Vietnamese Media's Construction of International Society: A Case Study of the Pandemic Reports of Vietnam News Agency

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Abstract: This study examines the construction of the international society in Vietnam News Agency's (VNA) COVID-19 pandemic reporting. Using the transitivity system of systemic functional linguistics, the study analyzes the headlines of VNA's reports and investigates the linguistic characteristics behind Vietnamese media's construction of the global community, particularly in relation to China and the United States. Through quantitative and qualitative analysis, the study reveals the distribution of prominent participants, the allocation of roles to countries, and the types of processes used. The findings demonstrate VNA's focus on Vietnamese administrative departments and individuals, as well as ASEAN and its member countries. The study also uncovers differences in the portrayal of China and the United States, with China often depicted as a patient or environmental element, while the United States is portrayed as an active agent. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of Vietnam's positioning in the international ecological landscape and its diplomatic priorities.
Keywords: News Media; International Relations; Systemic Functional Linguistics; Vietnam News Agency; COVID-19

1. INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of public health emergencies often triggers intensive coverage by international media and directs public attention to the countries involved. COVID-19 pandemic, especially during its early stage, has attracted transnational, and intensive coverage from the global media. Many of them have set up special columns for the pandemic and conducted multilingual coverage tailored to audiences in different countries.

They not only disseminate timely information about their own countries' pandemic situations to foreign audiences but also closely monitor the development of the pandemic in other countries and disseminate foreign

pandemic information again after processing it. On the one hand, the cross-border coverage of the pandemic strengthens international communication and reflects the current international ecology; on the other hand, it also constructs various national images and international relations (Bucatariu, 2020; Dinh & Ho, 2020)

With rapid economic growth, Vietnam has become an important manufacturing center and trading partner in the international society. Its position in ASEAN is also very important, with strong political, economic and cultural ties to countries such as China, the United States, Japan, and South Korea.

Also, Vietnam plays an important role in the security environment of both Asia and the world. Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, what are the focal points of Vietnamese media? How does it construct the international society and the nations like China and the United States? The answers to these questions concern the self-positioning of Vietnam in the complex international society. Since news media plays a role of ideological carrier (Zeng & Yang, 2017), the reporting on the pandemic by Vietnamese media is not only a delivery of information transition but also a process of discursive construction of international relations.

Therefore, this study, based on the transitivity system of systemic functional linguistics(Halliday, 1967), examines the headlines of VNA's reports on the COVID-19 pandemic, and discusses the discursive construction of Vietnamese media of the international community, especially the images of China and the United States.

2. THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The transitive system of systemic functional linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) includes three components: a process, the participant(s) in the process, and the circumstance associated with the process (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

There are six types of processes, which are often realized by verbs in English: (1) action process describes the action-oriented activities of relevant participants (e.g. eat); (2) relational process describing what they are, what they look like, where they are, what they own, and what they are related to (e.g. be); (3) Communicative process describes the process of information exchange between relevant participants through language(e.g. say); (4) mental process describes the psychological activities such as love,

hate, approval or disapproval, belief or doubt that participants achieve through emotion, will, and perception (e.g. think);(5) behavioral process is to describe the physiological activities that relevant participants unconsciously exhibit, such as breathing and smiling(e.g. sleep); (6) Existential process describes the state of participants' existence relational process(e.g. exist) (He, 2017).

Process participants, or simply participants, refer to the people, things, and objects associated with the process, usually realized by noun phrases, such as "He" and "apple" in the sentence "He ate an apple"(La et al., 2020).

Corresponding to the process types, participants are categorized into Actor, Carrier, Senser, Communicator and so on. Observation of these categories allowed us to identify the roles assigned to the countries in COVID-19 reporting. Some role-assigning patterns, especially those with high dispersion or mental salience, may contribute to image construction, since role assignment is a way of implicit evaluation. Readers may be informed, even without explicit evaluative linguistic resources, of how the news agency evaluates a country by assigning a particular role (Tran et al., 2021).

