Systemic Functional Grammar Analysis of News Reports of Li Wenliang Incident

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ABSTRACT

Based on a report on Dr. Li Wenliang in the British mainstream *BBC* media under the epidemic of Covid-2019, this paper analyzes from three perspectives guided by Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar: transitivity, mood and personal pronoun. It is found that the material process appears most frequently which shows that the news reports mainly reproduce the event process. The second is the verbal process, which shows that news reports are good at making use of multi-channel speech sources to enhance the authority and objectivity of reports. The third is the relational process and psychological process, which reflects the subtlety of news report content and the concealment of attitude. This paper reveals the ideological direction implied in the news reports through seemingly neutral and objective reports, aiming at providing reference for readers in the process of reading Chinese and foreign political discourse.

INTRODUCTION

With the continuous spread of the Covid-2019 epidemic, such reports in foreign media are also increasing. Because of the information asymmetry between netizens and the media, the media in the Internet age has the ability to "manipulate the truth". In this paper, Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar theory is used to analyze the BBC report on Dr. Li Wenliang, to be specific, from transitivity, mood and person pronoun. After the exploration of the news report from these three perspectives, this thesis attempts to analyze the attitude of BBC, it will help readers find out the discourse features of English political news and then avoid being manipulated by English ideologies. More importantly, the analysis of news report will improve people's language awareness, enable the public to have their own independent and critical views on certain discourse or events and enjoy public discourse such as news reports.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Halliday (1973) pointed out that language is structured through the meanings it realize, which is composed of three kinds of meanings: interpersonal meaning, ideational meaning and textual meaning. In terms of these three kinds of meanings, he divided the functions of language into three meta-functions: interpersonal meta-function-ideational meta-function and textual meta-function. These three meta-functions form the core of Systemic-Functional Grammar, which in Halliday' s view, consists of systemic grammar and functional grammar. The former aims to explain the internal relations in language as a system network, or meaning potential. The latter aims to reveal that language is a means of social interaction (Halliday, 1994). Huang Guowen (2001) put forward that Halliday' s Systemic-Functional Grammar provides the theoretical basis for analyse both on spoken and written discourse, which means this theory plays an important role in discourse analysis.

DATA COLLECTION

The corpus used in this paper comes from a news report titled "*Li Wenliang: Coronavirus Killings Chinese Whistler Blower Doctor*" published by *BBC* (British Broadcasting Corporation) on February 8, 2020. This news is a report about the doctor Li Wenliang's incident. As the British Broadcasting Corporation is the largest news broadcaster in Britain and one of the largest news broadcasters in the world,

it enjoys a high reputation at home and abroad. The selected news events are international issues that are closely related to China. The *BBC* has always maintained a rigorous and fair image in front of the world public, so the selected news report is also objective, fair and credible. This paper attempts to analyze news discourse from three aspects: transitivity, mood and personal pronoun.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Scholars who study systemic functional grammar hold that language is the product of human social activities. As a tool of human communication, it has important functions. Halliday divides these functions of language into three categories: conceptual metafunction, interpersonal metafunction and textual metafunction. Conceptual function, also called experiential function, refers to the expression of people's experiences in the real world expressed through language, which is mainly realized by transitivity and voice. Transitivity belongs to a semantic system, whose function is to divide people's real experiences in real experience into several processes. Halliday holds that human experience can be divided into material process, mental process, relational process, behavioral process, verbal process and existential process. Voice can be divided into active voice and passive voice. The starting point of active voice is the sender of action, while the subject of passive voice is the receiver of action. In general, passive voice is more objective. In addition to the above conceptual functions, language also has the functions of expressing the speaker's position, attitude, identity, motivation and his judgment and evaluation of things. This function of language is called "interpersonal function". Through this function, the speaker participates himself in a specific context, expresses his own attitude and tries to influence others' attitude and behavior.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Transitivity

