A Contrastive Study of Hedges in COVID-19 Reports Selected from China Daily and The New York Times

Wang Ya'nan[1], Tian Zhiling[2] & Wang Jinghua[3]

[1] English Department, North China Electric Power University, Baoding, China

[2] Beijing No. 80 High School Xiong'an Branch, Xiong'an New Area, China

[3] College of Foreign Languages Teaching for Non-English Majors, Hebei University, Baoding, China

Correspondence: Wang Ya'nan, North China Electric Power University, Baoding, China.

Abstract

Based on Jef Verschueren's Adaptation Theory, Lakoff's definition and Prince et al.'s classification of hedges, this paper takes New York Times and China Daily from January 23rd to April 8th, 2020 as corpus sources, randomly selects 39 COVID-19 reports, and makes a contrastive study of hedges among them, aiming at exploring the similarities and differences in the use of hedges in COVID-19 reports selected from Chinese and American mainstream newspapers and further revealing their influencing factors.

Keywords: adaptation theory, hedges, COVID-19 news reports, contrastive study

1. Introduction

In the past 50 years, linguists at home and abroad have been deeply exploring hedges, and their research perspectives have shifted from semantics to pragmatics and translation studies, and their research fields have gradually penetrated into medicine, natural science and communication studies. However, the author finds that the domestic research on hedges in news started late, and the earliest article was Huang Shifang's "Application of Fuzzy Language in News Writing" in 1994. After Huang Shifang, scholars began to explore the frequency and pragmatic functions of hedges in various news reports, such as political news (Yuan, 2009; Hu, 2011), Economic News (Gong, 2014; Huang, 2019), Science and Technology News (Niu, 2003; Dai & Shi, 2016), etc., but the "hedges in novel coronavirus news" still needs further study.

At the end of 2019, the novel coronavirus epidemic (hereinafter referred to as "COVID-19") swept the world without any prediction, which caused continuous concern and extensive discussion in all countries of the world. The epidemic situation is fierce and spreading fast. People all over the world are staying at home for their lives. The news reports of online media have become one of the important channels for people to get information about the epidemic situation. The author finds that many scholars have learned from non-linguistics (Zhao, 2021; Peng & Zhang, 2021) and linguistic perspectives, including systemic functional linguistics (Li, 2020; Lian & Mi, 2021) and cognitive linguistics (Zhang, 2020; Zhang & Ji, 2021), but it hasn't caused enough concern in pragmatics.

Therefore, it is of academic value to apply the adaptation theory to explore hedges in news reports of COVID-19. Based on the COVID-19 reports in The New York Times and China Daily, according to Lakoff's definition of hedges and Prince's classification of hedges, this paper contrasts the similarities and differences in the use of hedges in the news reports of COVID-19 in *The New York Times* and *China Daily* and explains the influencing factors from the perspective of adaptation theory.

2. Theoretical Basis

2.1 Definition and Classification of Hedges

Although scholars at home and abroad have different definitions of hedges in different periods (Zadeh, 1972; Lakoff, 1973; He, 1985), the definition of Lakoff is by far the most influential and widely circulated. Therefore, this paper will take Lakoff's definition as the research basis, that is, "hedges are words that make things vague" (Lakoff, 1973, p. 471).

There are various classifications of hedges, but so far no agreement has been reached. Among the existing

classifications, Prince and his colleagues have a comprehensive classification, which provides a theoretical basis for later scholars' classification research. Therefore, this paper adopts Prince's classification as the research basis. Therefore, hedges are mainly divided into two categories: approximators and shields.

Table 1. Classification of hedges by Prince et al. (1982)

Approximators		Shields	
Adaptors	Rounders	Plausibility shields	Attribution shields
almost, really, quite, kind of, more or less, to some extent, very	about, roughly, in most respects, loosely/strictly speaking	probably, I'm afraid, hard to say, I wonder/think/guess/ suspect/assume	It is said, presumably, according to, as is well known

2.2 Adaptation Theory

Verschueren, Secretary-General of the International Pragmatics Association, put forward the Adaptation Theory for the first time in 1987, aiming to examine and understand the use of language from a macroscopic and brand-new perspective. Language users can make choices because of their variability, negotiability and adaptability. Limit the possible range of variability selection (Verschueren, 1999, p. 59); Negotiability means that the choice is not made in a mechanical way or in strict rules or a fixed relationship between forms and functions, but in accordance with highly flexible principles and strategies (ibidem: 59); Adaptability is to enable people to make a negotiable language choice from a range of possibilities, so as to approach the satisfaction point of communication (ibidem: 61).

