

Critical Discourse Analysis Based on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics: Taking The Economist's First Commentation on the End of China's Zero-COVID Policy as an Example

Chuyan Wang*

Capital Normal University, Beijing 100080, China

*Corresponding author: Chuyan Wang, 13071101749@163.com

Copyright: © 2023 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: Based on Halliday's systemic functional grammar, especially the ideational function, this research aims at disclosing the hidden ideologies and values of the seemingly objective news reports on China's COVID-19 policies in The Economist. Transitivity, voice, and nominalization are the major analytical subjects. After China lifted the zero-COVID policy, western media began criticizing China's lack of data sharing, with some misinformation and misleading reports. The denouncement of inertness and reluctance to fight against the pandemic disclaim the Chinese government's efforts and depreciate China's image. China is portrayed as the villain and destroyer of people's health worldwide. Meanwhile, they also hold a hesitant attitude toward China's diplomacy. The re-engaging with foreign countries and travel restrictions have been described as imprudent and rushed actions. They also consider China as the fuse of contradiction in the United Nations. What is overt is their view of breaking up China.

Keywords: Systemic functional linguistics; Transitivity; COVID-19; News commentation; Re-opening; Critical discourse analysis

Online publication: June 30, 2023

1. Introduction

At the end of 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic was globally rampant, and China spared no efforts to prioritize the protection of people's lives in view of national conditions. With this end in view, within the last three years, the government introduced various policies, and a large amount of manpower and material resources were put into combat with the coronavirus. In that matter, western countries' miscellaneous coverage of China's fight against COVID-19 began to surface endlessly. Since the outbreak of the coronavirus, the number of China-related reports has been unprecedented. However, western media, with the expectation to launch media wars, attempt to stigmatize, twist the fact, and smear the image of China via negative means, such as slander and deceit ^[1]. Those could be embodied in their news reports and editorials directly or indirectly. Just as the founder of critical discourse analysis Fowler *et al.* ^[2] argued, news is not the authentic reflection of reality, but rather, to a large extent, what is called "ideas" ingrained in societies.

This research, based on Halliday's systemic functional linguistics, especially the ideational, aims to unveil the hidden ideologies and values of the seemingly objective news reports on China's fight against the pandemic by the western mainstream media The Economist, with transitivity, voice, and nominalization

as the major analytical subjects ^[3].

2. Selection of materials

The selected news material *Data, Diplomacy and Disease* ^[4] was issued in *The Economist* on January 14, 2023. As per the reports on *people.com* ^[5], the national key website, after the implementation of “Class B and B Management” for COVID-19 infection on January 8, 2023, the main responses for Chinese and foreign travelers were changed to optimize the travel management of Chinese and foreign travelers by ensuring COVID test for China-bound travelers within 48 hours before departure, canceling COVID-19 tests for all inbound travelers and centralized isolation, and canceling the number control measures for international passenger flights, such as “five ones” and passenger load factor restrictions. It was the first news commentation of *The Economist* about China’s reopening policy in the era of COVID-19 following the termination of the strict restriction of “zero-COVID” on January 8, 2023. As one of the most influential media in the world, the 16th editor-in-chief John McLevitt said, “Our success laid in the fact that our magazine is global, and the reporting is from a cosmopolitan perspective ^[6].” Consequently, the news material from a magazine that is based on an international perspective and catches on with and is adept in analyzing international heated discussions/events is analyzed, appropriating it as a potent material for the revelation of western countries’ attitude toward the reopening policy and ideologies concealed beneath the text.

3. Critical discourse analysis of the article

Critical discourse analysis, as an approach to language analysis, has been widely adopted by various disciplines, including sociology, sociolinguistics, politics, and communication studies ^[7], focusing on the construction of social ideologies within texts, which are seen by analysts as an arena in which different powers contend ^[8] and deemed as the entanglement of assorted rights and ideologies in critical discourse analysis. This means it helps readers resist the abuse of rights. Critical discourse analysis is mainly founded on Halliday’s systemic functional linguistics, whose purpose of construction is to provide a theoretical and analytical framework for discourse analysis ^[9]. According to Halliday, language should be construed as a system of social meaning, with meaning being superior to form, which could only be embodied by its integration with meaning. Systemic functional linguistics consists of “systemic grammar” and “functional grammar,” which are two aspects of the complete theoretical framework of language.

