

# Analysis of Discourse Subjects in the Reports on COVID-19 From the Perspective of Other Narratives - Based on China Daily

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## Abstract

2020 is a year of massive outbreaks of COVID-19, which has a huge impact on the lives of people around the world. In 2020, China Daily, a major mainstream English-language newspaper in China, provided detailed coverage of the outbreak facts in countries around the whole world. In these reports, both subjects of discourse from China and from abroad spoke out, expressing China to the world and conveying voices from the world to China. The reports about the COVID-19 in *China Daily* were taken as the research objects, and the relevant reports among them were manually identified and screened to build a corpus for discourse subject analysis. This study focuses the analysis on the discourse subjects as the Other, such as foreigners in China and voices from the international community. By analyzing the voices of the other in the text, readers can understand the image China has created in the international community and the responsibility and accountability China embodies as the largest developing country. By selecting and analyzing typical discourse subjects as the Other from the self-constructed corpus, this study aims to analyze the international image portrayed by China and to investigate the important role of different discourse subjects in news reporting.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, discourse subject, *China Daily*, news discourse

## 1. Introduction

Since December 2019, several patients with pneumonia of unknown cause have been diagnosed in some hospitals in Wuhan, Hubei Province. On February 11, 2020, this pneumonia was named as COVID-19 and on March 11 of the same year, WHO considered that the current COVID-19 situation could be called a global pandemic. The outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic has made a huge difference in people's lives. Faced with this global health emergency, nations have been engaged in a very difficult but committed fight against the epidemic. During this process, *China Daily*, as an important English-language newspaper and foreign propaganda medium in China, has reported on all aspects of China's epidemic fighting process, including the effectiveness of the fight, instructions from leaders and experts, and the public's reaction to the epidemic. Throughout the epidemic fighting process, *China Daily* played a very important role in helping the international community understand the actual situation of the epidemic in China and conveying China's anti-epidemic policies. In many of the reports, Chinese citizens, represented by Chinese officials and experts, have made their voices heard, building an image of a responsible country that is actively fighting the epidemic and responsible for all its citizens. Equally important are the foreign leaders, experts, and others in multiple reports, whose descriptions of the Chinese epidemic provide an opportunity to view the same public health event from multiple perspectives and, to a certain extent, enhance the objectivity and authenticity of the reports. This study focuses on foreign discourse subjects distinct from Chinese discourse subjects—namely, the Other—to analyze the anti-epidemic narratives in *China Daily*.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Narratives

Narrative is very important and of great practical importance. American linguists Labov and Waletzky (1967) thought Narrative could be seen as a means of reenacting past experiences, specifically, for constructing narrative units that match the chronology of past experiences. Narrative exists in different literary genres such as documentary, film, and fiction, and is largely practiced in films and television productions. Journalism is a typical narrative device that chronicles human activity of the past. As narrative theory continues to develop, numerous scholars (Hu, 2010; Li, 2013) have combined it with teaching and journalism, thus promoting the interdisciplinary development of narrative theory. However, news narratives are not always objective, and the process of processing objective facts is inevitably influenced by the position and background of the narrator. Van Dijk (1988) thought, "Discourse analysis is a new, interdisciplinary field that has emerged from several other disciplines of the humanities and the social science." In this study, we take news narratives as the object of study and examine the coverage of the COVID-19 in China Daily, so as to help readers make a more objective assessment of China's performance in the COVID-19.

### 2.2 Other Narratives

Other narratives can also be called "Otherness Narration". The Other, literally, is something other than the self. In news reporting, the narrative of the self and the narrative of the other plays an equally important role. Hu (2010) pointed out that "in the process of analyzing discourse, the dichotomy of "self" and "other" is often used as an important method of discourse analysis." In the narrative of news, the narrative of the "Other" is always present in an explicit or implicit form. Zhao (2019) studied the discourse in BBC from the perspective of Other narration. In this study, we use foreigners in China and voices from abroad as the Other. When the news is narrated from the perspective of the Other, it is also a process of constructing the self. The self-narrative and the other-narrative complements each other, together forming a complete news discourse context and helping to shape the image of the self. At the time of major international public health emergencies, China Daily, reported the real-time progress fighting COVID-19, while shaping the image of a great country that pays attention to people's lives and health safety and a country actively responsible for their safety and security.

## 3. Research Content

### 3.1 Corpus-Building

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19, it immediately became the focus of society. Mainstream media around the world have reported on it, and discourse analysis of these reports has also proliferated. Duan (2021) and Zhang (2021) analyzed discourse in public health emergency emergencies, which shows people's concern to COVID-19. In this study, *China Daily's* reports on the fight against the epidemic in 2020, the first year of a large-scale, global outbreak of the COVID-19, were used as the object of study. We used *China Daily* as the corpus selection object and searched for reports in 2020 by searching for keywords Hubei, COVID-19, Wuhan, etc. All relevant reports were copied and named in the format of 2020010101 to build the corpus. If there were multiple reports on the same day for the outbreak, they were named as 2020010102. For the resulting corpus, only the text was retained, and a total of 646 reports were obtained.

