

## Epidemic Discourse and National Image Construction From the Perspective of Visual Grammar Theory

JIANG Rongchun<sup>[a]</sup>; ZHOU Haiming<sup>[b]</sup>\*

<sup>[a]</sup> School of Foreign Languages, Yancheng Teachers University, Jiangsu, China.

\*Corresponding author.

**Supported by** Jiangsu Province Undergraduate Training Program for Innovation and Entrepreneurship (202110324014Z) and Key Program of Chinese Society for the Study of Tao Xingzhi (2021JS0142).

Received 5 December 2022; accepted 8 February 2023  
Published online 26 March 2023

### Abstract

A good national image helps to enhance the country's voice in international diplomatic activities, and helps to strengthen the country's soft power. As an important part of social reality, discourse plays an important role in the process of international diplomatic scene and national image construction. In recent years, with the global spread of the COVID-19 epidemic, news and public opinion around the world have focused on it, and a large number of news reports have emerged. Based on the theoretical framework of visual grammar theory and Halliday's systemic functional linguistics theory, this study analyzes the relationship between epidemic discourse and national image structure from three aspects: reproduction function, interaction function and composition function, and puts forward targeted suggestions for building a good national image.

**Key words:** Epidemic discourse; National image construction; Visual grammar theory

Jiang, R. C., & Zhou, H. M. (2023). Epidemic Discourse and National Image Construction From the Perspective of Visual Grammar Theory. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 19(1), 80-84. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/12953>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/12953>

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the epidemic, as a sudden global public health event, has become the focus of media coverage in many countries. As a major country in the world, China produced a large number of official discourse materials during the epidemic period. This makes people unconsciously analyze the language of the Chinese official media on the epidemic, an international hot spot, with a view to putting forward constructive suggestions on the shaping of the national image. So, what is the national image? It is generally believed that how to understand the image of a country needs to be explained from the perspective of internal understanding of the country, other countries' understanding of the country, and the internal and external dissemination of national information. Different scholars have different views. Boulding believed that the national image includes two aspects: the evaluation of a country's citizens on its own country and the evaluation of foreign citizens on the country (Boulding, 1959). Jervis, a famous international political scholar, proposed that the national image is the public's psychological perception of a country (Jervis, 1989). We know that this is not only the self-expression of the country, but also the activities between the main bodies of the country, as well as the relationship between the group and the group. Within Halliday's systemic functional linguistics theory, this study uses visual grammar theory and multimodal discourse analysis to analyze the cultural and ideological factors within the discourse framework. Especially at present, with the continuous transformation of the world pattern and the rapid development of the Internet, the communication between countries is increasingly close. Every country needs to play a role in international social activities. A good national image is very important to enhance a country's international influence. At present, we find that the research on national image mainly focuses on clarifying the concept and finding the orientation, and rarely involves the relationship

between media discourse and national image construction and the level of journalism and communication. Therefore, in terms of the choice of research perspective, from the perspective of discourse generation of systemic functional linguistics, we have made a comparative study of the genre characteristics and meaning construction methods of the official discourse of epidemic control in China and the United States, explored the cultural roots behind the discourse behavior and the differences in the ideological field, and thus formed the theoretical achievements of national image construction with strong practical significance.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

So far, various studies have been carried out concerning the relationship between discourse and image construction. Wang Shanlin analyzed the discourse of COVID-19 reporting through the self built corpus. He found that The Economist's coverage of the epidemic in China was mainly in the fields of diplomacy, media reports, and leading officials. In terms of discourse content, the Economist's description of China is mostly used to distort Chinese official media discourse or to smear the achievements of the Chinese government in the fight against the epidemic (Wang, 2022). Bai Xingyu believes that a good national image is not only conducive to the promotion of the country's voice in international affairs, but also an important part of the country's soft power. Chinese comprehensive national strength has become increasingly strong, and its international status has been significantly improved. Especially during the COVID-19, China has demonstrated strong political system advantages and strong executive power, becoming a "window of opportunity" to display the national image (Bai, 2021). Qiu Weiqiang, based on the research of China Daily, found that building a good national image is of great significance for promoting national development, maintaining national security, enhancing comprehensive national strength and competitiveness, and realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. The news media is an effective and direct channel to study the national image (Qiu, 2021).

