

China Image Construction during the Covid-19 Epidemic: Multimodal Discourse Analysis based on the China-Related Front Cover of The Economist

Jiaqi Ren

School of Foreign Languages, University of Electronic Science and Technology of China, China

1325957273@qq.com

Abstract. The paper adopts Kress & van Leeuwen's grammar framework of visual image to carry out a multimodal discourse analysis on China-Related Front Covers of The Economist, in order to disclose the representative of the western media, British media's attitude towards China after the outbreak of COVID-19, and further dissect the constructed China's image. The research has noticed that The Economist, hostile to China, mainly built negative national image in related front covers; in addition, the magazine has also demonstrated some positive image about China's active resistance to epidemic.

Keywords: grammar framework of visual image; multimodal discourse analysis; The Economist; China-related front covers; western media; China's national image.

1. Introduction

At the end of 2019, there were many cases of unknown pneumonia in Wuhan, Hubei Province, which were later confirmed to be an acute respiratory infectious disease caused by the 2019 novel coronavirus, namely "COVID-19". Since then, the COVID-19 epidemic in the past three years has exerted a great impact on people's lives. In the face of such a huge impact, the attitude and concept of people all over the world towards China have gradually begun to change. As we all know, the mainstream media in the world today plays a vital role in shaping the image of a country. As one of the mainstream media in the UK, The Economist has been publishing reports related to the epidemic in China since the beginning of 2020. During this period, the keyword "epidemic" has always been the dominated topic of Chinese reports, and the cover of each magazine issue facilitates readers to grab the theme of a publication. Therefore, this article tries to use Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar theory (Kress, G. & T. van Leeuwen, 1996/2006), to conduct a multi-modal discourse analysis of the 16 Chinese-related theme covers of The Economist from 2020 to 2021 for the purpose of exploring the hidden ideologies of western media when reporting on China, which can help readers better understand the constructed Chinese image.

Multi-modal discourse refers to the phenomenon of using hearing, vision, touch and other feelings to communicate through language, images, sound, action and other means and symbolic resources (Zhang Delu, 2009). With the development of the Internet, social symbols, such as images, sounds, movements, etc., also bear the function of transmitting information, and multi-modal discourse analysis theory has also developed in full swing at the same time. At present, the research of multi-modal discourse analysis covers three categories: theoretical exploration, literature review and applied research. Zhu Yongsheng (2007) and Zhang Delu (2009) made an early exploration of the comprehensive framework of multi-modal discourse analysis; Xiao Jun (2017) combined multi-modal discourse analysis with new media in the later stage, which has launched a multi-modal discourse analysis framework from communication perspective, and demonstrated its significance in cross-cultural communication; Li Yan and Jiang Yajun (2022) summarized the latest five research methods of multi-modal discourse analysis, including social function, corpus, metaphor and metonymy, discourse perception, and new media discourse. The review study is represented by Shi Xingsong and Xu Wenjuan (2020) on the analysis of the current situation and development trend of multi-modal discourse research in SSCI journals in the past 15 years, and they

expounds important information such as research topics, publication categories and quantity in this field in recent years.

Applied research accounts for a large proportion of multi-modal discourse analysis. As for topic in translation, Mo Aiping and Li Mi (2021) explore how Chinese culture's foreign translation can keep pace with the digital era through the three interfaces, namely translation, multi-modal analysis and pragmatics. Wu Yun and Mou Yiwu (2022) also explain how to tell Chinese stories well on the basis of the current situation of contemporary national foreign multi-modal translation. In terms of text analysis, Yi Xingxia (2015) analyzes dynamic news discourse with the help of visual grammar theory, and uses the news broadcast as the evidence to prove the feasibility of the theory; Teng Da and Miao Xingwei (2018) focus on the multi-modal metaphor research of picture books, and explore the construction of meaning in two perspectives, function and cognition. In addition, this field also covers the research of various discourse types such as photo discourse (Wang Jianhua, 2019) and online discourse (Geng Jingbei & Chen Zijuan, 2016). Multi-modal discourse research also consists of the visual grammar analysis of political cartoons. Wu Anping and Zhong Shouman (2014) combine Kress & van Leeuwen's visual grammar theory with the metaphor theory of Forceville, in order to make an in-depth interpretation of two specific cartoon pictures; Zhao Xiufeng and Feng Dezheng (2017) select the Chinese-related political comics in *The Economist* for multi-modal metaphor analysis and also analyze their construction of the national image.