### 3.2 Method Adopted

This study was based on a self-built corpus, combined with AntConc 3.5.8.0, statistics; in the analysis, the subjects of discourse that appear in it were analyzed by drawing on Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional analysis framework: description-interpretation-explanation to analyze the subjects in these reports.

### 3.3 Case Analysis

In this study, we divided the discourse subjects as the Other into voices from the international community and foreigners in China. In the analysis of discourse subjects, a diverse discourse subjects were selected and analyzed. In terms of time, reports from the beginning, middle and end of 2020 were selected for analysis in this study. In terms of content, the subjects of discourse in the examples were mainly descriptions of the actual situation in which they are found or descriptions related to China. Take the following sentence as an example.

Example 1: Last week, Thailand's Ministry of Health said Thai doctors had seen apparent success treating a 71-year-old woman infected with the virus using a combination of flu drug oseltamivir with lopinavir and ritonavir-antivirals used to treat HIV. However, doctors are still monitoring the patient and waiting for scientists to prove the results. (2020020702)

The subject of the discourse in the above example is Thailand's Ministry of Health. In the midst of the fight

against COVID-19, China was very concerned about the progress of the epidemic around the world. Both treatment and prevention were very important aspects of the fight against COVID-19. China was treating patients with COVID-19 at all costs and treating all patients equally, with active and effective treatment. The choice of the Thai health sector as the subject of the discourse reflected China's concern for the safety of people's lives while paying close attention to the latest achievements in the fight against the epidemic. The country has always put the lives and health of its people first, and has also tried its best to help other countries in serious epidemic situations to prevent and control the epidemic.

Example 2: Aylward, who headed the WHO-China Joint Mission on COVID-19 and visited Wuhan, epicenter of the outbreak in China, described China as "the first line of defense for international spread of this virus". He highly praised the country's fundamental control measures, especially placing a lockdown on Wuhan to prevent the further spread of the virus. (2020031101)

The subject of the discourse in the above example is Aylward. Aylward visited Wuhan as a representative of the WHO at the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak and praised China's efforts to combat the epidemic. It was very difficult for Wuhan to go on a city-wide lockdown, but it was a smart move in the face of the outbreak of COVID-19. China's measures to combat the epidemic were extremely strong from the beginning, and it was a very effective move to contain the spread of the COVID-19 from the start. China's move in the face of COVID-19 was also presented from the perspective of others, which was more objective and convincing. The comments made by the international community, and in particular the World Health Organization, about China throughout the fight against the epidemic deserve the reader's attention.

Example 3: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, for instance, has spared no efforts in trying to portray the virus as a threat emanating from China, claiming that China intentionally kept the world in the dark about the seriousness of the situation. (2020033003)

The subject of the discourse in the above example is Mike Pompeo, US Secretary of State. Gans (1980) pointed out that in the news, people often have to make "reality judgment". Since the large-scale outbreak of the COVID-19 firstly appeared in Wuhan, China, although there was no direct relationship between China and COVID-19, there was no shortage of reckless efforts abroad to smear and falsely accuse China in the name of the epidemic. In the face of this major public health event, many people, including many Western leaders, focused heavily on attacking other countries instead of focusing primarily on fighting the epidemic in their own countries and leading their people out of this plight. In fact, China has put a lot of effort into the response to the epidemic, the treatment of the people, and the preparation of medical supplies after the outbreak of COVID-19. China has received both goodwill and false accusations from foreign countries in the midst of statements made by foreign subjects of discourse.

Example 4: The WHO praised China's efforts to contain the virus and said it has earned valuable time for other countries to prevent and control the epidemic. "We would have seen many more cases outside China by now if it were not for the government's efforts," Tedros said at a news conference in Geneva, Switzerland. (2020022601)

The subject of the discourse in the above example is Tedros, who is a representative of the World Health Organization. In *China Daily*, according to AntConc 3.5.8.0, he appears 59 times. Its frequent appearance represented *China Daily's* attention to the voices from the world, on the other hand, it also reflected the World Health Organization's recognition and praise for China. In front of the epidemic, no country can be left alone. The WHO played a leading and commanding role in international public health matters, and China's full attention to the voices from it reflected China's determination and perseverance to actively fight the epidemic. The WHO's recognition and praise of China also objectively reflected the effectiveness of China's fight against the epidemic from another perspective. China has been open and transparent to the international community in its fight against the epidemic, and has achieved great success. This provides a very important channel and way for many readers of *China Daily*, especially foreign readers, to understand the achievements of China's epidemic fighting.

Example 5: The Mexican president said it's critically important that China offered valuable support and assistance to his country at a difficult time as Mexico fights the epidemic. Mexico will remain committed to actively developing relations with China and intensify exchanges and cooperation in such fields as epidemiology and public health. (2020041101)

The subject of the discourse in this example sentence is the president of Mexico. Fairclough (1992) wrote in his book that "Political speeches are often transformed into news reports." In the coverage on COVID-19, Leaders' speeches also often had a pivotal role. During the COVID-19, China actively taught other countries its own experience in fighting the epidemic while ensuring the process of fighting the epidemic in its own country, and

provided other countries with masks and other materials to fight the epidemic. For public health, China had given very much attention and invested a lot of energy. At the same time, in the spirit of the community of human destiny, China had also given humanistic care to other countries. With the president of other countries as the subject of discourse, it was more objective and realistic to illustrate China's role in the process of fighting the epidemic in the world.