Transitivity is a semantic system whose function is to divide what people see, hear and do in the real world (including the inner world) into several kinds of "processes", and to identify the "participants" and "environmental components" related to various processes (Haliday, 2000). In other words, people use language to talk about their experience of the world, including their inner world, and use language to describe events, states and the things involved (Thompson, 2008). Transitivity system can best embody the conceptual function of language, and transitivity analysis can help readers better understand the deep meaning of speeches by analyzing the language skills used by speakers. Relational process, existential process and mental process are used to express descriptive significance, while material process represents narrative significance (Huang GuoWen, 2001). This news report about Dr. Li Wenliang uses a great deal of material processes, accounting for about 51.6% of all articles. For example:

1. On 30 December he sent a message to fellow doctors in a chat group warning them to wear protective clothing to avoid infection.

This sentence describes Dr. Li's care and reminder to other colleagues when he first mentioned Covid-2019 through the material process. At the same time, it can be seen that Li Wenliang did not exaggerate harm of the virus, which added objectivity to Li Wenliang's reaction when he first saw Covid-2019's report.

2. Four days later he was summoned to the Public Security Bureau where he was told to sign a letter.
3. In the letter he was accused of "making false comments" that had "severely disturbed the social order".
4. He was one of eight people who police said were being investigated for "spreading rumours".

   In the above three examples, "sign", "disturb" and "investigate" are verbs to indicate actions. This news report uses the small sentences in the material process to describe the initial image of Dr. Li in front of the public——A man who spreads rumors. At the same time, it also adds objectivity to the fact that people made voices after the death of Dr. Li, which is more convincing.

5. A wave of anger and grief flooded Chinese social media site Weibo when news of Dr. Li's death broke late on Thursday.
6. Wuhan government owes Dr. Li Wenliang and apology.

   In these two clauses, "flood", "broke" and "owe" are words that express strong emotions, and describe the feelings of the public who want to stand up for Li Wenliang. However, the *BBC* report exaggerated the fact that the police just only warned Li Wenliang and the effect of Li Wenliang warning people about Covid-2019. It does not reflect the bad influence brought by him, and it does not have a positive guiding role for readers to understand and interpret objective facts.

7. When the *BBC* searched Weibo on Friday morning, hundreds of thousands of comments had already been wiped.

   The *BBC* report uses "wipe" which is interpreted by the Oxford English-Chinese Advanced Bilingual Dictionary as "to remove information, sound, images from a computer tape or video; to deliver forgotten an experience because it was unhappy or embarrassing". It shows that what *BBC* report wants to express is that the Chinese government's attitude towards this matter is to cover up the facts and the irony of the Chinese government's actions.

   Verbal process refers to the process in which people exchange information through speech. The participants involved are "speaker", "hearer" and "speech content". Common verbs are say, tell, talk, pray, scare, describe and so on. News discourses often increase the objectivity and persuasiveness of reports by quoting the statements made by parties or authorities (Cen Yue, Wu Wenhao, 2014). From the corpus analysis, a certain number of verbal processes are guaranteed, accounting for about 22.6% of all clauses. In news reports, verbal process is an important way to express the author's views and position, and the choice of speakers and process verbs is of profound implications. For example:

8. In the letter he was accused of "making false comments" that had "severely disturbed the social order".

In this example, to quote the Chinese official police, the verb uses the derogatory word "accuse", which shows that the Chinese official police disapprove of or even oppose Dr. Li Wenliang's practice. The police summoned Dr. Li Wenliang to the police station and warned him. It can be seen that the attitude of the Chinese official police towards Dr. Li Wenliang and the police's view of Dr. Li Wenliang's behavior is that he was "severely disturbed the social order". The quotations are mainly used to express attitude and make evaluation, not to describe facts. Therefore, whether it is indirect speech or direct speech, the narrator can easily to implant his attitude and evaluation into other people's words, thus confusing the reader's sight and imposing his own views on the reader. The *BBC* report quoted this sentence to express that Dr. Li Wenliang is in an incomprehensible predicament and wants to arouse the sympathy of readers.

