Discourse Studies of the National Image of China and the United States in Chinese Mainstream Media Reports on COVID-19

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Abstract

With the deepening of globalization, numerous international issues are increasingly emerging throughout the world, especially the COVID-19 pandemic. National image of a country changes over different periods and events. As a powerful voice in shaping national image, the media provides a convenient channel for people to recognize and understand the images of other countries. The discourse power of mainstream media has a profound impact on the construction and dissemination of national image. Based on Discourse-Historical Approach to critical discourse analysis, this study analyzes the national image of China and the United States in the context of the pandemic from the perspective of discursive strategies.

Keywords

National image, discursive strategies, the Discourse-Historical Approach, news media

1. Chapter One Introduction

1.1 Research Background

With the deepening of economic globalization, the world is witnessing increasing interdependence and complex energy and environmental issues. Therefore, different countries adapt their roles in the international arena to keep up with fast global developments. China also proposes tactics such as “Go Global” and the creation of “a community with a shared future for mankind” in response to unprecedented developments.

As a country’s national image would be largely influenced by its response toward public health issues like the COVID-19 pandemic, it is of great significance to study the image of China in comparison with the United States, which
can help us tell China’s story well and view the complex and volatile international situation more objectively.

### 1.2 Research Questions and Objectives

Through critical discourse analysis (CDA), we can address the national images of two countries and discursive strategies used by the media. From this perspective, it is indicated that we can concentrate on the interplay between language, power, and ideology, and analyze and manifest national images of China and the U.S. Furthermore, it is helpful for us to do critical thinking in understanding media reports on national image and improve our sensitivity to discourse manipulation by comparing the media reports of different measures taken by China and the United States. Lastly, this thesis is aimed to conclude effective discursive strategies to better shape China’s national image and provide a discursive reference to make China’s voice heard globally.

### 2. Chapter Two Literature Review

#### 2.1 Previous Studies on COVID-19 from the Angle of Discourse Studies

Since World War II, the novel coronavirus has emerged as the greatest international threat. Based on survey results, existing researches focus mostly on the medical care, management, economy, and education, with only few studies combining discourse analysis and the pandemic.

As a whole, foreign studies have developed more rapidly and covered a wider range while previous domestic studies on COVID-19 in discourse analysis are mostly related to news media or linguistic representation. Few of them turn to research other aspects of daily life.

#### 2.2 Previous Studies on Construction of National Images

Studies on national image construction have received extensive attention in different fields. Reviewing the present researches on China’s image, most of them concentrate on the concepts and functions of national image, including analysis of the portrayal image of China in literature or film and television works, which reflects the emphasis on cultural confidence. In a nutshell, domestic research focuses on livelihood, medical measures, economic security, policy, and other public-interest issues. To help the world better understand contemporary China from all aspects and enhance the national image, discourse analysis is an essential process. Similarly, the research on national image abroad has also received extensive attention and relate to broader fields, mostly focusing on emerging or less popular themes, such as the internet, culture, social media, ocean, and other niche topics. For instance, K-pop consumption attributes have an impact on national image and visit behavior intention (Kim et al., 2018). And the ocean familiarity could affect national image (Dong et al., 2019).

### 3. Chapter Three Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1 An Introduction to Critical Discourse Analysis

Fairclough proposed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in *Critical discourse analysis: the critical study of language* in 1995. In CDA, “critical” does not imply “negative” but rather “neutral”. CDA aims to explore and challenge any social phenomenon that is taken for granted by common people. It investigates the relationship among language (“discourse”), “power” and “ideology”, which is the core concepts of CDA. CDA regards “discourse” as a form of “social practice”, which means that the relationship between a specific discourse event and the institutional and social structure that constitutes it is dialectical (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997).

#### 3.2 Reisigl & Wodak’s Discourse-Historical Approach

##### 3.2.1 General Description of the Discourse-Historical Approach

As one of the leading figures in critical discourse analysis, Wodak (1990) proposed the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) in the process of studying anti-Semitic stereotyped images. In the last three decades, scholars of this approach have continuously elaborated their theories and methodologies, which has stimulated new topics of study, such as discourse and politics (Wodak, 2011) and racist and prejudiced discourse (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). This approach emphasizes a strong social and historical orientation in critical discourse studies.
3.2.2 Key Concepts of the DHA

The analysis of discursive strategies is the central part of the Discourse-Historical Approach. In a series of works concerning the establishment and advance of the Discourse-Historical Approach (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, 2009), there are five discursive strategies: nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, and intensification/mitigation.

4. Chapter Four Analysis of National Image Construction

4.1 Introduction

This chapter analyzes national images constructed by different discursive strategies to answer the question: what kind of national images of China and the United States have been created by China Daily. The collected reports are classified into two themes according to contents and action subjects: government and people. Then, for each topic, main discursive strategies and corresponding examples are selected with keywords highlighted in bold and italicized styles.

4.2 Five Discursive Strategies of Reports

4.2.1 Government

4.2.1.1 Nomination Strategies
Nomination strategies create in-group and out-group actors to construct and represent social actors. As Wodak (2009) said, there are many approaches of member classification such as metaphor, appellation, metonymy and so on. In the collected news reports about the pandemic, nominations of the novel coronavirus embody the country’s attitude and contribute to establishing the boundary between in-group and out-group identities. Here are some examples:

(1) He made the remark when asked to respond at a news conference to United States President Donald Trump’s remark on social media late on Monday that referred to the novel coronavirus as a “Chinese virus”. (G5)

4.2.1.2 Predication Strategies
Predication strategies assign certain attributes to social actors to position or evaluate them from a positive or negative perspective. These linguistic forms usually include positive or negative evaluative words, explicit or implicit predicates or adjectives etc. In the collected news reports about the pandemic, predication strategies are mainly manifested by the use of explicit predicates, which helps us distinguish the stance or attitude of countries shown by the media. Here are some examples.

