A Study of Speech in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Conference on COVID-19 and the Construction of National Image from the Perspective of Proximization Theory

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Abstract: Based on proximization theory, this paper analyzes the spokesperson's speeches of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on COVID-19, and the national image of China reflected in it. By using the software AntConc to retrieve the corpus, we analyze three dimensions of proximization theory---spatial, temporal and axiological proximization to find the construction of China's national image. The research shows that, in terms of spatial, temporal and axiological strategies, the national image of China shaped by diplomatic discourse is mainly characterized by being responsible, loving peace, and pursuing win-win cooperation. This study provides a new idea for the construction of national image through proximization theory.

1. Introduction

The novel coronavirus pandemic which has emerged at the end of 2019 had become the focus around the world. In this epidemic, Chinese people have united as one to fight the virus and actively promoted international control measures, which have won high recognition and praise from the international community. However, some western countries and media have stigmatized China, which has a bad influence to the country's national image. How to focus on valuable discourse in news reports, and guide people to think deeply about public speech have become the key point to the current research (Li Zhanzi, 2020:1)[6].

Proximization theory, a new approach to critical discourse analysis, refers to a discursive strategy that indirectly and negatively presents spatially and temporally separated entities to both speaker and listener (Cap, 2014:17)[4]. This article will use Cap's proximization theory as a framework, and choose spokesperson's speeches of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC on COVID-19 as the corpus to further explore how diplomatic discourse constructs the national image of China.

2. Literature Review

In recent years, proximization theory, as a new method of discourse analysis, has gradually become a hot spot in academic field. Wu Jianguo (2016) [11]first introduced this theory proposed by Cap into China, and explained the concept, theoretical basis, research methods and prospects by tracking the literature of Cap, and used the theory to analyze and interpret the anti-terrorist discourse, environmental discourse, medical discourse and other public discourses. Zhang Tianwei (2016)[15] used proximization theory to conduct a case analysis of the construction of the discourse system of political leaders. Yan Bing and Zhang Hui (2018) [13]combined the corpus to conduct a critical analysis of the language strategy of proximization in the spatial, temporal and axiological axis of the corpus about Sino-US trade in the mainstream websites of China, Britain and the United States. However, there is no research on the analysis of diplomatic discourse of China Ministry of Foreign Affairs from the perspective of proximization theory.

The concept of "national image" was first proposed by Kenneth Boulding (1959)[1]. He believed that national image is a combination of a country's perception of itself and other actors in the international system. Many domestic scholars have also conducted in-depth researches on national image.Tang Guanghong (2004)[9] believes that country image is the overall evaluation and judgment of a country by the external public and internal public. Liu Jinan and He Hui (2006)[7] refer to national image as subjective impression and overall perception. Sun Youzhong (2009) [8]pointed out that national image is the understanding and evaluation of a country's internal and external public on the country's political, economic, social, cultural and geographical conditions. In addition, some studies also conduct researches on national image from the aspects of cognitive linguistics, translation studies, and discourse analysis. Zeng Guang, Liang Xiaobo (2017)[14] analyzed the corpus from the perspective of multimodal metaphor. Wu Yun (2019)[12]expounded the construction of the national image self from the perspective of translation studies. Wang Hui, Xin Bin (2019)[10] based on the theory of critical discourse analysis, studied the discourse strategies of media in the construction of national image.

To sum up, there is no research to analyze the spokesperson's speeches on COVID-19 by using proximization theory to do the self-construction of national image. Therefore, this article is based on the proximization theory (Cap, 2006)[2], using the diplomatic discourse of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on COVID-19 as the corpus, and applying AntConc software to mainly discuss the following three issues: (1) What proximization strategies are applied in the corpus of diplomatic discourse? What are the characteristics of each of these strategies? (2) How does diplomatic discourse construct the country's image through proximization theory? (3) What kind of national image does diplomatic discourse construct through proximization theory?

3. Theoretical Basis and Analytical Framework

3.1 Proximization Theory

On the basis of Chilton's (2004)[5] discourse space theory, Cap proposed a new method of conflict discourse and coercion discourse— proximization theory. This theory refers to a discursive strategy that indirectly and negatively presents to the speaker and the listener a space-time-separated entity, including a distant hostile ideology (Cap, 2006)[2]. The proximization theory refers to the threat from the edge entity of the discourse space as the external entity of the instruction center (ODC), and the entity can penetrate the discourse space to invade the internal entity of the instruction center (IDC). Proximization can be divided into spatial, temporal and axiological approximation; Spatial proximization refers to the invasion of entities at the edge of discourse space to central entities; temporal proximization brings past and future conflicts closer to the current time; axiological

proximization is the central entity inside the space and the entity at the edge of the discourse space in value, forming a conflict (Cap, 2010)[3].

