

A Transitivity Analysis of News on China in the Western Mainstream Media during the Covid-19 Epidemic

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Abstract

The global outbreak of the Covid-19 Epidemic and China's effective anti-epidemic measures have been highlighted by foreign media. As a common English learning material, Western news discourse needs to be clearly recognized and discerned by learners for it may convey implicit positions through language. Halliday's systematic functional grammar is one of the most influential linguistic schools in the world in recent years, and the transitive theory provides a new perspective and method for analyzing news discourse. This paper takes a corpus analysis in *The Economist* as an example, calculates the six transitive processes of the article, and the participants, circumstantial elements and process of four main types in clauses have also been discussed to reveal the Western stereotype about Chinese and their ideology that are likely to influence English learners. Therefore, it is of great significance to enhance the English learners' sensitivity of identifying the Western media's attempts of language manipulation and to establish the consciousness of anti-control and critical reading.

Keywords

Transitivity analysis, COVID-19 pandemic, Western media, news discourse.

1. Introduction

Language plays a significant role in the media due to its capacity to shape people's perceptions and decisions. Language allows humans to create mental representations of reality and make sense of their experiences, both external and internal (Halliday). It is "a resource for making meaning, and meaning resides in systemic patterns of choice" (Halliday & Mattheissen). According to Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, humans create meaning not just by selecting words "semantics" but also by making grammatical decisions "lexicogrammar" (Halliday & Mattheissen). Thus, grammar involves meaning that is achieved, based on Halliday's theory, through three meta-functions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Regarding the ideational function, it reflects human experience, and meaning is constructed through specific linguistic choices that involve systemic transitivity patterns.

The COVID-19 epidemic presents an enormous challenge to human beings, during the outbreak of which the media coverage of the epidemic plays an important part in constructing people's perception of the evolution of the disease. During this time, academicians, especially those from the fields of international relations, mass communication, and linguistics, conducted in-depth analyses of the paradigm of foreign media coverage of the coronavirus epidemic and China's anti-epidemic actions. Some scholars start from the perspective of discourse analysis to study the relationship between media reporting and discourse construction. At the same time, language has the function of expressing the speaker's views, attitudes, and ideologies in the social context, so interpreting the types of transitive processes selected by news media reports is helpful to analyze the subjective cognition that may be embedded in the language, thereby revealing and examining the ideology implied in the report. News is a special means of

reporting or commenting on the latest important facts in the world to the general public to influence public opinion, and is one of the most familiar and exposed styles in people's daily life. Because journalism is the reporting and commentary of facts, it is different from fictional literature and has its own distinctive characteristics. This paper analyzes and discusses a news discourse of The Economics by using the transitivity theory of systematic functional grammar, aiming to reveal the regularity of news or media discourse in the distribution of process types and its language characteristics.

2. The Theoretical Framework of Transitive System

2.1. Transitivity System

Discourse in language is organized via three modes of meaning, or "meta-functions," at the clause level: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The ideational meta-function is regarded as "language as reflection," in which it reflects human experience. The interpersonal meta-function describes "language as action," which indicates that language is interactive and personal. The textual meta-function demonstrates the writer's or speaker's intention to make language meaningful (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

Within the ideational meta-function is the transitivity system, which is the experiential element in the grammar of the clause. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), the meaning of the clause is "a representation of some process in ongoing human experience". The human experience consists of "a flow of events," and the grammar of the clause breaks this sequence of events into "quanta of change," in which each "quanta of change" is modeled as a figure "of happening, doing, sensing, saying, or having" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). These figures comprise a process having three components, namely experience processes, participants, and finally circumstances. In English, the process is represented by the verbal group, participants are represented by the nominal groups, and circumstances are realized by prepositional phrases or adverbial groups.