To sum up, domestic scholars' research on multi-modal discourse covers many fields, each with its own focus, but less attention has been paid to Chinese elements. The author only have noticed that Zheng Qun and Zhang Bo (2015) analyze the multi-modal discourse on China-related or Chinese-theme-related covers of *The Economist*, and after the outbreak of COVID-19 epidemic, it is of great significance to figure out if the Chinese national image has been constructed differently by western media. Therefore, this article will make a multi-modal discourse analysis of China-related-theme cover of *The Economist* from 2020 to 2021, to summarize the constructed China image more deeply.

2. Visual Grammar Theory

Multi-modal discourse analysis is generated from Halliday's functional grammar (Halliday, M. A. K., 1985/1994). Halliday regards language as a social symbol and proposes the three meta-functions of language, ideational function, interpersonal function, and textual function. Kress and van Leeuwen (Kress, G. & T. van Leeuwen, 2001) extends these three meta functions to other symbol systems, including visual symbols, which are interpreted as representation, interaction and composition respectively (Zheng Qun & Zhang Bo, 2015).

With the development of modern society, new media has gradually become an important means of information dissemination. Compared with traditional media, new media not only utilizes texts for communication, but also transmits information through images, sounds, videos, emojis and other carriers. Therefore, the analysis of media discourse should not be limited to plain texts. Images, colors, music, and other modes should also be included in the scope of research. Moreover, multi-modal news discourse seems to be easier for the implantation of intentional ideology into readers' consciousness, which will affect western readers' understanding of Chinese image (Li Cunjie, 2018). As a consequence, it is feasible and reasonable to analyze western media's attitudes and comments for disclosing the relationship between language, power, and ideologies via the analysis of multi-modal discourse on China-related theme covers of *The Economist* after the epidemic.

3. Multi-modal Discourse Analysis of the Chinese-related Theme Cover of The Economist

This article selects the cover of The Economist as the research object. The reason for choosing this magazine is that it is regarded as one of the most well-known political and business magazines in the world, which concludes diversified themes such as global politics, business, finance, science and technology, with over 4 million readers in more than 200 countries around the globe. Therefore, the magazine can reflect western ideologies and discourse patterns to a certain extent.

This study uses the cover of 102 issues of The Economist from January 4, 2020 to December 18, 2021 as the source of corpus (51 issues per year), and manually selects the China-related texts or visual image symbols, such as “China” or other key words with Chinese characteristics, as well as other tokens of China, including the five-starred red flag, giant panda, Chinese dragon, etc.. And then, a total number of 16 qualified cover samples have been extracted, which accounts for about 15.7% of the 102 issues from 2020 to 2021. It represents that the western media has paid great attention to China during the epidemic, and it also reflects China’s increasing international status.

Before carrying out multi-modal discourse analysis, the author marked the cover of the 102 magazine issue in chronological order. The covers of the research sample are cover No.1, No.16, No.29, No.33, No.41, No.42, No.47 in 2020, and covers No.1, No.12, No.18, No.22, No.25, No.27, No.31, No.41 and No.47 in 2021. In the next chapter, the writer will use visual grammar theory to analyze the representation meaning, interactive meaning and composition meaning of selected theme covers, to explore the multi-modal method adopted by The Economist, and also the process of constructing China’s national image.

3.1 Representation

Representation meaning includes conceptual representation and narrative representation. Conceptual representation can reproduce the message of “China” through symbolic symbols.

The author has found that except for “China” and “Chinese”, other text symbols such as “Communist Party” and “President Xi Jinping” (Xi), also appear on the cover as text symbols that directly represent the image of China. It is worth noting that when it comes to “revolution of the world economy”, the four Chinese characters of “real-time economy” were put on a bowl of instant noodles. Although there are no “China” and other key words on the cover, these four Chinese characters represent that the western media takes advantage of various visual symbols to report China. In addition, the symbols with Chinese characteristics indicate the importance of China’s development to the world economy. Today’s global pandemic of COVID-19 has put the world economy in a downturn, and the government’s macro regulation plays a more important role. Considering the lag of government intervention in the market economy, the concept, “real-time economy”, has attracted great attention, and western media gives the anticipation to its effect in China.



