Critical Discourse Analysis of Italian News Reports on China's COVID-19 Vaccine Assistance

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Abstract

From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis, this paper extracts the news reports of Italian mainstream media on China's so-called "vaccine diplomacy" in LexisNexis news database, combining Python quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis, which aims at revealing Italian news media's general attitude towards China's vaccine overseas assistance and the ideological factors from behind. The study finds that Italian news media pay more attention to the export of Chinese vaccines than before; their attitudes tend to be mostly negative, and there seems to be some misunderstanding in the reports.

Keywords："Vaccine diplomacy"；Italian mainstream media；Critical discourse analysis

I. Introduction

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020, the Chinese government has attached great importance to the prevention and control of the epidemic, and has taken active anti-epidemic actions. At present, the epidemic prevention and control has achieved significant effects. It has been found that vaccines can help prevent and control the epidemic effectively. Researchers in China have developed efficient vaccines and advocated the implementation of vaccination and strengthening of immunity around China. Simultaneously, China shoulders responsibilities of being one of the major powers in the international community. It always upholds the concept of a community with a shared future for mankind, and tries its best to provide vaccine assistance to countries and regions in need. As of July 2021, China has provided more than 700 million doses of vaccines and helped more than 100 countries fight against the epidemic without any political requirement attached. However, some Western countries have criticized and discredited China's action, calling China's vaccine assistance "vaccine diplomacy". In news reports, voices criticizing China for engaging in so-called "vaccine diplomacy" emerge, it has a serious impact on China's international prestige.

As an important partner of China on the "Belt and Road" initiative, Italy's mutual assistance with China during the epidemic has strengthened the relationship between the two countries. Meanwhile, as a member of the G7 nations, Italy's international status and influence in the Western world cannot be ignored. When it comes to the attitude of the Italian mainstream media towards China's vaccine assistance, only a few scholars pay attention to this topic. Therefore, this paper aims to take this topic as the research subject. We will collect, sort out, and analyze data and texts of news reports of Italian mainstream media on Chinese vaccine assistance, so as to explore the general attitudes and discuss social ideologies behind them.

II. Critical Discourse Analysis

In the context of Systemic Functional Linguistics, a group of linguists and literary theorists played a pivotal role in developing critical linguistics (Fowler et. al., 1979; Kress & Hodges, 1979). In late 1970s, the Critical Linguists began to use CL as research tool, and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) stemmed out from CL. Van Djik, Wodak, Leeuwen and Norman Fairclough are significant protagonists of CDA approach, which uses the meta-theory of systemic functional linguistics as the basis of the evaluation system or evaluation theory as the research method (Hu Zhuanglin, 2012; 7).

In 1989, Fairclough conducted an in-depth study of CDA and pointed out that CDA reveals implicit relations between language, power and ideology by analyzing language form in the text, and explains how the ruling class uses language to exercise ideological control and maintain position of power (Fairclough, 1989). CDA covers the study of the relationship between discourse events and social, political and cultural factors, especially the ideology hidden in society by discourse. The CDA framework put forward by Fairclough includes three dimensions: text analysis, discourse practice and social practice. Based on this theoretical framework, this paper explores how a text reflects the relations between texts and social, cultural factors.

III. Research Methods and Tools

Since the second half of 2020, with the development of China's international vaccine cooperation, China has provided numbers of vaccines and anti-epidemic supplies to other countries. This action has attracted the attention of Western media and politicians. Especially since August 2020, there have been some voices criticizing China's so-called "vaccine diplomacy" in some Western countries' reports, and so far, with the spreading of public opinions, the number of such reports has been gradually increasing. Therefore, the corpus collected in this paper will be news reports published from August 2020 to July 2021.