3.1. Ideational function

Halliday made an abstract summarization of the functions that language can fulfill as three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Ideational function refers to the expression of people’s experiences in the real world conveyed by language. It comprises experiential function and logical function and is mainly realized by transitivity and voice ^[10]. Experiential function, the commonly applied method in research, mirrors the events that occurred, the people and objects involved, and the related environmental factors, such as time and place.

3.1.1. Transitivity

Transitivity is a semantic system, whose function is to divide people’s real experiences into several kinds of “processes.” In Halliday’s view, human experiences can be classified into six kinds: material process, verbal process, relational process, mental process, existential process, and behavioral process ^[11]. According to the tallying of the six kinds of processes in **Table 1**, the analysis is concentrated on the material process, verbal process, relational process, and mental process, accounting for a relatively large proportion of the article.

Table 1. Frequency of processes

Process	Material process	Verbal process	Relational process	Mental process	Existential process	Behavioral process
Amount	18	15	10	8	3	0
Percentage	34.0%	28.3%	18.9%	15.1%	5.7%	0%

3.1.1.1. Material process

Material process signifies the process of doing and indicates that news is dominated by the plausible description of some events ^[12]. Its characteristic is that it can describe events objectively ^[13]. In this article, the material process is mostly employed to portray China’s measures after the reopening, diplomacy, and other countries’ policies toward China.

Example 1: “After repeated requests from the World Health Organization, China has started sharing more genetic sequences of the virus from recent cases.”

Example 2: “...China submitted 15 sequences from two regions in the 17 days after lifting its ‘zero-covid’ restrictions on December 7th.”

In terms of the expression of China’s measure of the provision of coronavirus-related data, the selection of verbs includes “share,” “submit,” and “provide.” As in Example 1, the behavior of sharing information is on the condition of repeated requests from the World Health Organization (WHO), emphasizing the latent meaning of reluctance and inertness. Furthermore, in Example 2, the usage of the term “submit” instead of “provide,” a more neutral word, suggests China’s passiveness and lower status on the ground that its meanings in the Longman Dictionary are “to agree to obey someone or something or to go through a process, especially when you have no choice” and “to give a plan, piece of writing, *etc.*, to someone in authority for them to consider or approve.” However, it is not in accordance with reality ^[14].

Example 3: “China’s obfuscation of covid data is stirring memories of how it failed to share relevant information early in the pandemic and how it is still withholding data that could help to trace the origins of the virus.”

Example 4: “That is already fueling a fraught debate within the European Union over how to balance commercial interests against national security and democratic values in dealings with Mr. Xi. Any new tension over covid could further complicate efforts to re-engage with China by Olaf Scholz...”

With regards to the consequences of China’s reopening policy and re-engagement with other countries, the verbs chosen are “fuel,” “complicate,” and “stir”, displaying western politicians’ negative and opposed views toward it and having China playing an embellished role of a villain of the epidemic prevention. In Example 3, the narrator even exploits rumors about China concealing data to provoke criticism. In addition, as implied in Example 4, China’s new policy constitutes the fuse for European Union’s controversy and tension, dissembling the UN’s autonomy for the action.

Example 5: The next day the Chinese government stopped issuing some visas in South Korea and Japan in retaliation for their new restrictions on travelers from China.”

Lastly, in Example 5, “retaliation” establishes China’s image as an irresponsible, irrational, and petty country. It disregards other objective and reasonable factors such as the epidemic prevention and protection of lives, simply considering China’s suspension of issuance of passports for the Japanese and Koreans as a retaliation for their restrictions on Chinese travelers’ entry.

3.1.1.2. Verbal process

The verbal process is a process of using speech to exchange information. Verbiage can be free direct speech, direct speech, free indirect speech, indirect speech, or narrative report of speech act ^[15]. The option of the form of expression hinges on to what degree the boundary between the reporting speech and the quoted speech is clear-cut or vague. The speaker’s level of control increases as the foregoing sequences ^[16]. Those quotations are seemingly righteous and impersonal but are the cryptic embodiment of the media’s intention ^[17]. In this report, indirect speech and narrative report of speech act are the majority, as shown in **Table 2**, indicating that most reporting speech can be manipulated by the narrator.

