

Original Paper

A Comparative Ecological Analysis of Chinese and American Media Reports on Emergency Disasters from the Perspective of Transitivity System

Yue Sun^{1*}

¹ School of English Studies, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, China

* Yue Sun, E-mail: sy08180310@163.com

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Abstract

This article is based on the transitivity analysis framework proposed by He and Wei (2017), and adopts a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods to compare and analyze the ecological properties of domestic and foreign emergency reporting in the United States and China. It finds that overall, both China Daily and The New York Times have a certain degree of ecological ambiguity, with the beneficial presentation of China Daily being greater than The New York Times, and the destructive presentation of China Daily being smaller than The New York Times, with a smaller difference in ambiguity. In addition, China Daily presents more ecological benefits in domestic reports and uses more ecological ambiguities in foreign reports, while The New York Times uses more ecological ambiguities in domestic reports and more ecological destructiveness in foreign reports. Therefore, this article aims to stimulate the public's vigilance and awareness towards sudden accidents and disasters by studying the ecological properties of report, and to attach more importance to such public accidents.

Keywords

emergency disaster reports, transitivity system, ecological discourse analysis

1. Introduction

As ecological issues have been increasingly emphasized, ecology and linguistics have combined to form the interdisciplinary discipline of ecolinguistics. At present, there are two main research paradigms in this discipline, one is the Haugen model (Haugen, 1970) which focuses on the influence of environment on language; the other is the Halliday model (Halliday, 1990) which focuses on the

influence of language on environment. And ecological discourse analysis is the main research method of ecolinguistics at present. The term “ecological discourse analysis” first appeared in Alexander and Stibbe’s (2014) article *From the Analysis of Ecological Discourse to the Ecological Analysis of Discourse*. Subsequently, Stibbe (2015) categorized ecological discourse into beneficial, destructive and ambiguous discourse. In a broad sense, the research on ecological discourse analysis mainly includes the analysis of ecological discourse and the ecological analysis of discourse of both kinds.

In recent years, due to the increasing attention to ecology, many contributions have been made to the study of ecological discourse analysis at home and abroad. From the perspective of the research framework, the existing studies have focused on two categories: single-modal discourse analysis and multimodal discourse analysis. Multimodal ecological discourse analysis has been studied from the perspective of multimodal metaphorical scenes (Zhao, 2022), visual grammar (Mu & Zhang, 2022), and multimodal resources (Ope-Davie & Shodipe, 2023), which are used to guide the public and enterprises to maintain a harmonious relationship between human beings and nature. Studies on single-modal ecological discourse analysis are mainly based on the perspectives of systemic functional linguistics, which are mostly analyzed from the perspectives of the transitivity system (Sun & Guo, 2022) and appraisal system (Zhang & Yang, 2022) to reveal the interrelationships between language and ecology, so as to enable the public to understand more about ecological issues and to promote ecological environment protection and sustainable development. Nowadays, the themes of ecological discourse analysis are mainly related to the topics of climate change (Ariyo, 2017; Li & Liu, 2020), wildlife (Stibbe, 2003, 2012; Kuang, Guo, & Zou, 2022), resource and energy (Poole, 2016; Zhao, 2022). All of these research areas of ecological discourse can effectively draw attention to the ecology of the field, identify problems and crises that arise in the ecological environment, and thus promote rational public understanding and action on these topics.

Although the scope of ecological discourse analysis is relatively broad, there is a lack of ecological analysis of the topic of emergency disasters. As an issue of continuing concern around the world, emergency disasters deserve our attention for the ecological analysis of their reporting discourse. So far, very few scholars have paid attention to the study of emergency disaster reporting. Drawing on the perspective of Fairclough’s discourse analysis, Sun (2019) explored the factors behind the changes in the framing of *China Daily*’s coverage of emergency disasters from three perspectives: the micro dimension, the meso dimension, and the macro dimension. Yang (2020) compared the reporting frameworks of emergency disaster events in Chinese and American online media from the perspective of communication. Most of the studies on this kind of topic are more from the perspective of communication and journalism, but few from the perspective of linguistics. Therefore, it is necessary to study the discourse of emergency disaster reporting from a linguistic perspective. In this paper, we will utilize the transitivity system to make a comparative ecological analysis of the emergency disaster reports of Chinese and American media. It can not only reveal the attitudes, but also help to stimulate the public’s attention and concern for social issues, improve the safety awareness and risk management

ability of individuals and the society, and contribute to the prevention and resolution of potential disasters.

