

Hostility in Words: A Discourse Analysis of the China-US High-Level Talks

Hanfei Li*

Translation Major, Hebei Normal University, Shijiazhuang, Hebei Province, China

*Corresponding author: Tracylee2002@163.com

Keywords: China-US relations, linguistics, discourse analysis

Abstract: Language serves as a powerful tool for expressing intentions, and the words spoken by both sides in the China-US high-level talks held in Alaska had a significant impact on the direction of China-US relations. This paper employs a linguistic perspective to examine the discourse strategies and techniques employed by the representatives of China and the United States during the dialogue. Despite the original intended goal of the dialogue, the hostility between the two nations was hidden in words, preventing a successful outcome. Nonetheless, this analysis provides valuable insights for future negotiations and improving relations between China and the United States.

1. Introduction

The relationship between China and the United States has become increasingly tense, with the pandemic limiting face-to-face communication. Although online communication methods are now prevalent, they do not facilitate regular exchanges and have created a miscalculation from a political perspective. The China-US high-level talks in Alaska in March 2021 provided a rare opportunity for face-to-face communication, allowing us to analyze the actual thoughts and concerns of both sides. From a linguistic perspective, discourse reflects politics, and analyzing the text of the talks can uncover real intentions, emotions, or possible future behaviors. This paper analyzes the characteristics and images of the political words of China and the United States in the high-level talks.

2. Literature Review

Discourse, as a means of communication and a tool for expressing intentions, emerges from specific social practices and backgrounds. Professor Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional conception of discourse posits that texts are the outcome of discursive practices. Analyzing political activities, such as the China-US high-level talks, from a linguistic perspective requires the combination of cognitive linguistics to reveal the implied ideology and political purpose. Diplomatic language, in particular, is formal, conservative, accurate, and persuasive, focusing on etiquette and methodological strategies[1].

In relevant studies, researchers have adopted various approaches, such as Fairclough's three-dimensional conception of discourse, Chilton's Critical Discourse Analysis, M.A.K. Halliday's Systemic-Functional Grammar, and Wodak's Discourse-historical Approach. Previous discourse analyses on China-US talks, particularly in the political field during recent years, have revealed misstatements by some western media[2-3]. These studies contribute to the development of linguistics and have positive social effects.

Additionally, the China-US high-level talks can be seen as a political debate, and appropriate methods for debate analysis are also applicable to this study. For instance, the three-stage analysis model, which uses idea rotation to analyze political talks and negotiations, could be helpful.

In summary, the methods and findings from previous research can be applied to analyze the China-US high-level talks in Alaska, revealing the real intentions of both sides and the true images of both countries.

3. Research Design

3.1. Research Questions

Analyze the discourse used in the dialogue between China and the United States, and explain how both sides describe their understanding of the social context. Analyze the social cognition of both sides from a linguistic point of view.

Analyze the respective ideologies contained in the content of communication, and study whether the real intention of the two sides' discourse is to safeguard their national interest by restoring facts or to achieve their hegemony by denigrating and smearing the other side.

Research the discourse strategies and skills used by both sides, and analyze how hostility is hidden in the discourse through various strategies.

3.2. Collection of Analytical Materials

Collect the full text of the talk and relevant press releases about the talk, mainly from the official websites and mainstream media of the United States and China, including the Embassy of the United States of America, the BBC, Xinhua News Agency, China Daily, and others.

3.3. Research Tools

Five researchers, including the author of this essay, are all English majors and have a relatively systematic knowledge of linguistics. The author will explain the analytical tools of the study to the other four researchers, and then conduct a trial analysis of the text of the talk. After the trial analysis, a formal analysis will be carried out, and each researcher will provide their own ideas and cognition based on their understanding. Then, a consistency test of the cognition of the five researchers will be carried out. When the agreement reaches 75% or more, the consensus will be summarized to form the final conclusion.

4. Research Findings

4.1. Discourse Structure Analysis

As the dialogue took place in Alaska, the United States had an advantage in setting the discourse structure.

4.1.1. Main Contexts

The United States held a discursive advantage as the host of the dialogue, taking the lead in setting the context for many of the topics discussed, leaving China to respond passively. At the outset of the conversation, the United States positioned itself as a victim, claiming to be threatened by China and asserting that its mission to maintain global order was being challenged. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken even cited a meeting with Japan and South Korea to demonstrate the unity of action between the United States and its allies, paving the way for criticism of China in the following discourse.

