

Original Paper

A Comparative Study of Frame Construction in Chinese and Western English News Headline - with the Murder Case of a Junior High School Student in Handan, Hebei as an Example

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Abstract

Based on framing theory and appraisal theory, this paper explores how headlines in English reports from both China and Western Countries shape audiences' perceptions and opinions. It compares the differences in the frames of 44 reports on the murder case of a junior high school student in Handan City, Hebei Province at three levels: high, medium, and low. The high-level frame analysis includes news type, length, presentation, and source. Medium-level frame analysis centers on the use of different structures, including main events, previous events, history, results, impact, attribution, and evaluation. The low-level frame study analyzes categories and evaluative resources of the headlines. Significant differences are found between the reports by Chinese media and foreign media mainly in their presentation, sources, medium-level structures, and headline categories.

Keywords

framing theory, appraisal theory, news headlines, juvenile delinquency

1. Introduction

Juvenile delinquency and school bullying are both serious problems all over the world. In recent years, these two problems seem to increase in China, triggering growing concern in the whole society. On March 10th, 2024, the topic has once again become a social hotspot. Three junior high school students in Handan City, Hebei Province, bullied their 13-year-old classmate, and even killed him and buried his body in an abandoned vegetable shed. They initially feigned ignorance when questioned about the victim's whereabouts, but later admitted to the crime, for the police had surveillance video as evidence,

and they were also found to have committed the crime with premeditation. On April 8, the Supreme People's Procuratorate (SPP), China's top procuratorate, approved the prosecution of the three suspects. Both Chinese and international mainstream media have reported the case. Considering the differences in culture, values, and ideology among different countries, this article compares the English reports by Chinese and international media outlets based on framing theory and appraisal theory, and analyzes how the headline frames of different reports are constructed to influence the audience's perception and understanding about the issue.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Framing Theory

The concept "framing" was first proposed by Gregory Bateson and introduced to sociological research by Goffman, and later it was applied to news studies by Gitlin and Tuchman (Yan & Zhuang, 2012; Zhan & Li, 2024).

Frame involves a construction process of the reality and its meaning. During the news production processes, media will use different frames to deliver certain ideas and opinions by selecting, excluding, rearranging, highlighting, elaborating, and so on, to reconstruct the reality and create meanings for the news events (Yan & Zhuang, 2012; Hu, 2013; Wan, 2014), thus providing definition, giving moral evaluation, identifying the causes or offering solutions (Tsang, 1999). In this way, the audience can get to know the outside world about which they cannot have first-hand experience and develop deeper understanding of it (Sun, 2010). However, on the other hand, it also means that frames can also lead to bias by helping to form or reinforce some stereotypes (Tsang, 1999).

According to Tsang (1999), news frames consist of three levels - high, medium and low. Among them high-level frame means the themes or main ideas of the news report; the medium-level one involves the schematic structures including main events, previous events, histories, results, impacts, reasons and evaluation; while the low-level one means the expression structure that are formed by symbols and languages.

2.2 Appraisal Theory

Evaluation theory is proposed by Martin and White in *The Language of Evaluation: Appraisal in English* based on systemic functionalist research on interpersonal meaning, aiming to assess various attitudes and emotions of the evaluation subject in discourse, including the intensity of attitude and emotion as well as the attitude and emotion that are involved and manipulated (Peng, 2015; Li, 2022), and the theory can be used to reveal hidden ideologies in international communication discourse (Li, 2022).

The evaluation system consists of three subtypes - attitude, engagement, and graduation, in which the attitude system is at the core and is the major evaluation tool used in this study. The evaluation resources can be classified into emotional responses, social judgement and aesthetic evaluation, namely affect, judgment and appreciation systems. The three subsystems can all be used to give positive or

negative evaluations. Among them, the affect system involves human emotions and feelings. Judgment involves moral evaluation of the judged target and his/her character or behavior and is divided into social esteem and social sanction. The subsystems of social esteem include normality, capacity and tenacity, while social sanction includes veracity and propriety. Appreciation is often associated with aesthetic or value evaluations of objects or event processes, including reaction, composition and value systems. Engagement has two subsystems: monogloss and heterogloss, while graduation includes force and focus (Chen, 2007; Si & Pang, 2018). The following analysis simply groups graduation into two types: up-scaling and down-scaling, with the former including raised force and sharpened focus, and the latter including lowered force and softened focus (Martin & White, 2005).