Regarding process types, the system of transitivity consists of six processes: material, mental, and relational as main types, with behavioral, verbal, and existential as minor types of process. The first major process is material, which refers to clauses of doing and happening, with the actor and goal as the two primary participants. The second type of process is the mental process, which includes perception (seeing), emotion (feeling), and cognition (thinking) and has two participants: a sensor and a phenomenon. The third is the relational process that relates to clauses of being and having, in which it is classified into attributive and identifying processes. The attributive process is related to clauses of characterization, with the carrier and attribute as the main participants. However, the identifying process refers to an identity that has been assigned to something with two main participants: token and value (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

The minor processes are located between the main processes as follows: "behavioral at the boundary between material and mental, verbal at the boundary between mental and relational, and existential at the boundary between relational and material" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The behavioral process relates to physiological and psychological behaviors such as dreaming and staring, which consist of behavior and process only, as in "Don't breathe!" (Halliday & Matthiessen). The verbal process is associated with verbs of "saying," such as say, tell, and report, in which the sayer and target are the two participants along with the receiver and verbiage. The existential process represents the existence of an entity, which could be identified by "there," as in "there is" or "there are," along with other verbs such as exist, follow, occur, and emerge. Only one participant is involved in this process, which is the existent itself.

2.2. Related Studies on Transitivity and News Discourse

The transitivity system has been utilized to analyze both spoken and written news discourse. In regard to the spoken discourse, most of the studies examined presidents' speeches. Wang Jiayu (2018) investigated Obama's speeches and found the material process to be the most used process in his speeches.ⁱⁱ Similarly, Shayegh and Nabifar (2012) used transitivity analysis to analyze seven of Obama's interviews.ⁱⁱⁱ The findings indicate that the material process is the most predominant one in his speeches. In the same line of research, Zhao and Zhang (2017) investigated American president Donald J. Trump's inaugural address via transitivity system. Both quantitative and qualitative data were utilized, and the results showed that the material process is ranked as the most used one, followed by the relational and existential processes. Similar findings were reported in Yujie and Fengjie's (2018) study in their examination of the linguistic features of American President Donald Trump's Inaugural Address. They applied the transitivity system and analyzed the data quantitatively. They found out that the most commonly used process was the material one, followed by the relational and mental processes. The researchers had concluded that presidents mostly use the material process to highlight the government's actions and represent the experience of doing.

Regarding written political discourse, a considerable body of literature examines newspaper headlines and news articles using transitivity analysis. In a more recent study, EL Fallaki (2022) investigated twelve newspaper headlines related to the Russian attack on Ukraine. ^{iv} The data were collected from international newspapers, and the results show that the material process is the only one found in all the headlines. However, the way the war was presented is different in that seven out of the twelve headlines include the name of the Russian president as the actor to indicate his violent personal desire. The other headlines were found to hide the identity of the doer and mention the name of the country. Thus, the actor was represented differently in that he was portrayed as having the responsibility to maintain the border, leading the readers to think that he is not violent but rather protecting the country's safety and security.

2.3. The Transitivity Analysis

Back to Work is soft news. Soft journalism is a critical article that focuses on digging up representative and humane factual plots and discussing them. Soft news articles reflect the position and attitude of the author and have a strong guiding effect on readers.^v The 1,563-word Back to Work article describes the Chinese government's efforts to recover the economy in the post-pandemic period. According to the division principle of small sentences and the structure of transitive processes, there are 128 small sentences in the whole text. Material processes accounted for the largest proportion, accounting for 58.6% of the total text. Other types of processes are, in descending order, relational processes (21.1%), speech processes (10.9%), mental processes (7%), existential processes (1.5%), and behavioral processes (0.9%). From the perspective of type distribution ratio, this article conforms to the characteristics of news discourse.

2.3.1. Material Process Analysis

The main participants in the material process are the action and the target. This process objectively focuses on describing the behavior, action object, and action environment that the actor "does".^{vi} The material process of this discourse is mainly aimed at a series of actions made by the Chinese government and institutions to encourage the resumption of work after controlling the epidemic, as well as the economic response activities and current situation of various industries in China. For example:

- 1- March 20th it (the government) pledged to increase financial support for the unemployed.
- 2- The government has given provinces more leeway to raise funds for such things as infrastructure and buildings.^{vii}

From examples 1 and 2, we can see that in the process of a series of verbs like "push" and "initiative", most of the sentences in the discourse clearly indicate that most of the performers of the action respect and objectively record the positive regulatory role played by the Chinese government under different goals. However, in Examples 3 and 4, derogatory terms such as "be cooped up," "fiddling," "trickery," and "idle" appeared at the action, target, or environmental component positions, revealing disagreement with the "superficial efforts" made by some officials and economies in response to the resumption of work, and this choice of language subtly shakes the reader's trust in the true situation of China's economic recovery.

3-...when just about everyone was cooped up at home.

4- In this case, an obsession with the "work resumption rate" has invited fiddling. To prevent such trickery, some companies...by turning on idle equipment.

