



# A Study on Mystification Strategies of Shanghai Epidemic Reports in British and American Mainstream Newspapers

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## Abstract

Based on the critical discourse analysis, this paper analyzes the keywords and discourse of the report text from the perspective of permutation strategy, ambiguity strategy and approaching strategy, and explores the Mystification strategies used in the Shanghai epidemic reported by the British and American mainstream newspapers as well as their representation in the text, in order to help the text-consumers view Western reports rationally and objectively. Through a corpus-based study, it is found that the Shanghai epidemic reports in British and American mainstream newspapers use different mystification strategies at the lexical and textual levels to guide the text-consumers' cognitive tendency, blur the real situation of the event and mystify the text-consumers.

## Subject Areas

Journalism and Communication, Linguistics

## Keywords

Critical Discourse Analysis, Mystification Strategies, Mainstream Newspaper, Shanghai Epidemic

## 1. Introduction

Since the COVID-19 pandemic swept the world in 2019, China has contributed to the prevention and control of the epidemic worldwide, not only delaying the spread of the epidemic, striving to minimize the impact of the epidemic, but also enhancing the confidence of the world to overcome the epidemic. However, due to the rapid spread and wide range of infection of the Omicron variant strain, Shanghai suffered a new round of large-scale positive confirmed cases from

2022.3.1 to 2022.5.30. As of April 8, the number of confirmed positive infections of the new local novel coronavirus pneumonia exceeded 20,000, causing widespread concern in the international community. The development trend of the epidemic in Shanghai and China's response to the outbreak has become the focus of the news reports.

News is the channel to transmit social hot events. News reports discourse refers to the way of social practice between news writers and readers in a certain social context, and acts on the generation and spreading of news meaning. It inevitably includes the writer's ideology and subjective understanding of the reported events (Zhou Min and Zhi Hui, 2022) [1]. In addition, the news reports manipulator covers or masks the social facts by changing the form of the discourse language structure of the news reports, and guides the text-consumers to accept and understand the news. Therefore, it is particularly important to identify the mystification phenomenon in the news reports. The strategies of mystification are linguistic means adopted by the newspapers of various countries to safeguard national interests. The use of mystification strategies in news reports reflects the problems of the language and ideology, such as the ambiguity of the speaker's responsibility in discourse. The strategies of mystification in news have the function of inducing people's value orientation and exporting ideology (Mu Junfang and Lu Siyao, 2016) [2]. In addition, the news discourse of the newspapers in various countries has a "stigmatization" effect to a certain extent, which is a way of international competition.

The British and American mainstream newspapers, as an important channel for Western countries to democratically understand China's social events, different countries have different attitudes towards the epidemic and different reports on China. To a certain extent, there is a phenomenon of mystification in news reports of various countries. The authenticity and objectivity of its reports have an unpredictable impact on the text-consumers' cognition. Based on this, according to the circulation and influence of newspapers and periodicals, this paper chooses British mainstream newspapers *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Financial Times*, *The Guardian* and American mainstream newspapers *The New York Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, then selects reports about the Shanghai epidemic from February 28 to May 30, 2022, focusing on the mystification strategies used by the British and American mainstream newspapers in Shanghai epidemic reports, in order to help the text-consumers to view the Shanghai epidemic rationally.

## **2. Literal Review**

### **2.1. Overview of Mystification Research**

The term "mystification" was first used in France and in the mid-18th century to describe social phenomena that conceal reality (Mu Junfang and Lu Siyao, 2016) [2]. In critical discourse analysis, a research focus is to emphasize how the text uses the strategies of mystification to describe events, and how it specifically mystifies the agent related to the event (O' Halloran, 2005) [3]. The research on

mystification includes many fields, involving linguistics, literature, journalism and communication. It is divided into two parts: foreign and domestic research on mystification.

There are macro and micro studies on mystification abroad. From the perspective of macro research, it expands the scope of mystification research. For example, Boszormenyi-Nagy and Framo (2013) [4] believe that mystification can deceive the public, and the upper class uses rationalization to exploit the interests of another class, resulting in class conflicts and social chaos; From the perspective of law, Freeman (1980) [5] explains that the law school invested a lot of time and energy to expose the contradictions in mainstream thought and work. From the perspective of micro research, scholars have explored the influence of mystification from the perspective of linguistic features. For example, Box (2002) [6] links crime, power and ideology with mystification together in his book, which is divided into six parts to explain how power leaders reshape facts and make them look “fairer” to achieve the role of mystify the reality. Kieran and O’Halloran (2005) [3] use evolutionary psychology to study the absence of actors in child sexual crime reports on British newspaper websites, and contributed to the study of the mystification of critical discourse; Sik Hung Ng (2007) [7] argues that language can be manipulated by mystification devices such as the choice of verbs, thus reconstructing discriminatory statements as part of everyday discourse; Arrese and other scholars (2002) [8] study the use of strategies in British and Spanish political issues, including passive voice, metaphor and metonymy. Abramson (1999) [9] views mystification in the form of literature and uses it as a deception tool to expose the real face.

