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# *Linguistic Choices in News Reports on Social Incidents and Public Perception*

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***Abstract.*** With the increasing influence of news media on the spread of social events, linguistic choice in news reporting has gradually become an important factor affecting public cognition. Taking the language in news reports as the research object, this paper discusses how different linguistic choices shape the public's understanding and evaluation of events. The research object mainly selects the different naming methods of the South Korean The *Cho Doo-soon case* in the Chinese and South Korean media, as well as *The Guardian*'s language adjustment on climate issues. Through case analysis and literature analysis, the research is conducted from the perspective of news text, academic literature and normative theory. The study found that the language in news reports not only plays the role of information transmission, but also emphasizes specific facts through different language choices, guides the public to pay attention to different aspects of events, and constructs a framework to affect the public's value position. Therefore, when the news media express the news content, they should pay more attention to the standardization of language expression and social influence, carefully choose words, reasonably and properly use language on the basis of ensuring the accuracy of facts, and promote the public to form a more comprehensive and rational perception.

***Keywords:*** linguistic choices, News Reports, Public Perception, the Cho Doo-soon case, The Guardian

## 1. Introduction

With the development of modern science and technology, the speed of information dissemination is faster and faster. News media has become an important channel for the public to obtain social information and form social cognition. In the process of news communication, the media not only undertakes the responsibility of information transmission, but also affects the audience's understanding and evaluation of events through language expression. According to Christians' *Normative theories of the media*, 'All of the major values associated with good media—truthfulness, freedom, objectivity, diversity, and contributing to social solidarity—are infused with a moral sense.' [1]. Therefore, news is not only the medium of information transmission, but also the choice of words and sentence patterns of news language may affect the dissemination and presentation of information. In recent years, more and more scholars have begun to pay attention to the role of news

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language in shaping public cognition, emotion and attitude, which makes the linguistic choice has important research value.

Flusberg points out from the perspective of psychology that the framework constructed by language will affect people's cognition and emotion [2]. The study from Ishchuk and Sokorchuk examines how stylistic devices and media consumption habits shape public understanding,according to the evolution of language style of modern media [3]. This public perception is not only about what happened, but also about how should public feel and who or what is responsible for the event.

It is of great significance to study the linguistic choice in news reports. On the one hand, it is helpful to understand and explore how the media constructs a framework through language choices and affects the public's cognition of events. On the other hand, it can help the news media understand the communication effect behind the use of language, so as to improve the professionalism of news reporting and the sense of social responsibility of the news media, and avoid the bias of public opinion caused by the anomie of language use [4]. In today's media environment, the same event often produces different social feedback and response due to different language expressions, so as to explore the correlation between news language and public cognition.

This study focuses on the issue of the influence of linguistic choices in news reports on social incidents on public perception, and analyzes it from two cases. First, take the *Cho Doo-soon case* in South Korea as an example to study the impact of media naming methods in different countries on public focus and responsibility attribution. Second, taking *The Guardian*'s adjustment on the linguistic choice of climate issues as an example to analyzes how the change in language choice affects the public's judgment of the seriousness and urgency of climate issues.

In terms of research methods, this study mainly uses the methods of literature analysis and case-study analysis. By consulting the relevant literature of news communication, media ethics and framework theory, this study sorts out the theoretical basis of the impact of news language on public cognition. At the same time, two representative cases are selected to analyze the specific language use. Literature analysis and case-study analysis provide theoretical framework and case support respectively, which increases the credibility of this study.

This study aims to explore how the linguistic choice in news affects the public's understanding, emotion and value judgment of social events, and further reveal the role of language in the construction of news framework. To achieve this goal, this study combines the theory of media norms and framework theory, analyzes typical cases, and constructs the core logic of this study.

## 2. Case study

### 2.1. Horizontal comparison—*Cho Doo-soon Case* in South Korea

The above concept part reveals theoretically how news language affects the logical chain of public cognition. As an indispensable part of news structure, headlines shape readers' understanding and expectation [5]. Therefore, studying the naming methods used in news headlines also helps to clarify the purpose that the media want to achieve and the impact on public cognition, such as Manipulating Public Perception: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Political Headlines on Pakistani Social Media In, Muhammad Mubeen Shah discussed how political headlines on social media in Pakistan manipulate public perception [6]. This chapter will analyze the real case of *Cho Doo-soon case* in South Korea, compare the naming methods of news cases in different periods and regions, and explore how the framework of news language construction can reshape the public's perception of the same event.