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Data collection

Vietnam News Agency (Thông tấn xã Việt Nam) founded on September 2, 1945, is the national news agency of Vietnam, responsible for disseminating information and official documents about Vietnam to foreign countries. The VNA website has versions in six languages: Vietnamese, English, French, Chinese, Russian and Spanish. The English version has six main columns, including "Party Building", "Post-pandemic recovery", "East Sea", etc.

The "Post-pandemic recovery" section, which was named by "COVID-19" before January, 2022, began publishing related reports on January 31, 2020, and by October 1, 2020, a total of 3720 news articles were published. All these news articles from this period were collected. While the texts were saved for references when needed, the titles were extracted as the corpus for analysis.

Because titles carry the most important information of news articles, providing readers with a cognitive framework for the main text (van Dijk, 1991). Moreover, titles are likely to be the only source of information for readers since they often browse over the titles without reading the details

of the news texts.

3.2 Data analysis

Data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively to interpret the linguistic characteristics of the news titles. The main steps of data collection are as follows:

(1) Country labeling. The BFSU Qualitative Coder 1.2 was used to label all country names appearing in the news headlines, as well as closely related participants. For example, names related to the Vietnam and Vietnamese city names such as Hanoi and Da Nang, were marked as [VIET], while institutions like Harvard and Apple, and specific individuals like the president of Harvard and Trump, were marked as [US]. By labeling the countries, the most frequently mentioned countries in the VNA's COVID-19 related news titles were analyzed, and the distribution of participants were studied (Haseeb & Hartani, 2023; Leung & Huang, 2007)

(2) Process type labeling. The BFSU Qualitative Coder 1.2 was used to label the processes associated with high-frequency countries in all news titles. As the theme, or topic position, is the starting point of the information in the clause (Halliday, 1967), the participant in the topic position is the element that the clause is about (He, 2017). Therefore, the researchers labelled the process types that were associated with high-frequency countries when they were in the topic position. For example, in the clause "Russian media commends Vietnam's fight against COVID-19" (VNA, 23/04/2020), Russian media is the participant in the topic position, and the process "commend" is a communicative process. The clause is marked as <[RU]> Russian media </[RU]> commends Vietnam's fight against COVID-19 (Thi Trang & Alradhi, 2021).

(3) Quantitative analysis. It concerns the occurrences of prominent participants in VNA English pandemic reporting and the distribution of process types of these participants. After country labeling, the distribution of participant types was analyzed by sequencing the countries (and international institutions) according to their frequencies, which reveals the prominent countries in the VNA's epidemic news headlines. Then, headlines with high-occurrence participants in the topic position were extracted, and the distribution of processes were analyzed by observing their frequencies and proportions (Blackstone & Fuhr Jr, 2019).

(4) Qualitative analysis. After conducting quantitative analysis of the participants and processes, a qualitative analysis was performed to observe their linguistic features in greater detail. To analyze the participants, headlines featuring prominent countries in the topic position were

examined individually, and their roles as either agents or patients were compared between countries. Additionally, qualitative analysis was used to supplement the quantitative analysis of process types. Greater attention was given to the major process types designated to the prominent countries, such as action and communication, and the differences in the major process types between different participants were observed (Hoang Viet Lam, 2022; Strehovec, 2023).

3.3 The distribution of prominent participants

The distributional attributes of participants in the news headlines, as depicted in Figure 1, provide valuable insights into the countries that have captured significant attention. The dominant focus of the VNA's English epidemic news is on Vietnamese administrative departments (e.g., Hanoi), and individuals from Vietnam who have tested positive for COVID-19. These participants have generated the highest level of attention. Additionally, ASEAN and its member countries emerged as the second most prominent participants in the news coverage.

