

Rhetorical Tactics in a Cross-Cultural Dialogue: Transitivity Analysis of the FOX vs. CGTN Host Debate

跨文化对话中的修辞策略： 中美主播辩论的及物性分析

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Abstract This study analyzes the rhetorical tactics used in the FOX vs. CGTN host debate by Trish Regan and Liu Xin in the context of the China-US trade dispute. Utilizing a methodology rooted in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the Transitivity analysis, this research uncovers four primary rhetorical strategies used by the hosts to enhance persuasiveness, echoing the classic rhetorical appeals mentioned by Aristotle and Confucius. These strategies include the use of an effective-passive voice in the Material Process to highlight the evidence and, therefore enhance *logos*, the tactical use of the “happening” type of Material Process as well as the Existential Process to make justifications and defend the rectification of names by steering away from adverse discussions subtly, leveraging the Mental Process with the unique feature of “Entity as Sensor” to enhance the level of authority and credibility of the speaker (*ethos*), and employing the “identifying” Relational Process to reduce the credible authorship of the opponent’s speech (depriving of *ethos*). By breaking down these strategies through analyzing the language structures, the study provides insight into the nuanced linguistic strategies used in complex international discussions. It seeks to enhance effective communication and mutual understanding in intercultural dialogues, answering the calls of scholars for comparative, alternative, and multicultural rhetoric studies.

Keywords Transitivity analysis; Systemic functional grammar; Intercultural communication; Media discourse; Rhetorical analysis.

1. Introduction

The evolving economic relationship between China and the U.S. has garnered significant global attention, prompting discussions on economic interactions and intercultural engagement dynamics. In June 2018, the U.S., under the leadership of then-President Donald Trump, introduced substantial tariffs on Chinese exports, expressing concerns over intellectual property rights and trade practices (Brown and Horowitz, 2018; Swanson, 2018). This development, widely covered by mainstream media and social platforms, has highlighted the complex interplay between these

Received: 1st Dec, 2023

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two countries, influencing perceptions between their citizens and within the broader international community.

One of the most significant debates is between the two hosts, Trish Regan from Fox Business Network and Liu Xin from CGTN (China Global Television Network), on May 29th, 2019. Regan asserted that China was responsible for American businesses losing 600 billion US dollars annually, a claim that Liu Xin questioned, arguing that Regan lacked supporting evidence. Liu also described Regan's argument as being driven more by emotion than facts. Following these remarks, Regan invited Liu to participate in a televised debate, which Liu accepted shortly thereafter. As expected, this event has attracted considerable attention, being widely discussed in mainstream media and among the public.

While high-level decisions play a crucial role in shaping the outcomes of international disputes, fostering a deep understanding of bilateral dialogue can significantly contribute to advancing negotiations and reducing potential tensions. Effective communication, particularly in high-stakes discussions, is essential for building mutual understanding and finding common ground.

In exploring the rhetorical strategies used in the televised debate, this research employs Transitivity analysis, an approach from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) that examines how different types of Processes (elaboration of the concepts can be found in 2. Literature Review), such as actions, perceptions, and states of being, are represented in language use. The researcher aims to demonstrate how language choices shape meaning and influence perception in this case study. The research, therefore, is guided by the following questions:

1. How are different Process types represented in the debate, and how may they contribute to the rhetorical strategies used by the hosts?
2. What rhetorical strategies are employed by Trish Regan and Liu Xin in the debate, and how do these strategies align with the classic rhetorical appeals?
3. In what ways do the hosts use linguistic tactics to manage and steer the debate, particularly about controversial topics and credibility issues?

By discussing these questions, this research aims to uncover the nuanced linguistic and rhetorical tactics used by the hosts and their implications for intercultural communication. While the political and economic implications of the bilateral relationship are significant, they fall outside the scope of this paper. This study focuses on unveiling the linguistic tactics employed

in the debate to enhance understanding of a cross-cultural dialogue that may be linked to varied rhetorical traditions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Systemic Functional Linguistics and Transitivity

In the domain of social communication, the production, conveyance, and contestation of meaning across different media and social contexts form a fundamental concept of Social Semiotics (see for example, Hodge and Kress, 1988; Van Leeuwen, 2005, Andersen et al., 2015 and Lemke, 2021). Halliday's approach to Social Semiotics, which is central to this paper, emphasizes the role that language plays in building and maintaining social relations (see Halliday, 1985; 1994; 1995; 2014; Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014). Following this, language use is considered a resource for meaning-making in social contexts, with meaning constructed upon a system of choices. This perspective underpins the core principles of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which serves as the theoretical framework for this paper. Through analysis of the language choices made by the hosts, it is possible to interpret how the speakers construct meanings that are appropriate to their social purposes and functional to their persuasive strategies.

