A Study on Interactive Metadiscourse in China-related Reports from the New York Times During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has now developed into a worldwide public health crisis. During this period, news reports concerning China have attracted increasing attention from the world. Based on the Hyland’s model of metadiscourse, 30 China-related reports were collected from the New York Times during the COVID-19 pandemic to explore the use of interactive metadiscourse. By quantitative and qualitative analysis, it concludes that interactive metadiscourse markers exist considerably in English news reports; meanwhile different types of metadiscourse markers enhance the persuasion of the writer in different ways. These findings will help enrich the research on metadiscourse and improve news writers’ metapragmatic competence. Moreover, it demonstrates that China should attach more importance to western media and be committed to creating a favorable international public opinion environment.

Keywords: Interactive metadiscourse, COVID-19, the New York Times.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 has brought about a pandemic public health crisis since its outbreak in early 2020. American news reports related to COVID-19 and their corresponding counter-measures are manipulated by the U.S. government to label China as a “strategic competitor” and to beat the drum for “China threat theory”. As one of the three mainstream newspapers in the United States, the New York Times is the representative of serious publications which has long possessed good credibility and authority both domestically and internationally. As soon as the coronavirus was initially identified in China, the New York Times has been carrying out follow-up reports on China’s epidemic. In order to guide readers, news writers always adopt various linguistic devices to enhance the persuasion of their arguments, among which metadiscourse has raised growing concern.

The term metadiscourse was coined by Zellig Harris in 1959, but he did not give a specific definition [1]. After Harris’s proposal, many scholars [2]-[4] pushed back the frontiers of its concept. Without adding anything to the prepositional content, metadiscourse markers are deployed to signal the writer’s communicative intent by assisting the reader to organize, understand and assess the information presented [5]. According to Hyland [6], metadiscourse is the interpersonal markers used to organize coherently a discourse and convey its personality and credibility towards either its content or that of the reader. Then he accepted Thompson’s [7] viewpoint of interactive and interactional resources to supersede textual and interpersonal metadiscourse respectively. By borrowing Thompson’s notion of interactive and interactional resources, Hyland [8] reorganized a new model in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interactive</td>
<td>Transition markers</td>
<td>Show the relations among</td>
<td>Accordingly, additionally, and, however</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>metadiscourse</td>
<td>Frame markers</td>
<td>stress the acts, sequences, goals or stages of the discourse</td>
<td>Firstly, then, lastly, to sum up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Endophoric markers</td>
<td>Refer to other parts’ information of the text</td>
<td>(In) Chapter X, Fig. X, X before</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evidentials</td>
<td>Refer to information from other sources</td>
<td>According to X, (to) cite X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Code glosses</td>
<td>Elaborate propositional meanings</td>
<td>For example, such as, that is to say</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hedges</td>
<td>Withhold commitment and start dialogue</td>
<td>Maybe, might, possibly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Boosters</td>
<td>Street certainty or finish dialogue</td>
<td>In fact, definitely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactional</td>
<td>Attitude markers</td>
<td>Show the writers’ attitude to the proposition</td>
<td>Unfortunately, surprisingly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>metadiscourse</td>
<td>Self-mentions</td>
<td>Explicit reference to author</td>
<td>I, we, our,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engagement markers</td>
<td>Construct relationship with readers explicitly</td>
<td>Consider, as we know, you can see that</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This study attempts to compensate for the existing researches on metadiscourse and to delve into the intention of the use of metadiscourse by American news writers. Based on Hyland’s model of metadiscourse, this paper first examines the frequency of each interactive metadiscourse marker employed in China-related reports by the New York Times during the COVID-19 pandemic. Then, combined with quantitative results, a qualitative study is conducted so as to dig out the linguistic realizations of different types of interactive metadiscourse markers across the corpus. Finally, the factors that give rise to the overall distribution of interactive metadiscourse are probed by the thesis.

