Construction of national image in Chinese media reports: a case study of environmental reports in Japanese version of People's Daily Online

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Abstract. Combining Fairclough's three-dimensional analysis framework and KH coder, the critical discourse analysis of environmental reports in the Japanese version of People's Daily Online examines the construction of China's national image in terms of text, discursive practice and social practice. It is found that environmental reports in People's Daily Online focus on technological innovation and energy development, China's ecological achievements, and its participation in global environmental governance, and reported speech is widely used to enhance the authenticity of the reports, constructing the image of China as a leader in innovation, a prominent ecological achievement, and an insistence on win-win co-operation. In order to better fulfil its function as a media for propaganda to Japan, the reports can appropriately increase the content of life narratives and the use of direct speech.

Keywords: national image, environmental reports, People's Daily Online, critical discourse analysis, media

1. Introduction

The twentieth National Congress of the Communist Party of China explicitly proposed the promotion of the construction of a beautiful China and the promotion of ecological priority, conservation and intensification, and green and low-carbon development, stressing the importance of green development and the great significance of promoting the harmonious coexistence of human beings and nature from the perspective of national strategy. Under the guidance of this thought, China has made many new progresses and breakthroughs in the field of ecological environment construction. However, due to social and cultural differences and the inaccurate reports on China's environmental image in Western countries, the outstanding achievements of China's ecological and environmental construction have not been comprehensively and objectively recognised and evaluated on the international stage.

National image is an important manifestation of a country's comprehensive national strength and international discourse power, and has become part of the country's 'soft power'. In order to better shape China's ecological image in the international community, and break the pattern of global information resources being stronger in the West and weaker in the East, it is necessary to make every effort to build its own foreign discourse system and strengthen communication and cooperation with other countries around the world. As the official online information platform of People's Daily, People's Daily Online and People's Daily share the functions of information dissemination, public opinion guidance and other media functions, and its overseas edition plays an important role in the self-construction of the national image by disseminating Chinese wisdom and Chinese attitudes to foreign people. Taking the Japanese version of People's Daily Online as the research object to examine the construction of China's image in the foreign propaganda media has a certain degree of scientific validity and rigour.

Taking the environmental reports in Japanese version of the People's Daily Online in the past five years (2019-2023) as the object of study, and using Fairclough's three-dimensional analytical framework as the theoretical basis, this study examines the construction of China's mainstream foreign propaganda media in response to the country's image and tries to put forward some optimisation suggestions for the construction of China's image.

2. Literature review

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) originated from the concept of 'critical linguistics' proposed by Roger Fowler in his book Language and Control in 1979, and the term 'critical discourse analysis' was first proposed by Norman Fairclough in his book Language and Power in 1989 [1]. Critical discourse analysis is represented by the analytical framework proposed by scholars such as Foucault, Van Dijk, Roland Barthes, Norman Fairclough and Wodak, which focuses on the role of discourse in the construction of power, ideology, social identity, knowledge and cultural beliefs, etc. Scholars in the field of critical discourse analysis believe that language is not only a reflection of social processes and structures, but it also constructs social processes and structures [2].

In Fairclough's view, any discourse can be seen as a trinity, composed of text, discursive practice and social practice. Therefore, he proposed a three-dimensional method of discourse analysis corresponding to the three dimensions above: description, interpretation and explanation [3]. Among them, 'description' focuses on the linguistic analysis of the text, 'interpretation' is concerned with the production process of the text, and 'explanation' focuses on the social attributes of discourse [4].

Current research on the construction of China's ecological image from the perspective of critical discourse analysis focuses on Western media reports, and concentrates on reports from Europe and the United States, and finds that the Western media stigmatise China's environmental image. The construction of China's national image in The New York Times projects the communicator's values and ideology, and through intertextuality, metaphor, and over-lexicalization techniques, it constructs an inaccurate image of China's environment, such as the mismatch between people and the environment in the unilateral pursuit of economic growth, the resistance of environmental activists against the backdrop of political control, and the competition for the right to speak about the environment in the international context of the rising political powers [5, 6]. Similarly, reports on China's haze issue of Washington Post have been greatly influenced by the American political value system, and the reporting tendency has proven to be negative [7]. It can be seen that if the inaccurate reports on China's image in the Western media are allowed to continue to ferment, it will greatly damage China's national interests. Therefore, China must take the initiative in the construction of its national image, and respond to inaccurate news or even malicious framing through its own media reports.

