



Difference of Sino-US National Image Construction Seen from the Use of Shell Nouns: Illustrated by News Reports on the COVID-19 Pandemic

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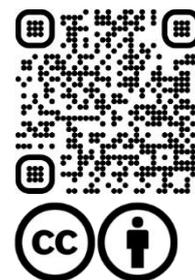
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Abstract— *This research examines the national image reflected in the use of shell nouns in Chinese and American news reports about the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a self-established corpus, more than 60 Chinese and 80 American news reports have been analyzed. With a focus on the stance expression of shell nouns, this study reveals the following: (1) In the use of Entity shell nouns, Chinese news reports tend to use Event nouns, measure(s), and Cognition nouns, such as vision, whereas American news reports prefer using nouns like effort(s) to convey negative information; (2) in the use of Attribute shell nouns, Chinese news reports tend to use positive evaluative nouns and Ability nouns, while American news reports prefer negative evaluative nouns and less use of Ability nouns. The research findings demonstrate China's global view and efforts to combat the pandemic, reflecting its national image of assuming responsibility, contributing, being ready to help neighboring countries, and being open and inclusive. In contrast, American news reports present a negative national image of lack of effort in the pandemic, shirking responsibility, chaos within its government, and disregard for people's lives.*

Keywords— *shell noun; stance expression; national image construction; the COVID-19 pandemic*



I. INTRODUCTION

In order to enhance the international image of the nation, a large number of scholars have explored the process and strategies of national image construction from both inside and outside the linguistic perspective. Scholars outside the linguistic fields, such as international relation (Tan 2012), communication strategy (Fan & Zheng 2015), sociology (Chang & Wang 2015), education (Li et al. 2022), and journalism (Wang & Zhang 2021), have studied the methods of shaping a country's image from various angles. From within the linguistic view, scholars have explored the

discourse strategies or methods of constructing the national image from the perspectives of multimodal metaphor (Pan & Zhang 2013), translation (Wu 2019), critical discourse analysis (Wang & Xin 2019), the transitivity system in systemic functional linguistics (Ma & Cui 2020), and appraisal theory (Deng & Yang 2022). However, no scholars have yet examined the functions of shell nouns' stance expression in national image construction.

As an essential medium of information dissemination, news reporting plays a crucial role in national image construction (Guo 2012: 76). Coverage of major unexpected

events not only reflects the attitudes and thoughts of particular social groups, but can enhance a country's prestige and influence by shaping its image. On the one hand, news reporting that effectively deals with such events can showcase a positive image of the country; on the other hand, negative reporting can damage the national image and undermine the country's credibility. Therefore, it is critical to focus and analyze valuable stretches of discourse amid a plethora of information, highlight the social construction function of discourse, and guide people to consider the connotation of news reporting. (Li 2020: 1–2).

Considering the afore-mentioned background, this study aims to explore the stance expression of shell nouns by studying news reports on the COVID-19 pandemic in China and the United States. We will examine the stance and the reflected image of the countries in their response to the unexpected pandemic, exploring new forms of national image construction and providing suggestions for improving international communication.

II. THE STANCE EXPRESSION OF SHELL NOUN

“Research on stance, however this term is defined, represents an ongoing trend toward understanding the full social and pragmatic nature of language, as it is used by actual speakers or writers to act and interact in the real world” (Du Bois 2007: 1). Although scholars have shown diverse understandings of stance, it is viewed as a specific discursive function of a linguistic form in a particular context (Luo 2014: 44). According to Hyland (2005: 49), stance is viewed as an author's “voice” or “community-recognized personality”, functioning as an attitude/author-oriented discursive strategy. Stance from this perspective both reflects the author's subjective attitude and the voices of the group. In COVID-19 news reporting related to government actions, the discourse can express not only the group's values, but also show the government's stance, reflecting a particular national image.

In terms of stance markers, the “shell noun + complement” (SN-cl) structure serves as a significant instrument of stance expression (Biber et al. 1999: 647). Shell noun (SN for short) makes up “an open-ended functionally-defined class of abstract nouns that have, to varying degrees, the potential for being used as conceptual shells for complex, proposition-like pieces of information”

(Schmid 2000: 4). Therefore, a SN embodies an unspecific meaning (semantic gap), which is used in a “shell-content complex” (Complex) to fill this gap through its Content (e.g. a complement clause), such as *the assessment in the assessment that COVID-19 can be characterized as a pandemic*. Although scholars have offered differing definitions and terms for SNs because of their semantic generality, their pragmatic functions remain the focus of investigation.