Based on the above three characteristics, the description and interpretation of language can be studied from four dimensions, namely, contextual correlates of adaptability, structural objects of adaptability, dynamics of adaptability, and salience of the adaptation processes. This paper focuses on the interpretation of hedges in COVID-19 reports from the adaptation dimension of contextual relationship. The explanatory framework of contextual adaptation is shown in the following figure.
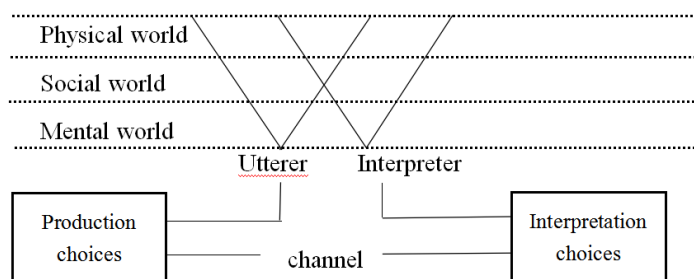

Figure1. Contextual correlates of adaptability (Verschueren, 1999, p. 76)

3. Research Problems and Methods

3.1 Research Questions

This paper is devoted to answering two research questions: (1) What are the similarities and differences in frequency and distribution of hedges in COVID-19 reports of The New York Times and China Dail; (2) What are the factors that influence the similarities and differences in the use of hedges in Chinese and American COVID-19 reports.

3.2 Research Methods

This paper focuses on contrastive analysis and corpus research. Taking The New York Times and China Daily as the corpus sources, two corpora of news reports on the epidemic situation in COVID-19 are established, namely, the corpus of reports on the epidemic situation in COVID-19, a mainstream newspaper in the United States ("American corpus" for short), and the corpus of reports on the epidemic situation in COVID-19, a mainstream newspaper in China ("Chinese corpus" for short). The time span is from January 23rd to April 8th, 2020. Every two days, 39 news reports about the COVID-19 epidemic are randomly selected, with 28,797 glyphs in American

corpus and 28,614 glyphs in Chinese corpus.

4. Contrastive Analysis of Hedges in COVID-19 Reports

4.1 Frequency Dimension

The Chinese and American corpora are composed of 39 reports on COVID-19 respectively, the reports of Chinese corpora are selected from *China Daily*, and the American corpora are selected from *The New York Times*. Through AntConc 3.5.9 software, hedges in Chinese and American corpora are searched respectively, and then the frequencies are counted. The results are shown in the following table.

Table 2. Contrasts of hedges in Chinese and American corpora

Corpus	Number of words in corpus	Number of hedges	Standardized frequency (per 1000 words)	The ratio of words in corpus
American corpus	28797	1357	47	4.71%
Chinese corpus	28614	1172	41	4.10%

The data show that there are hedges in both Chinese and American corpora, but the frequency and distribution of hedges in American corpora are significantly higher than those in Chinese corpora. The specific frequency of four types of hedges is as follows.

Table 3. Frequency contrasts of four types of hedges in Chinese and American corpora

Types of hedges	American corpus		Chinese corpus	
	Original frequency	Standardized frequency (per 1000 words)	Original frequency	Standardized frequency (per 1000 words)
adaptors	510	18	443	15
rounders	471	16	394	14
subtotal	981	34	837	29
plausibility shields	10	1	5	1
attribution shields	366	13	330	12
subtotal	376	14	335	13
total	1357	48	1172	42

As far as the standardization frequency of hedges in Chinese and American corpora is concerned, the usage frequency of adaptors, rounders and attribution shields in American corpora is higher than that in Chinese corpora, while the usage frequency of plausibility shields in Chinese and American corpora is lower.

