

The Discourse Construction of the Image of Medical Workers in News Discourse

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Abstract: In recent years, various reports on group images have been consistently emerging in discursive resources. Among them, the constructed image of medical workers in news discourse not only directly influences the public's subjective perception of medical personnel but also serves as a crucial reference factor for the public's perception of the real environment. To enrich the linguistic and image construction research in news discourse, this paper adopts the theoretical framework of appraisal theory and explores the construction of various images of medical workers in news reports and the evaluation strategies employed by the media to shape the image of this group.

Keywords: Image construction, Discourse analysis, Appraisal theory, Attitude system

1. Introduction

As the guardians of human health, medical professionals play a crucial role in improving the health status of the population, prolonging human life expectancy, and enhancing the quality of community life. Therefore, the construction of the image of medical professionals is not only related to the interests of medical workers and medical institutions but also to the general public. As the observer of human society, the news media, especially in the context of our country's reality, not only needs to provide comprehensive information services to the public but also needs to pay attention to public opinion guidance. Its credibility and influence are irreplaceable. This paper focuses on the portrayal of medical professionals in "China Daily" as the target corpus. The construction of the image of medical professionals during major public health emergencies will provide valuable references for improving the media image of medical workers in the future.

2. Literature Review

The current research on group images covers various types of discourses, including news, literature, advertisements, and films, both domestically and internationally. These studies focus on different groups, such as the elderly, women, social workers, intellectuals, and medical workers. In terms of the image of medical workers, most research is conducted through news reports, with a predominant focus on media and communication studies. For example, Chen ^[1] conducted a detailed comparative analysis of the media image of doctors before and after healthcare reform, considering the social context of the reform. Guo ^[2] compared healthcare news reports from "People's Daily" and "Southern Weekend" using the framework theory, summarizing the changes and similarities in the news frames of healthcare news reports between the two newspapers. Liu ^[3] analyzed healthcare news reports from "People's Daily," exploring the basic features, content characteristics, and formal features of the reports to investigate how news reports construct the media image of medical workers during the epidemic period.

Linguists have also conducted further research on the image of medical workers. Some scholars have used discourse-historical research methods to examine the construction of discourse surrounding healthcare worker images. For example, Zhu Lei and Shi Yantao ^[4] analyzed relevant reports on medical workers from the WeChat official account of "People's Daily" as their corpus. They employed discourse analysis, discourse strategy analysis, and visual grammar analysis to explore how media discourse constructs the image of medical workers. Other scholars have utilized appraisal theory to further investigate the construction of identity among young medical workers. For instance, Zhu Yonghua and Zhu Lei ^[5] explored the changes in the identity of young medical workers since the outbreak of the pandemic based on the evaluative theory of attitude systems. Moreover, some critical

discourse analysts have begun to pay attention to the construction of healthcare worker images. For example, X Sun and Malgorzata Chalupnik ^[6] employed a corpus-based critical discourse analysis approach to compare the portrayal of female medical workers and general medical workers in online news reports on the Weibo platform. Their aim was to investigate how the image of female healthcare professionals is represented in online news and the underlying ideologies.

Based on the above, (1) the majority of scholars have primarily examined the mediated image of medical workers in news from the perspective of communication studies in journalism, with limited research conducted from a linguistic standpoint. (2) Presently, there is a dearth of discourse construction studies on the image of medical workers that analyze from the viewpoint of evaluative theory, and few scholars have focused on the potential latent evaluative implications within news discourse. Currently, there is a lack of discourse construction research on the image of medical workers that analyzes from the perspective of evaluative theory, and few scholars have focused on the potential evaluative implications within news discourse or conducted studies combining the evaluative theory's attitude systems for image construction. In light of this, this study aims to propose the following research questions:

- (1) What kind of images of medical workers is constructed through news reports?
- (2) What discourse strategies are employed by news media in the construction of these images?