Shell nouns showcase special pragmatic functions, including discourse cohesion, information transmission, and interpersonal interaction such as stance expression and evaluation (Francis 1994; Lou 2013). However, it was Jiang & Hyland (2015) who systematically studied the stance function of shell nouns (or stance nouns) and classified their functions through an interdisciplinary corpus to investigate the distribution, differences, and characteristics of stance nouns in various disciplines. Jiang (2015) followed this functional typology and observed the stance function of shell nouns in Chinese and American students' argumentative essays. However, scholars have not analyzed the “national stance” that can reflect the national image in news discourse by exploring the stance potential and interpersonal function of SNs. The present study thus investigates the stance expression reflected by the SN-cl structure (Complex).

Since SNs themselves take on unspecific meanings, they require their Contents (the complement clauses in SN-cl) to provide specific semantic connotations, i.e. the “lexical realization” of SNs (Winter 1982: 62). Moreover, SNs also possess the function of “characterization” through which the concepts and characteristics of the Contents can be highlighted by the Shells. This semantic characterization function indicates that authors' lexical choices are the results of stance selection (Jaffe 2009: 3). Additionally, Jiang & Hyland (2015: 23) proposed the concept of “the lexicalization of stance”: SNs in SN-cl reflect the author's attitude towards the Contents (complement clauses). The SN-cl structure in this study consists of SN-*to do/of doing/that*. For example:

- (1) China is honoring **its commitment to make vaccines a global public good**. (China Daily:

2021-02-08) ¹

- (2) Health care workers have a **significantly increased risk** of contracting Covid-19 compared to the general population. (CNN: November 2, 2020)
- (3) “We receive this vaccine as it gave **the hope**...that finally we may be on the verge of returning to some semblance of normalcy.” (China Daily: 2021-02-16)

In example (1), the SN *commitment* lacks specific semantic content; therefore, the author uses the complement clause (*to make vaccines a global public good*) to provide more concrete information. Instead of using other SNs, the author uses *commitment* to characterize the Content — we understand that the Content implies China’s promise and efforts to make COVID-19 vaccines accessible worldwide. This is a covert stance expression, which demonstrates China’s determination and efforts to extend the worldwide availability of the COVID-19 vaccines.

In example (2), the author emphasizes the higher risks facing healthcare workers with the use of the SN *risk* to convey a negative attitude toward infection and express concern for healthcare workers. The author also criticizes Trump’s allegations against US healthcare workers in the report, which reflects Trump government’s failure in handling the pandemic and its unscrupulous attempt at avoiding responsibility.

In example (3), the Zimbabwean Minister of Health used the noun *hope* instead of *possibility* or *certainty* to highlight that the Content is not just a possibility, but rather, a statement of Zimbabwe’s desire to restore its people’s normal life after receiving China’s vaccine aid. This statement is not only encouraging but also reflects China’s efforts in providing international aid during the COVID-19 pandemic and presents the friendly and responsible image of China.

From the examples above, it can be concluded that readers first meet the SNs in the Complexes, and influenced by the nouns’ semantic, evaluative and stance-taking features, readers then obtain specific information through the Contents. This thus establishes the authors’ pragmatic presupposition of stances (Cheng 2003), influencing the

readers’ position and integrating them into the authors’ standpoint. Due to this fact, the readers can perceive the stance and national image of the governments in the news reports.

Based on the stance function of SNs and COVID-19 news reports related to actions and statements of China and the US government, this study will investigate the following three questions: 1) What is the distribution and use of SNs in these reports, and are there differences? 2) If differences exist, what do they reflect in terms of stance taking? 3) What are the implications of these differences for the national images of China and the US?

III. RESEARCH METHODS

1) Data Collection and Processing. The reports concerning Chinese government were obtained from China Daily, a national news website and China’s largest English information portal, which acts as a bridge for China’s international cultural and ideological communication; CNN and FOX, the two most influential media outlets in the US, were the sources for the English data concerning government actions and statements. More specifically, we used a tool programmed by Xiong (2021) to retrieve Chinese news data from China Daily. On the other hand, news articles related to government during the Trump and Biden administrations were collected from CNN and FOX NEWS websites. After manual verification and filtering out irrelevant data, PowerGREP was used to remove unnecessary information. The resulting text was processed, leading to the collection of over 60 articles from China Daily (78861 tokens) and over 80 articles from the US media outlets (78178 tokens).

