

International Communication of the Belt and Road Initiative and Possible Improvements: From Discourse Analysis Perspective

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Abstract

This study is grounded in the fundamental concepts of discourse analysis and draws on the theoretical and methodological frameworks outlined in *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*, which explores how language reflects social activities and viewpoints. By collecting and analyzing news reports related to the Belt and Road Initiative, this research examines the attitudes and discursive patterns present in Anglo-American (including America, Britain, Australia, Canada) mainstream media. The analysis reveals how these media outlets construct and convey specific narratives about the initiative, reflecting broader geopolitical and economic concerns. The study also investigates the reasons behind the formation of these attitudes from a discourse analysis perspective. Based on these findings, the paper offers insights and recommendations for improving the initiative's communication style to better address international concerns and enhance global perceptions.

Key words: The Belt and Road Initiative; International perceptions; Discourse analysis

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Belt and Road Initiative, introduced by Chinese President Xi Jinping in September and October of 2013, represents a broad vision encompassing the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. This initiative aims to foster economic integration, cultural communication, and a shared destiny among participating nations. Since its inception, the initiative has garnered significant international attention and generated diverse scholarly analysis from various perspectives.

In this paper, we propose to investigate the international response discourse to the Belt and Road Initiative through the lens of Anglo-American (including America, Britain, Australia, Canada) mainstream media. This approach is motivated by the extensive impact and varied interpretations of the initiative in global discourse. Despite considerable research on the subject within China, the exploration of how major English-language media portray and react to the initiative still have plenty of space for research. Understanding these perspectives offers valuable insights into the global reception of China's foreign policy and its broader implications on international relations and economic collaboration. This study seeks to bridge this gap by analyzing media coverage and assessing its influence on the global perception of the initiative.

2. THEORETICAL BASIS

The overall research idea is based on the theory of "Discourses" (with a big D) by James Paul Gee. (Gee 1999) Gee put forward the concept of "Discourses", distinguishing between "Discourses" (including the full range of social and cultural language use and behavior) and "discourses" (specific, everyday language use). He believes that "Discourses" involve the deep structure of culture and society, while "discourses" are specific

language practices. “Discourses” is a method of studying the language in practice, aiming at digging out the deep connotation behind the language. It takes language units larger than sentences as the research object, exploring the organizational and usage characteristics of language through the observation of language in actual use, and explains the constraints in language from the aspects of communicative function of language and cognitive characteristics of language users. Discourse analysis, from the aspect of object, includes spoken and written discourse; In terms of methods, it includes five methods: structural analysis, cognitive analysis, sociocultural analysis, critical analysis and comprehensive analysis. Historically, contributions from scholars such as Michel Foucault laid the theoretical foundation for discourse analysis. Foucault noted the readers should see “How is the relationship of the discourse to its author indicated and defined” (Foucault, 1991), emphasizing that each “discourse” constitutes specific practical functions.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This paper mainly adopts the corpus research method and the comprehensive analysis method in the theoretical basis of discourse analysis. To be more specific, the comprehensive analysis method mainly combines cognitive analysis, sociocultural analysis and critical analysis. First, relevant News reported by Anglo-American mainstream media on the Belt and Road Initiative in NOW Corpus (News on the Web) are searched to form a corpus of this paper. Second, the paper combines cognitive analysis, sociocultural analysis and critical analysis of complex texts applicable to written texts. The combination of these three methods requires us to analyze the generation and understanding of discourse, exploring the understanding of discourse indifferent cultural contexts, paying attention to the social function of discourse. We should not only analyze the surface meaning of sentences, but also analyze the social and cultural factors behind discourse, using discourse to reveal social problems, and study the significance of discourse analysis in society. The specific operation method in this paper is to start with the news text, analyzing its praise and criticism of the Belt and Road policy, its language and social and cultural reasons, and then give prospects and development suggestions from the perspective of discourse expression.

4. DATA STATISTICS

A total of 300 news articles were classified in the above way, and those that expressed agreement, opposition and no obvious attitude were classified as positive, negative and neutral. A total of 112 articles were classified as positive, 41 as negative, and 147 as neutral. Among them, the news topics mainly covered the following categories: China-U.S. relations in 31 articles, COVID-19 in 7 articles, initiative content in 14 articles, cultural communication

in 9 articles, global cooperation in 104 articles, countries related to the Belt and Road in 53 articles, China’s development in 36 articles and China’s policies in 31 articles. The following are some examples of news on different topics:

China-us Relations - Sample news: “Era of Great Power Competition” (Syeda, 2023)

The news explores the competitive relationship between China and the United States in the 21st century, especially in the economic and military fields. The article noted that the initiative is seen as part of China’s efforts to expand its global influence through diplomatic means, aiming to enhance its global dominance.

