A Review on Critical Discourse Analysis of COVID-19 Pandemic Reporting in American Media

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Abstract This review examines the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic by the American media and its critical discourse analysis (CDA). The paper initially underscores the global impact of the pandemic and the significance of China's response measures, then analyzes the pivotal role of news reporting in shaping public perception and attitudes. The pandemic coverage by American media has influenced public cognition and international relations through critical discourse. The article reviews the theoretical development of CDA, including Fairclough's social analysis model, Van Dijk's socio-cognitive analysis model, and discusses the application of Halliday's systemic functional grammar theory within CDA. It particularly highlights the rise of corpus-assisted discourse studies, which reduces subjective bias through quantitative analysis and reveals cumulative effects in discourse. The paper concludes by emphasizing that corpus-based critical discourse analysis (CLA), combining quantitative and qualitative research, provides new perspectives and tools for understanding the ideologies and attitudes in media reporting, which is of significant importance for public policy formulation and international relations research.

Key Words *COVID-19 Pandemic Reporting; Critical Discourse Analysis; Corpus*

I. INTRODUCTION

[1]The COVID-19 pandemic has swept across the globe, characterized by its wide infection range, rapid transmission speed, and the difficulty in prevention and control. It is the most severe infectious disease pandemic to have occurred globally in a century and has been designated as an "International Public Health Emergency" by the World Health Organization. As the first country to report the outbreak to the WHO and the international community, China's actions in handling and responding to the pandemic have attracted widespread attention from countries around the world. News reporting, as the most influential medium of information dissemination, often covertly presents social ideologies to the audience in the form of language. Focusing on and analyzing valuable discourse categories amidst the torrent of rhetoric, highlighting the social constructive function of discourse, and guiding people to think about the content of news reports has become a key issue in contemporary research (Li Zhanzi, 2020).[1]

The impact of the pandemic on the globe is profound, as it not only tests the public health systems of various countries but also alters our lifestyles and modes of thinking. (Chen Qi, 2020; Wang Dong et al., 2022)[2] In the midst of this global crisis, China's response measures have showcased the strengths of its system and governance capabilities. China has always upheld the principle that the people and their lives are paramount, constantly refining and perfecting its control measures in response to the changing situation, combating the virus with a stable strategy and flexible tactics. China's struggle against the pandemic has not only protected the lives and safety of its citizens but also provided valuable experience and support for the global fight against the virus.

News reporting plays a pivotal role in this process, serving not only as a conduit for information dissemination but also as a vehicle for social ideologies. Against the backdrop of globalization, the influence of news reporting transcends borders, affecting the cognition and behavior of the global public. Therefore, analyzing the discourse categories in news reporting and understanding their social constructive functions is of significant importance for guiding the public to correctly understand the

pandemic and respond to preventive measures. By focusing on valuable discourse, we can better comprehend the impact of the pandemic on global society, economy, and politics, as well as how it shapes our future.

II. U.S. MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE PANDEMIC

During the pandemic, media outlets from various countries have played a role in disseminating information about the virus, while also subtly influencing public attitudes towards their own and other governments and citizens. In other words, the role of media has become particularly significant during the pandemic; they are not only disseminators of information but also shapers of societal emotions and attitudes. For instance, studies have shown that social media has a significant impact on public psychological responses and related factors during the pandemic (Wang C, et al. 2020)[4]. This influence is evident on a global scale, with media in different countries adopting various strategies and discourses when reporting on the pandemic. These strategies and discourses play a crucial role in constructing national images and international relations.

Research on pandemic reporting encompasses media from various countries and regions, such as Canada (Zhang Mohong, Li Shujing, 2020), Germany (Chen Kefeng et al., 2021), and Japan (Cai Yan, Lin Jing, 2022), with the most extensive studies focusing on mainstream U.S. media outlets like The New York Times and The Washington Post (Deng Renhua, Yang Fan, 2022; Ge Houwei, 2020).[5] These reports not only convey the latest developments of the pandemic but also, to a certain extent, shape public perception and attitudes towards the crisis, thereby influencing international relations.