2) Part-of-Speech Tagging. The corpus was tagged by TreeTagger 2.0. In adjectival and appositive *that*-clauses, the conjunction *that* was marked differently.

3) Retrieval and Result Analysis. AntConc 3.5.9 was used to search for SN-cl constructions with regular expressions. After manual removal of irrelevant items, the results were categorized according to the stance functions of shell nouns proposed by Jiang & Hyland (2015: 12) (see Table 1). The frequency and distribution of each category

study also explores the stance-taking by examining the context in which the SN appears.

¹ Bold indicates the SN, underline indicates the Content, and parentheses indicate the source and date of the example. This

were also analyzed.

Table 1 The stance functions of shell nouns

Entity		
sub-type	description	illustrations
Object	concretizable metatext	essay, report, paper
Event	events, processes, states of affairs	change, process, evidence
Discourse	verbal propositions or speech acts	argument, claim, conclusion
Cognition	cognitive beliefs or attitudes	decision, idea, belief, doubt
Attribute		
sub-type	description	illustrations
Quality	traits that are admired or criticized, valued or depreciated	advantage, difficulty, value
Manner	circumstances of actions and state of affairs	time, method, way, extent
Status	epistemic, deontic, and dynamic modality	possibility, choice, ability
Relation		
sub-type	description	illustrations
Relation	cause-effect, difference, relevance	reason, result, difference

Table 1 demonstrates how different SNs are used by the authors to express their judgments of entities, evaluations of attributes, and relational descriptions, and how they convey their stance and assess the reliability of information sources. In details, the characterization of Contents can reflect the actions taken by, speeches given by, and the pandemic understanding of different countries (through Entity nouns). Furthermore, it can describe the features of the pandemic in various aspects and evaluates the circumstances of events and the status of governmental responses (through Attribute nouns). Finally, it can show the understanding of the relationships between events within the pandemic (through Relation nouns).

IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 The general findings

A total of 550 instances of SN-cl structures were identified in this study (Table 2). In COVID-19 news reports, the vast majority of SNs were used to define the entities of things in the pandemic (64.9%), with Event nouns (40%) frequently used to present or describe events. Among the Attribute nouns, SNs that describe the status of things (Status nouns) were the most commonly used, accounting for 14.6%. The study found a very low proportion of SNs used to describe the relation between propositions, i.e. Relation nouns (1.8%). Since they pose little impact on stance expression and national image construction, this study focuses on the use of Entity and Attribute nouns.

Table 2 The total number and overall distribution of shell nouns

Type	Total	Per 10,000 words	Percentage
Entity	357	22.7	64.9%
Object	0	0	0%
Event	220	14	40%
Discourse	39	2.5	7.1%
Cognition	98	6.2	17.8%
Attribute	183	11.7	33.3%
Quality	42	2.7	7.6%
Manner	61	3.9	11.1%
Status	80	5.1	14.6%

Relation	10	0.6	1.8%
Totals	550	35	100%

As shown in Table 3, the distribution of SN usage is generally consistent between China and the US. The proportions regarding the use of Entity (Object, Event, Discourse, and Cognition), Attribute (Quality, Manner, and Status), and Relation nouns are similar for both countries, with no significant differences. From a macro-perspective,

there is no large difference in the proportion of SN use, but from a functional perspective, we have to analyze stance within the context. Therefore, this study intends to explore the stance reflected by specific SNs and the national image they construct in specific contexts.

Table 3 The distribution of shell nouns (China and America)

Per 10,000 words (%)	Entity				Attribute			Relation	Totals
	Object	Event	Discourse	Cognition	Quality	Manner	Status		
China	0 (0)	14.8 (40.6%)	2.7 (7.3%)	6.7 (18.4%)	1.9 (5.2%)	4.3 (11.8%)	5.8 (16%)	0.3 (0.7%)	36.5 (100%)
	24.2 (66.3)				12 (33)				
America	0 (0)	13.2 (39.4%)	2.3 (6.9%)	5.7 (17.1%)	3.5 (10.3%)	3.5 (10.3%)	4.3 (13%)	1 (3%)	33.5 (100%)
	21.2 (63.4%)				11.3 (33.6%)				

In addition, the use of SN-*to do* is more frequent than SN-*of doing/that* (infinitives appear 374 times, accounting for 68%). This echoes with the view in Biber et al. (1999) that infinitives are commonly used to show human intention, future-oriented human-controlled action, and human’s control over behavior. During COVID-19, people are concerned with the government’s view, attitude, and measures taken towards the pandemic, as well as the government’s ability to prevent the spread of the virus and maintain normal social life, and its view, measures, and capability can contribute to the construction of national image. The forthcoming analysis of Event and Status nouns thus reflects the differences in the actions and abilities of the two governments.

