

A Proximization Study of Environmental Discourse under Proximization Theory

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Abstract: The ecological environment problem is a common problem at present. Environmental discourse can provide the public with the seriousness of environmental problems and the progress of coping with environmental problems, which is conducive to the promotion of public environmental awareness and the legitimization of the future preventive measures. The study is guided by the proximization theory so as to explore the approach strategies in environmental discourse. The paper tries to expand the application scope of the discourse types of the proximization theory, and finds that the discourse mainly uses the spacial proximization and axiological proximization to depict environmental threat.

1. Introduction

Proximization theory is defined as a coercive cognitive operation that seeks further legitimate precautions by making the viewer or reader aware of the gradual approach of external threats, or by awakening self-awareness to circumvent possible dangers. Therefore, the primary aim of this study is to clarify the methods and strategies of environmental discourse. According to the current situation, to arouse the public's attention about environmental crisis, TED has disclosed information for the first time. However, to know whether environmental discourse in TED is reasonably effective in alleviating people's anxiety, it is necessary to explain various discourse characteristics. Then the second purpose of this study is to interpret the construction laws within environmental discourse in TED.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Theoretical Framework of Proximization Theory

Proximization theory [1] is a theory about constructing crises and threats. Its primary purpose is to interpret how speakers construct a three-dimensional discourse space in the minds of the audience and legitimize their precautions through discourse strategies. The three-dimensional discourse space is constructed by the three axes of space, time and value, namely spatial proximization, temporal proximization and axiological proximization. In this space discourse, the inside-the-deictic-center entities (IDCs) usually refer to speakers and listeners, and beyond IDCs are

the outside-the-deictic-center entities (ODCs) that pose threats to IDCs. Through words, speakers use spatial proximization, temporal proximization and axiological proximization to depict a scenario that ODCs impend over IDCs so as to evoke fear and oppressive feeling in listeners, and eventually legalize their own words.

As a strategic construal operation, spatial proximization refers to the process in which peripheral entities (ODCs) continually approach central entities (IDCs) in physical space [2]. The desimilarity between center and periphery can related with geographic and geopolitical distance. The central and peripheral entities are opposing, so in spatial proximization, speakers intentionally make listeners be aware of the threat generated by peripheral entities, which can only be avoided by taking the necessary actions [3].

Temporal proximization is centered on the present, reflecting the conceptual movement of time. For instance, speakers forcibly shift the negative impact of past events to the present and the negative impact of possible future events to the present [3]. The purpose is to make a cognitive panic to the recipient of the discourse, thereby justifying the action that the discourse and the speaker take.

Axiological proximization refers to an artificially coercive conflict caused by the ideological confrontation between the central and peripheral entities in the discourse space. The ideological conflict accumulated between the IDC and ODC is a real conflict, and it can actually affect the IDC [3].

2.2. The Empirical Studies of the Application of Proximization Theory

Since the introduction of PT by Cap [1], many scholars have combined different research methods and applied PT to the discourse analysis of various topics. Currently, there are two main types of empirical studies applying PT, one is a comparative study for different languages and different political identities, and the other is monolingual empirical research.

Comparative studies include comparisons of different political identities for the same topic, as well as comparisons of source and target languages. The fields of the comparison of different political identities include politics [4], public health [5-6], environment [7-8] and so on.

Scholars have conducted empirical monolingual studies on topics such as politics, economy, public health, culture and education, and ecology. In Politics, there are topics on anti-terrorism war [9-10], diplomatic discourse analysis [11-12], political leaders' speeches [13-14] and so on.

3. Research Material

The author collected data on environmental statements at TED, and these data are highly approved and authoritative. A corpus of 34 texts containing 8746 words is built, providing the corpus origin of quantitative analysis.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Spacial Proximization

Spatial proximization refers to the gradual physical invasion of IDCs (speakers and hearers) caused by ODCs in the discourse space, which is mainly reflected in the usage of some noun phrases and verb phrases. It includes six categories: Noun Phrases (NPs) are identified as elements in the deictic center of discourse space (IDC); Noun Phrases (NPs) are identified as elements outside the deictic center of discourse space (ODC); Verb Phrases (VPs) of motion and directionality constructed as markers of movement of ODCs toward the deictic center; Verb Phrases

(VPs) of action are constructed as markers of the influence exerted by ODCs upon IDCs; Abstract noun phrases (NPs) are constructed as expectations of the influence exerted by ODCs upon IDCs; the noun phrase (NPs) indicates the result of the impact of ODCs on IDCs [2]. The following subsections showcase the spatial dimension of PT in environmental. The detailed analyses are as follows:

4.1.1. Noun Phrases (NPs) as Elements in the Deictic Center of Discourse Space (IDC)

The noun groups (NPs) identified as the core elements of the discourse space representing the central entities (IDC, henceforth), which means that the NPs in speech represent the speakers themselves and their communities of interest. They have common positive values and ideologies that exist in the center of the discourse space. In environmental discourse, all “we”, “government” and other related nouns are considered as IDCs. For example, “us”, “the world”, “people”, “countries” and so on. These groups of nouns indicate subjects who are on the same page as the speaker and share common values and ideology.

