
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Analysis of Media-Shaped Role Models from the Perspective of Transitivity: A Case Study of Rongzhi Lao Criminal Cases

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| ABSTRACT

News reporting is the carrier of ideology and culture. Although the media claims to be impartial, objective and neutral, they necessarily reflect a certain stance. The media usually constructs characters directly or indirectly in news reports so as to change the audience's perception of the events. Taking the news headlines related to Rongzhi Lao from the paper as the data, this paper analyzed the role models of Rongzhi Lao shaped by the media from the perspective of transitivity by using the UAM corpus tool and Python. The result shows that (1) in the news headlines related to Rongzhi Lao from the paper as the data, the material process accounts for the largest proportion, followed by the relational process, mental process, verbal process, and existential process; (2) through the five processes, Rongzhi Lao is constructed as a guilty person who is good at evading his responsibilities and disguising but does not regret committing felonies on his initiative. This paper gives us insight to clarify the purpose of media news reporting by understanding how the media constructs characters.

| KEYWORDS

Role model, Transitivity, Media.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

News reporting is a carrier of ideology and culture. Although the media claims to be impartial, objective and neutral, they necessarily reflect a certain stance [8]. The media usually constructs characters directly or indirectly in news reports so as to change the reader's perception of the events. Many scholars have studied characterization in news reporting. Li Ji [2016] concluded that when portraying characters in disaster reports, news media should stick to the following principles: using typical individuals to shape group images, using individual language to construct characters, and using down-to-earth narratives to tell the truth. Du Li and Cao Hui [2023] advocated to portray the image of scientists in a more people-oriented perspective. Yang Ying [2006] advocated that the news media should focus on revealing the inner world of the characters. However, these scholars only put forward some principles and methods. They ignore exploring how news reports shape the character. As an important tool for language analysis, the system of transitivity can be used to explain the characteristics of language in news reports, so as to explore the characters constructs in news reports.

Rongzhi Lao criminal case is a very representative criminal case. Rongzhi Lao committed four crimes with his lover Fa Ziying between 1996 and 1999, resulting in the death of seven people. After committing the crime, Rongzhi Lao absconded but was captured on 28 November 2019. On 18 December 2023, she was executed. The case was of a heinous criminal nature and caused a huge sensation in China. The media, represented by the paper, not only tracked the development of the case but also portrayed the image of Rongzhi Lao in depth. Taking the news headlines related to Rongzhi Rao from the paper as the data, this paper analyzed the role models of Rongzhi Lao shaped by the media from the perspective of transitivity by using the UAM corpus tool

(hereinafter referred to as UAM) and Python. The purpose of this paper is to explore (1) the transitive features in news reports related to Rongzhi Lao; and (2) the image of Rongzhi Lao constructed in news reports.

2. Material and Methodology

2.1 Material

In order to solve the research problem, I collected the news headlines related to the Rongzhi Lao criminal case from 28 November 2019 to 18 December 2023 in the mainstream media, thepaper. Rongzhi Lao was selected as the keyword and the time was set as 28 November 2019 to 18 December 2023. As a result, 199 news headlines were obtained in thepaper. To ensure the accuracy of the data, this paper only selected news headlines describing Rongzhi Lao and excluded the reports that had nothing to do with Rongzhi Lao. At the same time, this paper also excluded the reports from other media published in thepaper. Finally, I got 61 news headlines, totaling 932 words.

The reason why choosing the news reports from 28 November 2019 to 18 December 2023 is that the media reported a lot about this case. The media began to report on the case continuously after Rongzhi was captured on 29 November 2019, but the coverage gradually decreased after Rongzhi was executed on 18 December 2023. The reason why choosing thepaper is that this media has the highest number of news reports on Rongzhi Lao criminal case according to the data monitoring system. In addition, Another reason to choose thepaper is that this media sticks to reporting news originally, and the original news can better reflect the attitudes of the news report.

