

A Study of Diplomatic Discourse Strategies from the Perspective of the Attitude System

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ABSTRACT

This study utilizes the “Spokesperson’s Remarks” section on the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, focusing on over 100,000 words from the regular press conferences held by the Ministry in 2023. Drawing upon Martin and White’s (2005) appraisal theory as the analytical framework, this research conducts frequency statistics and functional discourse analysis on the categories of attitudinal resources in the selected corpus. Employing a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, the study aims to identify and investigate the discourse meanings conveyed through attitude resources in the news discourse of “regular press conferences,” revealing the linguistic characteristics of China’s diplomatic discourse. Furthermore, it seeks to summarize the significance and impact of diplomatic discourse on the construction of national image. The results indicate that the corpus is most rich in judgmental attitude resources, primarily realized through vocabulary, syntax, and rhetorical expressions. This suggests that spokespersons mainly express attitudinal tendencies through factual statements and enhance national discourse power with precise language control, reflecting the objectivity of the discourse and contributing to the audience’s trust in the information.

KEYWORDS

Chinese diplomatic discourse; regular press conference; appraisal theory; attitude system; china’s international communication

INTRODUCTION

Diplomatic discourse refers to the language and speech acts used by diplomatic entities to express their international strategies and foreign policies during specific historical periods. This includes official national documents on diplomatic ideas or policies, speeches by leaders, treaties, agreements, communiqués, declarations, diplomatic negotiations, press conferences, and news briefings (Hu & Li, 2018). However, diplomatic discourse is not only the expression of positions and statements of views but also reflects a country’s strategic intentions, political concepts, and ideology. “When language serves the national interest, it becomes a part of international core competitiveness and an important manifestation of a nation’s soft and hard power” (Wen & Zhang, 2018). In the national discourse system, exploring how actors use language to construct national identity is gaining increasing attention. Research on diplomatic language has become a hot topic in the interdisciplinary field of international relations and linguistics. Diplomatic discourse research involves not only the study of language itself but also the deeper significance of the relationship between language and society, language and ideology, and language and power dynamics. The generation, dissemination, and reception of diplomatic discourse are inseparable from specific social, cultural, and historical contexts, and are closely related to

human cognition. Based on this, studying Chinese diplomatic discourse is an important means of constructing China's image in a global context. It is also a core representational form of Chinese diplomatic discourse and Chinese national identity construction. It has positive significance for showcasing and shaping China's national image, constructing China's national identity in the international community, and striving for China's discourse power in the international arena.

The regular press conferences of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as a window and communication platform for China's foreign policy, hold extremely important status and significance for various sectors within China and the world. These press conferences are a crucial channel for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to convey information, interpret policies, and respond to concerns both domestically and internationally. They can timely and accurately communicate China's positions, policies, and stances to the public, media, and governments worldwide. They are also one of the key methods for China's external communication, using multiple languages to transmit China's voice and stance to the world, enhancing international understanding and recognition of China, and promoting communication and cooperation with other countries. Discourse analysis of Chinese diplomatic discourse construction can help the international community understand the Chinese government's attitudes, positions, and views on various issues and provide a basis for improving China's diplomatic discourse strategies.

In the West, research on diplomatic discourse started relatively early, with the early focus on political language, primarily the discourse of politicians, and later extended to the diplomatic field. From a linguistic perspective, research has mainly focused on the linguistic features of diplomatic discourse (Al-Gublan, 2015; Albalat-Mascarell & Carrió-Pastor, 2019), pragmatic phenomena (Viktoriia, 2018; Kukatova et al., 2020), metaphors, translation, and research combining critical discourse analysis (Lisa, 2011; Wageche, 2017). Chinese scholars have also conducted relevant studies on Chinese diplomatic discourse from different disciplines, fields, and perspectives, mainly focusing on linguistic features (Li & Hu, 2009; Ge, 2021), pragmatic strategy research (Guan, 2010; Sun, 2021), translation strategy research of diplomatic language (Yang, 2014; Zhang, 2015), and critical analysis research (Wang, 2019; Wang, 2020). A review of the literature reveals that research related to Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespeople rarely starts from the appraisal system's attitude subsystem. This study attempts to explore the appraisal resources in the selected corpus from the perspectives of lexicon, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and functions, making it a new attempt in the field of Chinese diplomatic discourse research. This study links the findings of diplomatic discourse research with the pragmatic choices for external communication and the construction of the national discourse system, attempting to provide more specific methodological guidance for news spokespeople, helping them to appropriately use language strategies to reasonably explain policies and measures, demonstrating its innovativeness.