Domestic research on mystification is also more diversified. For example, Huang He Shuiting (2022) [10] studies the construction of mystification narrative in suspense movies; Li Mingjun (2004) [11] studies the cultural mystification of female images in Lu Xun’s novels; Fu Yuanfeng’s (2007) [12] research on aesthetic mystification; Mu Junfang and Lu Siyao (2016) [2] propose a de-mystification strategy for the mystification phenomenon in news discourse. Compares with the domestic research on mystification abroad, its depth and scope are different. It can be seen that the previous research on mystification only follows the characteristics of mystification, that is, to cover up the truth. In news reports, discourse manipulators often use implicit language structures to cover up the truth of the facts in order to influence the text-consumers’ cognition. Critical discourse analysts lack research on such phenomena, especially the analysis of systematic mystification strategies. To sum up, based on previous studies, this study attempts to put forward discursive strategies suitable for news reports according to the characteristics of mystification in news reports, in order to help the text-consumers avoid the discourse structure that is vulnerable to mystify in news reports and assist the public view news reports objectively.

## **2.2. Overview of Epidemic Discourse Research**

Since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus epidemic in 2019, people have ob-

tained social information under the epidemic in a variety of ways, including print media, leaders' speeches and social media, so that scholars have begun to study the epidemic discourse in different countries. The study of epidemic discourse can be roughly divided into two aspects: domestic research and foreign research. From domestic research, taking the President's foreign speech during the epidemic period as the analysis object, Zeng Ruirui (2023) [13] conducts discourse analysis under the framework of discourse-historical approach to explore the national image and implicit meaning constructed in the foreign speech; Kong Zhiguo (2023) [14] takes the heritage foundation's research report on the epidemic situation as the research object, and deeply analyzes the discourse prejudice and its causes, so as to guide the international community to understand China's anti-epidemic more objectively; Su Hang, Ye Jun and Zhang Yuqing (2023) [15] explore the discourse representation of the COVID-19 in Chinese and American news media under local grammar, and find that there are differences and similarities in the discourse representation of the COVID-19 in Chinese and American news media. Wu Linfang and Wang Xuelian (2022) [16] take the Wuhan epidemic of China Daily as the research object, and summarize the current characteristics and future development ideas of mainstream media. Based on the framework analysis, Zhang Hongqian and other scholars (2022) [17] analyze the epidemic discourse of Global Think Tanks and discuss the rational judgment of Western media on global development.

From foreign research, Chaiuk and Dunaievska (2020) [18] take the UK media's coverage of the coronavirus epidemic as the research object, and analyze how it deeply rooted the culture of fear. Wicke and Bolognesi (2021) [19] take Twitter's coronavirus epidemic discourse as an example to explore how social media constructs epidemic discourse as the epidemic develops; Scholars such as Génèreux (2021) [20] have conducted quantitative and qualitative analysis of media epidemic discourse from the perspectives of communication, social ecology and linguistics, contributing to the spread of health emergencies and disasters; According to the media's politicization of the new coronavirus vaccine, Abbas (2022) [21] conducts an in-depth analysis and makes recommendations; Nor and Zulcafli (2020) [22] analyze the epidemic discourse from the corpus-driven level to explore how the virus caused harm to Malaysians in economic and social life.

To sum up, previous studies have a wide range of perspectives and involve more media, but lack a summary of epidemic discourse strategies and characteristics. In view of this, this study aims to summarize the mystification strategies of epidemic discourse in British and American newspapers from the perspective of critical discourse analysis, so as to help the text-consumers take a rational view of western media reports.

### 3. Methodology

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is an important force in discourse analysis. Its theoretical perspective and research methods are the most remarkable, and it is

also growing.