For instance, in the context of a publicly accessible television host debate, the language used by the hosts can be seen as a resource reflecting the relationship and dynamics between them based on the relevant social contexts (i.e., the trade dispute and the specific setting of the debate). Therefore, it is possible to analyze their communicative strategies by examining the text of the debate. More specifically, the text can be analyzed on the functional aspect of how language serves social purposes and the systemic aspect of how meaning is constructed through a series of language choices. To delve deeper into these choices, this research employs Transitivity analysis, an approach within SFL that examines the roles of Process, Participant, and Circumstance in the construction of meaning.

Transitivity analysis is mainly concerned with the experiential component of the Ideational metafunction, one of the three metafunctions that reflect the major purposes of language - the other two being the Interpersonal and Textual metafunctions. The experiential function of language addresses how we represent and make sense of the world through language use. In analyzing this function, clauses are broken down into three functional constituents: Process, Participant, and Circumstance.

When describing experiences or constructing reality with language, certain grammatical patterns emerge: patterns of doing (Material Process), sensing (Mental Process), being (Relational Process),

behaving (Behavioral Process), saying (Verbal Process), and existing (Existential Process). These patterns, known as Process types within the Transitivity system, are essential for understanding how different experiences are construed through domains of meanings that “differ according to the process itself and the nature of participants involved in it” (Matthiessen and Halliday, 2009). By categorizing various representations of experience through Process types, we can analyze and interpret how these linguistic choices serve to construct and convey meaning. For example, Material Processes are instrumental in depicting physical actions and their consequences (i.e., whether a participant undergoes a change). Conversely, Mental Processes provide insight into internal states such as perceptions and emotions, reflecting how characters' inner experiences are conveyed. Relational Processes are crucial for interpreting how entities are categorized and how their relationships are defined. Behavioral Processes describe habitual or involuntary actions that reflect characters' physiological responses (compared to Material Processes, the participants and their environments do not necessarily undergo changes of state in Behavioral Processes). Verbal Processes, which show communicative acts, are essential for interpreting how information and dialogue are structured. Existential Processes address the presence or absence of entities, framing the context in which events occur. In conjunction with Process Types, the analysis of Participants (the entities engaging in or affected by these Processes), and Circumstances (providing context such as time, place, and manner) offers a nuanced view of how meaning is constructed in the text. By analyzing these elements, the study not only discusses the structural organization of the dialogue but also uncovers the underlying dynamics and intentions that shape the events and relationships in the debate.

In this paper, the researcher will start by analyzing the debate transcript through the lens of Process types, Participants, and Circumstances within the Transitivity system. This analysis seeks to reveal how the two hosts utilize grammatical structures to highlight the functional use of language while simultaneously comparing their rhetorical tactics to understand better the strategies underlying their discourse in the debate.

2.2. Rhetorical Analysis Combined with Transitivity Analysis

According to Kennedy (2006), rhetoric can be seen as the innate energy in emotion and thought that is conveyed to others “through a system of signs” and hereby “influence their decisions or actions”. Rhetorical analysis, on the other hand, is a methodology with a long-standing history across disciplines used to examine how this persuasive communication is constructed and functions within a specific context, focusing on the selected features of a communication event

