

# A Contrastive Analysis of Same-Topic News Reports in Chinese and American Mainstream Media

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Based on ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions in systemic functional linguistics (SFL), a contrastive analysis is carried out on two same-topic news reports of Chinese and American main stream media. Two reports from the People's Daily and CNN are analyzed in terms of the lexical-grammatical systems (transitivity, mood and modality, and theme) realizing the three corresponding metafunctions to compare Chinese and American media reports on the same event. Results show that the two reports deploy different transitivity processes, but indicate similarity in the uses of mood and thematic choices. There are also respective preferences for reporting the same-topic news: CNN focuses on the whole process of the incident, the report being relatively objective and fair without obvious emotional bias, while the report of People's Daily is relatively comprehensive, analyzing the incident from various angles, and playing a positive role in guiding public opinion.

*Keywords:* systemic functional linguistics (SFL), contrastive analysis, metafunctions, same-topic news reports

## Introduction

In systemic functional linguistics (SFL), language performs three basic metafunctions: ideational function, interpersonal function, and textual function (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 20). Ideational function is the expression of people's experiences in the objective and subjective world (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 30). It is realized by the lexico-grammatical system of transitivity, involving processes, participants, and environmental components, which divides real experience into six processes (material, behavioral, relational, mental, verbal, and existential process). Interpersonal function refers to the function of language to express the speaker's identity, attitude, judgment, and evaluation of things (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 30), and is realized by mood system and modality system. Related to the construction of text, textual function promotes the continuity of ideational and interpersonal functions in the building-up of discourse sequence (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 31). It is mainly realized by the Theme-Rheme system. Theme refers to the point of departure of the message; Rheme is the remainder of the message to develop the Theme (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 89).

There has been a lot of systemic functional research on the field of journalism, mainly focusing on discourse pattern (Halmari & Ostman, 2001), diachronic changes of recorded discourse (Krieken & Sanders, 2016), as well as discourse analysis (Zhang et al., 2022), but there is little discussion on same-topic news reports. Based on the

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three metafunctions in SFL, this paper selects two same-topic news reports from the People's Daily and CNN as the research corpus, analyzes their differences realized at the lexico-grammatical level, and compares the respectively expressed emotional tendencies.

### Theoretical Framework

Language, as a complex semiotic system, has various strata (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 24). Language occurs under certain context, making people's experience and interpersonal relationships within the textual context expressed by meaning (the stratum of semantics) and meaning realized by wording (the stratum of lexico-grammar), and finds how expression of wording is realized by human body (the stratification into phonetics and phonology).

According to SFL, the "system of a language is 'instantiated' in the form of text" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 27). The common patterns of similar texts are summed up to identify the text types, which are genres of language used in different contexts of culture. Context of culture frames context of situation which is the "real isolates of culture" (Malinowski, 1944) can be investigated through the register. Any register has three main parameters of variation: field, tenor, and mode. As shown in Figure 1, SFL describes the lexico-grammatical realization of meaning based on context: field → ideational meaning → transitivity system; tenor → interpersonal meaning → mood and modality system; mode → textual meaning → Theme-Rheme system.

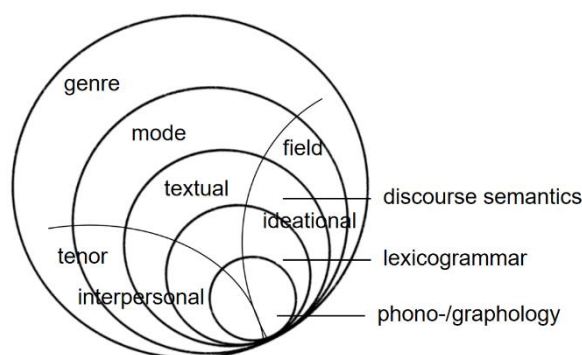


Figure 1. The realization of strata in SFL (Christie & Martin, 2007, p. 35).