Firstly, we use advanced retrieval function in the global database LexisNexis. With two phrases: *diplomazia dei vaccini* (vaccine diplomacy) and *cina* (China) as search terms, this paper has selected a total of 165 relevant news reports from eight local Italy's mainstream media (including La Repubblica, ANSA Notiziario Generale in Italiano, Agenzia Giornaistica Italia, Corriere della Sera, Avvenire, II Giornale, La Stampa, II Fatto Quotidiano) from the search results. Secondly, through manual reading, we have selected seven most relevant news reports to download and analyze, including two special reports, one online news, and four news agency commentary articles. Then, the author converts those articles to the txt format with the titles and texts remained, so as to clean up the corpus. Thirdly, we use self-edited Python program to count statistic data of word frequency. Words like modal particles, function words, and prepositions may interfere the results, so that only the words with actual meaning are kept. Finally, we obtain the word frequency statistics.

Based on the three dimensions of CDA, the text analysis dimension in this paper analyzes high-frequency words and discourse characteristics; the discourse practice dimension focuses on how news texts are produced, distributed, and consumed; and the social cultural practice dimension explores the influence of Italian society, history and culture embodied in news texts on its discourse.

3.1 Text Analysis

After crawling the text with Python program, 70 high-frequency words are obtained, which have appeared 471 times in texts. After sorting out the words and calculating the percentage of the total number of high-frequency words in each category, the results are as follows:

Table-1: High-frequency Words in Eight Italian News Texts

Ranking	Classification	Words	Percentage
1	Country/Region and group of People	*Cina* (China), *cinese* (Chinese), *Pechino* (Beijing people), *paesi* (country, region), *Gli Stati Uniti* (the United States), *mondo* (world), *globale* (global), *sviluppo* (developing country), fuori (foreign), *Emirati* (United Arab Emirates), *Arabi* (Arabs), *Russia* (Russia), *persone* (person), *nazionale* (national), *parte* (party), *clinici* (clinic), *presidente* (president, chairman)	40%
2	Vaccine Related	*Contro* (control), *avere* (own), stare (stop), *diplomazia* (policy), *Sinopharm* (Sinopharm), *Vaccini* (vaccine), *trattare* (discussion), *dichiarato* (public), *fornitura* (supply), *esempio* (example), *modo* (model), *lineare* (consistent), *usare* (use), *consegnare* (delivery), *vaccinazione* (vaccination), *dosi* (dose), *aumentare* (increase), *produzione* (production), *dire* (presentation), *fare* (do), *rapportare* (reveal), *studi* (research)	22%
3	Time and Phases	*Agosto* (August), 2021, *febbraio* (February), *fine* (final), *fase* (phase), *mese* (month), *stata/o* (status), *scorso* (past)	10%
4	Numerals	*Milioni* (thousands), *prima/o* (first), *due* (two), *3*, *miliardi* (billions)	8%
5	Virus Related	*Virus* (Virus), *Covid*, (COVID) *Covid 19* (COVID-19), *coronavirus* (coronavirus), *pandemia* (pandemic)	7%
6	Adjectives and Adverbs	*Piu'* (more), *solo* (only, merely), *molto* (a lot)	5%
6	Comment/attitude	*accusare* (accusation), *sicurezza* (safety), *critico* (criticize), *incredibile* (incredible), *pericolosa* (dangerous), *astuzia* (cunning), *efficaci* (efficient)	5%
7	Politician	*Xi* (Xi Jinping), *Biden* (Joe Biden), *Donald Trump* (Donald Trump), *Heiko Maas* (Heiko Josef Maas)	3%

Word frequencies can help researchers quickly, intuitively and systematically know the lexical characteristics of texts from a large amount of news reports. As shown in Table-1, the classification of high-frequency words concludes that the key contents of the Italian mainstream media's reports on the overseas assistance of Chinese vaccines is the country/region, group of people and vaccine related, which together account for 62%. Among them, the reports of country/region and group of people account for 40%. Moreover, the evaluative vocabularies only account for 5%, reflecting the objective characteristic of news reports. However, behind the seemingly objective reports, texts are conveying information with strong potential purposes to readers. For example, vaccine development is the key to global epidemic prevention and control, and the current allocation of vaccine resources remains problem. We can see that most of evaluative words such as *accusare* (accusation), *sicurezza* (safety), *critico* (criticize), *incredibile* (incredible), *pericolosa* (dangerous), *astuzia*

(cunning), *efficaci* (efficient) are negative in some sense. By searching for those keywords in original texts, we found that the Italian media seldom use the method of direct evaluation; instead, they evoke positive or negative emotional reactions from readers by quoting other people's comments or through pure information contents. This is called the recessive attitude expression, which is commonly used in news discourse.

