

## *Original Paper*

# A Critical Discourse Analysis of the United States Stigmatizing China in the Outbreak of COVID-19

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### ***Abstract***

*Since the outbreak of COVID-19, China has acted quickly and taken its responsibility to take strict and effective actions, forming a line of defending the widespread of the novel coronavirus. However, some American media and politicians stigmatized China on the ground of the virus, criticized actions that China has taken, so as to instigate people's resistance against China. Based on critical discourse analysis theory, this paper analyzes the United States actions of stigmatizing China in the outbreak of COVID-19 from classification, transitivity, mood and transformation, aiming to discover the political ideology behind American's stigmatization discourses, which is beneficial to safeguard the truth of China's fighting against COVID-19 and construct China's discourse mechanism in response to stigmatization.*

### ***Keywords***

*Critical discourse analysis, Stigmatization, COVID-19, Political ideology*

## **1. Introduction**

Since 1970s, critical discourse analysis theory has become a popular branch of discourse analysis. Based on Halliday's systemic functional linguistics, it aims to carry out critical analysis of popular discourses to reveal the power relations and inequalities behind language. Recently, the outbreak of COVID-19 has become a hot topic around the world. In the process of China's active fight against the epidemic, the United States has concocted a series of remarks that stigmatize China, such as "the origin of the virus", "opaque anti-epidemic", "transfer of responsibility", "economic collapse" and "China's partiality" etc., politicizing the epidemic of COVID-19, distorting the truth of China's fight against the epidemic, and maliciously slandering the Chinese Communist Party. By taking the discourses of mainstream American media such as Wall Street Journal and New York Times, as well as those of typical representatives like Trump, Pompeo, etc. as corpus, this article qualitatively analyzes corpus

from the perspective of critical discourse analysis, so as to expound the discourse strategy and ideological issues behind stigmatization behaviors. It not only helps to break the language hegemony of the United States, but is also significant for China to respond to public safety emergencies, which can better convey China's voice and improve its international discourse influence.

## 2. Research Review

Critical discourse analysis, originating in *Language and Control* by Fowler et al. (1979), is a social analysis of discourse from a linguistic point of view. News, ideology, discourse construction, and power control are hot research topics in critical discourse analysis. Shan Shengjiang (2011) explains the method of critical discourse analysis of news discourse through actual cases. Zhu Guisheng (2016) discusses how the mainstream media in the United States builds the image of China's the Belt and Road Initiatives and the social ideological issues behind it from text, discourse practice, and social practice. Taking the Syrian war as an example, Zhang Hui (2019) combines discourse space theory and approach theory to discuss the construction of discourse space in China, the United States and Russia on the axes of time, space and value. Mabhala Mzwandile A (2020), on the basis of critical discourse analysis, explores the phenomenon of power inequality and control caused by nonsense in infectious diseases. Therefore, critical discourse analysis is beneficial to reveal how the power classes use language to influence people's ideology and maintain their own interests and existing social structures. Research on COVID-19 is mainly concentrated on the field of medicine, social management, and news communication, while there are a few articles analyzing it from the perspective of linguistics, most of which focus on terminology, translation studies, pragmatics, and discourse strategies. Ye Qisong (2020) analyzes the naming process of novel coronavirus from terminology theory. Wang Lifei (2020) provides an English translation of the emergency terminology in the epidemic of COVID-19 with the principle of terminology translation. Zhang Yixuan (2020) discusses the anti-epidemic slogans from syntax, semantics and pragmatics, and explores their regional differences. Based on intersubjectivity theory and intervention system, Miao Xingwei (2020) studies discourse strategy of community identity construction in news reports of epidemic prevention and control. As for the phenomenon of stigmatization in epidemic of COVID-19, most research is conducted in the field of journalism and communication. Zang Chengcheng (2020) analyzes the current situation and causes of stigmatization in news reports of the COVID-19. Li Peiyao (2020) concludes that Western stigmatization reports are mainly divided into three kinds: "the origin of the virus", "opaque anti-epidemic", "transfer of responsibility", and sorts out the main causes of stigmatization reports from four aspects: ideology, stereotypes, media organizations and opinion leaders.

In a nutshell, in the research of critical discourse analysis, more attention is paid to news discourse and political discourse, aiming to reveal the relationship between discourse and power. As a recent global hot topic, research on COVID-19 is mainly concentrated in the fields of medicine, news and communication, and there are few articles on linguistics. Therefore, it is innovative and meaningful to

study the stigmatization phenomenon in the epidemic of COVID-19 from the perspective of critical discourse analysis.

