ON THE DISCOURSE CONSTRUCTION OF CHINA’S IMAGE IN FIGHTING COVID-19
FROM A CORPUS-BASED DISCOURSE HISTORICAL APPROACH PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. The study of national image has become an important topic in the context of globalization, and media discourse plays a significant role in the dissemination of national image. Based on the corpus technology and the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA), this paper, starting from nomination, predication and perspectivization, analyzes the discursive strategies of the mainstream media employed towards China after the outbreak of COVID-19, and finds that although the China’s image pictured in the New York Times has slight changes in different periods, the negative is still dominant. This study hopes to provide some reference for China to formulate feasible national image dissemination strategies and establish a good international image in the post epidemic era.

1 INTRODUCTION

Since December 2019, the patients of pneumonia of unknown cause (named as COVID-19 later) have been identified in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, confirmed as an acute respiratory infectious disease caused by a novel coronavirus. The World Health Organization (WHO) has listed it as a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC) with the highest level of alarm. It is a global pandemic with the most extensive impact on humanity in a century, which is a serious crisis for the entire world and a daunting challenge. After April 2020, nationwide virus control was conducted on an ongoing basis. The white paper, Fighting COVID-19: China in Action, was published in June 7, 2020 to articulate China’s ideas and propositions in the global fight against the epidemic to foreign countries. Li Zhanzi and Liu Boyi (2020) pointed out that the recent outbreak of new coronavirus has aroused great public attention to public health and safety discourse.

National image refers to the public recognition and evaluation of a country’s political, economic, social, cultural and geographical situations at home and abroad. It can be divided into domestic image and international image, and there are often great differences between them (Sun Youzhong, 2002). Ramo (2007) believes that promoting China’s national image is the most challenging strategic issue for China at present. How other countries view China and the reality reflected by China’s national
image in their views will determine China’s future development and reform. As the world media and the public view have been long dominated and influence by the western media, it has become an important research topic to construct a positive national image of China in an all-round way in the context of Globalization (Wang Ning, 2018).

The research on the strategy of China’s image discourse construction from the perspective of “the other” after the epidemic is of great significance to the construction of national security discourse and the maintenance and promotion of image in the public crisis. Therefore, from the perspective of discourse historical analysis of the research data of China report in the New York Times from December 27, 2019 to June 7, 2020, this study aims to explore the construction of China’s image in the American mainstream media in the special period and the underlying reasons.

2 THEORETICAL BASIS

Ruth Wodak initiated the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) which is one of the major schools of critical discourse analysis. In the dialogue interpretation, DHA regards history as a discourse structure, integrating the social and political background and historical resources embedded in discourse events, which observes the dynamics and scope of potential power from the three-dimensional perspectives of theme, discursive strategies and language form (Wodak 2009:38; Reisigl & Wodak 2016:31). Discoursive strategies are often used to shape the positive image of self and the negative image of the other (Wodak & Boukala, 2015: 93), which is often the focus (Zhao Yonggang, 2017). Researchers generally analyze the following five basic discoursive strategies proposed by Wodak and Meyer (2009): nomination (i.e. classifying members by metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and other rhetorical devices), predication (i.e. evaluating by commendatory or derogatory words, or by explicit or implicit predicates), argumentation (i.e. proving politics by topic), perspectivization, framing or discourse representation (i.e. expressing one’s perspective and viewpoint through specific reporting, description, narration or reporting), and intensification and mitigation (i.e. strengthening or weakening the illocutionary force).

This paper intends to study the New York Times from the perspective of DHA and corpus after the outbreak of the epidemic, the discourse construction of China’s image and its attitude tendency are also investigated to answer the following three questions: 1) what frequent topics are covered by the mainstream media in the United States; 2) how the mainstream media in the United States construct China’s image in different stages of the fight against the epidemic; 3) what the underlying social and historical reasons for NYT’s construction of China’s image are.

3 RESEARCH DESIGN

This author carries out the qualitative and quantitative research based on corpus. Corpus based quantitative research can provide a solid data base for discourse analysis. The richness of corpus also reduces the randomness of researchers’ choice of analysis objects and enhances the persuasiveness of discourse research (Kurt, 2019: 378).
The steps of this study are as follows: firstly, the theme of discourse is determined through high-frequency key words; secondly, the discoursive strategies and language realization forms of shaping China’s image in NYT news reports within this specific time range are studied in combination with the division of China’s fight against the epidemic in the white paper; finally, the reasons for building China’s image in NYT news reports are discussed in combination with the social and historical context.