Through the analysis of country/region terms, we can see that the ability of a country to develop vaccines is a manifestation of the country's soft power, and the competition for vaccine resources has evolved into a war of public opinion between countries. Especially the major countries such as "*Cina* (China), *Gli Stati Uniti* (the United States) and Russia (Russia)" are placed in such a competitive context. For example, there is a research report titled *Coronavirus: Russia e Cina vogliono battere Europa e Usa su vaccino* (Coronavirus: Russia and China Want to Use Vaccines to Defeat Europe). This type of reports reflects the anxiety of Western governments in the epidemic prevention and control. Western governments use the media to convey to the public that their own interests are threatened, and let readers to have sense of urgency and prejudice against China, thereby strengthening their recognition of China's so-called "vaccine diplomacy".

3.2 Analysis of the Discourse Practice

The analysis of discourse practice is involved in the study of the production, distribution and consumption of discourse. On the basis of existing lexical analysis, it explores the construction and understanding of discourse from the discourse level, and studies its impact on social reality. This paper extracts three example texts for analysis.

（1）"*I cinesi non possono continuare a condurre la loro diplomazia sui vaccini in questo modo che ha solo lo scopo di aumentare la propria influenza e non necessariamente di salvare la vita delle persone",ha affermato Maas. Sebbene non abbia fornito alcun esempio specifico, Taiwan ha accusato la Cina di utilizzare la consegna dei suoi vaccini per fare pressione sui paesi affinché abbandonino il loro sostegno a Taiwan, che Pechino rivendica come proprio territorio*. (Covid, Heiko Maas: La Cina usa donazioni di vaccini per fini politici--Agenparl, 2021)

English Translation: "China shouldn't continue to conduct vaccine diplomacy in this way. This method is only to increase its influence, but not necessarily to save people's lives", Maas says. Although there is no specific evidence, Taiwan (of China) accuses mainland China of using vaccine resources to put pressure on countries to abandon support for Taiwan and recognize the one-China principle.

The example text in (1) above is part of a report and commentary on the speech by German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas. Some Western politicians believe that China is shipping vaccines to other countries for political purposes and to expand its influence. The negative and critical attitudes can be seen in the phrases such as "*accusato*" (accuse) and "*fare pressione*" (put on pressure) in the example. The aim is to link vaccine donations to the sovereignty issue of Taiwan, thereby to make China questioned by the international community.

（2）*Pechino combina, qui, abilmente filantropismo e "astuzia" diplomatica. Il Dragone ha donato vaccini a 53 Paesi e ha venduto sieri ad altri 27. Un esempio su tutti per scoprire il modus operandi cinese. Il presidente serbo Aleksandar Vucic, dopo l'arrivo in Serbia di altre 500 mila dosi di vaccino della Sinopharm, ha annunciato «una sensibile intensificazione degli investimenti cinesi in Serbia, in particolare nel campo delle infrastrutture e dell'agricoltura».* (Ora la Cina vuole vaccinare il mondo--Avvenire Online, 2021)

English Translation: Beijing has skillfully combined philanthropy and diplomatic "tricks" here. The oriental dragon has donated vaccines to 53 countries and sold serum to 27 other countries. The first case that has revealed China's motives is that: after another 500,000 doses of Sinopharm's vaccines arrived in Serbia, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic has announced that, "China will substantially increase its investment in Serbia,

especially in infrastructure and agriculture."

