A Study on the Construction of China's National Image in Business News Based on Thematic Progression Patterns: A Case of *China Daily*

Yiding Liu* and Yi Zhang

Northwestern Polytechnical University, School of Foreign Studies, Xi'an, China
Email: 850266991@qq.com (Y.D.L.); yizhang@nwpu.edu.cn (Y.Z.)
*Corresponding author

Abstract—In the context of globalization, national image is crucial in international interactions, and business news, especially from media like *China Daily*, significantly influences its construction. The study adopts Halliday's thematic theory and analyzes business news from *China Daily*, using quantitative and qualitative research methods. It examines the distribution of simple and multiple themes and various thematic progression patterns, including Parallel, Linear, Constant, and Split patterns. The results show that the distribution of themes and progression patterns effectively constructs a national image of China as a technologically advanced, quality-oriented, culturally dynamic, and consumer-centered nation. The prevalence of certain themes and patterns highlights China's economic prosperity, technological innovation, and cultural influence, demonstrating that *China Daily*'s news reports use language strategically to project a positive national image.

Keywords—business news, national image, thematic progression patterns

I. INTRODUCTION

Within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics, the theory of Thematic Progression serves as a pivotal tool for analyzing the information structure of discourse, with its core significance lying in uncovering the dynamic mechanisms of information flow within texts. Building on the Theme-Rheme dichotomy proposed by the Prague School, Halliday further developed systematic models of thematic progression, offering researchers a microscopic analytical perspective to observe textual coherence, information hierarchy, and the realization of communicative intentions [1]. This theory not only elucidates how speakers guide recipients' attention through thematic choices but also reveals deep-seated information-organizing strategies in discourse by analyzing patterns of thematic sequences. Consequently, it demonstrates unique explanatory power in language teaching, stylistic analysis, and cross-linguistic comparative studies, establishing itself as an indispensable dimension of contemporary discourse analysis.

In an era of accelerating globalization, national image has emerged as a vital element of soft and hard power, shaping international diplomacy and political engagement. A positive national image enhances global recognition and political influence, serving as implicit leverage in global competition [2]. News discourse, as a cornerstone of international communication, not only informs global audiences but also molds perceptions and behaviors, playing a pivotal role in constructing national narratives [3]. *China Daily*, China's premier English-language newspaper, is a key platform for global information exchange, with its business news offering critical insights into China's economic policies, corporate developments, and commercial landscape. These reports serve as a primary channel for shaping international understanding of China's economic identity.

Recent decades have seen national image studies increasingly adopt linguistic perspectives, particularly focusing on thematic progression patterns—strategic choices of themes and their development in discourse, which reflect communicative intent [4]. However, limited research examines how these patterns construct China's national image in foreign-oriented news, despite the nation's rising global prominence. Addressing this gap offers valuable insights into China's self-representation strategies [5].

Theoretically, this study enriches theme theory by linking thematic progression to national image construction, advancing linguistic interpretations of discourse's role in geopolitics. Practically, it aids China in refining its image-building mechanisms through media, fostering a favorable global narrative amid its rapid ascent. Additionally, it proposes actionable writing frameworks for journalists to enhance China's discursive strategies, ultimately strengthening its international communication system.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Thematic Theory

The concepts of "theme" and "rheme" were first introduced in 1939. Vilem Mathesius, a scholar of the Prague School, first proposed them in the article Functional Sentence Perspective. He renamed the psychological subject in traditional Czech literature as theme and believed that a sentence consists of three components: theme, transition, and rheme. This means that Mathesius' concept of the functional sentence perspective contains two meanings: one is the arrangement of the internal structure of the sentence, and the other is the relationship with the text. That is, the principles of information theory are used to analyze discourses or sentences to examine the different functions played by various structural components in language activities. This distinction between the theme and the rheme is of great significance for comparing sentence structures, analyzing sentence functions, and stylistic features.

The Czech linguist Jan Firbas [6] redefined the concepts of theme, transition and rheme. He believed that the component with the least communicative dynamism in a sentence is the theme, the component with the most

communicative dynamism is the rheme, and the communicative dynamism of the transition is in an intermediate position.

