

# A Study of China's Epidemic News Report Based on Systemic-Functional Grammar-----A Case Study of a News

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## Abstract

News report, as an important social media, should convey information or report objectively and fairly. However, influenced by the ideology of different countries and the opinions of news reporters, news reports are not always objective and sometimes it would show some bias. Since the end of January 2020, COVID-19 has begun to spread around the world from Wuhan, China. At the same time, there have been increasing reports of outbreaks in China. Many reports showed many different attitudes and positions. This paper tries to analyze a news report titled as China Pushes Back as Coronavirus Crisis Damages Its Image on March 9<sup>th</sup> from *New York Times* as the research object. Based on Halliday's ideational function and interpersonal function theory, this paper uses qualitative research methods to discuss the distribution of the six processes in the transitivity system in news report and the feasibility of transitivity and modality analysis in news report. This study proves that Halliday's Systemic-Functional Grammar is an effective tool for analyzing news reports and it can help readers to critically read news reports and better understand the hidden meaning of news reports.

**Keywords:** Systemic-Functional Grammar; News report; Transitivity process.

## 1. Introduction

In the modern society characterized by the information age, the news media plays an increasingly important role in people's daily life. It is the news media that paint so many images in our minds that we know the outside world. The social influence of news media has been greatly promoted and enhanced nowadays. As Hillier points out, the world of journalism is not the real world but a distorted and judgmental one (Hiller, 2004). Therefore, it can be inferred that news reports may not be the real world, but they greatly affect people's view of the outside world or people's ideology. From this point of view, it is necessary to analyze news in a critical way.

The coronavirus outbreak in China caused more than 3000 people deaths. Since the outbreak in Wuhan, many countries' media have given varying degrees of coverage to the epidemic situation in China. Their different reports show their different attitudes to China.

This paper aims to analyze the linguistic features of a news reports from the perspectives of Halliday's Systemic-Functional Grammar, to be specific, from conceptual function and interpersonal function.

It is to reveal that American media holds that China needs to take responsibility of coronavirus outbreak and deterioration of international relations and leaves their readers a bad image of China. Through analysis, readers can better understand the hidden meaning behind the report. It is also conducive to enriching the theoretical connotations of these functions.

## 2. Literature Review

In recent years, news reports are often analyzed in terms of Halliday's Systemic-Functional Grammar. Some researchers focused on a certain type of news. For example, Yuan (2019) tried to interpret the economic news about British media's views on China's economic growth from the perspectives of transitivity, modality and vocabulary. Li and Liu (2019), used the transitivity system to analyze the news reports of Notre Dame's conflagration in People's Daily and explored the distribution of the six processes in the transitivity system in news discourse.

Some scholars made a comparison between two different countries' news report about a same affair to show their different attitudes. For example, Gan *et al.* (2015) made a comparative study of new reports of China Daily and New York Times on the 18th CPC National Congress from the perspective of transitivity. Xu (2019), offered a critical discourse analysis of China Daily and The Los Angeles Times' coverage of the ceasefire agreement in Syria.

### 3. Data Collection

The research object of this paper is a news report titled as China Pushes Back as Coronavirus Crisis Damages Its Image taken from *New York Times*. Founded in 1851, *New York Times* is not only the most influential mainstream newspaper in the American newspaper industry, but also the most prestigious newspaper in the world, known as “newspaper of record”. Therefore, the data collected from this newspaper websites can represent the political and ideological of the media and government.

A global outbreak of the coronavirus, which began in Wuhan in late January 2020, has set back the global economy, with more than 10 million cases and half a million deaths worldwide. News Reports of the China’s outbreak and quarantine have been coming in from all over the world, so it is necessary to analyze these news reports under the special period. An analysis and study of the impact of the coronavirus on China’s image on *New York Times* can provide a rough picture of China’s image in the US media during the outbreak. This paper is devoted to put the Halliday’s Systemic-Functional Grammar into practice by analyzing a news report which included 726 words.

### 4. Analytical Framework

Halliday (2004), divided the functions of language into three meta-functions: interpersonal function, ideational function and textual function. In this paper, I will use ideational function and interpersonal function to analyze that news report.