4.2 Distribution Dimension

This section focuses on the types and distribution of hedges in COVID-19 reports of *China Daily* and *The New York Times*. In the Chinese and American corpus, the ratio of four types of hedges in the total number of hedges is shown in the following figure.
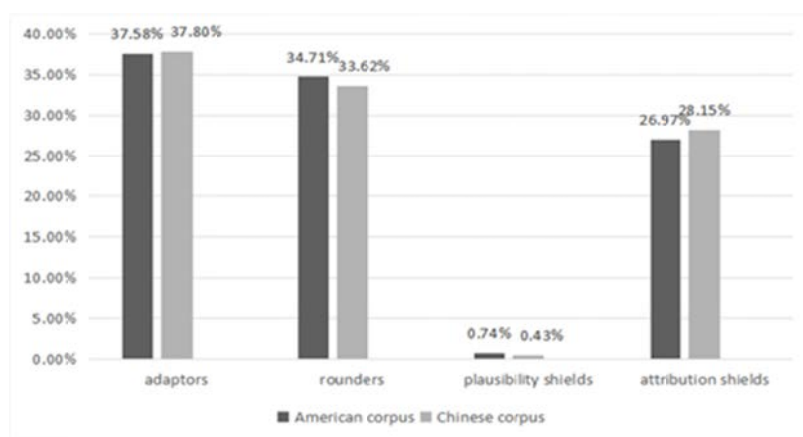
Figure 2. Distribution ratio of four types of hedges in Chinese and American corpora

In Chinese and American corpora, the proportion of approximators is higher than that of shields. Among the four types, adaptors account for the highest proportion, while plausibility shields account for the least. However, the proportion of rounders and plausibility in American corpus is higher than that in Chinese corpus, while the proportion of adaptors and attribution shields in Chinese corpus is higher than that in American corpus.

4.3 Similarities and Differences

Based on the statistical results of the frequency and type distribution of hedges in Chinese and American corpora, this section will make a contrastive analysis of their similarities and differences. To distinguish the difference of the frequency of hedges used in the two corpora, a chi-square test calculator will be used for data analysis. The specific data are shown in the following table.

Table 4. Analysis of the significant differences of four types of hedges in Chinese and American corpora

Hedges	American corpus	Chinese corpus	chi-square test	significant level
adaptors	510	443	4.37	0.037*
rounders	471	394	6.47	0.011*
subtotal	981	837	10.85	0.000***
plausibility shields	10	five	1.64	0.201
attribution shields	366	330	0.02	0.880
subtotal	376	335	2.14	0.14
total	1357	1172	12.95	0.000*

The above chart aims to contrast the frequency of hedges in the Chinese and American corpus of COVID-19 reports. Through the chi-square test calculator, it is found that the significance level P-value corresponding to its chi-square value is less than 0.001, that is, there is a significant difference between them. Compared with China Daily, The New York Times prefers to use hedges to report the real-time situation of the COVID-19. There are also significant differences in the frequency of use of adaptors in The New York Times and China Daily ($P < 0.01$), but there is no significant difference in shields. Among them, there are significant differences between adaptors and rounders in Chinese and American corpora, and the difference between rounders is the largest, but the difference between plausibility and attribution is not obvious.

4.3.1 Similarities

Based on the frequency statistics and chi-square test of hedges in Chinese and American corpora, this paper finds that they have the following similarities.

First, as far as the overall frequency of hedges is concerned, although there are essential differences between Chinese and American media in language background, cultural traditions and news values, *The New York Times* and *China Daily* both choose to use hedges in their reports on the COVID-19 epidemic. There are 48 hedges in every 1000 words in *The New York Times* and 42 in *China Daily*, which shows the popularity of hedges in COVID-19 reports in China and the United States. Chinese and American journalists tend to use hedges to explain

the real-time progress of COVID-19, so as to highlight the objectivity, accuracy and authenticity of news reports.