3.2 Analysis Framework

According to the proximization theory of Cap (2006)[2], this paper will solve the above research problems from three dimensions. First, through the identification and labeling of the corpus, exploring the distribution of the three dimensions; second, through the distribution, explaining China's attitudes and concepts towards COVID-19; finally, the national image is the external expression of ideology, based on analysis of discursive practices, explaining the reasons for positive or negative coverage in the present, and exploring nation-building. The analytical framework of this study is shown in figure1. It is hoped that this study will allow the international community to understand China more truly and comprehensively, enhance China's voice in international world.
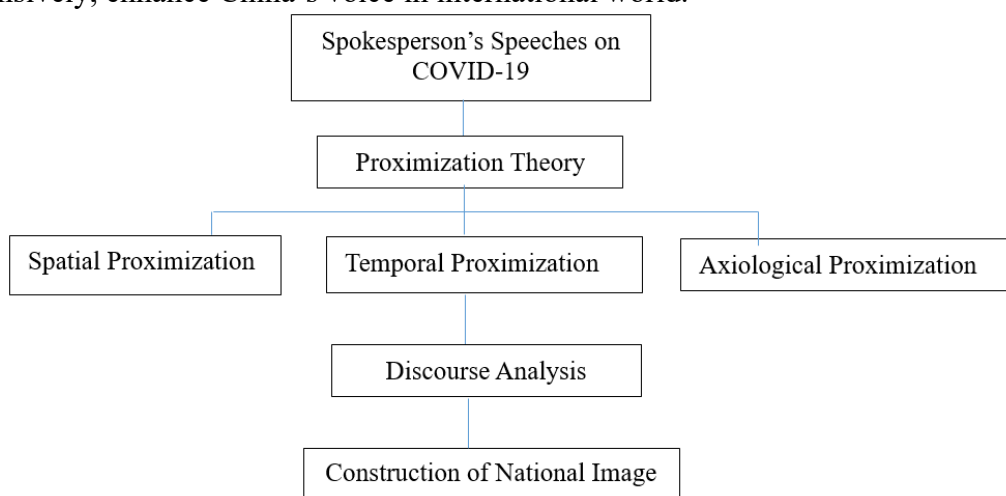

Figure 1: Analytical Framework

4. Example Analysis

4.1 Data and Research Methods

News media is an important way to construct national image. Diplomatic discourse is an important carrier that connects the country with the world and conveys value orientation of the nation. This article selects 50 diplomatic speeches on COVID-19 epidemic from the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC (https://www.fmprc.gov.cn) from January 2020 to December 2021, using AntConc to build a small corpus for quantitative and qualitative researches. The corpus contains a total of 12805 words. The salience of different strategies is analyzed by counting the frequency of items such as vocabulary, grammar and key words.

4.2 The Spatial Proximization Analysis

The use of spatial proximization strategies is presented in table one. The following are the phrases and the frequency used in spokesperson's speeches of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, see Table 1.

As shown in Table 1, the proportion of noun phrases interpreted as IDCs in diplomatic discourse is the highest, accounting for 5.7%. Among them,"China/Government/Chinese citizens"appear more frequently, reflecting that the overall command of this epidemic is the Chinese government, the main force is the"Chinese citizens". In contrast, the noun phrase--- "virus and COVID-19", which are

understood as ODCs, have a lower proportion, only 1.83%. Specific examples are as follows.

Example 1:"The Chinese nation is known for its perseverence and resilience. We have every confidence that with the resolute leadership of the CPC, the enormous strength of socialism with Chinese characteristics and the strong support from the international community, the Chinese people, fighting with one heart and mind, will definitely win the battle against the outbreak and overcome any difficulty lying ahead to realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."(Hua Chunying, 2020.1.31)

Table 1: Key Items of Spatial Proximization Framework

Category	Key items	Frequency
Noun phrases (NPs) construed as elements of the deictic center of the DS (IDCs)	China/Government/ Chinese citizens/ Chinese authorities/ Chinese people/Chinese nation	2.12%
	we/us	1.62%
	experts/scientists	0.60%
	Wuhan health authorities/ World Health Organization/global health security	1.21%
Total		5.7%
Noun phrases (NPs) construed as elements outside the deictic center of the DS (ODCs)	virus/ epidemic/novel coronavirus	1.2%
	cases/ carriers/ infected/contacts	0.13%
	COVID-19/major infectious diseases/plague	0.5%
Total		1.83%
Verb phrases (VPs) of motion and directionality construed as markers of movement of ODCs towards the deictic center	US officials shift the blame/covering up/denigrate Chinese government/stigmatize/ blame/smearing/erase/complaining/attack	0.2%
Total		0.2%
Verb phrases (VPs) of action construed as markers of impact of ODCs upon IDCs	threat/damage/challenge/spread/ cause/ impose/carnage/human-to-human infection/confirmed cases/racist remarks	0.17%
Total		0.17%
Noun phrases (NPs) denoting abstract concepts construed as anticipations of impact of ODCs upon IDCs	danger/ risk/ crisis/ outbreak	0.2%
	spread/ challenge/ human-to-human transmission	0.12%
	origin	0.35%
Total		0.67%
Noun phrases (NPs) denoting abstract concepts construed as effects of impact of ODCs upon IDCs	illness/disease/death/impact/fatigue	0.2%
	prejudice/stigmatization/politicization/accusation	0.16%
Total		0.36%

Hua Chunying's speech showed that under the leadership of Chinese government, Chinese people are united and will defeat COVID-19 epidemic. It embodies China's confidence and courage in resolutely fighting the virus, and at the same time builds China's image as a responsible country.

