

Media Stance and Interpersonal Meaning in News Discourse: A Systemic Functional Analysis of BBC and China Daily's Reports on China's Hydropower Project

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Abstract: *This study explores how media stance is constructed through language choices in news discourse. Drawing on Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar, it investigates interpersonal meaning in BBC and China Daily reports on China's approval of a major hydropower project in Xizang. The analysis focuses on four dimensions: mood, modality, pronoun use and appraisal to reveal how language realize evaluative positions and attitudes. Quantitative and qualitative analyses show that the BBC report relies heavily on medium-probability modal verbs, e.g., could, would and negatively loaded lexical choices, which highlight environmental and humanitarian concerns. In contrast, China Daily frequently employs high-certainty modality and positive evaluative language, framing the project as environmentally responsible and development-oriented. These language differences indicate distinct institutional identities and communicative purposes in the two media outlets. The findings contribute to understanding how news language encodes stance and ideology, demonstrating the potential of functional linguistic frameworks for media discourse analysis.*

Keywords: Media discourse, Interpersonal meaning, Systemic Functional Grammar, Modality, Stance.

1. Introduction

Hydropower development has increasingly become a focal topic in global media coverage amid growing environmental and geopolitical concerns. When China approved the construction of the world's largest hydropower station on the lower reaches of the Yarlung Zangbo River in Xizang, international and domestic news outlets presented strikingly different narratives. The BBC highlighted issues of displacement, human rights, and ecological risks, whereas China Daily framed the project as an environmentally friendly initiative that promotes regional development and energy transition. These divergent portrayals raise a crucial question: how do linguistic choices in news discourse reveal underlying media stances and ideological orientations

Previous studies on media discourse have largely adopted frameworks from critical discourse analysis (CDA), emphasizing the relationship between discourse, power, and ideology (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2008). While these studies provide valuable insights into ideological construction, they often focus on macro-level representations and overlook the micro-linguistic mechanisms through which stance and evaluation are realized. In contrast, Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) offers a fine-grained analytical framework that connects linguistic form with social function (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Within this framework, the interpersonal metafunction—encompassing mood, modality, and appraisal—serves as a key resource for exploring how media construct relationships with readers and project institutional attitudes.

This study aims to examine how interpersonal meaning contributes to the construction of media stance in English-language news reports on China's hydropower project. By analyzing texts from the BBC and China Daily, it seeks to uncover how linguistic features such as mood, modality, pronoun use, and appraisal reveal evaluative

tendencies and ideological positioning. The study employs both qualitative and quantitative methods to ensure interpretive depth and analytical reliability.

By integrating interpersonal meaning theory with media discourse analysis, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how grammatical choices mediate institutional identity and communicative intent. It also demonstrates the potential of functional linguistic approaches to enrich cross-cultural media studies, offering linguistic evidence for the subtle interplay between language, stance, and ideology in international news discourse.

2. Data Collection

This study selects news reports from the BBC and China Daily websites regarding China's approval of a hydropower project in Xizang as research samples. The original English texts are shown in the appendix 1. The BBC report, titled "China to build world's largest hydropower dam in Tibet," focuses on the project's environmental impact and geopolitical controversies. In contrast, the China Daily report, titled "China approves construction of hydropower project in lower reaches of Yarlung Zangbo River," highlights the project's positive role in promoting local economic and social development as well as the use of renewable energy. These two reports reflect divergent stances and attitudes on the same event and provide a comparative basis for analyzing media discourse construction.

3. Analytical Framework

In this study, the theoretical framework and analytic approach adopted is quantitative method from the perspective of the interpersonal meaning of systematic functional grammar. Halliday's interpersonal metafunction has been chosen to be the theoretical basis for the study. Its core components include

the mood system, the modality system, and the appraisal system. According to Halliday (1994: 19-20), the interpersonal function of language is mainly realized through its mood and modality systems. The mood system determines the speaker's role in interaction through clause structures such as declaratives, interrogatives, and imperatives, thereby reflecting the interactive patterns between participants in communication (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014: 120-184). While Thompson (2004: 57-58) mention that modality can reflect the speaker's subjective attitude toward the proposition involved, as well as indicate notions such as possibility, usuality, responsibility, and willingness. And modality can be divided into low-degree modality, medium-degree modality and high-degree modality.

Martin and White (2005: 210-223) propose that the appraisal system can be divided into three dimensions: attitude, engagement and graduation. This framework serves as a crucial theoretical tool for understanding media stance and attitudes. In addition, the use of pronouns reflects how the speaker positions themselves in relation to the listener (Wang, 2008). Through the strategic choice of pronouns, the media can reinforce its own stance or distance itself from others. Similarly, the system of address terms also encodes social relations such as authority, intimacy, or distance.

