

Eliminating Interferences of Intertextuality—An Optimal Cognitive Perspective for News Discourse Readers

Zheng Min^{1,a}, Cheng Jitang^{1,b}

¹College of Foreign Studies, Guangxi Normal University, Guilin, China
^a45790123@qq.com, ^bchengjitang1226@163.com

Abstract: In news discourse, the ideology that the writer intends to convey is highlighted through intertextuality, which conceptualizes the readers of news discourse, constrains the subjectivity of the readers and fulfills the purposes of increasing the trueness of the news. However, difference in perspective influences the result of readers' cognition. This thesis makes a contrastive study of the intertextuality of two pieces of English news from New York Times and China Daily respectively, and hereby discusses the best viewing perspectives of the readers in the light of Figure / Ground Theory and Subjectivity Theory. Finally, it comes to a conclusion that the influence of intertextuality on the readers of news discourse is inversely correlated to the readers' subjectivity. Therefore, to acquire an optimal perspective, the readers must bring into play their subjectivity.

Keywords: intertextuality, optimal viewing perspective, Figure / Ground, subjectivity

1. Introduction

The concept of “intertextuality”, primarily based on Saussure's view of symbolic language and Bakhtin's theory of dialogue ^[1], was first proposed by Kristeva, a contemporary French literary theorist, in her book — *Semiotics: A Study of Symbolic Interpretation* (1969). Kristeva ^[2] believed that “any text is the absorption and conversion of another text”. And she ^[2] thereupon defined intertextuality as “the intersection of discourse from other texts.” This definition emphasizes the intricate relationship between texts that are interconnected and synthesized.

Intertextuality, which is regarded as one of the most prominent features of discourse, has always been the main object of discourse analysis. Especially in recent years, research on intertextuality is in the ascendant. With the continuous expansion of its research theory, its research scope has expanded from the initial field of literary criticism ^[3]^[4] to discourse analysis ^[5] and critical linguistics ^[6]^[7] ^[8] ^[9] ^[10] ^[11]. In particular, critical linguistics studies intertextuality as a tool which reflects the author's ideology, thus greatly broadening the research scope of intertextuality.

Cognitive linguistics also brings “intertextuality” into its research category. For example, Goatly ^[12] discusses intertextuality and coherence in discourse from the perspective of metaphor; Beaugrande and Dressler ^[13] examined intertextuality in discourse from the perspective of conceptual synthesis in the psychological space; In addition, cognitive context theory has also been applied to explaining “intertextuality” ^[14]. As a new discipline, “intertextuality” has attracted more and more attention in the academic community, showing strong potential. Together with language analysis, it has become one of the two complementary approaches to discourse analysis ^[5].

2. Intertextuality of News Discourse

The intertextuality of news discourse has the function of transmitting the ideology of news writers. Notwithstanding, the ideology embedded in news discourse cannot directly affect readers, but rather impacts them indirectly via their own cognitive patterns as intermediaries. Therefore, the intertextuality of a text plays a vital role in changing the cognitive model of the reader, and thus achieving the goal of successfully transmitting the ideology of the news writer. Moreover, the most direct and effective way to alter the cognitive model of the reader is to change its cognitive perspective. In order to enhance the “objectiveness” and “authenticity” of news, writers of news discourse often refer to a secondary source. As such, the perspectives of a news discourse include the perspective of the writer, that of those

involved in the event, and that of the reader. Langacker^[15] points out that language, like vision and perception, bears subjectivity. Cognitive grammar holds that discourse and perception are closely related. In view of this, we can infer that what a discourse can be exactly rendered as inevitably embraces the perception of cognitive agent, that is, the subjective construing of the news writer on cognitive object (news event). Due to the subjectivity of the cognitive perspective ultimately derived from the unequal relationship between the cognitive agent and cognitive object, the results of readers' cognition often vary considerably.