9. He was one of eight people who police said were being investigated for "spreading rumours".

This quotation has a tendency. News reports have their own consciousness bias, but the *BBC*'s prejudice against the Chinese police will lead to readers' prejudice against news content. The *BBC* report quoted the words of the police indirectly, which indicated that the reporter thought their words are credible, and leads readers to accept their position and believe the authenticity of the report. In this way, on the one hand, it increases the credibility of the report. On the other hand, it also avoids responsibility.

10. Local authorities later apologised to Dr Li.

This clause quotes the words of other speakers. In addition, the spokesman is an authoritative organization in China, and his attitude towards Dr. Li Wenliang has changed from opposing to support.

Mental process is used to describe some psychological phenomena, such as "see, look", "like, reaction" and "know, believe, convince". Mental process has some words of subjective majolica, which is a subjective description of people's inner world. Some mental processes are also used in this news report about Dr. Li Wenliang, accounting for 9.7% of all clauses. For example:

11. The 34-year-old had notice seven cases of a virus that he thought looked like Sars - the virus that led to a global epidemic in 2003.

In this news report, mental process is mainly used for Dr. Li Wenliang's cognition of Covid-2019. Dr. Li Wenliang noticed the existence of coronavirus and compared it with the SARS in 2003. However, the *BBC* report did not mention that Li Wenliang was an ophthalmologist, nor was a professional researcher on the SARS virus. The danger of the SARS virus is well known, which is the reason why the police are worried that Dr. Li Wenliang's remarks will cause public panic, and it is also the reason why they warned Dr. Li Wenliang.

12. We want freedom of speech.

This clause uses the word "want" to express strong support, which has the meaning of complaining for Dr. Li

Wenliang. The public tends to support Dr. Li Wenliang's behavior, and at the same time, it has the significance of condemning authority's behavior.

Besides, in this news report, some clauses in the relational process are used to express opinions. Relational process is used to describe the background of news and people's reaction and discussion to news. Many explicit and implicit information can be extracted through relational process (Juan Li, 2010). Relational process refers to the process of reflecting the relationship between two different things, which is a description and judgment of the object. By analyzing the relational process in news discourse, we can find the focus of the narrator when reporting events, and then identify the trend of news. The *BBC* media called Dr. Li Wenliang "spreading rumors", which objectively showed the role of Li Wenliang in the whole event. The previous theoretical part introduces that people's experience can be expressed in six processes, but there is no behavioral process in this news text. Because the topic of this report does not need to express some physiological behaviors, this process does not occur.

Through transitivity analysis, this paper finds that *BBC* report highlights the tragic experience of Dr. Li Wenliang from some material and verbal processes and tries to arouse the anger and injustice of the public. The actual purpose is to denigrate the Chinese government. It inspires readers not to be guided by the media, but to watch news with their own eyes. Transitivity analysis helps us to improve our reading ability.

Mood

Interpersonal meaning is different from conceptual meaning, which expresses the author's attitude and judgment and creates and maintains social relations (Gerot, Wignel, 1994). Tenor is further recognized as power, contact and influence, and realized through mood and modality. In terms of interpersonal function, the mood system mainly includes subjects and qualifiers, which are closely related to the components of mood. The mood components are subdivided into three kinds of mood: declarative sentence, interrogative sentence and imperative sentence, which are used to exchange information. In this paper, 13 sentences are intercepted by *BBC* report, among which 13 sentences are all declarative sentences, accounting for 100%. Declarative sentences play a dominant role in this news report. The *BBC* report first described the story of Dr. Li Wenliang and Covid-2019, and then described the reaction of Chinese people to this event. By using a large number of statements, the reporter provides enough information to the readers which makes the contents of news reports appear objective and persuasive.