As shown in (2), the Italian phrases "astuzia" (tricks) and "il modus operandi" (crime techniques) show clear derogatory and critical meanings, and these two phrases are often used to describe criminal suspects and cunning people. Italian media believe that China's use of economic investment as a bargaining chip makes other countries to accept China's vaccine donations, so as to expand China's regional influence. Since the day when China's vaccines began to be exported, this kind of opinion has always existed in all the activities that China has participated in, which has seriously affected China's international reputation.

（3）*Alcuni esperti sanitari occidentali hanno avvertito che la Russia e Cina si stanno muovendo troppo velocemente, prima che gli effetti collaterali e l'efficacia dei vaccini possano essere adeguatamente accertati. Entrambi i Paesi stanno cercando di utilizzare la diplomazia dei vaccini come parte di una piu' ampia spinta per aumentare la loro influenza globale a spese degli Stati Uniti e dei loro alleati, con Pechino in particolare che sostiene i suoi successi contro il coronavirus come prova che il suo sistema autoritario e' superiore a quello democratico occidentale.* (Coronavirus: Russia e Cina vogliono battere Europa e Usa su vaccino--MF-DJ, 2020)

English Translation: Some Western health experts warn that Russia and China move too fast before the side effects and efficacy of vaccines are fully determined. Both countries hope to use vaccine diplomacy as part of expanding their global influence at the expense of sacrificing the interests of the United States and its allies. Beijing has especially publicized its achievements in fighting the epidemic as a basis for the superiority of China's centralized power system to Western democratic systems.

The ideological difference as can be seen in (3) is one of the main reasons for the contradictions between China and the Western countries. There is no obvious evaluative word in (3), but it contains China's intention to use so-called "vaccine diplomacy" to impose ideology on other countries. China's national conditions determine that its collective interests are higher than individual interests. This conflicts with the principle of the supremacy of individual interests in the Western countries. European and American countries divide their camps by ideology and judge which political system is better can only deepen misunderstandings between countries. Putting aside ideologies when disaster strikes and strengthening active international cooperation could be a better solution.

3.3 Social and Cultural Factors

The analysis of social and cultural practice covers the study of the relationship between discourse and social ideology, which is also the main purpose of text analysis and discourse practice analysis.

Currently, views in media reports of Italy and other European countries are becoming diversified. The reports on China include both positive and negative remarks. The phrases such as "*astuzia*" (cunning) and "*il modus operandi*" (crime techniques) can show that the Western countries believe that China's assistance has some political purposes. In addition, due to the influence of the Western political system and overall ideology, the contents that are full of misunderstandings and stigmatization of China still occupy a large amount of media coverage, which easily misleads people to have prejudice against China.

From the perspective of historical politics, society of capitalist countries are deeply affected by various political and economic factors. The unstable political situation and interest competition among parties within a country may reflect their views in media reports and disturb public opinions. From an economic perspective, the epidemic has severely affected the development of the world economy. The intensity of the fiscal and monetary policies adopted by the European Union in response to the epidemic confirms that their economy are experiencing difficulties. In March 2019, the *EU-China: Strategic Outlook* issued by the European Union has pointed out that China is a "competitor of the EU's new economic and national governance model system". It

can be seen that the EU's lack of confidence in its own economy has caused speculation and over-interpretation of the purpose of China's vaccine assistance.

IV. Conclusion

This paper has used Critical Discourse Analysis as the research framework. Combining with news databases and programming tools, we have analyzed the news reports by the Italian mainstream media on China's vaccine assistance from the perspective of text analysis, discourse practice analysis and social and cultural practice analysis. The paper has found that the Italian media have more negative reports than positive ones on "China's Vaccine Overseas Assistance", and the misleading information transmitted could leave a negative impact on China's international reputation. This means that a country needs to make efforts in the international discourse while developing rapidly. Only by finding a more effective way to tell the stories of a country and establish a good international image can the world better understand the country.

Acknowledgements

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Biography

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