Secondly, as far as the frequency of various types of hedges is concerned, the frequency of approximators in Chinese and American corpora is higher than that of shields, and the proportion of adaptors is the highest, while that of plausibility shields is the lowest. This shows that Chinese and American journalists are more inclined to use adaptors to express their news positions and mainstream views, so as to realize the pragmatic functions of protecting themselves, showing politeness and avoiding taking unnecessary responsibilities. In addition, through the chi-square test of the frequency of four types of hedges in the two corpora, it is found that the P-value of plausibility and attribution shields are all greater than 0.05, so there is no significant difference.

Third, as far as the type distribution of hedges in Chinese and American corpora is concerned (as shown in Figure 2), the proportion of approximators is higher than that of shields; Among the four types, adaptors account for the highest proportion, while plausibility shields account for the least.

4.3.2 Differences

First, as far as the overall frequency of hedges is concerned, although there are hedges in COVID-19 reports in *The New York Times* and *China Daily*, obvious differences can also be found. There are 48 hedges per 1,000 words reported in *The New York Times*, and 42 hedges per 1,000 words in *China Daily*. Obviously, there is a significant difference between them (as shown in Table 4).

Second, as far as the frequency of the four types of hedges is concerned, the standardization frequency of the four types of hedges in American corpus is higher than that in Chinese corpus, especially adaptors.

Although there are similarities between them in the use of hedges in four categories, there are significant differences between them (as shown in Table 4). With respect to the distribution of hedges, the proportion of adaptors and plausibility shields in Chinese corpus is higher than that in the United States, while the proportion of rounders and attribution shields is lower than that in American corpus (as shown in Figure 2).

5. Influencing Factors of the Similarities and Differences

5.1 Similar Factors in Both Languages

By contrasting the similarities and differences in the use of hedges in COVID-19 news reports between China and the United States, it is found that hedges are an effective strategy to adapt to the communicative context. According to Verschueren, the process of language use is a process of constant choice (Verschueren, 1999, p. 56). Therefore, the COVID-19 report is the product of journalists' language choice. In this part, under the guidance of adaptation theory, the author will explore the deep influencing factors of similarities in the use of hedges in COVID-19 news reports between China and the United States, which might help readers better understand how hedges adapt to the physical world, social world and mental world in the context.

5.1.1 Adapting to the Physical World

According to Verschueren's adaptation theory, the physical world includes time reference and space reference. Time reference is relative and uncertain, which consists of the time of the incident, the time of speech and the reference time. The spatial reference is the core of human thinking, which lays the foundation of cognitive metaphor. Spatial reference is absolute, such as specific locative words such as southeast and northwest; It is also relative, such as the position of the communicating parties in the physical world. The content of news reports is closely related to time and place, so time reference and space reference are very important in the language choice of journalists.

(1) In **recent** years, governments have imposed other large-scale measures to prevent the spread of infectious diseases.

— The New York Times 1.22

(2) UK exports shrank for the first time since **late** 2016 and output slumped as factories ran down stocks they had built up before a Brexit deadline in October, according to trade body Make UK and accounting company BDO.

— China Daily 3.17

According to Verschueren, time is a relative but not absolute concept. In COVID-19 news reports, when reporting the past or predicting the future events, journalists often use hedges to modify the time, instead of reporting specific figures, in order to highlight the accuracy and objectivity of news reports. Chinese and American journalists often use vague hedges such as "recent" and "late" to modify specific time, which conforms to the time reference in the physical world.

In addition to time adaptation, journalists need to adapt to the spatial reference in the physical world in order to

realize the authenticity and timeliness of reports.

(3) The combination of **higher** stock prices and lower expected earnings made stocks look increasingly overpriced according to widely used metrics, such as price-to-earnings ratios. This month, the S&P 500 reached a price-to-earnings ratio of 19 times the next 12 months' expected earnings, the highest level since May 2002.

— The New York Times 2.25

(4) Zhao noted that other **high**-level US officials have repeatedly used similar names and labels.

— China Daily 3.25

Chinese and American journalists convey the meaning of "stock price is higher than before" and "senior official" by using the adaptor "high". "High" is opposite to "low", so both sides adapt to the spatial reference in the physical world.