Guided by the theoretical framework outlined above, this study will analyze how interpersonal meaning is constructed in news reports by the BBC and China Daily through the aspects of mood, modality, personal pronouns, and the appraisal system. It aims to uncover the underlying stances and attitudes conveyed by BBC and China Daily.

4. Findings

The following section will present detailed results of the four aspects of interpersonal meaning mentioned above. The analysis of mood, modality, and pronoun use in the texts reveals that while there are certain similarities, there are also clear differences in how the two media report on China's approval of the dam construction in Xizang.

Table 1: The Frequency and the Percentage of Mood

	Declarative		Imperative	
	Statement			
	number	percentage	number	Percentage
From BBC (29)	29	100%	0	0
From China Daily (13)	13	100%	0	0

From the table 1, we can find that declarative sentences account for 100% of all sentence types in both texts. In the BBC report, a total of 29 declarative sentences are used, while in the China Daily report, there are 13.

Table 2: The frequency and the percentage of modality

	Modalization				Modulation			
	Probability		Usuality		Obligation		Inclination	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
From BBC (14)	13	93%	1	7%	0	0	0	0
From China Daily (5)	5	100%	0	0	0	0	0	0

A comparison between the BBC and China Daily texts reveals that in terms of probability, modalization appears in 93% of the BBC text and 100% of the China Daily text. This indicates that both reports tend to rely on probability-based modality

when expressing degrees of possibility. However, with regard to usuality, only one frequency word appears in the BBC text, and none in China Daily. As for modulation, which includes obligation and inclination, neither report contains instances of obligation modulation.

Table 3: The Frequency and the Percentage of Pronoun Use

	They/Their		Its/It/Itsself		You/Your		I/Me/My/We/Our/Us		There/This/That/Those	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
From BBC (23)	4	17%	6	26%	0	0	0	0	13	57%
From China Daily (6)	0	0	4	67%	0	0	0	0	2	33%

In the BBC report, a total of 23 pronouns are used. Among them, "they" and "their" appear 4 times, accounting for 17% of the total. "Its/it/itself" appears 6 times, making up 26%, while demonstrative pronouns such as "there/this/that/those" occur 13 times, the highest frequency, accounting for 57%. Notably, no second-person pronouns ("you/your") or first-person pronouns ("I/we/our") are used. In contrast, the China Daily report contains only 6 pronouns in total. Of these, "its/it/itself" appears 4 times, making up 67% and demonstrative pronouns "there/this/that/those" appear 2 times, accounting for 33%. Similarly, no second-person or first-person pronouns are used.

5. Discussion

5.1 Analysis of Interpersonal Meaning of Mood

The declarative mood is typically used to provide information, the interrogative to ask questions or seek information, and the imperative to issue directives or commands (Kondowe, 2014). Declarative mood typically carries the highest degree of modality (Xu and Gao, 2023). News reports predominantly adopt declarative sentences, which tend to convey objectivity and deliver information effectively. Below are some examples that illustrate declarative mood in news.

(1) The dam, which will be located in the lower reaches of the Yarlung Tsangpo river, could generate three times more energy than the Three Gorges Dam, currently the world's largest hydropower plant.

--- BBC

(2) Through extensive geological explorations and technical advancements, a solid foundation has been laid for the science-based, secure, and high-quality development of the project.

---China Daily

In example (1), the reporter employs a declarative mood to present readers with information about the dam's power generation potential. The subject "The dam" establishes the central focus of the message, allowing readers to gain an understanding of key details such as electricity output and overall scale. In example (2), emphasis is placed on geological surveys and technological advancements as the foundation of the project, objectively stating that the project is built on a solid basis. The use of the declarative mood in these cases helps establish a fact-based communicative relationship between the reporter and the reader.

5.2 Analysis of Interpersonal Meaning of Modality

Beyond mood, modality constitutes a second grammatical resource equally critical to the expression of interpersonal meaning. The analysis of modality in this study focuses primarily on two dimensions: modalization and modulation. Modalization is further divided into two subcategories: probability and usability (Thompson, 2004: 57-58). The modality system is not only semantically close to the judgment system but also serves as a resource for evaluation. By expressing the speaker's positive or negative stances and attitudes, it performs the same evaluative function as explicitly attitudinal vocabulary (Yang and Chang, 2012). According to the analysis, both the BBC and China Daily rely on modalization to express possibility. Nonetheless, the interpersonal meanings conveyed through modality differ significantly between the two sources. For example, in discussing the potential effects of dam construction, BBC and China Daily use different modal verbs that reveal their stances. The examples below illustrate this point.

