| RESEARCH ARTICLE

An Exploration of the Image Construction of Meng Wanzhou in News Article: A Critical Discourse Analysis

Yifan Zhang

Department of Foreign Languages, Sichuan University of Media and Communications, Chengdu, Sichuan, China 611745
Corresponding Author: Yifan Zhang, **E-mail**: 1353803346@qq.com

| ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the image construction of Meng Wanzhou in media discourse. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was utilized as the analytical framework of the study, in which text semantics was discussed from the aspects of "association with wealth", "details provided and details neglected", and "negative representation". The findings of this study were in line with Van Dijk (1995) in revealing that underlying ideologies may influence media discourse and cause ideological polarization between the ingroups and the outgroups.

1. Introduction

News media is one of the means we rely on to keep ourselves updated on the happenings in the world. However, there is always one concern: to what extent can we be sure that what we read from the news report is what really happens? After all, previous research on discourse and media has shown that news report is under the influence of many factors: social, political, economic and cultural context and ideology, to name just a few. For example, Van Dijk (2002) illustrates how the *Daily Mail* and the *Guardian* report the same incident (Sri Lankan political refugee Viraj Mendis being deported) differently: while the former focuses on the demonstration caused by this incident, the latter discusses the expulsion and its political implications in detail. Just as Van Dijk (2002) points out, special emphasis on specific topics may be a sign of ideological influence. Therefore, it would contribute to the research on language and power to examine how current affairs are reported in the news and to see how ideology and news media mutually influence each other.

In recent years, the trade dispute between China and the United States has attracted intense media attention. Huawei, one of the largest high-tech companies in China, seems to be caught up in such a sensitive time. The US has more than once accused Chinese technology companies like Huawei of endangering US national security, the accusations targeted at Huawei have become particularly frequent and harsh ever since Huawei announced its major breakthrough in 5G technology. The US and its allies banned domestic firms from buying communication network equipment and service from Huawei. At a time of continuing trade dispute, it seems suspicious that Huawei's chief financial officer, Meng Wanzhou, would be accused of violating the US sanctions on Iran and was detained subsequently in Canada. Not surprisingly, this would again attract various media coverage. The BBC homepage alone lists over 100 entries when "Meng Wanzhou" is searched as the keyword. Situating in this news background, the present study intends to conduct an in-depth analysis of one of the news articles concerning Ms Meng's house arrest after the bail hearing. To be specific, drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as an analytical framework, the study aims to explore how Ms Meng's image is constructed by the reporter's language use.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. I begin by briefly summarizing the history and definition of CDA. Next, I will discuss empirical studies conducted from the CDA approach and identify the specific research questions of the present study. After that, I will elaborate on my findings and answers to the research questions. Then, I will draw conclusions based on the discussions.

2. Literature Review

According to Van Dijk (2015), a central concern of CDA is social problems and political issues, such as gender inequality, nationalism, racism and political discourse. CDA is a "discourse study with an attitude" (p. 466). It not only describes the structure of discourse but also attempts to explain discourse from the point of social interaction and social structure (Van Dijk, 2015).

The study of news as discourse dates back to the 1970s, with an orientation towards new structures. Building upon previous research on news structures, Van Dijk (1988) proposed the theory of news schemata, which explains how news reports are organized through textual superstructures. Later, the social dimensions of news started to receive more attention; scholars began to look into news production as well as readers' comprehension and reception within particular social and economic contexts (Van Dijk, 2009).

Bell (1991) further explores the ideological dimension of news and highlights the necessity of looking into how news reports may mis-represent the actual event through various linguistic means, such as overstatement, emphasis and exaggeration. Similarly, Van Dijk (1995) also elaborates on how underlying ideologies influence news discourse by analysing different aspects of discourse semantics, such as topic, focus, lexical choice and implications. Following this route, a number of studies have investigated how news report on social events is influenced by underlying ideology (e.g., Hassan, 2018; Abbas, 2020; Chen and Wang, 2020).