3. Research Design

The present study adopts Martin's Attitude System, derived from the evaluative theory, as the analytical framework. Building upon the interpersonal function framework in Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, Martin proposes the evaluative theory starting from the lexical level, comprising three subsystems: Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation. The Attitude system serves as the core of the evaluative system, involving language users' attitudes towards the described object. It encompasses three sub-systems that express meanings of Affect, Judgment, and Appreciation, corresponding to the traditional domains of emotions, ethics, and aesthetics, respectively ^[7]. Regarding the implicit evaluative strategies, this study primarily draws upon P.R.R. White's mechanism of implicit evaluation in news discourse. Taking into account the characteristics of the corpus used in this study, the exploration of implicit evaluation strategies focuses on two aspects: evocation strategies and provocation strategies. Evocation strategies primarily analyze implicit evaluations triggered by conceptual meanings, while provocation strategies focus on the role of metaphors and devices of counter-expectation in eliciting implicit evaluations and constructing the image of medical workers ^[8].

This study adopts a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analyses. The quantitative analysis involves processing the corpus using the UAM CorpusTool software, with manual annotation of various attitude resources within the corpus, and automated generation of frequency distribution data. The qualitative analysis is based on the evaluative theory's attitude resources and incorporates data analysis. During the analysis, particular attention is given to the usage of vocabulary, phrases, and clauses that reflect the image of medical workers, thereby constructing their image. By exploring both explicit and implicit evaluative mechanisms, the study aims to investigate the discourse strategies employed by news media in constructing this image. To collect data, a search was conducted in the People's Daily database using the keywords "medical workers," "doctors," and "nurses." The search covered the period from January 22 to April 8, 2020, and the retrieved news articles were screened based on the following criteria: (1) duplicate news articles were excluded, and (2) the primary focus of the news articles should involve evaluations of medical workers (articles solely discussing activities, events, or resolutions related to medical workers were excluded). Finally, a random sample of 21 news articles was drawn from the eligible news reports, forming a small-scale corpus comprising a total of 16,677 words.

4. Research Findings and Discussion

4.1 Overall Distribution of Attitude Resources

A total of 282 instances of attitude resources were identified in the corpus. The distribution of attitude resources is shown in Figure 1. Among them, judgment resources and appreciation resources accounted for the highest proportions, representing 51.8% and 29.1%, respectively. This distribution is attributed to the genre of news reporting chosen for this study. News reporting emphasizes the

authenticity of events, and judgment resources and appreciation resources are primarily employed to evaluate the words, actions, and spirits of medical workers, reflecting attitudes generated from their conduct or mindset. These two types of resources, compared to affect resources, are characterized by a higher degree of objectivity and therefore are utilized more frequently. Furthermore, in news reporting, apart from evaluating the words, actions, and spirits of medical workers, the portrayal of their image also involves the utilization of discourse from the general public and healthcare professionals themselves. As a result, affect resources are also involved in the corpus.

ATTITUDE-TYPE	N	%
- affect	54	19.1
- judgement	146	51.8
- appreciation	82	29.1
TOTAL:	282	100.0%

Figure 1: Overall distribution of attitude resources.

4.2 Judgment Resources and the Construction of the Image of Medical workers

Judgment refers to the evaluative and adjudicatory process through which individuals make assessments about others' behavior based on their own moral environment [9]. The distribution of judgement resources is shown in Figure 2. In this study, judgment resources represent the evaluations of the image of medical workers in news reporting, based on the moral values and ethics of the Chinese nation. There are a total of 146 instances of judgment resources, accounting for 51.8% of the attitude system. From the distribution charts, it can be observed that the highest proportions within the judgment resources are attributed to the characteristics of tenacity and propriety. Following that, capacity and veracity are also prominent. However, resources related to behavioral norms were less frequently observed in this corpus.

JUDGEMENT-TYPE	N	%
- normality	4	1.4
- capacity	26	9.2
- tenacity	69	24.5
- propriety	30	10.6
- veracity	17	6.0
TOTAL:	146	51.8%

Figure 2: Distribution of judgment resources.