2. Research Questions

The main purpose of this study is to investigate the distribution of interactive metadiscourse markers in terms of types and frequencies and the realization of persuasion in news reports. As a result, three research questions will be proposed and answered:

(1) What is the overall distribution of interactive
metadiscourse markers employed in China-related reports by the New York Times during the COVID-19 pandemic?

(2) How are the persuasive functions realized by the use of each interactive metadiscourse marker in news reports?

(3) What enlightenment can we obtain from the above observation?

3. Research Design

3.1 Data Collection

In this study, all the news reports are selected from the official website of the New York Times (https://www.nytimes.com) to make sure the authenticity and standardization of the language.

Firstly, “Coronavirus” and “China” are chosen as key words on the official website of the New York Times. Then, the range of date is set from January 7 to April 3, 2020. On January 7, 2020, China initially identified the coronavirus. On April 3, 2020, China and the United States agreed to look for ways to cooperate for the purpose of slowing the contagion. The selected articles cover multiple countries and regions in Asia, Europe, America, and Africa, including fields such as health, economy, politics, technology and so on. A total of 1,460 news articles are obtained through preliminary search. Although some texts mentioned “coronavirus” and “China”, the theme had no relevance to China. Thus, repetitive and invalid reports are eliminated and 30 articles with high relevance are randomly selected as the final research object. At last, a micro corpus of 30 articles with a total number of 40,994 tokens are built for later study.

3.2 Data Analysis Methods

Metadiscourse resources in each text are identified and categorized manually. It is because metadiscourse is highly content-dependent and multifunctional, which means that the function that one metadiscourse marker performs may be different when it is used in another context. After identifying and categorizing the metadiscourse markers, the frequency of each subcategory of interactive metadiscourse is counted with the help of AntConc 4.1. Then, TreeTagger 3 is applied to tag texts in the form of POS (part of speech). At the same time, corresponding sentences or paragraphs are selected according to the subcategories of each interactive metadiscourse marker as examples of quantitative analysis for specific explanations in order to verify the validity of the qualitative analysis above.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Statistical Findings of Interactive Metadiscourse in News

The statistical results of data, which demonstrate the frequency of interactive metadiscourse in news, indicate such thought-provoking features as how American news writers use metadiscourse in their news reporting. The detailed statistical presentation is displayed in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Per 1,000 words</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transition markers</td>
<td>1,448</td>
<td>35.32</td>
<td>64.61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frame markers</td>
<td>292</td>
<td>7.12</td>
<td>13.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endophoric markers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidentials</td>
<td>442</td>
<td>10.78</td>
<td>19.72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code glosses</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>2.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,241</td>
<td>54.67</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As is shown in Table 2, it is apparent that there are altogether 2,241 interactive metadiscourse markers in news reports, with 54.67 occurrences per 1,000 words, which reveals the significant role of metadiscourse in persuasive writings. Among the total 2,241 interactive metadiscourse markers, transition markers rank in the first place with 64.61%, followed by evidentials with 19.72%. While the rest interactive metadiscourses share little percentage in news reports: frame markers (13.03%) run the third place, code glosses (2.63%) are seldom seen and endophoric markers (0%) do not appear.

In the data, transition markers are mainly composed of conjunctions and adverbial phrases, because news needs them to ensure the logic and fluency of the content. Evidentials rank the second because many news reporters quote information from other media or parties, thus evidentials suggest sources of news in order to guarantee the reliability. Frame markers together with code glosses also occupy a certain position in organizing a news report. Since most news reports are arranged through chronological order, few of which need to refer to the information within the reporting, the chance of using endophoric markers is supposed to be scarce.

4.2 Detailed Analysis of Interactive Metadiscourse

Apart from the quantitative analysis, a qualitative analysis is of equal necessity to be carried out for explicating how interactive metadiscourse help actualize the persuasion in news reports. As a result, this part expounds the use of four subcategories of interactive metadiscourse via exemplification, except for endophoric markers, which fail to be found in the corpus.