In response, the Chinese government emphasized the responsibilities and obligations of both China and the United States as world powers and expressed a willingness to cooperate with the United States. However, the Chinese government also made it clear that China's position and resolve on matters involving national interests and other issues would not be shaken. This reflects the determination of the Chinese people to not tolerate any interference or smear campaigns against their country.

4.1.2. Dialogue Semantics

In the dialogue, the United States made accusations against China in areas such as economic and trade relations, human rights, and the situation in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang. However, these accusations were not convincing as they were presented in a tone of condemnation that referred to "other countries" without providing any concrete evidence. In reality, these accusations were fabrications that the United States used to suppress China, as it perceived China's rapid development as a threat. This approach was ineffective during the dialogue, as China saw through the United States

attempts to label and smear China. For instance, when U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said, "We've heard each of these concerns posed from around the world—from our allies and partners to the broader international community," he was using a fabrication to smear China that did not exist.

In contrast to the United States' accusations, China emphasized the importance of cooperation between the two countries, urging the United States to correct its misunderstandings and find common ground. Despite China's dissatisfaction with the sanctions imposed by the United States, Chinese diplomats skillfully avoided expressing their discontent directly. In diplomatic situations, ambiguity can be an effective tool for improving the effectiveness of expression[4]. Through their words, China conveyed not only their active intention to seek dialogue results and cooperation but also their firm stance on issues related to national core interests. For instance, China expressed its willingness to cooperate by stating, "There are many areas where we can work together, where our interests converge." China has been making efforts to improve bilateral relations, resolve existing problems, and prevent new ones. China has never created conflicts in China-US relations but has consistently done its best to enhance them.

During the dialogue, it became apparent that the two sides had fundamental differences in their basic values. The United States made unfounded accusations against China without providing any supporting evidence, while China, in its response, outlined the attitudes of the Chinese and American people towards their respective ruling parties, democracy, human rights development, and regional conflicts. China's discourse effectively contrasted the differences between China and the United States and was more powerful and convincing.

4.2. Ideological Analysis

Although there was no obvious discourse conflict in the dialogue, ideological differences between the two sides were evident, which inevitably led to each side advocating for their own interests from different perspectives. Although both sides did not engage in a lengthy ideological debate, their respective ideologies served as an important context for their speeches and guided their dialogue. Both sides infused their respective ideologies into the discourse. In this regard, the discourse strategies applied by China and the United States were very similar. Therefore, the interests of each side and the so-called "conflict of interest" were influenced by ideology, and the discourse strategies of both sides in diplomacy were also shaped by ideology.

For example, the United States claimed that "It helps countries resolve differences peacefully, coordinate multilateral efforts effectively, and participate in global commerce with the assurance that everyone is following the." The real purpose of this discourse was to maintain the international order it advocates on a global scale from the perspective of its own interest, which ultimately promotes the spread of capitalism.

China's statement that "the leaders of China have wide support among the Chinese people, according to opinion polls" was a rebuttal to the baseless accusations made by the United States about China's democracy and socialism. This statement also carried an implicit reference to China's socialist ideology.

4.3. Discourse Strategies Analysis

In daily life, Chinese people often tend to use more euphemistic language, while people in Western countries such as the United States tend to be more direct and straightforward. However, in this dialogue, we can observe that China's tone was very firm and clear, while the United States did not explicitly state its views or objectives.

As China's comprehensive national strength continues to grow and its international status improves, its diplomatic discourse strategy has also evolved, which some western countries and media have dubbed as "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy." This strategy is characterized by an unambiguous, resolute, and firm tone when it comes to defending China's national interests and the interests of its people.

For instance, phrases such as "This will not shake China's position or resolve on those issues," "For China, we needed to make our position clear," and "Our history will show that one can only cause damage to himself if he wants to strangle or suppress the Chinese people" reflect the determination and attitude of the Chinese government. These statements exemplify China's increasing

international status and its growing right to speak on the global stage.

On the contrary, the United States government repeatedly mentioned its allies and partners during the talk to use it as an excuse to suppress China. As China's power has increased, the United States has come to view China as a threat, but instead of directly blaming China in its discourse, it used more indirect methods to warn China.