Therefore, this study adopts the attitude subsystem of the appraisal theory as an analytical tool, taking the regular press conference transcripts of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson from January 2023 to December 2023 as the research object. It conducts quantitative and qualitative analyses of the attitudinal resources involved in the responsive discourse of diplomatic spokespersons in China's diplomatic discourse, aiming to reveal the distribution characteristics of attitudinal resources in the discourse of the spokespersons and study the ideology and political stance conveyed by the spokespersons, exploring the characteristics of Chinese diplomatic discourse. This study aims to answer three questions:

- (1) What are the distribution characteristics of attitude resources in Chinese diplomatic

- discourse at the textual level?
- (2) How does Chinese diplomatic discourse convey information and construct diplomatic discourse through various types of attitude resources at the discourse practice level?
 - (3) What is the socio-historical context of the formation of Chinese diplomatic discourse, and how are the national image and national discourse system constructed?

REVIEW OF APPRAISAL THEORY AND ATTITUDE SYSTEM RESEARCH

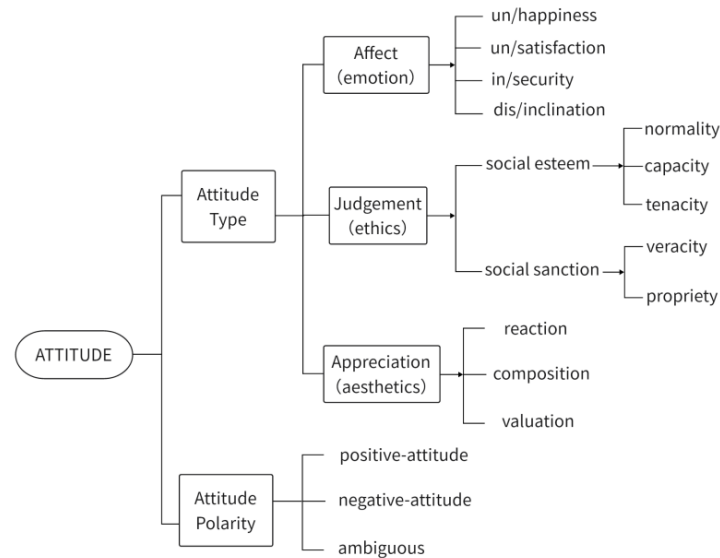
Appraisal Theory and Attitude System

Appraisal theory, proposed by linguists such as Martin in the 1990s, was established by Martin and Rose based on Halliday's systemic functional linguistics, focusing on interpersonal meaning. Appraisal theory effectively extends the interpersonal system in functional grammar. Martin and Rose (2003) later defined it as "the various attitudes negotiable in a text, the intensity of the emotions involved, and the ways values are indicated and aligned with the audience." This theory, based on Halliday's systemic functional linguistics, constructs the interpersonal function's attitudinal meaning on the foundation of discourse analysis theory. It complements and enhances one of the three major meanings of systemic functional linguistics, i.e., interpersonal meaning, and has become one of the cutting-edge linguistic theories of contemporary times. This theory primarily manifests in the form of lexicon and is a new lexical-grammatical framework developed in the study of interpersonal meaning within systemic functional linguistics, extending the interpersonal function horizontally and vertically. Appraisal theory focuses on evaluative resources in the text, discussing the intensity and power of various attitudes in the text and the source of appraisal, attempting to show through discourse analysis how speakers express their attitudes, stances, and viewpoints in the text. It is an important theoretical supplement to the interpersonal meaning in systemic functional linguistics.

