

A CDA Analysis of Transitivity in China Daily and BBC Reports on China's Dam Construction

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Abstract: *The construction of a dam in Western China was one of the hottest international events in 2024, attracting widespread attention from domestic and foreign media. From the perspective of critical discourse analysis (CDA), this paper employs Halliday's transitivity system as an analytical tool to conduct a comparative analysis of reports on China's dam construction in Xizang by BBC and China Daily. The aim is to reveal the transitivity characteristics of news discourse and the ideological differences behind them. The study finds that BBC frequently uses emotional vocabulary in material and mental processes, implying a negative stance. In contrast, China Daily constructs a supportive discourse through positive semantic selection. This comparative analysis reveals how different media convey specific ideologies through language choices when reporting on the same event, thereby shaping the public's understanding of the event.*

Keywords: Systemic Functional Grammar, Critical Discourse Analysis, Ideology, China's Dam Construction.

1. Introduction

In this era of rapid technological advancement, mass media serves as the primary channel for people to stay informed about domestic and international news. However, as Zhu Yan [18] pointed out, media language is a discourse used by communicators to express specific intentions in a context, directly or indirectly reflecting different ideologies and values. Therefore, when reading news reports from home and abroad, we must maintain a keen insight and conduct a critical analysis to accurately grasp the underlying ideologies.

In 2024, China's construction of a dam in Xizang became one of the hotly debated international events, sparking widespread concern. From the perspective of critical discourse analysis, this paper compares and analyzes the transitivity processes in reports on this event by BBC News and China Daily, aiming to uncover the implicit ideologies and political stances in different news reports.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which took shape in the 1970s, aims to reveal the relationships between language, power, and ideology by analyzing language in discourse [3]. In terms of analytical methods, CDA mainly uses Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) as an analytical tool. SFG advocates that discourse analysis should not only analyze language use but also evaluate discourse in the context of society, culture, and ideology [1].

2.2 Transitivity

One of Halliday's purposes in constructing SFG was to provide a theoretical framework for discourse analysis. He believed this framework could be applied to analyze any English oral or written discourse [6]. According to this theory, grammar has three metafunctions: ideational function, interpersonal function, and textual function. The grammatical resources for realizing these three functions include

lexicalization, transitivity system, use of active and passive voices, nominalization, mood, thematic structure, modality, and cohesion devices [12]. This paper focuses on comparing the similarities and differences in transitivity between BBC and China Daily news discourse.

In SFG, transitivity differs from the traditional distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs. In traditional grammar, a transitive verb requires an object, while in SFG, transitivity refers to the semantic relationship between a process, its participant roles, and circumstantial elements [8]. Halliday categorizes the transitivity system into six types of processes: material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential [6]. As Dong Youneng [2] noted, the choice of process and the arrangement of participant roles are largely determined by ideology. Therefore, taking transitivity as an analytical tool can help people explore hidden information behind the discourse.

Based on this, this paper aims to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What are the transitivity processes in Chinese and English news reports on China's construction of a dam in Xizang? What are their characteristics and distribution?
- (2) What attitudes and ideologies towards China's construction of a dam in Xizang are reflected by these characteristics?

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

China's dam construction project in Xizang has significantly impacted the ecological environment and regional development, drawing extensive discussion both domestically and internationally. As the largest news broadcasting organization in the UK, BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) has extensive international influence and high credibility. China Daily, as one of the most influential English media in China, has become an important window for China's

external communication by virtue of its in-depth analysis. This paper selects two reports on China's dam construction in Xizang from the official websites of BBC News and China Daily for analysis. The BBC report is titled "China to build world's largest hydropower dam in Tibet," while the China Daily report is titled "China approves construction of hydropower project in lower reaches of Yarlung Zangbo River." From the perspective of CDA, this paper employs Halliday's transitivity system theory to conduct an in-depth analysis of the transitivity features of the two news reports. By doing so, this study hopes to guide readers in developing critical thinking skills, deeply exploring effective information in news texts, and revealing the implicit ideologies and political stances.

