



# National Identities in Major Emergency: A Corpus-based Analysis on Interactional Metadiscourse in Regular Press Conference about COVID-19

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## Abstract

Addressers' metapragmatic awareness affects the language-choosing process and achieves diverse identities construction in different social contexts. Due to the COVID-19 epidemic, Chinese spokespersons endeavor to shape public opinions and defend national interest in Regular Press Conference through appropriately-employed languages, so as to avoid groundless criticism and probable panic among public. Based on Hyland's model of interaction, the present paper thus explores the discursive construction of national identities in spokespersons' remarks regarding the COVID-19. Verschueren's Adaptation Theory is adopted to explain spokespersons' employment of interactional metadiscourse in Regular Press Conference. The result shows that (1) self-mentions, attitude markers and boosters are made considerable use in remarks; (2) national identities as firm defender, responsible upholder and sincere friend are intentionally constructed; (3) spokespersons consciously adapt to the official context by adopting different metadiscourse resources. This analysis attempts to provide suggestions for international communication and shed some light on discursive strategies used in key context.

**Keywords:** Interactional metadiscourse; National identity; Discursive construction; COVID-19 epidemic; Major emergency.

## 1. Introduction

The global outbreak of COVID-19 epidemic has exerted adverse influence on social activities. Remaining unknown to the public, COVID-19 has given rise to suspicions and controversies in countries, which culminates in China, the first country to have found the virus. As major emergency featuring suddenness, publicity, destructiveness and extensive influence, COVID-19 epidemic has colonized every social media platforms and dominated various conferences. Media workers and spokespersons thus are confronted with more dire and complicated situations. This, indeed, poses great challenges to Chinese government in maintaining and shaping objective national image. Fundamentally, building a strong national identity contributes to avoiding groundless accusations as well as the panic of masses, and achieve positive national image (Cheng, 2018). Discursive strategies are commonly-used in identity-building (Kaunismaa, 1995). Against such background, diplomatic discourses made by spokespersons in question and answer session of China Regular Press Conference (hereinafter as CRPC) are noteworthy for its appropriately- and strategically-employed linguistic resources. Hence, with the aim to decode what and how national identities are constructed in spokespersons' interaction with journalists, the present paper probes into the linguistic features of discourse in CRPC, attempting to provide practical recommendations to discursive strategies in key context.

To conduct the empirical study, questions and answers regarding COVID-19 in CRPC were selected as corpus data. Adopting the theoretical lens of interactional metadiscourse, the paper investigates discourse strategies in diplomatic context. In specific, Hyland's model of interaction suggests that writers/speakers utilize metadiscourse resources to engage with readers/listeners in discourse, explicitly or implicitly direct their interpretation of propositions and show the stance, thereby achieving the position of both parties in communication (Hyland, 2005a;2005b). On behalf of China, spokespersons should not only stand firm in safeguarding core national interests but maintain harmony in association, for which interactional metadiscourse is made substantial use. Nevertheless, researches expounding the motivation behind the application of metadiscourse are sporadic, and more studies are needed. Chen X. (2014), claims that identities bear strong linkage with communicative contexts and purposes. According to Adaptation Theory proposed by Verschueren (1999), language use can be defined as the continuous making of linguistic choices according to specific situations. Therefore, this paper incorporates the theory to uncover the motive embedded on the discourse

So far, researches on national identity from the perspective of communication (Li C., 2007; Wang, 2009; Wang and Fan, 2019) and glottopolitics (Fitriati and Rata, 2020; Sari *et al.*, 2018) have accounted for a considerable proportion, whose data are mainly sourced online from political speeches and media discourse such as reports and government documents (Klymenko, 2016; Wu *et al.*, 2021). However, diplomatic words, which directly release information towards foreign media and closely relate to national identity, are scarcely researched. Hence, focused on spokespersons' remarks in CRPC, the present paper conducts a corpus-based analysis on interactional metadiscourse used in diplomatic communication, so as to unfold national identity construction in major emergency of COVID-19. It endeavors to make scholarly contributions to identity-building studies, extend the research scope of interactional metadiscourse, and provide practical recommendations to language adaptation in key context.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. National Identity Construction

The concept of identity stems from sociology, referring to the social attributes of individuals or groups, or roles people play in social context (Stryker, 1987). Relevant researches fall into two terrains: category approach arguing identity is fixed and stable, and social constructionist espousing the dynamic nature of identity (Tracy and Robles, 2013). As one of subcategories in identity studies, national identity deals with the role a country acts in the international community (Wodak *et al.*, 1999), and is constantly influenced by international politics, economics and culture (Alexander, 1994). Therefore, previous studies are partly concentrated on the field of communication and glottopolitics, revealing the interrelation between national identities and comprehensive national strength as well as the international community, so as to provide corresponding suggestions for diplomatic policy formulation (Boutin and N'Guessan, 2013; Fitriati and Rata, 2020; Li C., 2007; Sari *et al.*, 2018; Wang, 2009).