With the increasing attention on image construction, research on China's ecological and environmental image has made some progress, focusing on China's environmental reports in outreach media, and examining the environmental image and implied ecological ideas by using Transitivity System and Appraisal Theory. However, most of the studies focus on outreach media for Europe and the United States, and there is a lack of research on outreach media for Japan. Due to the different socio-cultural backgrounds of Asian countries and Western countries, reports may also present different characteristics. Therefore, based on Fairclough's three-dimensional analytical framework, this study is going to take the environmental reports in the Japanese version of People's Daily Online as the research object, use corpus and the textual analysis tool to examine the image of China's eco-environment in the outreach media from the perspective of combining quantitative and qualitative aspects, and try to put forward some suggestions for the environmental reports in the Japanese version of People's Daily Online in the light of the social and cultural characteristics of Japan.

3. Research methodology

In most studies on environmental reports, researchers have also classified 'resources' as the object [8, 9], so this study takes the Japanese version of the People's Daily Online as the corpus source, choose the「資源・環境」section on the official homepage of People's Daily Online, and extracts the reports between January 1, 2019, and December 31, 2023, to build a corpus. Due to the limitation of the data format of KH coder, an EXCEL file was used to build the corpus, and the texts of the environmental reports were entered into the file sequentially to build the final corpus consisting of the environmental reports in Japanese version of the People's Daily Online (JPDO for short). The corpus contains 100 news texts, 34320 tokens and 3746 types.

KH coder is a powerful software designed for quantitative content analysis and text mining, which supports text processing in multiple languages and is suitable for research in a variety of fields such as social sciences, humanities, natural sciences, etc. It provides a variety of functions, including word frequency statistics, cluster analysis, relevance analysis, and visualisation tools, which can help researchers to extract key information from textual data [10]. In this study, we will use KH coder to analyse the high-frequency words and concordance lines of the JPDO corpus, and analyse the intertextuality of the environment reports, exploring the construction of China's image by combining the quantitative analysis of the objective data as well as the qualitative examination of critical discourse analysis. The research questions are as follows:

1. What themes do the environmental reports in JPDO focus on?
2. How is China's image constructed in the environmental reports of JPDO?
3. What kind of China's image has been constructed in the environmental reports of JPDO?

4. Analysis and findings

4.1. Description

The stage of 'Description' will examine the themes involved in the environmental reports of JPDO through analysis of high-frequency words and concordance lines, and explore the construction of the national image of China.

4.1.1. Analysis of high-frequency words

High-frequency words are the starting point for corpus-assisted discourse research, which can illustrate the focus of the texts, and are the external manifestation of the core topic at the lexical level [11]. KH coder was used to count the high-frequency words in JPDO corpus, and the deactivation words were set to delete the words that were not related to the topics of the texts, and the following table was plotted (Table 1), which shows the words with the top 30 frequencies of occurrence in the environmental reports of JPDO corpus.

Table 1. List of high-frequency words in JPDC corpus

Rank	Word	Frequency	Rank	Word	Frequency
1	中国	327	16	風力	67
2	発電	265	17	資源	65
3	エネルギー	184	18	科学	63
4	ガス	144	19	開発	63
5	年	129	20	エリア	62
6	電力	95	21	生態	61
7	技術	94	22	建設	59
8	世界	93	23	砂漠	59
9	プロジェクト	90	24	環境	58
10	排出	90	25	炭素	56
11	研究	88	26	容量	54
12	太陽光	79	27	システム	53
13	設備	77	28	重要	53
14	生産	71	29	保護	53
15	地域	68	30	油	53