3.2 Data Analysis

3.2.1 Overall distribution of the transitivity process

According to the criteria for clause division in *An Introduction to Systemic Functional Grammar* compiled by Hu Zhuanglin et al. [7], the author divided the clauses of the two news reports and marked the verbs in the clauses to determine their process types [11]. After completing the analysis, the author aggregated and statistically analyzed the transitivity process choices in the two reports and calculated their percentages. To ensure the accuracy of the results and reduce subjective bias, the author invited a researcher familiar with systemic functional grammar theory and the transitivity identification procedure to conduct an independent statistical analysis. The final results presented are the consensus reached after consultation between the two researchers, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Proportion of different process types

Process type	BBC News		China Daily	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Material	46	53.5%	22	67%
Mental	12	14%	3	9%
Verbal	15	17.5%	2	6%
Relational	13	15%	6	18%
Existential	0	0	0	0
Behavioral	0	0	0	0
Total	86	100%	33	100%

The results indicate that BBC and China Daily reports most frequently used material, verbal, relational, and mental processes. Specifically, in the BBC report, a total of 86 processes were identified, with material processes accounting for the highest proportion at 53.5%, followed by verbal processes at 17.5%, and relational and mental processes at 15% and 14%, respectively. In the China Daily report, a total of 33 processes were identified, with material processes accounting for the highest proportion at 67%, followed by relational processes at 18%, mental processes at 9%, and verbal processes at the lowest proportion of 6%. No instances of behavioral or existential processes were found in either news report.

3.2.2 Transitivity Process Analysis

Transitivity provides new methods for discourse analysis. Word choice in discourse largely reflects the implicit viewpoints of the discourse, making this choice significant in expressing ideological meaning [16]. The attitudes of BBC

News and China Daily toward China's dam construction in Xizang can be reflected through the vocabulary selected in their news reports. The following is an analysis of typical examples from the top four transitivity processes in Table 1.

(a) Material Process

Material process refers to various actions and is primarily reflected through verbs that convey action. If a process requires only one participant, it is the actor; if it requires two participants, one is the actor and the other is the goal [8].

*Example 1: China has **constructed** multiple hydropower stations along the course of the Yarlung Tsangpo over the past decade in a bid to **harness** the river's power as a source of renewable energy. (BBC News)*

*Example 2: By **harnessing** the abundant hydropower resources of the Yarlung Zangbo River, the project will also **spur** the development of solar and wind energy resources in surrounding areas, thus **creating** a clean energy base featuring a complementary mix of hydro, wind and solar power. (China Daily)*

In both news reports, material processes are the most prominent. When describing China's dam construction in Xizang, both media outlets used verbs such as "harness" and "boost," which align with the requirements of journalistic objectivity. For instance, Example 1 indicates that BBC News focuses on the objective fact of China's construction of hydropower stations along the Yarlung Tsangpo River. Example 2 shows that China Daily emphasizes the dam's role in promoting the development of surrounding clean energy resources. Both examples highlight the importance of developing the hydropower resources of the Yarlung Tsangpo River and its value as a renewable energy source.

*Example 3: Among them are fears that the construction of the dam - first announced in late-2020 - could **displace** local communities, as well as significantly **alter** the natural landscape and **damage** local ecosystems, which are among the richest and most diverse on the Tibetan Plateau. (BBC News)*

*Example 4: It will **strengthen** the synergy of development between Xizang and other regions, thus **enhancing** the sense of gain, happiness and security for people of all ethnic groups in Xizang. (China Daily)*

Both clauses mentioned above belong to the material process, with the participant being the water conservancy project (i.e., dam construction). The extensive use of material process is in line with the objectivity of news reporting. However, the selection of goal components and process verbs in material process permeates ideological bias [9]. By comparing process verbs and goal components, the author found that these examples contain different media attitudes and ideologies towards the same event.