Table 2. Frequency of reporting speeches

Type	Indirect speech	Narrative report of speech act	Direct speech	Free direct speech
Amount	7	5	2	1
Percentage	46.7%	33.3%	13.3%	6.7%

The reporting speech is mostly associated with the denigration of China’s data and diplomacy policies. Superficially, most of the verbs used, including “say,” “add,” “express,” “report,” and “suggest,” are neutral. However, when describing the American’s transparency, “praise,” a positive verb, was used, yet, when commenting on China or China’s action, negative verbs such as “blame” and “denounce” were used, forming an irascible and reckless image, with China being positioned opposite to western countries. The negative reviews toward China have been magnified through the contrast with America. The narrator selects, processes, and quotes those reporting speeches in accordance with their ideologies and thoughts. Thus, the views of certain individuals have now become those of the majority. The audience’s perception is controlled and influenced.

3.1.1.3. Relational process

The relational process is concerned with being. It reflects the relationship between things, through which the attribution and identification of things are described. Through the analysis of the relational process, the identification and categorization of the reopening of China can be exhibited, with the attribution always containing the wider implicit ideology ^[18].

Example 6: “But the spat could get uglier, especially if China singles out America or European countries for new restrictions.”

Example 7: “European governments will probably be less overtly critical of China’s approach to covid, just as they were in 2020.”

Example 8: “The potential fallout for China is much less severe in the global south, especially among recipients of Chinese vaccines.”

Regarding the carrier of the relationship, the controversy surrounding the lifting of China's restriction, especially the travel policies, the narrator described it as a "row" and "spat," which generates the label of China as an "initiator of trouble." Their emotional expressions prevail over rational analysis. On the other hand, for European governments, they are "less overtly critical" toward China's approach to COVID. The negation of the negative description suggests that they are less overtly critical but in nature critical given China's devotion to them in 2020 and the profits Chinese tourists may generate for them. A similar way of description was also applied in Example 8. The arrogant and hypocritical perceptions of the European countries and a wavering attitude toward China's approach are showcased.

Example 9: "China is essential to such efforts because of its vast population, wildlife trade, and large numbers of coronavirus-bearing bats." (referring to the efforts to prepare for the next potential pandemic)

Additionally, as shown in Example 9, given the fact that the outbreak of coronavirus has nothing to do with wildlife and bats ^[19], those three factors obscure the cause of coronavirus and mislead the audience over the falsehood that China's bats contribute to the pandemic.

3.1.1.4. Mental process

The mental process is a process of expressing mental perceptions, such as perception, reaction, and cognition, consisting of the Senser and the Phenomenon ^[15]. The Senser's inner states, attitudes, and values can be discovered through the analysis of the mental process.

Example 10: "Some detect a similar timbre in China's recent diplomacy, including with countries long in Mr. Xi's bad books."

Example 11: "...when it was largely isolated from the outside world and saw attitudes toward it hardening in America and many other democracies."

Example 12: "Few believe that Mr. Xi's shift in tone implies a substantial rethink of policy, especially on core issues like Taiwan."

Most of the mental processes are associated with the reopening policy and diplomacy, reflecting western media's unconvinced perceptions of them. In their opinion, the three-year zero-covid policy of China destroyed the foreign relations with other countries. As indicated in Example 10, "countries long in Mr. Xi's bad books" suggests that China is to blame for the poor state of relations with those countries, and China's recent keen attitude toward diplomacy implies their precipitation to repair the relationship by the underlined expression in Example 10. Even their view of breaking up China is mentioned without scruples.

3.1.2. Voice

Voice can be divided into active voice and passive voice. In general, the passive voice is more objective. However, passivization, along with nominalization, conveniently disguises causality and the initiator of action ^[20]. In Example 11, the initiator of the action of isolation is blurred, and the sense of an isolated state is augmented. This state is deemed hard to change, implying that the three years of isolation from other countries is difficult to change.

3.2. Nominalization

Halliday proposed the concept of grammatical metaphors in systemic functional linguistics. Nominalization

is a type of grammatical metaphor where adjectives or verbs are turned into nouns or conjunctions into verbs, without losing their meanings. Through the deletion of the component of modality, the blurring of the concept of time, and the covering up of causality as well as the initiator of action, the impersonal effects of nominalization are created ^[16]. Consequently, the subjects are labeled and permanently belong to some attributions.

Example 13: "...his reluctance to share more complete data on the wave of covid-19 ripping through the country."

Example 14: "...the WHO says China's lack of transparency makes them understandable."

Example 15: "Nor will Mr. Xi's withholding of covid data help to reverse the deterioration of public attitudes to China in Europe..."