Some other studies on media discourse focus on the image construction of particular countries or social groups. For example, drawing on Van Dijk's (1991) news schemata, Suspitsyna (2015) investigates the image construction of China in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and finds that China is portrayed as the "hostile cultural Other" (p. 31) and the "West's inferior Other" (p. 34). Another example is Zhang and Wu (2017), which compares the news reports on the One Belt, One Road Initiative in *China Daily* and *Financial Times* from the CDA approach; their findings show that the image of China is constructed by the *China Daily* as a friendly country willing to collaborate with other countries, while the *Financial Times* portrays China as a rival and threat.

Despite the profusion of research on either ideological influence or image construction in media discourse, there is a paucity of research on the ideological influence over the image construction of particular Chinese public figures in Western news media. Therefore, inspired by previous analytical approaches that look into discourse semantics (e.g., Van Dijk, 1995, 2002), the present study examines how BBC, one of the largest Western news agencies, constructs the image of Meng Wanzhou in its news report.

To be specific, the study is guided by the following two research questions: (1) How does the reporter's language use construct the image of Meng Wanzhou? (2) Does the reporter's language use create ideological polarization between Meng Wanzhou and members of the reporter's social ingroup?

3. Methodology

The data collected for the present study is a news article (see Appendix 1) published on the BBC website on 24th January 2019. This article is a news story about Meng Wanzhou, the CFO of the Chinese technology company Huawei, which is also one of the largest smartphone makers in the world. At the time of the report, Ms Meng was under house arrest in Vancouver because she was accused of breaking US sanctions on Iran. The incident received worldwide media attention and even sparked diplomatic controversy to some extent since it happened in the midst of the long-lasting US-China trade friction. Therefore, it would contribute to the study of media discourse to investigate how Western media, like the BBC, report such an incident and portray a public figure like Ms. Meng in their news.

In order to address the research questions, the data is mainly analysed from the point of text semantics, which provides answers to questions concerning the meaning and implications of a given text (Van Dijk, 2002). A particular emphasis of this analysis is on implication, which is "one of the most powerful semantic notions in a critical news analysis" (Van Dijk, 2002, p. 113).

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Association with wealth

The most salient type of implication in this news article is an association with wealth (see **Table 1**), which is realized mainly through the reporter's lexical choice when he describes the location and condition of Ms Meng's house, in addition to his limited observations of Ms Meng's everyday life from an outside angle. According to the news report, Ms Meng's house is apparently located in an affluent area of the city. The house itself has a high market value and is well-maintained, which, of course, costs money. No one knows exactly what happens inside the house, that is, things like what the owner and her family may be talking

about and how worried they could be about the serious allegations she is facing. Speculations can only be made from the reporter's observations from outside the house. However, the reporter does not mention any details of the legal issues concerning Ms Meng's case, let alone any possible injustice or lack of evidence in the accusations towards Ms Meng. Instead, the report heavily emphasizes Ms Meng's wealth.

Table 1. Association with wealth

	Lexical choice
Location	On a corner; Leafy, exclusive area.
House	Gilded cage; Solid-looking, well-maintained; Valued at $4.2m; Bought another, far larger; Worth three times as much; being renovated.
Daily life	Bags of shopping; A maid vacuumed the porch.
Interior decoration	Usually seen only in celebrity magazines; Shiny marble and polished wood; A bar, a temperature-controlled wine cellar and a grand piano; One of the many indulgences; Afford luxury; Two kitchens, high-end appliances and gleaming surfaces.

It is worth noting that even though the reporter cannot get inside Ms Meng's house, he still manages to offer a detailed description of the possible interior decoration of the house by visiting the house of someone whose company builds "expensive homes for wealthy Chinese clients in Vancouver" (Bristow, 2019). Again, the focus is on wealth. However, we cannot even be sure whether this company built Ms Meng's house or not because the report seems to skip the precise information.

After reading such a news report, it is no surprise that readers could be left with a strong impression of Ms. Meng's wealth. Therefore, the image of Meng Wanzhou is first depicted as wealthy.