At any point in a text, we are "viewing a scene from a particular perspective."^[16] As for the readers, since they are not eyewitnesses of the news events, they can only understand the truth of the events through the perspective of the author. To some extent, the reader's perspective is subject to the author's perspective. "Perspective", as far as Langacker^[17] is concerned, is a matter of viewing arrangement which involves arranging the figure / background and selecting advantageous vantage points. Obviously, this approach is also subjectivity-prone. Due to people's subjective construal operation, when they choose different objects as the focus of observation; when they observe from different vantage points; and when they adopt different viewing perspectives, what they observe tend to be completely different. On this account, only when readers are immune to the subjective positions of news writers and the viewpoints of those involved, can they observe in an optimal perspective, exert their cognitive subjectivity, and thus remove interference and gain insight into the truth of the facts. This article will apply the Figure/Ground theory to analyzing the intertextual phenomenon of two English news discourses, then subsequently discuss their different intertextual features, and ultimately explore the optimal viewing perspective for readers' understanding of news discourse.

3. Data Collection

Two pieces of news on the performance of Chinese athletes at the Tokyo Olympics are collected from Chinese media and the US media respectively — one from the New York Times entitled *Chinese sports machine's single goal: Most gold, at any cost*; and the other, under the title — *Chinese move beyond "gold medal only" mentality*, from China Daily. In these two pieces of news the performance of Chinese athletes at the Tokyo Olympics are commented from different perspectives. In order to prove the truthfulness of their report, and influence readers' subjective cognition, both authors resort to citing the opinions of others.

The report headlined *Chinese Sports Machine's Single Goal: Most Gold, at Any Cost* cites 129 words, accounting for approximately 10.2% of the entire length of the news. These 129 words present the views of seven government officials, including athletes Hou Zhihui, Liao Qiuyun, Chinese Olympic Committee member Gou Zhongwen, anti-doping minister Li Hao of the Chinese General Administration of Sport's Lifting and Slaying Center, and an anonymous journalist. The report contains seven direct citations and three indirect citations. This report not only highlights the impressive achievements of Chinese athletes, but also questions the "gold medal complex" of the Chinese government and people. In order to verify the persuasiveness and authority of their own views, the reporter tactfully embeds others' viewpoints and opinions into their own discourse, thereby creating a sense of "authenticity". In the report, when expressing their disapproval or even criticism of China's "gold medal craze", the author "borrows" two supporting evidences. In one case, the views of athletes such as Hou Zhihui and Liao Qiuyun on striving and "focusing on training" is misinterpreted as the obsession of "blind and mechanical training" to win gold medals with ulterior motives. In the other case, "the highly effective" Chinese weightlifting talent training system promoted by officials of the Chinese Olympic Committee and the General Administration of Sport is distorted into a "sports assembly line" that trains impoverished rural girls to win gold medals. The author then openly expresses his viewpoint that the design of China's sports production line is only for the sole purpose of "churning out gold medals for the glory of the nation", "silver and bronze medals barely counting". The purpose of the writers alluding to the views of others who share their own views or are of advantage to their own views to showcase their own views is only too evident. If the readers rely solely on this news to acquaint themselves with China's "gold medal complex", they are likely to generate cognitive biases in the context of seemingly plausible evidence.

Unlike the New York Times, the aptly titled news — *Chinese Move beyond Gold Medal Only Mentality* from China Daily not only affirms the excellent achievements of the Chinese delegation, but also greatly appreciates Chinese people's renunciation of the "gold medal" favoritism. With reference to the opinions of multiple interviewees and netizens, the author reinforces the convincingness of the report. The report consists of 1113 words, of which 321 words are placed in quotes, accounting for

about one-third of the entire news. These quotations are mainly derived from the opinions of ordinary people, numerous netizens, and expert comments. They appear as many as sixteen times in the report, which apparently create a “truthful and unwavering” effect, so that readers are convinced of the success of Chinese athletes and of the inclusive and open attitude of the Chinese people towards athletes. The writer points out that the Chinese people not only tolerate the Chinese athletes who have not won gold medals, but also openly praise the sportsmanship of these “uncrowned kings” for their hard work, dedication, and perseverance on the field. This reflects “a different take on the ‘win or lose’ mentality” among Chinese people.