Echoing with constructivists' argument, Kaunismaa (1995) first pointed out the importance of discursive practices in national identity construction. Congruently, scholars (Hansan, 2006; Wodak *et al.*, 2008), furthered the proposition and developed methods such as Discourse-Historical Analysis (DHA) to explore the linguistic construction of national identity. A plethora of empirical researches thus are conducted, among which political elites' speeches, reports, documents and interviews are extensively examined. Appraisal theory and critical discourse analysis such as DHA, critical metaphor, are pivotal roles in extant researches. For instance, Chen *et al.* (2019) concluded Chinese identities as builder, contributor and promoter in Belt and Road Initiative from metaphors used in *China Daily*. Due attention is also paid to ideologies and cultural factors behind national identity-building (Rizwan, 2019; Wu *et al.*, 2021), contributing to cross-culture communication. Through the lens of critical metaphor, Weng (2013) probed into statements in Climate Change Conference, uncovering the fact that political standpoints influence the use of metaphors and different countries construct "Self-Other" identities discriminately to serve for group's interest.

Nevertheless, enormous concern is attached to the audience internal to the nation, aiming to enhance solidarity within. In CRPC targeting at international relationship, national identity serves somewhat different functions implicating issues that are of shared interest in global community (Liu and Chang, 2021). Therefore, focusing on remarks made by spokespersons, the present paper attempts to investigate national identities constructed in diplomatic discourse and discuss the behind motivations.

### 2.2. Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Remarks

CRPC is regularly held by China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where spokespersons release information on diplomatic activities and clarify political philosophy. It is an essential channel for foreign media to know about and report China. Spokespersons, when responding to various questions raised by foreign journalists, should not only firmly protect national interests but stick to foreign policy of peace. Thereout, it is the indispensable masterful skills and strategies in remarks that have intrigued scholars in fields of translation and pragmatics.

On account of political connotation conveyed in diplomatic discourse, researches have investigated translation strategies with the combination of Speech Act Theory, Skopos Theory, metaphor, cooperative principle and so forth, striving to explore how translators keep the source culture characteristics and foreground the national position in CRPC (Hu and Fan, 2016; Ren and Ji, 2021). From angle of pragmatics, typical features such as politeness, vagueness, euphemism and evasion in spokespersons' remarks are frequently discovered to unfold discourse strategies in establishing and maintaining diplomatic relations (Guan, 2013; Hong and Chen, 2011; Tu and He, 2009; Zhang, 2021) have developed a pragma-dialectical study approach to the spokesperson's replies, disclosing that the spokesperson utilizes strategies in maneuvering interaction to keep a balance between dialectical reasonableness and rhetorical discussion. These studies indeed break through the traditional communication research path of government press conferences, combine the linguistic research with communication studies, and thereby enrich the understanding of linguistic features in spokesperson's remarks. Illuminated by these studies, the present paper probes into the employment of interactional metadiscourse in diplomatic words, and further incorporate Adaptation Theory to expound the motivation behind, which may shed some light on communicative strategies in key context.

### 2.3. The Social Background of Major Emergency

As a major emergency, the outbreak of COVID-19 epidemic has been a topic of interest to researchers in various fields. The term "major emergency" was first officially put forward in the document *Plan for Responding to Public Emergencies* issued by the State Council in 2006, defined as "an emergency that occurs suddenly and causes or is likely to cause ecological environment destruction, property losses and casualties, or endanger public security".

Though the definition of major emergency varies slightly as analysis perspective changes, features of suddenness, publicity, destructiveness and extensive influence are shared by multidisciplinary researches.

To date, studies regarding major emergency mainly fall into terrains of medicine, social governance and communication (Li and Li, 2021; Liang, 2021; Wang and Li, 2021; Wang and Lei, 2022). Due to the unavoidable high-polluting nature of pharmaceutical industry, appreciable quantities of researches in medicine are conducted to stimulate industrial development. In addition, social planning and actions are central to studies because of the close relation between major emergency and people's livelihood. Notably, as currently social media makes giant strides, investigation on network reports, comments, and speeches from communication perspective provides certain guidance for public opinion channeling, as well as management for major emergencies. However, few scholars have paid attention to the discursive characteristics and strategies presented in relevant reports, documents, and press conferences. As the social context and international situation become increasingly complex, improving language competence in key context is conducive to social governance and image management. To address this lacuna, several scholars draw upon political discourse to explore strategies in anti-stigmatization (Li and Liu, 2021; Ye and Yang, 2021). Grounded on Chinese letters of advice from governments and hospitals produced during the COVID-19 pandemic, Na (2021) revealed different communicative styles adopted by two agencies. To enrich studies from linguistic perspective, the present probes into the discursive features of spokespersons' remarks concerning COVID-19 epidemic, and uncovers the national identities discursively constructed in conferences about major emergency.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1. Hyland's Model of Interaction

The concept of Metadiscourse is conceived in various manners since first put forward by Zelling Harris in 1959. Williams (1981), regarded metadiscourse as "discourse about discourse" and "writing about writing", proposing that both primary discourse and metadiscourse contribute to the communication between writers and readers. Differently, Mauranen (1993) and Adel (2006) took it as discourse reflexivity. It has also been claimed as a secondary level of meaning of a text concerning what the writer does to help the reader to "connect, organize, interpret, evaluate, and develop attitudes towards materials" (Vande, 2002). According to Hyland (2005a;2005b), metadiscourse represents the writer's awareness of the unfolding text as discourse: "how we situate ourselves and our readers in a text to create convincing, coherent prose in particular social contexts". That is, metadiscourse refers to those linguistic resources enabling speakers/writers to interact with listeners/readers.

