

A Positive Discourse Analysis of Reports on “Gansu Earthquake” from the Perspective of Appraisal Theory

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Abstract

From the perspective of the appraisal theory, this paper conducts a positive discourse analysis on the news related to the "Gansu Earthquake", aiming to explore the characteristics of attitude resources' distribution in relevant news and the characteristics of the national and social image constructed by them. The research results indicate that judgment resources appear most frequently among the reports, followed by appreciation resources, and finally, affect resources. These resources collectively construct a positive image of the country and society. It is united and helpful, efficient and responsible, people-oriented, actively responding to crises, and possessing social cohesion and emergency response capabilities. This study helps to enhance Chinese people's sense of identity and belonging to the country.

Keywords

The appraisal theory, Attitude resources, Positive discourse analysis, National and social image.

1. Introduction

Nowadays we are living in the information era and the news media play a key role in shaping public cognition and guiding public opinion, especially in shaping and showing the images of the country and society. In particular, after three years of fighting against the covid-19, the Chinese people, full of hope and enthusiasm, are working hard to get out of the predicament and welcome the dawn of a new life.

However, the 6.2-magnitude earthquake hit Gansu's Jishishan county on December 18, 2023. Once again people's attention focused on major social events. Therefore, it is crucial to guide the public on how to perceive the relevant events.

In such case of natural disasters, the ways of reporting and contents of news will not only affect the public's opinion and attitude towards the events directly, but also shape the image of the country and society, thus having a profound impact on the social solidarity. Therefore, this study, from the perspective of the appraisal *theory*, conducts a positive discourse analysis of the news about the Gansu earthquake on People's Daily Online, aiming to explore the linguistic features reflected in relevant reports and the characteristics of national and social images behind them.

At the academic level, the research can not only enrich the application of theories in this field but also provide theoretical support for the discourse strategies for the media in disaster reporting so that they can better play the role of information transmission and public opinion guidance. At the same time, at the practical level, analyzing the images of Chinese society during natural disasters, this study is conducive to bringing hope and confidence to the affected people, bringing positive social energy to the whole country, enhancing the courage and confidence of the people to overcome difficulties, enhancing the sense of national identity, and promoting the construction of a harmonious society.

2. Literature Review

This chapter will put forward the theoretical basis of this research and summarize the relevant domestic researches in the past five years so as to make the contents of the research more clear.

2.1. Theoretical Basis

The author chose “positive discourse analysis” as the keywords to search the domestic journals in the past five years on CNKI. The statistics indicate that 31.9% of the research perspectives in this field are based on the *appraisal theory*. Thus, it can be seen that positive discourse analysis with the *appraisal theory* is feasible and scientific. Therefore, the positive discourse analysis of “Gansu earthquake” news reports is also carried out based on the *appraisal theory*.

The *appraisal theory* was put forward by the scholar Martin in the 1990s as a new development in systemic-functional linguistics that allows us to understand and analyze language more deeply.

The focus of this theory lies in “evaluation”, which means that evaluation not only stays in the superficial meaning of language, but also considers the deep meaning beyond the superficial meaning, which is interpretive.

The *appraisal system* includes three sub-systems, *attitude*, engagement and graduation system. The focus of this paper is on *attitude system* which is subsystematized into affect, judgement and appreciation resources. Among them, affect resources are the category of response in psychology, which is the response to actions, texts, processes and phenomena, for example, “I’m very excited and looking forward to it because it is my first time to participate in such an activity.” Judgement resources belong to the category of ethics, which is to evaluate the behavior of language users according to ethical and moral standards, for example, “I think this is a very wise and responsible decision.” Appreciation resources belong to the aesthetic category, for example “The novel has a tight and engaging plot and vivid characters.”

Through the combination of words and the *appraisal theory*, we can grasp the psychological state, moral evaluation and aesthetic orientation of language users more accurately. This theory provides us with a powerful tool to reveal the deep meaning behind language.

2.2. Relevant Domestic Researches

The author has searched on cnki with the keywords “positive discourse analysis”, and the relevant researches in the past five years are summarized as follows.