The research findings reveal that the resources of tenacity and propriety are frequently employed together in constructing the image of medical workers. They often appear in close proximity within a sentence, serving to emphasize and progress the portrayal. This combination effectively constructs the image of medical workers as responsible and dedicated warriors who exemplify a strong sense of duty and accountability.

Example 1: The teams included 42,600 personnel, including 19,000 medical workers **dedicated to** [tenacity+] treating the severely ill. [propriety+]

Example 2: "Thousands of medical workers have come to Wuhan. **We won't resign ourselves to giving up.** [tenacity+]

Example 3: We need to **put the city back on track as soon as possible.**" [propriety+] Doctors and nurses in the province are staying at their posts to treat patients, [propriety+] with little regard for their own safety. [tenacity+]

The news reports also frequently utilize positive capacity resources in the discourse of healthcare professionals themselves, such as "be capable of," "ability," and "deal with." These resources emphasize the portrayal of medical workers' exceptional medical expertise in providing assistance to COVID-19 patients during critical moments, showcasing their remarkable medical skills and professional abilities in saving lives and providing care. Here are some relevant examples:

Example 4: "Now we're **capable of** shouldering social **responsibilities** and making contributions to the country with our own efforts," he said. [capacity+]

Example 5: He said he realized that he was not an unaccomplished person, as he had imagined, because he **has the ability to** do something when needed. [capacity+]

4.3 Appreciation Resources and Construction of the Image of Medical workers

Appreciation, as defined by Martin, involves the discernment of value in objects and phenomena and the evaluation of their aesthetic characteristics. It encompasses the aspects of response, composition, and value^[10]. The distribution of appreciation resources is shown in Figure 3. According to the distribution charts, the highest proportion within the appreciation resources is attributed to value resources. These resources primarily focus on the appreciation of medical workers' actions and outcomes in combating the epidemic.

APPRECIATION-TYPE	N	%
- reaction	25	8.9
- composition	11	3.9
- valuation	46	16.3
TOTAL:	82	29.1%

Figure 3: Distribution of appreciation resources.

Among the three types of appreciation resources, value resources have the highest proportion. They primarily convey the evaluation and appreciation of medical workers' actions by the news media, highlighting their significant contributions and the noble spirit they embody in the fight against the epidemic. Reaction resources serve as complementary resources, reflecting the attitudes people hold towards the words, actions, or spirits of medical workers and expressing their full recognition of their words, actions, or spirits. Value resources, on the other hand, primarily focus on the positive evaluation of their achievements. Similar reports are abundant, collectively constructing the image of medical workers as selfless heroes who exhibit unwavering dedication and boundless love in the process of combating the epidemic.

Example 6: Ke said, adding that every time he went to a hospital he was deeply **touched** [reaction+] by medical workers' **dedication** [valuation+].

Example 7: We have professional knowledge and years of clinical experience," Hou says. "It's our calling and our way of **paying back society**[valuation+]

4.4 Affect Resources and Construction of the Image of Medical workers

Affect resources represent the psychological responses to actions, texts, processes, and phenomena. In order to maintain objectivity, news discourse tends to avoid the use of affect resources^[9]. The distribution of affect resources is shown in Figure 4. Consequently, in this study, affect resources only appeared in 54 instances, accounting for 19.1% of the attitude system. Moreover, most of the affective attitudes were found in the quotations from interviews with medical workers or the general public. They were shaped by the self-discourse of medical workers and the discourse of others, rather than being subjective evaluations by the news authors. Therefore, the presence of affect resources in the corpus did not compromise the objectivity of the news reports.

AFFECT-TYPE	N	%
- unhappiness--happiness	7	2.5
- dis/satisfaction	24	8.5
- in/security	23	8.2
TOTAL:	54	19.1%

Figure 4: Distribution of affect resources.