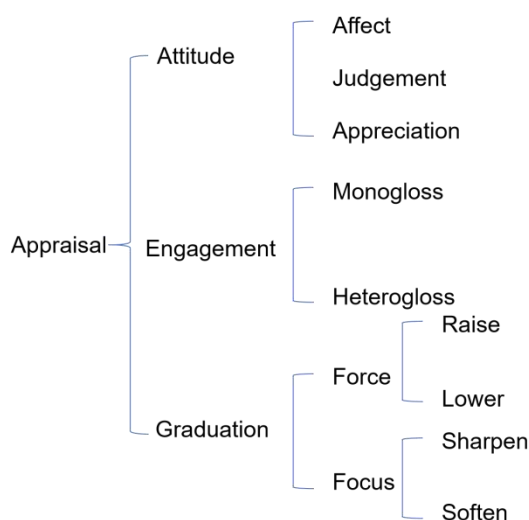


Figure 1. Appraisal System (Martin & White, 2005)

2.3 News Headlines

News headlines should accurately summarize the core content of the report in concise language, and their most important functions are prompting and evaluating, as well as stimulating interest, and sometimes reflecting the media's stance and attitude (Liu, 2003). Headlines are usually presented in the most conspicuous position, and thus are often the first impression of the readers about the news, presenting the news report's expression style and tone (Wang & Zeng, 2012). On the websites, news headlines may appear alone on the home page or other interfaces in the form of a list, and the introductory role of the titles becomes even more important when the main body of the news is hidden (Zhan, 2011). As the user's dependence on the news headlines continues to grow, so does the importance of the news headlines. News headlines represent the significant features of the news discourse. Considering the succinctness, typicality, and importance of news titles as well as the media stance contained in them, this paper only focuses on the interpretation of the headline, and analyze the frame and attitude in the news headline.

3. Research Method

This study targets the crime committed by three teenagers in Handan, Hebei Province, and takes the reports released on online platforms within three months after the incident as samples, with the publication time ranging from March 10, 2024 to June 10, 2024. Reports either on the case or relevant to it are both taken into account. A total of 44 samples of news reports are collected, of which 28 are from China's domestic media, including 11 from *China Daily*, 7 from *Global Times*, 4 from *South China Morning Post*, 2 from *Xinhua*, 2 from *Shanghai Daily*, 1 from *The Sixth Tone*, and 1 from *Beijing Review*; and 16 are from Western media, including 2 from *The Straits Times*, 2 from *Daily Mail*, 2 from *Reuters*, 2 from *The Guardian*, 1 from *Independent*, 1 from *The Economist*, 1 from *The New York Times*, 1 from *CNN*, 1 from *BBC*, 1 from *AP*, 1 from *Daily Telegraph* and 1 from *Fox News*.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 High-level Frame

4.1.1 Reports Type and Length

The 44 articles analyzed are categorized according to common news types such as news articles, features, interviews, reviews, columns and editorials. Reports from Chinese media include 23 pieces of news, 4 editorials, and 1 feature; foreign reports include 14 pieces of news and 2 features. In addition, as for the length of the full text, the average length of the 28 domestic reports is 619 words, only 4 of them have more than 1,000 words, and 3 reports have less than 200 words; the average length of the 16 foreign posts is 772 words, of which 3 have more than 1,000 words, and there are no reports with less than 200 words. As for the length of the headlines, the average length of domestic reports is 11 words, and the average length of foreign reports is 15 words.

The incident happened abruptly, so the main genre of the reports is news, which emphasizes speed and is characterized by its conciseness. The average length of the full foreign reports is slightly longer than that of the Chinese reports, which is also the consistent characteristic of Western reports. Headlines in both domestic and foreign media posts are succinct, with those in foreign reports being slightly longer than in domestic ones.