Although China always follows an independent foreign policy of peace, it is not afraid to boldly safeguard its national interest in the face of aggression by other countries. For example, the statement "The only result was damages done to the United States. China will pull through and has pulled through such confrontation" reflects China's resolute attitude in the face of US provocations.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

5.1. Lack of Specificity in Topics Discussed during China-US High-level Talks Reflects Intensifying Competition

The high-level talks between China and the US covered various issues, but the topics discussed lacked specificity, highlighting the intensifying competition between the two sides. In the high-level talks, the United States perceived China's rapid development as a threat, leading to a growing sense of competition between the two sides. The dialogue revealed an increasingly equal status between China and the United States, with China no longer tolerating unfounded accusations and sanctions from the United States and taking corresponding measures in response. The talks touched upon conflicts between the two sides in various areas, such as the economy, internal affairs, and international order, which had become focal points for both sides. However, ideology was not a debated topic during the talks, as ideological differences could not be resolved with a clear outcome. Both sides expressed their strategic intentions and concerns through their respective discourses, which needed to be supplemented by linguistic knowledge.

In the China-US high-level talks, the topics were generally broad and lacked specific action plans and resolution measures, making it difficult for both sides to achieve substantive consensus and cooperation. This demonstrated the increasingly fierce competition between the two sides. In addition, both China and the United States were more focused on defending and safeguarding their interests and positions, which may have led them to ignore each other's reasonable demands and concerns, hindering the progress of the talks. Analyzing the transcript of the China-US high-level talks can help us understand the strategic intentions and priorities of both sides. In dialogue, both sides often communicate and express their respective concerns and strategic goals, which can provide clues and references to help us understand the true purpose of both parties' words. The issues discussed in the talk were complex and profound, requiring long-term and meticulous communication and consultation to resolve.

Language serves not only as a means of expressing ideas but also as a tool for solving problems. The researcher believes that both Chinese and American officials had clear intentions and objectives for the dialogue. "Diplomatic discourse is essentially a verbal act performed by a diplomatic subject in accordance with diplomatic rules"[5]. However, the failure of both sides to reach any consensus may be attributed to the following factors:

- 1) The differences in interests between the two countries, including trade, technology, geopolitics, human rights, and other fields, are difficult to resolve in a short period of time.
- 2) Ideological differences limit the ways to solve problems and can lead to political misunderstanding, communication barriers, and lack of trust during conversations.
- 3) Differences in tactics and methods of dialogue between China and the United States may lead to the ineffectiveness of the dialogue. The Chinese side may focus more on historical, cultural background, and national sentiments, while the US side may focus more on practical issues and data.
- 4) The China-US high-level talks are affected by many internal and external factors. Domestic public opinion, external countries' intervention, pressure from interest groups, and other factors can all influence China and the United States' positions and attitudes.

These factors show that the complexity of the issues involved, as well as the differences in cultural, ideological, and strategic priorities, make it challenging to achieve substantive consensus and cooperation. Nonetheless, the dialogue remains a critical platform for communication and negotiation, and it is essential to continue engaging in dialogue to resolve differences and maintain stable and constructive relations between China and the United States.

5.2. China-US High-level Talks' Failure to Handle Ideological Differences Effectively

The China-US high-level talks were held in a complex social context, and the two sides failed to effectively address their ideological differences. Linguistically, the dialogue did not bridge the gap between the two sides but instead resulted in a deeper deadlock, which failed to achieve the original purpose of the dialogue. The topics discussed during the dialogue, such as human rights, democracy, and internal affairs, did not lead to much consensus. Although both sides conveyed their respective positions clearly, there was significant underlying hostility. In the subsequent statements by both sides, the Chinese side believed that some progress had been made in the talks, offering hope for bridging the rift in the relationship and strengthening cooperation. However, the US side condemned China's position. The substantive results of the dialogue remain debatable, and differences between the United States and China on key issues remain unresolved.

The ideological differences between China and the United States can be both a background and a subject of dialogue, depending on the purpose and agenda of the dialogue. If the goal is to establish cooperative relations and enhance mutual understanding and trust, the ideological differences may be used as a background, while the dialogue may focus on discussing common interests, opportunities for cooperation, and mutual benefits. However, if the aim of the dialogue is to resolve specific issues or disputes, then the ideological differences may become a topic of discussion, and the dialogue may need to explore the respective values in greater depth and seek consensus and solutions despite these differences. Such discussions require sophisticated and nuanced communication skills and discourse analysis.