Personal Pronoun

Li Zhanzi (2000, 51) argues that personal pronouns also have the function of realizing interpersonal meaning. Therefore, this paper counts the number of personal pronouns in this news report, and the distribution is as follows:

Pronoun	Number	Percentage
he	10	77
his	3	23
total	13	100

In most cases, "he" appears frequently in the news. "He" is the third person which shows the objectivity, Dr. Li Wenliang. Through the use of third-person pronouns, the image of Li Wenliang is mainly established. Therefore, the distance between the doctor and the reader is shortened, and the attention of readers can be attracted more.

13. Two days later he was in hospital.

Obviously, the use of third-person pronouns can arouse readers' sympathy, highlight the focus of public attention, and exert pressure on the Chinese government.

CONCLUSION

Based on the transitivity system theory and interpersonal function theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics, this paper makes a transitivity analysis and interpersonal function analysis on the report of Dr. Li Wenliang by the *BBC*. Through systemic functional grammar analysis of BBC news, the author found that *BBC* is critical of Li Wenliang incident. It is found that *BBC* media reports use a large number of transitivity processes, different transitivity processes also play different roles in the expression of attitudes. A large number of material processes to describe the events experienced by Dr. Li Wenliang and reappear the specific incident of Dr. Li Wenliang. It shows the *BBC*'s close attention and unrelenting attitude. The verbal process mainly provides readers with multi-angle thinking through different speech sources and expresses the media's subjective thoughts on this matter, thus arousing people's resonance and make the whole report more convincing. The relational process mainly reflects the tension between the small social components, and reflects the in-depth and opposition attitude of *BBC* report. The mental process borrows Dr. Li Wenliang's ideas to express the *BBC*'s sympathy and opposition. Secondly, the interpersonal function of this report is mainly reflected in mood and personal pronouns. The declarative mood is frequently used because of its function of providing information and enhancing the objectivity of reports. In addition, personal pronouns are often used between reporters and readers to shorten the distance. This paper reveals the ideological direction implied in the news report through seemingly neutral and objective report. Non-political news reports also take views of politics. Generally speaking, people tend to think that the position of news reports should be neutral. However, based on the analysis of sample texts, it does not seem to be the case. Ideology also plays an important role in economic report. In order to achieve this goal, many language means are skillfully used to convey ideology. The words used in the discourse are not random, but carefully chosen to ensure the transmission of ideology. Therefore, it is easy for readers to be influenced by ideology in the process of reading. Moreover, there are also some enlightenments for English readers. It reminds readers to read news critically, improves readers' ability to discover hidden ideological information and enhance their own critical thinking ability.

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APPENDIX 1

Li Wenliang: Coronavirus Kills Chinese Whistleblower Doctor

BBC 7 February 2020

What is Li Wenliang's Story?

Dr Li, an ophthalmologist, posted his story on Weibo from a hospital bed a month after sending out his initial warning. The 34-year-old had noticed seven cases of a virus that he thought looked like Sars - the virus that led to a global epidemic in 2003. On 30 December he sent a message to fellow doctors in a chat group warning them to wear protective clothing to avoid infection. Four days later he was summoned to the Public Security Bureau where he was told to sign a letter. In the letter he was accused of "making false comments" that had "severely disturbed the social order". He was one of eight people who police said were being investigated for "spreading rumours". Local authorities later apologised to Dr. Li. In his Weibo post he describes how on 10 January he started coughing, the next day he had a fever and two days later he was in hospital. He was diagnosed with the coronavirus on 30 January.

How has China Reacted?

A wave of anger and grief flooded Chinese social media site Weibo when news of Dr Li's death broke late on Thursday. The top two trending hashtags on the website were "Wuhan government owes Dr. Li Wenliang and apology" and "We want freedom of speech". Both hashtags were quickly censored. When the BBC searched Weibo on Friday morning, hundreds of thousands of comments had already been wiped.

APPENDIX 2

Table 1

Type of process	Number	Percentage
mental process	3	9.7
relational process	4	12.9
verbal process	7	22.6
behavioral process	0	0
material process	16	51.6
existential process	1	3.2
Total	31	100

Table 2

Pronoun	Number	Percentage
he	10	77
his	3	23
total	13	100