

Research Article

Critical Discourse Analysis of News Texts from Transitivity Perspective

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Abstract: Critical discourse analysis attempts to unveil how power and ideology can be embodied in the discourse which has been pervaded by ideology, including both discourse structure and its content. While the transitivity system in Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar is believed to be an efficient instrument for investigating ideologies hidden in news texts. Combined critical discourse analysis with Halliday's transitivity approach, the present article aims to explore different ideologies in new reports on "the Belt and Road"(B&R) selected from both Chinese and American media, thus confirming the function of transitivity system as an analytical tool by expanding its application area.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis; transitivity; news texts; ideology.

INTRODUCTION

As the economic globalization and integration goes deeper, news has penetrated through every area of life by means of broadcast, television, newspaper and the internet. On the one hand, news dissemination facilitates the exchange of information across the world. On the other hand, it also causes challenges and influences on our mainstream ideology. Meanwhile, language, as the main carrier of news, plays a critical role in reporting the news content and reflecting the attitude of the media towards the news events, which means that language cannot be regarded as a transparent medium to objectively and impartially report what is happening around people. In essence, language is a kind of economic and social practice, the use of language also forming different social groups and determining their meaning potential. Any form of language can reveal, reflect and contribute to the realization of linguistic functions. So discourse, as a form of language and a specific social practice, always defines, describes and limits what can be said and what can't be said. News discourses are no exception because all media, such as television and newspapers, are not only ideological machines, whose role is to help society control and dominate the public, but also they're driven by political and power groups with different interests. On the surface, they appear objective and fair, but in

fact, they implicitly express different ideologies and imperceptibly influence the audience.

Critical discourse analysis developed in 1979, with the purpose of uncovering the hidden relationships between language, power and ideology. Besides, it analyzes social interactions through the researches on language elements, revealing the decisive factors hidden in social relationship system and their influences on the system (Fairclough, 1989). Fairclough proposed that mass media has a strong influence on people's knowledge, beliefs, values, social relations, social identification, etc., which largely depends on the use of language. Language and language form are only the shell of news text, and consciousness is the key of text (Fairclough, 1995). So this study aims to reveal the relationship between language, power and ideology in news discourses by revealing the underlying purpose of the superficial form of language. Specifically, this paper will analyze different choices of language structure through critical discourse analysis, showing the different attitudes of two different newspapers to the same news event, which will show that the choice of different language forms can reflect different ideologies in general. Therefore, through the critical discourse analysis on news discourses, the ideology hidden behind the language form becomes visible, which will

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help to improve readers' sensitivity to the control and manipulation of language and enhance their awareness of resisting such control and manipulation.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Critical linguistics originally appeared in the book called *Language and Control* (Fowler, Hodge, Kress&Trew, 1979). The terms Critical Linguistics (CL) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) are often used interchangeably. Fairclough gives a clear definition of CDA in the book *Critical Discourse Analysis: A Critical Study of Language*. He proposes that CDA means an interdisciplinary approach to the study of discourse, which views language as a form of social practice. Scholars working in the tradition of CDA generally argue that (non-linguistically) social practice and linguistic practice mutually interact and mainly focus on investigating how societal power relations are established and reinforced through language use (Fairclough, 1995). Ruth Wodak (2000) thinks that CDA refers to a interdisciplinary method to study language from critical perspective in order to study verbal behaviors under the situation of natural language. These definitions manifest that CDA is primarily for revealing the hidden relationship between language practice, social practice, and social structure. In other words, CDA is based on the social and historical background, through the study of language structure to reveal hidden beliefs and values in the language that people do not know. CDA is conducted on the basis of diverse modern linguistic theories, and its primary linguistic theory and source of methodology is Systemic Functional Grammar(SFG) represented by M.A.K Halliday. CDA is based on three meta-functions in systematic function grammar, among which ideational metafunction can be used to represent either the external or the internal world. Meanwhile, transitivity, modality, etc can become the major analysis tools of CDA, but this paper principally employs CDA to analyze the news from transitivity perspective.