(Zachry, 2009). Researchers typically draw on rhetorical theories to conduct this analysis. However, it is challenging to underpin a specific framework of rhetorical analysis as rhetorical theories span from ancient times to the present day with a considerable and diverse array. Scholars need to be selective about certain subsets of ideas to be used in the theoretical foundation of their studies. Zachry (2009) also concluded three general perspectives of rhetorical analysis: traditional, new rhetorical, and critical-postmodern. This paper will adopt the traditional perspective which includes the work of thinkers in the classical period. Many scholars working from this perspective use Aristotle's *Rhetoric* as the foundation of their studies. Works by other thinkers from the same era, such as Plato, Isocrates, and Cicero, primarily ancient Greek and Roman figures, have also been referred to in the analysis from the traditional perspective. Strongly influenced by these philosophical giants, western traditions of rhetorical thought have not only been influential but also considered dominant (Garrett, 1999; Mao, 2003). Meanwhile, other rhetorical theories rooted in different regions, cultures and communities have received less attention, even though they are equally important, especially when addressing the increasing amount of cross-cultural communication. Kennedy's (1998) *Comparative Rhetorics* pioneered discussions on alternative and multicultural rhetorics. Following this, several scholars have emphasized the importance of alternative rhetorical theories, making efforts to introduce lesser-known traditions to broaden the field (e.g., Lipson & Binkley, 2012, on rhetorical theories in the Middle East, Egypt, and China; Borchers & Hundley, 2018, on African and Chinese rhetorical theories, among others). Among these, Chinese rhetorics have been among the most discussed non-Western rhetorical traditions. However, to the researcher's knowledge, few studies have explored comparative rhetorics within a specific, contemporary, cross-cultural, and influential dialogue. This paper aims to fill this gap.

In this paper, Aristotle's work on rhetoric is referenced in the discussion of results, particularly his rhetorical triangle: *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* (Aristotle, 2010). *Ethos* appeals to the speaker's characteristics and credibility, aiming to establish trustworthiness to enhance persuasiveness. *Pathos* appeals to emotion, using language to evoke emotional responses to strengthen the points made. *Logos* appeals to logic, which relies on facts, statistics, and evidence to increase the credibility and rationality of the arguments.

Additionally, this study draws on Confucius' rhetoric, particularly the concept of *the rectification of names* (正名 Zhèngmíng, also known as *the correctness of names*). This principle emphasizes the importance of ensuring that words and names accurately reflect the true nature of things. To ensure proper living and effective governance, it is essential that the actual state of

things aligns with the meanings associated with their names, and that every social class fulfills the roles they are meant to occupy (Steinkraus, 1980). In other words, social harmony depends on the proper alignment between language and reality: when names accurately reflect their corresponding realities, actions and relationships can be properly guided. In rhetoric, this notion suggests that persuasive communication is linked to the speaker's social status and behavior, with only virtuous deeds leading to effective persuasion (Gong, 1998). Therefore, successful persuasion may depend on whether the speaker's actions genuinely reflect the virtues they profess. According to Gong's argument, a speaker must embody these virtues to be perceived as convincing and trustworthy in a debate. Derived from Confucius' *Analects*, "Míng Zhèng Yán Shùn (名正言顺)" expresses the idea that when a person's title or reputation is just and authoritative, their words carry more weight and become more persuasive. This concept remains an influential aspect of Chinese rhetorical tradition, even in contemporary times. By incorporating both the "dominant" (at this point of study, this indicates the Western rhetorical traditions) and a relatively less discussed but culturally significant rhetorical tradition rooted in the Confucian philosophy, this research aims to enrich the comparison of rhetorical strategies across cultures, offering a broader perspective on rhetorical theory.

Methodologically, a general process of text analysis for rhetorical analysis follows the sequence of text identification, text categorization, identification of constituent parts of the text, and interpretation concerning theoretical concepts. Conveniently, this sequence of analyzing activities can be combined with the Transitivity analysis discussed above. Therefore, in this paper, the analyzing method will follow the sequence as shown in Table 1 below.

Step 1: Text Identification (extract the debate transcript)	Step 2: Text Categorization (group the dialogue into Regan's speech and Liu's speech for analysis and comparison)	Step 3: Identification of constituent parts of the text (separate each clause that includes a Process; code the clause of its Process type, Participant, and Circumstance with a focus on Process type)	Step 4: Interpretation in relation to theoretical concepts (analyze the ratio of different Process types and discuss potential reasons in relation to rhetorical theories)
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Table 1 - General Steps of The Transitivity-Rhetorical Analysis

Previous research extensively focused on either Transitivity analysis (see for example Nguyen, 2012; Seo, 2013; Zhang, 2017; Emilia et al., 2017 and Fadilah and Kuswoyo, 2021) or rhetorical analysis (see for example Leff and Mohrmann, 1974; Overington, 1997; Haber and Lingard, 2001;

Hart and Childers, 2005; Kuypers, 2010 and Supran and Oreskes, 2021) of their chosen text(s), but the combination of these two aspects remains considerably rare, especially in a cross-cultural dialogue. In this study, the focus of the rhetorical aspect will be on the linguistic strategies adopted by both hosts, realized through the Transitivity system. It contributes to an innovative analyzing framework, which will be further elaborated in the following section.