COVID-19 - Sample news: “China trade surges as global demand recovers from pandemic” (Joe, 2021)

The news looks at how China is taking advantage of surging global demand for medical supplies to fuel its own trade growth. The recovery of China’s economy after the epidemic has provided much-needed medical support to countries along the Belt and Road, thus further strengthening their economic ties with China.

Initiative Content- Sample News: “Guarding our backyard: China’s influence in the Caribbean” (Stacey, 2023)

The news reported on China’s infrastructure investment and financial assistance in the Caribbean through the initiative to help these countries achieve economic development. At the same time, from the perspective of the United States, such investment raises concerns about its own international standing.

Cultural Communication - Sample News: “International conference on network communication held in NW China’s Xinjiang” (Global Times, 2021)

This news story introduces the International Conference on Network Communication held in Xinjiang, bringing together experts, journalists and Internet celebrities from more than 20 countries to explore cooperation between China and countries involved in the initiative in the field of international communication, and showcasing successful cases of using Internet technology to express Chinese culture and ideas.

Global Cooperation- Sample news: “10 years of Belt and Road Initiative: Navigating towards a community of a shared future for mankind” (Qaiser, 2021)

The news summarized the achievements of the initiative in the past decade, including enhancing global transport links and promoting communication and cultural exchanges. The article highlighted the initiative’s influence in Central Asia, the Black Sea, the Mediterranean coast and throughout the European Union, as well as its positive outlook for the future.

Countries Related to the Belt and Road Initiative - Sample news: “BRI provides tangible benefits to Pakistan through CPEC: Pak envoy” (Agencies, 2023)

This news story tells how the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has brought tangible benefits to Pakistan,

improving transport, communications infrastructure and boosting energy security and industrialization. Pakistan’s ambassador to China highlighted the important role of CPEC in the country’s socio-economic development.

China’s Development - Sample news: “China’s brave new world -- with its gleaming skyscrapers and spotless streets, Shanghai is a modern marvel” (Ivo, 2023)

The news covered Shanghai’s modern urban scene and China’s rapid development, praised China’s aid policies to other developing countries, and was positive about Shanghai’s prospects to become an emerging global hub.

China’s Policy- Sample news: “Winning friends by training workers is China’s new gambit” (Shibani and Joshua, 2023)

The news looks at China’s worker-training programs in 25 countries as part of China’s soft power. The article analyzes how China borrows tactics from the United States, combining hard and soft power to advance its national interests.

By using AntConc to analyze all the news, the top 100 words that can reflect the meaning or attitude of the news are “global”, “international”, “initiative”, “economic” and other words:

Table 1
Content Words With the Top 100 Occurrences in the Self-built AntConc Corpus

Vocabulary	Frequency	Rankings
Global	172	47
International	171	48
Initiative	148	59
Economic	133	63
Trade	120	73
Infrastructure	118	75
Development	118	75
United	109	86
Government	107	89

At the same time, we analyzed all news texts, integrated and arranged the words that were paired with “the Belt and the Road” and “BRI” and other words that represent the initiative. The top seven words are mainly the following:

Table 2
The Top 7 Words Most Closely Associated With ‘Belt and Road’ In The Self-built AntCoc Corpus

Vocabulary	Frequency	Rankings
Initiative	78	1
Infrastructure	56	2
Bri	43	3
Response	40	4
Global	38	5
Program	37	6
guide	36	7