Appraisal theory includes three systems: Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation. Among them, the attitude system is the key to the entire appraisal system and the focus of this paper's analysis. The attitude system is comprised of three semantic regions: Affect, Judgment, and Appreciation. Being interrelated with each other, the three subsystems work together to convey the attitudes of a speaker or a writer in an all-round way. Wang Zhenhua et al. (2007) point out that the affect system concerns the emotional responses to behaviors, texts/processes, and phenomena; the judgment system evaluates the behavior of language users based on ethical and moral standards; the appreciation system evaluates texts/processes and phenomena. Affect is divided into (un)happiness, (in)security, and (dis)satisfaction; judgment is divided into social esteem and social sanction; appreciation consists of reaction, composition, and valuation (Martin & White, 2005). "Appraisal is the linguistic resource that language users use to express specific evaluative stances and negotiate these stances with actual or potential respondents" (Feng & Zhao, 2012). It focuses on the various attitudes negotiated in the text, the intensity of the feelings involved, and the ways values and alliances with readers are indicated. "The center of the appraisal system is 'system,' and the focus is 'appraisal.' Language in this system is a 'means.' Through analyzing the language used by language users, one can gain a deeper understanding of the language users' stance and attitude, making evaluation interpretive and explanatory" (Wang, 2001).

This paper starts from the three levels of the attitude system in appraisal theory to explore the usage and proportion of various attitude resources in the corpus of Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' regular press conferences. It aims to reveal the distribution

characteristics of attitudinal resources in the spokesperson’s discourse and study how the spokesperson conveys ideology and political stance. The theoretical framework is as



follows:

Figure 1. Framework of Attitude

LITERATURE REVIEW

The language appraisal system proposed by Martin et al. is a lexically oriented semantic system: it mainly presents the “stance of the author/speaker towards the material included in the text and the communicative objects” (Martin & White, 2005; Martin & Rose, 2003).

Appraisal theory “is one of the most important new developments in systemic functional linguistics. It has conducted rich research on evaluative lexicon, compensating for the shortcomings of the original model” (Fang, 2014). It has greatly developed the study of interpersonal meaning systems and has thus been widely used. As the core of appraisal theory, the attitude system is the focus of its research. Firstly, appraisal theory provides new perspectives for foreign language teaching practice (Arkoudis, 2006; Liao, 2008), translation practice (Xu, 2011; Chen & Wen, 2013). Secondly, it provides a theoretical framework for research on various written or spoken discourses. For example, business discourse (Xu & Xia, 2013), literary works (Nie, 2015; Shan & Ding, 2006), news reports (Li & Sun, 2007; Bednarek, 2006; Khoo et al., 2012), speeches (Wei & Yao, 2009), academic discourse prefaces (Yu & Zeng, 2015), book review titles (Bu, 2013; Yang, 2015), academic writing (Wu & Allison, 2015), and other genres of discourse have all used appraisal theory to varying degrees. Additionally, appraisal theory provides a new perspective for comparative analysis of English and Chinese texts of the same genre (Khoo et al., 2016; Xu & Xia, 2013; Xu et al., 2011). Xu and Xia (2013), using the attitude system of appraisal theory as a framework, conducted a comparative analysis of the distribution types and realization methods of attitude resources in English and Chinese business discourse, showing significant differences in distribution types and realization methods between the two, and explored the cultural reasons for these differences.

“The original intention of creating appraisal theory was to provide a new framework for the analysis of different types of discourse”(Liu, 2010). According to the literature collected, there are few studies on the evaluative language of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson from the perspective of the attitude system of the appraisal system. Therefore, this paper intends to use this type of discourse as corpus, within the

perspective of systemic functional linguistics, using the sub-theory of the attitude system of appraisal theory as a framework to analyze and interpret the discourse of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson from the aspects of affect, judgment, and appreciation. It aims to explore the distribution characteristics of attitudinal resources and the realization methods of language strategies in this type of Chinese diplomatic discourse, linking the pragmatic choices of diplomatic discourse with the construction of the national discourse system, and attempting to propose strategies for constructing a Chinese-characteristic diplomatic discourse system from the aspects of discourse features and discourse characteristics.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study aims to obtain authentic and effective results through quantitative and qualitative analysis of the corpus from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' regular press conferences