4.2 The stance expression and national image reflected by Entity shell nouns

Figure 1 shows that there is no significant difference in the frequency of use of Entity nouns (and the subclasses) between China and America. This further indicates that, by using Entity nouns, news reporters and media from both

countries focus on the events that occur in the pandemic and express or reproduce others’ thinking of the pandemic, meanwhile introducing relevant statements.

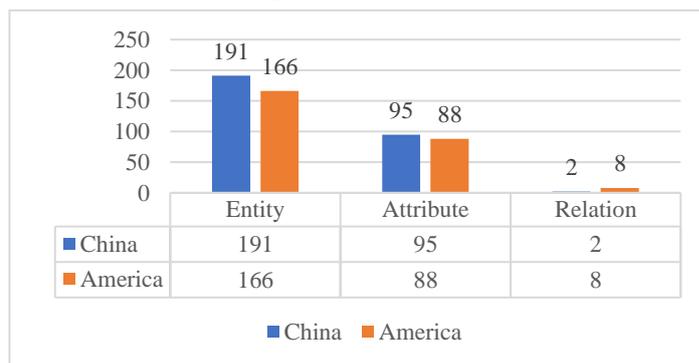


Fig. 1: The overall distribution of shell nouns (China and America)

Additionally, Table 2 indicates that the proportion of Event and Cognition nouns in Chinese and American news reports is the highest (89% for both), far exceeding other types. However, the use of Event (220 times) and Cognition nouns (98 times) is not balanced, with much more Event

nouns than Cognition nouns (LL=48, $p<0.0001$). This seems to contradict the research findings in Jiang & Hyland (2015) and Jiang (2015). However, due to our focus on news reports related to the COVID-19 pandemic, which involves the two governments' response and their efforts to prevent the pandemic, Event nouns are more frequently used in news reports.

4.2.1 Event nouns: The US's mishandling and blame shift of the pandemic

Through data analysis, the study found that the top five most frequently used Event SNs in both countries' reports are *effort(s)*, *measure(s)*, *arrangements*, *evidence*, *action(s)* and *effort(s)*, *plan(s)*, *action(s)*, *steps*, *fact*. Viewing the data alone, the United States used the word *effort* 42 times, while China only used it 34 times, which seems to suggest that the US have expressed more about its determination, hardship, and positive stance in fighting the pandemic.² However, from the functional perspective, stance needs to be analyzed in contexts. Through a detailed analysis of the contexts in which *effort* is used by both sides, the study found that the United States used *effort* to transmit negative information in 17 cases, while China only used it 7 times (LL=4.2, $p<0.05$). In the 17 cases where *effort* was used in US reports, the reports accused China of improper epidemic prevention and slander of China's use of the virus for international competition, or indicated that the US government's epidemic prevention was inadequate (such as being unable to control the epidemic, reducing efforts to combat the epidemic, and refusing to take responsibility for the epidemic). On the other hand, the 7 cases where *effort* was used in Chinese reports were mainly used to condemn US smear campaigns against China or to indicate the US government's inadequate epidemic prevention. For instance, the following examples respectively reflect the Trump administration's inaction on pandemic prevention and the fact that the Biden administration has reduced anti-pandemic investment due to funding problems.

- (4) When the virus' dangerous potential became readily apparent in January, Trump should have immediately led **an international effort to procure, allocate, and distribute needed medical**

equipment, to generate and share best practices on testing and isolation, and to advance the preparedness of lower income communities and countries ... (CNN: April 2, 2020)

- (5) "The Biden administration is curtailing **its efforts to combat the virus,**" the editors wrote, saying it was due to the lack of funding. (FOX: March 28, 2022)

Example (4) shows that when COVID-19 showed its fatal danger in January 2020, the Trump administration should have taken actions to obtain, distribute the required medical equipment, isolate patients, test the public, and give priority to protecting more vulnerable groups. But reportedly, the Trump administration didn't start discussing the virus until March. This indifference underscores its complete disregard for lives and health, and the irresponsibility the US government.

