Original Paper

A Study of American COVID-19 News from the Perspective of Ideational Grammatical Metaphor Theory

—Taking *New York Times* as an Example

Wenqi Wang[1]

[1] Xi'an University of Architecture and Technology, China

Abstract

Covid-19 has exerted a significant impact on people's life and health. Former coronavirus-related studies are mainly done through the lens of cognitive linguistics, especially Interpersonal Grammatical Metaphor Theory. This study focuses on the ideational grammatical metaphors in American coronavirus-related news, taking New York Times as the corpus for qualitative and quantitative analysis. The study combines the current issues concerning Covid-19 with Halliday's Ideational Grammatical Metaphor Theory. It not only updates the application of the theory but also explores the ideology hidden behind words, helping identify the reporter's potential purpose. It is found that the distribution of different types of ideational grammatical metaphors is shown by the proportion it takes in related news and is closely associated with their ideological functions. With Ideational Grammatical Theory serving as a media, the study offers a new perspective and approach for news report study.

Keywords

Ideational Grammatical Metaphor, Covid-19 News, Ideological Function

1. Introduction

Covid-19 has dramatically affected people's life during the past three years and has become the focus of media reports. With the death toll ranking first globally and as one of the most powerful countries, America has gained much attention on its policy and attitude toward the pandemic, which can be reflected in reports of prominent media, *New York Times* serving as an example. With a long history, *News York Times* is one of the most authoritative newspapers in America, serving as a reference for parliament and, to some extent, indicating its attitude. In the scope of Halliday's Ideational Grammatical Theory, this study uses qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze eight news reports

selected from *New York Times*.

This study aims to help readers to identify the news reporter's inclination and indication and avoid getting trapped in the delicately modified expressions. Theoretically, this study explores a more comprehensive application of Halliday's Ideational Grammatical Metaphor Theory to interpret social issues more practically, thus achieving theoretical and practical significance.

In this way, this study aims to answer two questions:

(1) What are the distribution features of ideational grammatical metaphors in American coronavirus-related news text?

(2) How do those ideational grammatical metaphors serve to deliver ideologies of American values and morality?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Previous Studies

In recent years, studies on Grammatical Metaphor Theory have gone deeper and broader, such as applying it to explain grammar in Chinese and analyzing grammatical metaphors from the perspective of cognitive linguistics. Yang and Li (2019) explore translation with the guidance of the Ideational Grammatical Metaphor Theory. Xu and Tian (2020) justify grammatical metaphors based on cognitive linguistics. As a grammatical metaphor, ideational grammatical metaphor has enriched its form and function.

Studies on grammatical metaphors in China have gone through the study of theory and the study of application. In the late 20th century and 21st century, researchers mainly describe its definition, classification, and understanding. For example, Liu (2004) proposes the rethinking of transitivity. Later, more and more scholars attempted to apply the theory to specific contexts, including teaching and education, translation research, and discourse analysis. Zhang and Zhu (2011) summarized the wide variety of discourse analysis, from advertisement, technical text to news and academia, among which ideational grammatical metaphors in news text are paid much attention. Xue (2007) discusses the abundant occurrence of nominalization in the news through metaphorization at the lexical level.

News text and political text are not distinctively separated. News from American mainstream media is also considered a political text, while the latter primarily refers to speeches in domestic studies. Studies of grammatical metaphors are mostly done around interpersonal grammatical metaphors, while a combined qualitative and quantitative analysis is rare. Some are also done according to Critical Discourse Analysis to explore ideologies in the news. However, taking ideational grammatical metaphor as the entry point to study its ideological characters is seldom seen.

Besides, considering its great coverage, the writing way coronavirus-related news reports employed has received much attention, with relevant studies usually based on cognitive linguistics. Liu (2022) summarized coronavirus-related war metaphors and their impact. Zhang (2022) compared interpersonal metaphors between China and America in the news. Ge (2020) does a discourse analysis of

2

China-coronavirus-related news from *the New York Times* based on a corpus. Nevertheless, no study has analyzed the coronavirus-related news report from the perspective of ideational grammatical metaphor.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Since Aristotle's first mention of metaphor two thousand years ago, the research on metaphor has mainly experienced further development by Quintilian, Richards, George Lakoff, and Mark Johnson. At the end of the 20th century, M.A.K Halliday creatively proposed his theory of Systematic Functional Grammar in his book *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* in 1985 and revised it in 1994. Halliday (2006) pointed out that metaphor does not only exist at the lexical level, same signifier and different signified, but also at the grammatical level, same signified and different signifiers, including two kinds, ideational grammatical metaphor, and interpersonal grammatical metaphor. Martin later added textual, grammatical metaphor to the original classification of Halliday. Chinese scholars have tried to introduce the theory (Hu, 1996, 2000; Zhu & Yan, 2000; Zhu, 2006).