Based on the definition, Hyland (2005a) discuss metadiscourse from interactive dimension and interactional dimension. The interactional dimension "concerns the ways writers conduct interaction by intruding and commenting on their message" Hyland (2005a). Therefore, the metadiscourse resources help the speakers/writers explicitly or implicitly guide listeners/readers' interpretation of targeted information and matter with their engagement, and thereby show their stance in specific context. Specifically, interactional metadiscourse consists of stance markers and engagement markers. Stance concerns "the attitudinal dimension and includes features which refer to the ways writers present themselves and convey their judgments, opinions, and commitments", including hedges, boosters, attitude markers and self-mentions. Hedges are used to withhold commitment and open dialogue, such as "might", "perhaps" and "possible". To the contrary, boosters emphasize certainty or close dialogue, for instance "definitely", "in fact" and "it is clear that". Attitude markers such as "unfortunately", "I agree" and "surprisingly" are adopted to express writer's attitude to proposition. And self-mentions refer explicitly to author(s), among which the first person pronouns are most commonly utilized. Engagement suggests "an alignment dimension where writers acknowledge and connect to others, recognizing the presence of their readers, pulling them along with their argument, focusing their attention, acknowledging their uncertainties, including them as discourse participants, and guiding them to interpretations". To be specific, engagement markers are comprised of reader mentions, directives, questions, shared knowledge and personal asides. Reader mentions such as 'you' and 'your' are the most direct way to achieve reader involvement. Directives help to guide readers' interpretation of propositions through imperatives, model of obligations and so forth. As for questions, they are rhetorical devices to arouse readers' interest. Appeals to shared knowledge highlight the common beliefs between two parties. And personal asides are explicit comments provided by addressers, allowing the writer's direct interruption of argument.

Essentially, the discursive preference shown in the employment of metadiscourse can position both writers and readers (Hyland, 2005b). That is, the strategic employment of interactional metadiscourse facilitates the construction of appropriate identities. Hence, this paper focuses on the discursive features of interactional metadiscourse, attempting to explore the national identity constructed in diplomatic discourse.

#### 3.2. Verschueren's Adaptation Theory

Adaptation theory embraces the view that the process of using language is that of choosing language, whether consciously or unconsciously (Verschueren, 1999). The selection process can be situated at any level of linguistic form. As a consequence, speakers possess reflective awareness and can choose proper language to construct corresponding pragmatic identity in interaction. In this way, metadiscourse can be one representation of such reflective awareness at linguistic level (Culpeper and Haugh, 2014; Verschueren, 1999; Ye and Yang, 2021).

As Verschueren (1999) rightly put it, the process of language choice-making involves three properties: variability, negotiability, and adaptability. Variability defines the range of possibilities from which choice can be made. Addressers can make choices during communication so long as there are accessible choices for language users. Moreover, such choices keep changing so that they cannot be made once for all. As for negotiability, it means

that the choice of language are not made mechanically but based on flexible principles and strategies. That is, the process of choice-making are filled with indeterminacy caused by various dynamic variables. In terms of adaptability, the core of adaptation theory, it suggests that language users are allowed to make negotiable choice of linguistic resources during communication. With respect to adaptability, Verschuere (1999) put forward four angles of investigation, which are contextual correlates of adaptability, structural objects of adaptability, the dynamics of adaptability, as well as the salience of the adaptation processes. To better investigate the correlation between national identity and metadiscourse resources, this paper thus adopts Verschuere's Adaptation Theory to decode the motivation behind spokespersons' remarks.

## 4. Research Method

### 4.1. Corpus Data

Corpus data were sourced online from the official website of Chinese Foreign Ministry (<https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/>). Though the COVID-19 epidemic broke out in December, 2019, it was not until on January 20, 2020 that questions and answers concerning COVID-19 appeared in CRPC. Considering the development of epidemic, discussion on COVID-19 reached a climax in the first half of 2020. There were 104 conferences in total held from January 20, 2020 to June 30, 2020, 90 of which involve the discussion of COVID-19 epidemic after manually checking. All contents in 90 conferences are downloaded from the official website. Nevertheless, the CRPC is held to disseminate information about foreign affairs, covering every aspects of a country such as education, economy, politics and diplomacy. Hence, only questions and answers regarding COVID-19 pandemic are retained in this paper, whose content covers epidemic investigation, epidemic prevention and vaccine. It should be noted that the corpus merely consists of spokespersons' remarks, with 150,022 words in total.