Similarly, in example (5), because Congress refused to pass the funding bill of COVID-19 prevention, the Biden administration reduced epidemic control expenditures, as if the pandemic in the United States had ended and people had returned to normal. This tragedy also shows that the US government is not determined in the prevention and control, and cannot work together. It reflects the image of the US being controlled by capital and ignoring people's lives. In addition, the US government has maliciously slandered the Chinese government, slandering the virus as the "Wuhan virus" and a tool for China to compete with it. We can also see this from the use of *effort*, as in example (6).

- (6) Washington has ramped up **efforts to blame China for the global spread of the virus** as it faces growing criticism at home for its own handling of the pandemic. (CNN: May 5, 2020)

4.2.2 Event nouns: China's decisive response and responsibility for the pandemic

In contrast, the Chinese government has shown a positive attitude in the fight against the pandemic, making full preparations and taking a series of prevention measures to protect people. The use of Event nouns, especially through *measure*, highlights the Chinese national image as being resolute, responsible, since the government values

² We should refer to the semantics of nouns for stance analysis. According to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English

(LDOCE), *effort* is defined as "an attempt to do something, especially when this involves a lot of hard work or determination".

people's lives and safety. In this study, China used *measure(s)* a total of 24 times, while the United States only used it twice, which represents a significant difference (LL=21.8, $p<0.0001$). See examples (7-8) for illustration:

- (7) Chinese President Xi Jinping made instructions ..., including putting people's safety and health as the top priority, making thorough plans, taking **effective measures to curb the spread of the virus**. (China Daily: 2020-09-24)
- (8) Li Keqiang presided over ... demanding the implementation of **solid measures to care for the medical personnel fighting on the frontline against COVID-19**. (China Daily: 2020-09-24)

4.2.3 Cognition nouns: China's international image of being open and inclusive

Apart from the differences in Event nouns, there are distinctions in the use of Cognition nouns. The study found that China used *vision* 9 times, while the United States did not use it at all (LL=12.4, $p<0.001$). According to its meaning, *vision* can express the author/visionary's view and attitude towards the event, reflecting their collective aspirations. Therefore, in pandemic reporting, the use of *vision* by China can convey the Chinese government's understanding of the pandemic and establish a common aspiration. For example:

- (9) It is also a concrete step to put into action the **vision of building a community with a shared future for mankind**. (China Daily: 2020-05-10)

In this example, China constructs an aspiration whereby it hopes to establish a community of shared future for mankind and help people around the world to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic through concrete actions. This showcases China's open-mindedness to the world.

4.3 The stance expression and national image reflected by Attribute shell nouns

Overall, there is no significant difference in the frequency of Attribute nouns (and their sub-classes) between China and the US. However, the following differences have been observed in terms of the sub-types of Attribute noun (Quality and Status nouns):

- 1) Jiang & Hyland (2015: 13) contended that Quality nouns are used to evaluate events in terms of being praised or criticized, the standard falling within "a scale of plus or minus", such as "good-bad", "important-unimportant", and

"safe-dangerous". Therefore, Quality nouns can be divided into positive evaluation (praise) and negative evaluation (criticism) nouns. The study found that among Quality nouns, the American reports exploited significantly more negative Quality nouns (20 times), while the Chinese reports only four times used those nouns (LL=11.5, $p<0.0001$).

- 2) Jiang & Hyland (2015: 12) define Status nouns as the description and judgment of epistemic, deontic, and dynamic modality, among which nouns of dynamic modality are used to describe "ability, opportunity and tendency". This research found that the Chinese reports used nouns of ability 15 times (including *ability*, *capability*, and *capacity*), while the United States only used these nouns 5 times, showing a significant difference (LL=5.15, $p<0.05$).

4.3.1 Quality nouns: The US's irresponsibility, chaos, and disorder in the pandemic

In terms of Quality nouns, the United States primarily used negative Quality nouns (taking up 74%), while China primarily used the positive ones (taking up 73.4%). This indicates that the United States adopted a critical attitude towards the pandemic, while China tended to praise more, indirectly constructing a negative image of the United States. More specifically, the United States frequently used the word *risk* embodying negative evaluation, with a count as high as 11 times, while China did not use *risk* at all (LL=15.2, $p<0.0001$). The following are examples of critical evaluation used by the US:

- (10) The US is at **risk of losing all its recent gains in the battle against Covid-19** as highly contagious variants take advantage of Americans getting lax with safety measures. (CNN: March 11, 2021)
- (11) **Trump's failure to work with Biden** is becoming more urgent as Covid spreads. (CNN: November 16, 2020)

Example (10) summarizes Biden's persuasion on the potential danger of virus mutations. Since taking office, the US government has changed its previous policy of "laissez-faire" towards the virus and has become more involved in international pandemic prevention and control. However, due to the issues left by the Trump administration's improper policies and the emergence of new virus variants, the Biden administration could not properly address the problems, and some previous achievements might go in vain.