Based on the Lexis Nexis Academic news database, with China as the search term, this study sets up the time period from December 27, 2019 (the Hubei provincial CDC has received reports of unexplained pneumonia cases) to June 7, 2020 (the white paper on the Chinese action against the new crown pneumonia epidemic), and the mainstream media New York Times (hereinafter referred to as NYT) of the United States was targeted. All the reports about China (except comments, editorials and letters from readers) were manually excluded from repetitive and irrelevant reports. A total of 594 valid news texts were obtained. After merging and cleaning up the texts, a special corpus is established: NYT corpus (December 27, 2019 to June 7, 2020), with 776,253 tokens and 33,238 type tokens.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Topics in NYT

According to the keyness analysis function of wmatrix, NYT corpus (December 27, 2019 to June 7, 2020) keywords list is displayed automatically by comparing with BNC sample written Corpus. After repeated experiments and observations, the top 20 high-frequency content words (except function words) related to China’s image with LL value over about 7 (LL value over 7 is considered to be significant) are manually selected. Table 1 below is used for further search to obtain concordance related to China’s image.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Keyword</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>LL value</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Keyword</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>LL value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>7641</td>
<td>1234.06</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>HongKong</td>
<td>1316</td>
<td>1613.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>4292</td>
<td>6186.00</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>1523</td>
<td>1566.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>coronavirus</td>
<td>2297</td>
<td>4165.39</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>global</td>
<td>866</td>
<td>1222.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>virus</td>
<td>1836</td>
<td>2944.49</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>government</td>
<td>2208</td>
<td>1188.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>said</td>
<td>6514</td>
<td>2708.97</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>people</td>
<td>2761</td>
<td>1171.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Wuhan</td>
<td>1638</td>
<td>2652.76</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>trump</td>
<td>737</td>
<td>1158.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>outbreak</td>
<td>1684</td>
<td>2573.16</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>epidemic</td>
<td>715</td>
<td>1132.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>1812</td>
<td>2527.01</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>pandemic</td>
<td>599</td>
<td>970.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>officials</td>
<td>1910</td>
<td>2425.62</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>cases</td>
<td>925</td>
<td>950.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Top 20 key words about China in NYT
The larger the LL value is, the stronger the significance of these keywords in the NYT corpus is, and the more they can reflect the theme of the text, which is conducive to discriminating the thematic features of the discourse. Among the top 20 high-frequency keywords, there are 6 words related to the new coronavirus and its characteristics: coronavirus, virus, outbreak, epidemic, pandemic, cases; 5 related to China: China, Chinese, Wuhan, Beijing, Hong Kong; 4 related to the United States and the international community: United States, American, trump, global; 4 related to politics and economy: officials, government, people, trade; 1 related to the narrative perspective of news report: said. On the whole, the top 20 significant keywords indicate that NYT pays more attention to China’s domestic response to the epidemic in this special period, as well as the impact of the epidemic on the US itself and even the world’s politics and economy.

4.2 DISCURSIVE STRATEGY ANALYSIS

Discursive strategy analysis is the core of DHA. This paper will discuss NYT’s attitude towards discourse construction of Chinese government’s fight against the epidemic from the perspectives of nomination, predication and perspectivization.

4.2.1 Strategy of Nomination

The nomination strategy in DHA refers to how to name and refer to social actors, objects, phenomena, events, processes and behaviors in discourse from the perspective of linguistics. Deixis, metonymy and nouns are often used to classify them to form “in group” or “out group” members (Reisigl & Wodak 2009: 93-94). In this study, NYT mainly uses metonymy to classify social actors, and some special nouns to name some actions of the Chinese government.

In these reports, the author often uses the Chinese President “Xi Jinping” or “Beijing” to refer to China and the Chinese government when describing the behavior of the state. For example, “the Communist State” refers to China (the title of example 1 below) and Trump refers to the United States. When describing the fight against the epidemic of the Chinese government, China is often regarded as an “out group” member.

In addition, special terms are often used to name Chinese government agencies and media. “propaganda” appeared 202 times when describing the fight against the epidemic and communication activities carried by the Chinese government. According to the Oxford Dictionary, “propaganda” means “ideas or statements that may be false or exaggerated and that are used in order to gain support for a political leader, party, etc.”, which is derogatory. In NYT reports, the term is used to refer to the named objects in two main categories: one refers to the mainstream media activities in China, such as CCTV, China Daily, etc.; the other refers to the government’s anti-epidemic mobilization activities, such as:
China’s media efforts in the United States have tended to reflect more traditional forms of government propaganda. (February 18, 2020 U.S. Designates China’s Official Media as Operatives of the Communist State)

He maintained that the Chinese news agencies working in the United States were part of Beijing’s propaganda machine not independent journalism outlets. (March 17, 2020 China Announces That It Will Expel American Journalists)

Three ministers, two vice ministers and the president of the Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences held a joint news conference to release it on Sunday morning at the State Council Information Office, an elite propaganda agency. (June 7, 2020 China Hails Its Virus Triumphs, and Glosses Over Its Mistakes)

Hence it can be seen that in the nomination strategy, NYT mainly uses metonymy to build China into an “out group” member, and uses the derogatory high-frequency noun “propaganda” to construct the negative image of the Chinese government and the media.