4.2.1 Transition markers

Hyland stated, “transition is the most frequent way to structure the argument of a text explicitly” [6]. They have the function of expressing additive, contrastive and causative relations based on the writer’s intention in organizing and presenting the stretches of discourse. As metadiscourse markers, they must perform a role internal to the discourse (adding, comparing and constructing arguments, drawing conclusions or countering arguments, etc.) rather than to the outside world (adding activities, comparing and contrasting events, explaining why and how things happen, etc.). In English news reports, transition markers like “and”, “also”, “but”, “however”, “though”, “because”, “therefore” are used. The following are some examples.

Example 1

News reports have also claimed that health officials are finding but not publicizing a number of people with asymptomatic infections, raising fears that the virus is still
silently spreading. In addition, cases continue to climb among people arriving in China from overseas. (Text 27: China to Ease Coronavirus Lockdown on Hubei 2 Months After Imposing It)

Example 2

Now that the rate of new infections and deaths in China has slowed, officials are trying to portray the country as the world’s leader in the fight against the coronavirus. The Central Propaganda Department is even publishing a book—in several languages—praising Mr. Xi’s role in guiding the country through the crisis, however premature a declaration of victory might seem at this point. (Text 23: China Pushes Back as Coronavirus Crisis Damages Its Image)

Example 3

Mr. Wang, 49, used to be able to find work in Shenzhen, a sprawling industrial megacity. But factories are turning him away because he is from Hubei Province, the center of China’s coronavirus epidemic, even though he hasn’t lived there in years. (Text 20: Coronavirus Lockdowns Torment an Army of Poor Migrant Workers in China)

In Example 1, the transition marker “in addition” is used to provide the additional elements for the readers and to render the content more coherent. The writer mentions in the previous sentence that there still exists unannounced people with asymptomatic infections, and then he shifts to the topic of new imported cases. “In addition” here is to add the latter content as a supplement, which together explains the rising panic among Chinese people.

The item “but” and “however” are the most frequently used transitions for contrast, which reflect the adversative relation with previously stated content. In Example 2, “however” is used to signal meanings opposite to the previous content, expressing the author’s own opinions and comments. In this case, the author denies China’s remarkable achievements in the fight against COVID-19, and believes that China has prematurely declared victory.

As a consequence, the frequently used markers in this category are “because”, “therefore” and “so”. In example 3, the causative transition markers “because” is used to explain the reason for Mr. Wang’s rejection by companies. In this way, the readers are more likely to accept the writers’ opinion that COVID-19 caused regional discrimination in China, even if it is not a proven truth.

To sum up, these examples embody that transition markers not only help the news report frame the arguments in a logical and coherent way as perceived by the readers, but also guide the readers to the interpretation of information as preferred by the writers. Therefore, transition markers play an important role in achieving persuasion in news reports by promoting rational appeals.

4.2.2 Frame markers

Frame markers signal text boundaries or elements of schematic text structure so that it is clear what arguments are discussed and will be discussed. In terms of functions, they are used to order arguments, label text stages, announce discourse goals and indicate topic shifts. It is particularly needed when massive information involved in the text or when the writer attempts to emphasize the topic. The items included are “first”, “then”, “next”, “finally”, “now”.

Example 4

Officials in Wuhan initially played down the threat and censored information as the disease spread throughout the country and even internationally. The city and the province then abruptly imposed a lockdown on travel, even though millions had already left for China’s Lunar New Year holiday. (Text 8: Coronavirus Crisis Exposes Cracks in China’s Facade of Unity)

Example 5

The government finally ordered a lockdown on Jan. 23 that effectively quarantined people in Wuhan. But by then, according to the mayor, five million people had already fled the city. (Text 9: Coronavirus Spreads, and the World Pays for China’s Dictatorship)

Example 6

Now the ruling Communist Party, facing a storm of anger from the Chinese public over its missteps, is trying to rehabilitate its image by rebranding itself as the unequivocal leader in the global fight against the virus. (Text 21: China Spins Coronavirus Crisis, Hailing Itself as a Global Leader)

In Example 4, the writer adopts frame markers such as “initially” and “then” to express the sequence of the structure and hence help readers understand the discourse’s structure and authors’ thinking order in their writings with strong guidance. Comparing the practices of Wuhan officials before and after the outbreak, the writer discloses their incompetence and inaction.