### 4.2. Data Analysis

Drawn upon Hyland's model of interaction, the metadiscourse resources are processed and coded via *ROST CM 6.0*, *BFSU Qualitative Coder 1.1* and corpus tool *AntConc 4.0.11*. Steps are as follows:

First, due to the fact that Chinese is unreadable to *AntConc 4.0.11*, the text should be primarily processed by *ROST CM 6.0*. Sentences in the text should be divided into phrases according to the meaning of Chinese words. For example, the sentence “nǐzhègèwèntí bǐjiào zhuānyè, jiànyì nǐ xiàng zhǔguǎn bùmén xúnwèn” (As for your professional questions, I suggest you refer to the competent authorities.) cannot be identified until its phrases are clearly divided as “nǐ zhègè wèntí bǐjiào zhuānyè, jiànyì nǐ xiàng zhǔguǎn bùmén xúnwèn”. Furthermore, the result is manually checked to avoid mistakes. And finally the processed version includes 78,374 file tokens and 5,533 file types.

Second, on account of the difference of interactional metadiscourse resources between English academic genre and Chinese diplomatic genre, the present paper attempts to put forward a newly revised checklist which is more suitable for diplomatic discourses with the help of checklist proposed by Hyland and existing researches on metadiscourse based on Chinese discourses. Therefore, 20 percent of the corpus data is manually marked by *BFSU Qualitative Coder 1.1* to have a wordlist covering those frequently-used interactional metadiscourses. [Table 4.1](#) shows the wordlist of interactional metadiscourse (Not all items are listed due to the space limit.). It should be noted that personal asides are not adopted.

Third, according to the wordlist and corresponding synonyms, frequency of each item is concluded via *AntConc 4.0.11*. Especially, the meaning and function of items would be reexamined with reference to their concordance lines in order to exclude fake ones. In addition, collocation of each item is also searched to comprehensively understand the function of metadiscourses.

**Table-4.1.** Wordlist of interactional metadiscourse in CRPC

Interactional metadiscourse	Chinese items	Translation
Stance markers	/	/
Hedges	yìxiē, gè bié bù yí dìng rúguǒ jù wǒ suǒ zhī, jù wǒ liǎojiě děng, dàyuē, yuē	some possible if to my knowledge about
Boosters	gāodù fēicháng bìxū zuì tèbié shì yuǎnyuǎn jiān (xìn), jiānjué(fǎn duì)	highly very must most especially far more firmly (believe/oppose to)
Attitude Markers	lǐngrén yíhàn de shì gǎndòng zhōngxīn de gǎnxiè wēnnuǎn rénxīn chōngmǎn xīnxīn zànshǎng	It's a pity that moved heartfelt gratitude heartwarming full of confidence appreciate

	fǎnduì, bù yǔnxǔ fǎngǎn, bùmǎn	oppose to disallow dissatisfy
Self-mentions	wǒ wǒmen zhōngfāng/zhōngguó (de)	I, me We, us, our China, Chinese
Engagement markers	/	/
Reader mentions	nǐ, nǐmen wǒmen wàiguó jìzhě, jìzhě péngyǒu mén	you we foreign journalist friends of journalists
Directives	Jiànyì, fèngquàn, qǐng yīng gāi	suggest please, should
Questions	nán dào . . . ma?/ne?	Shouldn't...
Shared Knowledge	nǐ yīnggāi/kěnéng zhùyì dào le nǐ yě zhīdào zhèng rú . . . zhǐchū	you should/may have noticed you also know/as is known to us As...point out

## 5. Discussion and Findings

### 5.1. An Overview of the Statistics

As indicated by Table 5.1, there are totally 5,396 interactional metadiscourses in corpus data among which stance markers account for 90.77%, far more than the proportion of engagement markers which is 9.23%. Basically, the result is similar to Hyland (2005b) research findings grounded on academic genre. Nevertheless, the distribution of interactional metadiscourses in diplomatic genre shows greater difference, revealing that spokespersons primarily lay considerable emphasis on taking national stance. Furthermore, self-mentions, attitude markers and boosters are most frequently employed by spokespersons, stressing the clear indication of Chinese perspective.

Table-5.1. Frequency of Interactional Metadiscourses

Interactional metadiscourse	Frequency	% of Total
Stance markers	4898	90.77
Hedges	255	4.72
Boosters	723	13.40
Attitude Markers	3089	15.40
Self-mentions	831	57.25
Engagement markers	498	9.23
Reader mentions	234	4.34
Directives	146	2.70
Questions	109	2.02
Shared Knowledge	9	0.17
Total	5396	100

## 5.2. Interactional Metadiscourse

### 5.2.1. Stance Markers

#### 5.2.1.1. Hedges

Hedges are devices adopted to leave leeway in communication and lower the certainty of propositions for negotiation (Hyland, 2012). Spokespersons tactfully express their conservative and prudent attitude towards certain propositions on diplomatic occasions. On account of the very nature of hedges being a powerless language, they have a relatively rare occurrence in spokespersons' remarks, which is expected because spokespersons are required to make explicit, rather than ambiguous statements in CRPC. According to statistics, hedges in CRPC mainly fall into two subcategories and perform different functions:

1. Showing a moderately cautious attitude to some governments and countries. Hedges such as "gèbié" (some) and "yīxiē" (some) are used together with "rén" (persons), "guójiā" (countries), "zhèngkè" (politician), "guānyuán" (officers) and "méiti" (media).
2. Providing the room for negotiation by lowering the certainty of propositions and allowing for alternative voices. Words such as "rúguó" (if), "jùwǒsuǒzhī" (to my knowledge), "kěnéng" (possible), "sìhū" (seem) and "jīn" (nearly) are used.