(1) *They had been opposing plans to build the Gangtuo dam and hydropower plant, which would displace several villages and submerge ancient monasteries with sacred relics.*

--- BBC

(2) *.....but they have not indicated how many people it would displace.*

--- BBC

In terms of modality types in systemic functional grammar, the use of "would" in both instances falls under the category of probability. Within the specific context, "would" here represents a medium degree of probability. It evaluates the likelihood of the mentioned event, namely, "displace several villages and submerge ancient monasteries with sacred relics", conveying a sense of hypotheticality or tentativeness. This indicates a degree of subjective involvement from the speaker as the reporter does not present the event as a definite fact but rather as a potential outcome that might happen.

This use of modality aims to draw the reader's attention and deliberately highlight the potential negative consequences of the dam project. Moreover, the choice of words, such as "villages," "ancient monasteries," and "people", is intended to evoke reader sympathy, thereby constructing a critical or opposed stance toward the decision to build the dam in Xizang.

(3) *It will directly stimulate the rapid growth of such industries as engineering, logistics and trade services, and create new jobs.*

---China Daily

(4) *Once completed, the project will further improve infrastructures of electricity, water conservancy and transportation.*

---China Daily

In example 3, the modal verb "will" expresses the speaker's prediction or commitment regarding the event. The adverb "directly" that follows intensifies the high degree of certainty, indicating the speaker's strong confidence in the stated results

that the project will directly stimulate economic growth and create new jobs. Additionally, the adjective "rapid" used to modify "growth" further enhances the sense of certainty about the significance of the expected development, conveying a strong expectation of rapid and substantial progress.

In example 4, "will" again functions as a high-context modal in this context, reflecting the speaker's strong confidence in the anticipated improvements to infrastructure following the project's completion. The conditional clause "Once completed" sets a prerequisite for the following result, indicating that the projected outcome is contingent upon the completion of the project. The adverb "further" suggests a progressive result, which indicates the benefits will continue to expand once the project is completed.

Through this comparison, it becomes evident that although both reports address the impacts of dam construction, their use of modality diverges significantly. The BBC frequently employs medium degree of modality such as "could" and "would", which convey uncertainty and potential threats, with a stronger focus on negative consequences. In contrast, China Daily predominantly uses high degree of modality like "will", expressing certainty and positive expectations, and centering on beneficial outcomes. This distinction clearly reveals the divergent stances and attitudes adopted by the two media.

5.3 Analysis of Interpersonal Meaning of Pronoun Use

According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014: 387), the person system expresses interpersonal meanings through two main grammatical resources: personal pronouns and possessive determiners. The use of different pronouns can produce different effects. News reports usually avoid the use of first-person and second-person pronouns, which reflects a common journalistic convention of maintaining an objective tone (Gao, 2019). However, the writer can establish an emotional connection with the reader through language choices like proximal demonstrative pronoun (Wang, 2008). the BBC report makes more frequent use of demonstrative pronouns, while the China Daily report relies more heavily on third-person pronouns like "it/its/itself", suggesting differences in referential focus and discursive strategies between the two media coverage. The following are some examples.

(1) *A dam ignited rare Tibetan protests. They ended in beatings and arrests, BBC finds.*

---BBC

"They" clearly refers to the "rare Tibetan protests" mentioned in the previous sentence. This subtly avoids specifying who carried out the beatings and arrests. The pronoun "they" refers to the protests, while the perpetrators are completely hidden from the grammatical structure. This omission reduces the risk of direct accusations by the media, but the mention of violent outcomes-beatings, arrests-strongly implies who the responsible party might be.

Despite the surface neutrality, the choice of pronoun and sentence structure strongly reveals the media's stance. Firstly, using emotionally charged terms such as "beatings and arrests" to describe the outcome is already a stance-taking act.

Coupled with the ambiguous agent in “they ended in...,” the sentence doesn’t directly state who ended the protest, but it naturally draws the reader’s attention to the hidden actors. At the same time, the media implicitly reveals and condemns the suppression. The phrase “rare Tibetan protests” combined with the outcome of “beatings and arrests” highlights the repression of local people. By anonymizing the protesters as “they” and portraying them as the recipients of violence, the sentence frames them as victims, evoking readers’ sympathy. Through this depiction of the violence faced by protesters, BBC positions itself as exposing injustice. Thus, while appearing objective, the discourse strategy actually conveys a strong critical stance.