Observing the list of high-frequency words, we can see that the words are mainly nouns, which can be roughly categorised into three semantic communities. The first semantic community includes words such as「発電」,「エネルギー」,「ガス」,「電力」,「太陽光」,「排出」,「風力」,「炭素」and「容量」, which cover such meanings as green energy, carbon emissions, and power system, reflecting China's focus on ecological priority and sustainable development. The second semantic community includes words such as「技術」,「プロジェクト」,「研究」,「設備」,「開発」and「システム」, etc., which imply terms such as technology research and development, engineering construction, and show China's investment in science and technology innovation and engineering construction as well as its remarkable achievements. The third semantic community includes words such as「中国」,「世界」,「地域」,「エリア」,「砂漠」,「生態」,「建設」and「保護」, which include the meaning of multi-region and various fields, ecological construction and environmental protection, and fully reflect China's vivid practice of all-round promotion of environmental protection, as well as its sense of responsibility for concern about global environmental governance.

4.1.2. Analysis of concordance lines

Analysis of Concordance Lines is the core of corpus linguistics, which can show the linguistic paradigm in the text and provide contextual information for the node words, thus providing more quantifiable and objective basis for the semantics expressed by the node words [12]. By analysing the concordance lines of the node word「中国」, we can gain insights into the construction of China's image in the environmental reports of JPDO. Using KH coder, we extracted relevant concordance lines of the node word「中国」from the self-constructed corpus and some of the search results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Typical concordance lines of JPDO corpus with「中国」as the node word

Concordance lines	Node word	Concordance lines
…情報によると、	中国	初の 1 万メートル科学調査井…
…稼働開始した。	中国	が独自に研究開発した初の深海水中生産システム…
気象ステーションは一体化された	中国	の国産気象観測設備を採用し…
…局によると、6 月末現在の	中国	全土の発電設備容量は前年同期比 8.1%増…
水素ガスを即時に製造でき、	中国	国内の業界の空白を埋めた
第 18 回党大会以降、	中国	の砂漠化対策が顕著な成果を上げた
国際標準化会議 2022 で、	中国	が主導し、世界初の新型電力システム…
同報告書によると、	中国	は 2021 年より積極的にパリ協定…
持続的に向上した。	中国	は世界の気候ガバナンスに積極的に参加し、
…研究によると、	中国	と米国の科学者からなる研究チーム…
砂漠化対処条約締約国である	中国	は関連義務をこれまで通り真剣に履行し、
米タフツ大学の研究チームは	中国	エネルギー・気候政策を研究する専門家 18 人

Environmental reports of JPDO focus on 'innovation', 'achievements' and 'international participation and cooperation' in the construction of China's image. In the context of 'innovation', terms such as「中国初」,「独自に」,「国産」are used to show China's independent technological research and innovation, and its contribution to the development of resources and environmental monitoring. In the context of 'Achievements', China's remarkable achievements in the development and use of clean energy, land desertification control and other fields are demonstrated through real data and collocations such as「空白を埋めた」,「顕著な成果を上げた」. In the context of 'international participation and cooperation', we can see that China actively participates in the construction of the global climate system, conscientiously fulfils its responsibilities and obligations under the Paris Agreement, actively carries out scientific research with other countries, fulfils the relevant obligations of the contracting partners, and works hand in hand with other countries to build a beautiful earth.

To sum up, 'description' of the environmental reports in JPDO shows that China bases itself on the specific environmental problems in various regions and fields, innovates technological means to continuously promote the implementation of ecological construction and environmental protection; focuses on the effectiveness and quality of environmental governance, and confirms China's ecological construction achievements through data support; and pays attention to not only its own green and sustainable development, but also participates in a wide range of international cooperation and provides Chinese solutions for global environmental governance, fully demonstrating the image of a great country with a sense of the overall situation and responsibility.

4.2. Interpretation

Fairclough considers discursive practice as a bridge between text and social practice [7]. The discursive practice focuses on the whole process of generation, distribution and consumption of the discourse, and given the linguistic pattern of news reporting, intertextuality is one of the important ways to analyse news discourse in terms of discursive practice. This study will examine the intertextuality in the environmental reports of JPDO in terms of the form of reporting modes as well as the news sources.