4.2.2 Predication Strategy

Predication strategy refers to the linguistic methods that endow social actors, objects, phenomena, events and processes with qualification and attributes. The devices used are explicit predicates or predicative nouns and adjectives (Reisigl & Wodak 2009:94). By using “Chinese government” as the search term, this paper investigates the adjectives and predicates around the concordance to determine the use of predication strategy in the text.

When shaping the image of Chinese government from the perspective of predication strategy, NYT often uses evaluative predicates and predicative nouns and adjectives for discourse construction, for example:

The announcement by the health commission in Wuhan, a central Chinese city where the virus originated last month, comes amid growing concern among some experts that the outbreak of the pneumonia like coronavirus in China could be more severe than the government has described. (January 19, 2020 China Reports New Cases of Deadly Virus, Adding to Outbreak Concerns)

At the initial stage of the outbreak, there was great uncertainty in the emerging infectious diseases caused by novel coronavirus, and experts were required to conduct field investigation and study to determine its transmission ability and mode. NYT used coronavirus to refer to this incident, the new coronavirus outbreak in China, and quoted experts who questioned the status of the outbreak as announced by the Chinese government. But in fact, on January 18th and 19th, China’s National Health Commission (NHC) organized a high-level expert group on medical treatment and prevention and control to Wuhan to investigate the epidemic prevention and control. Late on the night of the 19th, a high-level expert group determined that human-to-human transmission of novel coronavirus had occurred. Besides, NYT’s use of the adjective “more severe” with a more pronounced degree tendency
to judge China’s domestic epidemic shows a bias against the Chinese government and creates a public image of concealment.

The Chinese government silenced whistle-blowers, withheld crucial information and played down the threat posed by the new coronavirus, allowing an epidemic that has killed thousands to take hold across the country. (February 29, 2020 China, in Propaganda Push, Boasts of Response to Crisis)

Reporters at foreign news outlets in China were among those who aggressively reported on the coronavirus epidemic in January and February, including in its earliest days, when it was a regionalized outbreak in central China and the Chinese government sought to play down its severity. (March 17, 2020 China Announces That It Will Expel American Journalists)

The above examples (5) and (6) use a series of explicit predicates, which can be regarded as the material process in the transitivity. “Chinese government”, as the action remitter, sent out actions such as “silence”, “withhold” and “play down”. These verbs with a distinctly negative connotation are intended to project the image that the Chinese government’s mobilization of publicity against the epidemic and its reciprocal countermeasures against the US’s suppression of Chinese media agencies in the United States are intended to cover up the actual situation of the epidemic in China.

There is no evidence that the W.H.O. or the government in Beijing hid the extent of the epidemic in China…(May 30, 2020 Blaming China for Pandemic, Trump Says U.S. Will Leave the W.H.O.)

In Example (7), the predicative noun “Evidence” and the explicit predicate “hid” are used. According to concordance, it can be found that NYT at this stage has no obvious attitude tendency, and makes more objective representation of China’s image. By examining the diachronic variation of the predication strategy at each stage, this study finds that the US media’s reporting of the Chinese government’s fight against the epidemic announcement has undergone a change from skepticism to objectivity, and the image construction of the Chinese government has also experienced from negative representation to objective one.

4.2.3 Perspectivization Strategy

The analysis of perspective strategy mainly focuses on the analysis of speech, including direct speech, indirect speech and free indirect speech, aiming to locate the author’s point of view and detect the author’s involvement or alienation (Reisigl & Wodak 2009: 94). This strategy is often used in news reports. When narrating or commenting on some events, the speaker does not directly express his or her views, but implicitly expresses his or her views and the purpose he or she wants to achieve by means of direct and indirect speech. There are three major sources of cited information: specific and exact information sources, implicit and uncertain information sources and no reference to information sources (Xin Bin, 2006). The following perspectivization strategy is used to analyze the concordance of the co-occurrence of the high-frequency keywords “said”, “Chinese” and “China” (excluding the situation that the two are not in the same sentence, a total of 885 cases are retrieved), and it is found that the image of China in the epidemic is constructed mainly through the quoting and the perspective of news sources.
Even some international public health experts have said they were impressed with the speed and scale of China’s lockdown on more than a dozen cities, which has affected 56 million people. (January 28, 2020 Coronavirus Crisis Exposes Cracks in China’s Facade of Unity)