5.1.2 Adapting to the Social World

Social world refers to the established social norms, public systems and traditional culture. Language choice must adapt to social norms, be recognized by the public system, and adapt to the corresponding cultural environment. If it violates the norms of the social world, it may cause controversy or trouble. Therefore, the social world has an important influence on language choice. When writing news reports on COVID-19, journalists should take into account the political position of the country, the status, rights, occupation, background and social and cultural factors of the interviewer, and adapt to the corresponding social world. As news reports often reflect a country's political position and ideology, journalists often use hedges on some sensitive topics to ease their tone and protect the privacy of the parties concerned so as to show social decency and politeness.

The sudden outbreak of Covid-19 at the end of 2019 seriously threatened people's lives. Therefore, journalists must abide by specific rules and principles, such as objectivity, accuracy and timeliness, when writing news reports on COVID-19 in English in order to meet their professional needs in the social world.

(5) **Nearly** 70 drugs and experimental compounds may be effective in treating the coronavirus, a team of researchers reported on Sunday night.

— The New York Times 3.22

(6) Even in this dire situation, there is good news, too. First, the fatality rate of the virus is **approximately** 2.1 percent, compared to 10 percent with SARS.

— China Daily 2.6

The types of drugs used to treat coronavirus mentioned in this example and the fatality rate of the virus are not exact values. The use of "nearly" and "approximately" is the language means used by journalists to try to achieve the closest accurate value. As the coronavirus that broke out at the end of 2019 is new and uncommon, It is impossible to make an absolute statement about the drug types and mortality of the virus. Otherwise, it will arouse readers' doubts and concerns.

Besides adapting to the status of journalists in the social world, the established mass culture and social norms cannot be ignored.

(7) **Several** hospitals in affected cities have sent out pleas for donations online, saying they were running short of surgical masks, gloves and other supplies. Some health workers spoke of the challenge of getting to hospitals in cities where public transportation has been shut down and taxi services suspended.

— The New York Times 1.24

(8) During the initial period of the outbreak of the virus, which was first reported in Wuhan, Hubei province, **some** experts believed young people and minors were not sensitive to the virus, as almost all cases were elderly and middle-aged.

— China Daily 1.29

Chinese and American journalists use vague hedges with varying scope, such as "several" and "some", to refer to "hospitals" and "experts", aiming to adapt to the unified social norms in the social world, that is, to protect personal privacy. If specific hospital names and experts' names are clearly pointed out, negative public opinions may be generated, resulting in unnecessary troubles and disputes.

5.1.3 Adapting to the Mental World

According to Verschueren (1999), the psychological world includes the personality, emotion, belief, desire,

motivation, intention, desire and other psychological factors of both parties in communication. These psychological factors play a huge role in the process of language production and understanding, so they will undoubtedly affect the language choice of the communicators. That is to say, language selection is a dynamic process that needs to constantly adapt to the psychological world of both parties. News is one of the media for communication and dissemination of information, and both sides of communication mainly involve journalists and readers. Therefore, when writing reports on COVID-19, journalists need to conform to their own psychological world as well as readers' psychological world.

There are many kinds of news reports, including economic news, political news, commercial news, sports news, etc. The biggest difference between COVID-19 news and the above news reports lies in its popularity. Because the COVID-19 is sudden and fierce, which seriously endangers people's lives, people all over the country and the world are always paying attention to the latest progress of the epidemic. If the news reports of COVID-19 are full of complicated and lengthy digital charts and obscure technical terms, readers will be confused and lose their patience and desire to read, which will lead to the failure of information transmission. On the contrary, if the language of the COVID-19 is not extremely serious and blunt, but some hedges are appropriately used to ease the tone, it will undoubtedly satisfy readers' reading expectations, enable them to smoothly receive and understand the main points of the epidemic, and also play a pragmatic role in calming people's hearts and alleviating public worries.

Therefore, in order to achieve readers' maximum understanding of information, journalists should choose simple and easy-to-understand words or expressions first when writing reports, and avoid or minimize the use of lengthy and complicated technical terms. As an effective communication strategy, hedges can help journalists achieve this pragmatic effect. In order to effectively consider readers' psychological factors such as reading desire, belief, personality, intention, motivation, etc., journalists use hedges to help readers better understand the important information of the epidemic situation, so as to conform to readers' reading habits and ways of thinking.