Thus, this paper is guided by the ecological philosophy of “diversity and harmony, interaction and co-existence”, and conducts a comparative analysis of 12 reports on emergency disasters in *China Daily* and *The New York Times* from the perspective of the transitivity system. Therefore, this study proposes the following two research questions:

- (1) What are the characteristics of the distribution of transitivity systems in the reporting of emergency disasters in China and the United States?
- (2) What ecological properties are presented in the reports on emergency disasters in China and the United States? What are the similarities and differences?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Ecosophy

Ecological discourse analysis is based on the guidance of the ecosophy adopted by researchers to analyze the collected discourse, so the choice of ecosophy is crucial. The word “ecosophy” is a combination of “eco-” and “-sophy”, where “eco-” means “ecology” and “-sophy” originates from the term “sophia”, meaning “wisdom” (Naess & Haukeland, 2002).

After the introduction of ecolinguistics to China, He and Wei (2018) constructed an international ecosophy of “diversity and harmony, interaction and co-existence” by explaining the characteristics of ecological concepts and integrating traditional Chinese philosophy and diplomatic concepts. Subsequently, the outlook has been interpreted and developed in new ways. According to He, Gao and Liu (2021), this ecological philosophical outlook not only reflects the need for the benign development of natural ecosystems, but also that of social ecosystems, and helps to reveal the ecological significance of various discourses. Therefore, the relationship between the ecological consciousness reflected in the discourse and the ecosophy is the basis for judging the ecological orientation of the discourse.

2.2 Transitivity System

The transitivity system is a semantic system that expresses people’s experience of the real world and the inner world in terms of a number of processes and specifies the participants and circumstantial elements involved in the processes. Halliday (2004) argues that “the transitivity system constructs the experience of the world as a set of manageable material processes”. And this process consists of six types: material process, mental process, relational process, behavioral process, verbal process, and existential process. Therefore, and transitivity system consists of three parts: process, participant and environmental element. After that, He and Wei (2017) constructed an analytical model of transitivity that is suitable for describing the characteristics of ecological discourse by reconstructing the participant role system from an ecological perspective based on the transitivity system and assigning ecological significance to the main process system.

First, the participants are specifically categorized into “living organisms” and “non-living organisms”,

of which the “living organism participant” is further divided into “human living participant” and “non-human living participant”. (Figure 1) “Living participant” includes “individual participant” and “group participant”. “Non-living participant” is subdivided into “physical participant” and “social participant”. Secondly, the processes in the transitivity system are also given ecological significance. The transitivity system consists of six processes: material process, mental process, relational process, behavioral process, verbal process and existential process. The analysis of the ecological properties of processes depends on our chosen ecosophy. If the process follows our concept of ecosophy, then it is a beneficial process. Conversely, it is destructive. If the discourse presents an ecological consciousness that neither follows nor contradicts the ecosophy, it is an ambiguous or neutral process. Finally, the third core component of the transitive system is the circumstantial element, which mainly complements the information expressed by the process and participant roles, and is equivalent to syntactic gerundial components such as time, place, manner, degree, etc.