From a linguistic perspective, the high-level dialogue between China and the United States failed to bridge their differences and instead further entrenched their respective positions, resulting in the failure to achieve the original purpose of the dialogue. Despite covering various topics such as human rights, democracy, and internal affairs, there was little agreement or consensus reached between the two sides. Both sides reiterated their respective stances, and while there were no apparent conflicts during the dialogue, underlying animosity was evident. Following the dialogue, the Chinese side expressed hope for bridging the divide and strengthening cooperation, while the US side condemned China's position. It remains a matter of debate whether the dialogue produced any substantive results, but the differences between the two countries on key issues remain unresolved.

The irreconcilable differences that arise from ideological differences between two parties can be used as a background for dialogue or as the subject of dialogue, depending on the purpose of the dialogue and the setting of the agenda. If the purpose of the dialogue is to enhance mutual understanding and trust, and establish cooperative relations, then the irreconcilable differences determined by the ideological differences between the two sides can be used as the background of the dialogue. The focus of the dialogue may be on discussing common interests, cooperation opportunities, and mutual benefits, rather than directly discussing the ideological differences between the two sides. On the other hand, if the purpose of the dialogue is to resolve specific issues or disputes, then the irreconcilable differences determined by ideological differences between the two sides may become one of the topics of dialogue. The dialogue needs to explore the respective values in greater depth and find a solution that seeks consensus and solutions under these differences. This requires more sophisticated and nuanced discourse analysis and communication skills.

5.3. China-US High-level Talks' Breakthrough of Traditional Diplomatic Linguistic Style and Revealing China's Determination to Safeguard Core Interests

In general, China's diplomatic style is characterized by official formality, prudence, courtesy, respect, good use of rhetoric, and emphasis on image shaping, reflecting traditional Chinese and national culture. However, in the China-US high-level talks, Chinese diplomats also displayed some

differences in their linguistic style compared to traditional Chinese diplomacy. They used euphemisms and politeness in some instances to avoid direct conflict or intensification of contradictions when communicating with the United States. Additionally, China highlighted its development achievements and national interests, reflecting the country's rich history and cultural self-confidence, which diverges from the modesty and low profile typical of China's traditional diplomatic discourse.

Based on the results of discourse analysis, it can be observed that Chinese diplomats have adopted a more confrontational approach to counter the unfounded accusations of the United States during the China-US high-level talks. They emphasized China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and expressed a confrontational stance against possible provocations or interference by the United States, which is slightly different from China's previous diplomatic approach of moderation and consultation. This change is attributed to China's increasing comprehensive national strength and growing international influence, demonstrating China's self-confidence and determination to defend its national core interests. Scholars have pointed out that the "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy" style of Chinese diplomacy is a natural response to the pressure of US "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy"[6].

References

- [1] Zhang Yanmei.(2009). The Application of Speech Act Theory in the Translation of Diplomatic Discourse. *Consume Guide*(17),230.
- [2] Liu Wenyu & Xu Boshu.(2023). Container and Path: A Cognitive Discourse Analysis of the Remarks by Former U.S. Vice-president Pence. *Journal of Beijing International Studies University*(01),50-66.
- [3] Zhang Junchen.(2020). Media Presentation of Sino-US Trade Frictions: Discourse-Historical Approach of "Sino-US Female Anchors Transoceanic Debate". *Southeast Communication*(12),72-77. doi:10.13556/j.cnki.dncb.cn35-1274/j.2020.12.021.
- [4] Cai Yingying.(2014). Pragmatic analysis of ambiguous strategies in diplomatic language. *Journal of Hubei University of Economics: Humanities and Social Sciences*(11),115-116.
- [5] Zhan Quanwang & Wang Zhihong.(2022). A Pragma-Dialectic Study of Diplomatic Discourse Features: The Case of China-US High-Level Strategic Dialogue. *Technology Enhanced Foreign Language Education* (05),80-87+116.
- [6] Jiang Shixue.(2021). Word Order, Sino-US Relations and China's Diplomacy—Some Reflections on International Relations Study in China. *Asia-Pacific Security and Maritime Affairs*(06), 1-19+133. doi:10.19780/j.cnki.2096-0484.20211116.001.