4. Analysis of the Influence of Intertextuality of News Discourse on Readers’ Cognitive Perspective

From the two news accounts above, it can be noticed that both cover the same topic — Chinese people’s “gold medal only” mindset, but their readers are deliberately oriented towards different construals. From the perspective of critical linguistics, the authors of these two news reports have skillfully taken advantage of the intertextual discourses to convey their ideology and standpoint to the readers. In order to dominate readers’ ideological consciousness and encourage the readers to agree with their own views, news writers often select quotations that share their views, or “paraphrase” quotations to ensure the consistency of their own views. Additionally, they deftly organize the layout of the article by rhetorical techniques. Cognitively speaking, the reason why news writers do so is that they can subtly influence the cognitive perspective of readers by highlighting the intertextuality of news discourse. Van Dijk ^[18] once maintained that cognition is the interface between discourse and society. Accordingly, as an inherent property of news discourse, intertextuality reflects one of indispensable social attributes the news writers — their subjective intentionality. Because of the readers’ / audiences’ different cognitive perspectives in the process of reading / listening to news and construing objective facts, their different choices of scopes, their different ways of construing, and their different focuses of attention, they will form different imageries. As a result, news writers usually make full use of such cognitive characteristics of the readers by integrating the views and perceptions of those involved into their own discourse to manipulate the readers’ cognitive psychological mechanisms, to influence their cognitive subjectivity, and, in the final analysis, to mislead the readers about their real intention. It can be perceived that if readers are to eliminate the false and retain the true, and refrain from the interference of “intertextuality” in cognition, they must give play to their own cognitive subjectivity.

4.1 The Impact of Prominent Intertexts in News Discourse on Reader’s Cognition

Just like the way people distinguish between the actors and the scenery, props on stage with the aim of focusing their attention on the actors’ performances, when appreciating theatrical performances, the readers construe news by paying close attention on some prominent details in news events while ignoring other details. According to the figure / background theory proposed by Danish psychologist Rubin, people’s cognitive focus, when recognizing an object, is categorized as “figure”, and the part that highlights the figure is identified as “ground”; while the part that highlights the figure and ground is recognized as “background”, which is the cognitive reference point of the figure. When people choose different cognitive reference points, the scene observed also changes because the position of figure and background can be exchanged. Hence, different angles of viewing result in different prominent “scenarios”. In other words, the division of scope between figure and ground, to a large extent, depends on the principle of prominence.

In a news discourse, the writer adeptly embodies several paraphrases and quotations in their own discourse to achieve “intertextuality”. In this way, their own needs of expression are fulfilled. These quotations and the words of the writers construct the figure and background of the news discourse so as to highlight the importance of a particular section and make their own source of information objective, impartial, authentic and credible. Such way of reporting with a secondary source, whose unexceptionable purpose is to prove the neutrality of one’s own viewpoint, and to make the readers unable to challenge their true intentions and stance, serves effectively to blur or even conceal the writer’s own position and viewpoint.

Taking the two reports from *The New York Times* and *China Daily* as examples, although both writers capture the performance of Chinese athletes at the Tokyo Olympics and are also concerned about China’s “gold medal” complex, the two reports display different purposes. The citations in the

article *Chinese Sports Machine's Single Goal: Most Gold, at Any Cost* implicitly express complaints against or dissatisfaction with China's national sports system, highlighting the negative image of the Chinese government and people's "gold medal over" principle. Meanwhile the quotations in the other news — *Chinese Move beyond "Gold Medal Only" Mentality*, without exception, show a more open and inclusive attitude towards Chinese athletes' performance. In other words, what exhibits prominently in the latter article is the positive image of China as a "sports power". By and large, the citations in both news discourses carry distinct subjective biases of the news reporters. The differences between the prominent intertexts in the two news discourses are shown as follows (see Figure 1 and Figure 2):

