

A Corpus-based Critical Analysis of American Foreign Policies on China

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Abstract: Modality reflects the speaker's position, attitude or evaluation of the situation. This study collected American foreign policy discourse on China human rights to create two small corpora. Three types of modality are compared to reveal the hidden ideology behind political discourse. It is found that: (1) the proportion of modalities in Obama's corpora is larger than that in Trump's; (2) epistemic accounts for the largest, while volitional accounts for the smallest; (3) three types of modalities contribute to the realization of different communicative purposes in American human rights diplomacy to China.

Keywords: foreign policy; modality; textual functional analysis

1. Introduction

Modality embodies the speaker's subjective attitude and its importance is self-evident (Han&Zhang 2019,39). Modality is an important means of expressing interpersonal meaning. Scholars have been exploring the interpersonal meaning of modality. Fowler (1979) believes modality can express the speaker's evaluation or attitude. Quirk et al. (1985) found modal meaning can be thought of as the speaker's judgment of the truth of a proposition. There are different ways to classify. Portner (2009) divided modalities into cognitive and deontic. Xu (2018,56) mainly divides modality into three categories: epistemic, denotic and volitional. She regards them as the embodiment of affirmative, necessity and willingness respectively and puts forward three values (high, median and low).

Foreign policy is formulated to safeguard national sovereignty and interests. Since the reform and opening up, America and China have become increasingly close. Recently, Chinese scholars have conducted in-depth research on the US foreign policy towards China from the perspectives of linguistics, international relations, political economy, etc.

However, according to the existing literature, there are few thematic results on American foreign policy discourse on China human rights from the perspective of modality. This leaves some room for this study. In view of this, this study takes American human rights foreign policy discourse toward China as the research object, and creates two small corpora with the keywords China and human rights diplomacy. Among them, the Obama's corpora totaled 102,832 tokens and the Trump's corpora totaled 97,129 tokens.

2. Research Aims

The study answers the following questions:1)What are the characteristics and rules of using modality in the corpora?2)What are the differences in the frequency and preference of modality used by the Obama and Trump?3)What kind of image of human rights in China are constructed and what kind of communicative purpose do they have?

3. Modalities in Obama and Trump Administrations

Modality is a means by which the speaker expresses his position, attitude and opinion. According to Xu's classification, we conducted statistics on modalities through Antconc and tried to compare their frequency.

Table 1: Frequency of modality in Obama's and Trump's

Types	Obama	Trump	X ²	P-value
Deontic	470	435	0.07	0.78
Epistemic	567	477	3.38	0.06
Volitional	240	215	0.26	0.60
Total	1277	1127	2.72	0.09

P-value indicates no statistically significant difference showing they tend to use similar modalities to express political views.

3.1 Analysis of Modalities in Obama's Corpora

Obama tends to use the median epistemic (appear 247), followed by high-value (appear 172) and low-value (appear 148). P-values are: median vs high $P=0$, high vs low $P=0.16$, median vs low $P=0$. P-values of median vs high and median vs low are less than 0.01 ($P<0.01$), indicating a statistically significant difference; High vs low is greater than 0.01 ($P>0.01$), indicating no statistically significant difference. He prefers to use low-value deontic (appear 232) and there is no significant difference in using high-value (appear 119) and median (appear 119). P-values are median vs high $P=0.94$, low vs high $P=0$ and low vs median $P=0$ respectively. Among them, the results of low vs high and low vs median are both $P=0$ ($P<0.01$), indicating a statistically significant difference; There is no statistically significant difference in median and high ($p=0.94$). Among p-values of volitional, median vs high, high vs low and median vs low are all 0 ($P<0.01$), indicating statistically significant differences. And median volitional have been used 192 times, high-value 41 times and low-value only 7 times. Obviously, Obama prefers to use median volitional modality to express ideology.

There is a significant difference between denotic and volitional and epistemic and volitional. P-values of denotic and volitional and epistemic and volitional are both 0 ($P<0.01$) indicating a significant difference. When using cognitive, could and must are often used; When using volitional, Obama prefers to use words such as shall to express the subjective attitude.

3.2 Analysis of Modalities in Trump's Corpora

P-values of median vs high and the median vs low are both 0, indicating a statistically significant differences. Trump tends to using median epistemic (appear 223) to express subjective attitudes towards China and there is no obvious bias in using high-value (appear 129) and low-value epistemic (appear 125). In denotic, p-values of high vs median $P=0.08>0.05$, low vs high $P=0<0.01$ and low vs median $P=0<0.01$. When using deontic modality, he prefers to use low-value. P-values of volitional are all less than 0.01, indicating statistically significant differences. He uses more median to indicate subliminal meaning and subjective attitude, followed by high-value and low-value.