According to Halliday (2004), ideational function is a way of expressing our experience, including the internal and external world of our consciousness. The transitivity system is a semantic system that expresses ideational function. The transitivity system is a semantic system which expresses the function of concept. Its function is to express people’s behavior, seeing and hearing in the real world into several processes and to point out the participants and environmental components related to various processes. Halliday believes that human experience can be divided into six different processes by the transitivity system: material process; verbal process; mental process; behavioral process; existential process; relational process.

Interpersonal function is that people use language to communicate with each other, establish and maintain interpersonal relationships, and influence other people’s behavior. At the same time people use language to express their views on the world, and even change the world. Through this function the speaker engages himself in a situational context to express his attitudes and inferences and to try to influence the attitudes and behaviors of others. Interpersonal functions are mainly realized through mood, modality and evaluative lexis. In this paper, I will focus on the use of modality verbs of this new report.

## 5. Findings and Discussions

### 5.1. Transitivity Analysis

#### 5.1.1. Frequency of Transitivity Processes

In this news report, there are totally 27 clauses and 786 words included. The author divides these clauses into 5 transitivity process types in the light of verbs of the main clauses.

Table-1.

	number	proportion
Material process	15	56%
Relational process	2	7%
Mental process	1	4%
Verbal process	8	29%
Existential process	1	4%
Behavioral process	0	0

As shown in Table 1, five types of transitivity processes are included, i.e., material process, relational process, mental process, verbal process, existential process. Material process hold the largest proportion among all the process types, which is in consistency with the dispassionate essence of this news report; that is, the media should be more factual in accounting instead of making personal comments. Verbal process occupies the second largest proportion, which represents this news report quotes many other’s words. Relational process holds the 7% percentage among all the type process. Mental and existential processes share the same percentage of all the processes. In the following part, I will select the material, relational and verbal processes to analyze.

#### 5.1.2. Material Process Analysis

Material process is a process of doing something. The process itself is usually represented by a dynamic verb. The participants include the “actor” and the “goal” of the action.

(1) it has expelled foreign journalists, attacked displays of racism, hinted that other governments are responding too slowly, and suggested that the virus originated elsewhere.

In Example (1), the actor “it” represents China. “expel”, “attack”, “hint” and “suggest” are processes. The goals are foreign journalists, racism and other government. “expel” means forcing to leave which implies they think China does a barbaric act. “attack” represents that China is using race discrimination as an excuse to escape responsibility

for coronavirus spread. “hint” and “suggest” also mean that American media holds that China tries to blame on other countries. From this sentence, we can find that American media tries to blame China for the spread of the coronavirus and construct a image of China which is swearing off buck passing.

(2) China could also benefit from the shift in focus to other hot spots, especially in Italy.

In Example (2), the actor is China. The “benefit form” is the process and “shift” is the goal. From *New York Times* view, “benefit” indicates that if China continues to use the way of contributing anti-epidemic materials to other countries, many countries would begin to feel grateful for contribution. And the intention of shift will be achieved. China will benefit from this situation. Through this sentence, we can find that American media attempts to construct a image that China’s acts are done to shirk responsibility and for their own benefits.

### 5.1.3. Verbal Process Analysis

The verbal process is a process of communicating information through speech. This news report has the second largest proportion of the verbal process, showing that quoting the words of authority figures and authorities can enhance the credibility of news reports.

(2) He then referred to Mr. Xi’s signature Belt and Road investment strategy to unite the world through infrastructure and commerce, saying that this was “not the Belt and Road people hoped for Tragic.”

According to the context, the speaker “he” is Mr. Wuttke of the European Chamber of Commerce. The content of speaking is that he thinks that Belt and Road is a road for tragic not for hope. From this sentence, we can find that American media quotes his words to make their readers know China donates to European countries in order to maintain their good images and for its own benefit, just like building the Belt and Road. In their eyes, China is hypocritical. It unveils the intention that America media attempts to discredit China.

### 5.1.4. Relational Process Analysis

Relational process reflects what kind of relationship between things, and focuses on the description of meaning. In the news report, the relational process is used to show readers the relationship between the characters and the development of events.