Text construction can be viewed as a process of vocabulary selection, which is inevitably influenced by certain social contexts, ideologies, and power relations. Therefore, exploring vocabulary selection can reveal the attitudes,

stances, and ideologies of text producers [17]. In Example 3, three material processes are included, with verbs such as “displace,” “alter,” and “damage.” The actor is “the construction of the dam,” and the goals are “local communities,” “natural landscape,” and “local ecosystems.” This example clearly shows that the BBC News report uses vocabulary with strong emotional color and negative tendencies, emphasizing the possible social and ecological negative impacts of the hydropower dam project. This choice of vocabulary reflects the BBC’s cautious attitude towards the project, even with a critical bias. By highlighting the potential risks of the project, it aims to draw readers’ attention to the social and environmental problems that may arise from the project.

In Example 4, two material processes are included, with verbs such as “strengthen” and “enhance.” The China Daily’s report uses positive vocabulary to emphasize the project’s value in regional coordination and improvement of residents’ quality of life, reflecting a positive attitude toward the project. This reporting style aims to convey the project’s significance and its positive impact on social well-being to readers.

During the research process, through statistical analysis of verbs related to material processes and comparison of their word meanings, the author found that BBC News and China Daily present distinctly different attitudes when reporting on China’s dam construction project in Xizang. The specific vocabulary can be found in Table 2.

Table 2: Distribution of material process in samples of both newspapers

News	Actor	Process	Goal
BBC News	the construction of the dam	<i>displace .../ alter .../ damage... /</i>	communities /landscape /ecosystems
China Daily	The hydropower project	<i>promote .../ spur ... / create .../ improve .../ strengthen .../ enhance...</i>	low-carbon development /development of solar and wind energy resources /infrastructures /synergy of development between Xizang and other regions /sense of gain, happiness and security for people

In BBC News reports, in addition to some neutral vocabulary related to dam construction conditions, there is a frequent appearance of negative verbs such as “displace,” “damage,” “annex,” “protest,” and “oppose,” reflecting BBC’s skeptical and negative stance toward this event. In contrast, the verbs used in material processes in China Daily reports are predominantly positive, such as “promote,” “spur,” “improve,” “strengthen,” “enhance,” “advance,” and “boost,” demonstrating China Daily’s supportive attitude toward China’s dam construction project in Xizang.

(b) Relational Process

Relational process refers to the relationship between things or concepts. It is mainly divided into two types: attribution and identification. For instance, in English, the most commonly used verbs to express relational processes are “be” and “have” [8]. Ren Fang [14] argues that relational processes serve to express evaluations and judgments, reflecting people’s subjective classification of things. Therefore, by analyzing the

relational processes in the two reports, we can reveal the relevant background of news events and the attitudes and views of different institutions and individuals towards this event.

*Example 5: Activists have previously told the BBC that the dams **are** the latest example of Beijing’s exploitation of Tibetans and their land. (BBC News)*

*Example 6: The site of the development **is located** along an earthquake-prone tectonic plate boundary. (BBC News)*

*Example 7: The hydropower project **is** a green project aimed at promoting low-carbon development. (China Daily)*

*Example 8: Furthermore, the hydropower project **is** a safe project that prioritizes ecological protection. (China Daily)*

From the perspective of CDA, the two examples in the BBC News report construct ideological discourse through specific transitivity choices. Example 5 uses an attributive clause structure to establish a semantic connection between the carrier “dams” and their attribute “the latest example of Beijing’s exploitation of Tibetans and their land.” The word choice of “exploitation” has significant evaluative implications, implying possible over-exploitation issues. In Example 6, the carrier is “the project development site,” and the attribute is “an earthquake-prone tectonic plate boundary,” which highlights the project’s high risk. In contrast, China Daily’s report constructs a positive discourse through specific language strategies. Example 7 uses an attributive clause structure, linking the carrier “hydropower project” with the attribute “a green project aimed at promoting low-carbon development” through the relational verb “is”. The vocabulary choice of “green project” and “low-carbon development” forms an environmental semantic field, emphasizing the project’s alignment with sustainable development goals. In Example 8, the relational verb “is” categorizes the hydropower project as a “safe project that prioritizes ecological protection,” indicating that safety and ecological protection are fully considered in the project’s planning and implementation.