(9) In the past week, health officials across New York State have sent samples — taken by means of an oral swab, a nasal swab and by asking a patient to spit —from **at least** 10 people to the C.D.C. in Atlanta to be tested for the coronavirus. None so far have come back positive for the new coronavirus. Local laboratories do not have that testing capability for now.

— The New York Times 2.1

(10) As we approach March, nearly 80,000 people have been infected by the COVID-19 and **more than** 2,500 have died worldwide. Of course, the brunt of the outbreak has been Hubei Province and its steadfast capital Wuhan. Outside of that hot zone, the number of infections and deaths are quite limited. Most of China has had very few cases, and of course there are over 1.4 billion Chinese on the planet; so even these numbers are not so large.

— China Daily 2.24

When Chinese and American journalists report the number of infections and deaths in COVID-19, they provide readers with approximate data instead of precise data. Before writing a report, journalists need to consider readers' reading preferences and thinking habits. With regard to the number of infections and deaths in COVID-19, readers don't care about the exact data. They have a deep understanding of the harmfulness and destructive power of the virus. Therefore, in order not to cause public panic and anxiety, reporters use hedges to describe the consequences of the epidemic.

In addition to conforming to readers' psychological world, journalists should also consider their own reporting purposes, intentions and wishes.

(11) More than 1,250 other church members have reported potential symptoms, health officials said, raising the possibility that the nation's caseload could soon skyrocket further. In response, the government is shutting down thousands of day-care facilities, nursing homes and community centers, even banning the outdoor political rallies that are a feature of life in downtown Seoul.

— The New York Times 2.21

(12) In an article titled "Trump's Break With China Has Deadly Consequences," published on The Atlantic website Saturday, Beinart said US-Chinese collaboration against infectious disease isn't a globalist fantasy. It has proved "immensely effective" in the past, as in the fight against SARS and Ebola infections.

— China Daily 3.31

It can be seen that in the reports of COVID-19, Chinese and American journalists are good at using attribution shields such as "xxx said". By quoting the words and opinions of official or authoritative figures, journalists show

the objectivity and authenticity of their reports, aiming to protect themselves, adapt to their own psychological world and avoid taking unnecessary risks and responsibilities due to poor expression or incorrect information.

5.2 Different Factors

According to the above statistical results, there are differences in the frequency and type distribution between Chinese and American reports: as far as the frequency of use is concerned, compared with the report on the epidemic situation of COVID-19, *The New York Times*, *China Daily*'s report on the epidemic situation in COVID-19 has a lower frequency of overall use and distribution of various types; From the perspective of type distribution, Chinese journalists mainly use adaptors and attribution shields to avoid arbitrary expression and vague discourse meaning; American journalists, on the other hand, use rounders and plausibility shields, which are especially used to modify specific numerical values to achieve accurate and objective pragmatic functions.

The main reason for this result may be the different cultural values, language habits and ways of thinking of Chinese and American journalists.

5.2.1 Cultural Values

The different historical development paths of China and the United States determine that the traditional cultures of the two countries are very different. Chinese people have been advocating Confucianism since ancient times, advocating collectivism values and paying attention to collective views. Therefore, in news reports, Chinese journalists tend to use less or avoid using vague hedges with subjective colors. However, the values of individualism prevail in the United States, which pursues freedom and emphasizes personal feelings and self-reliance (Zhou Chaowei, 2002). Therefore, American journalists tend to use hedges that can express their personal views and show their unique opinions and personalities.

Different cultural values of the two countries permeate the use of hedges in COVID-19 reports between China and the United States: the proportion of plausibility shields in COVID-19 reports in *The New York Times* is higher than that in *China Daily*, while the proportion of attribution shields in COVID-19 reports in *China Daily* is higher than that in *The New York Times*. Chinese journalists are more inclined to express their views and attitudes by paraphrasing the words of leaders, experts, scholars and authoritative figures, so as to convey the real-time progress of the epidemic and weaken the subjective thoughts and feelings of journalists as much as possible. Therefore, in terms of its distribution, attribution shields are used more frequently than those in The New York Times. Specific examples are as follows.