### 3.1. Research Method

Critical discourse analysis originated from critical linguistics advocated by linguists in the 1970s. It involves many fields such as Linguistics, Sociology, Communication and Ethnology. It has an interdisciplinary nature. It aims to clarify ambiguous issues under the influence of social events (Wodak, 2012) [23], aiming to improve the role of discourse in social change. From the micro perspective, CDA involves three important concepts: criticism, ideology and power. The difference between critical discourse analysis and discourse analysis lies in criticism, which stems from critical theory. It refers to maintaining a skeptical attitude, not blindly believing in the corpus itself, and focusing on exploring the profound meaning behind it. Ideology and power are inseparable. Ideology refers to a way of thinking, which has class attributes (Gerring, 1997) [24]. It organizes discourse from a specific perspective and is a systematic ideological system (Hodge and Kress, 1993) [25]. Power is the product of the unequal use of social distribution by discourse manipulators in class. In critical discourse, social rights are understood as “control” (Van Dijk, 2016) [26].

From a macro perspective, critical discourse analysis has multiple theoretical perspectives. The newly developed corpus linguistics and cognitive linguistics are particularly worthy of attention. Corpus linguistics is based on computer or software to support the analysis of huge text data (Mautner, 2016) [27], so as to reduce the subjective defects of critical discourse analysis and achieve the combination of quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis. Cognitive linguistics focuses on the mode of thinking in the process of discourse production, and adds cognitive considerations to the process of discourse analysis, that is, the psychological characteristics of the discourse background, participants and speakers (Hart, 2010) [28]. This analytical model is mostly used in political discourse.

### 3.2. Research Design

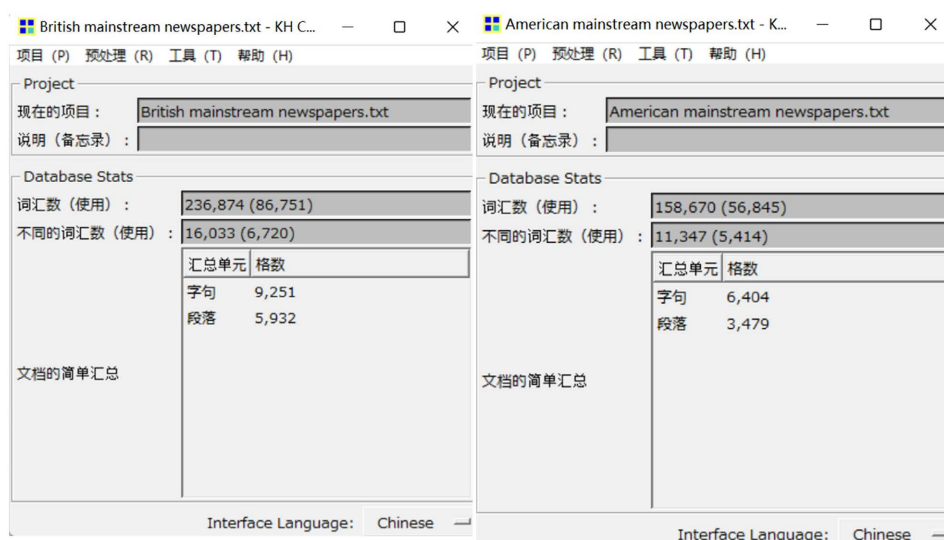
The research design includes two parts: corpus collection and analytical framework. The corpus collection part explains the selection of corpus content and the capacity of corpus. The analytical framework part specifically explains the theoretical basis and construction ideas of the framework.

#### 3.2.1. Corpus Collection

As one of the main research objects of critical discourse analysis, news discourse includes the ideology of news manipulators, which is essentially a social dimension. Therefore, this study selects the 2022 Shanghai epidemic reports of British and American mainstream newspapers for analysis.

This paper searches news reports through the Dow Jones (Factiva) database, which is a quantitative news database and has three characteristics. First, it has a wide coverage. The database provides news from more than 200 countries and

regions, including newspapers, journals, magazines and news agencies in 28 languages. Second, the update speed is fast, the news materials updated on the day account for 80%, and about 500,000 articles are newly launched every day, which can ensure the timeliness of news reports selection. Third, it has complete functions. Users can improve the accuracy and relevance of search reports by selecting keywords, newspapers, dates, and industry labels. In addition, the database provides graphical visualization for easy use. The keywords were “Covid-19 AND Shanghai”. The date was based on the Chinese government’s report of confirmed cases of the epidemic in Shanghai on 2022.2.18. The search date was 2022.5.18. In the column of information sources, the British mainstream newspapers The Daily Mail, The Daily Telegraph, The Financial Times, The Guardian and the American mainstream newspapers The New York Post, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post are selected as the main sources of corpus (The above newspapers are sorted according to the number of articles published on the topic). Among them, there are 189 reports on the Shanghai epidemic in the British mainstream newspapers, with 236,847 characters, and 177 reports on the Shanghai epidemic in the US mainstream newspapers, with 158,670 characters, as shown in **Figure 1**.