### Functional Analysis

This study uses SFL to manually annotate and compare the lexico-grammatical level of the two same-topic news reports. The analysis at this level mainly focuses on the unit of "clause", the basic unit representing meaning, including transitivity, mood and modality, and thematic structure. The research corpus is two news reports both published on June 12, 2022 (Beijing Time) from the People's Daily (<https://view.inews.qq.com/a/20220612A07SKE00>) and CNN (<https://edition.cnn.com/2022/06/12/asia/tangshan-video-attack-china-intl/index.html>) about the Tangshan beating incident happened on June 10, 2022 (BJT) in China.

#### Ideational Function Analysis

Table 1 is obtained after analyzing the transitivity processes of all clauses in the two news reports. These characteristics reflect what processes the Chinese and American media choose to realize the ideational meaning in the reporting of the same incident.

Table 1

*Distribution of Transitivity Process Types*

	Total	Material process		Mental process		Relational process		Behavioral process		Verbal process		Existential process	
		<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
PD	84	64	76.2	6	7.1	5	5.9	4	4.8	4	4.8	1	1.2
CNN	72	50	69.4	1	1.4	5	6.9	8	11.1	8	11.1	0	0.0

Among the six process types, material process in the two news reports accounts for the highest proportion (PD: 76.2%; CNN: 69.4%), for that material process can reflect everything that happens in the objective world. The proportion in the two reports is quite different in mental process, behavioral process, and verbal process. The mental process used in People's Daily accounts for 7.1%, which reflects moods of the victim and expresses the determination to severely punish the perpetrators in the follow-up to the incident. Example 1 expresses the victim's feeling at the time of the scene, showing readers the peril of the victim in contrast with the violence of mobs. The proportion of behavioral process and verbal process in People's Daily both account for 4.8%. These two processes, in contrast, are used more frequently in CNN, both accounting for 11.1%. As shown in Example 2, CNN detailedly reported on mutual behavior from the surveillance footage, trying to authentically restore the details of the incident to the reader. The verbal process in People's Daily's news report includes mostly the narration of the victims and the people at the scene, as well as the voice of justice from the social masses. Verbal processes in CNN's news report include the dialogue at the scene and the follow-up of the incident by the police afterwards.

Example 1 但是她又清楚地知道, 面对当时多名肆无忌惮的暴徒, 就算自己上去, 也只有挨打的份。  
(But she also clearly knew that in the face of many unscrupulous thugs at that time, even if she went forward to offer help, she would only be beaten.)

Example 2 The man is seen approaching one of the women and placing his hand on her back, before she grabs him by the wrist and pushes him away.

**Interpersonal Function Analysis**

Table 2 is obtained after analyzing the mood structure and modality of the clauses in the two news reports, which reflects the elements chosen in the two news reports to realize interpersonal meaning, including motivation and attitude when transmitting information to the public.

Table 2

*Mood and Modality Characteristics*

Total		Finite								Three moods		
		The first tense verb						Modal verb	Other modal element			
		Past		Present		Future						
		<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%			D-	In-	Im-
PD	58	34	58.6	16	27.6	8	13.8	5	4	16	2	0
CNN	41	27	65.9	14	34.1	0	0.0	4	1	19	0	0

Notes. D-: Declaratives; In-: Interrogatives; and Im-: Imperatives.

The declarative tone was used in both reports as the highest, the interrogative tone and imperative tone were not used in CNN reports, and the People's Daily only used two interrogative tones, which appeared in the victim's

accounts of the incident and in blaming extreme remarks in relevant discussions from the society through rhetorical questions.

The first tense verbs mainly take the time of the incident as the starting point to explain the time of process in the clauses. From Table 2, the past tense shows the highest frequency (PD: 58.6%; CNN: 65.9%), and the second is the present first tense (PD: 27.6%; CNN: 34.1%). The present tense in CNN's report is mostly the description from the surveillance video. As in Example 3, the whole article reports the event objectively based on the surveillance footage to restore the entire process. People's Daily, as shown in Example 4, reports more about the occurrence of the incident and the description from the victim, and puts forward appeals to solutions and strategies, which also pays attention to the promotion of the follow-up treatment of the incident. The People's Daily uses a proportion of the future tense to express the determination to severely punish the perpetrators, so as to play a positive role in guiding public opinion.

