China's Building of International Discourse System Against COVID-19 Pandemic—From the Perspective of Proximization Theory

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Abstract—Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 Pandemic, China has been actively leading international cooperation in fighting the virus. However, The US and some other western countries have repeatedly passed the buck to China, which has posed greater challenges for the building of China's international discourse system against such backdrop. To this end, this paper focuses on the official discourse of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs themed on "fighting against the COVID-19 Pandemic", and construes the strategies of building China's international discourse system against the context through the analytical tool—cognitive-pragmatic model of proximization theory, thus exposing the hidden ideology as well as the false propaganda of the western countries toward China and providing intellectual support for China to transform its development advantages in the field of hard power into those in soft power.

Index Terms—COVID-19 pandemic, official discourse, proximization theory, international discourse system, ideology

I. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated China's profound changes unseen in a century. China has taken the lead in containing the epidemic at home and in international cooperation. However, the western world, particularly the US, is trying to shift the blame to China and make it the scapegoat. In fact, in the international public opinion field, such a "strong in the West and weak in China" pattern has been existing for a long time. The western world has been stigmatizing and demonizing China's achievements in the fight against COVID-19 and creating a "discourse deficit" that is not consistent with China's achievements, thus forcing China to face a more complicated and severe international public opinion environment. China's president Xi Jinping attaches great importance to international communication. In a series of important speeches, he has mentioned many times that "We will improve our ability to engage in international communication so as to tell China's stories well, make the voice of China heard, and present a true, multi-dimensional, and panoramic view of China to the world."[1] Until now, the majority of the discourse studies in the context of COVID-19 were conducted from the perspectives of the United States and the West by using the principles of communication and political science to summarize the communication mechanism and path as well as the influence. However, little attention was paid to China's efforts of building its international discourse system. If we define politics broadly as the negotiation of subjective views or power struggle or reconciliation of social difference through discussion and persuasion (Chilton, 2002; Wodak, 2009; Cap, 2010), then language would be the main ideological tool of political discourse deconstruction.

Therefore, against the backdrop of COVID-19 pandemic, this paper, by building the corpus of anti-pandemic official discourse of Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and adopting the cognitive-pragmatic model of proximization strategy, is trying to demonstrate China's real, solid and comprehensive anti-pandemic narrative framework, sort out the discourse logic of China's "justified, restrained and well-grounded" response to the West's bogus claims on China and conclude China's strategies for building its international discourse system against the backdrop of COVID-19. Meanwhile, it aims to expose the ideology behind the false China-related propaganda of the US, thus providing intellectual support for China to transform its development advantage in the field of hard power into its discourse advantage in the field of soft power in the new era.

II. WHAT IS PROXIMIZATION

The proximization is a cognitive pragmatic strategy that legitimizes the speaker's political behavior by means of discourse intervention. The concept of "proximizing", which simply means bringing closer, originates from the political discourse research of Paul Chilton (Wang, 2019). Chilton (2004) believes that discourse—that is, language in use—is a process whereby readers and hearers set up discourse worlds ("conceptual domains" or "ontological spaces") that carry a deictic "signature" for space, time, and modality, and relationships among them (p.138). Cap (2006) develops

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[1] It is quoted from President Xi's speech at the CPC conference on publicity on August 21, 2018

Chilton's view and coins the term "proximization". In its most general and practical sense, proximization is a discursive strategy of presenting physically and temporally distant events and states of affairs (including "distant adversarial ideologies") as increasingly and negatively consequential to the speaker and the addressee (Cap, 2013, p. 293). According to Cap (2014), the speaker can use various means to highlight that the distant entities are gradually encroaching upon the speaker and addressee geographically and ideologically, but the primary goal is to legitimize the speaker's own actions and policies—evoking the closeness of the external threat and soliciting the legitimization of preventive measures. The threat comes from entities peripheral to the discourse space, referred to as "outside-deictic-center" entities (ODCs), which are conceptualized as crossing the space to invade "inside-deictic-center" entities (IDCs)—the speaker and the addressee (Wang, 2019).

From the formulation perspective, the proximiaztion theory was evaluated from the construal operation. It is a core concept of cognitive grammar in cognitive linguistics. This operation aims to explain why people have different ways of expressing the same event (Wang, 2019). At the same time, as an important cognitive mode, the construal operation determines the corresponding language expression; this can be used to discuss how and what kind of differences people experience when they perceive the same event (Wen, 2011). As an important part of the construal operation, deixis involves the use of conceptualization to explain the meaning construction of parts beyond the sentences in discourse, and adopts a practical positioning method to illustrate the consistency of textual context and subjective values (Wang, 2019).