Reporting modes refer to the way in which words are conveyed by the reporter and involves five forms, namely, Direct Speech (DS), Indirect Speech (IS), Free Direct Speech (FDS), Free Indirect Speech (FIS), and Narrative Reporting of Speech Acts (NRSA). Since FDS and FIS hardly appear in news reports, and NRSA essentially belong to indirect speech [13], the study focuses on the occurrence of DS and IS only in environmental reports. The frequency of occurrence of DS and IS in the environmental reports of JPDO corpus was calculated. A total of 135 instances of reported speech were discovered. Direct speech appears 49times and indirect speech appears 86 times.

Due to the social function of modern mass media, the extensive use of indirect speech has become a trend in news reporting [14]. According to the data statistics of reporting modes, it can be found that the environmental reports of JPDO corpus are more inclined to use indirect speech, which makes the news easier for the public to understand and accept by converting the official viewpoints into the language of the general public [15]. Combined with the specific reports, it can be seen that the environmental reports of JPDO transform a large amount of complex information and discourses published by government agencies (e.g., 自然資源部), scientific research institutes (e.g., 中国科学院大気物理研究所), and experts and scholars (e.g., 中国工程院院士の徐祥徳氏) into clear and easy-to-understand expressions, which is beneficial for readers to understand, and subconsciously conveys a positive image of China to readers. In addition, direct speech accounts for nearly 40% of the reported speech in the environmental reports of the corpus, which are usually more persuasive, and can make the reports more objective and fairer. Combined with the specific reports, it is found that the direct speech in the environmental reports of JPDO also comes from government spokespersons or experts and scholars from scientific research institutes, which further enhances the authenticity of the reports through their direct

expression, and constructs a positive image of China's all-round and multi-level ecological construction and outstanding achievements in environmental protection.

News sources refer to the originator of the reported speech, and it is usually necessary to account for the origin of the words when quoting others' remarks or opinions in news discourses [16]. There are three ways to account for the origin of the discourse [17], namely, specific and explicit sources, which in this study means that the report explicitly refers to the words of a department, an organisation or a person; implicit and unclear sources, which means that the originator of the reported speech is not explicitly mentioned, but is mentioned by other information; and plausible but not genuine sources, which means that the source of the speech is not mentioned in the report, and is only indicated by the use of vague and unclear idiomatic words. Combined with the above categorisation, the results of the sources of reported speech in environmental reports are as follows (Table 3).

Table 3. Distribution of sources of reported speech in JPDC corpus

Indirect Speech			Direct Speech		
specific and explicit sources	implicit and unclear sources	plausible but not genuine sources	specific and explicit sources	implicit and unclear sources	plausible but not genuine sources
65	13	8	46	3	0

According to Table 3, it can be seen that specific and explicit sources account for the majority of the reported speech, indicating that the environmental reports of JPDO corpus clearly and explicitly show the sources of the discourses when quoting them, which is conducive to improving the credibility of the environmental reports. In contrast, the implicit sources are more likely to omit specific information of the speaker and focus on the institution from which the discourse originates, due to the fact that it is not the personal information that is important to the readers, but the institution or department they represent [16]. In addition, the research of the roles of the explicit sources of the reported speech also reveals that government agencies and their related person, experts and scholars are the main explicit sources, and it can make the construction of China's image more convincing.

The research of the intertextuality of environmental reports in JPDO corpus found that the reports used indirect speech to make the reports clearer and easier to understand, and direct speech to increase the authenticity of the reports; they also tended to explicitly cite authoritative information from governmental agencies as well as from experts and scholars to construct a favourable image of China.

4.3. Explanation

Scholars in the field of critical discourse analysis, such as Fairclough, argue that discourse is not a singular reflection of society, but equally constructs social reality. Similarly, environmental reporting is never a static, singular coverage of environmental events by the mass media [5], but rather an important tool to actively shape audience perceptions. Combining the analysis of text and discursive practice of the environmental reports in JPDO corpus, it can be found that the reports have created a positive and great image of China through the strategies of vocabulary, collocation, and the choice of reported speech. Specifically, the environmental reports in JPDO portray three images of China:

Firstly, China is a dynamic country that adheres to technological innovation and leads sustainable development. The environmental reports in JPDO focus on China's positive initiatives in leading sustainable development. The reports particularly emphasise China's innovative practices in promoting the development of clean energy such as natural gas, the use of renewable energy such as wind and solar energy, and the green development of circular economy. Words such as「中国初」,「初の」and「国産」appear several times, highlighting China's efforts to actively pursue technological innovation and transform its production methods and energy structure. Through technological innovation and the completion of facilities, the efficiency of energy development has been greatly enhanced, while serious ecological pollution and environmental damage during the development process can be avoided in advance, contributing to the sustainable development of the ecological environment.