Through a specific analysis of the 54 instances of affect resources, it becomes evident that the news media conveys praise for the contributions made by medical workers and holds deep respect for their unwavering commitment and selfless dedication in fulfilling their duties. The reports frequently highlight the comforting and caring words of healthcare professionals towards patients, acknowledging the role they play in alleviating patients' emotions and safeguarding their well-being. As a result, the

image of medical workers as compassionate public servants who serve the people and are beloved by them is constructed.

Example 8: Since other medical teams have already started to **encourage** their patients to do some light exercises by leading dance and tai chi classes, she decided to teach them traditional dances from Xinjiang

Example 9: I told her that she was not allowed to drink water because of the tracheotomy, she then blinked and gave me a **thumbs up** [satisfaction+]. "I was touched. I can feel her desire for life and also the **trust** [security+] in us — the medical workers.

Example 10: Society should not forget their brave deeds and should strive to promote a healthy social environment by **respecting** [satisfaction+] medical workers and safeguarding their legal rights and interests.

5. Evaluation Strategies

EXPLICITNESS	N	%
- inscribe	158	55.8
- invoke	124	43.8
TOTAL:	282	99.6%

Figure 5: Distribution characteristics of explicit and implicit attitudes

Based on the distribution characteristics of explicit and implicit attitudes, which is shown in Figure 5, it can be observed that in the selected news corpus, more than half of the evaluated words and phrases exhibit explicit evaluations. This finding aligns with the analysis criteria of Martin's evaluation theory, which suggests that meaning construction heavily relies on explicit evaluation strategies. Through the analysis of the attitude system in the preceding sections, we have observed that explicit evaluation meanings are primarily expressed through lexical means, particularly evaluative adjectives, adverbs, and nouns, all of which are explicit attitudinal lexis. Considering that the corpus of this study consists of news discourse, which emphasizes fairness and objectivity, news authors have to employ implicit means to disperse their viewpoints throughout the entire discourse. Therefore, it can be observed that implicit evaluation meanings also play a significant role in the construction of the image of medical workers. In the subsequent analysis, we will focus on exploring the ways in which implicit evaluation strategies contribute to the construction of the image of medical workers in news reporting.

According to R. White, implicit evaluation refers to the indirect expression of positive or negative values, where "if the immediate context is ignored, all components that constitute the expression lose their attitudinal meaning."^[11] At the linguistic level, the realization of implicit evaluation typically falls into two categories. First, conceptual meaning evokes implicit evaluation. In discourse, authors often choose neutral vocabulary to describe things, involving the conceptual meaning of the words. However, sometimes, the words used to describe the essence of something may appear as a specific generalization of the thing or action on the surface, but they actually imply the author's viewpoint and attitude. Second, "attitude markers" can provoke implicit evaluation. The attitude markers involved in this study mainly include metaphors and counter-expectation^[12]. Therefore, this section primarily explores the role of conceptual meaning, metaphor, and counter-expectation in achieving implicit evaluation and further investigates how implicit evaluation strategies contribute to the construction of the image of medical workers in news reporting.

"Evocation" refers to evoking implicit evaluation through the pure informational content. Regarding triggering strategies, Martin & White point out that "even when there is no overtly attitudinal lexis in the discourse, the choice of conceptual meaning alone can be enough to evoke evaluation."^[10]

At the lexical level, in the following examples, words such as "promote," "maintain," "redouble," "calm," and others do not possess strong emotional connotations in themselves. However, readers can develop a positive attitude towards the efforts made by medical workers in epidemic prevention and control by recognizing the conceptual meanings of these words within the context.

Example 11: Their purpose is to **promote** mental health knowledge, reduce fear and **maintain** social stability. [propriety+]

Example 12: They vowed to **redouble** their efforts to consolidate the positive momentum on

epidemic control. [tenacity+]

Example 13: Bowing toward him, holding his hands and speaking softly, Zhao **managed to calm** the patient and resume treatment. [capacity+]

At the syntactic level, in example 14, the "not only...but also" construction demonstrates a progressive relationship, highlighting that medical workers possess not only the ability to treat and save lives but also the capability to provide services to the people. In example 15, the "so...that" construction further emphasizes the selfless dedication of medical workers in saving lives and providing care.