(2) 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

The pronoun “this,” used here as a demonstrative, refers to the act of building the dam. By using “it,” the media presupposes that the reader already knows or is expected to know what is being referred to. This indicates a shared base of information between the media and its target readers, thereby narrowing the distance between them. At the same time, it makes the report appear more neutral and objective, guiding readers to view the project in a positive and constructive light.

In conclusion, the choice of pronouns is not only a neutral linguistic act, but also a manifestation of the media’s ideological strategies through subtle language power. The BBC’s report employs “their” to construct a critical perspective on power relations, whereas China Daily’s use of “it” serves to create a sense of closeness and familiarity with the reader.

5.4 Analysis of Interpersonal Meaning of Appraisal System

The core of appraisal theory lies in analyzing how discourse presents attitudes, modulates the intensity of emotions, and establishes alignment with readers through value judgments (Li and Hu, 2016). The appraisal system consists of three subsystems: engagement, graduation, and attitude, all of which are revealed from the reader’s perspective based on the language features of the text. Among them, the attitude subsystem holds a central position, reflecting the speaker’s motivations, ideological stance, and value judgments toward various phenomena or experiences (Xu and Gao, 2023). Due to limited space, the analysis here is limited to the dimension of attitude.

The BBC report tends to employ negatively charged attitude expressions, emphasizing words such as “displacement,” “a contentious subject,” “environmental impacts,” “arrests and beatings,” and “crackdowns.” These lexical choices convey an opposed stance toward the project, highlighting its adverse consequences. The BBC frequently adopts a socially critical perspective, questioning the legitimacy of governmental actions, thereby indicating the BBC’s opposition to the dam construction.

In contrast, China Daily highlights positive expressions such as “high-quality development,” “ecological protection,” “clean energy,” and “prosperity.” The dam is framed as a strategic initiative that promotes regional sustainable development, balances environmental conservation with economic growth and ultimately benefits people’s livelihoods. This positive framing underscores the constructive effect of the project and conveys China Daily’s supportive stance towards the dam construction. Some representative examples include the following.

(1) China has approved the construction of what will be the world’s largest hydropower dam, stoking concerns about displacement of communities in Tibet and environmental impacts downstream in India and Bangladesh.

---BBC

In this sentence, while it appears to be an informative statement superficially, the use of the negatively emotionally loaded phrase “stoking concerns” implicitly constructs a evaluative stance toward China’s approval of hydropower station construction. Particularly, the noun phrases “displacement of communities” and “environmental impacts” carry connotations of humanitarian concern and ecological anxiety. These terms subtly suggest forced relocation of local residents, the loss of their homes, and environmental degradation, thereby steering the report toward a more skeptical tone.

Although the sentence adopts a declarative mood and seems to present facts, the strategic use of evaluative vocabulary, such as the verb “stoke” and negative semantic words like “displacement” and “impacts”, draws attention to certain issues. Additionally, the mention of geopolitically sensitive regions like “Tibet, India, Bangladesh” and the causal structure all work together to convey deep skepticism towards the project and strong concern over its potential negative consequences.

(2) BEIJING -- The Chinese government has approved the construction of a hydropower project in the lower reaches of the Yarlung Zangbo River. The project will play a positive role in accelerating the country’s efforts to create a new development pattern and pursue high-quality development, according to an official statement.

---China Daily

In contrast to the critical stance of BBC, this sentence employs positively evaluative expressions such as “play a positive role,” “accelerating the country’s efforts,” and “create a new development pattern and pursue high-quality development.” These phrases are intended to guide both the domestic and the international community towards recognizing the value of the project.

From the above analysis, it is evident that the BBC report frequently uses negative words to emphasize the project’s controversy and potential risks, reflecting a strong critical stance. In comparison, China Daily adopts a more positive tone, focusing on the project’s contributions, thereby constructing a favorable image of the dam construction.

6. Conclusion

This study, guided by the interpersonal meaning of systemic functional grammar, conducts a comparative analysis of BBC and China Daily reports on the Yarlung Zangbo hydropower project. The findings reveal that the BBC report adopts a more critical and concerned stance through questioning mood, modality expressing probability, negative evaluations, and the use of pronouns. In contrast, China Daily constructs a positive image of the project by employing affirmative tone, modality indicating certainty, positive evaluations. This study demonstrates how interpersonal meaning is constructed in these two news reports, showing that language not only conveys information but also embodies ideologies and constructs social relations.

However, the study has certain limitations, such as the restricted selection of only two news reports. Future research can expand the corpus and integrate theories from cognitive semantics to enable a more comprehensive analysis of news discourse from multiple perspectives.

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