Therefore, the news employed the negative evaluation noun *risk* to persuade the American people and inform them of the serious consequences that might be caused by gathering again. While the intention behind this advice was good, it could not cover up its failure in pandemic control.

Example (11) was reported on November 16, 2020, when Trump was still the President of the United States and Biden was about to take office. As the headline of this report, the example uses the term *failure* to criticize Trump for refusing to cooperate with the Biden team during a critical moment of the pandemic. At the time, the United States had already surpassed 11 million confirmed COVID-19 cases and the situation was out of control, but Trump refused to cooperate with the Biden team, rendering them unable to contact senior health officials in the White House. While the American people were struggling in the pandemic, the President was selfish, irresponsible, refused to accept the necessary health information during the transition, disregarded people's lives, and damaged the image of the United States. This highlights the chaos and dysfunction within the US government.

4.3.2 Status nouns: China's spirit of unity and cooperation

In respect of Status nouns, China mainly used nouns of ability (34%), while the United States used them relatively less (14%). Through these nouns of dynamic modality, Chinese media reports reflect that the Chinese government has the powerful capability to respond to emergencies for the protection of people's lives and safety, to resume social production, to assist other countries, and to build a community with a shared future for mankind. The reports also show China's international image of unity and mutual assistance, such as:

(12) Chinese Premier Li Keqiang spoke over phone with European Commission President..., noting the Chinese government and people have confidence, resolution and **ability to win the battle against the pandemic**. (China Daily: 2020-04-08)

(13) "Our second production line ..., enabling the company to attain **capacity to produce 1 billion doses of vaccine every year**," said Yin Weidong, chairman of Nasdaq-listed Sinovac. (China Daily: 2021-2-22)

Example (12) introduces the utterance of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang. The Premier emphasized that the Chinese government and people have confidence, plan, and capability to win the battle against the epidemic. Through using *ability*, the Chinese government described its state of ability, its ability of responding to emergency and mobilizing its people, which implies China's image of practicality and its internal solidarity.

Example (13) describes the production capability of Sinovac Biotech in manufacturing vaccines. China joined the COVAX initiative led by the World Health Organization in January 2020, which supports the export of vaccines and has exported COVID-19 vaccines to many countries. China not only has the ability to produce COVID-19 vaccines on a large scale, but has also furnished help for other countries. These facts demonstrate its international responsibility and showcasing its willingness for mutual assistance.

V. CONCLUSION

This study serves to expand the research field of national image construction, since it has analyzed the COVID-19 pandemic news reports concerning the Chinese and American governments, demonstrating that SNs are crucial for constructing national stance and facilitating interpersonal interaction. SNs thus can help reflect national stance and the corresponding national image.

The research findings show that there are significant differences in the use of SNs to express stance in these news reports, and different expressions of stance construct disparate national images. Specifically, there are differences in the sub-types of Entity and Attribute shell nouns. In the use of Entity nouns, Chinese news reports often use Event nouns such as *measure(s)* and Cognition nouns such as *vision*, while American news reports tend to use nouns like *effort(s)* to convey negative information. In the use of Attribute nouns, Chinese news reports tend to use positive evaluation nouns and nouns of ability, while American news reports tend to use negative evaluation nouns and use fewer ability nouns. The study results suggest China's global perspective, and its efforts in fighting the virus, along with its responsible, selfless, open, and inclusive national and international image. By contrast, the negative national image of the United States comes from its inadequate response to the pandemic, shifting responsibility, internal

chaos within the government, and disregard for people's lives.

From a functional view, this research also embodies significant implications for English news reporters. By using appropriate "shell noun + complement" structures (such as Event nouns that represent pandemic prevention actions or Cognitions nouns that express hope), writers using SN-cl can silently set "pragmatic presuppositions", clarify and highlight the information embedded in complements (Contents), and guide reader into clear stances.

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