Example 14: "We must **not only** try to improve the ability of disease control and prevention, **but also** try to improve the ability to provide public health services"

Example 15: Ding Renyu was **so** focused on his work with patients **that** he didn't realize his mask had caused the bridge of his nose to bleed.

Provocation refers to triggering readers' positive or negative responses through alternative evaluative means. P.R.R. White suggests that positive or negative evaluative meanings are "provoked" by the material itself. ^[13] Although these materials possess evaluative properties, they are not inherently positive or negative. For instance, evaluation meanings can be evoked through attitude markers such as metaphor and counter-expectancy.

Metaphor can implicitly convey evaluative meanings, which is why news authors often use metaphor to express their implicit evaluative intentions ^[14]. J.R. Martin and D. Rose ^[10] argue that through metaphors employed by authors in discourse, the similarity of the metaphorical entity is asserted, thereby highlighting the author's subjective consciousness. For example, in the following three sentences, war metaphors are used to liken medical workers to heroes fighting on the battlefield, combating the COVID-19 pandemic, and safeguarding people's health. The evaluative subject, through the metaphors embedded in the context, provokes a positive attitude towards medical workers.

Example 16: "When we **put the gowns on**, we need to **confront** the virus directly and safeguard other people's health."

Example 17: More than a month into **the battle** against the epidemic, it is clear that medical workers form the backbone of the **fight against** the virus, working around the clock to save lives.

Example 18: If the new coronavirus is described as an **enemy**, then the doctors and nurses are like **soldiers on the front line**, who bear the brunt of **the enemy fire**.

Counter-expectancy can provoke evaluative meanings. Communication between people is based on shared assumptions and expectations. These assumptions and expectations help authors construct dialogues, thus aligning themselves with potential readers. By negating expectations, authors can imply the evaluative meanings they wish to convey. In terms of grammar, certain conjunctions have evaluative functions that make readers aware of the author's attitude. In the news report, medical workers fearlessly persevere on the frontlines despite challenging circumstances. The author utilizes conjunctions such as "even as" and "despite" to create counter-expectancy, thereby eliciting positive evaluative meanings in readers towards medical workers.

Example 19: He is one of the hundreds of medical experts who have rushed to Wuhan to try and arrest the spread of the virus, **even as** new cases of infection are surfacing

Example 20: Which means that **despite** knowing the risks of contracting the disease, they chose to treat the patients.

6. Conclusion

Based on the research findings, it has been discovered that news reports utilize the affect, judgment, and appreciation resources of the attitude system to convey positive evaluative attitudes towards medical workers. Among them, judgment resources are the most frequently employed, accounting for 59.8% of the total, constructing the image of medical workers as brave warriors who face challenges and defend their country, as well as skilled professionals who are dedicated and conscientious in their profession. Following that, appreciation resources account for 29.1%, constructing the image of medical workers as selfless heroes with boundless love and devotion. The proportion of affect resources is the smallest, constructing the image of medical workers as compassionate guardians who serve the people and are beloved by them. When considering the distribution characteristics of explicit

and implicit attitude resources, it is evident that both explicit and implicit evaluative strategies are utilized to express attitudes and construct images. Explicit evaluations are primarily conveyed through lexical means, particularly through the use of evaluative adjectives, adverbs, and nouns that explicitly convey attitudes. Implicit evaluations are explored through evocation strategies and provocation strategies. Evocation strategies focus on analyzing implicit evaluations triggered by conceptual meanings, while provocation strategies focus on studying the role of metaphors and counter-expectancy in eliciting implicit evaluations and constructing the image of medical workers.

Acknowledgement

Fund Project: Tianjin Graduate Student Research Innovation Project "Image Construction and Strategies of Medical Workers in the Context of the Epidemic" (2022SKY304).

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