An Analysis of China's Image Construction Based on the Indexicality Principle

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Abstract: This paper investigates the construction of China's image in *China's Green Development in the New Era* based on the Indexicality Principle and the transitivity system of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). It finds that China is represented as an "active promoter, responsible actor, solid practitioner, and forward-thinker" through overt reference, implicatures and presuppositions, stance, and classic statements. The construction of China's image in the discourse is rooted in the profound traditional Chinese culture, closely connected with countries worldwide, and integrated into the Chinese proposal of building "a global community of shared future", demonstrating a broad vision that concerns the destiny of all humanity. This projected image permeates *China's Green Development in the New Era* and is in line with the national image established in China's history as well as the image to be shaped in the future.

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization and mediatization, the image presented by the country becomes more important. According to Buhmann [1], country image is defined as the subjective attitude of stakeholders towards a state and its polity, encompassing specific beliefs and general feelings, and proceeds on functional, normative, aesthetic, and empathic dimensions. Among these, the normative dimension of the country image covers beliefs about the integrity of the country and is related to the normative and value attributes of the country. According to the usual distinctions, this dimension includes specific judgments about the social and ecological responsibility of the country. As one of the most populous countries, China plays a key role in ecological development. In pursuit of the grand goal of environmental conservation, the Chinese government has intensified efforts to protect the ecological environment and has issued a series of white papers. These measures have subtly and effectively facilitated the construction of China's image. Consequently, this paper analyzes *China's Green Development in the New Era* based on the Indexicality Principle and the transitivity system and aims to reveal how the Chinese government projects its national image.

2. Literature Review

Studies on the perception of countries date back to the 1930s and 1940s. According to Grunig [2],

the perception of countries consists of two aspects: outside perception (by foreign publics) and self-perception (of a domestic population). Rusciano [3] further attributes outside perception and self-perception to national image and national identity, believing that image and identity are interrelated as a country's image shapes a country's identity through constant "negotiation processes" with the publicly communicated images held by foreign publics. At the same time, a country's identity can also shape the images it presents to foreign publics, as it seeks to establish and maintain a positive reputation or correct misconceptions. Ashmore [4] believes national identity fosters the public's perceptions of a country, and in turn, national identity is constructed through the global perceptions of a country. The relationship between national identity and national image constitutes a perpetual feedback loop. National identity serves as a foundation for a nation to project its values and priorities to the external world, consequently influencing how it is perceived by the foreign. Conversely, the perceptions formed by the foreign can reciprocally impact how the nation perceives itself.

In the era of globalization and mediatization, the national image is a key component of its soft power, an intangible asset that can be transformed into tangible assets under certain circumstances. The increasing emphasis on the national image has led to a variety of studies in a range of research domains, such as marketing, social psychology, politics, and communication science, each with its own distinct focus and contributions to the understanding of national image construction and perception. In the field of marketing, country image is conceptualized as an attitudinal structure covering a large number of different variables [5], such as the assessment of the economy [6], the political system [7], job training and the capabilities of the people [8]. Within social psychology, the analysis of country image focuses on individual perceptions, emotions, and behaviors. Political science considers the country's image as the study of international affairs, political identity, and behaviors. And communication science studies country image as a discursive phenomenon in the context of individual, organizational, and mass-mediated communication.

However, in contrast to the aforementioned disciplines, linguistics has made relatively fewer contributions to the study of national image. Nevertheless, the field of linguistics offers valuable insights into the intricate ways in which language choices and discourse patterns contribute to the construction, maintenance, and projection of a nation's image. For example, in terms of vocabulary choices, a country strategically chooses inclusive and positive language in its official documents and public speeches to project an image of peaceful cooperation and harmonious relations with other countries. The nation emphasizes terms like "collaboration", "partnership", and "mutual understanding" to create an image of a nation that seeks to work hand-in-hand with the global community for the betterment of humanity. And in terms of discourse patterns, these narratives focus on instances where the country has contributed to resolving conflicts, promoting sustainable development, and supporting humanitarian efforts worldwide. By consistently emphasizing these positive aspects of its engagement, the country aims to create a narrative that fosters trust and admiration from the public. By investigating these factors, linguistics research sheds light on the nuanced role of language in shaping, reflecting, and influencing national identity and perception. Consequently, linguistics occupies a significant position in the study of identity construction, particularly in relation to the construction of national image within political discourses.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Indexicality Principle

The Indexicality Principle proposed by Bucholtz is a principle within the sociocultural linguistic framework for analyzing identity within linguistic interaction. It refers to a linguistic phenomenon in which linguistic forms at all levels (e.g., vocabulary, phrases, grammatical structures, or

discourse) semiotically relate to social meanings, cultural beliefs, and values. It underlies the way in which linguistic forms are used to construct identity positions. According to Bucholtz [9], the principle of indexicality consists of four different linguistic devices in which identity is built: a) overt references, (b) implicatures and presuppositions, (c) stances, and (d) classical statements.