4.1.2 Reports Presentation

Of the 28 domestic reports, 18 are in the form of textual plus graphic presentations (Note 1), of which 5 reports in both *China Daily* and *Global Times* use images that are the same as or similar to other reports; 3 reports present both images and videos, all of which are from *the South China Morning Post*; and 7 reports are in the form of pure text. Of the 16 foreign reports, only one is purely text, while the others all use images. In conclusion, the Chinese media's application of multimedia resources is still relatively limited, and insufficient attention has been paid to the selection and usage of images.



Figure 2. The Same Picture Used in Three Reports from *China Daily* - “Killing of Hebei Student Ruled Premeditated Murder”, “Juvenile Case Shifts Focus on Social Issue” and “Three Schoolboys Held over the Death of a Classmate”

4.1.3 Reports Sources

Sources refer to the providers and interpreters of information or materials about the specific news event, and are also an important factor in the construction of news frames by the media, which can be used to show the authenticity and reliability of the news, and can also be used to convey the media's attitude and stance (Wang & Zeng, 2012). Referring to Yan and Ren (2020), the news sources are categorized into four categories: (1) news witnesses and facts providers, which include the parties involved in the news event (such as the abusers and the victims), relatives, friends and classmates, leaders and teachers of the school, surveillance videos or other video recordings; (2) the possessors and monopolizers of the news resources, which mainly include the media organizations or the journalists; (3) the publishers and agents of authoritative statements, which include institutions, experts and scholars, also the investigations and researches done by them, and other relevant documents, and laws and regulations; (4) the general public, including social media users or the masses in other scenarios.

Among the selected domestic and foreign media reports, domestic reports have a richer variety of sources, with the combination of publishers and agents of authoritative statements plus possessors and monopolizers of news resources accounting for the largest proportion, involving a total of 10 reports, followed by reports with sources only provided by publishers and agents of authoritative statements, involving a total of 8 reports. The most common sources of foreign reports are the combinations of witnesses and providers of news facts, publishers and agents of authoritative statements, possessors and monopolizers of news resources as well as the general public, involving a total of 9 reports. Compared with foreign reports, China's reports pay more attention to the authority and reliability of the information material, but less attention to the witnesses and providers of news facts and individuals. As far as social media is concerned, China's posts tend to present discussions on those platforms in the form of group opinions or general ideas, while foreign media tend to choose typical views of individual users.

4.2 Medium-level Frame

The headlines of the domestic media reports mainly emphasize the treatment of the perpetrators, and the corresponding category of frames is mostly the result frame, involving 9 news headlines; followed by the actions or plans initiated by the government or other organizations, namely the impact frame, involving 6 headlines; next comes the analysis of the root causes of the incident, or the attribution

frame, which includes 4 headlines. Also, the description of the violence, the main event frame, involves 4 news headlines. Western media reports are dominated by the analysis of the root causes, the attribution frame, most of which invariably center around the left-behind children, including 6 headlines; followed by the treatment of the abusers, the result frame, which involves 5 news articles. The headlines of two news posts from both Chinese and Western media feature the concerns and responses of various sectors of society, which can also be categorized into the impact frame. In addition, the headlines of three Chinese reports are about suggestions or reflections, all of which appear in the editorials, and since the theme is related to the follow-up action plan, it is also incorporated into the impact framework, while the headlines of the Western reports do not have such a theme; and there is also one news article from the foreign media that had the response of the victim's family as the focus, which is not found in the domestic reports, and the theme could be grouped into the result framework. Upon comparison and conclusion, it can be seen that in the reports analyzed, the categories of frames illustrated in the headlines of domestic and foreign reports are generally the same, both involving only the main event frame, the result frame, the impact frame, and the attribution frame, only that there is a difference in the proportion of the use of these different frames. The most common frames in the headlines of domestic reports are impact frames, followed by outcome frames, and finally main event frames and attribution frames, both of which account for the same proportion; the most common frames in the headlines of foreign reports are attribution frames and outcome frames, both of which appear with the same frequency, followed by impact frames, and finally main event frames. It can be seen that the biggest difference between the headlines of domestic and foreign media reports lies in the construction of the impact frame. Domestic media are more inclined to show the actions that the government and various departments have already taken or the measures that they plan to take in the future as well as the related suggestions, so as to solve the conflicts more directly and quickly, and at the same time, increase the credibility of the government and the departments, and help to break the rumors; foreign media are more inclined to explore the root causes and point out the pertinent problems to be solved. It is worth noting that the headlines of domestic and foreign reports on this case mostly focus on "the left-behind children" when constructing attribution frameworks, which might simplify the problems on the one hand, ignoring individual characteristics and other factors, and it can easily lead to the formation or strengthening of stereotypes of the group on the other hand.