Halliday firstly applied the transitivity theory to the analysis of the novel *The Inheritors* in 1971. Peng Ying, (2008) mentioned that transitivity theory is a semantic system representing the ideational metafunction, which plays a role in classifying people's outer and inner experience of the world into a manageable set of processes, and specifying the participants involved as well as the optionally circumstantial elements such as time and place, and therefore is seen as a bridge connecting the outside world and language. Meanwhile, Halliday (2000) classifies transitivity into six processes according to different choices of process, participant and circumstance, that is, material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral and existential process.

Material process, one of the most salient types of processes, involves physical actions, which the

“doer” of this type of action is called the Actor and the second participant is called the Goal. This process, representing “doing”, must involve Actor, but the Goal can be arbitrary. With the Actor and the Goal meanwhile, that process can be expressed by both active and passive voice. If the process just involves the Actor without the Goal, only active voice can be used. Furthermore, material process can not only represent specific movements, but also abstract behaviors and events.

Mental process is a process of sensing and construes a quantum of change in the flow of events taking place in our own consciousness (Halliday, 2000:197). There are four sub-categories of mental processes: emotion (processes of feeling); cognition (processes of deciding, knowing, understanding, etc.); and desideration (processes of wanting). The terms Sensor and Phenomenon are the participants in these processes that can be sensed and triggered by them.

Relational process stands for “being”, signaling what's the relationship between two different things. It can be classified into two kinds: attributive and identifying, in which the former refers to the entity (Carrier) carries the attribute (Attribute) and the later is represented by the process that one entity (Identified) is identified by another (Identifier).

Verbal process, verbs of “saying”, is intermediate between mental and material processes: saying something is a physical action that reflects mental operations. In addition, it represents the process of conveying messages through language, which involves three participants: Sayer, Receiver and Target (sometimes Verbiage).

Like verbal process, behavioral process is largely identified on semantic features, which in turn differentiate behavior process from speech process. This category is established to guide us to distinguish between pure mental processes and the external physical signs of these processes. For example, the verbs used in this category tend to mix the physical behaviors with mental perceptions together, like “hear” (mental) and “listen” (behavioral).

Existential process, always the process of “being”, stands for the existence of an entity, which “there”, serving as the subject, is the marked and recognizable symbol. Due to lack of richness and flexibility in expressing ideas, especially in news, existential processes are normally unpopular. Even so, such processes can still convey valuable information.

By virtue of this, this paper will contrast different types of news, attempting to find out whether transitivity can reflect the hidden ideologies behind the news.

A TRANSITIVITY ANALYSIS OF NEWS

In this part, the analysis of transitivity in news with the purpose of exploring the ideological meanings is conducted. The news reports mainly selected from both Chinese and American newspaper are exemplified by “the Belt and Road”(B&R) to explore their own ideological meanings. All of the news samples are selectively from the newspapers, i.e. *China Daily* from China, and *The New York Times* as well as *The Washington Post* from America, which can vividly illustrate two nations’ views on this event. Then the following parts will elaborate on each category and the specific application of transitivity in the news reports.

MATERIAL PROCESS

Material process, a process of doing, usually consists of two parts: Actor and Goal. It must be noted that the choice of the Actor, as well as the Goal is not arbitrary but selected by the journalists with deliberation. Therefore, the material processes in the news reports on the B&R can reveal what B&R can do and what China, Chinese leaders, Chinese government and Chinese people have done.

For example, the reports from *China Daily*:

- 1) China makes every effort to advance the flagship project of the Budapest-Belgrade railway.
- 2) The Silk Road plays an important role in advancing globalization and the diverse development of cultures.