4.3 The Tempral Proximization Analysis

Table 2: Key Items of Tempral Proximization Framework

Category	Key items	Frequency
Noun phrase (NPs) involving indefinite descriptions construing ODC actual impact acts in alternative temporal frames	since the outbreak/at the same time/a short period of time/yesterday	0.2%
	at once/in a timely manner/in time	0.1%
Total		0.3%
Discourse forms involving contrastive use of the simple past and the present perfect construing threatening future extending infinitely from a past instant	did/have done	3.5%
Total		3.5%
VPs involving modal auxiliaries construing conditions for ODC impact as existing continually between the now and the infinite future	could/should/can/may/must	1.21%
Discourse forms involving parallel contrastive construals of oppositional and privileged futures extending from the now	but/ however	0.24%
Total		1.5%

As shown in Table 2, in the speeches, the past tense and perfect tense of tempral strategy are used more frequently, accounting for 3.5%. By using these tenses, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs wants to show that after the outbreak of the epidemic, although it has affected the lives of residents to a certain extent, Chinese government and people have always actively taken measures to defeat the virus.

Example 2:"What I want to emphasize is that the new coronavirus is a brand new virus, and its discovery and recognition require a process. After we came to the preliminary conclusion, we notified relevant parties as soon as possible, showing a responsible attitude. China's anti-epidemic actions are open to the world."(ZhaoLi jian, 2020.6.23)

From Zhao Lijian's speech, we can see that from the very beginning to the present, Chinese government has been actively responding and maintaining contact with the international community to make data and information open and transparent, which shows that China has always upheld the attitude and position of a community with a shared future for mankind.

4.4 The Axiological Proximization Analysis

From the statistics in table 3, we can see that the frequency of positive axiological strategy in diplomatic discourse is 3.7%. Among them, noun phrases that are understood to be positive values of IDCs have a frequency of use as high as 1.88%, and words such as "measures/actions/move", which indicate that the Chinese government is actively fighting the epidemic, are most frequently used at 1.7%, reflecting the government's timely and effective actions to restrict the epidemic spread

domestically and abroad.

Example 3: "During the meeting, China and 28 countries jointly launched the Initiative for Belt and Road Partnership on COVID-19 Vaccines Cooperation, calling for stronger cooperation in vaccine assistance, export and joint production."(WangWen bin)(2021.08.02)

In the discourse, the word "stronger cooperation" aims to remind everyone that the epidemic is an international threat, and people all over the world should work together to fight the epidemic. These positive judgments better reflect the image of China as a country that loves peace and values cooperation and development.

Table 3: Key Items of Axiological Proximization Framework

Category	Key items	Frequency
Noun phrases (NPs) construed as IDC positive values or value sets (ideologies)	measures/manners/prevention/efforts/action/disease /prevention/move	1.7%
	a high sense of responsibility; open/openness/transparency	0.18%
	contribute to regional and global public health;put the people's life and health first;with a shared future	1.02%
	cooperation	0.8%
Total		3.7%
Noun phrases (NPs) construed as ODC negative values or value sets (ideologies)	China virus/Wuhan virus/ /political virus/information virus	0.35%
	laboratory leakage/ China's biological warfare program	0.14%
	lies/rumors/prejudice	0.1%
Total		0.8%

5. Conclusion

This paper uses the spokespersons' speeches of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC on COVID-19 as a corpus and analyzes the application of proximization theory. Studies have shown that the speeches released by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs focus on spatial and temporal strategies, supplemented by axiological strategies. On the spatial axis, the speech classified the countries of the world as internal entities and the COVID-19 as external entities, and used a series of action verbs to respond to the risks, showing the country as a responsible image. On the temporal axis, the spokesperson's remarks applied the simple future tense and the present perfect tense to explain the impact of the epidemic and speculate on the possible harm in the future, and used a large number of modal verbs to call on all countries of the world to work together to fight the epidemic and shape China's image of a friendly and peace-loving country. On the axiological axis, the speech interprets international cooperation as a positive value, and the negative impact of the epidemic as a negative value, and builds China's national image as a country of positive, justice and win-win cooperation. This study provides feasibility for the analysis of international positive political discourse by using the proximization theory, and it also provides a basis for integrating Chinese voices into the international community, and promoting the international community's understanding of the real China. In future research, we will combine corpus methods and compare news reports from multiple countries in order to open up more new paths for discourse research.

Acknowledgement

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