3. Methodology

Guided by Systemic Functional Linguistics, this research adopts a two-tiered framework to analyze both the experiential aspect (Transitivity analysis) and the rhetorical aspect (with the traditional perspective of rhetorical analysis, see 2.2. above). This approach intends to not only conduct the Transitivity analysis but also take one step further to touch upon the rhetorical tactics that can potentially influence the effectiveness and communicability of the debate.

The entire transcript of the host debate between Trish Regan and Liu Xin was initially extracted from the article “Full transcript of Liu Xin's live discussion on Fox”¹ on the CGTN website. The researcher went through each line of the speech by comparing the transcript to the debate video, which lasted 16 minutes and 26 seconds.² The text used for this research includes a total of 181 clauses with a Process spoken by Trish Regan and 231 clauses with a Process spoken by Liu Xin, with an overall word count of 2,620 words for the debate transcript (1,152 words by Regan, 1,468 words by Liu). Although the number of clauses between the hosts is not equal, the analysis focuses on the distribution of Process types expressed as percentages. This approach normalizes the data, allowing for a comparison of Process types for the hosts despite the imbalance in clause numbers and word counts. To ensure that the unequal numbers of clauses and word counts do not significantly affect the statistical results, the study includes methods to verify the robustness of the findings, such as examining the relative distribution of Process types within each host's contributions. This helps mitigate potential biases introduced by the uneven data sources.

Regarding the Transitivity analysis, each clause was analyzed on its Process type, Participant, and Circumstance. Compared to each other and Matthiessen's (1999) distribution of Process types, significantly frequent and infrequent uses of certain Process types were further investigated with partial discussion dedicated to Participants and Circumstances that were worth our attention. The coding criteria and notes grouped by Process types are exemplified below in Table 2. A description of each Process type can also be found in 2.1. above.

¹ Retrieved from <https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d774d3245444d35457a6333566d54/index.html>

² Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTRoPgIxOV0&t=39s>

Process Type	Main Subtype (if any)	Example from Text	Main Participant(s)	Circumstance(s) (if any)
Material Process (process of doing)	Active voice	...China has stolen enormous amounts of intellectual property (Regan)	Actor = China Goal = intellectual property	N/A
	Passive voice	Maybe these old rules need to be changed. (Liu)	Goal = old rules	N/A
	Middle voice	...as Liu Xin, a journalist working for CGTN (Liu)	Actor = Liu Xin Beneficiary = CGTN	for CGTN (Purpose, behalf)
Mental Process (process of sensing)		...I've heard very live discussions about this. (Liu)	Senser = I (Liu) Phenomenon = discussions	N/A
Relational Process (process of being)	Attributive	...trade wars are never good. (Regan)	Carrier = trade wars Attribute = never good	N/A
	Identifying	She's the host of a primetime English language television programme (Regan)	Identified = She (Liu) Identifier = the host of this programme	N/A
Existential Process (Process of existing)		...there are copyright issues (Liu)	Existent: copyright issues (entity)	N/A
Verbal Process (Process of saying)		As I said , I welcome different perspectives...(Regan)	Sayer = I (Regan)	N/A
Behavioural Process (Process of behaving)		If you look at the statistics... (Liu)	Behaver = you	at the statistics (target)

Table 2 - Examples of Process Types, Participants, and Circumstances from the Television Debate

To reduce subjectivity in determining the Process types, two additional researchers were invited to assist, particularly in resolving debatable occurrences. The analysis covered 412 clauses, and inter-coder reliability was assessed by calculating the agreement rate among the three raters. The final agreement rate was over 96%, indicating a high level of consistency in determining the Process types. This level of agreement supports the reliability and robustness of the manual

analysis conducted.¹ Zooming into the Process types and their distribution, the researcher further looked at several sub-categories of different processes, such as the discourse marker/filler type of Mental Process (e.g., “I think” or “you know”) as well as some special features of certain Process types, such as the voices (middle, pseudo-effective, effective-active, effective-passive) of the Material Process.

The Participation analysis was conducted by identifying both the Participant(s) and their roles in the corresponding clauses, such as ACTOR, GOAL, AGENT, etc. The analysis of Circumstances was carried out mainly by the analysis of adverbial and prepositional phrases in the text. However, due to the limited space and the relatively fewer occurrences of Circumstances, the focus of the discussion will be on the Process types and Participants.

