A Study of News Discourse from the Perspective of Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model

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Abstract—The coronavirus spreads at a horrendous speed and has influenced people's lives. Based on Fairclough's three-dimensional model, this paper, with quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis, chooses thirty texts from *The New York Times* and then dissects them by means of the corpus AntConc 3.5.8 and manual collection from three angles including text, discursive practice and social practice. It is found that in the dimension of text, high-frequency words demonstrate the severe status quo of the epidemic, while words with emotional meanings show reporters' critical views. In the dimension of discursive practice, Indirect speech as a preponderant reporting mode shows that subjective moods exist in news reports. In the dimension of social practice, five mainstream values deeply rooted in American people's minds influence their attitudes towards the epidemic. This paper reveals the relationship between language and society in news reports on the Covid-19 epidemic, promoting the process of researches on critical discourse analysis of news reports on public health events.

Index Terms—Critical discourse analysis, Fairclough's three-dimensional model, the Covid-19 Epidemic, *The New York Times*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 epidemic has swept across the world since 2020. As one of countries with the most severe outbreak of the Covid-19 epidemic, the United States has large quantities of domestic news reports on the epidemic. News discourse, influenced by ideological and political orientations, is often infused with many subjective feelings that reporters have, which ultimately leads to a great deal of interference in the judgement of readers. *The New York Times* is one of the mainstream media in the United States, whose attitudes towards the outbreak of the coronavirus can reflect both official stances of the US government and mainstream values of American people. It is, therefore, necessary to analyze the underlying attitudinal tendencies involved. Critical discourse analysis, an important research method in the field of critical linguistics, effectively foregrounds the relationship between language and society and thus has become a powerful tool for dissecting news discourses. In the academic field, critical discourse analysis is mainly utilized to analyze texts of commercial trades, while few linguists use it to study public health events.

This paper employs Fairclough's three-dimensional model as the theoretical framework and Halliday's functional grammar as the analytical tool to unpack American national conditions in the early period of Covid-19 epidemic. The research will ultimately achieve three goals by means of quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis. To begin with,

the paper will reveal values of word frequency with some typical examples fastidiously analyzed so that the stance of the American government on the Covid-19 epidemic and the anticipation of mainstream media for the uncertain future will be accurately unfolded. In addition, further discussion will focus on reporting modes, elucidating what kinds of opinions or feelings reporters are potentially instilling into their readers. Last but not least, the study will delve into core values, which have huge impacts upon the status quo of the Covid-19 epidemic prevention and control in the United States. In terms of academic value, this paper will help readers to develop a sense of critical thinking and to identify ideological and attitudinal tendencies implied in news discourse.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical discourse analysis propounded in *Language and Control*, the salient point of which focuses on the relationship between parole and society [1], is a new research method from critical linguistics that has a great influence upon journalism and linguistics over the past ten years. Different scholars delve into critical discourse analysis in different ways. Fairclough, one of the distinguishing scholars of CDA, gave a lucid exposition of the relationship between language, power and ideology, and introduced three main steps for CDA including description, interpretation and explanation in his book *Language and Power* in 1989 [2]. Besides, Van Dijk established the connection between discourse and ideology from social and cognitive perspectives, and defined the ideological discourse in his book *Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach* [3]. Discourse-historical approach propounded by Ruth Wodak is also a classic model used in CDA [4]. She built the bonds between discourse connotation as well as the relationship between method, theory and politics [5].

Many scholars have offered their insights into the theory and application of critical discourse analysis. For solving the problem that critical discourse analysis is difficult to operate in real contexts, scholar Guo Qingming proposed five principles and six steps for conducting text analysis, making the process of text researches more clear [6]. In order to explore the future direction of the theory, scholar Wu Jianguo considered that critical discourse analysis should not only focus on linguistic analysis itself but also on interdisciplinary fusion [7]. In terms of the application of the theory, Yang Min and Shi Yijun combined critical discourse analysis with corpus linguistics to dissect the discourse strategies of the US side in the Sino-US trade war, exposing the US's deliberate actions against China and making suggestions for Chinese diplomatic strategies [8]. In addition, Dong Mei and Yuan Xiaolu combined multimodal theory with the framework of

critical discourse analysis to conduct multiple analyses of English tourism news, which contributes to the promotion of a positive image of Chinese culture [9].