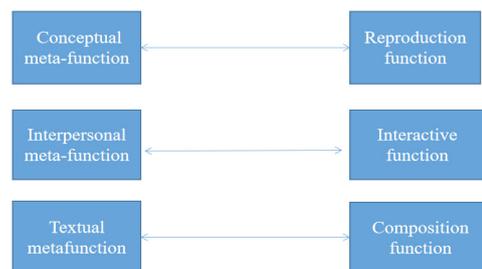
Recently, the latest research results of some scholars have also been published. We also studied the relationship between the discourse and the construction of Chinese national image from the three main strategies of the construction of Chinese national image in the anti-epidemic diplomatic discourse, namely, the cognitive strategy of war metaphor, the strategy of digital fact reasoning and the strategy of intra-group membership - the strategy of empathy. They believe that discourse, as the carrier of displaying the national image to the outside world, plays an important role in shaping the national image. As a special kind of discourse, anti-

epidemic diplomatic discourse can self-shape Chinese national image, increase the public's understanding of Chinese anti-epidemic action and obtain corresponding recognition.

## 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Visual Grammar Theory was proposed by Kress van Leeuwen (1996) on the basis of Halliday's (2015) Systemic Functional Linguistics. Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics generally puts forward three meta-functions of language: the conceptual meta-function that can use language to describe the life experience of the real world and people's inner world; The interpersonal metafunction that can establish interpersonal relationships through language and convey the speaker's attitude, identity, status and motivation; It can form the textual metafunction of a text through language organization information (Hu, Zhu, Zhang, & Li, 2017). Kress van Leeuwen (1996) believed that the three metafunctions in systemic functional linguistics are not only applicable to language, but also to any social communication system. The realization of people's communication in the real world is not only through language, but also requires the coding of various social symbols. Body language and images are also important ways to achieve interpersonal communication. Therefore, we can use the method of analyzing language, a social symbol, to analyze images. Kress van Leeuwen proposed three metafunctions for image analysis, namely, reproduction function, interaction function and composition function, which respectively correspond to conceptual metafunction, interpersonal metafunction and textual metafunction in systemic functional linguistics (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996).

### System functional language theory Visual grammar theory



**Figure 1**  
The relationship between two theories.

The reproduction function refers to the reproduction of events or actions by images. Kress van Leeuwen (1996) divided the meaning of representation into narrative representation and conceptual representation. The mark to distinguish between conceptual representation and narrative representation is whether there is a vector in

the image (the diagonal element is usually formed in the image, called the vector in the image). In narrative representation, there is a vector in the image. The vector in the image can be connected to reproduce the process of event occurrence, while conceptual representation does not have a vector.

The interactive function in the picture is mainly analyzed from four aspects: contact, distance, perspective and modality. Contact refers to the eye contact between the image participant and the image observer. What has eye contact is the “request” image, that is, the participants in the image request from the interactive person through their eyes.

The meaning of composition in visual grammar theory corresponds to the textual metafunction of systemic functional linguistics, also known as “layout”. The meaning of image composition can be analyzed from three aspects: information value, saliency and frame. The information value is realized by the composition position of elements in the image. It is divided into left and right distribution, upper and lower distribution and middle to edge distribution.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

### 4.1. Research Questions

This study was undertaken to approach the following questions:

First, how the three main functions of visual grammar theory, namely, reproduction function, interaction function and composition function, are indicated in media discourse?

Second, in the process of building the national image, how do the functions of reproduction, interaction and composition help us to build national images?

### 4.2. Data in this Study

The data analyzed in this study are mainly from the program manuscripts of CGTN anchors. We entered the keyword “COVID-19” in the search box of the website, and got a series of original materials of news reports. As a hot topic in recent years, the manuscripts on this topic are rich in content and huge in stock, which is convenient for analysis and research.

## 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Reproduction Function

The reproduction function refers to the use of image symbols to reproduce the relationship between objective things and the external world in a specific context, that is, the content to be conveyed by the image itself. If there is a visible “vector” in the image, this reproduction function is narrative reproduction. On the contrary, it is

concept reproduction. The vector is mostly represented by the lines formed by the eyes or attitudes and actions of the characters in the image and plays a great role in information transmission.



**Figure 2**  
The distribution of drugs

As shown in Figure 2, the corpus and pictures are from the CGTN report “What is Chinese COVID-19 response to rural areas?”. Medical staff distributed drugs to villagers in Shuangtang Village, Zhongshan District, Liupanshui City, southwest Guizhou Province. The picture was taken by Xinhua News Agency reporter. The doctor and the villagers explained the instructions for the use of drugs face to face, and their eyes met. The narrative reproduction function of image symbols has played a huge role in reporting.

In the news image that represents the concept, there is no directionality, and there is no vector. The image only represents an objective existence of information. As shown below:



**Figure 3**  
Nucleic acid tests

In the picture, people in the community queue up for nucleic acid examination in strict accordance with the epidemic prevention and control regulations. This is only the reproduction of information, without interactivity and direction designation. This image mainly reflects the concept reproduction function.