There is a statistically significant difference in denotic and volitional and epistemic and volitional. P-values are both 0. Compared to volitional, Trump prefers to use deontic and he is used to using may and should to express ideas when using deontic. When using epistemic, he tends to use would to express his subjective attitude and ideological bias.

3.3 Comparative Analysis of Modalities in Obama's and Trump's

In epistemic, Obama tends to use the median epistemic, followed by high-value and uses relatively few low-value. Similarly, Trump also prefers to use median epistemic. Although there is a difference in using high-value and low-value, the difference between the two is small. Both of them prefer to use the median epistemic to express certain subliminal meaning. In denotic, Obama prefers to use low-value, with a proportion of 49.36%. The frequency of using high-value and median is the same, with no difference. Similarly, Trump tends to use low-value, with a proportion of 46.20%, followed by high-value, and the use of median is significantly less. In volitional, they both tend to use the median, followed by high-value and low-value.

All in all, Obama uses more modalities than Trump. In epistemic, the statistic is 567:477, $P=0.06>0.05$; When using deontic, Obama used 470 times, while Trump used 435 times. $P=0.78>0.05$; In volitional, $P=0.6>0.05$, indicating no significant difference. And the selection order is also similar, with deontic preferentially selected, followed by volitional and less epistemic.

4. Underlying Reasons behind Trump and Obama

From the horizontal comparison, although Obama and Trump are presidents, they're distinct parties: Obama (D-Dem) and Trump (R-Rep). Compared with Trump, Obama has taken a friendlier approach to China. Sino-us relations have also been relatively harmonious during Obama's presidency. America aims to take human rights as the cornerstone of its foreign policy and tries to impose its own ideology and socio-political system on others and interfere in others' internal affairs under the pretext of human rights issues. No matter what party he belongs to, whether they are moderate or radical, the starting point is to degrade China's image and pursue the maximization of national interests.

In fact, for a long time, America and its allies have regarded the ideology they espoused as the only right thing. With the dramatic changes in Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union, these countries hailed the victory and superiority of Western ideology, and the United States took advantage of the unipolar moment after the end of the Cold War to commit itself to the historical mission of promoting Western democracy, freedom and free market concepts and values to the world. The American foreign policy on human rights in China is a kind of public opinion war against China, which deserves our attention.

5. Pragmatic Functions of Modality

Modality can express the speaker's subjective judgment, will or obligation. Speakers often choose modality depending on the discourse type. Both modal metaphor and modal congruence reflect the usage characteristics of discourse types, and modality also serves the cohesion and coherence of discourse (Li,2000;Miao,2004). Researchers in systemic-functional linguistics have found that modality is an important semantic carrier and means of realizing interpersonal function. Evaluation is the core of discourse analysis. Good and bad or yes and no are the simplest and most basic criteria for judging.

5.1 Achieve the precision of expression

Yang(2017) pointed out in communication practice, researchers of systemic-functional linguistics usually regard language as a meaning system. The conceptual function of modality is often directly connected with the communicative subject through transitivity, voice and ergative. They are usually used to reveal the speaker's inner world or his cognition and understanding of the logical relationship in the external world, so this function is usually called the experience/logic function.

5.2 Make attitude obscure and shirk responsibility

Modality has certain interpersonal functions. Hu(2005) found that as one of the three pure functions of language, interpersonal function is the meaning potential of speakers as participants, which is the participatory function. Interpersonal meaning system is proposed by Halliday (1994) based on the establishment of interpersonal functions of language. Modality has rich interpersonal meaning in political discourse. Speakers use modality to label words, obscure their attitudes, and shift responsibility. When Obama and Trump made relevant remarks on China, they would express relevant information about their own wishes and opinions. In their discourses of China, the two presidents fully demonstrated rhetorical skills when expressing their will and views.

6. Conclusion

In the American foreign policy discourse on China, especially on human rights in China, Obama and Trump have used many modalities. They are out of their own political purposes, under the guise of human rights to promote their so-called democracy and freedom to the world and take human rights as the cornerstone of US foreign policy, criticize others' human rights policies, and use their judgment as a criterion. The aim of the America is to interfere in China's internal affairs by means of human rights issues. It is also to wage a public opinion war against China, trying to damage China's image and misguide public opinion, so as to help America seize the international discourse power.

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