Figure 1, Cover No.41 in 2021



Figure 2, Cover No.47 in 2020

Narrative representation forms a vector through the slashes between various elements in the image, reproduces the change process of the participants' actions or events, and builds the meaning of the text. In the following paragraph, the author will take five representative magazine covers as examples.



Figure 3, Cover No.1 in 2021



Figure 4, Cover No.12 in 2021

On Cover No.47 in 2020 (Figure 2), “China Strategy Needed by the United States” is placed in the middle as a black title on a white background. Its outside is surrounded by seven connected hands, and signs on each hand illustrates country or union flags, including the United States, Korea, the United Kingdom, Japan, Australia, Canada, and the flag of the European Union. Each hand as a vector, one holding one wrist, refers to the above-mentioned countries band together and advance towards the same direction. On Cover No.1 in 2021 (Figure 3), the white word “The future of e-commerce” on a red background is placed above, and the black line depicts a soaring dragon as a vector facing the bottom of the title. The head of the dragon is “a shopping cart”, and the gap between the basket and wheels spews a fire, indicating that “China’s e-commerce is like a dragon with a mouth that breathes fire”. Such a visual symbol can firstly reflect the positive attitude of the western media towards the future of China’s e-commerce industry. Secondly, it may also imply “The vigorous development of China’s e-commerce may undermine western countries’ interests in related areas” and also conveys the ideology of “China Threat Theory”. In the same year, the Cover No.12 (Figure 4), taking warm red color in the background, the white title “The brutal reality of dealing with China” is placed above, and the lower place of the cover appears a huge hand pressing down on the left side, whose cuffs are hung with a round badge of the five-star red flag, with a crowd down under. Most of people raise their arms to fight against the pressure of the big hand. Sporadic two or three people are still holding umbrellas. Above the big hand, there was a person looking down on the crowd below. The above elements together form a three-dimensional space, which presents the action process of vector confrontation between big hands and small hands. By reading the report corresponding to the title, the author has learned the title represents that “China’s introduction of the ‘national security law’ has suppressed people of Hong Kong and violated their human rights”, while the red background on the cover may represent mainland China, and several people with umbrellas may refer to those who “do not want to accept the management of the mainland”. The big hand however, on behalf of the Communist Party of China, and the confrontation between big hands and small hands should be the resistance of some opponents of mainland China’s management. Such a visual symbol firstly demonstrates an inner experience of “violent law enforcement by the Chinese government, regardless of people’s feelings”. Secondly, it will make those who do not know the truth generate the idea that “China still hasn’t got rid of autocracy” and naturally becomes “the person above the big hand”, who can see through everything and strengthens the negative Chinese image built in their mind.

3.2 Interactive meaning

The interaction meaning is reflected in four aspects: contact, social distance, mood and attitude. According to the author’s observation, 5 of the 16 China-related theme covers use crimson as the background color (such as Figures 3). In addition, it is mixed with warm red (as shown in Figure 4)

and flame as embellishment colors, which shows that western media closely associate China and red. However, in western culture, red symbolizes bloodshed and sacrifice, which represents negative meanings. If readers do not understand the Chinese culture, they will build a negative Chinese image under the impact of visual symbols.