However, up till now, few scholars focus on news reports on health events, which can be regarded as the promising research orientation. Hence, Fairclough's three-dimensional framework including text, discursive practices and social practices in his book *Discourse and Social Change* [10] will be used to study the discourse of American Covid-19 epidemic. According to Fairclough, all levels and all structures of discourse may be ideologically significant in theory [11]. However, as Lin deems that it's unnecessary and impossible to examine every linguistic element in discourse when people conduct CDA [12]. Normally, based on language functions and social relations, critical analysis should center on language structures and processes which possibly have important social significance, and then summarize the ideology of the discourse accordingly [13]. In order to effectively explore news discourse, word frequency, reporting modes and mainstream values are going to be analyzed in later sections.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

This paper dissects news reports on the Covid-19 epidemic on the basis of Fairclough's three-dimensional model, which includes text, discursive practice and social practice. In terms of three angles combined with theories of the news, this paper attempts to answer the following three questions:

(1) How are features of lexical choice as the form of text manifested in news reports on the Covid-19 epidemic from *The New York Times*?

(2) What functions does reporting mode as the form of discursive practice have when they are used to analyze news reports?

(3) How does mainstream value as the form of social practice influence the epidemic prevention and control in the United States?

The corpus is composed of 30 news reports on the Covid-19 epidemic from *The New York Times*. In order to ensure the authenticity of the news, the author manages to find articles with reporters' names as analytic targets. Besides, 30 texts including 32,886 words in total are chosen from March to December, with three articles per month. Every text selected includes 1000–1200 words. Randomness of appearance of words can be effectively evaded, and results are valuable, objective and convincing.

This paper, combining quantitative analysis with qualitative analysis, will follow three main steps. First, the word list of AntConc 3.5.8 will be utilized to acquire data of high-frequency words. Then, data of reporting modes will be gathered by manual collection. It is necessary to verify the statistics after the first collection. Second, the author will use the statistics to analyze phenomena existing in the 30 passages, trying to find out the standpoint of the American government on the Covid-19 epidemic. Then, some typical examples selected from 30 texts will be used as qualitative analysis, which involves two stages: text and discursive practice. In the next part, American mainstream values will be analyzed so that the relations between discursive practice and social practice will emerge. Third, major findings will be generalized as conclusions, which also include research limitations and research prospects.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Text Analysis Based on Lexical Choice

Lexical choice is one of core elements of text analysis. The reporter, as the producer and interpreter of news discourse, always inadvertently incorporates his own opinions and values into what he describes. By analyzing lexical choices, people can identify deliberate discourses of reporters and thus effectively differentiate misleading ideologies from plausible interpretation. The following table shows specific statistics of word frequency.

According to the Table I, the words "state(s)", "death(s)" and "case(s)" with high-frequent occurrences prove that not only are large quantities of Americans infected with the coronavirus, but also the Covid-19 epidemic has spread into almost every region in the United States. The specific contexts in which the words "health" and "expert" appear indicate that the public and doctors are very concerned about their own health and physical conditions of people around themselves. It is ironic, however, that the official attitude of America towards the Covid-19 epidemic is rather negative, although the situation is so serious that many people are still on the brink of death. Compared with 131 occurrences of "death(s)", "prevention" appears only 11 times in 30 texts, which clearly manifests that the Trump administration disregards preventive measures but foregrounds the solution to political and economic stagnation. This kind of indifference towards prevention will make it difficult for such a bad situation to improve in the short term.