In the 1960s, M.A.K. Halliday, a representative figure of the Systemic Functional Linguistics School, accepted the concepts of theme and rheme proposed by the Prague School, but put forward different viewpoints on the division of themes. Halliday [7] believed that the definition of themes in English should be based on function rather than the distribution of components. A theme is "the point of departure of a message, the element with which the clause is concerned", and the rheme is the content stated in the sentence. The theme is the starting point of the rheme and can be divided into simple theme, multiple theme and clause as theme.

The classification of theme proposed by Halliday has been recognized by numerous scholars at home and abroad and is widely applied in various types of texts such as academic and news discourses. The feasibility and operability of this classification have been fully verified. Therefore, this article adopts Halliday's thematic theory.

B. Thematic Progression Patterns

Danes [8] proposed the thematic progression system. Thematic progression refers to the selection and arrangement of expressed themes, their interrelationships and hierarchies, and also refers to the relationship between the hypertheme of the upper-level discourse unit and the entire discourse and the situation. The information structure of a discourse depends on the progression of theme and rheme. He also divided the thematic progression patterns into three types: simple linear theme pattern, theme pattern with a continuous theme, and theme pattern with derived themes. In 1986, in On the Linguistic Analysis of Discourse Structure, Danes further divided the thematic progression patterns into five types: Simple Liner Thematic Progression, Thematic Progression with a constant theme, the superrheme goes throughout the following clause, the superrheme overcontrols the themes following the first clause, and "in the claim of theme-rheme, there may be one that is omitted, but can be easily recovered in the last sequence".

On this basis, domestic scholars such as Xu [9], Zhu [10], and Huang supplemented this and proposed their own classifications. There is no essential difference between the classifications of thematic progression patterns by Xu Shenghuan and Zhu Yongsheng, except for the names of each pattern. Zhu Yongsheng classified the thematic progression patterns into four basic patterns according to the development of themes: (1) Parallel progression with the same theme and the different rhemes; (2) Constant progression with the same rheme and the different themes; (3) Liner progression with the rheme or part of the rheme of the previous sentence acting as the theme of the later sentence; (4) Split progression with the theme of the first sentence acting as the rheme of the second sentence, and the theme of the second sentence acting as the rheme of the third sentence.

C. China Daily and National Image Construction

In recent years, with the improvement of China's international status and the complication of the international public opinion environment, the construction of national image has become a hot topic in academic research. As the core media for China's external communication, China Daily plays an important role in shaping the national image.

Some scholars pay attention to the construction of the ecological image in environmental issues. Taking the reports on the elephant tour group as an example, Zhang and Zhao Bohan [11] pointed out that China Daily shows inclusive interests through multi-subject interaction (government, citizens, and nature), combines ecological protection with national soft power, and shapes the image of China as credible, lovely, and respectable. Wang [12] further proposed that such reports elevate local practices into China's solutions for global ecological governance through discourse packages such as making every effort to protect and building a community with a shared future for all life forms.

There are also some scholars who focus on the shaping of a composite image in the Belt and Road Initiative. Both Wang Guohua [13] and Ouyang [14] focused on the reports on the Belt and Road Initiative and found that China Daily constructed an economic image of mutual benefit and cooperation, a political image of openness and inclusiveness, and a cultural image of innovation through topics such as political and economic cooperation and cultural and scientific and technological exchanges.

However, currently in the field of academic research, there are relatively few research achievements that deeply explore the news reports of China Daily from the unique perspective of the thematic progression pattern and seek to understand the constructed national image through this approach. Many studies on China Daily's news reports often focus on other directions, neglecting the close connection between the thematic progression pattern and the construction of the national image. Therefore, this research is innovative and exploratory. It chooses to start from the thematic progression pattern to deeply and meticulously explore the structure of China Daily's news, and to excavate the information-transmission rules hidden behind the news texts and the construction mechanism of the national image.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Questions

(1) What is the feature of the distribution of thematic progression patterns?

(2) How do the thematic progression patterns in *China Daily*'s business news contribute to the construction of China's national image?

B. Research Procedure

This study adopts both quantitative and qualitative research methods. In terms of quantitative research, this study selected news discourses from *China Daily.* Based on the timeliness of news coverage, business news published within the past year were chosen, with 25 pieces randomly sampled for analysis.