Cover No. 27 (pictured on the right) in 2021 with multiple visual symbols will be the focus of the author's analysis. The cover is based on blue, and "Biden's Chinese Doctrine" is placed directly above, and below is a close-up portrait of Biden himself, wearing a pair of glasses with both lenses occupied by the five-star red flag. Although he can't touch and interact with readers through his eyes, his frowning brows, pursed lips, and solemn expression displays his serious look to readers. Additionally, his black suit jacket, white shirt and neat tie also proves Biden's official image. From the perspective of social distance, the cover reflects that the type of distance between Biden and the reader should be the personal close distance. What is more, the photo is taken from a horizontal angle in order to establish an equal social relationship with readers. Combined with the theme of the cover, it is evident that Biden, as the new U.S. president, will inevitably consider the future direction of Sino-US relations after he comes to the stage. Zero-sum game or a new era of win-win relationship still remains unclear. This will be one of the most important problems faced with Biden, and China's rise will inevitably hinder the world hegemony of the United States. Therefore, the cover illustrates a collection of the above visual symbols, showing that "Biden has seen through China's intention to subvert the world order, and his rise to power will shatter China's fantasy." However, the ultimate goal of China's advancement is to achieve the great goal of common prosperity and let the people live a prosperous life. China has never generated the idea of replacing the United States to dominate the world. Western media always discusses the topic of "Sino-US relations" in an important position, but they build the incompatible relationship between the two all the time. Nevertheless, the western binary opposition mode is different from China's "global community with a shared future" philosophy. If readers always get exposed to texts with binary ideologies, in the long run, they will gradually strengthen this antagonism, and the division of China and the West will become much more serious.

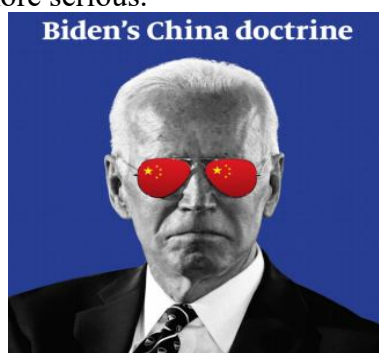


Figure 5, Cover No.27 in 2021

3.3 Composition meaning

Composition meaning refers to the overall layout of multi-modal text. From the perspective of information values, the left is old information, and the right is new information. The generalization of information should be placed above as an ideal factor, and the specific real factor should be placed below as a detail. Zhu Yongsheng summarizes it as a more practical and "down-to-earth" letter. (Zhu Yongsheng, 2007).

First of all, from the layout of the magazine (as shown in Figure 8), at the top quarter, the name of the magazine is marked on the left "The Economist", and there appears four titles of the key articles on the right, which are always placed in the first 30 pages. In most cases, the title will be placed directly at the top, and the bottom will correspond to the relevant symbols as a supplement to the meaning. This layout can attract the attention of readers and also help readers get more information and understand the general attitude of the magazine in a short time. From the

perspective of multi-modal discourse, the layout of the magazine cover is scientific, and one example will be cited for specific explanation.



Figure 6, Cover No.16 in 2020

The Cover No.16 in 2020 (Figure 6) takes the transition color from warm red to yellow as the background color. The main title of the white character “Is China winning?”, and the subtitle “The geopolitical consequences of COVID-19” are directly above, highlighting the importance of the information. And then, the light white lines below outline the shape of the virus as the background. The Oriental Pearl Radio and Television Tower complex, a landmark building in Shanghai, is placed in front of the stage, with images describing the aircraft leaving the port and the ships leaving the Bund, which are classified as real and specific information for supplements of the visual symbol system. In addition, the presentation of warm tones also gives readers a comfortable and gentle visual effect. As the first country to achieve a phased victory in

the fight against the epidemic, China gives the rest of the world hope of victory. The cover was published on April 18, 2020. At that time, China had achieved initial results in the fight against the epidemic. People gradually began to resume work and production, and actively returned to normal life, which forms a contrast with western countries. From this perspective, the magazine displays a positive attitude towards China’s anti-epidemic action and affirms China’s anti-epidemic achievements.

4. Conclusion

This article uses visual grammar theory to discuss the construction of China’s national image in The Economist. After detailed discourse analysis, it is found that The Economist mostly presents negative national images of China on theme covers, especially the red or five-star red flag as the background color of the Chinese theme, which conveys China’s image of “danger and dictatorship”. Moreover, the magazine often expresses the ideology of “China Threat Theory” for constructing China’s negative image, but in the early stage of fighting against the epidemic, the western media also holds a more objective and positive attitude towards China’s anti-epidemic achievements and economic recovery, partially shaping China’s positive national image.

