in the text because these two words express a kind of guess or wish. Their tone is not as strong as high-value modal verbs, but at the same time, they can express The reporter has certain speculations or wishes and will not take too much risk due to the certainty of the tone and can leave himself a certain amount of leeway.

For examples:

HKSAR will face even bigger pressure in autumn if its COVID- 19 situation couldn't be well controlled, let alone economic stability. Therefore, only by concentrating on COVID-19 control can the government restore normal social order and facilitate the special administrative region's economic recovery and livelihood improvement. (CD, August 16,2020)

We believe that under the firm supports of the central government, as well as the generous assistance from the Chinese mainland, the HKSAR government will definitely bring an early win over the virus and usher in a brighter future of the special administrative region. (CD, August 16,2020)

But it said output would be lower in 2021 if the benefits were extended, because fewer Americans would be working.

"An extension of the additional benefits would boost the overall demand for goods and services, which would tend to increase output and employment," the office wrote. "That extension would also weaken incentives to work as people compared the benefits available during unemployment to their potential earnings, and those weakened incentives would in turn tend to decrease output and employment."

(NYT, June 5, 2020)

Example 6 and 7 China Daily used the modal verb "will" many times in reports to express the Chinese government's beautiful vision to restore regular social order after the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region fights the pandemic. This New York Times report "Surging Coronavirus Caseloads Put Strongmen on the Back Foot" uses multiple modal verbs "would" to express the reporter's speculation that the extra

benefits during the anti-virus period will have an impact on the future. Chinese and American reporters can unknowingly convey their speculation or will to readers through the use of modal verbs, and to a certain extent, can influence readers' attitudes and views on events.

CONCLUSION

News discourse is the unity of objectivity and subjectivity. News reports convey the reporter's position and attitude through positive or negative statements and indirectly share their values to readers. Based on corpus tools and linguistic theories, this article analyzes the critical discourse of news reports related to the COVID-19 pandemic. By studying the classification, modality, and social practice in the text, it is found that Chinese news newspapers can use objective, neutral, and accurate language. Describing related events and government actions, The New York Times and Los Angeles Times in the news relayed other remarks that referred to the new coronavirus as the Wuhan virus and the Chinese virus, has a certain degree of non-neutrality, reflects the difference in ideology. In terms of modal value, the Chinese corpus has a significantly higher proportion of medium-value modal verbs, which shows that the Chinese attitude has a certain degree of objectivity. The American news corpus has a prominent use of medium-value and low-value modal verbs, which indicates that its reports and speech during the anti-virus stage are inherently highly hesitant and uncertain and are not sufficiently specific. The different social cultures of the two countries, China's rising international status, and the political changes in the U.S. election have all affected the media's choice of specific discourse to a certain extent. All in all, news reports are a dissemination tool that reflects the will and ideology of the government. Journalists should have a sense of social responsibility and create a good international environment and a fair and just social atmosphere in the post-epidemic era. Readers should treat news reports critically and respect the objectivity of news.

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