2.2 Methodology

First, I annotated the transitivity words by using the transitivity system in UAM and counted the number of each category of transitivity. The specific steps are as follows: Firstly, I imported the news headlines into the UAM system to annotate the transitivity manually. Then, I use the Statistics in UAM to count the number of each category.

Since all news headlines contain descriptive parts, such as "Court exposure" and "The second trial of the Rongzhi Law case will be held again", which only state the progress of the case and do not describe Rongzhi Lao. So I excluded these parts in the news headlines. What's more, If the news headlines do not contain this part, no change will be made. A specific example is sentence (1). The first half of the sentence is "Court exposure", describing only the case. So I modified the sentence(1) as (1)*.

(1) Court exposure: Rongzhi Lao cried on the spot when he heard the death penalty (2021-09-09)

(1)* Rongzhi Lao cried on the spot when he heard the death penalty.

Second, I used Python to count the frequency of transitivity words. Firstly, to ensure the accuracy of statistics, the news headline text only retained the part of the title that described Rongzhi Lao. Secondly, I imported the data into Python to count the word frequencies. After that, I located the transitivity words in them. Thirdly, I sorted the transitivity words according to the frequencies. I only focused on the base form of the transitivity words when sorting the frequency.

Finally, I used Excel to count the thematic participants in the news headline and then calculated the percentage of each thematic participant.

3. Analytical Framework

Halliday [3] points out that the nature of language is closely related to the demands we make on it and the functions it fulfills. He divides the function of language into conceptual, interpersonal and discourse functions. As a semantic system that expresses the conceptual function, transitivity divides what people see, hear and do in the real world into "process" and "participant" and "circumstance". The process consists of the material process, mental process, relational process, behavioral process, verbal process and existential process.

The material process is the construction of the external world, referring to a series of events that occur in the objective world as a result of what people do or what happens in the objective world [Ma, 2021]. There might be one or two participants in material processes. The theme of an action is the **actor** and the recipient of the action is the **goal** [Long, 2012]. Mental processes are the description of the process of occurrence and development of people's inner activity [Li, 2024]. Mental processes generally have two participants, respective **sensor** and **phenomenon** [Long, 2012]. Relational process reflects the logical relationship between two concepts and focuses on "what it looks like and what it is related to" [Hei, 2017]. Relational process generally has two participants, respective **carrier** and **attribute** [Zhang, 2012]. Verbal process represents speech communication [Yu, 2020]. The participants of the verbal process include **sayer**, **reciever** and **verbiage**. Behavior process refers to the process of mental or physical behavior. The participant of the behavior process is **behavior**. The existential process indicates the existence of things. The participant of the existential process is **existent**.

In (2), the sentence is judged to describe material process according to the “denied”. The “denied” describes what happened to Rongzhi Lao. So, Rongzhi Lao is the **actor** and the accusation is the **goal**

(2) Rongzhi Lao (**actor**) denied the accusation (**goal**)

4. Results and Discussion

In 66 news headlines related to Rongzhi Lao, 125 transitive processes were obtained. The frequency of each subcategory is shown in Table 1.1. According to Table 1.1, the highest frequency of occurrence is the material process (13.2%), followed by the relational process (5.36%), and the lowest proportion is the existential process (0.21%). Because of the low proportion of existential processes, the following analysis will focus on the material, relational, mental, and verbal process.