3.1.1. Overt Reference

Overt reference is the most direct way to build an identity through communication. It is typically expressed using the format "X is Y", as shown in "China is a pacesetter in implementing the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development". By employing direct indexical expressions, the government explicitly identifies China in terms of "a pacesetter", thereby establishing a clear frame of reference within the communicative context. Consequently, the public can develop a concrete comprehension of China and its contributions based on the attributes associated with being "a pacesetter". In this manner, overt reference directly mediates linguistic forms and identity, thereby influencing the public's perceptions by directly indicating another entity. Such a communication strategy promotes effective communication and contributes to the formation of a vibrant and cohesive image.

3.1.2. Implicatures and Presuppositions

Implicatures and presuppositions are the less direct ways to constitute identity, which both of which require more inferential work. Implicature refers to the meaning that is indirectly conveyed or implied by an addresser, surpassing the literal interpretation of their words. Through implicature, addressers can communicate additional information, attitudes, or intentions that contribute to image construction. Presupposition pertains to the assumptions or beliefs that are taken for granted or presupposed in a communicative act. These assumptions are frequently embedded in linguistic expressions and can shape the understanding and interpretation of discourse. Both implicatures and presuppositions operate beneath the surface of language, influencing the construction of identity and image. As shown the sentence "China is exploring new paths for green development in rural area", it inexplicitly conveys the information that China has realized the importance of green development in rural area and has always been seeking innovative approaches to address environmental challenges in rural areas. By means of the implicatures and presuppositions embedded in the statement, the Chinese government can strategically shape China's identity and image they intend to portray and influence how the public perceives them.

3.1.3. Stance

Stances, consisting of evaluative, affective, and epistemic orientations in discourse, all of which can be resources for identity construction. These orientations encompass subjective judgments, emotional responses, and knowledge-based perspectives. By employing evaluative orientations, the Chinese government conveys its assessments, preferences, and value judgments. Affective orientations involve the expression of emotions, attitudes, and personal experiences. Lastly, epistemic orientations pertain to the way that the Chinese government presents its knowledge, beliefs, and philosophy, thereby shaping its identity and public image. Collectively, these stances serve as lenses through which the Chinese government navigates language, influencing the construction of its identity and public perception. As shown in the sentence "China has established a fundamental national policy of conserving resources and protecting the environment and a national strategy of sustainable development", the implementation of this policy is based on China's epistemic orientations of environmental protection and resource conservation. The Chinese government influences public perceptions of its identity and image by stating its orientations on the

environment and resources.

3.1.4. Classic Statements

Classic statements play a significant role in constructing identities by subtly shaping perceptions and influencing interpretations. These statements, including proverbs, allusions, idioms, and famous quotations, possess deep cultural and ideological connotations that resonate with the public and the government. When strategically employed, classic statements convey implicit meanings and evoke emotional responses, thereby contributing to the construction of a specific identity and image. By drawing on the rich cultural heritage embedded in classic statements, the government can establish connections, reinforce identity, and shape public perception subtly yet influentially.

3.2. Transitivity System

In order to enhance the comprehensiveness of the analysis, the study is augmented by the integration of the transitivity system. The transitivity system is the set of choices through which the speaker, the participants in the process, and the environmental components associated with the process construct the process experience of the speaker's external world as well as the process experience of the internal world as he perceives it [10]. It consists of six processes: material process, mental process, relational process, behavioral process, verbal process, and existential process, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Transitivity system overall.

Process type	Core meaning	Participants
Material	"doing", "happening"	Actor, Goal
Mental	"sensing"	Senser, Phenomenon
Relational	"being"	Identified, Identifier
Verbal	"saying"	Sayer, Receiver
Behavioural	"behaving"	Behaver, Behavior
Existential	"existing"	Existent

To briefly recap, the Indexicality Principle, together with the helpful transitivity system in the SFL, serves for us to investigate *China's Green Development in the New Era* to see how national identity and image are built through the use of particular linguistic resources.

4. Case Study: China's Green Development in the New Era

The study first uses UAM Corpus Tool 6.2 Version to mark the corpus annotations and label them based on transitivity. The distribution of six processes in the corpus is illustrated in Table 2. Material process, describing activities that happen outside of human beings, accounts for 87%, which dominates the corpus and is followed by the relational process. The percentage of relational process is 8.5% in these segmented sentences. In addition, the share of mental process is 2.3%. The verbal process and existential process of the corpus account for 1.7% and 0.5%.

Table 2: The distribution of six processes.