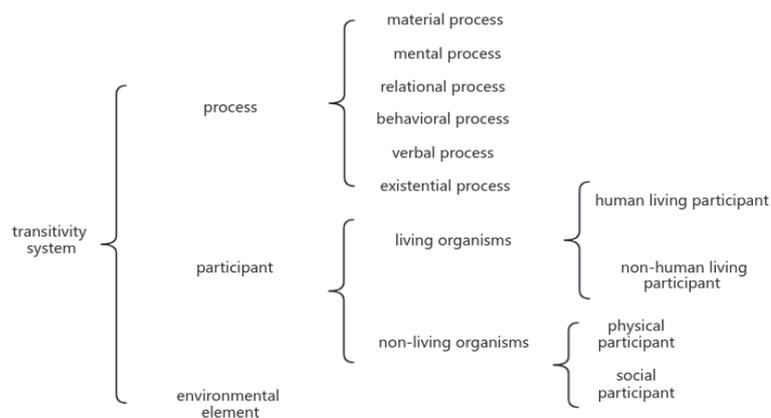


Figure 1. Ecological Discourse Analysis Model

3. Analysis of Reports on Emergency Disasters Based on Transitivity System

3.1 Data Collection

Among the Chinese and American media, *China Daily* and *The New York Times* are selected as two influential media. In this paper, we selected 3 domestic reports on the 4-29 Changsha residential building collapse accident and 3 foreign reports on the 4-15 Notre Dame de Paris fire accident in *China Daily*, and 3 domestic reports on the 6-24 Miami apartment collapse accident and 3 foreign reports on the 4-15 Notre Dame de Paris fire accident in *The New York Times*, for a total of 12 reports on the disaster in Chinese and American media. All three disasters have caused a certain degree of damage to society and the national environment, as well as casualties and missing persons. They represent China’s domestic and foreign reports, and America’s domestic and foreign reports, respectively, in order to obtain more detailed and profound comparative results.

3.2 Data Analyses

From the perspective of ecological discourse analysis, different process types and participants in news reports have different roles in the characterization of ecological meaning. By using UAM Corpus Tool 6.2 to count processes, we found that the emergency disaster reports we selected involved a total of 611 processes. *China Daily* had a total of 243 processes and *The New York Times* had a total of 368 processes.

Next, we will focus on the statistics of specific processes in the selected reports of *China Daily* and *The New York Times*. As shown in Table 1, *China Daily* has the highest number of material processes at 60.1%. Verbal processes follow, totaling about 19.8%. Relational processes and mental processes account for 13.6% and 5.3% respectively. And existential and behavioral processes are the least numerous. The statistics of *The New York Times* are similar to the results of *China Daily*, and again its material processes are the highest, totaling 59.8%. Next, verbal processes account for 19.6% of the total. Relational and mental processes are 13.3% and 6% respectively. Existential and behavioral processes are again the least in number. From this, we can find that the distribution of processes in the reports of these two media is very similar. In the reports of emergency disasters, material processes have the highest proportion, followed by verbal processes, then relational and mental processes, while existential and behavioral processes are rarely used in this type of report.

Table 1. Process Statistics

The type of process	China Daily	The New York Times
Material process	146 (60.1%)	220 (59.8%)
Verbal process	48 (19.8%)	72 (19.6%)
Relational process	33 (13.6%)	49 (13.3%)
Mental process	13 (5.3%)	22 (6%)
Existential process	0	0
Behavioral process	3 (1.2%)	5 (1.3%)
Total	243 (100%)	386 (100%)

Next, we will focus on the statistics of the participants in the selected reports of *China Daily* and *The New York Times*. Overall, it has a total of 534 participants, with *China Daily* having 203 participants and *The New York Times* containing 331 participants. Of these, *China Daily* has a total of 125 human living participants and 88 non-human living participants. The highest proportion of group participants is 39.4%. The distribution of participants in *The New York Times* is slightly different from that of *China Daily*. *The New York Times* has 130 human living participants and 201 non-human living participants. The proportion of physical participants is the highest, at 36.3%. After comparison, we can find that the percentage of human living participants in *China Daily* is higher than that of *The New*

York Times; while the percentage of non-human living participants of *China Daily* is lower than that of *The New York Times*.

Table 2. Participant Statistics

The type of participant	China Daily	The New York Times
Individual participant	45 (22.2%)	86 (26%)
Group participant	80 (39.4%)	44 (13.3%)
Physical participant	52 (25.6%)	120 (36.3%)
Social participant	26 (12.8%)	81 (24.4%)
Total	203 (100%)	331 (100%)

After rough preliminary statistics, we can draw the following conclusion: firstly, in terms of transitivity processes, the distribution of transitivity processes in the selected reports on emergency disasters in *China Daily* and *The New York Times* is similar. According to various process statistics, material processes account for the highest proportion, followed by verbal processes, followed by relational and mental processes, while existential and behavioral processes are rarely used in such reports. Secondly, in terms of participants, the distribution of participants in the selected reports on emergency disasters in *China Daily* and *The New York Times* is different. The proportion of human living participants in *China Daily* is higher than that in *The New York Times*, while the proportion of non-human living participants in *China Daily* is lower than that in *The New York Times*.

