News Values and Ideology Construction from the Perspective of Vocabulary

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Abstract. News is not a neutral and transparent medium, but a reflection of social ideology. It reflects and in turn shapes the prevailing values of the society in a particular historical context. The critical analysis of ideology-loaded news reports seeks to expose the ideology hidden in language structure and its relationship with social structure and power manipulation. Systematic functional study proves that language users make different choices in the symbolic system at all levels of language to construct ideology in the discourse of news reports. This study focuses on the relationships between ideology-loaded words and power to unveil the hidden ideology in public discourse to strengthen the anti-control awareness of public discourses.

1. Introduction

News is the carrier of information. The transmission of information through news provides us with a wider world to live in. News is meant to be an objective, impartial, unbiased, and unambiguous recording of world reality. However, media is not independent of ideologies and priorities that are currently operational in society as the world is a social construct. In other words, news reports are unavoidably influenced by domain ideologies, so they implicitly expressed different ideological meanings in a roundabout way to control and affect people’s attitudes. Just as Fowler says, the news produced by media is not a natural phenomenon emerging straight from reality but a product. It is shaped by the bureaucratic and economic structure of the industry, by the relations with government and other political organization. From a broader perspective, it reflects and in turn shapes the prevailing values of the society in a particular historical context.[1] It is therefore apparent that every force related to media is reflected from the inclination of media discourse and language in news reports is not always neutral and credible as it claims to be, but ideology loaded.

The relationship between discourse and ideology has always been the focus for critical discourse analysis, which is derived from critical linguistics, a subject that explores the relations between signs, meanings, and the social and historical conditions which govern semiotic analysis.[2] Within critical linguistics, language is not an objective and transparent transmission medium as claimed by previous linguistics, but a kind of social practice, which not only reflects society but also directly gets involved in the making of social relations. In the specific language analysis, the systematic functional linguistics initiated by Halliday is often applied as the analytical tool from the perspective of critical discourse analysis, which focuses on the description of the linguistic structure of discourse and manages to explain how a discourse fulfills its social and communicative functions. He believes that language itself is a huge and complex symbol system composed of many subsystems. Each subsystem has a set of items for people to choose from, and each option expresses a certain meaning, so any choice indicates a different choice of meaning. In the practice of discourse, language users make different choices in the symbolic system at all levels of language (eg. transitivity, passivization and nominalization, and so on) thereby constructing ideology in the discourse of news reports. [3]

Categorizing things through vocabulary is a commonly used and effective method in the mass media to generate different opinions. The choice of vocabulary can best reflect the speaker or journalist's worldview and his views on the event. Halliday believes that words are the determinants
of concept, which reflect people’s various experiences in the real world and his inner world. It is fair to say that the selected vocabulary unconsciously meets the journalist's ideological needs. To unveil the hidden ideology in public discourse as well as the counteractive influence that the discourse exerts on ideology, the present research attempts to explore the linguistic representation of ideological elements in some news discourses from the perspective of lexical classification.

2. Ideology Construction in Naming

In a news report, a person can have different identities and an event can be reported with different words at the same time. Different options would achieve various social or political purposes and express the journalist’s particular ideological tendencies. For a journalist, an event can be a “demonstration” or “disruption”, and conflict can be “riot” or “uprising” based on his personal opinions and experiences. Naming is the way to project his values to the referent and thus exert impact on his target audiences.

**Case study 1**: What does Starbucks have to do with Hong Kong protests? While Starbucks may be an American brand, the Hong Kong franchises is operated by local company Maxim’s catering. Anny Wu, the daughter of Maxim Group’s founder recently defended Hong Kong police and criticized activists as radical protesters. [4]

This news report refers to those protesters who deliberately attacked police, besieged police stations, sabotaged public facilities, and assaulted innocent people as activists. As is known to all, an activist is a word with positive connotations, referring to a person who works to bring about political or social changes by campaigning in public or working for an organization. By naming them activists, BBC is basically supportive of those people and stand up for their “heroic behavior”, while criticizing the police reactions to protesters as “abuse of force”. The disturbance in Hong Kong in 2019 was triggered by the public opposition toward a proposed bill to close the legal loophole in the city’s fugitive system with the rest of China. It was initially a peaceful protest and took a violent turn when protesters stormed the legislative council on July 1st. There had been lots of public order incidents ever after and thousands were reported injured and economic casualties have been heavy. It makes no sense to call those committing vandalism and looting to shops as “activists.”

Actually, news values are hardly neutral. “Analysis of discourses should focus on wider social practice, which may involve its more immediate situation context, the wider context of institutional practices the event is embedded within or the yet wider frame of the society and culture.[5] All of these layers may be relevant to understanding the particular event, it is therefore of great value to get to know the profound social context in which the news events take place and realize the implied meaning of the news discourse. BBC is the world’s leading public service broadcast, who claims to act in the public interest, serving all audience through the provision of impartial, high-quality, and distinctive output and services. It is clear that BBC did not fulfill its mission when it comes to the Hong Kong coverage. The words used in the disturbance report here are obviously ideology-loaded.