Halliday summarized 13 types of ideational grammatical metaphors: (1) quality → entity (quality → noun) (2) process → entity (verb → noun) (3) circumstance → entity (adverb/PP → entity) (4) relator → entity (conjunction → entity) (5) process → quality (verb → adjective) (6) circumstance → quality (adverb/PP → adjective) (7) relator → quality (conjunction → quality) (8) circumstance → process (adverb/PP → verb) (9) relator → process (conjunction → verb) (10) relator → circumstance (conjunction → adverb/PP) (11) [zero] → entity ([zero] → noun) (12) [zero] → process ([zero] → verb) (13) entity → [expansion] (noun → all forms).

Systematic Functional Grammar assumes that all the transference at the semantic level can only be realized through lexical, grammatical change (shown in the bracket). The expression is called congruence when it forms a fixed corresponding relation between meaning and syntax. This study compares the congruent and incongruent forms to determine the functions and effects of congruence.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and quantitative analysis, using the method of data sampling and collecting eight reports on Covid-19 from *New York Times* website to establish a small corpus. Combined with data analysis, this study also takes examples for case studies for theoretical and textual analysis. All the reports share the following features: (1) Time: from Jun.21.2020, when the first case reported on the website, to Dec. 11.2020 when vaccines putting put into use in America was first reported (2) Content: related to Covid-19 from different countries, from South Korea to Russia, and wide-range perspectives, including health, culture, politics, and education (3) Words: all under 1100 characters, making the corpus 7057 in total. Taking "Covid-19" as the keyword for research on *New York Times* website, 6613 results are shown. To make the corpus more helpful and persuasive, except for time, this study sorts out three sections on the website as the resource, including "world," "U.S.," and "New York."

This study employs quantitative and qualitative approaches supported by Halliday's Ideational Grammatical Metaphor Theory. For the quantitative part, two tables of statistical results are provided and illustrated. For the qualitative part, examples from the corpus in metaphorical form and the respective adapted congruent form are given to determine the effect of ideational grammatical metaphor on ideology delivery.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Distribution Features of Ideational GM in American Coronavirus-Related News

Based on thirteen types of ideational grammatical metaphors. This study calculates and classifies all ideational grammatical metaphors in eight samples.

Table 1. Number, Frequency, and Percentage of Ideational Grammatical Metaphors in American Coronavirus-related News

Type	Number	Frequency	Percentage
1	26	4%	9.4%
2	105	16%	37.8%
3	0	0	0
4	1	0. 15%	0.4%
5	72	11%	25.9%
6	41	6.2%	14.7%
7	2	0.3%	0.7%
8	0	0	0
9	2	0.3%	0.7%
10	6	0.9%	2.1%
11	0	0	0
12	1	0.15%	0.4%
13	22	3.3%	7.9%
total	278	42.2%	100%

Note. Frequency=Number of Type X ideational grammatical metaphor/Total Number of all Small Clauses; Percentage=Number of each type of.../Total Number of all...

As is shown in the statistic table, in all small clauses, which is 657, transference from process to entity takes the most considerable percentage (Type 2), 16%. Transference from process to quality (Type 5) ranks second, accounting for 11%. In comparison, transference from quality to entity, circumstance to quality, and entity to [expansion] (Type 1, 6, 13) is less, 4%, 6%, and 3.3%, respectively. Other types (Type 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12) are much less in the sample reports.

Table 2. Basic Information of the Selected Samples

Name	Title	Date	Words
Sample 1	*Australia Scraps Covid-19 Vaccine That Produced H.I.V. False Positives*	Dec. 11.2020	784
Sample 2	*Covid- 19 Upends South Korea's Thanksgiving and Its Rituals*	Oct.2, 2020	924
Sample 3	*Connecticut Hospitals Ordered to Allow Visitors for Patients With Disabilities*	June 9,2020	576
Sample 4	*A Coronavirus Mystery Explained: Moscow Has 1,700 Extra Deaths*	May 11,2020	968
Sample 5	*Europe's Battle-Hardened Nations Show Resilience in Virus Fight*	May 10,2020	1010
Sample 6	*In Detroit She's a Hero. In Canada She's Seen as a Potential Risk*	April 10,2020	986
Sample 7	*Colleges and Universities Cancel Classes and Move Online Amid Coronavirus Fears*	March 10, 2020	798
Sample 8	*As Foreigners Flee China, Pakistan Tells Its Citizens to Stay*	Feb 11,2020	1011

It can be seen that Sample 1 is the largest in the percentage of ideational grammatical metaphor, 63.8%, with the title "Australia Scraps Covid-19 Vaccine That Produced H.I.V. False Positives," Sample 3, 58.6%, following it with the title "Connecticut Hospitals Ordered to Allow Visitors for Patients With Disabilities." Sample 1 talks about a political issue, a possible mistake the Australian government might have committed, and their current measures. Sample 3 writes about the situation disabled people face, a social issue of discrimination and deficiency. Both two reports are on controversial topics and focus on the opposing side. Furthermore, Sample 1's topic is more sensitive, which explains the large proportion of ideational grammatical metaphor employment, particularly from process to entity, Type 2. Sample 8 uses many direct quotations from Pakistani students to show the writer's attitude but avoids talking straight about it. Because of the features of colloquial language, mostly in congruent form, the percentage of ideational grammatical metaphors is the smallest. Noticeably, there are many occurrences of Type 6, 10.8%, in Sample 4, "A Coronavirus Mystery Explained: Moscow Has 1,700 Extra Deaths." From the analysis above, the occurrence of ideational grammatical metaphors is roughly equivalent in coronavirus-related news reports. When it comes to politically and socially sensitive issues, the percentage it takes up will increase to some extent. There are mainly nine types of ideational grammatical metaphors in the corpus of this study, in which transference from process to entity (Type 2) and from process to quality (Type 5) take up the most significant proportion. Many cited words may be used to keep the reporter free from liability and make the report more accurate and reliable, and ideational grammatical metaphors become much less.