Research Corpus

The research subject of this paper is Chinese diplomatic discourse, focusing on authentic transcriptions from regular press conferences. The data were selected from the "Press and Media Service - Spokesperson's Remarks" section on the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (<https://www.fmprc.gov.cn>), covering the period from January 2023 to December 2023. A total of 229 press conferences were held, from which 33 were systematically sampled by selecting every 7th conference, resulting in a corpus of 102,400 words. The main focus is on the spokesperson's responses, closely linked to the reporters' questions. A closed corpus was constructed, using the attitude subsystem of appraisal theory as the theoretical foundation, to conduct qualitative research and quantitative analysis on the selection of attitudinal resources in the Chinese diplomatic discourse. This analysis aims to understand the methods and techniques the spokesperson uses to convey emotions and attitudes towards various events.

Research Methodology

This study uses the UAM Corpus Tool 3.3 software and involves manual annotation of the corpus to mark attitudinal resources in the texts. Due to the lack of natural separation between Chinese morphemes, the corpus was pre-processed with Chinese word segmentation tools to prevent lexical adhesion. Following this, the segmented corpus was added to a project [Chinese Diplomatic Discourse - Appraisal System] created in the UAM Corpus Tool 3.3 software, using the theoretical framework shown in Figure 1 to establish the annotation system. A combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis was applied. Qualitative analysis includes the identification of attitudinal resources, description of the spokesperson's discourse characteristics, interpretation of the national image, and explanation of the causes of the national image. Quantitative analysis was used to depict the distribution of attitudinal resources in the diplomatic discourse texts.

Research Design

This study follows the classification framework of the attitude system in appraisal theory to manually annotate lexical resources in the corpus. Subsequently, the various categories of attitudinal resources in the corpus were classified and their frequencies counted. Finally, functional discourse analysis was employed to interpret the corpus and explore its distribution characteristics. Combining qualitative and quantitative methods, the study

elaborates on how the spokespersons rigorously control language during regular press conferences to enhance the national discourse power and adapt to various communicative context factors. Additionally, the study attempts to summarize the spokesperson's discourse style and media image construction characteristics. It explores the effects of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' spokesperson in shaping the national image, conveying the national stance, and constructing national identity through diplomatic discourse.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Discourse

Based on the perspective of external communication, some suggestions and reflections are proposed. Based on the three subsystems of the attitude system, three types of attitudes used by spokespersons during regular press conferences could be identified, along with typical semantic examples (see Table 1), which served as annotation standards:

Table 1. Classification and Examples of Affect, Judgement and Appreciation

<i>Affect</i>	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>
<i>Dis/inclination</i>	Long for, yearn for	Wary, fearful
<i>Un/happiness</i>	Cheerful, happy, like	Sad, sorrow, heart-broken
<i>In/security</i>	Assured, together, trusting	Uneasy, anxious, astonished
<i>Dis/satisfaction</i>	Impressed, pleased, charmed	Angry, bored, sick of
<hr/>		
<i>Social esteem</i>	<i>Positive (admire)</i>	<i>Negative (criticize)</i>
<i>Normality</i> (how special)	Fortunate, familiar, lucky, fortunate	Unlucky, hopeless, eccentric, obscure
<i>Capacity</i> (how capable)	Powerful, robust, healthy, mature, experienced	Weak, foolish, naive, insane
<i>Tenacity</i> (how dependable)	Brace, persevering, reliable, loyal	Timid, impatient, unfaithful, unreliable
<hr/>		
<i>Social sanction</i>	<i>Positive (praise)</i>	<i>Negative (condemn)</i>
<i>Veracity</i> (how honest)	Frank, credible, discrete, frank	Dishonest, lying, blunt, deceptive
<i>Propriety</i> (how far beyond reproach)	Ethical, polite, caring, unassuming	Corrupt, unjust, cruel, greedy
<hr/>		
<i>Reaction</i>	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>
<i>Impact</i> (Did it grab me?)	Arresting, exciting, dynamic	Tedious, uninviting, unremarkable
<i>Quality</i> (Did I like it?)	Good, lovely, beautiful, appealing	Ugly, revolting, nasty, plain
<hr/>		
<i>Composition</i>	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>
<i>Balance</i> (Did it hang together?)	Harmonious, balanced, consistent	Irregular, contradictory, shapeless
<i>Complexity</i> (Was it hard to follow?)	Simple, pure, precise, detailed	Simplistic, plain
<hr/>		
<i>Valuation</i>	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>
<i>Was it worthwhile</i>	Creative, original, genuine	Ineffective, common, fake