In Example 5, the use of “finally” can rapidly catch readers’ eyes, and draw readers’ attention to the latter stated content under authors’ conscious emphasis. The frame marker “finally” highlights the delay of China’s action towards coronavirus since the first known infection in the city of Wuhan was found on Dec. 1. However, the fact that China informed the W.H.O. of the virus on Dec. 31 is deliberately diluted. The writer attempts to erase China’s indelible contribution to the international community.

In Example 6, the frame maker “now” is used to signal the conversion of the topic. Previously, the writer states that the Chinese government silenced whistle-blowers, withheld crucial information and played down the threat posed by the new coronavirus. Here the writer suspects news media that hailed China’s response to the outbreak as a model for the world, accusing countries like the United States and South Korea of acting sluggishly to contain the spread. Instead of shifting the topic directly, the writer informs the readers of a new topic by means of the frame marker “now”, so that it will not appear too precipitate.
4.2.3 Evidentials

Evidentials indicate the sources from which a writer acquires evidence for proposing convincing arguments. In news reporting, writers commonly quote evidentials from authoritative people, reliable institutions or survey reports, in order to enhance the objectivity and credibility of their statements, and to support their arguments. Sometimes the writer will also quote hearsay when he is not clear of its source or when there is no need to mention the source. The following evidentials are often used: “according to X”, “X states”.

Example 7

Still, medical experts were startled by the scale of the shutdown in Wuhan, which has more people than the entire country of Sierra Leone. Dr. Tom Inglesby, director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, said that a city the size of Wuhan has “tens of thousands of connections with the outside world that are coming and going all the time, bringing food and medicine.” (Text 4: Wuhan, Center of Coronavirus Outbreak, Is Being Cut Off by Chinese Authorities)

Example 8

The W.H.O. says animals appear to be the most likely primary source of the outbreak, though it is still not known which animals are responsible. Past outbreaks of similar illnesses, like SARS, were believed to have emerged from markets where people and live animals were in regular contact. (Text 2: China Confirms New Coronavirus Spreads from Humans to Humans)

Example 9

Many of China’s businesses, particularly small ones, appear to be in trouble. One-third of small firms in the country are on the brink of running out of cash over the next four weeks, according to a survey of 1,000 business owners by Peking University and Tsinghua University. Another third will run out of cash in the next two months. (Text 19: As China Fights the Coronavirus, Some Say It Has Gone Too Far)

The writer in Example 7 resort to related influential people to support and consolidate her arguments. By quoting the remarks of “Dr. Tom Inglesby”, a famous medical expert, the writer attempts to raise doubts about Wuhan’s lockdown. She believes that the complexity and downside cost of lockdown will be potentially very high.

Example 8 shows how the writer quotes statements from authoritative institution “W.H.O.” in order to make his argument more conceivable and objective. The writer claims that many of the cases were connected to the Huanan Seafood Market, which sold live poultry and exotic animal meats, thus animals appear to be the most likely source of the virus. Similarly, the writer guides readers to regard Huanan Seafood Market as the source of the coronavirus. However, up to now, the tracing work of the source of coronavirus is still in progress and has not yet formed an authoritative conclusion.

In example 9, instead of directly saying that the epidemic has brought heavy damage to China’s economy, the writer uses the research data from Peking University and Tsinghua University to demonstrate that China’s small enterprises are in trouble, making it a fact to readers more evidently, and thus impressing the readers of being verifiable.

4.2.4 Code glosses

“Code glosses supply additional information by rephrasing, explaining or elaborating what has been said” [6]. Code glosses make contributions to the arrangement of text for they deal with the writer’s prediction of the reader’s knowledge background for the sake of easier understanding by readers. Different backgrounds as the readers are in, it is necessary for the author to consider the readers’ knowledge so that most readers can understand the text. By elaborating or interpreting arguments, the text becomes easier and more persuasive. Code glosses like “for example”, “for instance”, “such as”, “which means”, “that means”, “in fact”, “known as” are commonly used.