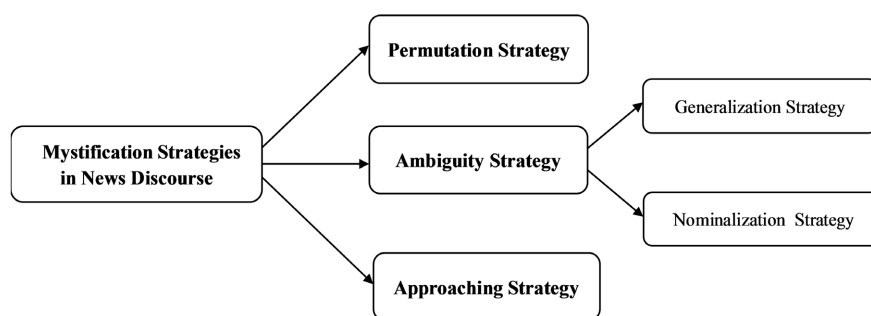
**Figure 1.** The characters of Shanghai epidemic reports of British and American mainstream media in KH Coder software.

### 3.2.2. Analytical Framework

The use of language to create news discourse can be regarded as the completion of a social practice. Van Leeuwen (2008) [29] believes that discourse is a re-contextualized social practice. In other words, when the discourse is influenced by the subject’s manipulation behavior, the use of discursive strategies is endowed with obvious pragmatic features, and discursive strategies can help the discourse subject to reconstruct the context, so as to achieve the communicative intention of the discourse subject. This paper draws on Ng & Bradac’s (1993) [30] language masking strategy, pragmatic ambiguity strategies (Wu Tieping,

1999) [31] and proximization (Cap, 2013) [32], and constructs the mystification strategies of news discourse according to the characteristics of news discourse, as shown in **Figure 2**.

In **Figure 2**, Language masking strategies include lower-level masking devices and higher-level masking devices. Lower-level masking devices involve a single sentence or a single discourse, which is subdivided into permutation, truncation, generalization and nominalization. The permutation strategy realizes the influence of the text-consumers on the focus of the sentence by changing the position of the subject in the sentence, such as the passive sentence that changes the position of the subject and predicate in the news reports. The use of permutation strategy can hide the agent, make the predicate in English sentences prominent, become the focus of the play, and attract the attention of the text-consumers. The generalization strategy refers to that the discourse manipulator uses non-specific or abstract words to vaguely refer to the agent or agent's behavior. The nominalization strategy is to transform a verb clause composed of subject, predicate verb and object into a noun or noun phrase, thus blurring the relationship between the agent and the patient (Mu Junfang, 2018) [33].



**Figure 2.** The analytical framework of mystification strategies of the Shanghai epidemic by British and American mainstream newspapers.

The representation of the Generalization strategy and nominalization strategy have ambiguity significance, so the generalization strategy and nominalization strategy are classified as ambiguity strategies. Wu Tiejing (1999: 139) [31] point out that vagueness is one of the essential attributes of language, which belongs to the pragmatic phenomenon. It is essentially to observe how semantic vagueness is represented in discourse. Ambiguity is a representation of pragmatic vagueness, a communicative strategy, which refers to the phenomenon that the discourse subject uses vague, unclear or uncertain vocabulary or syntactic structure to convey information to the listener in the context (Thomas, 2014) [34]. According to this feature, in news discourse, news manipulators often use ambiguity strategies such as neutral words, ambiguous words, abbreviations and indirect quotations to make the position of the discourse difficult to define, so as to achieve the effect of mystification.