Overall Distributional Features of Attitudinal Resources

Chinese diplomatic spokespersons illustrate from the perspectives of affect, judgment, and

appreciation how China effectively utilizes linguistic resources in international affairs, constructs a discourse system with Chinese characteristics, enhances national discourse power, and construct the national image of China on this basis. After multiple manual annotation and quantitative statistics on the selected corpus, the frequencies and proportions of various types of attitudinal resources were determined, as shown in Table 2.

In the selected corpus, there are a total of 1,641 instances of attitudinal evaluation resources. These can be examined in detail from the aspects of resource type, expression methods, and polarity distribution. The overall usage distribution of attitudinal resources is uneven. Judgment resources are the most frequent, accounting for 55.4%, indicating that spokespersons tend to make judgments based on laws, regulations, or the inherent rightness or wrongness of matters, primarily using factual statements to express their stance. Appreciation resources are the next most frequent, accounting for 24.4%. Affect resources are the least frequent, possibly because the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is an official platform for the Chinese government to convey policies and positions externally, requiring the avoidance of overly subjective and emotional language, and favoring objective expressions.

Table 2. Distribution of Attitude in the Corpus

Attitude-type	N	Percentage
Affect	331	20.17%
Judgement	909	55.39%
Appreciation	401	24.44%
Total Units	1641	100%

Regarding polarity distribution (Table 3), the text predominantly uses positive attitudinal resources, accounting for 82.5%, indicating that the use of positive discourse aids in constructing the national image and forming the national discourse system. Negative attitudinal resources account for only 17%, mainly used to evaluate the attitudes of certain Western countries towards public affairs in the international community. Ambiguous attitudes account for 0.5%. The use of positive evaluative resources in the discourse exceeds negative evaluative resources, with judgment resources being the core method by which spokespersons convey their sentiments. “This reflects that the most compelling attitudinal resources are also the easiest to resonate with the audience, thereby achieving the media’s goal of serving a particular group or class” (Deng & Yang, 2022). The continuous use of positive and fluent language helps to clearly present China’s beliefs, systems, practices, achievements, and experiences in external exchanges.

Table 3. Polarity of Attitude in the Corpus

Attitude-polarity	N	Percentage
Positive attitude	1353	82.45%
Negative attitude	279	17.00%
Ambiguous	9	0.55%
Total Units	1641	100%

The National Image of China Constructed in the Diplomatic Discourse

This section examines the specific ways in which China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokespersons utilize diplomatic discourse to achieve various objectives. By analyzing the selected corpus, the study explores how different attitude resources are employed to construct a multifaceted national image, convey China’s national stance, and build national identity. The analysis demonstrates the strategic use of language to project qualities such as confidence, reliability, inclusiveness, cooperation, justice, reasonableness, capability, institutional confidence, and a global vision.

Affect Resources: Constructing a National Image of “Confident, Reliable, Inclusive, and Cooperative”

In the context of diplomatic discourse, the affect system may involve psychological descriptions of diplomatic counterparts, with a characteristic of “direct communication to individuals.” As shown in Table 4, the most significant proportion of affect resources is Dis/satisfaction, accounting for 27.79%. Specific examples are used below to understand and analyze the use and manifestation of affect resources in the corpus.