Table 1.1 Number and proportion of process categories

Category	Number	Proportion
Material Process	64	13.20%
Relational process	26	5.36%
Mental process	18	3.71%
Verbal process	16	3.30%
Existential process	1	0.21%

To find out the specific transitivity words that describe Rongzhi Lao, the word frequency of the top 10 transitive words is counted by using Python. The top three words are “execute”, “deny”, and “cry”. Among the top 10 transitivity words, the highest frequency falls into the material process, followed by the mental process, as shown in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2 Frequency and process categorizes of transitivity words

Transitivity words	Process category	Frequency
Execute	Material Process	5
Deny	Material Process	4
Cry	Material Process	3
Deep	Mental process	2
Hard	Mental process	2
Bring to justice	Material Process	2
Hope	Mental process	1
Sinful	Relational process	1
Claim	Verbal process	1

A clause usually contains three components: a process, a participant, and circumstance [Long, 2012]. For different types of processes, participants can be **actor**, **carrier**, **attribute**, etc. [Feng, 2022]. Participants are usually located in the position of the theme and the rheme. The thematic participant indicates the subject of the action’s implementation. In order to figure out the subject of describing Rongzhi Lao, I also counted the thematic participants. The specific data of the thematic participant are shown in Figure 1.1. According to Figure 1.1, the largest proportion of the thematic participants falls into Rongzhi Lao and the victim’s family, respectively.

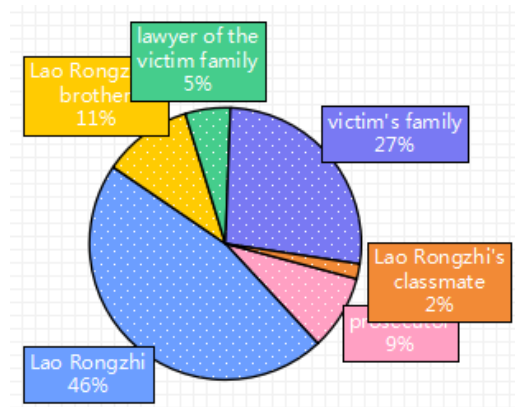


Figure 1.1 Proportion of thematic participants

4.1. Material Process

I found that the material process is mainly concentrated on three thematic scenes, namely, the behavior of Rongzhi Lao in the courtroom, Rongzhi Lao’s crime, and the capture of Rongzhi Lao. The thematic participant is mainly Rongzhi Lao.

In the description of the behavior of Rongzhi Lao in the courtroom, the thematic participant is Rongzhi Lao and the transitivity words are mostly negative words. Observing (3)* and (4)*, Rongzhi Lao is the thematic participant, which indicates that Rongzhi is the initiator of the action. Moreover, the transitivity words “denied” and “cried” are negative words. The “denied” shows that Rongzhi is ungrateful to commit the crime, and the “cried” shows that Rongzhi is unable to accept the death penalty and has a strong will to live. Thus, the media constructs Rongzhi Lao as a person who has a strong will to live and is ungrateful to commit the crime.

- (3) Trial scene exposure: Rao Rongzhi cried on the spot when she heard the death penalty (2021-09-09)
- (3)* Rongzhi Lao (**actor**) cried on the spot when she heard the death penalty
- (4) Photo of Law Rongzhi in courtroom revealed: denied the accusation, claiming he was also a victim (2020-12-21)
- (4)* Rongzhi Lao (**actor**) denied (**goal**) the accusation, claiming that he was also a victim

When describing Rongzhi Lao’s crime, the thematic participant is Rongzhi Lao and the transitive words are mostly negative. As can be seen from example (5)*, Rongzhi Lao is the thematic participant, showing that Rongzhi Lao has a high degree of initiative. The “absconding” refers to “to depart secretly or suddenly, esp. to avoid arrest, prosecution, or service of process” in the Balck’s Law Dictionary [14], suggesting that Rongzhi Lao knows that she has committed a crime but she desires to avoid legal responsibility.

- (5) Female fugitive Rongzhi Lao was caught: absconded for 20 years with her boyfriend after killing 7 people. (2019-11-29)
- (5)* Rongzhi Lao (**actor**) absconded for 20 years with her boyfriend after killing 7 people.