Example (1): “The majority of the global population breathes air that exceeds WHO air quality limits, threatening health.”

Example (1) shows that no one is immune to the harm caused by air pollution around the world, so that people can feel the harshness of the ecological environment they live in, and inspire people to pay attention to air pollution and participate in protecting the environment.

4.1.2. Noun Phrases (NPs) as Elements Outside the Deictic Center of Discourse Space (ODC)

Noun Phrases (NPs) are considered as extra-central elements outside the deictic center of discourse space (ODC), indicating negative values in opposition to IDCs. In environmental discourse, groups of nouns opposed to speakers are identified as ODCs. For example, “climate change”, “global warming”, “extreme weather”, “deforestation”, “carbon emission”, “water pollution”, “urbanization”, “our inaction”, “a lack of decisive government action”, “lack of management” and so on. These entities stand in opposition to IDC and hold negative values that threaten IDC’s positive ideology.

Example (2): “There is emerging evidence that PM 2.5 can penetrate deep into the lungs. It then enters the bloodstream and triggers cardiovascular disease.”

Example (2) takes the process PM 2.5 attacking human organs as an example to manifest the cruelty of the ODC camp attacking the IDC camp, so that people can have an intuitive feeling and deep understanding of the existence and potential danger of this threat. Combined with “evidence”, the scientific perspective reinforces the great physical damage caused by air pollutants and makes people pay attention to air pollution. This is a pavement of ideological awareness for subsequent action.

4.1.3. Verb Phrases (VPs) of Motion and Directionality as Markers of Movement of ODCs

Motion and directional verb phrases (VPs) indicate the proximity of ODCs to IDCs in physical space. This is a dynamic process of inward motion that causes hearers to feel the constant approach of ODCs, resulting in a sense of oppression, tension, and anxiety. Practical examples are presented below:

Example (3): “This deforestation is starting and is simultaneously climbing.”

VPs of motion and directionality characterize the diffuse spread (invade IDC) of climate change. As in example (3), the grammatical words “start” and “climb” keep narrowing the physical distance between ODC and IDC, presenting a schema of the outward spread of the virulence of deforestation.

What's more, the word "climb" identifies the rate of ODC's impact on IDCs, which directly amplifies the impact of ODC on the outbreak process.

Example (4): "The air pollution has soared to hazardous level and emergency strategies must be implemented as soon as possible."

The verb "soar" conveys the threat of ODC from the edge of discourse space toward the center. It is a threat to the national interest and the health of the public. However, it is also used to improve the legitimacy of measures and present a good image of actively responding to environmental issues

4.1.4. Verb Phrases (VPs) of Action as Markers of the Influence Exerted by ODCs

Verb phrases (VPs) of action constructed as labels that the ODCs affect the IDCs, which indicates that the ODCs' behavior have a negative impact on the IDCs, and these sets of behaviors are typically verbs or expressed as verb phrases. Examples (5 to 8) illustrate the usage of this substrategies.

Example (5): "Climate change disrupted global supply chain."

In the context of the impact of climate change as a peripheral factor. The verb phrase "destroy" is used to indicate that ODC is building a world that is contrary to IDC's values and interests, indicating a growing threat from ODC. This strategy can cause panic in IDC and thus legitimize IDC's policies against ODC.

Example (6): "Environmental issues shake the very foundations of the world."

In example (6), the word "shake" indicates the irreconcilability of the interests of the ODCs and the IDCs, which reflects a negative assessment, further deepening the IDCs' understanding of ODC as a threatening target. Therefore, it is imperative that IDCs unite to stop ODC's violent threatening behavior.

Example (7): "...broke up the advanced development of the world and erode our strategic advantage."

In example (7), verb phrases "broke up" and "erode" are actions done by ODCs. These words carry a strong sense of fear and can put the listener in a state of dread. Opposing entities take a series of brutal actions that destabilize the IDC community and threaten national security. The audience will reach a consensus that IDCs will suffer greatly if they do not take action against ODCs.