This paper meticulously conducts manual annotation of theme types in strict accordance with relevant operational definitions, aiming to comprehensively collect data and deeply summarize their distribution characteristics, including their frequencies, proportions, and potential correlations with other factors in the corpus.

In terms of qualitative research, it conducts in-depth analysis of the thematic progression patterns in each selected news report, exploring the logical relationships and semantic cohesion between themes and rhemes, as well as their functions in the development of the discourse.

Although the dataset of this study is relatively small, the reliability of the research is still ensured due to its focused nature on business news reports and the timeliness of news. Additionally, a peer was invited to co-code the data, achieving a coding agreement rate of 92%, further supporting the consistency of the analytical process.

Finally, by closely integrating with specific contexts and numerous examples, this paper deeply explores the national images constructed by these thematic types and thematic progression patterns, revealing the impact of language use on national image-building from a micro-level and comprehensively demonstrating how news discourses present and construct specific national images through language means.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. Features of Thematic Progression Patterns Distribution

After analyzing the business news from *China Daily*, the statistics of thematic progression patterns were obtained. Table 1 shows the frequency of different thematic progression patterns.

Table 1. Frequency of different thematic progression patterns

Thematic Progression Patterns	Number	Proportion
Parallel Progression Pattern	75	50%
Linear Progression Pattern	50	33.3%
Constant Progression Pattern	25	16.7%
Split Progression Pattern	0	0
Total	150	100%

A total of 150 instances of thematic progression patterns were identified in the corpus. Among them, the parallel progression pattern is the most prevalent, with 75 occurrences, accounting for 50% of the total. The linear progression pattern ranks second, with 50 instances, making up 33.3% of the total. The constant progression pattern appears 25 times, representing 16.7% of the total. Notably, the split progression pattern was not detected in this corpus, with a frequency of 0.

In news discourse, journalists employ a variety of thematic progression patterns, rather than adhering to a single pattern throughout the text. This is because news discourse aims to convey news events to the public and explain the process of their occurrence and development. News discourse inevitably involves elements such as time, place, characters, and manner. This means that the theme or rheme of a clause in news discourse cannot remain unchanged; instead, it continuously adds new information to enable readers to understand the ins and outs and causal relationships of the reported events. This dynamic semantic connection between the theme and rheme of a clause and the context achieves semantic coherence and continuity in the text, driving the discourse to unfold continuously. Therefore, the richness of content and diversity of form in news discourse must rely on the interplay of various thematic progression patterns. In fact, a news discourse that only uses a single thematic progression pattern is somewhat monotonous and fails to achieve textual coherence.

1) Parallel progression pattern

In the overall distribution of thematic progression patterns, this pattern accounts for the largest proportion. This is because the purpose of news discourse is to provide information and construct textual meaning. Therefore, journalists continue to use the theme from the previous sentence as the theme for the next sentence to maintain a discourse topic, constantly expanding the information of the clause in the rheme part. This helps readers grasp the focus of what the journalist is discussing and provides clarity of news information.

Example 1: The Spring Festival holiday, also a peak season for consumption (T1), has seen strong sales revenues and rich festive mood this year, and China's overall consumption market is expected to show a steadily growth trend in the first quarter, the Ministry of Commerce said on Thursday (R1). Over the holiday period, (T2=T1) sales of key retail and catering enterprises in China increased by 4.1 percent year-on-year (R2=R1). Food, festive products, green and smart home appliances, mobile phones and tablets recorded booming sales, (T3=T1) data from the ministry showed (R3).

In this text, "The Spring Festival holiday, also a peak season for consumption" serves as T1 in the first sentence, introducing the topic of the consumption market during this period. Subsequently, "Over the holiday period" (T2) and "Food, festive products, green and smart home appliances, mobile phones and tablets recorded booming sales" (T3) function as themes in their respective sentences. T3 appears to have no connection with T1, but it is actually a reflection of T1. They all revolve around the core topic of "The Spring Festival holiday". "Over the holiday period" in T2 is closely related to T1, referring to the same holiday time frame. Although T3 lists specific product categories, the sales situation of these products is also part of the Spring Festival holiday consumption market, representing an extension of the theme of Spring Festival holiday consumption. This conforms to the characteristic of the Parallel Pattern, where themes are the same or closely centered around the same topic.