When describing the capture of Rongzhi, the thematic participant is Rongzhi Lao and the transitivity words are mostly negative words. In (6), the vocabulary “execute” refers to put to death, esp, by legal sentence in Black’s Law Dictionary [Bryan, 2004]. In (6), the verb was shown in passive voice, suggesting that Law Rongzhi was forced to put to death. Rongzhi Lao must accept the sentence even though she does not accept it psychologically. Thus the media constructs Rongzhi Lao as a person who is not grateful to commit the crime.

- (6) Rongzhi Lao (**actor**) was executed.

From the above statement, we can find that through the depiction of the material process, the media portrays Rongzhi Lao as a person who desires to avoid legal responsibility although he is ungrateful to commit the crime and have a strong will to live. The material process is mainly reflected in the description of Rongzhi Lao’s behavior in the courtroom, Rongzhi Lao’s crime, and the capture of Rongzhi Lao. The thematic participant is mostly Rongzhi Lao.

4.2. Mental Process

By analyzing the news headlines, I found that the main participants of the mental process are the victim’s family and the procurator. The mental process is mainly manifested in the description of two thematic descriptions, one of which is describing the victim’s inner perception of Rongzhi Lao, and the other theme is describing the procurator’s inner perception of Rongzhi Lao.

When describing the victim’s inner perception of Rongzhi Lao, the main participants are the victim's family, including the wife of

the victim, the victim's son, the victim's brother, the victim's daughter, etc. From (7)*, it can be seen that the victim's family wants to see Rongzhi Lao get severely punished. The media uses the mental process "wanted to see" to describe the victim's family's perception of Rongzhi Lao, which shows that the victim's family hates Rongzhi Lao and Rongzhi Lao has caused great harm to the victim's family. So we can see that the media constructs Rao Rongzhi as a guilty person. At the same time, when describing the procurator's perception of Rongzhi Lao, the thematic participant is the procurator. From example (8)*, it can be seen that the prosecutor believes that subjective malice is extremely deep. Although the word "believes" is subjective, Rongzhi Lao must committed the crime on his initiative due to the special status of the sensor. By describing the prosecutor's perception of Rongzhi, the media further constructs Rongzhi Lao as a guilty person who commits the crime on his initiative.

(7) the wife of the victim of the Rongzhi Lao case, went to Nanchang to attend the trial: she wanted to see her severely punished (2021-09-08)

(7)* The wife of the victim (**sensor**) wanted to see her severely punished (**phenomenon**).

(8) A chronicle of the trial of Rao Rongzhi case was released! Procurators believed his subjective malice was extremely deep (2020-12-23)

(8)* Procurators (**sensor**) believed that the subjective malice was extremely deep (**phenomenon**).

Based on the above statement, we can find that through the description of the mental process, the media portrays Rongzhi Lao as a guilty person who commits the crime on his own initiative. The main participants of the mental process are mainly the victim's family and the procurator, which is mainly expressed in the two themes of depicting the victim's perception of Rongzhi Lao and describing the prosecution's perception of Rongzhi Lao.

4.3. Relational Process

The relational process is mainly reflected in the description of two descriptions. One is the description of the character of Rongzhi Lao while the other is the description of Rongzhi Lao's crime. In describing the character of Rongzhi Lao, the thematic participant is Rongzhi Lao. In (9)*, it can be seen that Rongzhi Lao has the attributes of cunning and cruelty, thus indicating that the media believes that Rongzhi Lao is a sinful person by nature. In (10)*, when describing the crimes of Rongzhi Lao, Rongzhi Lao's subjective malice is described as extremely deep. It shows that Rongzhi Lao commits the crime on his initiative instead of receiving instructions from others. Thus she is constructed as a sinful person who committed a serious crime on his initiative.

(9) Hunan citizens traveled to Jiangxi to attend the trial of Rongzhi's case: she was cunning and cruel (2021-09-09)

(9)* Hunan citizens believe that she (**carrier**) is cunning and cruel (**attribute**).