Here four specific examples are extracted for clear demonstration.

(1) **gèbié** méiti chēng xīnguàn bìngdú shì "zhōngguó bìngdú" jí bú fù zérèn, wǒmen duì cǐ jiānjué fǎnduì.  
It is highly irresponsible for **some** media to dub it "China virus". We firmly oppose that.

(2) yǔ cǐ tóngshí, yěyǒu **yīxiē** guójiā, tèbié shì měiguó duì zhōngguó yìqíng zuòchū guòjì fǎnyīng, cǎiqǔ guòdù yīngduì cuòshī.

Meanwhile, **some** countries, especially the US, overreacted to the epidemic in China and took excessive measures.

In above examples, spokespersons use “gèbié” and “yīxiē” to implicitly refer to some western countries and media who stigmatize China by making irresponsible comments such as “China virus” and “Chinese propaganda”. Against such context, hedges not only allow questioners to engage into interaction with shared information, but avoid fossilization and keep harmony in international community. This is, indeed, spokespersons’ adaptability to social context. In accordance with diplomatic principles, they should give consideration to interlocutors’ identity and face, as well as principle of politeness when choosing appropriate linguistic resources, which reflects the metapragmatic awareness of conforming to communicative context.

(3) **rúguǒ** wǒ méiyǒu jìcuò de huà, zài dàlù gānggāng fāshēng yìqíng de shíhòu, táiwān dāngjú fā gōnggào bú yǔnxǔ kǒuzhào chūkǒu.

**If** my memory serves me right, when the epidemic first broke out in China's mainland, Taiwan authorities banned the export of masks

(4) zhōngguó yīliáo zhuānjiā tóng fēifāng jǔbàn shìpín jìshù jiāoliúhuì **jìn** 30 chǎng, zhōngguó yuánfēi yīliáoduì zài dāngdì kāizhǎn gèlèi péixùn huódòng **jìn** 400 chǎng, péixùn rényuán 2 wàn **yú** réncì.

Chinese medical experts have held **nearly** 30 video meetings with the African, and Chinese medical teams in Africa have conducted **nearly** 400 training activities in Africa, covering **more than** 20,000 people.

Notably, hedges are used to give conservative responses and leave room for negotiation. As above two typical examples shows, if there’s no official statement, spokespersons tend to use hedges especially when stating facts and quoting concrete data. In example (3), spokesperson use phrases “rúguǒ wǒ méiyǒu jìcuò de huà” when recollecting facts. This, to some extent, can shun embarrassing situation with mild tone and also reduce the probability of a proposition being overturned. As for example (4), data quoted in CRPC are sometimes combined with hedges such as “yuē”, “jìn” and “dàgài”. Spokespersons give such approximate quantities instead of the exact number in case of any changes and mistakes. In these occasions, spokespersons choose expressions cautiously to adapt to the official diplomatic situation.

### 5.2.1.2. Boosters

Contrary to hedges, boosters suggest that “the writer recognizes potentially diverse positions but has chosen to narrow this diversity rather than enlarge it, confronting alternatives with a single, confident voice” (Hyland, 2012). Hedges and boosters are two opposite sides in measuring determinacy and certainty to a proposition. As major emergency, COVID-19 epidemic has definitely incurred criticism and suspicion in international community, which results in considerable employment of boosters by spokespersons to clearly and firmly take a stance and refute rumors.

On the whole, there are three subcategories of boosters: 1) verbs like (jiān)xìn/xiāngxìn (believe); 2) modal auxiliaries like bixū (must); 3) adverbs like gāodù (highly), fēicháng (very), míngquè (clearly), tèbié (especially), jiānjué (firmly), zuì (most), yuǎnyuǎn (far) and so forth. Spokespersons are possible to utilize boosters in two distinct circumstances. One is boosters employed in positive enhancement which collocate with words such as zhòngshì (emphasize), fùzé (responsible), zhuānyè (professional), and the other is boosters used to emphasize position when criticism is cast for instance “jiānjué fǎnduì” (firmly oppose to), “jiānjué èzhì” (firmly resist), “qiángliè qiǎnzé” (strongly criticize).

Examples from (5) to (7) are extracted for detail illustration.

(5) zhōngguó zhèngfǔ jìshí cǎiqǔ le **zuì** quánmiàn, zuì yángé, **zuì** chèdǐ de fǎngkòng cuòshī, **quánlì** èzhì yìqíng kuòsàn mànyán.

The Chinese government has taken **the most** comprehensive, rigorous and thorough prevention and control measures in a timely manner to contain the spread of the epidemics.

(6) **xiāngxìn** zài zhōngguó zhèngfǔ de jiānqiáng lǐngdǎo xià, zài guójì shèhuì de dàlì zhīchí xià, zhōngguó rénmín **yīdìng nénggòu** zǎorì zhànshèng yìqíng.