The approaching strategy has the characteristics of proximization, but at the textual level, it refers to the use of words similar to the text-consumers to short-



en the distance between the text-consumers and the manipulator, so as to control the text-consumers' cognition (Cap, 2013) [32]. In news reports, discourse manipulators will intentionally guide the text-consumers through direct or indirect ways (Haddington, 2007) [35]. This kind of "synergy" or "harmony" appears in news interviews or news discourse, which conforms to the characteristics of proximization. It is mainly reflected in three aspects in news reports. First, news manipulators use personal deixis such as "we" and "our country" to draw the distance between the text-consumers as well as the support of the text-consumers, which is distinguished from the target subject of the report, so as to ensure that the content of the report is objective to the text-consumers. Second, the bias of the report content is transferred through intertextuality discourse to ensure the positive image of the discourse manipulators and make the reports credible. Thirdly, news manipulators arouse the common values, beliefs and moral consciousness of both sides of the text-consumers through rhetorical means such as repetition and contrast, and guide the text-consumers to identify with the content of the report (Yang Na, 2020: 37) [36]. These three aspects can consciously manipulate the content of the report, thus mystifying the text-consumers.

The discursive strategy framework of mystification proposed above will be analyzed in the third chapter with KH Coder to prove its applicability to the mystification discourse of news reports.

#### **4. Analysis of the Mystification Strategies of the British and American Mainstream Newspapers Coverage of the Shanghai Epidemic**

Based on the corpus analysis, this part focuses on how mystification strategies are represented by linguistic means at lexical and discourse levels.

##### **4.1. Keywords Analysis of Shanghai Epidemic Reports in British and American Mainstream Newspapers**

After manually cleaning the corpus, the self-built corpus is imported into KH Coder text analysis software to obtain the keyword network diagram of Shanghai epidemic reports in British and American mainstream newspapers, as shown in **Figure 3** and **Figure 4**. The KH Coder text analysis software can capture the high-frequency words appearing in the self-built corpus. Among them, the larger the node where the keyword is located, the higher the frequency of the words appearing is in the report. The subgroup composed of the same color node represents the tightness between the keywords. In the graph, it is represented by a solid line. Subgroups of different colors also have internal relations in news reports, and are represented by a dotted line in the graph. The closer the distance between the nodes, the more likely the words appear together in the report, and the stronger the correlation of the words. High-frequency keywords can extract the focus of news reports, as well as can analyze the relevance and tendency of reported events, so as to more intuitively and deeply analyze the hidden discursive strategies in specific report texts.





#### 4.1.1. Analysis of High-Frequency Keywords in Shanghai Epidemic Reports of British Mainstream Newspapers

According to **Figure 3**, the keyword network cluster of Shanghai epidemic report of British mainstream newspapers can be divided into three categories. The first category mainly focuses on the specific situation of Shanghai epidemic in China (including subgroups 01, 06, 07 and 09); the second category involves energy prices and market economy under the impact of the epidemic (including subgroups 02, 03, 05, 08, 10 and 11); the third category shows world hot news (including subgroup 04). Among them, the subgroups of the first category mainly revolve around “China”, “Shanghai”, “Omicron” and “lockdown”. It can be seen that after China implemented closed management of the epidemic in Shanghai, the British mainstream newspapers paid more attention to the measures of closed management and the chain of people’s living materials during the closed period. Other subgroups in the category involved events, data and Beijing’s condition during the epidemic in Shanghai. The “demand” and “price” of subgroup 02 are connected with “lockdown” and “food” in subgroup 01. The second category focuses on the impact of energy and food prices during the outbreak of the epidemic in Shanghai, especially the keywords such as “economy”, “market”, “energy” and “service”, indicating that the British mainstream newspapers are more concerned about the impact of the epidemic outbreak in Shanghai on the world economy and the consumption demand for energy such as natural gas and oil. The third category mentions the Russia-Ukraine conflict, indicating that the British mainstream newspapers keep up with the current events, highlighting the dual impact of the war and the Shanghai epidemic on inflation.

It can be seen from the above classification that the British mainstream newspapers pay more attention to the social operation under the Shanghai epidemic, such as the measures taken by China in the face of the sudden outbreak of the epidemic, how to develop the economy under the epidemic, how to guarantee the living materials when the whole staff are closed at home, and the change of energy prices.