During the analysis of the two reports, in addition to the media attitude and ideological differences revealed by the previously mentioned examples, the author also noticed that BBC’s negative inclination toward the project is reflected in other aspects, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Distribution of relational process in samples of BBC News

News	Carrier	Process	Attribute
BBC News	The site of the development	<i>is located</i>	along an <i>earthquake-prone</i> tectonic plate boundary.
	landslides and flows	<i>are</i>	often <i>uncontrollable</i> and will also pose a huge threat to the project
	The project could	<i>cost</i>	as much <i>as a trillion yuan</i>

It can be seen from the Table 3 that BBC News uses the vocabulary “uncontrollable” to describe the impact of earthquakes on the project, such as landslides and mud-rock

flows, further emphasizing the project's uncertainty and potential risks. Additionally, the mention of "cost" implies that BBC considers the economic burden or feasibility of the dam project.

(c) Verbal Process

Verbal process refers to the process of exchanging information. It has three participant roles: sayer, receiver, and verbiage [8]. As shown in Table 1, BBC News employs verbal processes more frequently than China Daily in its report. This demonstrates that BBC News values the diversity of information sources, allowing audiences to hear different voices and thereby enhancing the objectivity of the news [5]. In contrast, due to its shorter length and focus on describing the event's material process, China Daily's verbal process is relatively singular, with only one instance.

Through detailed analysis, the author found that BBC News exhibits a clear tendency in the selection of discourse subjects when employing verbal processes. Table 4 reveals that BBC tends to select discourse subjects related to China.

Table 4: Distribution of the main participants in verbal clauses

News	Sayer	Number	Total
BBC News	China	2	10
	Chinese state media	1	
	Beijing	1	
	Chinese authorities	1	
	China's foreign ministry	1	
	a senior engineer from Sichuan provincial geological bureau	1	
	Activists	1	
	Reports	1	
	a senior Indian government official	1	
China Daily	BEIJING	1	1

The use of quotations can enhance the authority of an article while indirectly conveying the reporter's views through others' words [9]. Although BBC News varies its wording and cites statements from Chinese officials and experts to demonstrate reporting diversity, it may actually use these statements to highlight other negative information in the report. Furthermore, a subtle implication cannot be overlooked: the selection of non-official representatives in BBC reports is rather arbitrary [5], such as "a senior engineer from Sichuan provincial geological bureau" and "a senior Indian government official." These speakers lack names and identity information, making BBC's reporting appear less objective and fair. The following specific examples will be used to illustrate this point.

Example 9: In the case of the Yarlung Tsangpo dam, Chinese authorities have stressed that the project would not have major environmental impact - but they have not indicated how many people it would displace. (BBC News)

Example 10: "Earthquake-induced landslides and mud-rock flows are often uncontrollable and will also pose a huge threat to the project," a senior engineer from Sichuan provincial geological bureau said in 2022. (BBC News)

In Example 9, BBC News quotes Chinese officials stating that the dam project will not have a significant environmental impact but immediately points out that officials have not

indicated how many people will be displaced. This reporting approach not only implies a lack of full trust in official information but also highlights concerns about social impacts. By emphasizing the lack of information disclosure by officials, BBC News may imply the lack of transparency of the Chinese government, thereby stimulating readers' question about China's official stance and showing a strong guiding influence.

In Example 10, BBC News quotes a senior engineer's comments emphasizing the potential threat posed to the project by landslides and mud-rock flows induced by earthquakes. This approach of quoting professional opinions indicates that BBC News tends to emphasize the uncertainty and potential negative impacts of the project.

Overall, by quoting Chinese officials and experts, BBC News seemingly provides diversity in verbal information. However, these quotations are often deliberately rephrased by the reporter, who subtly conveys their own stance through seemingly objective and neutral citations [9]. In reality, BBC may use these statements to highlight other negative information in the report, demonstrating its skepticism and concerns about China's dam construction project in Xizang. This reporting strategy may affect readers' perceptions of China's policies, making them more critical of China's actions in Xizang.

(d) Mental Process

Mental process refers to the inner activities of living individuals, including seeing, feeling, and thinking. It usually has two participants: a senser (the feeling individual) and a phenomenon (the object being perceived) [8].