We **believe** that Chinese people **will** prevail over the epidemic at an early data under the strong leadership of the Chinese government and with strong support of international community.

(7) jìnlái, měiguó yīxiē zhèngkè bǎ xīnguàn bìngdú tóng zhōngguó xiàng liánxì, zhèshì duì zhōngguó gǎo wūmínghuà. wǒmen duì cǐ **qiángliè** fēnkǎi, **jiānjué** fǎnduì.

Recently, some US politicians have linked the COVID-19 with China. We are **strongly** indignant and **firmly** opposed to this stigmatization.

In example (5), boosters are used in tandem with adjectives describing anti-epidemic measures, by which spokespersons strengthen the degree of proposition and stress Chinese responsible attitudes to fight the epidemic. Similarly, spokespersons adopt both verbs “xiāngxìn” and modal auxiliaries “yīdìng nénggòu” to show Chinese determination to prevail over the COVID-19. In these two examples, boosters are conducive to construct, maintain and even enhance positive Chinese image and identity. Conversely, boosters in example (7) are used to eliminate negative comments. According to specific context of application, boosters are frequently used when journalists raise doubts and cast criticism in China so as to defend national interests. Boosters, actually, should be used consciously for they show absolute attitudes towards propositions. Nevertheless, spokespersons substantial utilize them when discussing major emergency which exerts profound impact on countries. In addition, it is noteworthy that sometimes hedges are used in conjunction with boosters. Combining them together can function significantly in obtaining the

acceptance and endorsement of the general public and journalists. This, indeed, manifests spokespersons' adaptability to official occasions.

### 5.2.1.3. Attitude Markers

Attitude markers indicate the writer's affective, rather than epistemic, attitude to propositions, conveying surprise, agreement, importance, frustration, and so on, rather than commitment (Hyland, 2005a). In spokespersons' remarks, they are expressed in two fashions: 1) verbs such as *zànshǎng* (praise), *fǎnduì* (disagree); 2) adjectives, for example *gǎnxiè* (grateful), *lǐngrén yíhàn de* (regretful), *fènkǎi de* (indignant). Generally speaking, attitude markers are representations of addresser's personal emotions. According to Chen (2015), spokespeople and leaders who represent the government and national agencies to deliver speeches seldom employ attitude words to disclose or express their individual feelings. Nevertheless, the present paper finds that attitude markers accounts for 15.40%, second only to the employment of self-mentions. The COVID-19 epidemic which as major emergency incurs rumors and criticism urgently requires spokespersons express Chinese attitude and standpoint. Hence, attitude markers are utilized by spokespersons in two apparently distinct cases and perform different functions: expressing gratitude and opposing to stigmatization. Following three examples are given for further discussion.

(8) *wǒ xiǎng hěnduō zhōngguó wǎngmín hé wǒ yīyàng dōu zhùyì dào le rìběn rénmín zhè ixiē wēnnuǎn rénxīn de jǔdòng.*

I think many Chinese netizens have noticed these **heart-warming** actions of the Japanese people as I have.

(9) *wǒmen duì qítā guójiā rénmín jīyǔ zhōngguó de tóngqíng, lìjiě hé zhīchí biǎoshì zhōngxīn gǎnxiè.*

We would like to express our **heartfelt thanks** to people of other countries for their sympathy, understanding and support.

(10) *péngpèiào xiānshēng zàicì duì zhōngguó jìnxíng wúduān zhǐzé, wǒmen duìcǐ shífēn fǎngǎn bìng jiānjué fǎnduì.*

Mr. Pompeo made groundless accusation against China. We are deeply **indignant** and firmly **opposed to** it.

Adjective attitude markers in example (8) and example (9) are utilized to modify helpful actions taken by other countries. CRPC, as formal occasion to disseminate information towards the world, can scarcely be connected with attitudinal expressions. Nevertheless, timely and proper grateful expressions contribute to establishment of friendly relationship with other countries. Likewise, as shown in example (10), overtly opposing to false report and slander is necessary for safeguarding national interest. To sum up, spokespeople are all in favor of adopting attitude markers to assist them in expressing standpoints of some tough issues and events.

### 5.2.1.4. Self-Mentions

Self-mention refers to the use of first person pronouns and possessive adjectives to present propositional, affective and interpersonal information (Hyland, 2001). Results indicate that self-mentions takes the largest proportion which is 57.25%, far more than other interactional metadiscourses. In general, every discourse conveys the idea and information of the addresser. But the first-person pronoun is probably the most influential way of self-representation. Addressers project themselves into the discourse and relate their attitudes as well as positions to the declaration and the audience. The presence and absence of explicit author reference is generally a conscious choice by addressers to adopt a particular stance and a contextually situated authorial identity (Hyland, 2001). There are four types of self-mentions in CRPC: *wǒ* and *wǒmen* (I, me, we, us), *zhōngfang* (de) and *zhōngguó* (de) (China, Chinese). Furthermore, on behalf of Chinese government and Chinese people, spokespersons employ more plural first person pronouns than singular ones, which can integrate the general public, the government and spokespersons themselves. As for singular person pronouns, spokespersons tend to use them especially when referring to themselves instead of as representatives of Chinese people.