4.2 Ideology Analysis of Ideational Grammatical Metaphor in American Coronavirus-Related News

Ideational Grammatical Metaphor manifests part of speech change to realize the semantic transference.

According to Halliday, children speak in congruent form, consistent with the direct way people think. With the need to deliver a specific ideology while at the same time keeping seemingly objective, reporters have to choose a particular type to reach their purpose. Expressions with ideational grammatical metaphors are called metaphorical or incongruent forms. This part presents examples from the corpus for detailed comparison and analysis.

4.2.1 Type 2: From Process to Entity

Dynamic verbs give a vivid and clear picture of the event, creating a real scene and giving readers a sense of authenticity. Verbs give readers imagination and allow more subjectivity, while nouns are more concrete and objective. Transference from process to entity helps to hide the reporter's ideology well.

Congruent Form: The United States *was closer to approve for* a Covid-19 vaccine for the first time.

Incongruent Form: The United States *moved closer to issuing its first approval for* a Covid-19 vaccine. (Sample 1)

The process "approve" in congruent form becomes the goal "approval" in the metaphorical form, and the circumstance "for the first time" in the former one becomes attribute "first" in the latter one. Also, the attribute "was closer to" becomes the process "moved a step closer." This change draws more attention to "its first approval" and "moved a step closer." Since most of the article talks about the wrong decision the Australian government made on the Covid-19 vaccine and its remedy, the use of ideational grammatical metaphor stresses the American government's carefulness. It, therefore, intends to eradicate American citizens' dissatisfaction with its slow-motion vaccine release.

4.2.2 Type 5: From Process to Quality

Adjectives reveal the quality and status of an agent directly. Converting verbs to adjectives and transferring from process to quality makes the text more concise and therefore shows objectivity.

Congruent Form: People kicked nurses off public transportation, *doused* them with chlorine, and *assaulted* them.

Incongruent Form: Nurses have been kicked off public transportation, *doused* with chlorine, and *assaulted*. (Sample 6)

In this example, the processes "doused" and "assaulted" in congruent form become the attribute, two past participle verbs are used as post-positional determiners, and the active voice is changed to the passive voice. In this way, the actor "people" in congruent form is omitted; thus, it predominates "Nurses." This report talks about the problems cross-border nurses confronted with, who had to commute from Canada to America daily, by telling stories of individuals. By using the incongruent form, readers will pay more attention to nurses and their misery, contrasting with their contribution to the pandemic. Deep concern about nurses and criticism toward the policy and people's attitudes is invisibly expressed.

4.2.3 Type 6: From Circumstances to Quality

Circumstances are always realized by adverbs and preposition phrases, which take more words to complete the meaning. Transference from circumstances to quality makes focal points stand out, and

the reports seem more reliable.

Congruent Form: Student life was grinding to a halt, and students were scrambling to make plans *at the last minute* to live elsewhere.

Incongruent Form: Student life was grinding to a halt, and students were scrambling to make *last-minute* plans to live elsewhere. (Sample 7)

The preposition phrase "at the last minute" is converted to the adjective "last-minute," moving from post-position to front-position. Through this change, the status of "last-minute" is stressed, emergent, and with minimal time. At the same time, it makes the text more concise; thus, it seems more objective and reliable. Moreover, the reporter's negative attitude toward campus policy, care for the students, and emotions about the uncertain situation under Covid-19 are hidden behind.

5. Conclusion

The problematic situation of Covid-19 is ending, and related news reports are decreasing. Based on eight samples from *New York Times*, this study mainly analyzes the distribution of ideational grammatical metaphors and ideologies hidden behind them. The use of ideational grammatical metaphors is closely connected to its ideological function. Through quantitative analysis, this study reaches the conclusion that Type 2 and Type 5 take the most percentage in coronavirus-related news reports, primarily due to their being a kind of political text.

Studies on political text mainly discuss its nominalization. Studies on the news pay more attention to the overall framework or rhetorical devices. Although metaphor has been increasingly analyzed, study in the framework of ideational grammatical metaphor has yet to be seen. This study offers a new perspective on news report, helping readers find out hidden ideologies.

Despite the creativity and contribution, this study has some inevitable deficiencies. Due to the feature of the Ideational Grammatical Metaphor Theory, thirteen types have to be sorted out and classified manually. Some indistinction exists in identification of metaphor types. Besides, this study establishes a corpus based on the eight samples selected with specific requirements on words, content, and time. Also, the number of samples is limited; therefore, there might be a difference if other samples are chosen.

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7

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