### 5.2 Interactive function

The interactive function is designed to reflect the social relationship between the characters in the picture

and the audience through contact, distance, perspective and modality. There are two types of images. One is to ask for feedback, the other is to provide information directly.



**Figure 4**  
**Concern from President Xi**

President Xi said that he was pleased to learn that they were receiving effective treatment and their condition was improving. The general secretary waved his greetings to the patients undergoing treatment.<sup>1</sup> This reflects his concern for the people. This reflects the role of interactive function in news reporting. In the process of interactive function embodiment, we can divide the distance between image audience and image participants into close-up, short distance, medium distance and long distance. Generally, close-ups and close-up photos show the intimacy of the relationship. And the distance is medium or far away, which is generally used for alienating relationships. This close-up shows a close relationship and reflects the deep love of the party and state leaders for the people. From the point of view, the angle of shooting reflects an attitude. The shooting angle can generally be divided into up view, head up view and down view. The close-up lens in this picture uses a slightly upward view, which shows the people's love for the leader. This picture is to provide information directly.



**Figure 5**  
**Encouragement**

In this image, the health care worker makes direct eye contact with the viewer of the image. Such eye contact

<sup>1</sup> CGTN Xi Jinping vows victory against COVID-19 in Wuhan. <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-03-10/Xi-Jinping-vows-victory-against-COVID-19-in-Wuhan-OKFGZOYDnO/index.html>

indicates that the image participant has the intention to ask for a response from the viewer, and the specific intention to ask can be seen from the facial expression and posture of the image participant. Such contact of expectation and response is quite common in movies. Participants in movies often need to ask for other complex emotions besides attention, such as pity, obedience, encouragement, etc. so as to make viewers more immersed in the plot.

### 5.3 Composition Function

The composition function refers to the use of visual art means by designers to arrange and combine image elements to form images with aesthetic value. The composition function mainly includes three parts: information value, significance and framework. The information value represents the information conveyed by the orientation of the composition of all participating elements in the image. The degree of information representation of all participating elements in the image mainly depends on their two placement methods. Significance indicates the attractiveness of the image viewer in the symbols and participants in the image, and the ability of all participating elements in the image to attract the attention of the image viewer. This ability can be achieved by placing it in front and back scenes, color difference and other technical means. The viewfinder is reflected by whether there is a viewfinder in the image. For example, virtual or real frame lines divide or combine the elements in the image to reflect whether they belong to each other. In general, the saliency in the image is closely related to and interacts with the viewfinder. The core information and background information in the image and the relationship between all information are presented by different saliency and viewfinder.

For example, in Figure 2, the three words of health package convey a kind of information and an accurate expression to the image audience. This indicates that this bag is used for storing medicine. At the same time, the prominent enlargement of the three words "health package" reflects the strong significance of this image symbol. The physical framework is also reflected in the report. For example, in Figure 3, people use fences to separate teams during accounting and detection. It shows that people strictly follow the regulations and control the distance, and it also shows that the epidemic situation is still not relaxed.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Through this study, the following major findings have been highlighted.

First, in the process of national image construction, the reproduction function of image symbols in media discourse plays a huge role. Through the reproduction function, we can accurately convey the information to the news audience. To make good use of the reproduction

function of pictures in our news reports, pictures are indispensable.

Second, the interactive function can better express emotional attitudes. In some images, shooting angle and shooting distance are implicit expressions of attitude. The shooting angle and distance of the picture must be properly selected.

Third, the composition function not only plays a role in information transmission, but also enhances the attraction of news reports. Therefore, in order to build a good national image, we should also pay attention to the integration of technical means.

---

## REFERENCES

---

Bai, X. Y. (2021). Public health crisis and media discourse construction of national image: Based on the report of COVID-19 in *People's Daily* (overseas edition). *News Culture Construction*, (03), 32-33.

- Boulding, K. E. (1959). National Image and International Systems. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 3(2), 122. Quoted from Zhou Lintong: New York Times' Research on the Construction of China's National Image
- Hu, Z. L., Zhu, Y. S., Zhang, D. L., & Li, Z. Z. (2017). *Introduction to systemic functional linguistics* (p.274). Third Edition. Beijing. Peking University Press.
- Jervis, R. (1989). The logic of images in international relations. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kress, G., & Van Leeuwen, T. (1996). *Reading images: the grammar of visual design*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Qiu, W. Q. (2021). A discourse study on the construction of Chinese national image under the "the Belt and Road" initiative of *China Daily*. *Radio & TV Journal*, 1, 171-173. China Academic Journal Electronic Publishing House.
- Wang, S. L. (2022). Corpus based discourse construction of the national image of the economist's China related COVID-19 report. *Hunan University of Industry Journal of Science (Social Science Edition)*, 27(6), 78-89