#### 4.1.2. Analysis of High-Frequency Keywords in Shanghai Epidemic Reports of American Mainstream Newspapers

Different from the British mainstream newspapers, the American mainstream newspapers pay more attention to the Shanghai epidemic itself. As shown in **Figure 4**, it can be divided into two categories. The first category is a subgroup dominated by high-frequency words “China” and “SHANGHAI” (including subgroups 01, 04 and 08). Among them, “policy”, “leader” and “China” are closely linked, indicating that the American mainstream newspapers attach great importance to China’s response to the outbreak of the Omicron epidemic. “control” highlights that China stops the invasion of the epidemic with extremely high level of control. For the outbreak epicenter—Shanghai, the American mainstream newspapers pay attention to the supply of materials and are more

inclined to report the impact of the epidemic on the Russia-Ukraine war. The second category is the subgroups dominated by “lockdown”, “infection” and “company” (including subgroups 02, 03, 05, 06 and 07). Similar to the British mainstream newspapers, the American mainstream newspapers also attach importance to the living, food sources and work of the people after the blocked of China.

In addition, the high-frequency words “hospital”, “facility”, “patient” and “quarantine” not only indicate that China’s response to the epidemic covers a wide range, can achieve isolation and quarantine, and effectively prevent the spread of the epidemic, but also reflect that the American mainstream newspapers attach importance to the relationship between doctors and patients under the epidemic. For the outbreak of the epidemic in Shanghai, the American mainstream newspapers also pay special attention to its infection rate and mortality rate, and pay attention to the physical and mental health of Omicron after his recovery. Besides, the economic development, stock turmoil and factory production in China’s coastal cities under the epidemic are the focus of American mainstream newspapers reports.

#### 4.2. Permutation Strategy

In news reports, discursive manipulators influence the focus of the text-consumers by changing the position of the subject in the news statement. The use of permutation strategy can hide the agent and shift the text-consumers’ attention. Based on the above keyword analysis of the British and American mainstream newspapers reports on the Shanghai epidemic, it is found that the mainstream newspapers of the two countries reports around “China” and “Shanghai”. Considering that the position of keywords in the reporting sentence affects the text-consumers’ judgment on the reporting values, the distribution of “China” and “Shanghai” in the mainstream newspapers reports of the United Kingdom and the United States is sorted out, as shown in **Table 1**.

Obviously, the newspapers discourse has certain similarities in the location distribution of “China” and “Shanghai”. Placing the keywords at the beginning of the sentence is to highlight the keywords, and placing them in the middle or end of the sentence is suspected of covert keywords. The words at the beginning of the sentence will attract the attention of the text-consumers, thus ignoring the real situation about China. From the perspective of discourse, the permutation strategy is often characterized by passive structure. According to **Table 1**, the proportion of “China” and “Shanghai” at the beginning of the sentence in the British and American mainstream newspapers is 21% and 23% respectively, which is much lower than that in the middle and end of the sentence. This shows that the mainstream newspapers in the United Kingdom and the United States use more permutation strategies to achieve the purpose of mystifying the text-consumers. The following analysis is combined with specific text:

**Table 1.** Position distribution of “China/Shanghai” in British and American mainstream newspapers’ sentence.

China/Shanghai	At the beginning	In the middle/at the end
British mainstream newspapers	21%	79%
American mainstream newspapers	23%	77%

1) **For all its problems of growing debt**, a declining population and a US-led tech embargo, China in all likelihood will become the biggest economy in the world by around 2030. (*The Daily Telegraph*)

2) **The government has been concerned about comparatively lower rates of vaccination among China’s older adults.** The country also has far fewer intensive care hospital beds compared to its population than most industrialized countries. (*The New York Post*)

After the British mainstream newspapers report the epidemic situation in Shanghai, they made an example (1) evaluation of China’s development status. From the surface sense, although the report expresses good expectations for China’s development prospects, it is essentially exporting to the text-consumers. The report does not first explain the possibility of China becoming a world economy in 2030, but puts the discourse manipulator’s view that China’s current problems are at the beginning of the sentence. The text-consumers tend to remember the early things deeply. Obviously, this position arrangement can make these “defects” become the focus of the text-consumers’ attention, causing the text-consumers to misunderstand that China’s development has many restrictions, so as to achieve the purpose of the discourse manipulator to obscure the facts.

As shown in example (2), the bold clause uses a passive structure, and “**government**” and “**country**” are prominent. According to the context of the report, we can see that the subject is the Chinese government, but the report places “China” at the end of the sentence. When the text-consumers browses the report, it is easy to ignore the main content of the report, that is, to ignore the advantage that’ China has fewer severe patients than industrialized countries. It can be seen that the American mainstream newspapers often use permutation strategy to mystify the text-consumers’ true understanding of China’s epidemic prevention and control measures.