This paper also discusses the rhetorical strategies realized through language use while referring it to some classic rhetorical appeals. It is crucial to note that this paper primarily focuses on the rhetorical strategies observed through Transitivity analysis. The intention here is to delve into linguistics strategies without extensive discussion on the philosophical level.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Overview of Transitivity Analysis

In Table 3 below, both the number and percentage of each type of Process for both hosts were listed. To limit the potential randomness in the results, the researcher considered the result as salient or significant when at least two of the following conditions were met:

- A. The difference in Normalized Occurrences is no less than 1
- B. The difference in Percentage is no less than 2%
- C. The difference in raw Occurrences is no fewer than 10

For example, even though the occurrences of the Existential Process are a small number on both sides of the speech, the percentage of Liu’s uses of this Process was 3.23% more, which is over 4 times Regan’s uses. The researcher considered it worth investigating further. Another example is that even though the percentage difference of the Material Process is less than 2%, 16 more occurrences of this Process appeared in Liu’s speech. Given the high raw number of occurrences, the researcher also treated this result as salient which is worth looking further into.

Process	Trish Regan (183 clauses)			Liu Xin (234 clauses)		
	Occurrences	Norm.	Percentage	Occurrences	Norm.	Percentage

¹ The coded data of the entire transcript is also accessible from here: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1NRygoImnkIsX59aSWYffzx-gqgkBqQ3n5-DJV0uOG3k/edit?gid=0#gid=0>

Material	52	28	28.73%	68	29	29.44%
Behavioural	2	1	1.10%	3	1	1.30%
Mental	42	23	23.20%	38	16	16.45%
Mental (I think, you know)	16	9	8.84%	28	12	12.12%
Mental (overall)	58	32	31.69%	66	28	28.21%
Verbal	16	9	8.84%	27	12	11.69%
Relational	51	28	28.18%	57	24	24.68%

Table 3 - Overview of Process Types of Regan and Liu's Speech¹

First of all, all six types of Processes that are “representing patterns of experience” (Halliday, 1994) can be identified in the debate. Secondly, the researcher further divided the Mental Process into Mental Process as it is and Mental Process as a discourse marker/filler (e.g., “I think”, “you know”). For one thing, there appear to be a considerable number of such uses by both hosts. For another, Liu's uses of such discourse marker/filler are much more than Regan's. Out of these seven types and subtypes, Liu significantly used four types of Process more (Material Process, Mental Process in the form of discourse marker/filler, Verbal Process, and Existential Process) while Regan took the lead in two other types (Mental Process and Relational Process).

Inspired by Matthiessen's (1999) pie chart of the distribution of Process types, the researcher also made Figures 1, 2, and 3 below for a more demonstrable result for comparison.

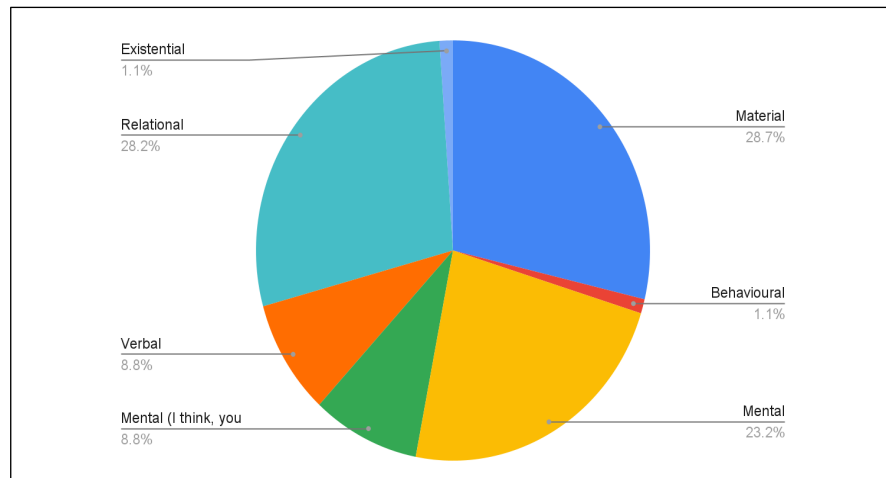


Figure 1 - Distribution of Trish Regan's Process Types

¹ The filled cells represent “meeting the conditions of significance” according to conditions A, B and C mentioned above.