Notably, China, Japan, South Korea, the United States, Russia, and various Western European countries also featured prominently. This selection of participants aligns with Vietnam's diplomatic policy, which places importance on fostering relations with neighboring countries and subsequently expanding engagement with major powers and traditional friendly nations (Pan, 2011).
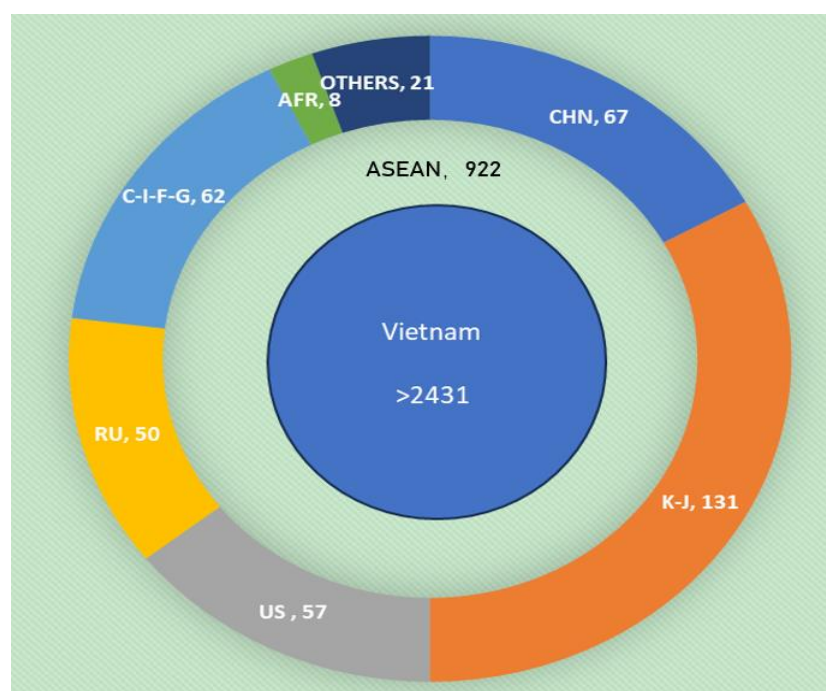

Figure 1:. Primary countries in the headlines of English epidemic reports by VNA

Close observation shows that roles of agent and patient were allocated diversely to these participants. The United States was allocated more often as agent than China. It appeared 57 times in VNA's COVID-19 headlines, of which 43.86% (n=25) were agents, while China appeared 67 times, of which only 26.87% (n=18) were agents. That means there is a higher probability of the United States being recognized as a primary initiator in pandemic prevention. Although China was frequently shown in Vietnamese news coverage, it was more often shown as patients, the ones affected by the processes, or the environmental elements, or the modifiers of participants. Extracts (1)-(3) are examples:

(1) China thanks Vietnam for aid in coronavirus fight（agent）（2020/2/11）

(2) Vietnamese province assists Chinese region in nCoV fight（patient）(2020/2/6)

(3) 30 citizens arrive at Van Don airport from China（environmental element）(2020/2/10)

3.4 The distribution of process types of prominent participants

The overall distribution of process types highlights the differential semantic selection by the VNA concerning various countries (see Table 1). The actions performed by Japan, South Korea, and the United States constitute the majority, accounting for nearly two-thirds of all their processes. close observation would reveal that they are characterized by the aid provided to Vietnam and ASEAN countries, or epidemic prevention and control measures related to the opening or closing of ports, thereby constructing an image of actors, though sometimes passive actors (Nguyen & Do, 2023). Following closely are Vietnam and ASEAN countries with action processes accounting for 49.4% and 55.8%, respectively. While actions of Vietnam feature prevention of domestic pandemic and assistance towards ASEAN countries, Vietnam was constructed as an efficient manager in epidemic prevention.