(3) The epidemic is first and foremost a public health crisis, having already caused more than 3,000 deaths, but for China, it has become a challenge to its standing at home and abroad, too.

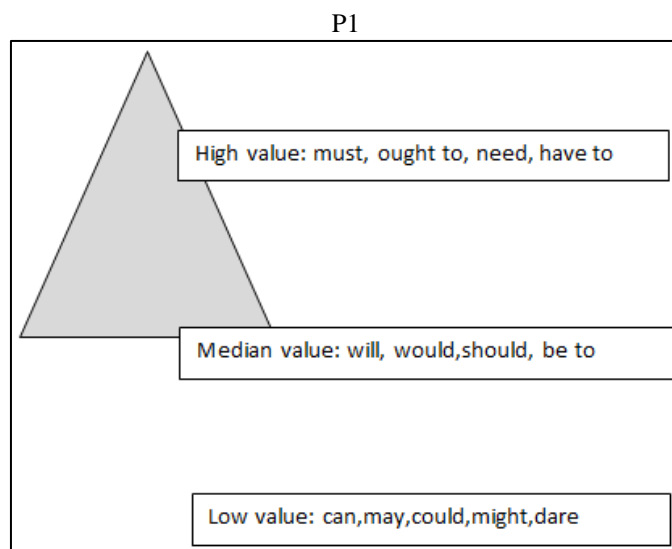
The first relational process is giving the epidemic a character. The verb “is” makes the epidemic carry the attribute “first and foremost a public health crisis”. In the second relational process, “become” as a linking verb lays emphasis on the dynamic changes while “be” is static. Here American media’s use of “become” indicates that in the future China will face many challenges about handling the epidemic situation at home and dealing with international relations at abroad. It also implies that America media holds that due to epidemic outbreak from China, China has to accept this kind of situation.

In summary, through analysis, we can find that American media tries to undermine China’s image and put all the responsibility to China to make themselves innocent and irrespective about epidemic outbreak.

## 5.2. Modality Analysis

Modality is one of the means of expressing the interpersonal function of language. It can express a person’s wishes, take responsibility for others’ demands, or predict the development of events. The purpose of modality is to help speakers or writers to express their evaluations of truth, attitudes and views towards an certain events. In the news report, modality is an important tool to address the attitudes of speakers or writers towards a news event.

Different modality verbs have different quantifiers, which can indicate different degrees of possibility, regularity, obligation and willingness. The quantifiers of modality verbs can be divided into three value levels: high, median and low just like P1.



In this news report, there are 6 modality verbs included.

Table-2

	High value	Median value	Low value
Number	2	1	3
Proportion	33%	17%	50%

From the above figures, it is found that modality verbs with low values take up the highest frequency and the proportion is 50% in total. The high value of modality verbs the second frequently used among the three values., and the proportion is 33% in total. The median value modality verbs are the least frequently used verbs among the three values and the proportion is 17% in total. There are some examples listed subsequently.

(4) China faces a torrent of suspicion from other countries that could undermine its ambitions of becoming a global economic and political power.

“could” belongs to low value modality verbs. It is a kind of mild tone to avoid the absoluteness of events to make the message is easier to be accepted by the reader. Put in the sentence to understand, “could” means that a torrent of suspicion from other countries has the least possibility to undermine China’s ambitions of becoming a global economic and political power. It also represents an irony that American media thinks that even if under the situation of coronavirus outbreak and other countries’ suspicion crisis, China would not give up its ambition and interest.

(5) Fernando Simón, the head of Spain’s coordination center for health alerts and emergencies, told a news conference that “we have to progressively think that China is not the highest risk zone.”

“have to” is a high value modality phrase. This sentence is a quotation from Fernando Simón. He wants to emphasize China is not the highest risk zone and warn Spanish people to pay attention to the coronavirus spread in Europe.

(6) The Trump administration retaliated this week by announcing that it would cap the number of Chinese employees in the United States at five major state media organizations, including Xinhua and CGTN.