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In December, 2008, in Ansan City, Gyeonggi do, South Korea, Cho Doo-soon sexually assaulted an 8-year-old girl, Na-young, and eventually led to her lifelong disability. The killer, Cho Doo-soon, used the excuse of 'being delirious after being drunk', and the maximum sentence in South Korean law was 12 years at that time. The lightness of the sentence caused continuous public anger in South Korean society [7]. In 2013, *Hope(So-won)*, a film based on the case, was released, making the spread of the incident break through the border of South Korea and become a public issue widely discussed by a large number of East Asian societies, including China. It is precisely because this event has been repeatedly narrated and named in different social and cultural environments that the news language of the media presents a framework with significant differences, which provides a good horizontal comparative sample for analyzing the impact of news linguistic choices on public perception.

South Korea, as the country involved in the case, *Cho Doo-soon case* has been named many times in the South Korean network. One of them is "Anshan child sexual assault case". This naming method directly refines the main process of the incident. If the former is not widely used, the latter two are widely discussed in South Korean news, and this chapter mainly discusses the next two. Before 2009, the event was named *Na-young case*. Without a definite official name, the media named the case after the alias 'Na-young' of the girl victim, which was widely used on various platforms and news. The victim herself dominated public cognition. With the improvement of ethical awareness of sexual crime reporting in South Korea, after 2009, Yonhap news agency and South Korea's largest state funded news agency announced that the case would be renamed *Cho Doo-soon case*, 'Because child sexual aggression can cause serious physical and mental harm to the victim, revealing the identity of the perpetrators is in line with the public interest goal of the media. The word Na-young is considered to cause harm to child and her parents.' [8]. To avoid secondary injury to the victim and family members, the name focuses the public's attention on the criminal Cho-Doo soon and the judicial responsibility he should bear behind him.

Different from the naming method of the South Korean media in the news language, China gradually learned about the case with the release of the film *So-won* after 2013. The Chinese public should be more familiar with the name of the film *So-won* than the victim, perpetrator, time and place of the case. Therefore, the Chinese media usually named the case *So-won case* in the news, focusing on the story of a wide range of discussions based on the experience of the victim.

By comparing the news language of media naming in South Korean and Chinese society, according to its different reasons and purposes, the case naming constructs the news language framework from different perspectives. In the process of name change in South Korea, from naming the case under the victim's pseudonym at the beginning to naming it as the perpetrator, it confirms from a certain point of view that the media participate in and guide and assist the public discussion as mentioned in Christians' book [1]. Therefore, in the communication, news language bears the ethical responsibility. Naming the case after the victim's pseudonym emphasizes the victim's experience, draws the public's attention to the victim and her suffering, and avoids the recurrence of tragedy. However, as Yonhap's report said, this naming that binds the victim to trauma for a long time may cause deeper psychological harm to the victim and her family members, which is not in line with the public interest goal of revealing the identity of the perpetrators [8]. After 2009, the naming method with the criminal Cho Doo-soon as the name of the case emphasizes the criminal's judicial responsibility and plays a role of publicity and alertness. However, it is still faced with the ethical issue of whether to give too much attention to the criminal. It always makes the public's view of the case dominated by anger, and whether it will ignore the educational significance of the case itself as a criminal case.

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In China, the naming of the event directly uses the film *So-won* as the naming method. Although it can effectively ensure the public's basic understanding of the event and spread, the film is always a manifestation of artistic techniques. The perception of artistic works may make the public unable to realize the importance of the event itself from a rational and objective perspective. Similarly, the naming of *So-won case* may also allow the film narrative with artistic techniques to intervene in real cases.

The different naming methods used in the news reports of South Korea and China constitute a horizontal comparison, which corresponds to three cognitive orientations respectively, confirming how different naming methods, as part of the news linguistic choices, construct different public cognitive frameworks, and determine what the public sees, feels, and will judge why, so as to affect public perception.