Mental process reflects the attitudes and opinions of different subjects towards events. The selective use of mental process is the selective expression of the reporter's attitude, expressing society's attitude towards events through the setting of participants [9]. As presented in Table 5 and Table 6, when reporting on the same event, BBC News and China Daily show clear tendencies in their choice of wording and sensing subjects, clearly revealing significant differences in their attitudes.

Table 5: Distribution of mental process in samples of BBC News

News	Senser	Process	Phenomenon
BBC News	China	<i>stoke</i>	<i>concerns</i> about displacement of communities
	Human rights groups and experts	<i>raised</i>	<i>concerns</i> about knock-on effects.
	Experts and officials	<i>have flagged</i>	<i>concerns</i> that the dam would empower China to control ...
	Chinese researchers	<i>flagged</i>	<i>concerns</i> that ... increase the frequency of landslides.
	A dam	<i>ignited</i>	rare Tibetan <i>protests</i> .
	topography	<i>poses</i>	major engineering <i>challenges</i>
	landslides and flows	will <i>pose</i>	a huge <i>threat</i> to the project

As depicted in the table 5, the sensers in BBC media include "China," "human rights groups and experts," "experts and officials," and "Chinese researchers." The phenomena are all concerns about China's dam construction project in Xizang.

BBC News tends to use vocabulary with negative connotations, such as “stoking,” “raised,” “flagged,” and “poses,” to highlight the challenges that dam construction may trigger. These examples directly express the inner state and value orientation of the sender through verbs and phenomena in mental processes, aiming to show dissatisfaction and concerns from various sectors of society towards government actions [9].

As Reah [13] highlights that the deliberate selection and skillful use of words are intensifiers for the media to inject opinions into news reports, especially the use and repetitive appearance of key vocabulary. Notably, the word “concern” frequently appears in BBC reports, not only highlighting the worrisome sentiment in the report but also enhancing the dynamic effect and urgency of the report through collocations with different verbs, such as “stoking concerns,” “raising concerns,” and “flagged concerns,” thereby intensifying the atmosphere of doubt and worry about the project.

Table 6: Distribution of mental process in samples of China Daily

News	Senser	Process	Phenomenon
China Daily	The hydropower project	is <i>expected</i> to	boost local people's livelihood and prosperity
		is <i>expected</i> to	help improve the local eco-environmental network system
		is a safe project that <i>prioritizes</i>	ecological protection

In contrast, Table 6 shows that China Daily tends to use positive vocabulary such as “expected to” and “prioritize,” emphasizing the project's positive impact on local communities and its emphasis on ecological protection, demonstrating support for the project. This difference in vocabulary usage clearly reflects the different orientations of the two media in terms of reporting stance and attitude.

4. Findings and Discussions

As Fowler [4] stresses that news content cannot be a true reflection of the world but is largely what is called “opinion,” which is rooted in society. Differences in reporting angles and content among different media provide the public with opportunities to understand dam construction from multiple dimensions. International media reports often carry different political inclinations. However, through comparative analysis, we can clearly see China's image in international public opinion and also enable citizens to better understand the country's stance and responsibilities on issues such as cross-border water resources development. This comparative analysis not only helps enhance national pride but also promotes public understanding and support for national policies.

Through the transitivity analysis of the above news reports, it can be found that the transitivity processes, participant choices, and vocabulary use in news discourses depend on the function of language and the ideology of discourse producers [9]. This study uses reports related to “China's dam construction in Xizang” as data and conducts an in-depth analysis through different transitivity processes, aiming to explore the transitivity characteristics of news discourses and reveal the implicit ideologies and political stances in different

news reports. It is hoped that through CDA, readers' sensitivity to news reports will be enhanced, helping them dig out more valuable information.

In terms of transitivity processes, BBC frequently uses vocabulary with emotional color, creating a relatively negative semantic atmosphere and expressing its doubts and opposition towards the project. The choice of goal components and process verbs in material processes permeates ideological biases [9]. For example, BBC News report contains expressions such as “displacing local residents,” “altering the natural landscape,” and “damaging local ecosystems.” These expressions have strong negative emotional connotations, highlighting the social and ecological risks that the project may bring, reflecting the BBC's cautious attitude towards the project.