In example (8), an indirect speech is used, and the source of the information is implicit and uncertain. Fairclough (1995:61) points out that the media tends to use indirect speech, thus blurring the line between the quoter’s and the quoted’s discourse and drowning out the quoted’s voice with that of the quoter. The reason is that the main role of the media is to act as a medium between the public and private spheres, transforming official views into popular language so that these views can be widely and naturally understood and accepted by the public (Xin Bin 2006). In addition, the media often report official ideas with vague sources, which may indicate the approval of the publisher (Bell 1991:208). Therefore, NYT expressed doubts on China’s implementation of “lockdown” to prevent the proliferation of novel coronavirus through indirect quotation of implicit and uncertain sources, which negatively constructed the image of China on the whole.

(9) “China really does not want to help us,” said Daniel Blumenthal, the director of Asian Studies at the American Enterprise Institute. “They have every interest in covering up and distracting and blaming the U.S.”. (March 22, 2020 Coronavirus Drives the U.S. and China Deeper Into Global Power Struggle)

(10) “The Chinese now do not have confidence in the vaccines produced in China,” said Ray Yip, the former head of the Gates Foundation in China. (May 5, 2020 China Hustles for Vaccine, Despite Patchy Reputation)

Both examples (9) and (10) use direct quotes and specific and accurate sources. Direct quotes highlight the objectivity and reliability of the report. Example (9) quoted a researcher’s opinion that China shirks its international responsibilities, conceals facts, and criticizes the United States, indicating that NYT agrees with his opinion, thus creating a negative image of China as an “apathetic” and a “liar”. Example (10) cites a staff member of the Gates Foundation who holds a negative attitude towards China’s vaccine research and development, which reflects NYT’s negative image construction on China’s vaccine research and production.

Through the above perspective strategy analysis, it can be found that NYT reports the epidemic control image of the Chinese government by directly or indirectly quoting a large number of information from dissidents to negatively construct the image of China and enhance the objectivity and authenticity of its reports.

4.3 Discussion on Social and Historical Context

According to DHA’s thematic analysis and discoursive strategy investigation, although since the outbreak of the new coronavirus until the white paper was published, an initial victory in a critical battle has been achieved in Wuhan and Hubei, major strategic achievements have been achieved in the epidemic prevention and control, and nationwide virus control is now being conducted on an ongoing basis. However, NYT has always been skeptical of the epidemic prevention measures and policies of
the Chinese government, and has a negative tendency to the contribution and publicity mobilization of China’s epidemic prevention and control efforts.

Through the social and historical context analysis of DHA, it is found that this phenomenon is not accidental, and closely related to the political position and values of social system and mainstream media. China is a typical socialist country, while the United States is a capitalist one. The political system determines the differences between the two countries in major policies, including policies of fighting the epidemic and media ideology. Therefore, NYT, as the mainstream media in the United States, constructs China as an image outside the group in reporting. With the change of American domestic and strategic policies, American media’s coverage of events will change to uphold their own interests. One the one hand, NYT’s overall negative attitude towards the discourse on China’s image during the epidemic has been skeptical, which is consistent with American scholars Herman and Chomsky’s suggestion that the selection and presentation of news in Western countries is subject to one of the five “filters” of “anti-communist” ideology. On the other hand, under the influence of domestic party politics and the general election, Trump announced the suspension of the payment of membership fees to the World Health Organization, accusing the WHO of helping China conceal the epidemic situation, so as to divert the public’s criticism of his poor response to the epidemic situation, which is also questioned by NYT. Although later there is a certain degree of objective reporting on China, it is still actually creating a hot topic before the election and maintaining the image of a liberal media that questions authority and criticizes the government.

5 CONCLUSION

Based on the Discourse Historical Analysis, corpus linguistics, and keyword analysis and concordance analysis, using DHA’s nomination, predication strategy and perspectivization strategy, combining with the social and historical context, it is found that NYT’s portrayal of China’s image since the New Crown epidemic differs significantly from the positive China image construct in the white paper. Although it occasionally presents objective representation, as a whole NYT constructs a negative image of China under the epidemic, which is driven by its political stance and values. As a small-scale diachronic critical discourse study on the same topic, the research in this paper suffers from a single perspective of corpus selection, for which the author will expand the research perspective in the follow-up research to make the research results more comprehensive.

NOTES

①Xinhua News Agency reported on World Health Organization’s announcement of a public health emergency of international concern: https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1657221504942416893&wfr=spider&for=pc.

Guangxi Graduate Innovation Program: Research on the Construction of China’s National Image Based on Diachronic Corpus

REFERENCE