### 4.3. Ambiguity Strategy

In news reports, ambiguity refers to the use of uncertain lexicogrammar in the description of related concepts or events, which can’t accurately express facts, convey ambiguous meaning to the text-consumers, and make the text-consumers unable to correctly recognize the real events of news reports. Ambiguity strategies include generalization strategy and nominalization strategy.

#### 4.3.1. Generalization Strategy

The generalization strategy is mainly based on the use of generalized words.

Therefore, according to the definition of generalization strategy by Ng and Bradac (1993) [30], the generalization words in British and American mainstream newspapers are sorted out, as shown in **Table 2**.

**Table 2.** List of generalized words in British and American mainstream newspapers reports.

	British mainstream newspapers		American mainstream newspapers	
Adverbs	Just	182	About	26
	Already	126	Nearly	84
	Only	126	More	193
	Very	122	Very	52
Noun	Risk	155	People	429
Adjectives	Higher	165	Other	290
	Other	299	Such	139
Total	1175		1213	

According to **Table 2**, the generalized words in the British and American mainstream newspapers report on the epidemic in China and Shanghai involve adverbs, nouns, adjectives and deixis (deixis are specifically analyzed in sentences). There are many adverbs. For example, in the American mainstream newspapers, “About” has approximately and almost meaning as an adverb, and it has abstract ambiguous meaning. In the British mainstream newspapers, “Very” refers to the concepts of many and extraordinary, and the quantity modifiers is also an ambiguous meaning. The adjectives “Other”, “Such”, etc. reflect their ambiguous meaning according to the concept of the word itself. The following text specific instructions:

3) **It** has kept cases and deaths remarkably low through a “zero-Covid” strategy that has involved tracking and tracing every case, closed its borders and locked down cities of millions of **people**. **It** fostered domestic vaccines that allowed the country to carry out a massive inoculation effort. (The Washington Post)

Through the description of news reports, we can see that the subject of example (3) is China’s “Zero COVID-19 Case Policy”, but there is no name and country of this policy in explaining its role and significance, and the alternative deixis words “**It**”, “**its**”, the text-consumers can’t clearly obtain who the subject of this event is. In addition, the “**people**” in the sentence is a general reference. The previous text does not specify which city, but vaguely refers to the agent.

#### 4.3.2. Nominalization Strategy

The nominalization strategy is the process nominalization, the nature nominalization and the relational nominalization of the clause, which can effectively blur the relationship between the agent and the recipient, as shown in the following

examples:

4) Shanghai, one of China's biggest cities and an important international financial center, on Friday **ordered schools to move online and suspended kindergartens, sparking concerns among its residents that more draconian measures beckon.** (*The Daily Mail*)

According to Example (4), we can see that the subject of the sentence is Shanghai, and the discourse manipulator uses command and manipulative words such as “**ordered**” and “**suspended**” to establish a negative image of Shanghai, causing the text-consumers to misunderstand Shanghai. The discourse manipulator puts “**sparking**” at the beginning of the sentence in a prominent position, aiming to make the text-consumers think that Shanghai's implementation of measures is severe and difficult for other residents to accept, and uses “**that**” clause to convey that, Shanghai will also implement more severe measures than the above, triggering more concerns among residents, so as to guide the text-consumers to doubt Shanghai's policies and cause confusion.

#### 4.4. Approaching Strategy

In news reports, discourse manipulators establish consistency with text-consumers cognition through linguistic means, including deixis, intertextuality and repetition. From the above keyword analysis, it can be seen that “Shanghai” is closely related to “China”, “lockdown”, “covid-19” and other words in British and American mainstream newspapers. According to the distribution of strong correlation words with “Shanghai” in KH Coder Keywords networks, they are divided into proper nouns, nouns, verbs, adverbs and adjectives. Then, the words with high correlation and high co-occurrence frequency with “Shanghai” are sorted out, as shown in **Table 3**.

It can be seen from **Table 3** that the number of co-occurrences of “Shanghai” and related words has certain differences in the British and American mainstream newspapers reports. Specifically, the British and American mainstream newspapers all involve more proper nouns, and these proper nouns are related to China. Shanghai epidemic report includes China, Beijing, and so on, which can explain the situation of Shanghai epidemic from many aspects, with approaching effect.