Example 3 The woman can be heard questioning him, surveillance footage shows.

Example 4 如今嫌犯已被逮捕，期待相关部门深挖彻查，依法严惩，还伤者公道、还市民安宁、还社会稳定。(Now that the suspect has been arrested, we look forward to the relevant departments' in-depth investigation, severe judicial punishment, justice for the injured, peace for citizens and social stability.)

Modality is mainly realized by modal verbs and other modal adjuncts in the two texts of news reports. The small number of modal verbs shows that the news report is mainly based on facts rather than subjective judgments, but still when explaining the incident, assertion is too absolute to make the tone euphemistic and intelligible for readers. In Example 4, the expression of modality in People's Daily often appears in the firm attitude to severely punish the perpetrators; and in Example 3, modal expressions in CNN reports are mostly used to infer the behavior of the victim from the surveillance footage and to state the relevant official treatment. It is worth mentioning that the modal adjunct "brutally" was used in the title of CNN's report, highlighting the excessive interpretation of the nature of this event to attract the attention of readers, while the two repeatedly used the adjunct "坚决 (resolutely)" in the title of People's Daily which expresses the affirmation of resisting violence and upholding social justice. The obvious contrast in titles of the two news reports suggests different reporting preference of the two media, one magnifying the event property and the other publicizing positive guidance.

### Textual Function

Among the three metafunctions, textual meaning plays a special role, which organically combines ideational meaning and interpersonal meaning. Thematic structure is an important embodiment of textual meaning. The results of thematic structure analysis are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

*Thematic Structure*

	Total	Unmarked theme		Marked theme	
		<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
PD	24	16	66.7	8	33.3
CNN	19	14	73.7	5	26.3

In terms of theme selection, the two news reports both prefer unmarked theme, that is, theme and subject overlap (PD: 66.7%; CNN: 73.7%), showing that the word order of most clauses is normal and meets the needs of news report to provide information. The use of marked theme enhances the sense of rhythm and attractiveness

of the text and the speculation or the guidance of the subsequent subject in the clause. Adverbials have a high occurrence rate in both news reports, mainly used to express places, concessions, or conditions of the event, which expresses the spatial relationship and internal relationship of the development of things, enhances the coherence between sentences, and promotes the realization of the textual function. The two reports both aim to describe the objective events and show the internal relations between the events, so as to highlight the textual significance of the text.

### Discussion

The differences in the lexico-grammatical level of the two news reports indicate that People's Daily and CNN have distinct preferences for the perspectives of reporting the same-topic news. The analysis of the language features at the lexico-grammar level corresponds to the three parameters of the situation of context: field, tenor, and mode. In terms of field, the news reports involve social issues. The American media focus on restoring the whole process of the event, while the Chinese side covers a more comprehensive perspective and interprets the event from multiple perspectives. CNN objectively carries out a detailed description of the whole incident. The report of People's Daily covers the interpretation of the whole incident from different angles, including the real discourse of the victim and the witness, and the discussion and voice of justice from the society on the incident. In terms of tenor, the most important aspect of tenor is the choice of interpersonal relationship. Several expressions of interpersonal meaning in CNN did not show obvious emotional bias. People's Daily expresses the positive guidance of severely punishing the perpetrators and building a sense of social security with justice to the readers. In terms of mode, the most common form of expression in newspapers and periodicals is written, the key point of which lies in the discourse structure and language cohesion.

Within the overall context, the two news reports with the same-topic in Chinese and American media generally conform to the linguistic characteristics of the mass media genre. Both properly realize their social functions, so that readers can understand the differences in the whole and details in the application of SFL to news discourse.

### Conclusion

Based on the three metafunctions in SFL, the analysis of this paper is mainly to embody different reporting preferences of same-topic news reports at the lexico-grammatical level. It is found that CNN's report on China's negative news expresses objectivity and fairness without obvious emotional bias; People's Daily reports the incident more comprehensively covering the interpretation of the incident from multiple perspectives, which plays a positive role in guiding the public to believe in fairness and justice.

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