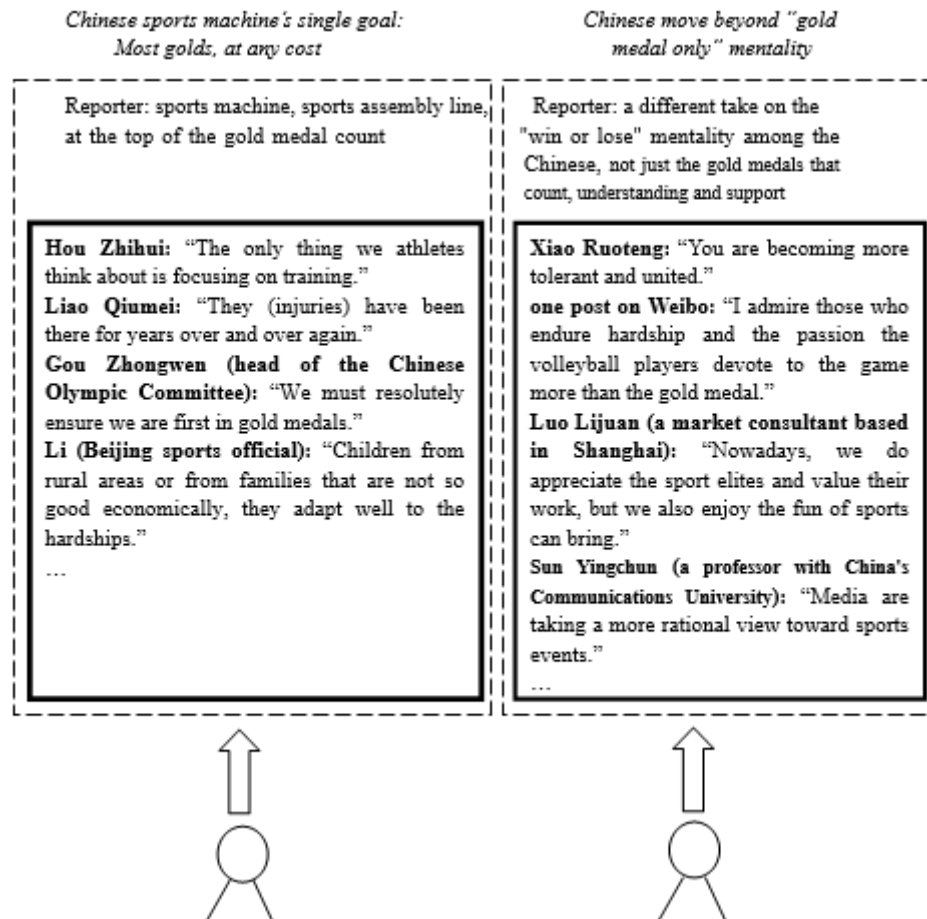


Figure 1: Prominent Intertexts in "Chinese sports machine's single goal: Most golds, at any cost"

Figure 2: Prominent Intertexts in "Chinese move beyond 'gold medal only' mentality"

When the readers are scrutinizing these two reports, they are influenced by different prominent details in the discourse. That is to say, while confronting the fact that the total number of medals of the Chinese delegation is in the leading position, they will inevitably obtain different cognitive results through their different construals. It can be demonstrated that the cognitive perspectives of readers are largely dominated and constrained by the content made prominent by the author.

4.2 The Influence of intertextuality of News Discourse on the Optimal Viewing Perspectives of Readers

In light of cognitive psychology, when observing the external world, people have a limited attention scope and can concentrate on only a few things within a certain field of vision. Langacker vividly compares the way people observe things to the audience watching a play in a theater. According to the figure / background theory, the relevant information of events in news discourse, such as time, location, process, outcome, and other factors, constitutes the "ground" of the stage; the writer is the "figure" on the stage, while the reader is the audience off stage. On this "stage", the areas receiving more attention, such as the process of news events, comments from the writers, and opinions of people involved, are

called “onstage regions”. On the contrary, the areas receiving less attention, including the readers and their surrounding areas, are referred to as “off stage regions”.