Example (8): "Emissions including health-damaging pollutants lead to the premature death of around 2.6 million people every year."

In example (8), the use of "lead to" connects the "pollutants" in the ODC camp with the result of "premature death", and reveals the harm suffered by human beings. In other words, the example sentence presents the reader with the typical characteristics of the ODC threat to IDC, namely the rapidity of the ODC impact and the wide coverage of the catastrophic results of that impact.

4.1.5. Abstract Noun Phrases (NPs) as Expectations of the Influence Exerted by ODCs

These abstract noun groups are constructed as expectations of ODC's impact on IDC, which means that ODC's influential behaviors and forces may have an impact on IDC that is not happening now, but may cause harm in the future. This is a prediction that uses a noun group to express this expectation. The specific usage of this sub-strategy are as follows:

Example (9): "But through a collective action, and shared sacrifice, national determination we will overcome the threat of the virus."

In reference to the expected impact of ODC on IDC. Example (9) uses the terms "sacrifice" and "threat" to indicate the effect that ODC will bring to IDC. Through these noun phrases, example (9), on the one hand, successfully conveys the hearer the great threat posed by ODC and the declaration

of a state of emergency. On the other hand, it presents a positive image of countries dealing with environmental issues.

Example (10): "... creating new threats. Climate change, in particular, has rapidly become more assertive."

In example (10), the word "more assertive" is used to describe threatening behaviors. However, this is only a prediction. There are no specific policies or actions to prove that the threat has occurred. However, it does indicate that the likelihood of ODCs threatening IDCs in the future is high and the risk of IDCs being at risk is increasing.

Example (11): "The evidence base for damage from atmospheric pollution is growing rapidly, and many atmospheric pollutants can cause significant harm pollutants even at low levels."

Example (11) further demonstrates the growing evidence of the harm caused by air pollution to humans and points out that even minute amounts of air pollutants can be extremely harmful, which aims to call attention to the air pollution problem and take decisive action to avoid irreversible consequences.

4.1.6. The Noun Phrase (NPs) Indicating the Result of the Impact of ODCs on IDCs

The noun phrase (NPs) indicating the result of the impact of ODCs on IDCs means that ODCs' actions have a truly disruptive impact on the IDC.

Example (12): "We face a world of rising temperature, the melting ice caused arise in sea level."

In the example above, IDC's decision to address the challenge and competition from ODCs is a direct indication that ODCs pose a threat to IDC's profitability and value, and demonstrates that ODCs negatively impact IDCs.

Example (13): "Environmental issues have caused deaths amid increasing worries of a wider outbreak."

"has caused death" and "increasing worries" indicate that ODC has the power to kill, therefore, the people will feel panic. What's more, these words show that ODCs' actions have been happened or are taking place in present. More importantly, these actions have a negative impact on IDC. What's more, example (13) depicts the direct impact of ODC on human health and illustrates the extent of the damage caused by ODC so as to make people aware of this shocking fact and raise awareness of environmental protection.

4.2. Temporal Proximization

Temporal proximization refers to the past and future events approaching the present and having an impact on the present. It includes five categories: the use of non-definitive descriptive noun phrases for constructing the impact of ODC on other times, the use of the simple past tense and the present perfect tense, the use of nominalized phrases to presuppose the impact of ODC on any future time, the use of modal verb phrases to construct a lasting impact of ODCs on the present and the future and the use of contrasting sentences to construct the alienated world in the future. The detailed analyses are as follows:

4.2.1. The Use of Non-identifying Deictic Noun Phrases

A deictic word is a group of words consisting of an article, a common noun and its determiners. A non-definite descriptive noun phrase is a deictic word that includes an indefinite article (such as a, an) such as "an apple", where "an" replaces the indefinite pronoun. This indicates that the phrase does not refer to a specific object. Temporal proximity theory applies fuzzy time to reflect the threat of ODC with great uncertainty.

Example (14): "we will work with our partners to have a fight with deforestation."

In the above example of environmental discourse, the indefinite descriptive noun phrase “a fight” fully illustrates the threat to IDCs from ODCs, and gives IDCs the feeling that ODCs are domineering.

Example (15): “In recent years, NATO countries have taken military exercises as an excuse to constantly send their military contingents on the territory of Ukraine.”

In example (15), the phrase “in recent years” is a vague time. It conveys that ODCs are preparing to do harm to IDCs. Not knowing when the crisis will erupt left room for the listener’s imagination, which will create fear of the unknown.

4.2.2. The Use of the Simple Past Tense and the Present Perfect Tense

The simple past and present perfect tenses mainly record past events and serve to realize the “past-present” function.