In the context of international relations, frame analysis of pandemic reporting reveals how media coverage of other countries' responses to the pandemic can influence public perceptions of foreign governments. For instance, research has indicated that
U.S. media often employs critical discourse when reporting on the pandemic, which may affect the

American public's view of how other governments are handling the crisis (Fetzer T, et al., 2021).[10] This critical discourse not only shapes domestic public attitudes but can also impact international relations, as it may exacerbate tensions between nations.

Additionally, pandemic reporting also touches upon the issue of international cooperation in the face of public health crises. Studies have pointed out that international cooperation during the pandemic has been challenged, with some countries' uncooperative behaviors in pandemic response, such as vaccine nationalism, affecting the global effectiveness of the pandemic response (Braw E, 2020).[11] This uncooperative behavior has been widely discussed in media reports, further influencing public perceptions of international cooperation.

III. CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) theory was first proposed in the 1980s by Roger Fowler in *Language and Control* (Fowler R, et al., 1979).[12] Unlike traditional discourse analysis, CDA views language as a form of social practice, emphasizing the need to combine the social and cultural dimensions of discourse for a comprehensive analysis.

The interdisciplinary nature of CDA implies a diversity of research approaches within its framework. Notable among these are Fairclough's (1995) social analysis model, Van Dijk's (2018) sociocognitive analysis model, Wodak's (2001) discourse-historical approach, and Scollon's (2003) mediated discourse analysis.[13] These research focus on how discourse sustains power, how power influences discourse, and the resulting abuse of power and social injustice, with the aim of dissecting, exposing, and ultimately eliminating such inequitable phenomena.

Building on Fowler's critical linguistics, Fairclough (1995) further developed the approach, attempting to find a new method that combines discourse analysis with social theory. He drew upon systemic functional linguistics and sociological theory,

aiming to propose a theoretical paradigm for Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Fairclough considered language as a part of society, a form of social practice, and believed that any social practice is subject to the constraints and influences of the broader social context. Based on this, he proposed three dimensions of discourse, describing it as a complete unity that includes text, discourse practice, and social practice. In this model: Text refers to the linguistic analysis of content. Discourse practice pertains to the processes of text production, distribution, and consumption, focusing on the creation of discourse and genres, as well as the interaction between authors and readers. Social practice emphasizes the dialectical relationship between discourse power relations, discourse practices, and social practices. These three components are closely related, and each is indispensable for discourse analysis, serving a specific purpose. The three-dimensional nature of discourse demands that CDA must also be three-dimensional. Therefore, he proposed three steps in critical discourse analysis: description, interpretation, and explanation. That is, the linguistic description of texts, the interpretation of the relationship between texts and discourse practices, and the explanation of the relationship between discourse practices and sociocultural practices.

Fairclough's three-dimensional model, starting from a dialectically constructed view of language, proposes an analytical model with strong operability, which holds high reference value for the study of mass discourse. Wu Qingying and Wang Xian (2024), through CiteSpace visualization bibliometric analysis, analyzed and organized literature related to Critical Discourse Analysis produced between 2019 and 2023, providing reference insights into the key directions and research paths of domestic CDA studies. Jiang Yi (2021) applied Fairclough's three-dimensional analysis model to a critical discourse analysis of The New York Times' coverage of China's COVID-19 pandemic, and Hu Xiaobin (2021) also used the three-dimensional discourse analysis framework to study the construction of China's national image by Chinese and American media in the context of the pandemic. Through these studies, we can see that CDA is continuously

advancing and developing, offering profound insights into the role of language in society.[18]

IV. HALLIDAY'S SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL GRAMMAR

Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar theory serves as a theoretical foundation for Critical Discourse Analysis. The British linguist M. A. K. Halliday began developing Systemic Functional Linguistics in the 1950s and 1960s, positing that language is essentially a social semiotic with three meta-functions: the ideational function, the interpersonal function, and the textual function. This theory provides a powerful analytical tool for Critical Discourse Analysis, enabling it to delve into the ways in which language operates within social structures and cultural contexts.