From the practical point of view, the proximization strategy could be used to legitimize political discourse. Cap (2014) believes that the geopolitical environment of interventionist discourse is often very unstable, and due to the long time period, speakers need various methods to maintain the legitimization position, which must be able to cope with linguistic or non-linguistic changes at any time in the process of global legitimization. To this end, the proximization strategy achieves these goals by achieving positive self-presentation and stable leadership power, and at the same time, the proximization strategy offers a dynamic model to explain the non-linguistic changes in space, time and value domains. In other words, the proximization strategy can explain the changed or re-formulated policies in political discourse and cope with the changes and fluctuations of political situation. As such, the proximization strategy combines critical discourse analysis with cognitive linguistics and provides a new perspective and paradigm for discourse analysis.

III. ANALYTICAL MODEL AND THE CORPUS

Cap (2013) believes that the proximization is a rhetorical pragmatic strategy in which the speaker, in order to persuade the addressee and legitimize his actions, regards the actor, situation or event as threats from temporal, spatial, and axiological dimensions. The approach is summarized as the spatial-temporal-axiological model (STA), namely. When entities and events are mapped onto axes representing social space, time, and ideological distance, mental space provides conceptual coherence to the context and an analytical tool with which to reveal and evaluate the ideologies conveyed in the discourse (Wang, 2019). In recent years, this approach has been used in state political discourse to a certain extent, and has successfully provided practical research paths and analytical tools for discourse such as crisis construction and rhetoric of war, discourse analysis of immigrants, political party representation and construction of national memory.

To limit the subjective tendency existing in discourse analysis, this paper introduces quantitative research methods, represented by corpus to objectively determine the concepts like "who is the speaker; why is he speaking and under what circumstances is he speaking" and further carries out the follow-up critical discourse analysis, in order to better figure out the ideology and power relations behind the discourse. To this end, this paper collects texts from the database of official website of Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs themed on "Fighting against Covid-19 pandemic" from January 2, 2021 to August 15, 2021. Forty-seven related articles including 11,281 words in total have formed the corpus. Meanwhile, the corpus retrieval tool AntConc, combined with Cap's STA model is used to form a word class table of the entity elements of discourse space. Based on it, a more operational and effective critical discourse analysis is carried out.

IV. PROXIMIZATION THEORY AND BUILDING OF INTERNATIONAL DISCOURSE SYSTEM DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

A. Spatial Proximization Shapes China's Philosophy of "Global Cooperation Against the Pandemic"

Spatial proximization refers to the forced construal of the discourse space to perceive that the peripheral entities are encroaching physically upon the discourse space of central entities, the speaker and addressee (Cap, 2013). Spatial proximization has a diachronic nature. It can be viewed as the most basic tool for legitimizing. In political interventionist discourses, a pre-emptive response to "collective threats" is legitimized by allowing the collective to perceive that a threat is imminent and will have a negative impact on individuals (Wang, 2019). Let's see the statistical table below:

TABLE 1
ENTITY ELEMENTS AND THE FREQUENCY (SPATIAL PROXIMIZATION)

Category	Words	Frequency（%）
IDCs (noun phrases)	We	1.36
	People in China	0.74
	People across the world/in all countries	0.51
ODCs (noun phrases)	Covid-19	2.14
	Pandemic	1.76
	Virus	1.59
ODCs move to IDCs (verb phrases)	Spread	2.38
	Rage	0.92
	Resurge/recur	0.43
ODCs encroach upon IDCs (verb phrases)	Threat	0.32
	Devastate	0.27
	Wreck	0.14

In the discourse themed on "fighting against the pandemic", the spatial proximization strategy was used extensively to win the understanding and support of the international community, in order to push the international community to take measures to deal with the pandemic in time. The table above shows that the most frequent word in the IDCs category is "we", indicating that China has linked itself to the fate of the international community since the beginning of the outbreak, which is highly consistent with the concept of "a community of shared future for mankind" [2] proposed by China. It has further enhanced the international community's recognition of China's anti-pandemic works as well as its diplomatic philosophy. The second and third highest frequent words/phrases are "People in China" and "People across the world/in all countries". The word "people" with a collective nature, has demonstrated the fact that no one can be left out of the pandemic and at the same time it's a call for the international community to cooperatively fight against the pandemic. Meanwhile, the most frequent words in the ODCs are "Covid-19", "pandemic" and "virus", which directly and explicitly includes the pandemic in the oppositional camp and guides addressees to construe it as the top threat faced by the international community.

