

A Corpus Research of the Corporate Identity

—Based on the Sustainability Report of China Mobile and Annual Report of AT&T

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Based on the English version of the *Sustainability Report* of China Mobile and the *Annual Report* of AT&T published in 2019 to 2020, this paper uses discourse analysis framework Discourse-Historical Approach. It explains and analyses the identity of China Mobile and AT&T and discusses the ideological factors behind their images through the analysis of referential strategy, strategies of perspectivation and strategies of intensification and mitigation. By combining the use of corpus, this paper also analyses the identity of China Mobile and AT&T from the perspective of the use of high-frequency content words, modal verbs and their concordance. By doing so, the research shows that the identity created by the English version of China Mobile's *Sustainability Report* is mainly authentic and practical, focusing on management and sustainable development as well as the development of technology. While the identity of AT&T is people-friendly, concerning about equity of female, male and black people, and focusing on diversity and inclusion.

Keywords: corpus, corporate identity, discourse analysis, discourse-historical approach

1. Research Background

Corporate image, which is originated in the 1950s, refers to the sum of knowledge, beliefs, feelings, ideas, impressions and values of corporate entities (Williams & Moffitt, 1997). The international academic community has carried out research on corporate identity since the 1990s, but most of the relevant researches have been carried out from the perspective of management and marketing. There are relatively few empirical researches based on linguistic theories and methods, and the domestic linguistic community pays less attention to corporate identity (Shi & Cheng, 2021, p. 171). Corporate discourse, as an important carrier to highlight the ideas, culture and operation of enterprise, plays an important role in the construction of corporate identity. The sustainability report usually introduces the sustainable development strategy, policy, management and performance adopted by the enterprise from the economic, social and environmental aspects, so as to strengthen the communication between the enterprise and the outside world and improve the corporate image (Hu & Sheng, 2020, p. 95). The annual report published by the company also represents what the company has done during the whole year. Therefore, based on Wodak's discourse-historical approach and self-building corpus,

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this paper analyzes the sustainability report of China Mobile and annual report of American Telephone & Telegraph (AT&T), which were issued in 2019 and 2020 from the perspective of the analysis of high-frequency content words, collocations and the concordance lines showed in the corpus tool AntConc3.2.4w. By doing so, the language features of the English version of *Sustainability Report* and the *Annual Report*, as well as the corporate identity it constructs can be revealed, in order to clarify the role of discourse in building corporate identity.

2. Literature Review

Research on the identity of domestic institutions is mainly focused on legal discourse and news discourse. Some scholars pay attention to the identity of universities, and few scholars study the identity of enterprises.

The research on corporate identity is mostly focused on three aspects: the relationship between corporate publicity translation and corporate image, the comparative study of Chinese and foreign corporate image and the analysis of corporate image. Among these three aspects, most papers are about the analysis of corporate identity, which promotes the research on corporate image and deepens the academic understanding of the essence and characteristics of corporate image.

Among the research of the relationship between corporate publicity translation and corporate image, Mou Yiwu and Wu Yun (2021) have explored the path of constructing Chinese corporate image in enterprise hypertext publicity translation, to display the new Chinese corporate image by using the nonlinear, multimodal and interactive characteristics of hypertext. Xu Jun and Zi Zhengquan (2020) through the self-built Chinese-English parallel corpus of corporate profiles, using USAS and taking Beijing companies as a research point, have investigated the hidden corporate image in the corporate publicity translation.

There are some researches of the comparative study of Chinese and foreign corporate image. For example, Zhao Yonggang (2021) has investigated the construction of Chinese corporate image in news reported by China Daily and the New York Times. Shi Xingsong and Cheng Xia (2020), from social constructionism, combined with the discourse-historical analysis, and with the help of the corpus tool Wmatrix, have compared the commonness and individuality of the construction of identity in the overview of Chinese and American banks from three levels: macro theme, discourse strategies and micro language characteristics. Wu Nan and Zhang Jingyuan (2019) have taken the 2017 annual reports of Huawei and Apple as the corpus, adopting discourse-historical approach, and comparing the implementation methods and language characteristics of discourse strategies of Chinese and American corporate identity.

Most researches are about corporate image analysis. For example, Hu Kaibao and Sheng Dandan (2020) have adopted Fairclough's critical discourse analysis theory and its three-dimensional discourse analysis model. By using corpus, from the perspective of the application of high-frequency content words, keywords and modal verbs, this paper describes the language features of the English translation of Huawei's *Sustainability Report* (2008-2017) and the image of Huawei, and discusses the ideological factors behind the image of Huawei. Based on the analysis framework of Van Demieroop, Li Yi and Xu Haiping (2021) have analyzed the English company profile of Chinese enterprises, and discussed how enterprises realize the construction of institutional identity through discourse construction strategy in the background of overseas market.