TABLE I: THE DISTRIBUTION OF WORD FREQUENCY

Word	Frequency	Word	Frequency
state(s)	208	expert(s)	49
health	142	university	48
death(s)	131	business(es)	42
case(s)	106	vaccine(s)	42
children	77	young	20
school(s)	77	prevention	11

In addition, the word "vaccines" appears 42 times in the selected texts, the phenomenon of which tallies with claims of the American government that the states are eager to overcome the pandemic by means of herd immunity. However, the Trump administration overlooks a serious problem. How many people can be vaccinated if the epidemic is not defended against to the best of their ability? Even if healthy people are vaccinated, can the American government ensure that they, surrounding too many sick people, will not be infected? This reflects that the Trump administration has been underestimating the gloomy situation of Covid-19 epidemic in the near feature and flouting fundamental interests of American people.

What's more, the word "business(es)" occurs 42 times.

Based on the concordance, it can be seen that this word is often paired with "shut down", "closing", "urgently" and "issue", which shows the trade and business system in the United States has been severely damaged during the epidemic and that the situation will still keep serious. "Business(es)" paired with "reopen" only appears twice, indicating that the rejuvenation of American business is unlikely to realize soon. This is at odds with the Trump administration's official statements that the epidemic has few impacts on the US business and that the economy can be restored quickly in a short period of time. The hypocrisy of the Trump administration is vividly revealed by descriptions of the business situation utilized by several news reporters who aim to record the reality of tragedy-stricken trade and business.

Last but not least, another set of data is heartbreaking. According to the table above, the word "children" appears 77 times and the word "young" 20 times. This manifests the huge number of young Americans infected with the coronavirus. The White House, regardless of such a severe pandemic, repeatedly calls for schools in many states to operate as usual as soon as possible, professing that young people are less susceptible to the coronavirus. Hence, "school" and "university" also appear frequently and they are usually paired with the word "reopen". In general, areas with dense population should have become focal points for regulations, as gatherings can contribute to the high risk of viral transmission. However, the American government ignores the fact and insists on the reopening of schools even though the situation of the epidemic prevention and control is still severe, which reflects the lapse of the US government's policy. In the meantime, some states, albeit with the emergence of several cases of mass infection in schools, still allege to the public that reopening schools and restarting offline teaching are definitely a correct decision, which fully demonstrates that American officials underestimate the situation of the Covid-19 epidemic in youth groups and brush the people's right of lives aside.

The following are specific examples of lexical choices.

(1) New York Sees Glimmer of Hope as Staggering Death Rate Stabilizes (April 7, 2020)

(2) Daily Virus Deaths Approach Grim Record Set in Spring (November 11, 2020)

These are the headlines of the selected reports. As we all know, news headlines can not only reflect reporters' opinions and emotions but also lay the groundwork for the tone of the whole article, thus influencing readers' basic judgements from the very moment when they read the news. In the first example, the reporter uses the word "glimmer", which means a faint and unsteady light. Instead of using the single word "hope", he uses the phrase "glimmer of hope" to express the underlying view that there is little hope that New York will return to normalcy soon even though the death rate gradually stabilizes. The reporter implicitly conveys a very uncertainly positive hope by using the word "glimmer". In the second example, the reporter could have used the word "high" to more objectively indicate large numbers of death tolls in the United States in November, but instead the reporter uses the word "grim" to create a vivid and despondent picture which can be engraved into readers' minds. By using the emotive word "grim", the reporter expresses latent dissatisfaction with negative policies of the Covid-19 epidemic and shows gloomy anticipation for the future.