### 2.2. Longitudinal comparison—*The Guardian* language changes on climate matters

If in the *Cho Doo-soon Case*, the naming methods of China and South Korea is considered to constitute a horizontal comparison, and different naming methods affect the public's judgment on the center of the event- that is, who is in the dominant position- and finally affect the public perception, the changes in descriptive language of climate related news in *The Guardian* constitute a longitudinal comparison [9]. From the perspective of how the news media want the public to deal with environmental problems, changing linguistic choices, affect the public's judgment on the seriousness of the event, so as to promote the behavior of environmental protection.

This strategy for changing the linguistic choices is not a simple adjustment of language style, but a typical means for the media to guide public opinion and emotions through emotional language and rhetorical appeals. In Teneva's article, *Emotionalization of the 2021–2022 Global Energy Crisis Coverage: Analyzing the Rhetorical Appeals as Manipulation Means in the Mainstream Media,* it is pointed out that, by using rhetorical appeals and emotional language, positive or negative emotions can be induced and public opinion can be shaped, and news reporting can also be emotionally influenced as a result [10]. These means and skills of news language play an important role in influencing the public perception of environmental issues. *The Guardian*'s news linguistic choice also follows this logic, affecting the public's judgment of the seriousness of the event by replacing words with different emotional colors, so as to enhance the sense of crisis and advocate the public's joint participation in the cause of environmental protection.

*"Climate emergency' or 'climate crisis' to be used instead of 'climate change' .Climate change is no longer considered to accurately reflect the seriousness of the overall situation; use climate emergency or climate crisis instead to describe the broader impact of climate change'* [9]. Compared with climate change, crisis more implies the potential risks of climate change, and directly rises to emergency to call on the public to pay more attention to climate change and take action to protect it.

*'Use 'wildlife', not 'biodiversity' We felt that 'wildlife' is a much more accessible word and is fair to use in many stories, and is a bit less clinical when talking about all the creatures with whom we share the planet.'* [9]. Echoing the responsibilities of the news media, the more understandable words avoid the misunderstanding and wrong acceptance of news information by the public, and reduce the possibility of being misunderstood as an expression as much as possible in the first step. It can also be seen from *The Guardian*'s words that the news media bear the responsibility of guiding the public's discussion. Therefore, it is necessary to use a more humane 'wildlife' to stimulate the public's sympathy for other creatures as part of earth's life, so as to promote the public's behavior of protecting the environment.

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Exploring *The Guardian*'s discretion in the use of news language, and finally announcing the purpose of the change in linguistic choices, it is obvious to see that, from the final discovery of the news that *The Guardian* clearly defines the emissions that countries around the world need to reduce within a specified time. Viner's words are quoted at the end of the news, pointing out that the purpose is to remind the public [9]. This also coincides with the view expressed by Christians in the works that the news media in a democratic society not only need to convey information, but also help the society to participate in the discussion of events [1].

Even for words with similar meanings, the change of a single word will change the public's reception of news information. For this large group of society and even news content about the global environment, the linguistic choices will affect the public perception of crisis and urgency. Stimulating this perception will largely promote the public's action of environmental protection. From the perspective of *The Guardian*'s content, it is also what the speaker wants to convey.

This case is based on the longitudinal comparison of the change of the official linguistic choices on the same issue in the UK, which induces the public's positive and negative emotions, sympathizes with the Earth's creatures, and at the same time, takes a nervous and stressful attitude towards the environmental problems, and gives solutions at the end of the news. The guidance of these two different emotions jointly shapes the public's awareness of the imminent environmental problems and promotes the decision-making of environmental protection.

## 3. Discussion

Entman argued that media frames serve four key purposes [11]. First, they define social problems by assessing associated costs and benefits against widely-shared cultural norms and pinpointing the responsible actors behind given issues. Second, frames diagnose the root sources that produce these social difficulties. Third, they deliver moral evaluations of relevant actors as well as the outcomes stemming from their actions. Finally, framing puts forward potential solutions to the identified problems, provides justifications for these proposed measures, and anticipates what consequences such remedies might bring about [11].