Example (16): “In April 2021, air pollution killed about 4000 people to death.”

Example (17): “We have for years been hit by heavy air pollution.”

In the sentences we see, “April 2021” is already in the past tense. And “has been hit” is the present perfect tense. In addition to the examples above, these two tenses appear multiple times, indicating that IDC has faced threats in the past and may face the same threats today.

4.2.3. The Use of Nominalized Phrases to Presuppose the Influence Caused by ODCs

By nominalization, it refers to the conversion of processes and activities into states and objects, and the conversion of concrete things into the abstract (Fairclough, 1995).

Example (18): “Li Keqiang declared war on pollution, but the question is why the air pollution keeps returning, in spite of the government has already made actions to deal with the problem.”

Among them, the nominalized phrases such as “pollution” and “problem” visualize the negative impact on IDC, which increases the audience’s fear and the sense of urgency to eliminate the threat. Such sentences will have an immediate impact on the listener.

4.2.4. The Modal Verb Phrases to Construct a Lasting Impact of ODCs

Modal verb phrases can express the uncertainty of a situation and the likelihood that the situation will persist.

Example (19): “Air pollution may be on the retreat but it still remains a problem, we can not ignore it”

Example (20): “The country’s agricultural production could be seriously affected if we can not solve the smoggy conditions.”

In these examples, they use modal verbs to reflect the continuity of time, the possibility of threat, and the oppressiveness of what will happen in the future. This can increase the listener’s sense of fear.

4.3. Axiological Proximization

Axiological Proximization refers to the dichotomy between the hometown values of the IDC and the foreign and oppositional values of the ODC. Speakers attempt to avoid the implications of the latter approaching the former and emphasize the justification of current behavior. This encompasses two aspects, IDCs denote noun groups of positive values or ideologies and ODCs denote noun groups of negative values or ideologies.

4.3.1. Noun phrases Representing Positive Values or Ideologies of IDCs

Example (21): “We are implementing the strictest policy to develop eco-friendly model of lifestyle.”

Example (22): “Revised laws and regulations will help to reduce pollution.”

Example (23): “Governments are preparing a new smog action plan.”

The above examples use “eco-friendly”, “laws and regulations” and “action plan” to build the IDC category, which carries the positive values of determination and confidence to fight the environmental issues together. In the face of environmental issues, as the public of IDC, no one is an outsider. Only by facing the threat of environmental problems together, understanding, cooperating and resolutely implementing strategy can we effectively resist ODCs. Therefore, it is becoming a common understanding of the entire community that “we are responsible for fighting the epidemic together”, which has reinforced the legitimacy and effectiveness of the strategy to solve environmental issues and protect people’s health by referring to the values of the central entity.

4.3.2. Noun Phrases Representing Negative Values or Ideologies of ODCs

Example (24): “Living in the haze weather is bad for people’s health.”

Example (25): “Air pollution do harm to the growth of the crop.”

These sentences containing words such as “bad” and “harful” are used to highlight the huge threat posed by ODCs to IDCs. By using these negative terms, the threat and persecution of the central entity by peripheral factors is quickly conveyed to the audience. These words show that ODCs are continuing to undermine IDCs. They distort IDCs values and ideas, attack and threaten IDCs. These noun groups create threatening competitors for listeners and construct the negative values and ideology of ODCs.

5. Conclusion

This paper analyzes TED’s environmental discourse and examines how speakers arrange discursive strategies through proximization theory to explain the legitimacy of environmental policies. The study shows that in a spatial approach, TED’s environmental language constructs various environmental issues as imminent threats, putting listeners in fear and inspiring them with a sense of urgency about external threats. As a result, a solid foundation for environmental policy is laid.

In the light of temporal proximization, environmental discourse at TED mainly uses the past tense and enumerate a large number of facts that happened in the past which shows the proximization of the facts of the past to the present and the future. And it seeks legalized support for preventive and countermeasures.

In terms of axiological proximization, environmental discourse at TED mainly employs the ideological confrontation between IDCs and ODCs, emphasizing that the conflict is intensified and the confrontation continues so that measures should be taken immediately.

Through the analysis, the application of proximization theory in the field of environmental speech can be better understood and has research value for dealing with environmental problems. The study of the environmental problems using the STA model of proximization theory has taken on a new dimension in the new era and has a new research perspective, which is of great significance to broaden the academic research field in the environmental field. However, due to the limitation of time and space, only a few reports are selected in this paper, and quantitative analysis

cannot be conducted. For further research, a corpus can be constructed by selecting reports from multiple sources to conduct a comprehensive study.

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