(1) Life is the most precious. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19, President Xi has demonstrated tremendous political courage, and put forward that we must always put people and life front and center. At this Summit, President Xi shared China's experience in combating the virus, stressing that to completely defeat the virus, we must put people's lives and health front and center, and truly respect the value and dignity of every human life...Putting people first, science-based policy, and coordinating pandemic prevention and control and economic recovery are written in the Declaration of the Summit.

In the above example, by repeatedly mentioning words like "People" and "COVID-19", China frames the international community and the pandemic as two groups in opposition to each other. Therefore, the construction of a central entity and a peripheral entity is achieved, which has laid a foundation for anchoring the spatial threat.

After the clarification of the central and peripheral entities through the noun phrases, the relationship between the two needs to be further presented with the help of the verb phrases for the ultimate purpose of legitimization. To this end, at the first level, verbs which could demonstrate sense of space such as "spread", "rage" and "resurge/recur" frequently appear in the discourse, anthropomorphizing the abstract pandemic and making the addressees feel that the object will keep approaching and getting closer, and eventually become an inescapable reality. At the second level, verbs like "threat", "devastate", and "wreck" has created us a negative emotion of the approach of the pandemic, which will pose a direct threat to the addressees and eventually lead to an immediate international response to combat the pandemic.

(2) The sudden pandemic is a "big test", and it has laid bare weaknesses and deficiencies in the global public health governance and highlighted the urgency to enhance capacity-building of global governance in the area of public health. President Xi has pointed out many times that public health emergencies like COVID-19 may very well recur, so there must be global action, global response and global cooperation. All parties shall uphold multilateralism, increase their political support and financial input to the WHO, support the WHO in playing a key leading role, and continuously improve the global health governance system.

Faced with the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, China's related discourse still attaches importance to drawing the international community's attention to combat the pandemic through spatial proximization. The discourse evokes the international community's empathy for the pandemic outbreak through term like "recur", to prompt cooperative measures to fight against the pandemic, or we might bear risks of being crushed by it.

It is interesting to note that, for one hand, from the critical discourse analysis in this section, the spatial proximization strategy, by constantly reducing the distance between the central and peripheral entities, can reveal the negative impact of the peripheral entities on the central entities, thus legitimizing such the discourse as "state interventionism" (more towards negative discourse studies). For the other hand, in the author's view, this strategy is also clearly explanatory enough to be used in the "state demonstration effect" discourse (more towards positive discourse studies) by showing

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[2] In the Resolution 2344 (2017) adopted by the UN Security Council at its 7902nd meeting, on 17 March 2017, "a community of shared future for mankind" is firstly mentioned.

the central entities overcoming the negative influence from the peripheral entities. It could be a potential practical area for proximization strategy. For example,

(3) <u>Fighting the pandemic is currently the most pressing task for us. To complete this task, China will work with CEE countries through solidarity, coordination and cooperation</u>. Our two sides could enhance joint response and experience sharing on prevention and treatment, explore cooperation on traditional medicine, and scale up public health and medical cooperation. These efforts will contribute to a global community of health for all.

By stating that "Fighting the pandemic is currently the most pressing task for us", China aims to acknowledge the pandemic as a peripheral entity that can pose a threat to the central entity, and at the same time, the sentence "To complete this task, China will work with CEE countries through solidarity, coordination and cooperation" is to demonstrate the possibility that the central entity can overcome the threat of peripheral entities through measures. This redoubles legitimacy of the discourse. The traditional proximization studies are limited to the threats and the consequent negative effects from ODCs to IDCs in one direction, but future studies could be more focused on the responses from IDCs to ODCs, i.e. the corresponding positive effects, both of which can achieve the purpose of enforcing the addressee's construal of a certain point of view as well as a more comprehensive understanding of the conflicting nature of political discourse.