Regarding the verbal process, BBC adopts a concealed stance expression method. On the surface, the report extensively quotes Chinese officials' statements, but in reality, it achieves the purpose of expressing its own stance through selective quotations and context stripping, “borrowing others' mouths.” This finding is consistent with the viewpoint proposed by Shang Xuenan [15]: on the one hand, by providing diverse sources of discourse, it increases the objectivity of news discourses; on the other hand, media concerns and doubts about events are expressed through others' words, distorting China's true intentions, reflecting the negative attitude of BBC News. Kang Junying [10] also proposes that news reports subtly integrate the reporter's own stance and viewpoint into the verbal process by blending various voices, thereby constructing the reporter's intention.

The analysis of the relational process reveals deeper ideological tendencies. BBC repeatedly uses the colonialist-tinged vocabulary “exploitation,” forcibly associating infrastructure construction with political control. Meanwhile, by emphasizing that the project is located in an “earthquake-prone” area, has “uncontrollable” risks, and high “costs,” it implies the economic burden and feasibility issues that the project may bring, thereby constructing a risk discourse system.

The use of mental processes is particularly noteworthy. The collocation of the word “concern” with different verbs (“stoking,” “raising,” “flagged”) not only intensifies negative emotions but also creates the illusion of “widespread concern” through quotations from multiple subjects. This discourse strategy not only highlights the anxious sentiment but also enhances the dynamicity and urgency of the reports, further intensifying the atmosphere of doubt and anxiety about the project.

In contrast, through positive semantic choices, China Daily demonstrates clear supportive discourse characteristics when reporting on the same event. In terms of material processes, the report extensively uses positive verbs such as “strengthen” and “enhance,” emphasizing the project's role in improving people's livelihood and welfare and promoting regional development. This vocabulary choice strategy clearly reflects the media's affirmative stance towards the project.

At the verbal process level, although China Daily's report is

relatively concise, it clearly conveys the official support for the project through verbs such as “approve.” This concise and powerful expression is in line with the reporting norms of Chinese official media.

The use of relational processes is particularly prominent. Specifically, the report categorizes the hydropower project as a “green project” and a representative of “low-carbon development.” This expression not only highlights the project’s environmental protection attributes but also integrates it into the discourse system of the national sustainable development strategy. This expression embodies China’s commitment to the concept of ecological civilization in infrastructure construction. In terms of mental processes, China Daily uses vocabulary such as “expected to” and “prioritize,” demonstrating the scientific nature of project planning and conveying optimistic expectations for project results. This expression helps shape a positive semantic atmosphere.

Overall, through systematic positive vocabulary choices and grammatical structure arrangements, China Daily constructs a complete development discourse system, fully demonstrating China’s responsible attitude and commitment to sustainable development in infrastructure construction.

5. Conclusion

From the perspective of critical discourse analysis, this paper uses Halliday’s transitivity system as an analytical tool to compare and analyze news reports on China’s dam construction in Xizang by BBC and China Daily. The study finds that the two media exhibit significant differences in transitivity features, mainly through material, relational, verbal, and mental processes. BBC’s reports frequently use emotionally charged vocabulary in material and mental processes, constructing a set of skeptical discourse through negative expressions such as “destruction” and “displacement.” This language choice reflects its negative stance towards China’s dam construction in Xizang. In contrast, China Daily’s reports construct a supportive discourse framework by employing positive verbs such as “strengthen” and “enhance,” as well as positive expressions like “green project” and “low-carbon development.” This reporting approach aligns with the reporting norms of Chinese official media and accurately conveys China’s commitment to sustainable development in infrastructure construction in Xizang.

This study reveals discourse differences in international media reporting, providing linguistic evidence for understanding the different stances of Chinese and Western media on Xizang-related issues. The research results not only enrich the application of CDA in media studies but also provide methodological references for subsequent related research.

Appendix

Data Resources

(1) BBC News:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/crmn127kmr4o>

(2) China Daily:

<https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202412/25/WS676b53f1a310f1265a1d4b68.html>

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