Table 4. Distribution of Affect in the Corpus

Affect-type	N	Percentage
Un/happiness	59	17.82%
Dis/satisfaction	92	27.79%
In/security	91	27.49%
Dis/inclination	89	26.89%
Total Units	331	100%

Examples 1: We are glad to note that Chinese investment has expanded to more sectors, including emerging industries like sci-tech, finance and e-commerce, apart from manufacturing, electricity and construction mentioned in the report. Equity participation, mergers and acquisitions have become new modes of Chinese investment in Africa. (Aug. 18, 2023)

Examples 2: the Central American Parliament adopted the resolution to revoke the “permanent observer status” of the so-called “Legislative Yuan” of the Taiwan region and accept the National People’s Congress of China as a permanent observer. China welcomes and commends the resolution. (Sep. 18, 2023)

Examples 1 and 2, “glad” and “welcomes,” are typical affect resources that directly express positive emotions. “Glad” signifies “feeling pleasure or happiness,” representing high emotional intensity, while “welcome” means “to greet to greet or accept something with pleasure and enthusiasm.” From the perspective of the appraisal theory’s attitude system, these lexical resources and included meanings possess positive evaluative characteristics and belong to the category of happiness-related affect resources. The direct use of happiness-related affect resources enables the speaker to convey positive and enthusiastic emotions to the audience at the beginning of the speech. The audience can directly perceive the speaker’s joy and share the positive emotional experience, thereby reducing the psychological distance between the speaker and the listener and creating emotional resonance.

Example 3: We believe that there will be more excellent projects resulting from high-quality Belt and Road cooperation which will boost development, improve people’s lives, and generate more opportunities for countries to prosper together. (Mar. 10, 2023)

In Example 3, “believe” means “to trust and consider something true without doubt,” expressing the speaker’s or participant’s strong belief that their expectations or predictions will come true. “boost development” and “generate more opportunities” reflect confidence and a sense of security about future developments. From the perspective of the appraisal theory’s attitude system, these words belong to positive, explicit security-related affect resources. The spokesperson directly expresses strong confidence in the high-quality development of the “Belt and Road Initiative,” affirming its progress and achievements while conveying this positive emotion to the audience. This can instill a sense of confidence in the audience about future collaborations in various fields, promoting development opportunities and substantial benefits. Thus, the use of security-related affect resources not only conveys the speaker’s confidence but also effectively mobilizes the

audience’s emotions, fostering a sense of trust in the speaker’s content.

Example 4: The narcotics control authorities have put in place a comprehensive and dynamic supervision mechanism for all stages of precursor chemical management. Those are exemplary efforts on global drug governance. China has the strictest drug control policy in the world and enforces it in the fullest way. Our efforts are widely recognized by the international community. (Sep. 18, 2023)

In Example 4, “exemplary” means “a role model worthy of imitation,” and “recognized” signifies approval and appreciation of an achievement, along with two instances of “-est” (in Chinese version). From the perspective of the appraisal theory’s attitude system, these words belong to satisfaction-related affect resources. Their use expresses the sense of achievement and satisfaction of the spokesperson, represented by Deputy Director Maoning (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Information Department), towards China’s achievements in building a comprehensive dynamic monitoring mechanism for drug control. It also reflects the international community’s high regard for China’s anti-drug policies and future development expectations. Directly expressing satisfaction-related affect resources creates a positive emotional atmosphere, encouraging the audience to maintain a positive mental state.

Judgment Resources: Depicting a National Image of “Just, Reasonable, and Capable”

The judgment system may involve moral or legal assessments of a diplomatic counterpart, with an element of ideological manipulation. According to Martin’s classification, judgment resources include two categories: social esteem and social sanction, both of which can have positive or negative meanings. Social sanction focuses on the legality and morality of the evaluated entity, including the sub-systems of veracity and propriety. Social esteem evaluates whether the entity’s behavior possesses excellent qualities, capabilities, and whether it is commendable, including the sub-systems of normality, capacity, and tenacity. As shown in Table 5, among judgment resources, propriety-related resources account for the largest proportion, followed by capacity and tenacity. This indicates that news discourse in “Answering Journalists’ Questions” highlights positive behavioral qualities related to propriety, capacity, and tenacity. The following examples provide specific analysis.