B. Temporal Proximization Shows China's Determination to Overcome the Pandemic in a Cooperative Manner"

Temporal proximization can be used as a method of enhancing spatial proximization. In the spatial axis, temporal proximization is useful for interpreting a process wherein an event is approaching or has already occurred (Wang, 2019). According to Cap (2013), temporal proximization is a symbolic "compression" of the time axis, and a partial conflation of time frames, involving two simultaneous conceptual shifts (pp.85-86). They are past-to-present shift and future-to-present shift. The past-to-present shift could construe the past events and actions, mainly those instigated/performed by the ODC entities, informing the speaker's present context, in the interest of her own current actions. And the information is validated by analogies holding between the past and the present context arrangements. The future-to-present shift accommodates construal of the near future ODC actions stemming directly from the present context, a collection of premises up-dated by the premises construed from the past events. Under future-to-present shift, a future event is interpreted as entailing urgent need to take immediate measures; under past-to-present shift, past events are construed as still occurring and affecting reality (Wang, 2019).

TABLE 2
ENTITY ELEMENTS

Category	examples
past-to-present shift	[1] We meet at a time of great changes and a pandemic both unseen in a century. [2] The recent resurgence of the virus and its frequent mutation are a sobering reminder that the fight against COVID-19 is a marathon. [3] COVID-19 has taken its toll on countries' ability of fighting terrorism.
future-to-present shift	[1] The ongoing pandemic has also amplified the unadaptable side of the global governance system. [2] As COVID-19 is worsening global food shortages, the international community needs to deepen cooperation on food security and help developing countries overcome their food challenge. [3] As the virus continues to mutate and wreak havoc, putting it under control remains our top priority. [4] The impact of COVID-19 on world peace and security is still unfolding, with long-standing hotspots showing new dynamics and new hotspots exacerbating long-held grievances.

It can be seen that the Chinese side, in addition to demonstrating the negative impact of the outbreak on the international community from the beginning of the pandemic to the present, still emphasizes that the pandemic will continue, and urges the international community to continue to play an active role in the fight against the pandemic by construing the possible future events from the present context.

The relationship between language and human history can be explained from the perspective of cognitive construction. Both thought and language are meaningful and can be interpreted as a reconstruction process that is propagated in a particular way. First, the role of language in memory structure cannot be ignored. It is not only a tool to understand the past, but also a way to reshape history. Through discourse characterization, the collective memory of history is formed, and the legitimization of historical behaviors and events is realized (Wang, 2019). In addition, the past-to-present shift demonstrates that since the outbreak of the pandemic in 2019, no country in the world has been spared, thus making the international community form an objective collective memory of history of the pandemic. For this reason, through temporal proximization strategy, the international community's perception of this history can be reconstructed, and ODCs and IDCs could be brought closer. The discourse in this process becomes both a tool for understanding the past and a way to reshape history, ultimately legitimizing real actions and events through historical analogy.

(4) <u>The recent resurgence of the virus and its frequent mutation are a sobering reminder</u> that the fight against COVID-19 is a marathon. No country should slacken in its efforts, and cooperation must be strengthened. The COVID response should be more science-based to maximize the roles of vaccines and drugs and to make good use of preventive measures with a particular emphasis on international and regional coordination

and information sharing. Efforts should continue to balance routine COVID protocols and emergency measures, and ensure both epidemic control and socio-economic development.

This sentence is a typical analogy strategy proximization. "The recent resurgence ... and frequent mutations are a sobering reminder" highlights the whole process of the international community's fight against the pandemic in the past period, and awakens the collective historical memory of the addressees that the threat of the pandemic to the international community has not disappeared, and that cooperation is still needed to finally overcome the threat. Apart from that, the collective agreement on identity of different people is constructed, and common concern of different people about the reality is enhanced, which becomes an effective means to lead future actions.

(5) The impact of COVID-19 on world peace and security is still unfolding, with long-standing hotspots showing new dynamics and new hotspots exacerbating long-held grievances. The interplay of traditional hotspots and non-traditional challenges has made them even more complicated and difficult to solve. We the BRICS countries should act on the new security vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security, and encourage political settlement of regional hotspots and resolution of disputes through dialogue and consultation. And we should take more preventive actions to this end.