At the noun level, both the British and American mainstream newspapers' Shanghai epidemic reports contain the word “Home”, and “Home” has the meaning of warm, comfortable and settlement, and its use in Shanghai epidemic reports can shorten the distance with the text-consumers. At the verb level, “Come” has the meaning of close to the reporter, shortening the distance between objects, and other verbs also have the concept that one side is close to the other side; at the level of adverbs and adjectives, “Now” and “Recent” indicate a close time. “Chinese” and “Zero-Covid” are closely related to the epidemic in Shanghai, creating spatial relationships and creating situations for the text-consumers. The following is a specific analysis of the report text:

**Table 3.** Co-occurrence of “Shanghai” related words in British and American mainstream newspapers reports.

	British mainstream newspapers		American mainstream newspapers	
Proper nouns	China	131	China	221
	Hongkong	60	Xi	78
	Shenzhen	18	Beijing	57
Nouns	Lockdown	141	Government	82
	Government	25	Authority	76
	Home	29	Home	65
Verbs	Impose	16	Come	41
	Extend	15	Start	32
Adverbs	Most	18	Now	42
Adjectives	Chinese	46	More	111
	Zero-Covid	22	Local	48
	Biggest	20	Recent	35
Total	541		888	

5) **If the lockdown is extended**, China’s economic growth will be **significantly** affected, said Raymond Yeung, chief economist for Greater China at ANZ. Yeung added that half of China’s GDP and population will be impacted this time and a one-week lockdown of the **affected** region could shave about **0.1 percentage** points off the country’s economic growth this year. (*The Guardian*)

6) Daily Covid-19 infection numbers in China **continued to hit** levels not seen since early 2020, as health authorities rushed to stay ahead of a fast-moving virus spreading quickly through asymptomatic carriers. (*The Wall Street Journal*)

According to Example (5), the economists of the Bank of Australia predict that China’s economic growth is affected by the epidemic lockdown measures, which are divided into two sentences to explain the extent of the impact. First of all, the identity of the news subject economist can strengthen the authenticity of the content, and use “**extended**” to indicate the increase of China’s lockdown time by the epidemic, and “**extended**” refers to the extension without an exact date, so that the text-consumers has negative emotions about China’s lockdown policy; secondly, the repeated use of “**affected**” in the two sentences strengthens the certainty of economic impact. The specific value of “**0.1 percentage**” in the supplementary explanation can guide the text-consumers to think in the direction of “China’s economy will be affected” and affect the text-consumers’ cognition. In Example (6), “**continued**” refers to the keep up doing something, and the connotation meaning means continuous, non-stop and endless. Then “**hit**” is used to explain the ferocity of the epidemic in China, indicating that the epidemic continues to invade China, showing a linear approach state, so that the



text-consumers thinks that the number of confirmed cases in China is large, but does not point out the exact number of people infected by the epidemic, so as to achieve the effect of mystifying the text-consumers.

## 5. Conclusions

This study first analyzes the high-frequency keywords of the self-built corpus of the British and American mainstream newspapers' Shanghai epidemic reports, and finds that the British and American mainstream newspapers mainly focus on the epidemic in Shanghai, but each has its own focus. From the analysis of high-frequency words, the British mainstream newspapers tend to report the impact of the outbreak of the epidemic in Shanghai on society, that is, economic, social, people's life and political changes, while the American mainstream newspapers pay more attention to how China responds to the epidemic and the measures it takes. We can see the tendency of British and American mainstream newspapers reports from the high-frequency words, so as to further discursive strategies study.

According to the analysis of mystification strategies, we find that both British and American mainstream newspapers use permutation strategy, ambiguity strategy and approaching strategy, but there are differences. In general, the British mainstream newspapers use more permutation strategies to mystify the agent or hide the event keywords, so that the text-consumers ignore the key information. The American mainstream newspapers use more ambiguity strategy and approaching strategy to achieve the mystification effect. Among them, ambiguity strategy includes generalization strategy and nominalization strategy, both of which cause semantic ambiguity, that is, reporters do not use clear language to fully describe events and confuse the text-consumers. To sum up, the British and American mainstream newspapers have used mystification strategies in the coverage of the Shanghai epidemic incident. The use of these discursive strategies will make the text-consumers ignore the key information of the reports to a certain extent, resulting in misunderstanding or cognitive bias, which violates the objectivity and authenticity of the news report and deserves the attention of the text-consumers.

In response to this phenomenon, this study believes that: on the one hand, China should strive to enhance its international status, gain more voice in the international community, strive to show the image of China, and establish a firm and good understanding of China by the world; On the other hand, we should increase the discursive strategies in the public, enhance the text-consumers' ability to make a clear distinction between right and wrong in news reports, and help the text-consumers avoid being mystified.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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