4.2 Details Provided versus details neglected

The second type of implication relates to details (see **Table 2**). After the detention happened at the airport, Ms Meng was bailed out on the condition of house arrest. Under such circumstances, no doubt the security guards were assigned by court order, which means Ms Meng does not have any choice in either the number of guards or the cost of hiring security guards. However, by stressing "expensive", the report could be implying that this arrangement is costing taxpayers money. As to irrelevant details, the report describes in detail how Ms Meng is allowed to travel and how she and her family are having a great time at popular tourist spots. This could imply that even though she is faced with serious accusations that may lead to up to 30 years of imprisonment if convicted, her life is unaffected, and she still enjoys a privileged life.

Table 2. Details provided versus details neglected

Details provided	Security guards; Expensive vehicles; Allowed to travel; Enjoying themselves at popular tourist spots; Bail sponsor one: yoga teacher who offered $37,000 in cash; Bail sponsor two: wife of a former Huawei employee who offered part of her home.
Details neglected	Bail sponsor three; Bail sponsor four.

The report also mentions the fact that four Canadian citizens voluntarily offered money for Ms Meng's bail but only provides information about two of the four: one is a yoga teacher who pledged cash, while the other one's husband is a former Huawei employee. This neglect of certain detail could possibly arouse some suspicion among the readers: Why cash? Why someone from Huawei? However, no other details regarding the four citizens are given, and no further comment from the reporter either. All is left to speculation. As a result, one more layer is added to the image of Ms Meng, that is, privileged even when facing serious allegations.

4.3 Negative representation

Negative representation in discourse could be achieved through various ways, such as lexical choice, a quote from a particular group of people, and unwarranted speculation. Examples of negative representation identified in the news report are listed in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Negative representation

Quote from Troy Van Vliet	Other than clean air, other than mountains, other than it being a beautiful place to live, other than stable government - they want their kids to be educated in the West.
Quote from Fenella Sung	Dead zone; Personal safety is not always guaranteed; Consequences for Vancouver; Destroying the way of life.
Presupposition	Appear to …shielding…from the prying eyes; Seems keen to protect her privacy; Impossible to see inside the house; Influx of rich Chinese families; Possible money laundering; Steep rise in house prices.

Just as Van Dijk (2002) points out, quotations in the news can also be biased, depending on what source the reporter chooses to quote from and how the reporter uses the source texts. The present study finds that the reporter quotes two people. One is the president of a house building company, whose words could imply that the city where Ms Meng comes from is not a beautiful place to live in and that it has neither clean air nor stable government, let alone quality education. The other person is an activist who claims to know the reason why people like Ms Meng prefer to settle down in Vancouver while at the same time accusing them of creating a "dead zone" in the neighbourhood and "destroying" the way of life here in Vancouver. Interestingly, Fenella Sung herself is no native Canadian; she immigrated to Vancouver from Hong Kong. All these quotations help to create a negative representation of Ms Meng and something Ms Meng represents: rich Chinese people who come to Vancouver to enjoy life but also bring destruction along with them.

Another type of negative representation is presupposition. When reporting about the security guards, the reporter indeed takes pains to provide details. Apart from telling readers the cars they drive are expensive, he also makes assumptions about the duty of these security guards. The report mentions that the security guards seem to be protecting Ms Meng's privacy when their intended duty should simply be following the court order and making sure the defendant shows up at trial. This could imply that the security guards are burdened with extra workload because of Ms Meng. Another presupposition made by the reporter is that Ms Meng "Seems keen to protect her privacy" (Bristow, 2019). It is likely that this speculation is made on purpose. To begin with, who does not value privacy? Being under house arrest and facing certain charges does not mean that Ms Meng has an obligation to display their private life. However, the reporter's presupposition sounds like she has something to hide.

At the near end of the news report, the presupposition is made about "the influx of rich Chinese families", "possible money laundering", and "steep rise in house prices" (Bristow, 2019), yet no solid evidence is provided. At this stage, the image of Ms Meng is intensified and extended to the image of a group, the outgroup that represents rich Chinese people who immigrate to Vancouver as an "exit strategy" (Bristow, 2019) and who are destroying the community they have come for.