Table 5. Distribution of Judgement in the Corpus

Judgement-type		N	Percentage
Social esteem	Normality	132	14.52%
	Capacity	182	20.02%
	Tenacity	135	14.85%
Social sanction	Propriety	356	39.16%
	Veracity	104	11.44%
Total Units		909	100%

Example 5: Since COVID-19 began, China has been sharing information and data with the international community in an open and transparent manner. We reported the spread of the virus to the WHO at the earliest opportunity. We immediately sequenced and published the genome of the virus and shared with the world China’s protocols for diagnostics, treatment and containment. Those efforts marked an important contribution to global vaccine and drugs research and development. China has twice invited WHO experts for origin-tracing research. The China-WHO joint origin-tracing study report reached scientific and authoritative conclusions, laying a foundation for the next phase of global origin-tracing efforts. (Jan. 12, 2023)

In Example 5, the Chinese government’s efforts in the international fight against

COVID-19 are described through a series of actions such as “reported the spread of the virus,” “sequenced and published the genome of the virus,” and “sharing information and data.” These actions evoke the audience’s judgment of China’s anti-epidemic principles and behavior, portraying a reliable and sincere government image. The “scientific and authoritative” definition of the tracing report underscores an irrefutable conclusion of authenticity. The clauses led by “at the first time” (Chinese version) recognize and commend the Chinese government’s most timely and effective prevention and control measures against the unknown virus and sudden epidemic, affirming China’s significant contribution to international anti-epidemic efforts.

Example 6: We would like to stress again that China has been sharing relevant information and data in a timely, open and transparent manner in accordance with the law. China has not only protected its own people’s lives to the greatest extent possible, but also served as a major source of COVID response supplies for the world, making China an important participant in international cooperation against the virus. (Jan. 12, 2023)

In Example 6, terms such as “sharing relevant information,” “protected its own people’s lives,” and “a major source of COVID response supplies” are propriety-related social sanction resources. Their use reflects qualities such as China’s selfless sharing and impartiality. Faced with the epidemic, the Chinese government prioritizes people and lives, unreservedly sharing control and treatment experiences with other countries, securing a critical line of defense against the epidemic and buying valuable time for countries to respond. The use of judgment resources emphasizes China’s diplomatic principle of peace and development and calls for global cooperation to overcome the epidemic together. Functional discourse analysis views language as a tool of political activity, emphasizing its intervention function and placing language research within the social practice of political contexts (Fang, 2014).

The spokespersons primarily use propriety and capacity resources to positively evaluate China’s words and actions, while condemning behaviors that violate social morals and legal standards, such as “political manipulation is unpopular” and “politicizing the tracing issue.” Compared to highly subjective affect resources, judgment resources allow the spokesperson to demonstrate the reasonableness of China’s words and actions and stimulate international recognition of China’s efforts.

Appreciation Resources: Shaping a National Image of “Institutional Confidence and Global Vision”

The appreciation system may signify the evaluative judgment of certain diplomatic affairs, with an aim to guide the audience to follow a particular diplomatic direction. According to Martin’s classification, appreciation is generally used to evaluate natural objects, man-made objects, or abstract entities such as policies and plans. It includes three subsystems: reaction, composition, and valuation. As shown in Table 6, among the appreciation attitude resources, composition resources account for the largest proportion, followed by social valuation. This conveys the interconnected and cohesive nature of the subjects. The following examples illustrate this. Table 6 presents the frequency statistics of appreciation resources.