In contrast, China and Russia have a significantly smaller proportion of action processes. China's action processes account for 38.4% of all processes, while Russia only has 9.1%. Corresponding to this is their relatively larger proportions of communicative processes, which together with their mental processes, are featured by the recognition of Vietnam's exemplary model in epidemic prevention.

One notable observation is that during among the communicative processes of United States, Japan, and South Korea, a significant portion

has been dedicated to expressing admiration for Vietnam's model and its effectiveness, which enhanced Vietnam's image as an acclaimed entity within the international community.

Table 1: Processes and Roles of Participants in VNA's COVID-19 Reporting

The thematic participants	Vietnam	ASEAN	China	U.S.	Japan and South Korea	Russia
Action processes	49.4%	55.8%	38.4%	62.5%	62.9%	9.1%
Communicative processes	24.6%	22.5%	46.3%	31.2%	25.9%	81.8%
Mental processes	2.8%	2.6%	15.3%	6.3%	7.4%	-
Relational processes	23.2%	19.1%	-	-	3.8%	9.1%
Behavioral processes	-	-	-	-	-	-
Existential processes	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

By comparing China's and the United States' actions, we find that China's actions are mainly about China's participation and support for international cooperation or involvement in epidemic prevention work. It is noteworthy that these processes are primarily portrayed as inclinations and intentions to take action, rather than actual actions being taken. In contrast, the United States' counterparts describe specific measures taken for epidemic prevention (see Table 2).

For example, Example4C describes the action process "join" as "ready to join", implying that China has not yet joined the ASEAN vaccine development efforts. Likewise, the action process "supply" in Example6C (grammatical metaphor) is expressed as "to prioritize…in…supply", which means that the provision of vaccines to Mekong River region countries is only a priority consideration. The action processes in Examples7C and 8C are in the passive voice, where Chinese citizens and enterprises are the recipients rather than the implementers of action. On the other hand, the action verbs "cancel" "donate" "present" "fund" and "grant" in Examples4U-8U used to realize action processes of U.S. are more specific, indicating that meaningful and practical actions were taken for international epidemic prevention.

Table 2: Action processes in headlines with China and the US as the thematic participants

China（C）	U.S.（U）
(4C) China ready to join ASEAN to develop COVID-19 vaccine: Ambassador	(4U) US cancels annual large-scale drill with Philippines
(5C) China strongly supports Vietnam's ASEAN chairmanship: ambassador	(5U) US donates 100 brand-new ventilators to aid Vietnam's COVID-19 response
(6C) China to prioritize Mekong countries in COVID-19 vaccine supply	(6U) US firms present medical supplies to HCM City
(7C) Chinese father and son discharged from hospital	(7U) US funds additional 1.5 million USD for Cambodia's COVID-19 response
(8C) Chinese firms in Hai Phong requested to actively fight nCoV	(8U) US grants Vietnam 9.5 million USD to combat COVID-19

Table 3: Communicative processes in headlines with China and the US as the thematic participants

China（C）	U.S.（U）
(9C) China thanks Vietnam for aid in coronavirus fight	(9U) US lauds Vietnam's medical capacity
(10C) China willing to strengthen cooperation with ASEAN: Chinese commerce ministry	(10U) US magazine highlights Vietnam's social solidarity in COVID-19 fight
(11C) Chinese ambassador hails ASEAN+3 cooperation in fight against COVID-19	(11U) US magazine praises Vietnam song on COVID-19 fight guidance
(12C) Chinese diplomat praises Vietnam's support in COVID-19 fight	(12U) US paper: Vietnam takes science-based approach to COVID-19
(13C) Chinese diplomat thanks HCM City hospital's care for citizens	(13U) US's Veterans for Peace praises Vietnam's success in fighting COVID-19
(14C) Chinese expert lauds Vietnam's role in organising ASEAN, ASEAN+3 summits on COVID-19	
(15C) Chinese Premier calls for joint efforts against COVID-19	