Process type	Frequency	Percentage
Material	803	87%
Mental	21	2.3%
Relational	78	8.5%
Verbal	16	1.7%
Behavioural	0	0%
Existential	5	0.5%

4.1. Overt Reference

Analogous to the relational process, overt reference often utilizes the structure "X is Y" to identify or attribute an entity in terms of another. Among these 78 relational clauses, there are a total of 10 clauses that directly identify China's identity and image by using the structure "China is Y". For example, examples (1) and (2) utilize overt references to explicitly refer to China's active participation in cooperation on energy transition, energy efficiency, and climate change under various international frameworks. This overt direct reference highlights China's involvement in various organizations, establishes a clear context, and demonstrates China's extensive participation in regional and international collaborations. China is depicted as actively collaborating with other nations and regional organizations to address global energy and climate issues, foster clean and sustainable practices, and promote the transition to a low-carbon economy. The engagement of multiple international frameworks positions China as an active prompter a responsible and influential global actor in the field of energy and climate, emphasizing its willingness to work with other nations and organizations to achieve common goals.

China is an active participant in cooperation on energy transition and energy efficiency under the frameworks of G20, China-ASEAN partnership, ASEAN Plus Three, East Asia Summit, Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and Asia- Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).

China is also an active participant in South-South cooperation on climate change.

4.2. Implicatures and Presuppositions

There are a total of 803 material processes, which describe activities occurring externally to humans, out of which 120 are initiated by "China" as the subject. The white paper employs a substantial number of material processes to elucidate China's practices in the realm of green development. Through these processes, a comprehensive depiction emerges, shedding light on China's various actions, initiatives, and measures toward fostering sustainable and environmentally-friendly growth. For example, examples (3) and (4) employ material processes to reveal China's practices of addressing pressing environmental challenges, implementing eco-friendly policies, and adopting sustainability. These not only highlight China's significant contributions to global sustainable development and the transition towards a greener future but also depict China as a solid practitioner.

China has established a fundamental national policy of conserving resources and protecting the environment and a national strategy of sustainable development.

China has carried out large-scale afforestation projects, steadily increased the area of forests, grasslands, wetlands, rivers, and lakes, and effectively reversed the trend of desertification.

4.3. Stance

Stances such as evaluative, affective, or epistemic orientations play a significant role in indirectly mediating linguistic forms and shaping identity. In the first sentence, this epistemic orientation suggests that China has a well-established understanding and conviction regarding preserving natural resources. It highlights China's commitment to environmental conservation and the recognition of the intrinsic value of natural environments. In the second sentence, the use of epistemic markers emphasizes that China possesses a deep understanding and knowledge of this philosophy. It projects an image of China as a nation that is confident and knowledgeable about the principles it embraces for its development path. Overall, the epistemic orientation employed in these sentences reveals an image of China as a nation that holds steadfast beliefs and knowledge

about natural resource conservation and sustainable development, reinforcing China's strong determination to specific ideals.

China has firmly upheld the belief that lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets.

China is committed to the philosophy of innovative, coordinated, green, open and shared development.

4.4. Classic Statements

In addition to stance constructing identity at the micro-level linguistic structures, entire linguistic systems such as classic statements are associated with identity. Within classic statements, not only are ethical norms and moral beliefs embodied, but also political ideals that aim to construct a harmonious social order. "Harmony between humanity and nature" is an ancient philosophical concept originating from both Confucianism and Daoism in ancient Chinese thought. It emphasizes the close connection between the universe and humanity, viewing humans and nature as inseparable entities. This statement has deep roots in traditional Chinese culture and profoundly influences the values and behavioral principles of the Chinese people. In the white paper, the mention of "harmony between humanity and nature" evokes an image of balance and coexistence between humans and nature. It implies a philosophical perspective that acknowledges the interdependence and inter-connectedness of human society with the natural world. This reflects a holistic approach to sustainability, suggesting the importance of living in harmony with nature, respecting its rhythms, and utilizing its resources responsibly. Overall, these classic statements project an image of China as a forward-thinker that values the environment, recognizes the significance of natural resources, and seeks to establish a harmonious relationship between humanity and the ecosystems that support life.

5. Conclusion

This study utilizes the "Indexicality Principle", together with the transitivity system of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to investigate the construction of China's image in *China's Green Development in the New Era*. It finds that China is represented as an "active promoter, responsible actor, solid practitioner, and forward-thinker" through overt reference, implicatures and presuppositions, stance, and classic statements. However, there are some limitations in that this study merely attempts to apply the "Indexicality Principle" from sociocultural linguistics to analyze the construction of China's image, thus the analysis may not be fully comprehensive. Future research can utilize and explore other principles from sociocultural linguistics theory or other linguistic theories to further investigate this topic.

Acknowledgements

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