Example 10

But sometimes the watch can be designed in ways that harm the public good. In 2001, for instance, Beijing ordered provincial officials to reduce water pollution from factories. Many provinces simply moved the factories to their borders, ensuring pollutants would flow into the next district. Nationwide, water pollution worsened. (Text 6: Coronavirus Exposes Core Flaws, and Few Strengths, in China’s Governance)

Example 11

The coronavirus, which has killed more than 1,300 people in China, has temporarily severed many of the ties between the country and the global community. For many Chinese students abroad, that means worrying about family at home and, in some cases, enduring unwanted attention from classmates. (Text 15: Coronavirus Forces Foreign Students in China to Choose: Stay or Go)

Example 12

But some people, particularly in the south, believe that the way to achieving a balanced body is through eating certain meats. Wildlife markets such as the Huanan Seafood Market in Wuhan, the site that is believed to be the origin of the coronavirus, proliferated because of the demand for such meats. (Text 12: In Coronavirus, China Weighs Benefits of Buffalo Horn and Other Remedies)

In Example 10, “for instance” is served as an exemplification. In the previous text, the writer mentions that the common good in China is seen as something that should be designed from above, like a watch being engineered to run perfectly. The writer argues that the China’s model has both the strengths and perils, then he cites the above examples to prove this systemic problem. Furthermore, the writer attempts to illustrate that China’s systematic problems would be exposed in COVID-19, which echoes the main idea of the article. Code glosses provide the readers with background knowledge, and then the writer explains the intended meaning.
In Example 11, “that means” is adopted to elaborate specifically the embarrassing situation of many Chinese students studying abroad, so that the readers with different background knowledge will have a clear impression on the dilemma faced by them. On one hand, the epidemic cut off the connection between China and the world, making it difficult for Chinese students abroad to get in touch with their families and to master accurate information. On the other hand, it is in China that the epidemic initially broke out, so that Chinese students may bear unwanted attention from their foreign classmates, causing certain psychological pressure.

In example 12, traditional Chinese medicine is linked to the consumption of exotic wild meats. Though it is unclear whether the eating of the meats is really based on the practice. The writer uses “such as” to introduce the Huanan Seafood Market where the coronavirus was first found, and directly relates the consumption of wild animals with the emergence of the virus. In this way the readers will be more inclined to accept the writer’s statement and mistakenly believe that the outbreak of COVID-19 was caused by the consumption of wild animals by Chinese people.

5. Conclusion

This study explores the use of interactive metadiscourse in China-related reports from the New York Times during the COVID-19 pandemic and examines how persuasion is realized by its use. Based on Hyland’s model, a quantitative analysis is first conducted to investigate the general distribution of interactive metadiscourse, followed by a qualitative analysis that discusses how each interactive metadiscourse is adopted to help realize persuasion. Some major findings are summarized as follows:

First, in terms of the general distribution of interactive metadiscourse uses, there are 2,241 occurrences and about 54.67 occurrences per 1,000 words in English news reports. Second, with regard to the subcategories of interactive metadiscourse, transition markers rank the first, reflecting that news writers’ resort to this device not only to highlight the cohesion and coherence of news, but also to explicate pragmatic connections in the reports. The large proportion of evidentials indicates the news reporters’ emphasis on the objectivity and credibility of news reports. News reporters employ frame markers and code glosses to organize the order of an argument or to elaborate and to explain the information. The zero appearance of endophoric markers can partly be explained by the fact that most texts are not that in need of referring to information from other parts. All in all, the considerable use of interactive metadiscourse markers demonstrate the determinate roles that metadiscourse plays in an English news reports and regardless of news types, metadiscourse is an indispensable part to connect the contents inside as well as the readers outside.

Practically, the study has confirmed the ubiquity of metadiscourse in news texts and its role in achieving persuasive effects, thus providing some enlightenment for news writers so as to use metadiscourse more effectively to enhance persuasiveness in the face of readers.

References