The Communicative process from China mainly focuses on expressing recognition for Vietnam's epidemic prevention work. However, unlike the United States, China, as the communicatee, the party who initiates the communicative process, emphasizes Vietnam's specific actions in epidemic prevention work, such as Example 9C (aid assistance), Example 10C (cooperation), Example 12C (support), Example 13C (hospital's care), and Example 14C (organizing). Conversely, the United States emphasizes

Vietnam's abilities, methods, and achievements in epidemic prevention work, such as Example 9U (medical capacity), Example 10U (social solidarity), Example 12U (science-based approach), and Example 13U (success), etc. This indicates that China, like the United States, recognizes Vietnam, but China focuses more on specific actions that do not highlight Vietnam's administrative working ability. Conversely, the United States evaluates Vietnam more positively based on stable features such as abilities and methods.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 VNA's construction of the international society

The processes and participants selected in the headlines illustrate the screening and filtering of information in news discourse. Overall, the news headlines from VNA cover a diverse range of objects of concern, but more attention was paid to Vietnam's domestic situation, ASEAN, China, Russia, and developed countries such as U.S., Japan and South Korean. Instead of accusations and critiques, it selected processes (e.g., aiding and recognizing between participants) that convey positive evaluations in its headlines, contributing to the construction of a harmonious atmosphere as a whole. Roles of actors, managers, and commentators are highlighted for different countries, which shows Vietnam media's positioning of different countries in the international ecosystem.

The English epidemic headlines of VNA subtly exemplify Vietnam's multifaceted relationships with other nations in the global community. Firstly, in contrast to countries such as China, the United States, Russia, Japan, and South Korea, Vietnam maintains a closer affiliation with ASEAN countries. Although other nations also receive attention, they are deemed as "Others". This disparity can be discerned by examining the frequency of ASEAN and its member states and the processes designated to these countries. Except for Vietnam's internal circumstances, ASEAN remains the focal point of concern, with Vietnam exhibiting a greater level of care and assistance towards ASEAN in combating the pandemic. Secondly, it is worth noting that Vietnam's diplomatic relations with various other countries manifest notable differences. The level of warmth and affinity observed in the interactions between Vietnam and China appears to be less prominent when compared to their engagements with the U.S. China's response to the global pandemic often exhibits a more rhetorical nature, lacking the same level of tangible and proactive measures

demonstrated by the United States. In fact, when expressing appreciation for Vietnam's efforts, China's voice seems relatively weaker, thereby giving rise to the perception of a lesser degree of sincerity and warmth in comparison to the United States and other nations.

These findings reveal Vietnamese media's politeness and indifference to China on epidemic-related issues. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic, China has garnered significant global media attention. This attention has been accompanied by a diverse range of opinions, with some lauding China's anti-epidemic measures (Gao & Liu, 2020) and others levying critiques and accusations (Gao & Ren, 2020). Given the profound geographic, historical, cultural, and economic links between China and Vietnam, China's progress in epidemic prevention ought to be one of the more closely monitored factors. However, Vietnamese media appears to have deliberately distanced itself from this issue. The silence of Vietnamese media leaves ample opportunities for public imagination and interpretation. The impact of such silence on the international ecological status quo rests heavily upon the diverse understandings and perspectives of different publics.

5. CONCLUSION

News media plays a crucial role in conveying national ideas and constructing complex multilateral international relations, as evident in the coverage of the COVID-19 epidemic. This study utilizes the systemic functional linguistics framework to analyze the multilateral international relations constructed through Vietnam's epidemic reporting, with a focus on China and U.S. The analysis sheds light on Vietnam's positioning within the global ecological landscape and its diplomatic priorities. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study, particularly in terms of the sample collection. The global fight against COVID-19 has evolved through different stages, and there may have been changes beyond the time period examined in this study. Therefore, further research that examines Vietnamese media's use of transitive resources across different stages of the global pandemic would provide a more comprehensive understanding of Vietnam's positioning in the international society.

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