2.3.2. Relational Process Analysis

The relational process, which often uses be verbs as lexical features, is divided into two categories: "belonging" and "identifying". The attribution class refers to "what is", and the participants have "carriers" and "attributes"; Recognition refers to "what is like what and is related to what", and participants have "recognizers" and "recognized people".^{viii} The relational process reflects the interpretation and cognition of China's post-epidemic economic situation in this discourse. For example:

5- It involves two things that are harder for the government to manage....

6-The reality is less exuberant. When any measures become an official target, it is susceptible to distortion—known as Goodhart's law.

7- Queues outside Apple stores...are deceptive.

In the small sentence that reflects the relational process, although there is an objective interpretation of China's post-epidemic economy such as Example 5, there are also "undercurrents" such as Example 6 and Example 7: by choosing "susceptible to distortion". "Goodhart's law," which states that when policy becomes a goal, it ceases to be good policy. Words with obvious pejorative connotations such as "deceptive" to describe "attributes" or "identified persons", and the choice of adverbs such as "less" and "amply" to modify environmental components, attempt to imply that the material processes mentioned above (false measures taken to increase the returning to work rate) are the "usual tactics" of the Chinese government and enterprises, which do not stand up to scrutiny, thus exposing their inherent biases.

2.3.3. Verbal Process Analysis

The verbal process refers to the process by which the "speaker" expresses his or her own views through the mouths of others and through direct and indirect quotations. In news discourse, the use of speech process can enhance the objectivity and authority of news commentary.^{ix} The "speaker" in the participant is the media, and the "recipient" is usually defaulted to the reader. For example:

8- "We want to reduce risk to the absolute minimum and will not count the cost of that," says Mr. Gu.

9- Officials boast that things are almost normal again.

10- Such measures are necessary but cumbersome, he (a German manager) says.

Similarly, much of the discourse objectively illustrates China's economic activities that are premised on controlling the pandemic. The speakers of the verbal process come from official institutions (CSRC), authoritative media (Xinhua), enterprise employees with specific identities and names (Mr. Gu, etc.) and self-employed persons (Bao, etc.), enhancing the reliability of sources. However, in Example 9, the verb "boast" replaces the commonly used neutral words such as "say" and "report", implying that the "content of the speech" is exaggerated, which to

some extent reduces the reader's credibility in the Chinese government officials' claims. Example 10 is a verbal process that includes a relational process. Readers' attention is likely to be directed to the post-transition message of "cumbersome," which is cumbersome and tricky. The German (Western) identity of the "speaker" is also worth thinking about.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

The current paper has employed the transitivity theory for the sake of analysis and investigation of the transitivity process types in The Economics. From the perspective of Halliday's functional linguistics, this paper interprets a news report on China's economic recovery, focusing on its material, relational and verbal processes. From these processes, the discourse basically follows the law of news reporting, objectively presenting to readers the situation of China's multi-layered structure and actively leading economic recovery, and the government, enterprises and individuals are still taking relatively severe anti-epidemic measures after resuming work. At the same time, however, by analyzing the specific participants, environmental components and processes of these three processes, it is not difficult to see that the Western media (using this discourse as an example) is still permeating their subjective views and stereotypes in their reports (in addition to the transitive process, the subtitle of the article "Hey Small Spender" also conveys the same meaning).

Language is not a transparent medium, but a tool for expressing ideology and power. In the process of social interaction, people often choose different vocabulary, grammar, and syntactic patterns to convey information and participate in activities, and construct identities and represent facts according to the organization or institution to which they belong to. Thus, discourse has the potential to acquire political or ideological involvement in a particular way, that is, ideology is embedded in the language and reflects the speaker's views, attitudes and positions. Therefore, while we are reading foreign articles, we should notice that this article also provides certain enlightenment for our foreign propaganda in news writing. For example, in the process of translating Chinese political or media articles, we need to compare the transitive characteristics of the two texts of Chinese and English, then we can see that the transitive process is not equaling to one another, which indicates that the translator deliberately chooses different transitive processes based on certain translation purposes. This implicit position guides the reader's thinking and ideology to a certain extent. Therefore, when reading such news reports and obtaining hot news information within China and abroad, English learners should establish a critical reading awareness, improve their critical thinking ability, and be wary of potential ideological manipulation through language.

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