(13) International and regional cooperation should be expanded, and good communication with the WHO and experience-sharing with relevant countries should be continued, **Xi said**, adding that China will shoulder its responsibilities as a major country and provide necessary assistance to the countries affected by the novel coronavirus.

— China Daily 2.26

(14) **Yang Yu**, a researcher at the China Center for Urban Development, **said** the key to balancing disease control with production is to adopt tailor-made measures according to the epidemic situation in different regions.

— China Daily 2.14

(15) **I think** it's close to criminal the way they're dealing with this guy.

— The New York Times 4.5

(16) **I think** he should have a commendation rather than be fired.

— The New York Times 4.5

For the above example, in China Daily's report on COVID-19, Chinese journalists used attribution shields "President Xi said" and "China's urban development center Yu Yang said" to relay the important instructions and valuable opinions of national leaders and experts and scholars in various fields, without any subjective comments from journalists. However, American journalists frequently use plausibility shields such as "I think" to express their personal views and attitudes. This difference is consistent with the research results of scholars such as Gong Huifang (2016: 46) and Xu Jing (2017: 142). The reason may be the different cultural values of journalists in the two countries.

The use of hedges can permeate a country's overall cultural values, and culture can be revealed through language. This is reflected by the differences in the use of approximatores in China and the United States, but the differences in language expression caused by cultural differences can't be changed easily.

5.2.2 Language Habits

Language habits reflect a country's history and culture, and the different language habits of China and the United States will greatly affect the preferences of journalists in both countries in using hedges. Both Chinese and American journalists use hedges in COVID-19 epidemic reports, but the frequency of using hedges by American journalists is much higher than that by Chinese journalists, which is closely related to the language habits of China and the United States. Chinese people's language habits are roundabout and tactful, while Americans are straightforward.

First of all, there are great differences in the types of hedges between Chinese and American journalists. American journalists use 88 hedges, while Chinese journalists use 83 hedges. American journalists use different types of hedges freely, which is closely related to their long-term native language context and English proficiency, while Chinese journalists are slightly inferior, which is one of the influencing factors that the overall frequency of hedges used by Chinese journalists is lower than that of the United States.

Secondly, by analyzing the corpus, Chinese journalists tend to use modal verbs to express the meanings of "willingness", "hope" and "speculation" due to the influence of mother tongue culture. Therefore, Chinese journalists used a large number of modal verbs as hedges in COVID-19 epidemic reports, resulting in the proportion of modal verbs in Chinese corpus being 61.40%, slightly higher than that of American corpus being 59.02%. The specific examples are as follows.

(17) Referring to the virus' spread abroad, Tedros said it was "minimal and slow", while warning that it **could** worsen.

— China Daily 2.4

(18) The world has to acknowledge these steps and support and strengthen the Chinese fight against the virus. Support **can** come through medical equipment, expertise and information sharing.

— China Daily 2.6

(19) The spread of the novel coronavirus to more than 140 countries and regions has shaken the industrial chain and supply chain, raising concerns that globalization **may** slow down, leading to de-globalization.

— China Daily 3.17

For the above examples, Chinese journalists tend to use modal verbs such as "can", "could" and "may" to report information about the epidemic situation. Whether it is the action track of domestic confirmed patients, drug research and development, the resumption of work and production, the international situation and the dynamic development of the world, there are modal verbs in almost every report on the epidemic situation in COVID-19, China collected by this research, which also reflects the Chinese people's determination to face the epidemic situation and hope that the epidemic will end as soon as possible. However, the excessive use of modal verbs may lead to readers' reading burnout and psychological anxiety. Therefore, in order to better conform to readers' physical, social and psychological contexts, journalists should choose more words of hedges to meet readers' reading expectations and information demands.

The difference in language habits is an important factor in the different preferences of Chinese and American journalists in the use of hedges. The language habits reflected in the reports of COVID-19 epidemic by Chinese and American journalists represent a country's diplomatic ideas and national positions. However, there is no difference between good and bad language habits, and every language habit deserves to be respected.