3. Design of Research

3.1 Research Materials

The two companies selected are from 2021 Fortune Global 500. One is China Mobile (ranking 56) and the other one is American Telephone & Telegraph (ranking 26). Both companies are about communications. The corpus used in this study comes from the English translation of the *Sustainability Report* of China Mobile and the *Annual Report* of AT&T which were published in 2019 and 2020 on the official website. The total number of tokens of China Mobile is 50348 and the sum of types is 6087. The total sum of tokens of AT&T is 36291 and the types are 6667.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

This paper analyzes the reports of China Mobile and AT&T based on the discourse-historical approach that has been proposed by Ruth Wodak. Discourse-historical approach analysis methods include five analysis strategies: referential strategy; strategies of prediction; strategies of argumentation; strategies of perspectivation; and strategies of intensification and mitigation.

The referential strategy realizes the construction of identity within or outside the enterprise group. The strategies of prediction realize the construction of enterprise vision and factual identity. The strategy of perspectivation realizes the construction of enterprise's subjective and objective identity. The strategies of intensification and mitigation realize the construction of enterprise's arbitrary or negotiated identity (Wu & Zhang, 2019, p. 223)

3.3 Research Steps

According to Wodak's discourse-historical approach, this paper analyzes the corporate identity created in the English version of China Mobile's *Sustainability Report* and AT&T's *Annual Report* from the referential strategy, strategies of perspectivation and strategies of intensification and mitigation.

Firstly, taking high-frequency content words, concordance lines and collocations as the research objects, this paper reveals the corporate identity of China Mobile and AT&T created in their respective report. High-frequency content words can usually reflect the key issues concerned by enterprises, describe the measures often taken by the speaker, and involve the thoughts, words and actions of the speaker, which can be directly applied to the shaping of the image of the speaker (Hu & Sheng, 2020, p. 97)

Then this paper makes discourse analysis of the reports from the referential strategy, the strategy of perspectivation and the strategies of intensification and mitigation. The paper also reveals the ideological factors behind the image of China Mobile and AT&T.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Analysis of Text

4.1.1 High-Frequency Content Words

Based on the corpus analysis software AntConc3.2.4w, the selected corpus is sorted by high-frequency content words. The top ten high-frequency content words of the two companies are shown as follows:

Table 1
Top Ten High-frequency Content Words

AT&T	Frequency	Rate	China Mobile	Frequency	Rate
our	480	23.1%	we	601	17.8%
we	387	18.6%	G	425	12.6%
employee(s)	191	9.2%	China	403	11.9%
their	174	8.4%	our	351	10.4%
women	169	8.1%	mobile	348	10.3%
diversity	165	7.9%	management	293	8.7%
best	136	6.5%	employee(s)	280	8.3%
member(s)	133	6.4%	development	264	7.8%
people	130	6.3%	number	217	6.4%
black	116	5.6%	information	197	5.8%
Total	2081	100%		3379	100%

The self-referential words “we” and “our” refer to company. Using the first-person narrative to refer to the company can shorten the distance with the audience and have more affinity. At the same time, “China” in the *Sustainability Report* ranks third by frequency. However, when referred to the concordance of “China”, it can be seen that the word “China” often appears with the word “mobile”. “China Mobile” has appeared 257 times, highlights the authoritative position of state-owned enterprises and tends to make relationship with the national government policy. “G” ranks second on the list. “G” means 5G in the text. which means that the company pays much attention to technology and aims to make great use of 5G. The word “management” comes next, which shows China Mobile puts management at the forefront. From the high-frequency content word list, it is easy to find China Mobile cares about its employees and uses number to highlight the assets of the enterprise and emphasizes its own ability, making the report more convincing.

In AT&T’s report, “employee(s)” appears frequently after the self-referential words “our” and “we”. It is obvious that this company pay much attention to its staff. The word “women” ranks fifth and “black” ranks tenth on the list, which means the enterprise wants to make a balance between men and women and races. The word “diversity” appears frequently on the report, which reflects American multi-culture. Instead of using numbers to show what AT&T has done, it uses “best” to show what awards it has got.

4.1.2 Concordance and Collocations

After analyzing the concordance and collocations of these high-frequency content words, it is found that: In China Mobile’s report, by analyzing the concordance of “management”, it is found that “management” is mostly matched with “approach and action”, “system”, “risk”, “quality” and “environment”, indicating that China Mobile emphasizes management methods and systematic management, as well as the sustainability of management. The word “development” is mostly matched with “high-quality”, “social” and “sustainable”, which shows that China Mobile concerns about sustainable development and the development of quality. It is related to Chinese long-term orientation culture. By analyzing the concordance and collocation of “employee(s)”, it shows that China Mobile cares about the life, needs of employees and female employees. These concordances build caring for employee development-oriented company identity. The word “information” is frequently matched with “technology”, “security” and “service”, which are all the concerning problems of customers. The frequent application of these words shows that China Mobile emphasizes practical

issues directly related to the company's development, such as service, management and development (sustainable development and 5G development), and shapes a practical identity.