Table 6. Distribution of Appreciation in the Corpus

Appreciation-type	N	Percentage
Reaction	84	20.95%
Composition	192	47.88%
Social valuation	125	31.17%
Total Units	401	100%

Example 7: The EU-China Fair is one of the largest business, technology and innovation cooperation platforms between China and the EU, with the most extensive participation from both EU member states and EU businesses. (Jul. 6, 2023)

Example 8: Lancang-Mekong Cooperation(LMC), as the first new type subregional cooperation mechanism launched by riparian countries based on wide consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits, has been growing at a high level since its inception seven years ago, becoming a golden model of success for subregional cooperation. The six countries agreed at the seventh LMC Foreign Ministers' Meeting held in Myanmar in July 2022 to jointly build an area of demonstration for high-quality Belt and Road cooperation, an area of pioneering efforts under the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and a pilot area of cooperation under the Global Security Initiative (GSI), and forge an even closer community with a shared future for Lancang-Mekong countries. (Mar. 22, 2023)

Example 9: This forum in Shanghai is yet another action to serve high-quality development and high-level opening up for regions in China through diplomacy. We believe this world-class forum will build a bridge of even closer interaction between Shanghai and the world. (Apr. 21, 2023)

In Example 7, phrases like “the largest business,” and “most extensive participation,” highlight the richness of the composition and the openness and inclusiveness of this event. In Examples 8 and 9, terms like “golden model,” “closer community with a shared future,” and “a bridge of even closer interaction” refer to the coordination and close connection of the structure or overall state of the objects. These lexical resources belong to the composition category of appreciation resources. The spokesperson uses these terms to indicate that countries around the world are increasingly becoming a closely connected whole. Facing new global development trends, China actively promotes the building of a community with a shared future for mankind, fosters global partnerships, and advances major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics. This deepens the international community's understanding of China, especially during the regular press conferences of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where the spokesperson needs to convey ideology and political positions through such “response to the reporters' questions” sessions.

Example 10: RCEP is a milestone in Asia-Pacific economic integration. It is a great example of regional countries sharing opportunities for development. Since its implementation began, trade links between relevant countries have grown notably, trade within the region has become a key engine stabilizing and driving external trade, and the region has remained a popular destination for global investment. (Jun. 14, 2023)

In Example 10, the word “key” refers to “a factor that plays a decisive role in the situation.” This lexical resource highlights the importance of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in the development of regional countries and in driving the growth of foreign trade since its implementation. The term “milestone” signifies “an opportunity or favorable circumstance,” indicating that since China proposed this agreement, it has significantly contributed to both China's economic development and the world's economic growth. These lexical resources are typical positive and active valuation appreciation resources. The audience thus understands China's significant strategic achievements in promoting regional economic integration and its contributions to global economic growth. China also expresses its willingness to work with other countries to further implement the RCEP, promoting continuous economic recovery and development both regionally and globally.

CONCLUSION

This study employs a combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses. Initially, attitude evaluation categories from appraisal theory were applied to annotate the text, followed by statistical methods to compare and analyze various evaluative parameters. The qualitative research then interprets and elucidates the characteristics and reasons for changes in evaluative resources based on statistical analysis. The findings reveal that Chinese diplomatic discourse, situated within a specific socio-historical context, effectively utilizes affective, judgmental, and appreciation resources to convey national messages, constructing a national image of confidence, reliability, inclusivity, and cooperation. This discourse also establishes a distinctive national narrative framework. Positive affective resources help bridge the psychological distance with the international community; judgment resources offer objective evaluations that showcase China's legitimacy and moral standing in international affairs; appreciation resources provide value assessments that underscore China's significant role in global cooperation. Through these strategies, Chinese diplomatic discourse not only enhances its persuasiveness and appeal but also effectively shapes and maintains the national image. This contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the diversity and complexity of Chinese diplomatic discourse and offers solid theoretical and empirical support for enhancing China's discursive power and influence on the international stage.

However, the study has limitations. Due to time constraints, the research did not exhaustively analyze all the transcripts of the 2023 press conferences, instead selecting a sample for text analysis, which may lead to some insufficiencies in the results. Additionally, since appraisal theory is a relatively subjective evaluation method, the results may be influenced by the researchers' subjective factors. Therefore, future research could examine more objective indicators, construct larger corpora, or incorporate multimodal resources such as images and videos to further refine the systemic functional linguistic approach to the study of China's image construction in discourse.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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