(3) They referred to this as "state authority handoff," and it was at the heart of what would become at once a **catastrophic** *policy blunder and an attempt to escape blame for a crisis that had engulfed the country — perhaps one of the greatest failures of presidential leadership in generations. (July 19, 2020)*

(4) In recent weeks, Orthodox leaders in Brooklyn have faulted the city government for what they contended was **meager** *and inconsistent efforts to engage in community outreach. (October 5, 2020)*

Underlined and bold adjectives in both cases convey the reporters' emotions. In the third case, the reporter uses the strong word "catastrophic", which means causing terrible disasters. In the reporter's eyes, the Trump administration's orchestrated decision is an extremely stupid and far-reaching mistake which proves that the White House does not prepare to dispose of the Covid-19 epidemic at all and wants to pass it off irresponsibly to local governments. The reporter expresses his anger at the indifferent attitude of the White House towards the Covid-19 through the use of high-emotive adjectives, indirectly sending readers the message that they should advocate taking rigorous measures as soon as possible. In the fourth example, the word "meagre" has the meaning of "too small", which can be regarded as a derogatory word in this sentence. Quoting the word from the leader of the Brooklyn Orthodox Church, the writer directly reproaches the US government for only doing a perfunctory job.

(5) The announcement by the governors stunned restaurant owners, whose businesses have been **decimated** *by the pandemic. (June 30, 2020)*

(6) The disruptions to daily life — and the associated stresses of lives on pause — have been perhaps most acutely felt by children from low-income families, many of whom live in predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods that have been **plagued** *by a rise in gun violence and disproportionately high coronavirus infection rates. (December 30, 2020)*

In the two sentences, underlined and bold verbs show the reporters' attitudes. In the fifth sentence, the reporter uses "decimate" rather than the common word "damage". "Decimate" itself has the connotation of severely damage and is highly charged than the word "ruin", which suggests that on the one hand the reporter objectively records the enormous damage caused by the epidemic, and on the other hand, the reporter potentially outputs his own subjective emotions, his wrath at the inefficiency of the US government and his distress at the tragic situation of the businessmen. In the sixth sentence, the word "plague" is far more emotive than "disturb", emphasizing suffering over a long period of time. The reporter intends to tell the public that the Covid-19 epidemic is as perilous as gun violence and that lives of the underprivileged are seriously affected. The underprivileged lack material assurance from the American government and they are gradually losing freedom proclaimed in *the Declaration of Independence*. The reporter is deeply apprehensive that people's rights will not be adequately guaranteed in the post-pandemic era.

Based on the above analysis, the high-frequency words manifest major events as well as critical decisions that take place during the period of the pandemic and effectively reflect the attitudes of the American government, while

headlines as well as emotive words express reporters' opinions on these events.

B. Discursive Analysis Based on Reporting Mode

In news discourses, reporting mode is a crucial way to deliver messages and almost every news report is with different reporting modes. According to the theory of Leech and Short, direct speech, indirect speech and present direct speech exist in news discourses [14]. Direct speech means interviewees' words are directly shown within quotation marks, while in indirect speech their words are repeated by reporters as objective clauses. Present direct discourse is a very special reporting mode, a phenomenon that indirect speech gradually slides into direct speech. The following table reveals the feature of distribution of reporting modes.

According to the accurate statistics in the Table II, indirect speech accounts for 57.75%, while the proportion of direct speech is only 38.18%, which is to a certain degree different from the style of news reports concerning the economic field. Direct speech, although the proportion is not high, plays a vital role in all selected texts. It is direct speech that enables articles to keep relatively objective. Indirect speech and present discourse speech are usually used to describe words of private citizens and senior government officials. One of the reasons why reporters are more inclined to use them is that many government officials and residents make critical statements during the epidemic that cannot be published directly without any modification. Hence, reporters paraphrase their words. Another factor is that reporters can inadvertently add their own viewpoints to sentences by using indirect speech and present discourse speech, which may change people's minds.

TABLE II: THE DISTRIBUTION OF REPORTING MODE

	Direct Speech	Indirect Speech	Present Discourse Speech
Total	197	298	21
Percentage	38.18%	57.75%	4.07%

The following are specific examples of reporting modes.