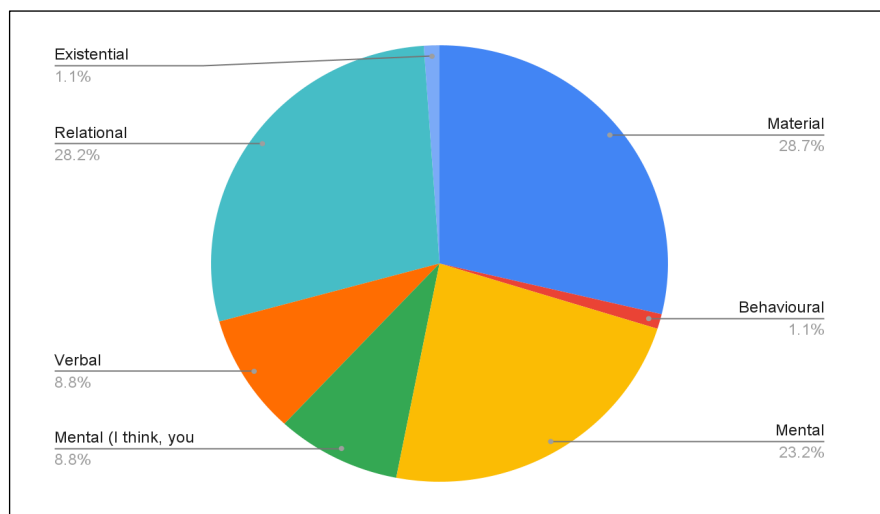


Figure 2 - Distribution of Liu Xin's Process Types

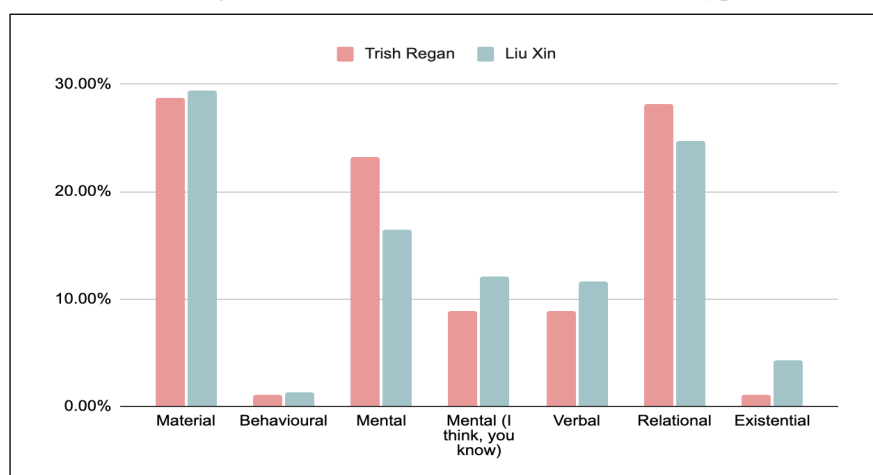


Figure 3 - Comparison of Process Types of Regan and Liu

4.2. The Effective-Passive Voice to Highlight *Logos*

The processes that describe the actions and events of the outer experience are usually considered Material Processes. In the debate, Liu's speech contains more occurrences of the Material Process than Regan's. Further, Liu uses effective-passive voice three times more than Regan. See Example 1a and 1b below.

Example 1a. ...80% of Chinese employees **were employed** by private enterprises...

Example 1b ...80% of Chinese exports **were done** by private companies, or produced by private companies...

This type of grammatical structure with effective-passive voice emphasizes the figures, as evidenced by putting them up front while moving the ACTOR back after the *by*-phrase. Combining the details that Liu accused Regan of her lack of evidence before the debate, the researcher

considered such use of an effective-passive voice to lay out the evidence as a rhetorical strategy corresponding with Aristotle's rhetorical appeal of *logos*. *Logos* can be understood as the appeal to logic or reason. Through the use of facts, evidence, and statistics, the speaker supports an argument and makes it logical and more credible. This effective passive voice to move the figures to the front can be a linguistic tactic to enhance the *logos* appeal.

4.3. The “Happening” Type of Material Process and Existential Process in Defence of *the Rectification of Names*

Continuing the discussion on the Material Process, Liu's speech displays more occurrences of the “happening” type of the Material Process than the “doing” type compared to Regan's. For example,

Example 2a

Regan: At what point will China decide to abandon its developing nation status...?

Liu: ...this kind of discussion **is going on**...