3.3 Result and Discussion

This section will specifically analyze the ecological properties of the selected reports of emergency disasters by exploring processes and participants. Since the number of existential and behavioral processes is too small, this paper will focus primarily on four: material, verbal, relational, and mental processes.

3.3.1 Material Process

Material process refers to the process of “doing”, which expresses the doing of something by one entity or possibly to other entities. In the case of material process, there are three main factors involved: actor, process, and goal (Halliday, 2004). First, let us focus on the domestic and foreign reports of *China Daily*. In Example (1), there is “battle”, an action process, and “battle” forms a semantic configuration of “group participant + action process”. It describes the fact that the firefighters are trying to protect the building, which is a beneficial process. The participant in Example (2) is the physical participant “fire”, which describes the fact that the Notre Dame de Paris was burned by fire, which is an ambiguous process. Examples (3) and (4) are domestic reports. The participant in Example (3) is “Hunan (government)” as a social participant, where “启动”, “开展”, and “成立” reflect the process of action. In the face of a sudden accident, the Hunan government reacted quickly and dealt with the emergency,

which is a beneficial process. Example (4) has the same participant as Example (3), and it also reflects the beneficial process of the Hunan government's efforts to protect the people in an emergency.

(1) Firefighters battled to prevent one of the main bell towers from collapsing.

(2) A major fire has engulfed the medieval cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris, one of France's most famous landmarks.

(3) 事故发生后，湖南迅速启动应急预案，迅速成立现场调度处置指挥部，全力开展现场救援。

(4) 另据了解，湖南全面开展人员救治，协调权威专家，调配优质医疗资源，赶赴现场指导救治，开通绿色通道，转运救治伤员，尽最大努力减少人员伤亡。

Next, we will focus on the analysis of the material processes of *The New York Times*' domestic and foreign reports. In Example (5), we can find that the participant "spectacle" is a physical participant and the action process is "stun", and the semantic configuration of the sentence is "physical participant + action process", which describes that the damage of the fire to Notre Dame has frightened the crowd, showing the seriousness of the damage to Notre Dame, which is a destructive process. The participant "a French environmental group" in Example (6) is a group participant, which shows that the government did not deal with the aftermath of the fire in a timely manner. Therefore, it is a destructive process. Examples (7) and (8) are domestic reports. Example (7) uses the group participant "office" and the action process "end", which indicates that the search activity is ending, and is an ambiguous process. Example (8) uses an individual participant, "one rescuer", whose action process describes that the rescuer has met an untimely end, which is a destructive process.

(5) The spectacle of flames leaping from the cathedral's wooden roof — its spire glowing red then turning into a virtual cinder — stunned thousands of onlookers.

(6) A French environmental group has filed suit over what it says was the government's delayed response to the large-scale release of lead into the atmosphere during the Notre-Dame fire.

(7) Officials are ending the search for survivors in the Surfside condo collapse.

(8) One rescuer fell 25 feet off the wreckage right in front of people who had been invited to watch the search.

3.3.2 Verbal Process

The verbal process refers to the process by which participants speak and exchange information directly through the use of language. It consists of four main components: speaker, process, addressee, and the content of the speech (Halliday, 2004). First, we will focus first on foreign reports. The individual participant "he" in Example (9) is referring to the French President. Here, the French president is directly quoted to show his determination to rebuild Notre Dame de Paris, which is a beneficial process. In Example (10), the participant is the group participant "Paris prosecutor's office". The indirect quotation describes that the next step is to investigate the cause of the fire, which is an ambiguous process. In the domestic reports, both Examples (11) and (12) are direct quotes of what individual participants said. Example (11) shows the seriousness and responsibility of the rescuers, so the sentence belongs to the beneficial process. Example (12) describes the rescue process through tools, which is an

ambiguous process.

(9) “We’ll rebuild Notre-Dame together”, he said as he praised the “extreme courage” and “professionalism” of the firefighters.

(10) Paris prosecutor's office said it had opened an inquiry into “accidental destruction by fire”.