Admittedly, how readers comprehend the same text also depends on social cognition and sociocultural contexts. As Van Dijk (2002) explains, each language user has a unique way of representing the news events reported by the text in their memory. This

representation is influenced by social cognition and sociocultural contexts. According to Van Dijk (2002), news production is subject to the reporter's context model, which includes components like news participants, their roles, and the social knowledge and ideologies of the participants. In the present case, Ms Meng is clearly not a member of the reporter's social ingroup. She and people like her are something different. By using words like "Chinese-looking" and "Chinese families enjoy", the reporter stresses this difference to his readers. This also provides an answer to the second research question, that is, the reporter's language use seems to create some ideological polarization between Meng Wanzhou and members of the reporter's social ingroup.

5. Conclusion

In the process of depicting Meng Wanzhou and her life in the news article, the reporter shapes the image of Ms Meng through his language use. In terms of text semantics, different types of implication are applied, such as lexical choice, providing and neglecting certain details, and negative representation. As a result, the report could imply that Ms. Meng is a rich Chinese woman who could be hiding something and that her wealth enables her to enjoy a privileged life even when she is under house arrest, facing serious accusations; just like other wealthy Chinese people who immigrate to Vancouver, she may be held responsible for bringing some harm to the community. Shaping Meng Wanzhou's image like this has to some degree, led to the ideological polarization between Meng Wanzhou and members of the reporter's social ingroup. The findings are consistent with Van Dijk (1995) in that they reveal that underlying ideologies may influence media discourse and cause ideological polarization between the ingroups and the outgroups.

Although the research questions are sufficiently addressed, the present study is bound by some limitations. First of all, the small size of the data could limit the breadth of the analysis. Second, the concentration on implication in text semantics could limit the depth of the analysis. Future studies may be benefited from including more data and expanding the analysis from the point of news schema, style and rhetoric.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.
Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

References

[1] Abbas, A. H. (2020). Politicizing the pandemic: A schemata analysis of Covid-19 news in two selected newspapers. *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law-Revue internationale de Sémiotique juridique*, 1-20. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11196-020-09745-2

[2] Bell, A. (1991). *The language of news media*. Blackwell.

[3] Bristow, M. (2019, January 24). Meng Wanzhou: The Huawei exec trapped in a gilded cage. *BBC News*. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-46978631

[4] Chen, F., & Wang, G. (2020). A war or merely friction? Examining news reports on the current Sino-US trade dispute in *The New York Times* and *China Daily*. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2020.1844252

[5] Hassan, A. (2018). Language, media, and ideology: Critical discourse analysis of Pakistani news bulletin headlines and its impact on viewers. *SAGE Open*, *8*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244018792612

[6] Suspitsyna, T. (2015). Cultural hierarchies in the discursive representations of China in the Chronicle of Higher Education. Critical Studies in Education, 56(1), 21-37. https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2015.971330

[7] Van Dijk, T. A. (1988). News as discourse. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

[8] Van Dijk, T. A. (1995). Discourse semantics and ideology. Discourse & Society, 6(2), 243–289. https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926595006002006

[9] Van Dijk, T. A. (1991). Racism and the press. Routledge.

[10] Van Dijk, T. A. (2002). Media contents. The interdisciplinary study of news as discourse. In N. W. Jankowski & K. B. Jensen (Eds.), *A handbook of qualitative methodologies for mass communication research* (pp. 108-119). Routledge.

[11] Van Dijk, T. A. (2009). News, discourse, and ideology. In K. Wahl-Jorgensen & T. Hanitzsch (Eds.), *The Handbook of journalism studies* (pp. 191-204). Routledge.

[12] Van Dijk, T. A. (2015). Critical discourse analysis. In D. Tannen, H. E. Hamilton & D. Schriffin (Eds.), *The Handbook of discourse analysis* (pp. 466-485). John Wiley & Sons.

[13] Zhang, L., & Wu, D. (2017). Media representations of China: A comparison of China's daily and financial times in reporting on the Belt and Road initiative. *Critical Arts, 31*(6), 29-43. https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2017.1408132