(10) The chronicle of the trial of Rongzhi Lao case was released! Procurators believe her subjective malice is extremely deep (2020-12-23)

(10)* Prosecutors believe that her subjective malice (**carrier**) is extremely deep (**attribute**)

Through the description of the relational process, Rongzhi Lao is portrayed as a sinful person who commits felonies on his initiative. It is mainly expressed in the two descriptions, respectively Rongzhi Lao's character as well as Rao Rongzhi's crime.

4.4. Verbal Process

In the news headlines, the verbal process is mainly reflected in the introduction of the evaluation of Rongzhi Law and Rongzhi Lao's behavior in the courtroom, and the main participants are mainly Rongzhi Lao and Rongzhi Lao's friends. Observing (11)*, it can be found that the victim's family said Rongzhi Lao was "pretending to be pitiful". The word "said" shows that Rongzhi is a person who pretends to be pitiful in their mind. Thus the media portrays Rongzhi Lao as a character who is good at pretending. In (12)*, the dominant participant is Rongzhi Lao when it comes to his behavior in the courtroom. Rongzhi Lao claims himself a victim, indicating that he still does not think he is committing a crime. Thus the media constructs Lao as an unrepentant person.

(11) Rao Rongzhi's case was adjourned and he was escorted back in a police car, and the victim's family said that Lao was "pretending to be pitiful" (2022-08-21)

(11)* The victim's family (**sayer**) said that Lao was "pretending to be pitiful" (**verbiage**).

(12) The photo of Rongzhi Lao in court was revealed and she cried in defence: denied the accusation and said she was also a victim (2020/12/21)

(12)* Rongzhi Lao (**sayer**) denied the accusation and claims that she is also a victim (**verbiage**)

Through the description of the verbal process, Rongzhi Lao is portrayed as a person who is good at pretending and unrepentant. This is mainly reflected in the introduction of the evaluation of Rao Rongzhi and Rao Rongzhi's behavior in the courtroom.

5. Conclusion

Taking the news headlines related to Rongzhi Lao from the paper as the data, this paper studies the role models of Rongzhi Lao criminal cases shaped by the media from the perspective of transitivity by using the UAM corpus tool and Python. The questions proposed are addressed.

First of all, in the news headlines related to Rongzhi, the transitivity process mainly consists of the material process, relational process, mental process, verbal process, and existential process. Among them, the most frequent occurrence is the material process, followed by the relational process, and the lowest percentage is the existential process. The highest number of transitivity words is also material vocabulary.

Secondly, through the material process, relational process, psychological process, verbal process and existential process, Rongzhi Lao is constructed as a guilty person who is good at evading his responsibilities and disguising but does not regret committing felonies on his initiative. Through the depiction of the material process, the media portrays Rongzhi Lao as a person who desires to avoid legal responsibility although he is ungrateful to commit the crime and has a strong will to live. Through the description of the mental process, the media portrays Rongzhi Lao as a guilty person who commits the crime on his own initiative. The main participants of the mental process are mainly the victim's family and the procurator, which is mainly expressed in the two themes of depicting the victim's perception of Rongzhi Lao and describing the prosecution's perception of Rongzhi Lao. Through the description of the relational process, Rongzhi Lao is portrayed as a sinful person who commits felonies on his initiative. It is mainly expressed in the two descriptions, respectively Rongzhi Lao's character as well as Rao Rongzhi's crime. Through the description of the verbal process, Rongzhi Lao is portrayed as a person who is good at pretending and unrepentant. This is mainly reflected in the introduction of the evaluation of Rao Rongzhi and Rao Rongzhi's behavior in the courtroom.

This paper is of guiding significance for us to clarify the purpose of media news reporting by understanding how the media constructs characters. At the same time, it also gives us some enlightenment for the media. In the information age, people are covered by the various information. Media should stick to their professional ethics and hold fast to the bottom line of their professional ethics.

However, this paper has some limitations. This article is a case study. More data to support the conclusions of this thesis. Moreover, the number of news headlines is small, more data is needed to ensure the accuracy and precision of the conclusions.

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