In the above material processes, two different Actors are employed to show specific movements. Overall, the Actors adopted in *China Daily* reveal very positive inclinations to the Belt and Road Construction. The Actor, China in the first sentence, will achieve certain goal through efforts, indicating that China is ready to cooperate with the neighboring countries to promote common development. Meanwhile, such a transitivity process indicates China spares no efforts to work with other countries sincerely. The second Actor, the Silk Road, can bring great benefits to the Goals, namely, globalization and the diverse development of cultures, which manifests the tremendous contributions and great significance of the Belt and Road. So the readers may also be full of hope with B&R project. But with the same Actors, the news reported by *The New York Times* depicts the material processes in a completely different way:

- (1) China *cannot give* the rest of the world what it wants today.
- (2) B&R *meets* Chinese planners’ expectations.

From American news reports, they transparently signify their judgments on B&R. The third example considers China as the Actor, as well as “the rest of the world what it wants today” as its Goal, implicitly suggesting America’s negative attitude towards B&R and building the power-seeking image for China, which doubts China’s motivation on initiating

B&R. In example (4), by the negative words, “Chinese planners”, America apparently disapproves B&R because they unilaterally believes only China can gain profits. To sum up, different material verbs adopted above reflect the images of the Actors in their minds.

MENTAL PROCESS

Mental process can be applied to the clause process of attitude expression. It can serve different ideology and reflect emotional tendency. So these processes adopted in international news will also serve different needs for ideology. The following news make a sharp contrast in China’s and America’s reactions to the Belt and Road Initiative if attention is focused on the verbs embedded in the mental processes:

- (3) These countries *enjoy* a friendly and mutually beneficial relationship with China and have an enormous stake in China’s security, energy demand and economy. (*China Daily*)
- (4) But Beijing’s effort to revive ancient trade routes, a plan known as the Belt and Road Initiative, is causing geopolitical strains, with countries increasingly *worried* about becoming too dependent on China. (*The New York Times*)

The above mental processes in the two newspapers convey their respective feelings on this initiative by words “enjoy” and “worried”. For China, they are convinced that other countries will give friendly feedback on the B&R Initiative because it indeed features mutual benefit and reciprocity. Besides, the economy of these countries and China is closely connected, so they all hope to revitalize the Belt and Road, hoping to bring about development and prosperity for their nations along the road. While example (6) seems to depict China as a threat by worrying about forming “geopolitical strains”. Undoubtedly, that’s how the US intervenes in the implementation of B&R Initiative by seeking ways to restrict China’s strength. Therefore, America expresses their suspicion on the success of B&R, through which they demonstrate other countries’ negative mentality. All in all, mental processes can be stronger to reveal the hidden ideology.

RELATIONAL PROCESS

Relational process is the process of “being”, which relates to the property of an entity or the relation between participants. The analysis of relational process will enable readers to understand the different attitudes towards the property or relation in Chinese and American newspapers, which can further deepen the attitude and reasons through the literal meaning. The following are some examples of relational processes of different newspapers listed:

- (5) The project *will become* more beneficial for a large number of participating countries. (*China Daily*)
- (6) The project *can be* a promising way of dumping of Chinese goods and polices. (*The New York Times*)

With regard to the above relational processes, we can easily make sense that the seventh example is an attributive process and the eighth example an identifying process. With the quality of “beneficial for a large number of participating countries”, it highlights the feasibility and necessity of B&R project to produce win-win situations. However, the Identifier “a promising way of dumping of Chinese goods and polices” adopted here explicitly expresses America’s strong dissatisfaction and condemn on China’s other intentions. As a result, their views on the same entity (either the Carrier or the Identified) are all determined by their own ideologies.

VERBAL PROCESS

Verbal process is the process of “saying”, which involves all kinds of meaning exchange and includes three elements Sayer, Receiver and Target(sometimes Verbiage). Generally speaking, the speaker in verbal process can be represented by domestic and foreign officials, news agencies, scholars as well as experts. One of the characteristics of political news discourse is to quote the relevant people’s words, and then make comments to enrich the content of news reports and discuss their own views. Then the author will make a concrete analysis of these processes by relating them to specific news reports.