Naming selection is a usual way to construct ideology. People use name classification to give order to the world. The process of naming is referred as the textual “referential strategy”, which specifies the essence of its intentional choice of words based on the subjective value judgment of the speaker.[6]

3. Ideology Construction in Predicative Expressions

Predicates can indicate the characteristics of a person or thing. Sometimes, a sentence may have more than one propositions, for example, Sully has put on a lot of weight after his painful divorce with his second wife. There are several propositions here: Sully gained a lot of weight; Sully divorced; Sully went through some hard time and Sully had been married twice. If we take into account all the propositional structures that are expressed or implied, the predicates in the text are not just grammatical predicates in the sentence, but also include many attributive and complementary adjectives, prepositional phrases, participle phrases, appositives and other structural
elements. The choice of all these predicates will have an impact in the process of textual ideology construction.

**Case study 2:** “In Hong Kong, daring escapes from a violent siege at a university.”[4]

As in the case of Hong Kong protest in 2019, the New York Times published a story with the headline “In Hong Kong, daring escapes from a violent siege at a university” on Monday, November the 18th in its coverage of the campus standoff. As is known to all, daring indicates bold, courageous or adventurous. These are all adjectives with positive connotations. According to the article, it sounds like the students inside the campus should be celebrated for their bravery. However, the real context of this event is that an unknown number of protesters and rioters started occupying parts of the Hong Kong Polytechnic campus, and the situation escalated later as rioters tried to phase off police using a variety of improvised weapons and dangerous items. Given the context, it makes no sense in this case to use the word daring in the report of this event. The predicate escape is also misleading that readers may kind of feel that those daring students are innocent and brave social activists who were forced into corners and left with no choice but to escape in the autocratic regime. But the truth is there is no need for them to escape. The police offered one way out on the condition that they drop their weapons. Despite running out of the options, the students fear they will be arrested if they obey the police’s instructions to drop their weapons and leave through the designated exit. However, it is a legitimate and common practice for any police forces in the world to refuse rioters to walk out armed with weapons, to arrest rioters who hijacked a university and turned it into a weapon factory. It is impossible in any country for people to ransack a place and get away with it. By glamorizing those who broke the law, whatever the motivation is, whether they are students or not, the New York Times, unfortunately failed to tell the true story.

**Case study 3:** “Hong Kong protesters made the last stand as police closed in on besieged university.”[4]

In this news report, by using “the last stand”, the headline portrays those protesters as some kind of gallant heroes who were faced with overwhelming odds. The article later mentioned that “the students are trapped inside.” The word trapped makes it sounds like they are helpless victims without any option to leave the campus, but the truth is these people have made great damage and harm to the city and stayed inside the campus to avoid arrest. Basically, they are trapped by their own criminal behavior. By phrasing the beginning of the story, the journalist is hinting to the reader who the good guys are and who the bad guys are in the event. The journalist’s ideological stand is therefore obvious in these overwhelmingly negative reports of China.

Meaning is constructed on the service of power. The media function to maintain the dominance of those already in positions of power. One should shape his own opinion when observing such a context within the information from any source. It is essential for the readers of mass media to realize the hidden information involved in the forms of news discourses and to develop a more sensitive awareness of the “hard facts”.

**Case study 4:** Petrol bombs tossed at Police in Hong Kong amid clashes, thousands take part in the banned march that turned violent as hardcore protesters clash with police.[4]

The word toss is tricky in this news report. To toss something means to throw it lightly and often in a rather careless way, which is often used with a ball, a piece of paper or a blanket. People hurl or throw petrol bombs rather than go around tossing petrol bombs. And the word hardcore is defined as unswervingly committed, uncompromising, dedicated, which is pretty aspirational. It is actually a slang form for extreme or intense, usually reserved for hobbies like hardcore punk music fan. The people involved in violence can’t be called hardcore protesters. It is not hard to infer the ideology loaded in this report. Vocabulary selection in this news report is subject to a particular ideology rather than being conducted randomly or accidentally. It is a matter of choice for journalists in determining which word is employed or which word is suppressed in vocabulary selection. This process may be consciously or unconsciously influenced by the ideology of the social group to which the journalists go on, which explicitly or implicitly reflect their ideological stances and their attitudes towards the events and people concerned. [7]
Most media critics and CBA practitioners believe that the mainstream media do not safeguard the independence and integrity of the news service, but rather is constrained by the economic, political and institutional ownership context which prevents media from giving objective report. In their news reports on international events, mainstream media’s representations, for the most part, correspond to their country’s foreign policies and embody general stereotypes and prejudice against other countries. Though desirable, absolute objectivity and impartiality are not attainable in news reporting. There is no “reality”, but “the intention of making a reality.”