In AT&T's report, the word "employee(s)" is most frequently collocated with "our", which greatly shortens the distance of the company and employees. The word "diversity" is frequently collocated with "inclusion", "supplier" and "equity". It constructs people-friendly identity by using these words, which is in line with American culture. The word "people" appears frequently with "of color" and "disability". It means that AT&T aims to ease racial conflicts and concerns about the disable people.

4.2 Analysis of Discourse Strategy

By analyzing the discourse, it is found that the two companies use referential strategy, strategy of perspectivation and strategy of intensification and mitigation to build their own identity.

4.2.1 Referential Strategy

Referential strategy in discourse-historical approach refers to how to name and refer to social actors, objects, phenomena, events, processes and behaviors in discourse from the perspective of linguistics.

(1) Self Reference of the Enterprise

In the two reports, the first-person pronoun "we" and the possessive pronoun "our" are more widely used to refer to the enterprise itself than the collocation "China Mobile" and "AT&T". The first-person pronoun is a discourse strategy commonly used by enterprises in external publicity to personalize the discourse, which helps to reduce the distance between enterprises and readers (Degano, 2010, p. 257). Therefore, China Mobile's and AT&T's reports focus on building the identity closed to the people, highlighting harmony and friendship. By using "we" and "our", readers can feel they are in a group with the company.

(2) Reference of Employee

The word "employee(s)" is often used to refer to staffs in the report, which regards employees as another subject independent of the enterprise, clearly constructs the employees' out-group identity. In Chinese culture, there exists high power distance between superiors and subordinates. China Mobile uses "employees" to highlight the social distance and power relationship between enterprises and employees, and highlight the enterprise's authoritative identity, which is in line with the power distance in Hofstede's cultural dimension theory. While in AT&T's report, although it also uses "employees", the report puts "our" in front of it. By adding this word, the in-group identity of employees is constructed. It not only cares for the psychological feelings of employees, enhances their sense of belonging and psychological identification with the enterprise, but also narrows the social distance between enterprises and employees, and shapes people-friendly image of the enterprise. According to Hofstede et al.'s (2010, p. 61) power distance theory, China has a high-power distance, while the power distance in America is low. Hence, in AT&T's report, it can be seen that it tries to build people-friendly identity.

4.2.2 Strategies of Perspectivation

There are two ways of quotation: direct and indirect speech. In the two reports, the direct speech is widely adopted. In AT&T's report, the direct speech is from its employees and suppliers. While in China Mobile's report, the direct speech is from its customers.

In China Mobile's reports, the direct speech is from rangers, principals of school, villagers and director of hospital. All these people are outside the company, so by using their speech, the discourse is convincing. It is in line with Chinese high-power distance culture—stressing authority. While in AT&T's report, the direct speech is mainly from its senior employees and suppliers. Comparing to China Mobile's speech, it is more subjective. Hence, China Mobile constructs a more objective identity.

3.2.3 Strategies of Intensification and Mitigation

The strategies of intensification and mitigation are mainly reflected in the application of different modal means in discourse.

Deontic modality and epistemic modality are two major types of modality system. Different from deontic modality, epistemic modality expresses an attitude of respect or honesty, increases the negotiation of discourse, and helps establish a good relationship between the author and the reader (Meng & Zhang, 2010, p. 54). Compared with the deontic modality “must” (The frequency is 1), the report uses more epistemic modality “can” (The frequency is 48) and “may” (The frequency is 9), showing the affinity image of China Mobile. In AT&T's report, the deontic modality “must” (The frequency is 3) is also not frequently used than “can” (The frequency is 28) and “may” (The frequency is 7). By using epistemic modal verbs, the two companies establish the identity of willing to communicate with readers.

5. Conclusion

With the help of the corpus tool AntConc3.2.4w, the paper combines Wodak's discourse-historical approach to conduct critical discourse analysis, analyze language from three levels: high-frequency content words, concordance and collocation lists. By exploring the application of discourse strategies from referential strategy, strategy of perspectivation and strategies of intensification and mitigation, the relationship between discourse, construction of corporate identity and the social ideology are studied. By comparing the two companies' reports, it is found that China Mobile's report pays attention to the construction of authentic identity while AT&T aims to build a people-friendly identity. By adopting these words and strategies, China Mobile has built its identity of focusing on management, the development of 5G and sustainable development, trying to make achievement and AT&T has built people-friendly image, aiming to narrow the gap of female and male, and people of different races.

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