5.2.3 Thinking Pattern

Besides the differences in cultural values and language habits, the use of hedges also reflects the completely different ways of thinking between China and the United States. Thinking mode is a process in which the brain reflects reality through language, a concentrated expression of the deep structure of culture, and an ideological activity closely related to language style (Wang, 2012). Generally, there are two ways of thinking: image thinking and abstract thinking. Influenced by different philosophical thoughts, Chinese and American ways of thinking are quite different. Since ancient times, China has respected the unity of man and nature and advocated thinking in images; however, the philosophy of American culture is the separation between man and nature, emphasizing that man is an independent individual and advocating abstract thinking (Liu, 2019).

Thinking in images emphasizes emotional experience and is used to observe nature by intuition, which makes Chinese people focus on their own perception of the world and their overall understanding of things. This thinking integrates people's cognition and emotion, and it is easy to project subjective feelings onto objective things. Facing the complicated and changeable Covid-19, the Chinese people are not afraid but show their determination and

confidence to unite against the epidemic, and show their responsibility as a big country that cares about the people, cares about the world and builds Community of Shared Future for Mankind together, as follows.

(20) It is now crucial to detect and quarantine all patients in Wuhan and put close contacts under medical observation, steps that will **quickly** help us contain the outbreak.

— China Daily 1.25

This example shows that the government departments made a quick decision at the most critical moment of the outbreak of the epidemic, and took reasonable resettlement measures for the confirmed personnel and close contacts so as to minimize the spread of the epidemic. The reporters of *China Daily* use the term "fast", highlighting the government's high attention to the safety of people's lives and property and its all-out efforts, always caring for the people, putting the life safety of all people first and safeguarding the vital interests of the people. There are many adaptors, such as "largely", "widely" and "mainly". Chinese journalists use such hedges to convey the timeliness and comprehensiveness of the party and the state's concern for the people. Therefore, there are more lexical adverbs of adaptors in COVID-19 epidemic report of *China Daily* than in *The New York Times*. At the same time, the Chinese people's attitude towards the epidemic has always been positive and full of hope, and they have always believed that as long as everyone works together, the virus will eventually be defeated. The hedges in *China Daily*'s report on the epidemic situation in COVID-19 place the cognition and emotion of Chinese people and reflect Chinese image thinking mode.

Abstract thinking is a way of thinking that does not depend on people's intuition to reflect external things but on the analytical logic of abstract and rational statements. This mode of thinking emphasizes individual and partial interests, which leads to the individualism and liberalism prevailing in the United States. For instance:

(21) The patients who come in with encephalopathy are confused and lethargic and **may** appear dazed, exhibiting strange behavior or staring off into space. They **may** be having seizures that require medical care, and experts are warning health care providers who treat such patients to recognize that they **may** open a separate Neuro Covid unit to care for patients with neurological conditions.

— The New York Times 4.1

Americans' innate thinking pattern makes them better at analyzing the causes of problems and then seeking solutions step by step. In this case, the reporters in The New York Times used the adaptors "may" in several degrees continuously to present the symptoms that the diagnosed patients may have and the specific measures of follow-up treatment. In order to ensure the accuracy and objectivity of news information, journalists are very strict in choosing words and avoid conveying too absolute semantics.

The differences of thinking patterns between China and the United States are deeply rooted. Facing the COVID-19 epidemic, there are some differences in reporting methods between journalists of the two countries, so it is inevitable that there will be differences in the use preferences of hedges.

6. Conclusion

Hedges are favored by Chinese and American journalists because of their unique politeness function and euphemistic effect. Although the cultural values, language habits and ways of thinking of Chinese and American journalists are completely different, in order to adapt to the physical world, social world and psychological world of both parties, there are a lot of hedges in COVID-19 reports of *The New York Times* and *China Daily*. Contrast with *The New York Time*s, adaptors and attribution shields in COVID-19 report of *China Daily* are used more frequently in order to show the official attitude and establish an authoritative image. In future research, more attention should be paid to how to define and refine hedges and the pragmatic functions of hedges in different genres.

Acknowledgments

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