Secondly, China is a green example of coordinating national resources and making several ecological achievements. The environmental reports in JPDO corpus fully reveal China's proactive approach to integrating ecological protection into national strategies and coordinating national resources to promote ecological construction. Through a series of policies, plans and strong supervision by government agencies, China has successfully guided enterprises to change production modes and accelerate green transformation. At the same time, the reports fully quote the discourses from government agencies, experts and scholars, showing not only China's substantial progress in energy saving and emission reduction, but also the efficient implementation of pollution prevention and ecological restoration. With objective data and positive comments from experts and scholars, the reports vividly present China's brilliant achievements on the road of green development, and contributes Chinese wisdom and Chinese solutions to the world.

Thirdly, China is an open country with a strong sense of international commitments and win-win cooperation. The environmental reports of JPDO focus on China's ecological commitment and regional cooperation in the international community, highlighting China's active role in fulfilling international environmental agreements and promoting global climate governance, as well as China's win-win cooperation with other countries in the field of environmental protection. China has continued to promote

the steady implementation of its national carbon neutral strategy, actively fulfilling its responsibilities and obligations under the Paris Agreement, and advocating that all countries in the world jointly address the challenges of climate change; under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, China has actively assisted in environmental conservation and governance in countries along the route, fully demonstrating the role of a great power; in addition, scientific research between China and other countries has also made significant progress, providing strong support for the promotion of global environmental governance, and fully demonstrating China's responsibility and commitment in the international community.

5. Conclusion

This study takes the environmental reports in the Japanese version of People's Daily Online from 2019 to 2023 as the research object, and applies Fairclough's three-dimensional analytical framework to examine the construction of China's image from the perspective of text, discursive practice, and social practice.

The study found that environmental reports in the Japanese version of the People's Daily Online focus on technological innovation and energy development, China's ecological achievements, and participation in global environmental governance; the reports make extensive use of indirect speech to make the reports clear, and at the same time combine direct speech appropriately to enhance the authenticity and credibility of the contents. By investigating the sources of reported speech, it can be found that in the environmental reports of JPDO, the sources are usually clearly mentioned, and discourses from national government agencies and experts and scholars are used to further enhance the authenticity of the construction of national image; through the description of the text and interpretation of discursive practice, it can be seen that the image of China constructed by the reports includes 'a dynamic country that adheres to technological innovation and sustainable development', 'a green example with outstanding ecological achievements through the coordination of national resources', and 'an open country that advocates international commitments and win-win co-operation '.

However, the environmental reports in JPDO still focus on grand narratives at the national level, with strong official colours, which can reflect the seriousness and truthfulness of news reporting, but are easily resisted by the Japanese, and the scope of the selected topics of the reports can be appropriately enlarged to increase the narratives of life that are close to the people. At the same time, since indirect speech is contrary to the Japanese culture of not imposing on others and not making a fuss, direct speech is more easily accepted by the Japanese [15], the environmental reports in Japanese version of the People's Daily Online can appropriately increase the use of direct speech in constructing China's image and expand the scope of the news sources, citing the positive comments of the spokespersons of the international community or international organisations on the construction of China's image and positive words of the general public to further enhance the coverage of the reports.

As one of the Chinese foreign propaganda media targeting the Japanese, the Japanese version of People's Daily Online is an important window to show a good image of China to the Japanese society and people, and is an important link in the construction of China's foreign discourse system. It should focus on telling a good story of China, spreading a good voice of China, and presenting an image of China that is innovative, coordinative, open and sharing.

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