5. ANALYSIS OF CAUSES

5.1 Social and Cultural Factor

Based on sociocultural analysis, we will briefly compare Chinese and Western cultures to find out the cultural background of the ambiguity. From the data analysis results, although the Belt and Road policy proposed by China is beneficial to many countries and is put forward based on the goal of peace and cooperation, there are voices in the Anglo-American mainstream media that praise the Belt and Road policy for bringing cultural exchanges and economic cooperation, but there are also some voices that this policy involves geopolitics. They believe that China strengthens its influence through diplomatic means to compete in the international arena. According to the official website of the initiative, China proposed the Belt and Road policy as part of the concept of building a community with a shared future for mankind. Xi put forward a five-point proposal: establishing a partnership based on equality, mutual consultation and understanding, creating a security structure featuring fairness, justice, joint contribution and shared benefits, seeking open, innovative, inclusive and mutually beneficial development prospects, promoting exchanges among civilizations that are harmonious while diverse and inclusive, and building an ecological system that honors nature and green development. China’s the Belt and Road Initiative is rooted in its historical tradition of the Silk Road, a historic trade route that exemplifies peaceful exchanges and cooperation among different cultures and economies. The Chinese government has stressed that the initiative is to promote common economic development, strengthen regional cooperation and enhance connectivity, based on the concept of harmonious symbiosis in Chinese culture. The geopolitical concepts of Western countries are deeply influenced by the Cold War period and often focus on the expansion of national power and international influence. In this context, it may see the initiative as a way for China to expand its influence across the globe. In addition to this, there is a strong sense of competition and alertness to the expansion of foreign powers in the culture. When confronted with China’s broad cooperation initiatives, it may view them as a means of strategic competition, fearing a threat to its global influence.

5.2 Translation Method Factor

This part will study the translation methods of the the Belt and Road Initiative from the perspectives of China, which is the target of the discourse, and the Anglo-American mainstream media, the recipient of the discourse, combining with the analysis of social and cultural factors. Based on the cognitive analysis method of discourse analysis, we learn that indifferent cultural environments, the same discourse may produce different understanding paths. Therefore, as a bridge of discourse communication between different countries, whether translation can

accurately express the meaning of words and enable different language groups to accurately understand and accept their internal cultural connotations and goals is an important determinant of different countries' different attitudes towards discourse.

5.2.1 China's Translation of the Belt and Road Initiative

Regarding the current situation of the term translation of the Belt and Road Initiative, it should first be mentioned that Chinese scholars have recognized the importance of translation of this term. Professor Li Yuming of Beijing Language and Culture University (2015), in his article "The Belt and Road Needs Language Paving" published in *People's Daily*, he pointed out that the key to promoting understanding and realizing the principle of mutual benefit is that "research on the term of the initiative should be launched as soon as possible to formulate relevant principles for the use and translation of terms". (Li, 2015) Subsequently, the Leading Group of the Chinese Government for the Promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative issued a notice on standardizing the use of English translation of the initiative. The circular made it clear that in foreign official documents, the initiative should simply be translated as "the Belt and Road", using the English abbreviation "B&R". The notice also stipulates that the singular form of "initiative" should be used, avoiding phrases such as "strategy," "project," "program," and "agenda." In addition, given the high frequency of use of the term "Belt and Road Initiative", in informal Settings, apart from using the full English name when it first appears, it is also possible to use "the Belt and Road Initiative" or "the land and maritime Silk Road initiative" depending on the actual situation. Earlier, *China Daily* translated initiative as "One Belt(.) (and) One Road" in its news on June 5, 2014. However, by 2017, the translation standard was updated to "the Belt and Road" as used by the Leading Group for the Construction Work of the Belt and Road. In order to show China's attitude of inclusive cooperation and avoid misunderstandings in the West, words such as "strategy","project", "program" and "agenda" were rejected, while "initiative" was chosen to highlight the nature of the cooperation. The above translation proposal not only reflects China's recognition of the peaceful nature of the initiative, but also hopes to have a positive impact internationally. Besides, keeping "Silk Road" in the full title also highlights the cultural values and historical significance behind the initiative.

5.2.2 Translation of the Term of the Belt and Road Initiative by Anglo-American Mainstream Media

Firstly, according to statistics, after the Belt and Road Initiative was proposed, common expressions in the reports of the *Boston Post*, *The Guardian* and *The Economist* are "China's Belt and Road projects" and "Belt and Road program". However, "China's Belt and Road Initiative" is still the most commonly used expression.

Early translations such as "One Belt One Road" and the "New Silk Road" were adopted by Anglo-American mainstream media. However, with the passage of time, the official English translation "the Belt and Road" initiative provided by the Chinese government gradually became more common. (Hu and Chen, 2018)

5.3 Analysis of Causes

The following will summarize the above factors and analyze the formation of positive and negative attitudes of Anglo-American mainstream media.