Three examples are extracted for demonstration.

(11) *zhōngguó zhèngfǔ bǎ rénmín shēngmìng ānquán hé shēntǐ jiànkāng fāngzài diyīwèi.*

The **Chinese** government gives top priority to people's safety and health.

(12) *wǒ xiǎng qiángdiào, yìqíng miànqián, wǒmen xūyào de shì kēxué, lìxìng, hézuò.*

**I** want to stress that in the face of the epidemic, what **we** need is science, rationality and cooperation.

(13) *wǒ zuótiān yǐjīng jiù xiāngguān wèntí zuòchū guò huíyìng.*

**I** have already responded to similar questions yesterday.

In example (11) and (12), self-mentions are employed when national position and ideas are mentioned, which contributes to strengthen and emphasize determination of the whole country and government as a whole group to continue the efforts of fight the epidemic. Singular person pronoun is employed in example (13). The spokesperson uses "wǒ" to indicate that he had already made clear his position on the issue in press conference on the previous day, implying that there was no point in asking repeatedly for the questioner. This reflects the spokesperson's reflective awareness of the physical context for which he uses above interactive metadiscourses so that questioners can realize and adapt to the physical context in which they no longer ask questions, so as to achieve the purpose of communication.

### 5.2.2. Engagement Markers

Engagement markers are aimed to include readers or audience as participants in the discourse and position them rhetorically, "pulling readers into the discourse at critical points, predicting possible objections and guiding them to particular interpretations" (Hyland, 2005a). They are used to create an impression of integrity, authority, and credibility with readers/listeners. According to Zhang (2019) analysis on Chinese Regular Press Conference,

engagement markers take up 42.6% among metadiscourse resources, surpassing the number of self-mentions which take up 35.3%. Nevertheless, the present paper finds that against the context of major emergency, spokesperson adapted more self-mentions in showing stance while reduce the employment of engagement markers. There are four categories of engagement markers: reader mentions, shared knowledge, directives and questions, among which reader mentions takes the largest proportion of 4.34% and shared knowledge has the least occurrence of 0.17%. Reader mentions include the participants who are mentioned by the spokespersons, consisting of direct appellation such as “wàiguó jìzhě” (foreign journalists), together with personal pronouns “nǐ” (you), “nǐmen” (pl. you) and “wǒmen” (our, us).

(14) nǐ zuòwéi zhùhuá jìzhě, yīnggāi nénggòu gǎnshòu dào, zhōngguó shì yí gè kāifàng de shèhuì.

**As a journalist stationed in China**, I think you can feel that China is open and opening up even wider to other countries.

(15) wǒmen yīnggāi bǎ zhègè wèntí jiāoyóu kēxuéjiā hé zhuānyè lǐngyù rénshì qù jiějué.

**We** should leave the problem to scientists and professionals to investigate and prove the origin of the virus.

In example (14), direct appellation and personal pronouns are combined together to directly appeal to journalists and personalize their interaction (Hyland, 2005a). As Fairclough (1993) rightly put it, personalization creates meaningful and real-time personal interaction among interlocutors. Specially, plural person pronouns can be used both as self-mentions and reader mentions, which needs careful identification, by which spokespersons can also refer to Chinese people as a whole, or humans as a community sharing the future. Example (15) illustrates that spokesperson utilizes “wǒmen” to strengthen connections with all foreign friends. Thus, by virtue of reader mentions, spokespersons can set up dialogues by weaving their potential views into the discourse, thereby directing addressees’ interpretation and anticipating their objections, concerns and ideas.

(16) wǒ xiǎng dàjiā hé wǒ yīyàng dōu zhùyì dào le riběn rénmin zhèxiē wēnnuǎn rénxīn de jùdòng.

**I think you have noticed, as I have**, these heart-warming actions from Japanese.

Generally, knowledge references scarcely appear in spokespersons’ remarks. This, indeed, is contrary to previous research results.

As indicated in example (16), phrases such as “nǐ yīnggāi/kěnéng zhùyì dào le” (you should/may have noticed) and nǐ yě zhīdào (you also know/as is known to us) are utilized by spokespersons to emphasize the consensus and facilitate addressees’ acceptance of related standpoints.

(17) wǒ bù liǎojiě nǐ shuō de qíngkuàng, jiànyì nǐ xiàng zhǔguǎn bùmén xúnwèn.

I have no information on that and **refer you to** the competent authorities.

Directives instruct the addressees to perform an action or to see things in a way determined by the addresser. Verbs such as jiànyì (suggest), fēngquàn (advise) and modal auxiliary such as yīnggāi (should) are all employed in spokespersons’ remarks. Compared with other engagement marker resources, directives show a tougher attitude of spokespersons, which can shun acute and professional questions.

(18) wèishénme yǒude guójiā zuòchū le zúgòu fǎnyìng, jìnxíng le gǎnyù, ér měiguó què rang yìqíng fāzhǎn dào jīntiān de dìbù? nándào měifāng méiyǒu rènhe zhìde fānsī de dìfāng ma?