(11) “在冰箱后面的一个大梁下面，有一名受困人员！”长沙市消防救援支队特勤大队政委蒋爱兵略有些激动。

(12) 长沙市消防救援支队副支队长张铮介绍，“被困者距离我们越来越近了，我们在打‘观察眼’的时候，钻机滴落的碎渣和振动造成的粉末灰尘，已经落在被困者的头发上了，距离已经非常近了。通过‘观察眼’能够确定被困者的具体位置和具体形态，为下一步的作业打好了基础。”

There were also many verbal processes in *The New York Times*. The participants in both Examples (13) and (14) are individual participants. In Example (13), the failure of the government to notice the problems that arose in the aftermath of the fire is shown through direct quotes, which is a destructive process. Example (14), on the other hand, shows sadness about the fire that befell Notre Dame de Paris by metaphorically referring to Notre Dame de Paris as one’s own home; therefore, it belongs to the beneficial process. In the domestic reports, Examples (15) and (16) are both direct quotes from individual participants. Among them, Example (15) directly expresses that there is no possibility for the missing person to survive, which belongs to the destructive process. Example (16), however, is a prayer to God to bless the people in the accident, which is a beneficial process.

(13) “There was neither recognition nor warning about the danger,” said Jacky Bonnemains, the head of the Robin Hood organization, in an interview.

(14) “It is like losing a member of one's own family,” said Pierre Guillaume Bonnet, a 45-year-old marketing director.

(15) “Just based on the facts, there’s zero chance of survival,” Assistant Chief Ray Jadallah of Miami-Dade Fire Rescue told families of the missing in a private briefing.

(16) “We have all asked God for a miracle,” Mayor Daniella Levine Cava of Miami-Dade County said at a news conference.

3.3.3 Relational Process

The relational process is the process of expressing “to be”, where an entity is given or attributed a certain quality, or something is assigned an identity (Halliday, 2004). In the foreign reports of *China Daily*, the semantic configuration of Example (17) is “social participant + relational process(is)”, which indicates that the cause of the fire has not yet been investigated, which is an ambiguous process. The participant in Example (18) is also a social participant, which shows the special value of Notre Dame de Paris and implies that it is unfortunate that Notre Dame de Paris suffered a fire. Therefore, it belongs to the beneficial process. In terms of domestic reporting, the semantic configuration of Example (19) is also “social participant + relational process(is)”, which describes the tools used in the search and rescue of people and their ability not to cause secondary damage, and is, therefore, a beneficial process. In example (20), the participant is a group participant, suggesting that the collapse of the house may be

related to the movement of the house, which is an ambiguous process.

(17) The cause of the fire is not yet clear.

(18) The 12th-century church is home to relics, stained glass and other works of art of incalculable value, and is a leading tourist attraction.

(19) 蛇眼音视频生命探测仪主要是为救援人员可以精细准确地定位被困人员，不再造成对被埋者的二次伤害。

(20) 房屋有不同程度的结构改动。

In *The New York Times* foreign reports, the semantic configuration of Example (21) is “social participant + relational process (is) + attribute (out of scale)”, which shows that the scale of the Notre Dame fire has exceeded the predetermined scope, so the sentence belongs to the destructive process. On the other hand, the semantic configuration of Example (22) is “carrier (it) + relational process (is) + attribute”, which shows that Notre Dame de Paris has a high status in the heart of every Frenchman, so it belongs to the beneficial process. In the domestic reports, the participant in Example (23) is a social participant, and “was” is a relational process, which indicates the danger of the rescue work, and it is an ambiguous process. In Example (24), the participant is a social participant, and it is a beneficial process because it demonstrates the efforts made to speed up the search and save the trapped residents.

(21) Everything that happens at Notre-Dame is out of scale.

(22) It is the cathedral of all the French.

(23) The work was grueling and dangerous, with fires that burned in the rubble and the constant possibility of mounds of debris giving way.

(24) On Sunday, the section of the building that had remained standing was demolished to guard against it toppling on its own and to help speed the search.

3.3.4 Mental Process

In the transitivity system, the mental process expresses the process of “knowing” and includes the categories of perception, emotion, and cognition. The two participants in a mental process are the perceiver and the phenomenon (Halliday, 2004). The participant in Example (25) is a group participant and demonstrates some of the behaviors of people after the fire at Notre Dame de Paris, reflecting the sadness and pain of the people, and even some people praying for Notre Dame de Paris. Thus, Example (25) is a beneficial process. In Example (26), the participant is a group participant, describing the care taken by rescuers in searching through the rubble and rescuing trapped people, and it is a beneficial process.