### 3. Case Analysis

Originating from critical linguistics, critical discourse analysis reveals the influence of ideology on discourse and the reaction of discourse on ideology. Halliday's systemic functional grammar is the main foundation of critical discourse analysis methodology. He believes that language has three meta functions, namely conceptual function, interpersonal function and textual function. Based on these three functions, this article conducts a critical discourse analysis of the stigmatization discourses of China in the United States from the perspectives of classification, transitivity, mood and transformation, in order to explore the interaction between language and ideology.

#### 3.1 Classification

Classification is one of the means to reflect the conceptual function of language, which refers to cognition and categorization of the external world through language, so as to give order to the external world. The classification system of text indicates the naming and description of characters and events, which is mainly realized through the choice of vocabulary (Xin Bin, 2005, p. 65). With regard to an epidemic disease, the international community has a set of objective and professional practices and consensus on the naming of COVID-19, which cannot include geographic locations such as cities, countries, regions or continents. When the source of COVID-19 has not yet been identified, some American media and politicians deliberately ignored the scientific naming method on the grounds that COVID-19 was first discovered in Wuhan, China. This naming of the novel coronavirus is subjective and racist, reflecting the discrimination and prejudice against China behind language.

On February 11, 2020, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of WHO, officially announced the official name of the novel coronavirus "COVID-19", and pointed out that we should prevent other potentially inaccurate or stigmatizing names from being used. However, the United States has done the opposite and stigmatized China with different names for the novel coronavirus. For example, on January 31, 2020, Republican Senator Tom Cotton used the term "Wuhan Virus" in a Senate meeting; On March 6, Secretary of State Pompeo called the novel coronavirus "Wuhan Virus" in an interview with US media; On March 16, U.S. President Trump tweeted that the United States will vigorously support companies affected by "Chinese Virus"; On March 17, a Chinese writer for CBS wrote on Twitter that a White House official called the novel coronavirus "Kong-Flu" in front of him. Besides, news media like the New York Times and CNN (Cable News Network) in the United States have also referred to the novel coronavirus as the "Wuhan Virus" in reports for many times.

It can be seen from the above that when naming the novel coronavirus, the United States usually associated it with cities, countries, and cultures. This kind of labeling aims to point the finger of the epidemic to China and mislead the international and domestic people into anti-China sentiment. In addition, when the United States used the "Chinese virus" recklessly, it was in the midst of a large-scale

outbreak of the epidemic. Its stigmatization is aimed at ignoring domestic contradictions, diverting people's anger at the US government's ineffective response to the epidemic, thereby inciting racism and xenophobia among the American people, and achieving the purpose of spreading their own ideology. Nevertheless, the virus knows no borders and should not be distinguished between races and regions. These unscientific names by the United States have exacerbated the tension in Sino-US relations, and have been questioned and opposed at home and abroad.

### 3.2 Transitivity

Transitivity is a semantic system that expresses conceptual function in language. It divides what people see, hear and do in the real world into several processes, and specifies the participants and environmental components related to each process (Xiong Jingjing, 2010). The transitivity system includes six processes: material process, psychological process, relational process, behavioral process, speech process and existential process. Fairclough (1992, p. 180) points out that which process is chosen to express a real-world process has important cultural, political, and ideological implications. Hence, from the perspective of the transitivity system of language, the discourse of the United States stigmatizing China reflects the process or outcome of the event, demonstrating different conceptual functions and different focuses on the event.

On February 3, 2020, the Wall Street Journal, the largest paid-published financial newspaper in the United States, published an article named "China is the Real Sick Man of Asia". This stigmatizing discourse embodies the relational process of the transitivity system. The relational process is the process of "being", which refers to connecting one experience to another. The Wall Street Journal connects China in the epidemic stage with the decaying China in the late Qing Dynasty, establishing a common attribute between the two. On the one hand, it expresses that China is suffering from the pain of the COVID-19, and it is the most severely affected area in Asia. On the other hand, it compares China under the epidemic with the China in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which is called the sick man of East Asia because of its economic stagnation and political corruption, in order to solidify the stereotype of Chinese people who were sick, backward and poor.