(7) Mayor Bill de Blasio said "Indoor dining in New York City, where you already have issues with high congregations, you already have issues of people clearly violating social distancing, and you now have an added factor of viral spread all across the nation, and a high likelihood that those people will come to New York City. (June 30, 2020)

(8) "It was just always a sense of 'it's coming, it's coming,'" Ms. Jennings said, describing it as "pre-traumatic shock syndrome." (November 29, 2020)

Two quintessential direct speeches are enumerated. In the seventh case, the administrator officially reprimands people for blatantly violating rules of New York State by congregational meals. The sentence is full of disappointment of the speaker, which results from the value of excessive individual freedom engraved in American's minds. An overinterpretation of freedom leads American citizens to hold a firm belief that individual freedom must be prioritized even though the collective interest and the national interest have been severely vitiated, which directly contributes to difficulties in imposing restrictions in any way because there will always be those who find diverse means to evade

obstacles. Using direct discourse, the reporter directly points out that those without collective consciousness should be criticized, furthermore showing the importance of quarantine through the direct words of officials. The eighth example is from an American civilian. The short sentence "It's coming" tugs at people's heartstrings. It is more frequent that people use post-traumatic after convalesce because fear often haunts them although wounds have healed. However, the woman is with pre-traumatic complications, which means that she feels very frightened when seeing people around her gradually dying, although she herself does not infect the virus. The reporter explicitly demonstrates that the Covid-19 epidemic mentally and physically harms people and creates an atmosphere of fear among the public, further expressing craving of American civilians to end this kind of fearfulness soon.

(9) Dr. Alasdair Munro, clinical research fellow in pediatric infectious diseases at University Hospital Southampton in Britain, said that the most important point of the paper is that "it clarifies the care with which we need to interpret individual studies, particularly of transmission of a virus where we know the dynamics are complex." (August 15, 2020)

The ninth sentence is a typical present direct discourse. The subject of the object clause exists in an indirect speech, the authenticity of which is worth discussing. If "the most important point" is indeed formulated by the interviewee, why does the reporter describe it by indirect speech? Due to this style of reporting mode, there is increased likelihood that the opinion originates from the reporter. In addition, a direct speech exists in the predicative clause, indicating that it is these words that are quoted without any modification by the reporter. Dr. Alasdair Munro argues that the paper reveals the way the coronavirus is transmitted. By means of indirect speech slipping into direct speech, the reporter shows that major breakthroughs in researches on the virus itself may have been made but indirect speech may contain the reporter's own viewpoint, indirectly influencing readers' attitudes.

(10) An epidemiologist of California said that the risk of the virus to most Americans was very low. (May 21, 2020)

(11) Kristen Porter Basu, a spokeswoman for the company, said that a "more detailed analysis" would be published "very soon." (December 5, 2020)

The two cases are identified as indirect speeches. In the tenth example, the reporter quotes a passage from an epidemiologist who claims that the risk of virus spreading in the United States is not so high and is not worthy of becoming a focal center, which can be seemingly considered cogent. However, there are two critical issues contained in this sentence. On the one hand, indirect speech generally indicates that the reporter interprets what the expert says in his own words so it is not distinct whether the reporter really grasps the substance of the interviewee's perspective on the coronavirus. On the other hand, the news source is very vague, which means people are not convinced that he is an authoritative specialist. Hence, the credibility of the information is drastically damaged. Indirect speech combined with the semi-specific source latently conveys to readers that the spread of the Covid-19 in the United States is not terrible, misleading readers' judgements. In the eleventh example, the

word "said" is followed by an indirect speech, with only a few words placed between quotation marks, demonstrating that these are from the author's original words. The quotation of two phrases by the reporter intends to express his approval of key information. However, something pivotal may be lost between these two phrases, which will result in readers' various conjunctures of the sentence meaning from two separate phrases. Quoting only phrases, the reporter aims to boost people's confidence in forthcoming vaccines but the method of quotation impairs the credibility of the piece of news.

Based on the above analysis, direct speech which objectively quotes others' words enhances the credibility of news discourse, while indirect speech and present direct speech which to some extent incorporate reporters' opinions vitiate the authority of news reports.