The ideational function concerns how language expresses cognition of the real world, including the experiential and logical functions, which are primarily reflected in the transitivity system. *The Journal of Zhejiang International Studies University* published a special column on multilingual discourse analysis of COVID-19 in its sixth issue of 2020, which included five articles that conducted transitivity analysis on the headlines of reports from five countries involving China during the COVID-19 pandemic. (Gu Yifan, Ye Liangying, 2020; Ding Haotian, Zhou Tong, 2020; Ning Zhenjiang, He Xiaojing, 2020; Cai Zhexi, Shao Ying, 2020; Song Yang, 2020) This analysis demonstrated the powerful interpretive capacity of the transitivity system, revealing how linguistic choices in media reports can influence the understanding and interpretation of events.[21]

The interpersonal function focuses on how language constructs social relationships. In the discourse analysis of U.S. media's coverage of the pandemic involving China, this function has received significant attention. Appraisal Theory, as an important component of the interpersonal function, is widely used in the analysis of news discourse. Since the Australian scholar White provided a detailed theoretical framework for the evaluation research of

news discourse in his doctoral thesis (1988), Appraisal Theory has become an important tool for analyzing attitudes and value judgments in media reports. [26]Yang Yang (2021) used Appraisal Theory as a perspective and applied Critical Discourse Analysis methods to explore the attitudes presented in Chinese and American media's news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic.[27] Deng Renhua and Yang Fan (2022) based their theoretical framework on the appraisal framework to compare and analyze the distribution of evaluative resources in the COVID-19 reporting of China and the U.S. and the national images they reflect.[28] Both articles used the corpus annotation software UAM Corpus Tool, indicating the increasingly widespread application of modern technology in discourse analysis.

In summary, Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar theory provides a solid theoretical foundation for Critical Discourse Analysis, enabling it to delve into the social functions and cultural significance of language. As interdisciplinary research continues to advance, the application and influence of this theory will continue to expand.

V. CORPUS-ASSISTED DISCOURSE STUDIES

Corpus-assisted discourse studies have emerged as a recent research trend, and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is no exception. While traditional CDA research follows certain analytical frameworks and is largely based on qualitative interpretations of limited texts, it often suffers from a lack of representativeness in the corpus and a strong subjectivity in analytical conclusions. Corpora, as collections of specific types of discourse, reveal linguistic features that are more representative, and the quantitative analysis based on corpora not only reduces the researcher's subjective bias but also uncovers the cumulative effects presented in large volumes of discourse. Domestic scholars, by constructing their own corpora, have studied The New York Times' reports on China's COVID-19 pandemic (Ge Houwei, 2020; Zhang Congying, 2022) and The Wall Street Journal's reports on China's pandemic (Lian Shaoying, Mi Ruoyu, 2021), revealing the attitudes, viewpoints,

and ideologies of mainstream American media from an empirical perspective.[9][28][29]

Corpus-assisted Critical Discourse Analysis (CLA) offers a novel research perspective by seamlessly integrating quantitative and qualitative research, thereby enriching the lens through which discourse studies are conducted (Lian Shaoying, Mi Ruoyu, 2021). This method is particularly suited for analyzing ideologies and attitudes in media reports, as it can uncover patterns and frequencies of language use, thus revealing underlying social and political orientations. For instance, Yang Yang (2021) employed the perspective of Appraisal Theory and applied critical discourse analysis to explore the attitudes presented in Chinese and American media reports on the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found that both "judgment" and "appreciation" occupy a significant proportion in both Chinese and American news reports. However, there are differences in the distribution of attitude resources between Chinese and American news reports, reflecting the attitudes and values embedded in media coverage.[29][27]