Since this study is based on The Economist’s China-related theme covers from 2020 to 2021, it does not reflect the full picture of the western media’s image construction of China, and can only be analyzed based on the visual symbols of the cover, so to some extent, the analysis is one-sided. In addition, the author did not use screening software in the process, but manually checked 102 issue covers. Therefore, there are limitations in the collection and screening of corpus. In future studies, the author will use professional retrieval software for corpus analysis as much as possible, and collect other foreign journals for comparative demonstration, so as to enhance the persuasiveness of the research.

References

- [1] Halliday, M. A. K. An Introduction to Functional Grammar[M]. London: Arnold, 1985 /1994.
- [2] Kress, G. & T. van Leeuwen. Reading Images[M]. London: Routledge, 1996 /2006.
- [3] Kress, G. & T. van Leeuwen. Multimodal Discourse: The Mode and Media of Contemporary Communication[M]. London: Arnold, 2001.
- [4] van Leeuwen, T. Introducing Social Semiotics[M]. London: Routledge, 2005.
- [5] Geng Jingbei, Chen Zijuan. Multi-modal discourse analysis of network community - take QQ group discourse as an example [J]. Foreign language teaching, 2016, 37 (03): 35-39
- [6] Li Cunjie. The Economist's China-related cover multi-modal discourse analysis [J]. Young Reporter, 2018, (21): 89-90.
- [7] Li Meixia, Song Erchun. Interpreting meaning and co-construction from the perspective of multi-modal text analysis - take an ancient Chinese landscape freehand painting as an example [J]. Foreign language teaching, 2010, 31(02):6-10.
- [8] Li Yan, Jiang Yajun. Multi-modal discourse research - source flow, perspective and trend [J]. Chinese Foreign Language, 2022,19(02):54-62
- [9] Mo Aiping, Li Mi. Multi-modal pragmatic strategy of foreign translation of Chinese culture in the context of digitalization [J]. Foreign Language Electrochemical Teaching, 2021 (06): 68-74+11.
- [10] Shi Xingsong, Xu Wenjuan. Analysis of the current situation and development trend of network multi-modal discourse research in SSCI journals in the past 15 years [J]. Foreign Languages (Journals of Shanghai International Studies University), 2020, 43(03):55-66.
- [11] Teng Da, Miao Xingwei. The meaning construction of multi-modal metaphor in the picture book from the perspective of visual grammar [J]. Journal of Foreign Languages, 2018 (05): 53-59
- [12] Wang Jianhua. Visual grammar of government new media photo discourse - pragmatic analysis [J]. Contemporary Rhetoric, 2019(02):72-83.
- [13] Wu Anping, Zhong Shouman. Multi-modal discourse research on visual grammar and metaphorical mechanism [J]. Foreign Language and Foreign Language Teaching, 2014 (03): 23-28.
- [14] Wu Yun, Mou Yiwu. Research on multi-modal national translation strategies of Chinese stories [J]. Foreign language teaching, 2022,43(01):76-82.
- [15] Xiao Jun. Multi-modal discourse analysis: theoretical model and its methodological significance for the study of cross-cultural communication in new media [J]. Journal of Wuhan University (Humanities Edition), 2017, 70(06):126-134.
- [16] Yi Xingxia. Graphic-text relationship in dynamic multi-modal discourse [J]. Journal of Xi'an Foreign Studies University, 2015, 23(04):50-53.
- [17] Zhang Delu. Exploration of the comprehensive theoretical framework of multi-modal discourse analysis [J]. Chinese Foreign Language, 2009, 6(01):24-30.
- [18] Zhao Xiufeng, Feng Dezheng. The construction of China's image by multi-modal metaphorical metaphor--Take The Economist's Chinese-related political cartoon as an example [J]. Journal of Xi'an Foreign Studies University, 2017, 25(02):31-36.
- [19] Zheng Qun, Zhang Bo. Multi-modal discourse analysis on the Chinese theme cover of The Economist [J]. Journal of Xi'an Foreign Studies University, 2015, 23(01):47-50.
- [20] Zhu Yongsheng. Theoretical basis and research method of multi-modal discourse analysis [J]. Journal of Foreign Languages, 2007, (05):82-86.