C. Social Practice Based on Mainstream Values

Civilians' actions on the coronavirus are mainly determined by values deeply rooted in American people's minds. The selected news reports can manifest five mainstream values: individual freedom, equality, self-reliance, hard work as well as the pursuit of wealth.

The frantic pursuit of individual freedom is one of main reasons that the epidemic is out of control in the United States. Overinterpreting the signification of freedom one-sidedly, large numbers of Americans hold a firm belief that freedom must take precedence over collective interests in any circumstances. Therefore, they always resist wearing masks, deeming that it impedes their freedom to breathe the air. They constantly organize congregational events, considering that quarantine restricts their freedom to join the activities. It is reprehensible to disregard collective and national interests, which can be regarded as selfish freedom that is directly to the detriment of people's health.

In Americans' minds, all people are created equal and they deserve to enjoy equal rights. However, when facing the ferocious epidemic, they seem to have forgotten the principle. Some people say in public that the white should be given priority for vaccination with the black and the Latin coming second, remarks on which some officials even wholeheartedly endorse. This is extremely contrary to the value of equality. People cannot choose their skin color, ethnicity or family when they are born, so why should they be discriminated against? Those comments reflect the hypocrisy of some people and officials who always chant the slogan of human rights but practice racial discrimination behind the back, which seriously aggravates social conflicts within the United States.

Many American civilians hold a negative attitude towards the prospect of the post-pandemic era on account of domestic political turbulence and intensified social conflicts. At the end of 2020, the Trump administration concentrated on the election and business restoration but neglected the epidemic prevention and control, which directly contributes to the predicament of the guarantee of human rights in the post-epidemic period. American people, under such difficult circumstances, fully exploit their spirit of self-reliance, endeavoring to sustain their family lives. They continue to undertake strenuous tasks every day in the hope that their family members will be happier in the future, even though many lives are snatched away every day in a merciless manner. They still never forgo their pursuit of wealth and desperately seek a better life, albeit with the social order badly disrupted. It is these spirits that make American civilians more resilient to what is about to happen in the post-epidemic era.

V. Conclusion

This paper dissects linguistic features and social values hidden in news reports on the Covid-19 epidemic in *The New York Times*. Through the combination of quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis, the paper delves into connotations of the text, the discursive practice and the social practice step by step. This chapter elaborates upon key findings, research limitations and research prospects.

In the dimension of text, high-frequency words objectively manifest the severe status quo of the epidemic as well as the uncertain trend of American policies. Reporters often utilize nouns, verbs and adjectives with emotional meanings to indicate their own views on events, furthermore indirectly influencing readers' minds. In the dimension of discursive practice, direct speeches do not predominate because there are many people making critical or negative statements that reporters cannot directly quote without any modification. The reason for the large proportion of indirect speeches is that reporters intend to incorporate their own remarks into sentences by paraphrasing other people's words in order to guide public opinions. In the dimension of social practice, five mainstream values have impacts upon people's actions. Even though the unprivileged suffer dreadfully, they can still pursue freedom and equality, endeavoring to live a better life by self-reliance and hard work.

Based on the analysis of three dimensions, there are four themes emerging from news discourses. First, many experts and scholars rebuke the Trump administration for always taking negative measures to confront the epidemic and oppose revolving around the restoration of commercial trade. Second, American private citizens crave to be vaccinated, anticipating that the development of Covid drugs can be accelerated. Third, civilians insist that everyone should be treated equally, protesting against the politicization and racialization of the epidemic prevention and control. Fourth, many American people hold a relatively despondent attitude towards the prospect of the post-epidemic era, deeming that human rights cannot be well guaranteed.

This paper concentrates on news reports on major public health events, combining language with society in order to assist readers to see the essence through language phenomena. However, although this paper has many valuable findings, limitations still exist that sentence elements in this paper are not analyzed in the dimension of text so readers may feel it difficult to discover the linkage between sentences and themes. Therefore, in the future, scholars can dissect sentences themselves from the angle of transitivity so that the relationship between processes of sentences and social practice will be clearly revealed.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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