In the review of domestic and international Critical Discourse Analysis research over the past five years, Zhang Shujing (2014) discussed the role of corpora in Critical Discourse Analysis, emphasizing the potential of corpus methods in revealing ideologies and power relations in discourse. Furthermore, Hu Jiang (2019), based on a military news reporting corpus, followed the analysis method of the extended unit of meaning model, starting from vocabulary, to conduct an analysis of the ideological meaning of discourse, examining and dissecting the ideological significance in Western media's military reports involving China. These studies demonstrate that corpus-assisted discourse studies not only provide an in-depth understanding of discourse but also reveal the socio-cultural and political motivations behind it.[30]

The integration of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Cognitive Linguistics has led to the gradual development of the interdisciplinary field known as Critical Cognitive Linguistics. Critical Metaphor Analysis, as one of the most widely applied areas of

Cognitive Linguistic theory within CDA, has evolved into an effective method for in-depth study of the relationship between language, thought, and society (Wang Hui, Xin Bin, 2019; Sun Yi, Xiong Jiateng, 2022).[32] These studies combine corpus research methods with Critical Metaphor Analysis to identify metaphors in corpora and describe and interpret those that occur frequently, thereby exploring how media constructs specific images through metaphor and revealing the ideologies and political motivations within discourse.

In summary, the application of corpus-assisted discourse studies in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has not only enhanced the scientific and objective nature of research but also provided new perspectives and tools for understanding the ideologies and attitudes within media reports. As technology advances and research methods innovate, research in this field will continue to deepen, offering more insights into discourse analysis.

VI. CONCLUSION

Corpus-based Critical Discourse Analysis (CLA) is a research method that combines quantitative and qualitative research, demonstrating unique advantages in revealing ideologies and attitudes in media reporting. In recent years, with the development of corpus technology and the deepening of Critical Discourse Analysis theory, CLA has received widespread attention in the academic world both domestically and internationally. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemic reporting by U.S. media has become a hot topic for Critical Discourse Analysis.

Firstly, the theoretical foundation of Critical Discourse Analysis—Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar—provides us with a framework for understanding and analyzing the role of language in society. Through this theory, researchers can delve into how language constructs reality, expresses social relations, and organizes information flow. During the pandemic, the application of this theory is particularly important because it helps us understand how media reporting shapes public perception and attitudes

towards the pandemic.

Secondly, domestic and international scholars have conducted in-depth analyses of pandemic reporting involving China by mainstream U.S. media such as The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal through self-built corpora. These studies not only reveal the linguistic characteristics and ideological tendencies in media reporting but also reflect how media constructs specific national images through language. For instance, research by Ge Houwei (2020) and Zhang Congying (2022), through analysis of The New York Times, demonstrated how U.S. media constructs reports on China using the transitivity system and appraisal theory framework. These research findings are of great significance for understanding power relations and ideologies in media reporting.[9][28]

Furthermore, the integration of Critical Discourse Analysis with Cognitive Linguistics, especially the application of Critical Metaphor Analysis, provides new perspectives for analyzing media reporting. Research by Wang Hui and Xin Bin (2019) and Sun Yi and Xiong Jiateng (2022) identified and analyzed metaphors in media reporting, revealing how media constructs specific ideologies and political positions through metaphor. The application of this method not only enhances the depth of Critical Discourse Analysis but also provides new tools for understanding the complexity and multidimensionality of media reporting.[32]

In summary, corpus-based Critical Discourse Analysis of U.S. media's pandemic reporting is a highly worthwhile research issue. This research not only helps us understand how media reporting influences public perception of the pandemic but also reveals the ideologies and power structures behind media reporting. With the continuous development of technology and innovation in research methods, research in this field will continue to deepen, providing more insights for discourse analysis and offering important references for public policy formulation and international relations research.

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