In contrast to description of the past-to-present shift in the previous examples, this example adopts a future-to-present shift strategy aimed at shaping a common identity by stating "The impact of COVID-19 on world peace and security is still unfolding". It points out the increasingly widespread negative impact of the pandemic on global health governance, as well as on peace and security. It creates a common conceptual space for current and future actions to be taken by the international community through stating "we should take more preventive actions to this end". The temporal proximization model is presented as follows.
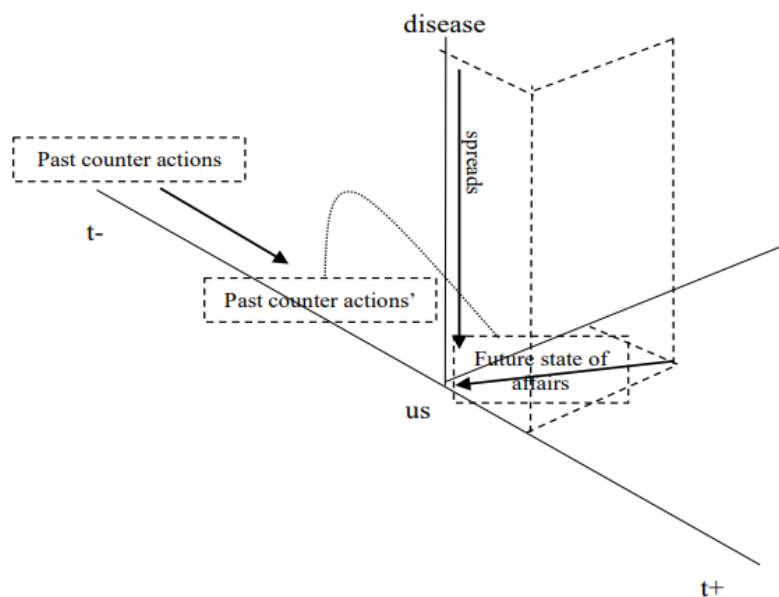

Figure 1. Temporal Proximization Model

Temporal proximization therefore has a dual effect. On one hand, it helps to establish a collective memory of the past; On the other, it legitimizes or delegitimizes historical events to help people of different groups reconstruct these historical events and shape a common identity (Wang, 2019).

C. Axiological Proximization Exposes the US and the West's Intention of Politicizing the Pandemic.

Axiological proximization refers to the mechanism through which the ODCs' value is derived, from both far and near. The values of IDCs and ODCs are interpreted as there being a growing conflict of consciousness between the two. The mechanism of axiological proximization involves the addressee's construal of a continuing ideological conflict that eventually materializes in a physical clash between the speaker/addressee and the audience (Cap, 2010). International values are generally regarded as the embodiment of ideology. The construction of certain ideology relies largely on who is to convey the ideology and how to describe and explain it—that is, how to seek shared values or promote the integration of values through external forces. At the same time, it is also important to choose which events or issues to describe, and this choice itself has an impact on the value orientation of these events.

TABLE 3
ENTITY ELEMENTS AND THE FREQUENCY (AXIOLOGICAL PROXIMIZATION)

Category	Words	Frequency （%）
IDCs(noun phrases)	We	1.31
	China	0.92
ODCs (noun phrases)	US	0.53
	They	0.36
ODCs threats IDCs (verb phrases)	Politicalize	0.15
	Slander	0.05

It is noted that in the section, China identifies the "false statements made by the U.S. and the West against China's fight against the pandemic" rather than the "pandemic" as a peripheral entity, because it is not the "virus" that holds values, but the U.S. and Western countries who use the "virus" to engage in "virus politicization". Clarifying this point is crucial to the perspective from which we conduct critical discourse analysis, and helps us to further understand the operation of proximization strategies in practice.

(6) China's position on global origin-tracing is consistent and clear-cut. First, origin-tracing is a matter of science. It should be and can only be left to scientists to identify, through scientific research, the virus's zoonotic source and animal-human transmission routes. No country has the right to put its own political interests above people's lives, nor should a matter of science be <u>politicized</u> for the purpose of <u>slandering</u> and attacking other countries.

The words "politicize" and "slander" directly point out the approach taken by the U.S. and the West on dealing with the pandemic, which highlights the inaccurate statements by the US and the West towards China. It's a direct response to the U.S. and the West's attempt to cover up their own ineffectiveness in fighting against the pandemic by discrediting China. It also reinforces the support of the Chinese people and the international community for China to have a say during the pandemic. In the global "test" against the pandemic, China delivered convincing answers and became the "top student", while the U.S. and the West responded poorly and were reduced to the "poor student". In the context of the pandemic, the difference between the two sides' anti-pandemic philosophy determines the ideological difference in their discourse. Faced with the U.S. and the West's "shifting the blame", the Chinese side, out of safeguarding its anti-pandemic achievements and maintaining its international image, identified the U.S. and the West, especially the U.S., who made false statements, as peripheral entities, and its "politicization of the virus" as well as its "shifting the blame to China" as threats. The way of doing it helps China spread its positive position on global anti-pandemic cooperation.