On March 8, 2020, the New York Times, which has always advertised objectivity and fairness, published two consecutive tweets. One is a comment on the huge loss of people's lives and freedom caused by China's lockdown. Twenty minutes later, it published another tweet, commenting that Italy's closure is risking the economy to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus. Its original texts are as follows:

*"To fight the coronavirus, China placed nearly 60 million people under lockdown and instituted strict quarantine and travel restrictions for hundreds of millions of others. Its campaign has come at great cost of people's livelihoods and personal liberties."*

*"Italy is locking down Milan, Venice and much of its south, risking its economy an effort to contain Europe's worst coronavirus outbreak."*

The New York Times' diametrically opposed attitudes towards the lockdown measures reflect its double standards. Its stigmatizing discourse of China embodies the material process of the transitivity system, that is, the process of "doing", including actor, process, and goal. In the discourse of stigmatizing China's lockdown measures, the actor is "China", the process is "put...under lockdown", "strict", and the goal is "at great cost of people's livelihoods and personal liberties". The New York Times believes that China's series of measures to lock down the city are undesirable, for it greatly violates human rights and freedoms. It is contrary to what the mainstream American culture advocated, and is more likely to arouse public resistance in the United States.

### 3.3 Mood

Mood is one of the means of expressing the interpersonal function of language. It shows the extent of the speaker's responsibility for the truth of discourse propositions, the commitment to future behavior, as well as the speaker's attitude, social distance and power relations between speakers and receivers, etc. (Xiong Jingjing, 2010). According to Fowler (1991), modality can express the evaluation or attitude of the author or speaker. Therefore, we can infer the attitude of the media corresponding to the event from the modality in the discourse.

In addition to modal verbs, real verbs and tenses can also express emotional meaning. On March 2, 2020, Fox host Waters made a big speech on the show, asking China to apologize for the epidemic.

*"I'd like to ask the Chinese for a formal apology. This coronavirus originated in China, and I have not heard one word from the Chinese. A simple 'I'm sorry' would do, it would go a long way."* (Fox News)

The modal verb "d like to" shows that Waters is personally very delight to accept China's apology and takes it for granted. "Have not heard" adopts the negative structure of the present perfect tense, expressing his dissatisfaction with the impact of China's unapologetic practice, and expounding the origin of the virus in China on the grounds that the virus was first discovered in China. He argues that China is the source of the virus, and has brought hidden dangers to the safety and public health of the people in the world, and it is China that should be responsible for it. The word "simple" shows that Waters believes that an apology is an easy thing to do, and satirizes China in the form of irony that China could not even do anything as easy as saying an apology, further describing China's irresponsible national image. The modal verb "would" adopts a virtual modal to express the impossibility of apology, which creates a contrast between ideal and reality, criticizes China's inaction and irresponsibility in fighting the epidemic, and expresses the dissatisfaction and indignation of the speaker.

### 3.4 Transformation

Transformation is a means of expressing the textual function. By changing relationships between various grammatical structures, it means to highlight certain components in the text, so as to attract the reader's attention. Passivation changes the theme-rheme structure and is a means of theming.

On March 16, 2020, US President Trump tweeted:

*“The United State will be powerfully supporting those industries, like Airlines and others, that are particularly affected by the Chinese Virus. We will be stronger than before.”*

In this attributive clause, Trump takes airlines and other companies as victims, and puts them at the beginning of the sentence as the theme, which can attract enough attention and arouse people's sympathy for the airlines affected by the epidemic. At the same time, he appreciates the U.S. measures to vigorously support these companies, aiming to create a positive image for the U.S. to revive the economy in the fight against the epidemic. Yet, “the Chinese virus”, the rheme, which can be omitted in passive sentences, did not disappear. Instead, it was modified with an adverb of degree “particularly”, which blames all the reasons for the impact of the company on China, makes people reject the Chinese virus, and triggers the anti-China mentality of people around the world.

#### 4. Conclusion

Through critical discourse analysis of the U.S. stigmatizing China in the COVID-19, we can see that discourse and ideology are inextricably linked. Discourse affects ideology, and ideology reacts to the construction of discourse. Using the analysis method of systemic functional linguistics, this paper describes and analyzes conceptual function, interpersonal function and textual function, and finds that the United States stigmatization of China in COVID-19 is mainly realized by classification, transitivity, modality, and transformation. The stigmatizing discourses by the United States reflects its hegemony and its discrimination against China. It attempts to use the theory of the origin of the virus to control international public opinion and arouse international anti-China sentiment. It is precisely because of safeguarding its own interests and diverting the contradictions of the aggravating domestic epidemic that the United States has established a series of issue mechanisms, pointed the finger at China, ignored China's effectiveness in fighting the epidemic, criticized China's anti-epidemic measures, used inappropriate remarks and distorted facts to stigmatize China. Regarding these stigmatized remarks, China's positive results in fighting the epidemic are the most powerful measures to break the U.S. conspiracy. In response to such public health emergencies, China should establish an issue mechanism and a discourse system with Chinese characteristics, uphold the concept of a community with a shared future for mankind, and make full use of the advantages of new media, so as to continuously improve the international discourse power and response to stigmatization behaviors of other countries more effectively.

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