Example 2b

Regan: How do American businesses operate in China if they're at risk...?

Liu: ...you can't say, simply because these cases **are happening**, that America is stealing...

Stating what is happening usually indicates that the speaker acknowledges or is aware of the ongoing event. In this case, despite the confronting questions raised by Regan, Liu's response emphasized the “happening” rather than the “doing”.

It is helpful to check the difference in such Material Processes by using a probe question. For Examples 2a and 2b above, some of Regan's questions can be simplified as “What will China do?” or “What will the American businesses do?” while Liu's answers generate probe questions such as “What is happening around the issue?” or “What is the current state of the issue?”. By using more “happening” in the Material Process than “doing,” a specific AGENT was left out in the answer, which moves the focus away from the potential “causer” or the key issue/entity being questioned to the current situation in general. A single Participant or Subject (the issue that is or was happening) can be identified in Liu's speech without a specific AGENT or a causal relation. In the meantime, it was not an immediate change of topic to turn away from the questions raised.

Rhetorically, the “actual conduct” (i.e., the actions accused by Regan) of the speaker might play a vital role here on Liu's side. First, despite whether these accusations were the facts, these actions in their contexts described some “less virtuous deeds.” However, according to *the rectification of names* by Confucius, only virtuous deeds can achieve effective persuasion (Gong, 1998). The

researcher hypothesized that, in an effort to uphold *the rectification of names* and achieve effective persuasion in a culturally specific sense, Liu attempted to divert attention away from the “less virtuous deeds” of which her side of the world was confronted. By discussing the issue from a broader, more external perspective, she shifted to a “bird’s-eye” view of the situation, focusing on the larger context rather than addressing the internal details. By using more “happening” type of Material Process over the “doing” type, the sense of action is less obvious due to the lack of an AGENT or a specific causal relation. Regarding the Participants, while the AGENTs in Regan’s questions were often entities or nation-states (e.g., China, American businesses), Liu avoided directly responding from the perspective of these AGENTs. This aligns with her statement that she was speaking only for herself, not as a representative of her nation. Since she could not respond from a position beyond her individual role, her rhetorical strategy to uphold *the rectification of names* involved using the “happening” type of Material Process, steering the conversation away from directly answering such questions when being asked as if she was the nation’s representative.

The Existential Process shows when a certain phenomenon is recognized to exist or to happen without a known AGENT or obvious cause for such happening. In the analysis, Liu’s speech has significantly more Existential Processes than Regan’s. For example,

Example 3a Liu: **there are** IP infringements...

Example 3b Liu: ...**there are** companies in the United States who always sue each other over infringement on IP rights.

In Example 3a and 3b, Liu attempted to argue that the existence of the “less virtuous deeds” is not uncommon. One could infer that her statements sought to highlight that the behaviors Regan criticized may be widespread and not exclusive to China or Chinese companies. Combining the previous points on Liu’s more frequent use of the effective-passive voice to highlight the figures as well as the frequent use of the “happening” type of Material Process, we may infer that Liu attempted to enhance her rhetorical appeal on *logos* by stating figures and what is happening and existing as evidence to support her point that such conduct can, in a way, be justified or coped with globally.

Moreover, the “question-answer-style” debate, to a certain extent, influences the rhetorical tactics used by the two hosts. On the one hand, Liu’s speech focuses more on describing “what is happening,” “what exists,” or “how much of something there is” regarding the central issues. These descriptions can be interpreted as justifications and defences responding to Regan’s questions and accusations. On the other hand, Regan’s speech features more direct questioning and authoritative

statements, which may be influenced by her role as the “hosting host” of her prime-time show during this debate.

4.4. “Entity as Sensor” in Mental Process to Enhance *Ethos*

Mental Process demonstrates the process of sensing, oftentimes with its experience happening in the inner world as opposed to the Material Process. The analysis suggests that Regan’s speech includes more Mental Processes than Liu’s overall. Within the Mental Process of Regan’s speech, the researcher found that 20% of the occurrences used an entity as the subject (or the Sensor) instead of the host herself. See examples 4a and 4b below.

Example 4a. Regan: **China** is **upset** that Huawei is not being welcomed into the U.S. markets...

Example 4b. Regan: ...**the liberalized economic world in which we live** has **valued** intellectual property...