Example 6: NBA veteran David West lamented the lack of understanding about China among Americans during a video interview on Aug 18 with Black Agenda Report, an overseas news and opinion website, stressing that Red-Scare tactics no longer work against a country like China. (2020082101)

The subject of the discourse in the above example is David West. News reporting is not always objective, and there are always many subjective elements mixed in it. By using the other as the subject of discourse, the same event can be analyzed from more perspectives, which leads to a more comprehensive conclusion and helps readers understand the full truth of the event. Tuchman (1978) pointed out "the task of news media and news workers, conveying information, remained the same". And keeping the information consistent is also required to ensure the authenticity of the news. He was chosen as the subject of the discourse to give a voice to China from the perspective of the Other, to call for more understanding and objective evaluation of China.

Example 7: But the veteran farmer says that the prices can be better if there are closer links with one of Vietnam's largest dragon fruit markets, China. "We want more Chinese traders to come here to buy," said Phong, who began to grow dragon fruit in 2006. (2020090302)

The subject of the discourse in the above example is the veteran farmer. The impact of COVID-19 on people around the world has been multifaceted, with varying degrees of impact on the economy, finance and even the normal order of daily life. The coverage of Vietnamese farmers in the news reflects the fact that China plays an important role in the international market, and provides China Daily readers with a perspective on the world, allowing them to understand the impact caused by COVID-19 from the eyes of Vietnamese farmers, and making the news narrative more diverse and realistic.

Example 8: Since the COVID-19 outbreak began in the United States, Asian Americans have been under attack by the Trump administration, and more than 2,500 hate incidents against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have been reported to advocacy groups. (2020102702)

The subject of the discourse in the above example is Trump administration and foreign media. The uninformed masses simply combined it with the region after the outbreak of COVID-19, making many Asians abroad discriminated. In the face of science, all ignorance will dissipates. It made readers righteously angry to see that many people have been treated unfairly after the outbreak of COVID-19. Through this subject of discourse, China expresses its concern for the world, especially for Asians Americans. Through this subject of discourse, readers can understand the attitude of people outside China towards COVID-19. The epidemic is not man-made, and as all citizens of the world are victims of COVID-19, they should unite to fight the epidemic together instead of verbal attacks.

Example 9: The Wall Street Journal, in reporting the research on Tuesday, said the results add to "growing evidence" suggesting COVID-19 was present outside of China earlier than previously known. (2020120201)

The subject of the discourse in the above example is the Wall Street Journal. As research on the outbreak of COVID-19 progresses, the cause of COVID-19 is becoming increasingly clear. The results of this study reflected the latest research findings. One can't simply link geography and viruses while facing COVID-19, and attacking each other is not the desirable outcome. It is all people's greatest desire to work together to defeat a common enemy. In the face of it, experts and scholars from all countries, as well as the public, should take serious precautions to fight the epidemic under a unified directive.

#### 4. Discussion

In many cases, the Other is a means of self-construction, and the selection of the Other as the subject of discourse actually aims at shaping the image of the self. Both foreigners in China and other voices from the international community are an important part of China's external voice. People in China had experienced everything firsthand and had more trust and confidence in the socialist system. When speaking out to the outside world, it is not enough to analyze only the subjects of Chinese discourse, such as hospitals, experts, and people, as objective and realistic. This study selects the perspective of the Other in China Daily to analyze the reports related to the 2020 epidemic in order to get more neutral analysis results. The process of analyzing the self from the perspective of the other is also the process of constructing the self. From the above examples, we can see that the subjects of anti-epidemic discourse in *China Daily* are very diverse, and different discourse subjects provide

us with different perspectives on the anti-epidemic situation in China and the world. China's anti-epidemic process and achievements cannot be communicated to the outside world only through its own discourse subjects, such as experts, scholars, leaders and Chinese citizens. With the help of the Other, including WHO, presidents and citizens from other countries, *China Daily* can speak to the outside world in a more objective and realistic way, expressing concerns to the world and shaping its own image.

Gitlin (1980) wrote in his book "The world of news production is not self-enclosed". News discourse is influenced by the position of the person reporting it, the social context, etc., and so is the discourse. Different discourse subjects represent different positions, and this study selected the discourse subjects of the other as richly as possible to analyze the anti-epidemic discourse. Hall (2013) pointed out that in news there was always "ideological reproduction". Therefore, with the diversity of news discourse subjects, readers are also required to be able to objectively analyze and thus understand the truth. In fact, the effectiveness of China's fight against the epidemic is obvious to everyone living in China. However, in the face of COVID-19, there were also voices of doubt and even false accusations against China in the international community. We analyzed the discourse subjects of *China Daily* from the perspective of "the other", in order to provide readers with a broader perspective and a more objective view of the news.

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