4.3 Low-level Frame

4.3.1 Headline Categories

The table below is compiled based on the overall interpretation of the headlines in terms of wording, sentence structure, key elements, and functions. Since a headline may contain different elements at the same time, the proportions do not add up to a total of 100 percent.

Table 1. Headlines Categories in Chinese and Foreign Reports on the Murder Case of a Junior High School Student in Handan, Hebei

Media outlets	Percentage of title categories			
	Informative headlines	Suspenseful Headlines	Emotional headlines	Instructional headlines
Chinese media	21(75%)	1(4%)	4(14%)	3(11%)
Western media	6(38%)	1(4%)	10(63%)	0(0%)

As shown in the Table, domestic reports use informative headlines the most, which are characterized by objectivity and seek to accurately and concisely deliver the core information of the news, such as “13-year-old boy in N. China’s Hebei bullied and killed by three classmates” from *Global Times*. Foreign media reports are dominated by headlines involving emotional factors, or emotional headlines. These headlines use expressions that clearly contain emotions, which may help to add a human touch, and narrow the distance with the readers, but they are often more provocative, such as *the Daily Mail*’s “Heartbroken father calls for death penalty for three children who beat his 13-year-old boy to death leaving him ‘disfigured beyond recognition’: ‘I hope they pay with their lives’”. The other two categories are less frequently used in both Chinese and foreign coverage of this event. Guiding headlines are shown in domestic editorials, which often use suggestive expressions to provide guidance or to help increase readers’ awareness of a particular issue, such as *the Global Times*’ “More efforts from society needed to prevent juvenile delinquency”. Suspenseful headlines refer to headlines that contain questioning phrases that can trigger the reader’s interest in reading or inspire further thinking. This type is usually about controversial topics, such as *the New York Times*’ “China’s Anguished Debate: Do Its Children Have a Crime Problem?”

4.3.2 Appraisal Resources

Table 2. Appraisal Resources in Headlines of Chinese and Foreign Reports on the Murder Case of a Junior High School Student in Handan, Hebei

Attributes			Chinese media		Western media	
			Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
attitude	Affect	Positive	2	2.7%	3	4.7%
		negative	1	1.4%	5	7.8%
	Judgement	Positive	1	1.4%	0	0.0%
		negative	29	39.2%	23	35.9%
	Appreciation	Positive	7	9.5%	1	1.6%
		negative	8	10.8%	8	12.5%
	Total		48	64.9%	40	62.5%

engagement	Monogloss	1	1.4%	0	0.0%
	Heterogloss	7	9.5%	6	9.4%
	Total	8	10.8%	6	9.4%
graduation	Up-scaling	12	16.2%	14	21.9%
	Down-scaling	6	8.1%	4	6.3%
	Total	18	24.3%	18	28.1%
Total		74	100.0%	64	100.0%

The total number of words in the headlines of the domestic reports is 321, and that of the foreign media reports is 238. It is found that the frequency of the use of evaluation resources by the foreign media is slightly higher than that of the domestic counterparts, though the difference is not significant.

Generally speaking, the tendency of evaluation resources use by Chinese and Western media in the reporting of this incident is basically the same, both of which use attitude resources with the highest frequency, followed by graduation resources, and finally engagement resources. In terms of specific subsystems, domestic and foreign media use judgmental resources in the attitude system the most, dominated by negative evaluations pertinent to the legitimacy of the behavior, and since the incident analyzed in this paper is a criminal case, the reports more often choose the more subtle negative judgmental resources, and use definition, which is at the root level, to reflect the impropriety of the abuser. Examples include “murder”, “kill”, “crime”, “bully” and so on.