In terms of the research perspective, as mentioned above, it is based on the *appraisal theory* occupying significant position in the field of positive discourse analysis. For example, Lu Yang (2020:88-93), under the framework of the *appraisal theory*, investigated the three semantic evaluation resources of attitude, engagement and graduation resources in Gu Hongming's English translations of *The Analects of Confucius* and *The Doctrine of the Mean*, focusing on analyzing the positive meanings from the lexical level.

Guo Ming, Zhong Meisong, and Lu Junlong (2022:84-88) used the *appraisal theory* to label the attitude resources and its subsystems in news discourses about “Chinese Dream” on Xinhuanet, summarized the linguistic characteristics the reports and guided readers to dig out the hidden meanings in news discourses.

In addition, there are other research perspectives. For example, Luo Xuanmin and Cao Yunzhi (2023:103-113), taking Zhu Ziqing's prose *Spring* as an example, conducted a positive discourse analysis on it from the perspectives of spatial proximization, temporal proximization and axiological proximization.

In recent years, the researches on national image have gradually attracted the attention of scholars. Based on the *appraisal theory*, Wang Zhihong and Zhan Quanwang (2023:80-87)

conducted a positive discourse analysis of the English version of *China: Democracy That Works* and explored the attitude resources and the national image of China constructed by that.

Zhou Xiaochun (2023:12-15) conducted a positive discourse analysis on the reports on carbon peak and carbon neutrality released by China Daily through high-frequency notional words, collocation network of high-frequency words and concordance lines, and deeply interpreted the national image of China.

However, in spite of the increasing researches in the field of positive discourse analysis, there are still relatively few studies on the construction of national and social images. The current researches mainly focus on external transmission, while the researches for domestic education is insufficient. China's president Xi Jinping emphasizes the need to focus on the cultivation of modern Chinese civilization and building a shared spiritual home for the Chinese nation, and promote our national spirit centered on patriotism and the spirit of our times built upon reform and innovation, so as to increase our sense of identity and pride in the Chinese nation. Hence, it can be seen that such internal education is equally important.

Therefore, this study aims to highlight the positive images of China when the society suffers from major disasters. Through positive discourse analysis, it can convey positive social energy to the Chinese people and enhance their sense of identity and pride in their country. This not only helps to enhance the soft power of Chinese culture, but also is an important part of domestic education, and is of great significance to the construction of the modern civilization of the Chinese nation.

3. Research Design

This study will focus on the following two questions.

What are the distribution characteristics of attitude resources in the reports about the "Gansu Earthquake" ?

What kind of national and social image does China Daily construct when reporting the "Gansu Earthquake"?

As a leading comprehensive media in China, China Daily has a wide range of influence and authority. With the keywords "Gansu Earthquake" and "Earthquake Gansu", the author searched reports on China Daily with the time range limited from December 18, 2023 to December 25, 2023 to ensure that the news obtained is timely and relevant, and selected 10 pieces of news randomly as the corpus.

In order to better analyze these reports, UAM Corpus Tool 6, a professional software, was used in this study to build a small corpus. This software has been widely used in academic researches, with high reliability and accuracy, and can help researchers to conduct efficient and accurate quantitative analysis.

By using UAM Corpus Tool 6, this study will conduct a discourse analysis of these 10 reports from the perspective of the *appraisal theory* by combining quantitative analysis with qualitative analysis. Among them, quantitative analysis refers to finding the distribution of attitude resources by figures, and qualitative analysis is used to identify and classify attitude resources in related reports and interpret their distribution characteristics.

4. Results and Discussion

There are rich attitude resources in the news reports on "Gansu Earthquake" selected in this study. They play an important role in the reports and actively shape different national images.