(2) China has held nearly 20 video conferences involving experts and officials in more than 100 countries. In them, it has shared its experience and provided suggestions to other countries. (G6)

(3) China’s Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said on Tuesday that some US politicians’ connection of the novel coronavirus to China is “stigmatization”, which China strongly condemns and firmly opposes. “We urge the US side to immediately correct its mistake and stop making groundless accusations against China,” Geng said. (G5)

4.2.2 People

4.2.2.1 Argumentation Strategies
Since we have previously mentioned nomination and predication, it is necessary for us to analyze argumentation strategy which demonstrates the author’s ideas. Wodak (1999) used “topoi” and “fallacies” as argumentation schemes or formulae in argumentation theory, which makes the argument clearer and more plausible. And different topoi are listed and examined by Reisigl and Wodak (2001, 2009) such as topos of definition, topos of (dis)advantage, topos of threat, topos of humanitarianism, and topos of justice.

4.2.2.2 Perspectivization Strategies
The perspectivization strategy is principally embodied in the use of direct or indirect speech in these news and reports, which helps us distinguish the author’s position, attitude, and objectivity of the report.

(4) “Having lived in Beijing at the time of the SARS panic in 2002-2003, I would not personally have concerns about returning to Beijing now under the current conditions,” said Lewis, who added that he was “quite shocked” that US airlines canceled all flights between the two countries. (P4)

4.3 Results and Discussion

4.3.1 China
When the pandemic broke out in China, the media immediately reported that the country took strict control measures, including lockdown and quarantine. They reported in detail that China mobilized all resources to support the hard-hit areas regardless of economic and reputational losses, which shows the focus and care of the authority and portrays Chi-
na as a responsible country that puts people’s lives and safety first. In the face of stigmatization, the media reported that China’s foreign ministry immediately reacted harshly to the stigma and demanded that the US immediately correct its claims. They constructed China as tough and inviolable when it comes to the country’s reputation. In terms of lockdown and quarantine measures, the media have reported in detail the attitudes and practices of the people from many aspects. For instance, Chinese citizens voluntarily support the prevention and control policies by staying at home wearing masks, and keeping social distance, which represented Chinese people as a united nation who obey orders and dedicate themselves for the interest of the country and the community.

4.3.2 The U.S.
At the beginning of the outbreak, the United States was barely affected. Perhaps because of this, the media reported little about the pandemic in the US at first. Instead, they mostly reported on the attitude or remarks such as incomprehension, devoid of humanity, absurd, etc. of the US authorities on the pandemic in China, which seems to run counter to the established image of the most powerful nation in the world today. When China was hit hard by the pandemic, the media rarely mentioned whether the United States would provide assistance or the like. Instead, they carefully reported the attitudes of the president, the Senate, experts, and the public of the United States toward the outbreak in China. The media represented the U.S. as an onlooker, watching and waiting for the crisis to get worse. And the media portrayed a variety of positions and voices that are difficult to unify from an assortment of parts. For instance, people have their own ideas about whether to follow government instructions and the medical institutions, the Senate and the Trump administration disagree on some measures. In short, America is constructed as blindly confident, opinionated, abusive, chaotic, and devoid of in-group communication control.

5. Chapter Five Conclusion

5.1 Major Findings
CDA is helpful for us to understand that the media have a certain position and attitude to write reports, to achieve their goals. For this purpose, they will choose specific writing methods or strategies. In this process, DHA provides scientific and highly practical analysis methods and directions, and closely combines social and historical context with analysis closely, making the research results more comprehensive, scientific, and profound.

Secondly, all of the five discursive strategies are used to construct the national image, among which predication strategies are mostly used. Because of the difference in cultural values and political systems between China and the US, most reports on China focused on what instructions the central government and the headquarters have issued, how effective they have been and what results they have achieved, yet barely cited the views of the masses. And a united, friendly, responsible, orderly, humane, and collectivist image of China is constructed. In contrast, reports on the United States used perspectivization strategies and cited multiple viewpoints, though did not clearly indicate the main position of the authors, leaving readers to make their own judgment. Besides, some reports on the United States also explored the causes of the phenomenon by using argumentation strategies to enhance the logic and rationality so as to find cultural reasons. Hence, a blindly confident, opinionated, abusive, chaotic, and devoid of in-group communication control image is constructed.

5.2 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Study
There are still some limitations of this thesis. Firstly, although the texts are collected from Chinese mainstream media, the sources can be more diversified so as to further verify, refine, and extend the findings of this study. Secondly, due to the different timing of outbreak in China and America, this study mainly focuses on the specific period when the epidemic reached its peak in China but claimed down in the United States, which will lead to different focus of the media toward different countries. The discursive construction of national image should have been analyzed by diachronic perspective.

Considering the aforementioned limitations of this study, there are several suggestions for future research on the discursive construction of the national image. Firstly, when collecting news reports, it is better to expand the search scope and sources. In addition to mainstream press, new online media such as Weibo, Douban and forums can also be used as text sources, in addition to mainstream press. Secondly, future studies can make diachronic analyses of national image construction in Chinese media. Besides, in future research, comparison can be the major focus by observing more perspectives in order to reveal the real strategies used in national image construction.
References