“would” is a median value modality verb. The use of median value modal expression reflects a relatively equal relationship between the speaker and the listener, and it does not impose strong obligations and responsibilities on the listener. The Trump administration declared to retaliate China and the use of “would” makes easier for readers to accept the action of Trump administration. And then it lets the readers choose to support them.

## 6. Conclusion

Based on Halliday’s Systemic-Functional Grammar, this paper analyzes a news report titled as China Pushes Back as Coronavirus Crisis Damages Its Image on March 9<sup>th</sup> from *New York Times*. Through transitivity and modality verbs analysis, we can find that American media tries to discredit China’s image and mislead their readers to have a bad understanding of China. They think that China needs to take all the responsibility of coronavirus outbreak. This study proves that Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar is an effective tool for analyzing news reports and it can help readers to critically read news reports and better understand the hidden meaning of news reports.

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## Appendix1: Data:

-----China Pushes Back as Coronavirus Crisis Damages Its Image *New York Times* 2020. March 9<sup>th</sup>

The epidemic is first and foremost a public health crisis, having already caused more than 3,000 deaths, but for China, it has become a challenge to its standing at home and abroad, too. China faces a torrent of suspicion from other countries that could undermine its ambitions of becoming a global economic and political power.

China is now hitting back — it has expelled foreign journalists, attacked displays of racism, hinted that other governments are responding too slowly, and suggested that the virus originated elsewhere. The government has

hailed friendly countries that sent supplies or stayed open to Chinese travelers and has also itself sent shipments of aid. It has inflamed relationships that were already tense, like that with the United States, but also strained those with friendlier countries such as Russia.

China has urged countries to work together, but lashed out at the United States and others, at least in part, it seems, to deflect public anger at home.

“The epidemic is a lost opportunity for China to rebuild some good will with America and other countries,” Susan L. Shirk, chairwoman of the 21st Century China Center at the University of California, San Diego, wrote in an email. “Beijing is playing geopolitics with the epidemic,” Ms. Shirk wrote. “The domestic propaganda is hostile to the U.S. and emphasizing the superiority of the Chinese system and the wisdom of Xi Jinping.”

The intensity of the outbreak forced China to go on the defensive early, especially as the government failed to explain [the delays](#) in warning the public about the threat of the coronavirus, especially in Wuhan, the city where it began.

China’s embassy in Berlin slammed the German newsmagazine Der Spiegel [for a cover photograph](#) that showed a man in a protective suit and mask, with the headline “Made in China.” “Epidemic outbreaks must not be used as an excuse for discrimination and xenophobia,” the embassy’s statement said.

In the case of The Wall Street Journal, China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs went further, expelling three journalists from the newspaper’s Beijing bureau over a headline on [an opinion-page essay](#): “China Is the Real Sick Man of Asia.”

The Trump administration retaliated this week by announcing that it [would cap the number](#) of Chinese employees in the United States at five major state media organizations, including Xinhua and [CGTN](#). That, in turn, prompted new accusations of hypocrisy from Ms. Hua, the Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, and a hint of still more tit-for-tat moves. “Now the US kicked off the game,” she [wrote on Twitter](#), “let’s play with China.”

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.

At a briefing in Beijing on Thursday, officials highlighted the assistance China is now providing other countries. That includes sending coronavirus test kits to Pakistan, Japan, Iran and other countries. China’s Red Cross flew a team of volunteer experts to Iran, which has been particularly hard hit.

Rush Doshi, director of the China Strategy Initiative at the Brookings Institution in Washington, said that China’s effort to rewrite the narrative — by donating test kits and sending other aid — could pay off.

China could also benefit from the shift in focus to other hot spots, especially in Italy. Fernando Simón, the head of Spain’s coordination center for health alerts and emergencies, told a news conference that “we have to progressively think that China is not the highest risk zone.”

Others, though, are skeptical that China can easily rebound from the taint of the epidemic “Resentment against China in Europe is palpable,” Mr. Wuttke of the European Chamber of Commerce said. He then referred to Mr. Xi’s signature Belt and Road investment strategy to unite the world through infrastructure and commerce, saying that this was “not the Belt and Road people hoped for Tragic.”

## Appendix2: Details of Analysis: original tables

Table-1

	number	proportion
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