**Why** is it that some countries made adequate reactions and effective interventions, while the US failed to do so? **Is there** nothing that the US can reflect upon?

Employing questions is another engagement feature functioning directly to build relationship among communicators. In most case, questions made by spokespersons do not require audience’s answers. Example (18) shows that spokesperson continuously cast two questions as response to skepticism regarding anti-epidemic measures. This can effectively create a discursive context between speakers and listeners, which guide listeners’ reflection and interpretation in a relatively mild way.

### 5.3. National Identity Constructed in Spokespersons’ Remarks

By and large, national identities as firm defender, responsible upholder and sincere friend are discursively constructed via interactional metadiscourse in CRPC. Throughout spokespersons’ remarks, the stance of China on COVID-19 epidemic has been clarified consciously and inadvertently. Pronounced absoluteness and bluntness are shown in spokespersons’ utterances when it comes to relatively tough topics. Therefore, the construction of China as firm and steady defender is achieved through substantial application of self-mentions, boosters, together with some questions and hedges. As major emergency first broke out in China, COVID-19 has brought about enormous loss globally, which made China target of public criticism. Under such context, spokespersons make considerable use of boosters when responding questions implying stigmatization of China and false information. Self-mentions are the most direct way to achieve authorial projection in discourse. Hence, boosters are frequently used together with self-mentions so as to express China’s strong dissatisfaction and firm opposition, for example “wǒmen jiānjué fāndui” (We firmly oppose to). Although this hardline stance can come in a roundabout way, a rather confident and steady manner is exhibited through boosters. Nevertheless, it can be noticed that hedges like “yìxiē” and “gèbié” are utilized to refer to specific media and countries spreading unsubstantiated speculation in a relatively soft way. If confronting tough questions, spokespersons sometimes employ questions to arouse targeted audience’s reflection and resonance, which help to leave leeway for negotiation. This, indeed, is aimed to maintain harmonious atmosphere and friendly relationship in international community, manifesting spokespersons’ adaptation to diplomatic communication.

Besides, national identity as responsible upholder is constructed through employment of boosters, attitude markers and directives. This can be reflected from two aspects: scientific and rigorous attitude toward professional questions and supremacy attached to people as well as their lives. Questions regarding the source of virus are topical

issues in the CRPC. Directives are availed when spokespersons answer some professional questions, avoiding hasty and irresponsible conclusions. In addition, boosters are used to modify anti-epidemic measures, stressing the degree of recognition and rapid response domestically and internationally, which can show china's attitude of putting people and their lives first. Embracing the idea of human community with a shared future, China is responsible for both Chinese people and the world.

Reader mentions and attitude markers contributes to the construction of China's identity as sincere friend. Reader mentions are conducive to establish connection and signal sincerity among interlocutors. It is worth noting that, apart from personal pronouns, direct appellation is still adopted in spokespersons' remarks. In addition, such direct appellation is combined with appositives such as friends. This can greatly narrow psychological distance between addressers and addressees, constructing China as a sincere friend for other countries. Attitude markers can straightly convey spokespersons' affections, be it positive and negative. Therefore, directness in expressing gratitude and appreciation for assistance from other countries in CRPC signals Chinese sincerity and gratitude, promoting the international cooperation in anti-epidemic.

## 6. Conclusion

Considering the internationally extensive and profound impact of major emergency, the paper discusses the interactional metadiscourse employed in diplomatic discourse and further concludes three national identities constructed in spokespersons' remarks: a firm defender, a responsible upholder and a sincere friend. It is argued that the metapragmatic awareness needs to be considered in analyzing identity construction.

The paper makes both theoretical and methodological contributions in following three aspects. First, it extends the scope of discourse analysis, particularly from the metadiscourse perspective. Taking diplomatic language as research data, discursive construction of national identity is explored. Second, the research method and perspective are enriched. Grounded on Adaptation Theory and interactional metadiscourse, this paper studies international communication in CRPC from linguistic perspective, which offers some suggestions for the field of communication. Third, the result implies that interactional metadiscourse plays an essential role in establishing relationships with the public, guiding speakers to process and refine ideas for intended reactions. This, indeed, is beneficial for addressers at the key context such as press conference to engage their audience and guide the listeners to understand the information presented.

Admittedly, there are some limitations in this research. First is the limited data. The time horizon of corpus data can be expanded as the COVID-19 has been influencing the world over two years. Second, this paper probes into the construction of national identity in specific events. In future researches, changes in the identity can be discussed. COVID-19 epidemic, as major emergency, has exerted great influence on national discursive system and identities, which is worthy of exploring. Third is the subjectivity in marking the interactional metadiscourse. Team collaboration can be adopted in future researches to reduce the subjectivity. Fundamentally, more studies should be made based on Chinese discourses to perfect the Chinese wordlist of metadiscourse.

Amidst the post-epidemic era, construction of national identity and discourse system are increasingly significant. It is necessary for us to continue exploring in diplomatic language whose potential can then be exploited to the fullest.

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