Viewing arrangement describes the relationship between people, the external world and things while observing ^[19]. When a reader keeps an outsider of the entire news event and calmly sits “off the stage” to watch what is happening “on the stage”, he is adopting the optimal viewing arrangement. When readers incorporate themselves into news events, making themselves both observers and participants of the event, they are comprehending the event with egocentric viewing arrangement. Through these two viewing arrangements, readers will have different construals of news discourse ^[20]. When using the optimal viewing arrangement, the readers, in the process of objective construal, are recognized as the audience, as well as the conceptualizer, excluded from the stage. Their observation is proactive and their perspective is also broad. In such case, the readers are put in the “optimal viewing arrangement” of the news events. Nevertheless, when using the method of egocentric viewing arrangement, the readers are subjectively construing the news, and also shift from the audience to performers on stage, from conceptualizer to a part of conceptualization. If so, they only passively accept the views of news writers and those related to the event, while the readers’ own viewpoints and positions are ignored. This “egocentric viewing arrangement” puts readers in a very unfavorable position when observing news events.

Take the two reports from the New York Times and China Daily as examples, when readers are in the optimal observation arrangement, that is, when they are viewing from the most desirable perspective, they are the subject of cognition, completely excluding themselves from the discourse mixed with many bystanders’ viewpoints. To put it in another way, when readers ignore the interference of others’ viewpoints in intertextual discourse, they will have a more objective and unbiased understanding of the entire event, and of a more impersonal evaluation of China’s “gold medal” complex. Although there are still a few irrational people criticizing athletes for their losses on the field, there is a wider Chinese public cheering for athletes’ brilliant breakthroughs. Gold medals are no longer the only yardstick of Chinese people for success or failure. The optimal viewing arrangement can be illustrated as follows in Figure 3, with R representing the reader; the range delineated by the dashed line the viewer’s viewing range; and arrows the reader’s perspective:

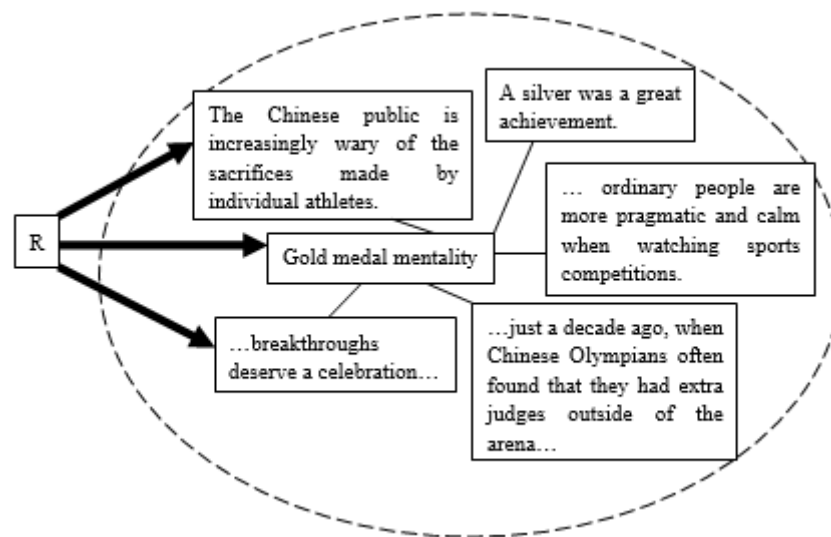


Figure 3: Optimal Viewing Arrangement in News Discourse

Instead, when readers are in a situation of egocentric viewing arrangement, their viewing perspective is guided by the perspective of the quotations in the discourse, which unconsciously prompts them to construe what they are reading from the perspective of those involved. The reader’s egocentric viewing arrangements, while reading these two reports, are illuminated in Figure 4 and Figure 5 respectively:

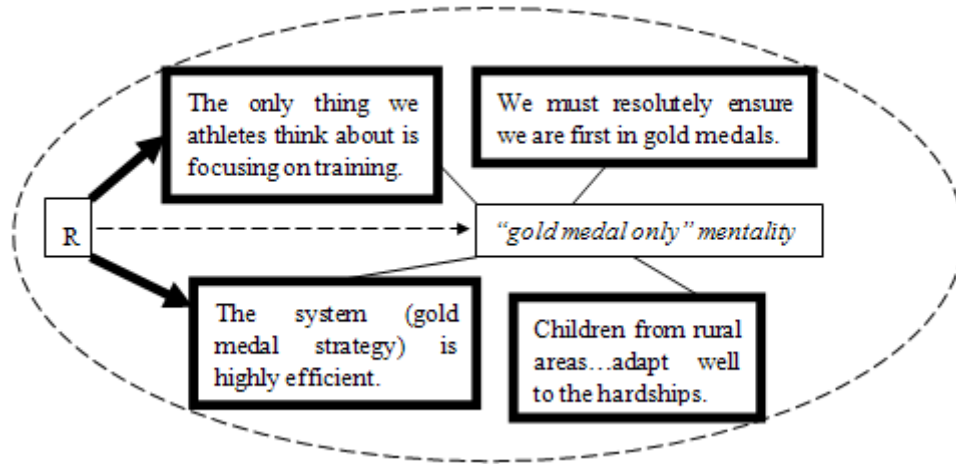


Figure 4: Egocentric Viewing Arrangements in Chinese sports machine's single goal: Most golds, at any cost

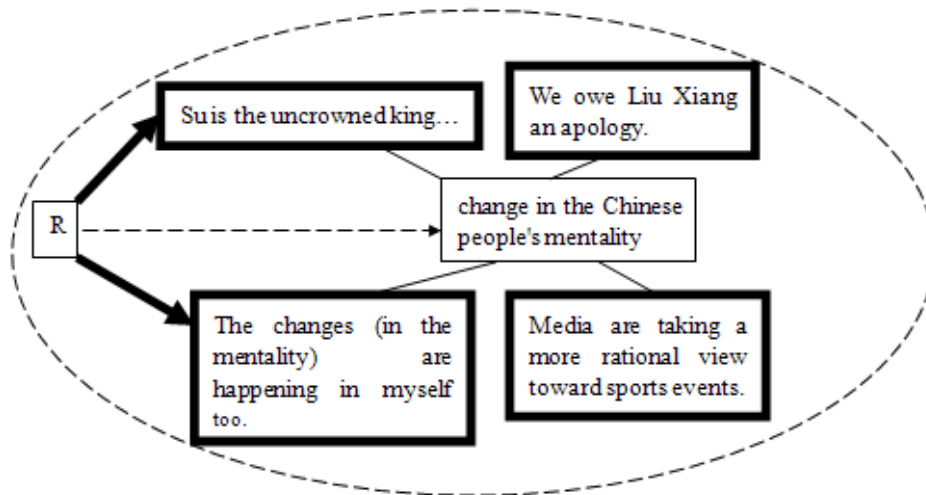


Figure 5: Egocentric Viewing Arrangements in Chinese move beyond "gold medal only" mentality

Obviously, what readers observe through these two reports is different, because intertextuality has changed their cognitive perspective and mode. Readers of *Chinese Sports Machine's Single Goal: Most Gold, at Any Cost* may think that China's only gold medal frenzy is harmful and should even be denounced. In contrast, readers of *Chinese Move beyond "Gold Medal only" Mentality* may be soberly aware that the "gold medal" mania of the Chinese people has a long history and has seriously hindered the promotion of mass sports, but this situation has greatly improved in recent years. The afore discussed explicitly manifests that "intertextuality" can convert the readers' way of viewing and present readers with different perspectives of the same news events.

4.3 Intertextuality of news discourse and subjectivity of readers' cognition

Subjectivity refers to "devices whereby the speaker, in making an utterance, simultaneously comments upon that utterance and expresses his attitude to what he is saying." [21] And cognitive subjectivity is essentially a form of cognitive perspective, which is opposite to objectivity. In cognitive grammar, subjective and objective psychological states represent subjective self-consciousness and objective self-consciousness, respectively. When the subject is in the onstage region and the readers themselves is in the offstage region, they are able to freely exercise subjectivity, maintain a sober mind, and keep their undivided attention so as not to be readily swayed by the opinions of others. In this situation, readers are observing news events from the "optimal perspective". Conversely, when readers have been assimilated into the onstage region, they will otherwise ignore their identity as "observers" and willingly accept the views of others. Because that way, they are viewing from the same perspective as they are looking at themselves from a mirror, which is from an "egocentric viewing perspective".