Regarding the engagement system, domestic and foreign media mostly use heterogloss resources, such as “alleged” or methods like identifying the source through quotation marks or colons, to reflect the objectivity of reporting, and to increase the distance between the authors and the opinions, indicating that the point of view does not belong to or represent the author’s position, thus reminding readers that they need to remain critical.

In the graduation system, the most frequent terms used by Chinese and Western media are up-scaled expressions, with numbers being the dominant type, such as “three” and “all” that describe the number of abusers. Others include “vow to” and “crack down on”, which are used to express the determination and intensity of actions and plans.

As for positive attitudes and feelings, they are usually linked to preference, such as “vows to” which indicates the determination to solve the problem and “call for” which urges punishing the perpetrators. Positive judgment and positive appreciation are mostly associated with the dependence on the rule of law to realize fairness and justice or to maintain order. For example, “strengthen discipline” and “bring order”.

The only case of monogloss in the engagement system is where the author incorporates his or her own query in the title, “is it ready to face the causes?” On the one hand, it provokes the reader to think about the causes of the event. On the other hand, it implies the complexity of the causes, as well as a

questioning of capacity of the subject.

Down-scaled semantics in the graduation system are usually used to indicate the young age of the victim, such as “13-year-old”, “junior high school student”, or to indicate the possibility of subsequent actions or plans through modal verbs such as “can” and “will”.

It is worth noting that although the headlines of most English reports on this event, either from Chinese media or Western media, are relatively easy to understand, and the use of evaluative resources serves the construction of the news framework well. They help readers grasp the main events, results, or impacts, or to ponder about the reasons behind the events. However, there are also media outlets that implicitly convey misleading ideologies in their headlines. The headline from *New York Times* - “China’s Anguished Debate: Do Its Children Have a Crime Problem?” - first identifies China’s debate by using heterogloss, claiming that it is a dispute actually exists in China, then highlights the heaviness and dreadfulness of the debate through the up-scaled semantic “anguished”, and then blurs the focus through the down-scaled term “its children”, ignoring the background of the incident. It not only skips the topic of left-behind children, but also changes the subject from individual Chinese children in certain underdeveloped areas to all Chinese children, exacerbating the conflicts, and misguiding the reader to form a negative perception.

5. Conclusion

This paper centers on the news headlines and compares the differences in the framing of 44 reports from Chinese and foreign English-language media on the murder case of a junior high school student in Handan, Hebei Province at three levels: high, medium, and low.

In terms of high-level framing, both Chinese and foreign media reports are predominantly characterized by news genres that emphasizes speed and efficiency, while domestic reports are relatively richer in genres. The average length of either full text or headlines of foreign reports is slightly longer than that of domestic reports. As for presentation, there is still a relatively obvious lack of multimedia application in Chinese posts, with more repetitive use of graphics. In terms of sources, domestic media emphasize authority and reliability of information more, and pay less attention to the voices of the people involved and the general public, especially as individuals.

When it comes to the medium-level structures, both domestic and foreign media present only four categories, namely, the main event frame, the result frame, the impact frame and the attribution frame. Specifically, the domestic media prefer the presentation of actions, plans or suggestions, and the foreign media are more inclined to the analysis of the causes. However, when discussing the underlying factors, both domestic and foreign media target left-behind children, which may simplify the issue, ignoring the individual characteristics and other complex factors behind it, and easily leading to stereotypes.

In the study of the low-level framework, the headline categories are first analyzed, followed by the evaluation resources in the headlines using the appraisal theory. Domestic media mostly use informative headlines, while foreign media mostly use headlines containing emotional elements. In the

use of evaluation resources, the overall tendency of domestic and foreign media is basically the same, with attitude resources being the dominant ones, followed by graduation resources, and finally engagement resources. Almost all of them are negative evaluations, among which the proportion of behavioral justification in the judgment system is the largest, which is used to highlight the illegitimacy and condemnability of the perpetrators. The analysis also notes that specific headlines resort to evaluation resources to mislead their readers.

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Note(s)

Note 1. Images that are composed solely of text or color are excluded from graphic presentation.