Regardless of the authenticity of the news, those nominalized expressions of China's sharing of data implicitly add the attribution of permanence to its behavior, and the concept of time also fades away, vilifying the image of the Chinese government and emphasizing the disavowal of China's efforts and world contributions to fight against the pandemic.

4. Conclusion

Applying Halliday's systemic functional linguistics, the first commentation on China's reopening policies in *The Economist* is analyzed based on transitivity, voice, and nominalization. After China lifted its zero-COVID policy, western media began criticizing China's lack of data sharing, with some misinformation and misleading reports. The denouncement of inertness and the reluctance of fighting against the pandemic disclaim the Chinese government's efforts and depreciate China's image. China is portrayed as the villain and destroyer of people's health worldwide. Meanwhile, western media also hold a hesitant attitude toward China's diplomacy. China's re-engaging with foreign countries and travel restrictions are described as imprudent and rushed actions, and they also consider China as the fuse of contradiction in the UN. What is overt is their intention of breaking up China.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Liu J, 2022, On the Significance of The Economist for China's International Communication Capacity Building. Publishing Reference, 2022(06): 20–23.
- [2] Fowler R, Hodge B, Kress G, et al., 2020, Language and Control, Routledge, UK, 3.
- [3] Chen H, 2017, Research on the Development Trend of TV Media in the Integrated Media Environment. Radio & TV Journal, 2017(08): 44.
- [4] The Economist: The World This Week, Data, Diplomacy and Disease, the Age of Grandma and More, 2023, viewed on March 6, 2023, <https://daily-the-economist.com/the-economist-the-world-this-week-data-diplomacy-and-disease-the-age-of-grandma-and-more/>
- [5] Sun H, Lu Q, (eds) 2022, From January 8, 2023, "Class B and B Control" Will Be Implemented for New Coronavirus Infection, viewed on March 6, 2023, <http://health.people.com.cn/n1/2022/1227/c14739-32594152.html>

- [6] Cui Y, 2006, The Economist: “The Best of the Best”. Youth Journalist, 2006(19). Viewed March 6, 2023, <https://mall.cnki.net/magazine/article/QNJZ200619034.htm>
- [7] Jiang X, 2003, An Effective Approach to Critical Discourse Analysis – Functional Grammar. Academic Exchange, 2003(07): 132–135.
- [8] Yang Y, 2018, Analysis of Ecological Discourse in News Reporting from a Systemic Functional Perspective. Journal of Beijing International Studies University, 40(01): 33–45.
- [9] Huang G, 2001, Issues on Functional Discourse Analysis. Foreign Language and Foreign Language Teaching, 2001(12): 15–19.
- [10] Lihan K, 2020, Systemic Functional Grammar Analysis of News Reports of Li Wenliang Incident. Advances in Language and Literary Studies, 11(5): 12–16.
- [11] Halliday MAK, 2000, An Introduction to Functional Grammar. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, Beijing, 14.
- [12] Zhang X, Zhang S, Li X, 2011, Critical Linguistic Analysis of U.S. Media Reports on China. Journalism Lover, 2011(09): 50–51.
- [13] Liu X, 2014, The Analysis of Transitivity of Obama’s Graduation Speech. Journal of Language and Literature Studies, 2014(9): 18–19.
- [14] Jiang Y, 2019, A Critical Discourse Analysis of Reports from the U.S. Mainstream Media on the Political Report at the 19th NCCPC. Foreign languages and Literature, 35(04): 10–16.
- [15] Hu Z, Zhu Y, Zhang D, 2017, Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistic, Beijing University Press, Beijing, 79–80.
- [16] Xin B, 1996, Language, Rights and Ideology: Critical Linguistic. Modern Foreign Languages, 1996(1): 21–26.
- [17] Dong Y, Wang J, 2012, Critical Discourse Analysis of English News. Journal of Hubei University (Philosophy and Social Science), 39(02): 133–136.
- [18] Jiang Y, 2022, Critical Discourse Analysis of English News Discourse from the Perspective of Transitivity – Taking Reports from the New York Times on China’s Combat Against COVID-19. Journal of Hubei University of Science and Technology, 42(02): 83–89.
- [19] Pereira MJR, Bernard E, Aguiar LMS, 2020, Bats and COVID-19: Villains or Victims?. Biota Neotropica, 20(3): e20201055.
- [20] Wang Y, 2009, Critical Discourse Analysis of Political Discourse Translation. Shanghai Journal of Translation, 2009(3): 23–27.

Publisher’s note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.