5.3.1 Analysis of the Causes of Positive Perspective

a. The vision of internationalization is recognized from the perspective of global significance: Through the analysis of the high-frequency words such as "global" and "international" in the news related to the initiative, it can be seen that the initiative has been recognized internationally. These words occur frequently show that English-speaking countries as "area" initiative for global significance project, agree that it is not only limited to the development of China's or a region, but has the characteristics of the internationalization.

b. Substantive success of economic and cultural cooperation: The repeated appearance of terms such as "economic" and "trade" in the report demonstrates the trade nature of the initiative. This is in line with the fact that China has actively promoted economic cooperation in countries along the routes, and also shows that the Anglo-American mainstream media have given recognition to the economic role of the initiative.

c. Solidarity appeal, resonating: The use of words such as "united" reflects the importance that the Anglo-American mainstream media attach to the unity and community spirit of the initiative. This shows that in the process of international communication, China emphasizes the concept of win-win cooperation and global community. The global village of mankind can only achieve better development in an environment of mutual friendship and cooperation among all countries, which has struck a chord with the Anglo-American mainstream media.

5.3.2 Cause Analysis of Negative Perspective

a. Misunderstandings in early translations resulted in translation bias: early translations such as "One Belt, One Road" may lead to misunderstandings due to cultural differences. In English, "belt" also means "leather belt", which makes this translation in Western culture may be understood as "one leather belt, one road", resulting in a sense of pressure and difficulty in understanding. British magazine *The Economist* once pointed out that this translation is not elegant in English, and it is not conducive to dissemination.

b. Geopolitical misinterpretation occurs in the path of discourse understanding: Chinese scholar Liang Zhifang(2020) compared "One Belt, One Road" and

the later official translation of “the Belt and Road” and found that the former is easy to be misunderstood as China playing a geopolitical game (Liang, 2020), better demonstrating China’s vision of achieving win-win results through cooperation, while the latter effectively weakens this strong color.

c. China’s inadequate response to international public opinion: The quality and quantity of discourse in the responses are insufficient, and the amount of news related to the initiative is increasing, but it is still limited on the whole, which means that the voice in international communication is not strong enough. As a result, misunderstandings may remain in the international community’s understanding of the initiative. While current news reports focus on specific examples of cooperation, China needs to provide a more robust and comprehensive explanation of international doubts in order to better respond to international public opinion. Through these analyses, we can see the complexity of the initiative in international communication, but also point out the current challenges in communication and the direction of improvement.

6. POSSIBLE IMPROVEMENTS

Through the research on the attitude and discourse expression of the initiative in Anglo-American mainstream media, several key points can be summarized, which reveal the improvement direction of the Belt and Road policy communication.

a. The accurate use of vocabulary. The study shows that in the reports of the Anglo-American mainstream media, China can accurately use words with positive meanings. These words, such as “global”, “international” and “initiative”, can effectively express China’s global vision and its attitude of uniting the world. In the process of international communication, the use of these words helps highlight the international character of China’s initiative. In the process of Chinese-English translation, it is very important to accurately grasp and disseminate the core spirit and meaning. By ensuring accuracy and consistency in translation, China’s core values and international vision can be better conveyed.

b. Using standardized translation. For proper nouns and terms that reflect the Chinese cultural background, it is of great significance to develop a unified standardized translation. This not only helps to ensure the standardization and consistency of communication, but also helps to make the concept of cooperation deeply rooted in people’s hearts through accurate and consistent expression.

c. Improving the translator’s ability and the introduction of cultural background. The communication and transmission of political terms not only requires the translator to have a solid foundation in Chinese and English, but also to trace the source. By telling Chinese

culture and integrating knowledge of different cultural backgrounds, the rich connotation of Chinese culture can be better understood and recognized by the international community, and an attractive channel for cultural communication can be established.

d. Diversify channels of publicity. In the modern Internet era, publicity is no longer limited to traditional newspapers and magazines, but also includes online new media platforms. Through a variety of publicity channels, more extensive and deep-seated communication can be achieved. In the publicity process, promotion combined with culture and customs can make the message more attractive and influential, promoting correct understanding and enable initiative to better help the development of the world.

7. CONCLUSION

Based on the theory of discourse analysis, this study uses the corpus method to categorize and analyze the Anglo-American mainstream media reports on the initiative, revealing the positive, negative and neutral attitudes towards the initiative in these reports. From the perspective of discourse analysis, this paper discusses the international views of the initiative in the Anglo-American mainstream media, and puts forward suggestions to improve the expression of communication discourse. The study finds that although the initiative is regarded as an important policy to promote global cooperation and development, it is often interpreted in Western media as a tool for China to expand its geopolitical influence. Reasons for this include misunderstandings in early translations, differences in geopolitical context, and asymmetric information in international communication. Through discourse analysis, this paper puts forward several suggestions for improvement so that the Belt and Road policy can better promote world development. Through these improved measures, the initiative can better promote the development cooperation of the international community, promote the common prosperity of the global economy and build a community with a shared future for mankind.

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