(25) Some could be seen openly weeping, while others sang hymns or said prayers.

(26) 救援人员一刻不停小心翼翼的处理倒塌的碎物。

In *The New York Times*, the participant in Example (27) is an individual participant, which shows that people’s sadness after the fire at Notre Dame de Paris may last for a long time, which is a beneficial process. In Example (28), the participant is a social participant, and “feel” is a mental process, reflecting the fact that he is too sad to accept the news of his loved one’s death due to the collapse of

the house, which is a destructive process.

(27) Mr. Bonnemains acknowledged in an interview that the emotion and confusion after the catastrophic fire, which shocked the French may have sidelined environmental concerns.

(28) The death of his loved ones still feels unreal, and haunting.

Finally, after a thorough analysis of the ecological properties of the selected reports in *China Daily* and *The New York Times*, we obtained specific and comprehensive data. As shown in Table 3, we can find that on the whole, both *China Daily* and *The New York Times* have certain ecological ambiguity, with *China Daily* presenting more beneficial than *The New York Times*, and *China Daily* presenting less destructive than *The New York Times*, with a smaller difference in ambiguity. In addition, *China Daily* presents more ecological benefits in its domestic reports and uses more ecological ambiguities in its domestic reports, while *The New York Times* uses more ecological ambiguities in its domestic reports and more ecological destructiveness in its foreign reports.

Table 3. Ecological Property Statistics

Ecological property	China domestic reports	Daily's foreign reports	China foreign reports	Daily's reports	The New York Times' domestic reports	The New York Times' foreign reports
Beneficial process	90 (54.9%)	29 (36.7%)	42 (19%)	39 (26.7%)		
Ambiguous process	65 (39.6%)	45 (57%)	133 (60%)	52 (35.6%)		
Destructive process	9 (5.5%)	5 (6.3%)	47 (21%)	55 (37.7%)		
Total	164 (100%)	79 (100%)	222 (100%)	146 (100%)		

4. Conclusion

In this paper, under the perspective of ecolinguistics, following the ecosophy of “diversity and harmony, interaction and co-existence”, we draw on He and Wei (2017)’s transitivity analysis framework to comparatively analyze the ecological properties of the media’s coverage of emergency disasters in the U.S. and China. It is found that the distribution of processes in the reports of the two media is very similar. Material process accounts for the highest proportion of emergency disaster reports, followed by verbal process, then relational and psychological process, while existential and behavioral processes are rarely used in this type of report. In terms of participants, *China Daily* has a higher percentage of human living participants than *The New York Times*, while *The New York Times* has a higher percentage of non-human living participants than *China Daily*. Secondly, the comparison of the ecological properties of the two media shows that, in general, both *China Daily* and *The New York Times* have a certain degree of ecological ambiguity, with the beneficial presentation of *China Daily* being greater than *The New York Times*, and the destructive presentation of *China Daily* being smaller than *The New York Times*, with a smaller difference in ambiguity. In addition, *China Daily* presents

more ecological benefits in domestic reports and uses more ecological ambiguities in foreign reports, while *The New York Times* uses more ecological ambiguities in domestic reports and more ecological destructiveness in foreign reports. All in all, there is still room for improvement in the presentation of ecological properties in Chinese and American reports, and Chinese media should increase the use of non-human living participants and increase the use of ecological benefits in foreign reports, so as to proactively take the responsibility of spreading ecological awareness and show the style of a great nation.

This study expands the scope of ecological discourse analysis and provides a new perspective for news reporting. In addition, the comparative analysis used in this study is not limited to the overall coverage of China and the United States but rather chooses to conduct detailed and in-depth comparisons from different perspectives, which fills the gap in the comparison of China and the United States. However, there are still some limitations of this study that need to be pointed out. First, the scope of our study and the selected discourse are limited due to time and effort. Second, although the findings are based on a large amount of data and representative examples, there is still some subjectivity in the study. Therefore, due to the versatility and complexity of ecological awareness, more in-depth research is needed.

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