

A Critical Analysis of the Agent Invisibility in Sino-U.S. News Discourses

Congling Liu¹, Xiaojun Yang^{23*}

¹Changsha Pinggao Songya Lake Senior High School, Changsha, China

²School of Foreign Languages, Guangzhou Institute of Science and Technology, Guangzhou, China

³College of Foreign Studies, Xiangnan University, Chenzhou, China

*Corresponding Author. Email: 787150946@qq.com

Abstract. This critical analysis of discourse based on a corpus carefully studies language forms and discourse uses of hidden doers in news reports about a diplomatic event between China and the US. This study focuses on two main grammar structures: passive voice and using nouns to express actions. It analyzes how news discourses purposely hide or play down people who should take responsibility in describing diplomatic events. The research uses a self-made similar parallel corpus, which includes 18 typical news reports from China Daily and 18 from The New York Times respectively. Real research results show that structures that remove doers are widely used in news texts from both news agencies. However, The New York Times uses these language ways to hide doers much more frequently. This study not only proves the practical uses and analysis value of corpus linguistics methods in finding hidden rules of discourse in news language. It also shows the importance of checking small grammar choices when we learn how international news media build stories about sensitive diplomatic arguments and international conflicts. So it provides a view from language to help people understand media prejudice and hidden ideas in international news reporting.

Keywords: corpus-based CDA, agent invisibility, passivization, nominalization, news discourses

1. Introduction

The closing of the Chinese Consulate in Houston in July 2020 is a key event in China-US relations, and it draws huge attention from media. News reports have a strong influence on how the public understands diplomatic events, but they are deeply shaped by hidden ideas and power relationships [1].

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a useful method to find hidden meanings by studying the links among language, power and ideas. This research picks China Daily and The New York Times to analyze language strategies used in reporting the consulate closing. In detail, it studies the use of passive voice and noun forms to make the doers of related actions unclear, and this influences how stories are built and what the public thinks.

Past related studies show that media reports often use language tools to build certain facts and pass on specific ideas [2]. Of these tools, passive voice and noun forms are widely used to leave out action doers. They make reports seem objective while avoiding giving responsibility or blame [3]. This research makes earlier studies deeper by focusing on how these strategies are used in China-US news reports about an important diplomatic event.

A corpus-based method is used to study how passive voice and noun forms hide action doers in news texts from the two chosen media. This research tries to show how media groups build stories about responsibility in international conflicts and arguments by analyzing these grammar structures. This research also explains the research plan and early number-based results of the critical discourse analysis based on corpus.

2. Research methodology

This section details corpus compilation and analytical procedures implemented in this study.

2.1. Corpus compilation

We made a similar English corpus with 10 news articles from China Daily and 8 articles from The New York Times. All these articles came out between July and August 2020, and they all focus on the event of closing the consulate. This corpus has 15,081 words in total, and it can fully and fairly show the reporting opinions of the two media.

2.2. Analytical framework

The analysis plan pays attention to certain language features and basic theories. It aims to find out the hidden ideas and power relations in news reports.

We focus on two main language structures: passive voice (for example, "The consulate was closed.") and noun form (for example, "The closure of the consulate"). We choose these two common structures because they can leave out the doers of actions and change how responsibility is given in news stories [4].

We also use Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) to study three key functions of language in news reports: showing ideas, building relationships and organizing texts [5]. This theory helps us find the hidden ideas and power relations shown in the way news reports are written.

2.3. Coding and analysis

Two research helpers finished the coding by hand. They marked the places of passive voice and noun form at the start and end parts of sentences. We made sure the two coders had the same standards by talking and checking many times. After that, we did number-based analysis to count how often these two structures appear and how they are distributed in the two small corpora.

The most important results of the number-based research are shown in the next part.

3. Major research findings

This study's main results focus on how often passive voice and noun forms are used and how they are spread in these two corpora.

3.1. Frequency of agent-obscuring features

Numbers from research show that both China Daily and The New York Times often use passive voice and noun forms to make action doers unclear. Table 1 shows how often these two structures appear and their percentage in the main parts of sentences.

Table 1. Comparative frequency and percentage distribution of nominalization and passive-voice themes

Feature	China Daily (n=10)	The New York Times (n=8)
Nominalization	15 (23.4%)	18 (32.1%)
Passive Voice	22 (34.4%)	25 (44.6%)
Total	37 (57.8%)	43 (76.8%)

(Note: Data adapted from [6].)

The numbers show that reports from The New York Times have a higher total rate of ways to hide action doers (76.8%) than reports from China Daily (57.8%). This result shows that The New York Times more often does not clearly name the people who take actions about the consulate closure.

3.2. Functional differences in these two media

Although the two media both used the two similar language structures mentioned above, quality-based studies show these structures work differently. China Daily usually uses passive voice to clearly point out the U.S. government as the exact action doer (for example, "The consulate was closed by the U.S. government."). But The New York Times likes to use noun forms and only focus on the event itself, not the people who should be responsible (for example, "The closure of the consulate was ordered.").

These study results show that language choices play an important part in how media build stories. They also give directions for deeper quality-based research in the future.

4. Conclusion

This comparative study based on corpus finds clear differences in how China Daily and The New York Times use language to hide action doers when reporting the closing of the Houston consulate. The New York Times uses these grammar structures more often, which means it tries harder to stay neutral in stories or not give direct blame.

The study results are helpful for understanding China-US news reports and improving people's media literacy. First, they tell us it is important to study language features in news to find hidden ideas and power relations. Second, they show how media use language tools to build different story styles and lead public views. Third, they stress that teaching media literacy is necessary. It helps people judge news carefully and find possible unfair ideas.

Future studies will expand and deepen the analysis. They will study more language features and explain the hidden ideas of these story patterns in detail. This study proves that corpus linguistics is a useful first step for critical discourse analysis. It gives real proof of how media build stories in small and careful ways.

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