This pattern ensures a high level of coherence in information transfer. The first sentence provides an overview of the overall performance of the Spring Festival holiday consumption market, including strong sales revenues, a rich festive atmosphere, and the expected growth trend of the market. Then, the sentence with T2 specifically details the year-on-year growth of sales in key retail and catering enterprises during the holiday period, further refining the performance of the consumption market. The sentence with T3 lists the booming sales of various types of goods, elaborating on the prosperity of the consumption market from

different aspects. The information is presented in a progressive manner, gradually enriching the description of the Spring Festival holiday consumption market and enabling readers to understand the specific situation of the consumption market during the Spring Festival holiday in a systematic and comprehensive manner.

2) Linear progression pattern

The linear thematic progression pattern accounts for the second largest proportion. In this pattern, the rheme of the previous sentence interacts with the theme of the following sentence, forming a semantic relationship. Authors often use methods such as repetition, pronouns, and synonym substitution to achieve coherence between sentences, constructing semantic logic. The linear thematic progression pattern is commonly used in narrative discourse, making the description of events and characters more closely connected, the development of events more compact, and the semantics progress continuously, thereby enhancing the logic of the sentences and making the focus and emphasis of the message more prominent.

Example 2: Hong Kong-listed Shanghai Henlius Biotech Inc, a subsidiary of Fosun Pharma (T1), announced on Wednesday that its anti-PD-1 mAb, HANSIZHUANG, or serplulimab, has been approved by the European Commission to treat extensive-stage small cell lung cancer for adult patients (R1).The approval (T2=R1) makes the medicine, which is marketed as Hetronifly in Europe, as the first and only anti-PD-1 mAb approved in the EU for the treatment of extensive-stage small cell lung cancer (R2).

In this example, we clearly observe the linear progression pattern. In the first sentence, "Hong Kong - listed Shanghai Henlius Biotech Inc, a subsidiary of Fosun Pharma" is the theme (T1), and the rheme (R1) contains information about the company's announcement regarding the approval of its anti - PD - 1 mAb for treating a specific type of lung cancer. In the second sentence, "The approval" (T2), which is derived from the rheme (R1) of the first sentence, becomes the new theme. This pattern is characteristic of the Linear Progression Pattern, where the rheme of one sentence serves as the theme of the next. In the form of language, both monotony and cohesion are avoided.

3) Constant progression pattern

The constant thematic progression pattern accounts for the third largest proportion. In this pattern, the content of the rheme refers to the same thing or revolves around the same topic. The starting points of the information are different, but the focus of the content is the same. By repeating the rheme, the pattern emphasizes the key point of the information, which helps readers gain a comprehensive understanding of the news content.

Example 3: As of 1:25 pm Thursday, this animated blockbuster's box office revenue (T2) had exceeded 5.77 billion yuan ($804.84 million), achieving the milestone in just eight days and five hours, according to ticketing platforms Maoyan and Beacon (R2=R1).

With projections now pointing toward a final total of 9.4 to 9.5 billion yuan (T3), "Ne Zha 2" is firmly cemented as the top-grossing film in China's cinematic history (R3=R1).

In this example, the constant progression pattern is evident.

The core characteristic of this pattern is that the rheme remains constant across different sentences while the themes vary. Here, the key rheme "Ne Zha 2" becoming the highest - grossing film in China's cinematic history (implied in R1 as the achievement of a milestone related to box-office success, and explicitly stated in R3) stays the same in both sentences.

In the first sentence, the theme (T2) is "this animated blockbuster's box office revenue," and the rheme (R2), which is related to achieving a significant box-office milestone, is consistent with the underlying idea of "Ne Zha 2" box-office-related success. In the second sentence, the theme (T3) is "With projections now pointing toward a final total of 9.4 to 9.5 billion yuan," while the rheme (R3) re-emphasizes "Ne Zha 2" status as the top - grossing film in China, which is in line with the consistent rheme across the two sentences.

4) Split progression pattern

The crossing thematic progression pattern has the lowest proportion. In this pattern, the theme of the previous sentence serves as the rheme of the following sentence. This pattern occurs less frequently in written discourse. This is because, from the perspective of information flow, new information is often located in the rheme. However, in this pattern, the content of the rheme comes from the theme of the previous sentence, which contradicts the principle that new information should precede old information (Zhu Yanqiong, 2021).