To sum up, in news discourse, the subjectivity of readers is inversely related to the authenticity of

the news. When readers are in the “optimal viewing perspective”, their subjectivity is at its highest, and the authenticity of the news enormously diminishes. Contrarily, when readers are construing the news from an “egocentric viewing perspective”, their subjectivity greatly decreases, while the “authenticity” of the discourse immensely increases. This is the reason why news reporters can manage to articulate their ideology “with the aid of” intertextuality. That is to say, the “authenticity” of news often relies on a large amount of discourse that is quoted from others.

As is noted above, both the reports from the New York Times and the China Daily are typical intertextual texts in which various views commingle, which, to some extent, inhibit the subjectivity of readers. Restrained by intertextuality, readers’ understanding of China’s “gold medal” mentality is thence inevitably biased. The “truth” that readers of the New York Times discover is that the champion plot of the Chinese people has led to Chinese government’s focusing “on less prominent sports that are underfunded in the West or sports that offer multiple Olympic gold medals”; that Chinese athletes have been trained by the national system since childhood as sports machines that are only able to engage in “full-time training”; and that “for these castoff athletes, life is often difficult”. Contrary to their American counterparts, what China Daily depicts in its news is an opposite imagery — the changing attitude of the Chinese society. For most Chinese people, “it’s not just the gold medals that count”. And what’s more important, as China rises, people are naturally becoming more and more confident.

It is noticeable that the writers of the two news articles extract the remarks of others out of context in order to resonate with readers. The ideologies hidden in both news have their own biases. On the one hand the “gold medal” complex in China is distinct from the “gold medal only mentality” described in the US report which is harmful champion-monomania, and which must be completely abandoned. On the other hand, it is not as easy as the “participation only”, hit-or-miss philosophy, either. Indeed, the “gold medal only mentality” goes against the Olympic spirit and needs to be gradually and appropriately diluted. But the efforts made to win the gold medal, and the never-say-die spirits play an immeasurable role in boosting national morale and increasing national cohesion.

Generally speaking, while reading news discourse, if readers are confronted with a large number of biased statements, they will gradually lose their “subjective self-awareness”, their viewing perspective will be unconsciously assimilated, leaving themselves not able to distinguish subjective comments and objective facts in the citation, and feeling confused about the truth. So, when reading news discourse, readers should have the courage to challenge the viewpoints of the writers, exercise their subjectivity, and investigate from the “optimal viewing perspective”. Only by these means, can readers ensure what they observe are reliable and reliable, and hold their own position more firmly without being led by others. And only by removing the “mirror” of intertextuality can readers prevent themselves from being biased, explore the truth from a more intuitive and pure perspective, and exam the merits and demerits of China’s sports system.

5. Conclusion

To be concluded, just as a mountain appears to assume divergent contours, when viewed from different perspectives, so does the news discourse a diverse stance. Things in the objective world often have multifaceted characteristics. Whether you see a ridge or a peak depends on the viewing perspective. When observing from different perspectives, selecting different cognitive reference points, and occupying different regions, the phenomena will be vastly different. In the process of perceiving and experiencing objective objects, subjectivity plays a crucial role in the process and results of cognition. It is “intertextuality” that hampers a reader perception of the position of the news. As a reader, in order to gain insight into the various realities of news events, it is necessary to break free from the constraints of the intertextuality in news discourse, eliminate the interference of others’ viewpoints, and allow oneself to construe from the optimal viewing perspective and objective scene. To unmistakably construe the “true position” of intertextuality in news discourse, we must put ourselves out of the “stage”, give full play to the subjectivity of our own cognition, and make our understanding closer to the objective reality.

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