4.1. Quantitative Analysis of Attitude Resources

The author used UAM Corpus Tool 6 to manually annotate the corpus related to “Gansu earthquake”. Through careful annotation work, the author found out the distribution characteristics of judgement resources, appreciation resources and affect resources. As shown in Table 1, judgment resources appear most frequently, up to 32 times, followed by appreciation resources, a total of 23 times, while affect resources appear relatively less, only 15 times. This data shows the frequency and importance of different resources in shaping the national image. Next, the author will conduct further qualitative analysis on the overall situation of attitude resources and the distribution of those three resources.

Table 1: The Distribution of Attitude Resources in News Reports

Attitude Resources	Number	Percentage (%)
Affect Resources	15	21.4
Judgement Resources	32	45.7
Appreciation Resources	23	32.9
Total	70	100

4.2. Qualitative Analysis of Attitude Resources

When reporting the news, reporters show obvious imbalance in the use of attitude resources. Specifically, judgment and appreciation resources occupy a large proportion in the reports, while affect resources are relatively less used due to their strong subjectivity. This strategy of distribution shows that reporters generally avoid using excessive emotional expressions to make news reports more objective and neutral. And according to the data, there is no significant difference in the use frequency of judgment and appreciation resources in the reports. This shows that news reporters not only pay attention to evaluating the news from the perspective of ethics and morality, but also do not ignore the consideration of aesthetic and non-aesthetic perspectives, which makes the reporting more comprehensive.

To sum up, when using attitude resources, news reporters not only pay attention to maintaining impartiality, objectivity and persuasion, but also strive to strike a balance between ethics and aesthetics. The application of this strategy enables reports not only to state facts, but also to guide the public to form correct value judgment and aesthetic orientation.

4.2.1. An Analysis of Affect Resources

Affect refers to the expression of people's emotions and feelings, which is usually realized by the psychological process, and sometimes through the relational process (Si Xianzhu and Xu Tingting, 2011:17). The frequency of affect resources' appearing is not high, only 15 times. The essence of news reporting is to convey information objectively and impartially. Although the use of emotion is not frequently in news reporting, the inclusion of emotion can endow the discourse with deeper emotion, thus arousing the resonance of readers and narrowing the distance between them and the reporter. This kind of emotional resonance not only enhances the appeal and attraction of news reports, but also enables readers to understand and feel the stories and characters behind the news more deeply. At the same time, the use of affect resources is also an important means to shape the image of the country and society.

For example: “Villagers also used tricycles to help each other transport daily articles between the tents and the prefabricated houses,” said Ma Zhiying, a villager of Chenjia village. “I felt quite warm from my fellow villagers as well as the strength and power of our country.”

This example is a quote from Ma Zhiying, a villager from Chenjiacun, during an interview. He said he felt both warmth from and the strength of the country during the earthquake as villagers helped each other deliver daily supplies.

The word “warm” in this sentence depicts the picture of people in earthquake areas helping each other. This warm affect resource conveys mutual support, love and trust among people and pride in the country in the face of disaster. This spirit of solidarity shows the humanistic care and social cohesion in the national image.

Moreover, “the strength and power of our country” implies the villagers' pride of being born in China and expresses their trust in their country. In the face of such natural disasters, the country's quick response, strong organization and effective rescue made the villagers deeply feel the strength and warmth of the country. This power is not only material support, but also spiritual encouragement and support. It makes the affected people no longer lonely in the face of disaster, and have more courage and confidence to face difficulties. This kind of trust and pride in the country also reflects China's national image. China is powerful, and responsible for its people, and has shown the “Chinese strength”. China not only acted quickly after the disaster, providing necessary rescue and support to the affected areas, but also helped the affected areas return to normal life as soon as possible. This positive and responsible national images convey unlimited expectations to the people in the earthquake area.

4.2.2. An Analysis of Judgement Resources

Judgment resources are primarily used to convey how language users make positive or negative evaluations of certain behaviors according to different moral principles. According to statistics, the judgment resources in the corpus account for 45.7% of the attitude resources, which is the most frequently used resource. This kind of high frequency use not only reflects the author or speaker's evaluation of a specific behavior, but also deeply reveals the multi-dimensional images of the country.