B. National Image Construction based on Thematic Progression Patterns

1) The image of a prosperous and well-organized consumer-driven nation

The prevalence of the parallel progression pattern in news discourse, as demonstrated in the Spring Festival holiday consumption example, contributes to constructing an image of China as a prosperous and well-organized consumer-driven nation. By continuously centering on the Spring Festival holiday as the theme in multiple sentences, it showcases the holiday's significance as a peak consumption season.

The detailed information provided in the rheme part of each sentence under this pattern reveals the comprehensiveness and prosperity of China's consumer market. For instance, the mention of strong sales revenues, a rich festive mood, and growth in various sectors like retail, catering, and sales of different products (food, home appliances, etc.) indicates a vibrant and diverse consumer economy. This implies that China has a large and active consumer base with a wide range of consumption demands, which in turn reflects a high-quality of life and a well-developed market economy.

The pattern's ability to maintain a clear and consistent topic also suggests an organized approach to economic activities. It shows that the Chinese market operates in an orderly manner during important festivals, with different sectors contributing to the overall economic growth. This gives an impression of a nation that can effectively manage and stimulate its domestic consumption, which is an important driving force for the economy.

2) The image of an innovative and competitive nation in the global market

The linear progression pattern, as seen in the example of Shanghai Henlius Biotech's drug approval, constructs an image of China as an innovative and competitive nation in the global market. In this pattern, the seamless transition from the company's announcement of drug approval (T1-R1) to the significance of that approval (T2=R1-R2) showcases China's ability to translate scientific and technological achievements into real - world applications.

The fact that the rheme of one sentence becomes the theme of the next highlights the logical sequence of events, which is crucial in the highly competitive global pharmaceutical industry. It implies that China's biotech companies like Henlius are not only capable of conducting advanced research and development but also have the capacity to navigate the complex international regulatory environment and bring their products to the global market.

This pattern also emphasizes China's competitiveness. The drug's approval by the European Commission and its unique status in the EU market as the first and only anti - PD - 1 mAb for a specific treatment show that Chinese biotech products can meet and even exceed international standards. It projects an image of China as a nation that can compete on a global scale in high-tech industries, contributing to the overall perception of China as an innovative and forward-looking country.

3) The image of a nation with thriving cultural industry and strong soft power

The Constant Progression Pattern, illustrated by the "Ne Zha 2" box-office example, helps to construct an image of China as a nation with a thriving cultural industry and strong soft power. By keeping the rheme related to "Ne Zha 2" being the top-grossing film in China's cinematic history consistent across sentences, it highlights the remarkable success of this cultural product.

The different themes in each sentence, such as box-office revenue and future projections, provide a comprehensive view of the movie's success. This indicates that China's cultural industry is not only capable of producing high - quality cultural products but also has a large and enthusiastic domestic audience, as well as the potential for significant commercial success.

The success of "Ne Zha 2" on the box-office front also implies China's growing soft power. A highly successful domestic movie can attract international attention, promoting Chinese culture and values. It shows that China's cultural products have the ability to resonate with a wide audience, contributing to the spread of Chinese culture globally and enhancing China's cultural influence on the international stage. This pattern, through emphasizing the consistent rheme of the movie's box-office achievement, effectively projects an image of a culturally vibrant and influential nation.

V. CONCLUSION

Collectively, these thematic progression patterns work in synergy to construct an image of China as a multi-dimensional power that balances economic growth, technological innovation, and cultural influence. The strategic use of themes (e.g., proper nouns for institutional authority, common nouns for everyday life, prepositional phrases for contextualization) ensures that the discourse remains rooted in factual credibility while subtly advancing narratives of progress and responsibility. By avoiding overtly subjective language and prioritizing objective structures, *China Daily*'s reports maintain an authoritative tone, aligning with the nation's goal of projecting a credible and respectable image in global communication.

In essence, the thematic progression patterns in *China Daily*'s business reports act as a discursive bridge, connecting micro-level linguistic choices to macro-level national identity construction. They not only inform readers about China's achievements but also shape perceptions of its values, priorities, and role in the world. This linguistic strategy reflects China's broader efforts to define its national image on its own terms, leveraging language to counter stereotypes and present a nuanced narrative of its development and global engagement.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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