In the *Cho Doo-soon case* in South Korea, the same event was spread in China and South Korea in four naming ways, each of which corresponds to Entman's definition of the core function of framing. Different ways of defining problem determine whether the public's attention is on the offender or victim, on the case information itself or on the victim's story, and change the way the facts are perceived without changing the facts. To diagnose causes, finally, taking the *Cho Doo-soon case* used by the South Korean government as an example and named after the offender, the news language takes this case as a typical case at this moment, pointing out the loopholes in the legal system, and alerting the public to the awareness of children's sexual safety protection. Such news language distinguishes the narrative center, thus giving birth to the moral judgment of the case, including but not limited to the punishment of the offender and the discussion on the safety and protection of children, suggest remedies, promoted the implementation of the law: the South Korean parliament passed a bill called *Cho Doo-soon Act* in March 2019, which was implemented in April of the same year.

In contrast, in the case of *The Guardian* linguistic choices change on climate matters, the news media took the initiative to build a framework through language changes, defined problem, adjusted the level of public perception of environmental crisis, weakened the abstract and mild expression, avoided the public's sense of distance from the relatively grand expression of environmental crisis, and enhanced the sense of urgency. Instead of professional rhetoric, it used the language full of life temperature, mainly referring to animals other than humans, to stimulate the public's empathy and

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moral obligations, and finally suggested remedies, leading to the advocacy of environmental protection.

By comparing the two cases, the conclusion is that no matter what cultural context, the language framework used by the news media shows consistency. Whether it is social criminal cases or global environmental issues, the media follow the four core roles of framing given by Entman, and distinguish the narrative center and focus. However, there are differences between the two. In the *Cho Doo-soon case*, the public is naturally angry with the offender and sympathetic to the victim. Therefore, at this time, news language mainly aims to distinguish the narrative center; *The Guardian* pointed out that the climate crisis is a relatively abstract and seemingly distant concept. Therefore, it is more necessary to rely on the emotionalization of news language to make up for the sense of distance between the public and grand issues, so as to distinguish the narrative focus. However, the news language in criminal cases inevitably encounters more ethical disputes, such as the secondary injury to the victim and family members clearly pointed out by the official. On the contrary, *The Guardian*'s news language change is a part of the news media's responsibility to assist the public discussion. Although it needs to rely on long-term and repeated discourse accumulation, there are relatively few ethical disputes.

Through the above comparison, how the news linguistic choices affect public cognition depends on the topics discussed in the news. Issues of humanistic care are often accompanied by the risk of high moral disputes. To reduce or avoid such moral disputes, it is necessary to distinguish the narrative center, so as to avoid the public cognition completely dominated by emotion; For natural science issues, it is necessary to start with narrowing the distance between the public and the grand issues, so that the public can form a perception of the details around them that together constitute the grand issues.

## 4. Conclusion

Based on the naming differences of *Cho Doo-soon case* in the media of different countries in South Korea and the language adjustment of *The Guardian* on climate issues in Britain, this study discusses how the linguistic choice in news reporting affects public perception. The results show that different linguistic choices expression will change the focus of public attention and value judgment. The different naming of *Cho Doo-soon case* by Chinese and South Korean media has made the public focus on the victim and the offender or the story itself, while *The Guardian*'s use of words such as 'climate crisis' and 'climate emergency' has gradually strengthened the public's understanding of the seriousness and urgency of the climate problem. Based on the case-study analysis, this study further strengthens the conclusion that news language is not only a tool for information transmission, but also an important means to shape public cognition.

This study provides new case support for the relevance between news language and public perception, and further verifies the applicability of the framework theory in journalism and communication. Because of the influence of media on public perception in the process of linguistic choices, news media need to fully understand the social impact of language expression, and improve the standardization and responsibility of language use while ensuring the authenticity and objectivity of news.

Future research can further expand the scope of research, select more countries, media and social issues for comparative analysis, or directly explore the impact of different linguistic choices on public perception and behavior in combination with quantitative research for the public. Through more diversified research methods, deepen the understanding of news language on communication effect and social influence from different perspectives.

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