Example 1: They received meal boxes provided by local authorities and beef noodles cooked by volunteers from a private company.

In Chenjia Village, the villagers received timely assistance in times of crisis. They received lunch boxes issued by the local government, which clearly reflects the government's deep care and rapid response to the affected people, highlighting the country's attention to livelihood issues, and shows the image of the country being responsible for and caring about the people. In addition, the phrase “provided by” clearly points to the role of volunteers in private companies in disaster relief. They provided much food that is needed for the affected residents. This shows that under the leadership of the Chinese government, members of the whole society have shared social responsibilities, actively practiced civic consciousness, and formed a powerful relief force. On the whole, this example not only highlights the leading role of the government, but also affirms the important contribution of social forces, and jointly creates a bright social image of the Chinese people's solidarity and mutual help in overcoming difficulties.

Example 2: Meanwhile, rescue teams braved the winter chill to continue their search for survivors.

Meanwhile, rescue teams continue to search for survivors in spite of the cold winter . The description highlights the bravery and tenacity of rescue teams who did not hesitate to put their own safety at risk even with the harsh weather and the threat of aftershocks. This kind of behavior fully demonstrates Chinese people are not afraid of sacrifices. They are brave and selfless. Under the leadership of the Chinese government, the rescue teams adhere to the people-centered work philosophy and always put the safety of people's lives and property first, which not only reflects the the government's respect for life, but also demonstrates the protection of people's right to survival. This firm determination and efficient actions have jointly shaped the social image of the Chinese government in crisis management, which is efficient, responsible and people-oriented.

4.2.3. An Analysis of Appreciation Resources

Appreciation resources are also an important subsystem of attitude resources, which are used to express our evaluation of things. There are 23 appreciation resources included in this corpus, accounting for 32.9% of attitude resources. These resources not only reflect the author's evaluation of things, but also further reflect the national and social images.

Example 1: The substantial difference between day and night temperatures in Jishishan made the search and rescue operation more challenging.

In this sentence, the appreciation resource “challenging” is used to describe the difficulties of search and rescue work. This word not only highlights the difficulty of the work, but also reflects the courage to challenge and the spirit of not being afraid of difficulties. This spirit is not only praise for the search and rescue personnel, but also indirectly reflects the country's firm stance and determination in the face of challenges such as natural disasters.

Example 2: Construction workers in Northwest China's Gansu province are working tirelessly to build prefabricated houses for residents impacted by a recent 6.2-magnitude earthquake so that...

Here, the appreciation resource “working tirelessly” highlights the tireless efforts and selfless dedication of the construction workers in the relief effort. They are working around the clock to help the affected residents restore their life order. This description not only reflects the professional spirit and sense of responsibility of the workers, but also shows the solidarity of the whole society.

To sum up, through the skillful use of affect, judgment, and appreciation resources, news reports have successfully shaped an image of a united, cooperative, efficient, responsible and people-centered country. The country is proactive in crisis response with social cohesion. This image also further indicates the courage, tenacity and selfless dedication of the Chinese nation in the face of difficulties.

5. Conclusion

From the sub-systems of attitude resources, affect resources, judgment resources and appreciation resources, this research makes an interpretation and analysis of the news corpus about “Gansu Earthquake”. The research finds that relevant reports not only present objective news facts, but also reflect the positive images of the country and society, which is conducive to enhancing the public's confidence and identity in the country and society.

Although the results of this study have reference value, there are still limitations. First, about data accuracy. Since the data in the study mainly relies on the author's subjective judgment, although the author has checked for three times, the author cannot guarantee the accuracy. Second, the perspective of analysis is not complete. In the study, we mainly focus on the positive aspects of the three resources but the negative aspects are not explored and explained. Third, the size of the corpus is limited. This study is only based on 10 reports for analysis, and the relatively small corpus size may limit the breadth and depth of the study, thus affecting the universality and representativeness of the research conclusions to some extent. At the same time, it is also hoped that future researchers can make breakthroughs in these aspects and contribute more valuable results to the research in related fields.

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