- (7) “The joint effort of building the Belt and Road is in the best interest of the world community and reflects the common ideas and pursuits of human society,” *said* Ren, *adding* that the Chinese government welcomes American enterprises and entrepreneurs to join the initiative. (*China Daily*)
- (8) The critic *states* that China will make much ado about increasing its global footprint Under the umbrella of OBOR...(The New York Times)

Both the utterances quoted, whether direct statement or indirect one, show the intention of China on the B&R program but produce disparate effects. The direct quotation in example (9) is considered to show that Chinese government is devoted to constructing the best interest for the world community, which makes the statement more persuasive and authentic. Moreover, the latter part adopts an indirect quotation, which actually indicates the Chinese government’s attitude that they desire to gain support form American enterprises and entrepreneurs. Combined with both direct and indirect quotation in example (9), it not only sheds light on the importance of B&R initiative but also highlights its inclusiveness. However, the indirect quotation employed in example (10), primarily represents the American newspapers’ viewpoint on China’s intention to facilitate B&R project. So such a verbal process used here indeed expresses the disapproval of America, as well as misguide readers to consider whether China is inclined to impose its influence on other countries.

BEHAVIORAL PROCESS

Generally in news reports, behavioral process is utilized skillfully in order to make the readers comprehend their verbal description. For example:

- (9) Despite breakneck economic growth north of the border, few Vietnamese want to *speak* Chinese, while many *clamor* to learn English. (*The Washington Post*)

Here the verbs “speak” and “clamor” in the behavioral process allude to different responses to learning Chinese and English. In light of this statement, the readers will be impressed by the situation that Vietnamese attach more importance to English learning while discounting the learning of Chinese, which aims to show that Vietnam is reluctant to associate with China even if they are tempted by economic growth. As a result, such a behavioral process is adopted to clearly show America unilaterally imposes its own ideas on other countries, which serves to realize the ideology.

EXISTENTIAL PROCESS

Existential process, always the process of “being”, stands for the existence of an entity, in which “there”, serving as the subject, is the marked and recognizable symbol. One of the characteristics of this process is to introduce new information, whose structure is clear so that it’s easy to identify. Due to lack of richness and flexibility in expressing ideas, especially in news, existential processes are normally unpopular. Even so, such processes can still convey valuable information. For example:

- (10) “They have believed it is high-end technology and *there is* no doubt about Chinese companies’ competitiveness in building the railway,” *said* Kohout. (*China Daily*)
- (11) *There are* also immense challenges in implementing the bank’s promise to be “lean, clean and green.” (*The Washington Post*)

The first news actually underscores that China is still striving to pursue the vision for common development, as well as affirms the tremendous efforts China has made, consolidating the promising prospect of this vision. Although China makes great contributions to investing much capital in constructing the railway in Pakistan, America shifts the emphasis to environmental issues shown in example (13), which evidently attempts to stand in the way of China’s projects. It is obvious that both the two countries’ ideologies are revealed by certain transitivity processes.

In summary, transitivity in the above six processes embodies different ideologies of Chinese and American in terms of their news reports on B&R. It is found that Chinese media tend to employ positive verbs, which show their inclination to facilitate to realize the B&R project. In contrast, a large number of negative verbs emerge in American news on B&R project, which can illustrate their reluctance to promote the realization of B&R project because they distort the

true intention of China and doubt China's ability to handle the challenge appearing in the project. No matter what type of transitivity processes they adopt, the attitudes they hold can be always clearly visible, and this in turn enables readers to explore the hidden ideologies behind the language in news.

CONCLUSION

Through the analysis of news texts based on critical analysis, it can further prove that transitivity theory can necessarily serve as an effective tool of critical discourse analysis. In general, countries with different ideologies and interests use the media to spread different values and judgments to the same event, reliably implying their different ideologies. This paper attempts to investigate how the different ideologies hidden behind the news texts can be reflected in the process selection of the transitivity system. Through the analysis of news reports on the B&R project from China and America, it is found that news report can not be as impartial and transparent as it reflects objective facts because it serves the government interests and the mainstream social ideologies. Due to their different ideologies and competitive relations between China and the United States, there are differences in their attitudes and direction of B&R project. In addition, by identifying these issues, readers can be given a better understanding when they are exposed to various kinds of news.

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