D. Application of STA Model

According to the spatial-temporal-axiological (STA) model in proximization theory, these three strategies are conducive to continuously narrowing the distance between entities in the discourse space and influencing addressees (Wang, 2019). Cap (2013) believes that one of the principles of proximization theory is that, although any application will likely contain all three strategies—spatial, temporal, and axiological—the degree of their expression in the discourse parallels their effectiveness in changing contexts. This is particularly evident in axiological proximization analysis, as spatial and temporal proximization can be projected onto the axis of analysis by means of metaphors, which constitute an integrated use of the STA model:

(7) <u>"China, like other countries, is a victim of the pandemic,</u> and we all hope to find out the origin of the virus and cut off its transmission as early as possible. Given the ongoing spread and rebound of the virus, the priority remains to be stepping up equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines and enhancing solidarity and cooperation. Origin-tracing cooperation must be based on science, and <u>politicization must be firmly rejected.</u> China will work with other parties to carry out science-based global origin-tracing, and contribute China's part to humanity's final victory over COVID-19."

"China, like other countries, is a victim of the pandemic" takes the lead in identifying China as the central entity under threat, and reinforces this judgment with the word "victim" as a value anchor. In addition, the description of "politicization must be firmly rejected", with the metaphor "reject" helps the listener learn the fact through mental space that the central entity is under threat and he's unwilling to bear the threat. It can be seen that spatial proximization plays an important role in compensating for the ideological expression of axiological proximization, and in terms of discursive effect, it achieves the purpose of strengthening the addresses' construal.

V. CHINA'S INTERNATIONAL DISCOURSE SYSTEM

A. "China's Voice" in the Context of the Pandemic Is Conducive to the Building of Its International Discourse System in the New Era

As China moves closer to the center of the world stage, it is also accompanied by "troubles on the rise". The U.S. and the West have been repeatedly making various arguments and creating traps to malign China. Especially since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. and the West have aggressively fabricated the statement of "Wuhan virus leak", and forced the World Health Organization to launch the "The second investigation on the origins of the

COVID-19" to China. In this regard, China's experience in fighting against the pandemic and its adoption of public health governance to stimulate innovation and improvement of the global governance system has promoted its initiative to facilitate its building of international discourse system.

B. Focusing on Both Attack and Defense Has Become an Important Feature of China's International Discourse System in the New Era

International public opinion itself is a war of narrative, language or information, which involves not only the right to explain, such as the origin of the virus, the spread of the virus and the information and narrative of overcoming the virus, but also implies the battle of different philosophy and values. In the face of new development opportunities and complex communication environment, China's international communication philosophy gradually change from passive ones based on "explanation" to active issue setting and public opinion guiding, such as the "Investigation of Fort Drikritsu" initiated by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the participation of 25 million Chinese netizens.

C. Proximization Strategy Could Be an Important Analytical Tool for International Discourse Gaming

The "speech-act" reflects the cognitive construction process, and discourse becomes important corpus for analyzing behaviors. The three dimensions of the proximization strategy can be used to analyze how political discourse converges the ideologies of ODCs and IDCs by bringing the "peripheral entities" and the "central entities" closer in time, space, and ideology. In the post-pandemic era, discourse has become the main mediator of the international community, and the competition between the East and the West for global discourse power will become more and more intense. Discourse analysis can help us better understand and interpret the political behaviors of all parties and seek for the value convergence between different political forms. The building of the discourse of similar value can better stimulate the resonance of public opinion, bridge the gap, and serve our international image building and international communication.

VI. CONCLUSION

The battle of discourse is the third battlefield followed by the economic and political ones. The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation will inevitably affect the international order dominated by Western powers and trigger blocking, containment and interception by certain vested interests in the international community. Therefore, China must be fully and strategically prepared. In this paper, the author adopts proximization theory as a new research perspective within the framework of critical cognitive discourse analysis to examine the construal operations under the corpus of the official discourse of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs on "fighting against the COVID-19 pandemic". This paper demonstrates the feasibility of proximization strategy in critical discourse analysis and the strong explanatory power of its SAT model in the building of values, which can provide theoretical support for the construction of China's international discourse system in the next stage.

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