4. Ideology Construction in Rhetoric Choices

Rhetorical methods are often used in news for the purpose of expressiveness of the event being reported. Rhetoric is to polish language by means of selection and adjustment of language materials so as to effectively communicate and express ideas. Appropriate use of some rhetorical means in news reports can increase the artistic effect of language expression and successfully disseminate news information. Sonja K. Foss defines rhetoric as "the act of using symbols to communicate" and ideology as " ideas and belief systems determining a group’s interpretation of the world".[8] She believes that different groups have different ideologies and one of them will gain “hegemony” over others in a certain culture and guide people’s behavior. In order to maintain its status, the dominant ideology will inevitably strengthen and defend itself by means of rhetorical approaches. Therefore, "the rhetorical criticism of ideology is to identify the various groups in power and the ideologies behind".[8] The common rhetoric devices in news reports are similes, metaphors, euphemisms, puns, parody, etc, which are important in the introduction of ideology.

Case study 5: That should be a worrying prospect for China, a would-be great power whose current phase of growth is associated with an increasingly aggressive military posture and a tsunami of capital spending in its strategic neighborhood.[9]

In 2013, President Xi Jinping initiated the idea of the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "reconstruction of Maritime Silk Road in the 21st century" during his visit to Central and Southeast Asian countries, which is also referred as the "Belt and Road Initiative". Over the past six years, the “Belt and Road” initiative has achieved great results and attracted the attention of media from all over the world. In this sentence, the Washington Post compares China's investment in neighboring countries to "tsunami", implying that China's investment in neighboring countries is excessively huge, which may bring a tsunami-like disaster to the recipient country.

Case study 6: Indeed, to many, Beijing's dream of a new future is starting to look uncomfortably like nightmares of the past.[9]

In this news report, "Beijing's dream for a new future" refers to the widespread acceptance of the "Belt and Road" initiative which is believed to benefit all mankind, while "past nightmare" refers to the history of the colonization of Southeast Asian countries. This sentence uses an analogy to compare the “Belt and Road” initiative to a means of Chinese colonization, and believes that China’s promotion of the “Belt and Road” initiative is not for world peace and development, but for the pursuit of hegemony. The Washington Post implies that China’s big concern is to boost the domestic economy and maintain social stability as well as to increase its influence on other countries so as to lead and even take over the world. But in reality, China has always been committed to working with other countries to promote world economic and trade development and build a community with a shared future for mankind. However, the accusation of China's hegemony in the western media has never stopped.

5. Ideology Loaded in Presuppositions

Presupposition is what the speaker must satisfy in order to ensure the appropriateness of the his utterance or sentence.[6] In other words, it is something that is believed to be true and used as the beginning of an argument even though it has not been proved. Sometimes, presupposition is not the information that the speaker and the recipient know, but the information that is naturally agreed with under the persuasion of the speaker, which is a typical pragmatic presupposition.
For another example, Sinkiang has always been one of the main topics of foreign media reports on China due to its special geographical location and ethnic composition. Chinese and foreign media have presented dualism in reports of Sinkiang issues. In mainland China, official media usually condemn violent terrorist activities in Sinkiang and support the anti-terrorism policy, while western media usually justify or express sympathy for violent terrorist activities in Sinkiang. This duality of public opinion on Sinkiang issues is the natural consequence of intensive ideology confrontations.

Case study 7: Beijing, wary of instability and the threat to the Communist Party’s grip on power, often blames what it calls violent separatist groups in Sinkiang for attacks on police or other government targets.[10]

In this sentence, "instability" is derived from the clause "Sinkiang is not stable." The expression in the clause may be true or not. Readers are aware that this is the author's point of view, but the statement constitutes a presupposition after the clause is nominalized into "the instability of Sinkiang." The journalist regards the "instability in Sinkiang region" as a fact or something that must happen, so as to realize pragmatic presupposition and implicitly impose this meaning on readers. It is not hard to find out that a large number of abstract noun entities are used in news reports by means of nominalization to affect readers' ideology. The extensive use of the abstract terms will make readers ignore the time, place and person of the event and mistake it for a concept with true values. These nominalized words account for a considerable proportion of the western news discourse. They are highly deceptive for the nominalized term helps to objectify the event and therefore misguide its readers.

6. Conclusions

The media uses language to influence people's ideology, so as to achieve the purpose of power control. The utterance of news, wherever they are from, is to serve the purpose of media persuasion. The process of reporting is actually a social process which is constrained by the idea of dominant groups in power. Journalism, therefore, is essentially ideological, which is “a communicative vehicle for the transmission to an audience (intentionally or otherwise) not just for facts but of the assumptions, attitudes, beliefs and values of its makers, drawn from and expressive of a particular world-view.”[5] There are more than one way to understand and interpret events (even the most apparent facts) as journalism is actually an “arena for struggle between competing ways of sense-making; an expression and reflection of the ideological ‘balance of forces’ in a given society.”[5] Vocabulary selection is an important aspect of news discourse and the core of ideology. The choice of vocabulary affects people's perception of events. Authors with different ideologies and values will choose different vocabulary to express the world they experience. By studying the choice of words in the text, we can understand the ideology behind the text and the author's position and viewpoints. Critical discourse analysis uses critical approach to reveal the implicit relationship between language and ideology through language forms and how the dominant class uses language to maintain ideological control and protect their rights. It is highly necessary to make a critical interpretation of the news and keep sober-minded when reading news reports as to strengthen the anti-control awareness of public discourses.

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