Although the difference seems small in the figure (i.e., Liu’s use of “Entity as Sensor” in Mental Processes accounts for 17% compared to Regan’s 20%), Liu’s speech primarily uses the term “American businesses” as Sensor and the relevant clauses often cluster these references within the same sentence. In contrast, Regan’s use of “Entity as Sensor” was scattered throughout her speech as she frames broader narratives (such as U.S. economic policies and global trade dynamics) in a way that potentially positions her as a voice of authority. This rhetorical strategy gives her speech a tone closer to a commentator or a decision-maker, rather than that of an individual, as seen in her statements about Huawei and the global economy.

Since the Mental Process typically describes the consciousness and awareness of the Sensor, applying this type of Process to entities that normally lack the ability to sense brings them closer to the status of their human animators, who *are* capable of sensing. This, in a way, echoes Cui’s research findings (2020) about how Regan treated herself as a part of the negotiation team in this debate. In another direction, this strategy pulls Regan closer to the entity even though she is an individual. Cui argued that Regan’s alignment of herself as a part of the negotiation team displayed a high level of subjectivity, which needed to be noted by the audience due to its untrue nature. However, in the realm of rhetoric, the researcher considered this strategy to correspond to Aristotle’s rhetorical appeal of *ethos*. *Ethos* is the appeal to the credibility or characteristics of the speaker. It involves establishing the speaker themselves as ethical, trustworthy, and knowledgeable to the audience, aiming to eventually achieve more persuasiveness in the speech. To a certain extent, the “Entity as Sensor” strategy can boost her credibility as an individual by adding a layer of confidence and certainty to her speech. By intentionally aligning herself with a larger entity, the

speaker may appear to elevate her authority, which could enhance her credibility, though this effect is largely rhetorical.

After evaluating the occurrences, the researcher created a sub-category of Mental Process that only contains the clauses “I think” and “you know”. Instead of simply treating them as discourse markers/fillers, the researcher took a further look at their ratio within the Mental Processes. Interestingly, the percentage of the discourse marker/filler type of Mental Process out of all Mental Processes was particularly high on Liu’s side (42.42%), while Regan’s was relatively lower (27.59%). Respectively, there was a higher percentage of non-filler Mental Processes in Regan’s speech (72.41%) than in Liu’s (57.58%). The researcher argued that Liu’s uses of “I think” and “you know” might result from three factors. Firstly, the even distribution of these phrases throughout Liu’s speech suggests that their use could be a personal speech habit, which is plausible given the individualized nature of their speech in this context. Secondly, at the start of the debate, Liu explicitly stated that she was speaking solely for herself rather than representing any other entity. The frequent use of “I think” could reinforce this stance, as it frames her statements as personal opinions rather than official positions. Thirdly, it is noteworthy that, unlike Regan, English is not Liu’s mother tongue, although she operates at a professional level of fluency. Research suggests that second language (L2) speakers often utilize more fillers in their speech, both to afford additional time for linguistic processing (Tavakoli and Foster, 2011) and to adopt a pragmatic approach that tempers the directness of their statements (Müller, 2005). Interestingly also, indirectness is a characteristic part of the Chinese rhetorical style (Liu, 1996). The fillers, to a certain extent, dialed down the directness, which can be seen as in line with the Chinese indirectness style in rhetorical communication. On the contrary, Regan’s direct style of questioning might not be perceived as convincing in the eyes of the Chinese audience. Furthermore, Liu’s role as a guest in Regan’s prime-time show could potentially contribute to her feeling less at ease, which might affect her language use.

Although these factors likely influenced Liu’s communication style, they tend not to significantly alter the substantive analysis of rhetorical strategies in this study. Because the core of the analysis focuses on how rhetorical strategies function within the broader discourse of the debate. While fillers and personal speech habits may affect delivery, they do not fundamentally change the underlying rhetorical patterns or the strategic use of language to convey arguments or construct meanings. However, acknowledging these elements is crucial as they provide important context that enriches our understanding of the discourse dynamics during the debate.

4.5. Relational Identifying Process to Deprive *Ethos*

To relate one piece of experience to another demonstrates the Relational Process, which can usually be further divided into Relational Attributive and Relational Identifying Processes—the former assigns qualities or attributes to a subject, while the latter builds a relationship of equivalence or identity between two entities. The Identifying type of Relational Process can also serve to classify the subject by placing it within a particular category or role.

Overall, Regan’s speech displays a higher share of the Relational Process than Liu’s. However, different distributions of the two subtypes can be observed from their speeches. See Figure 4 below.

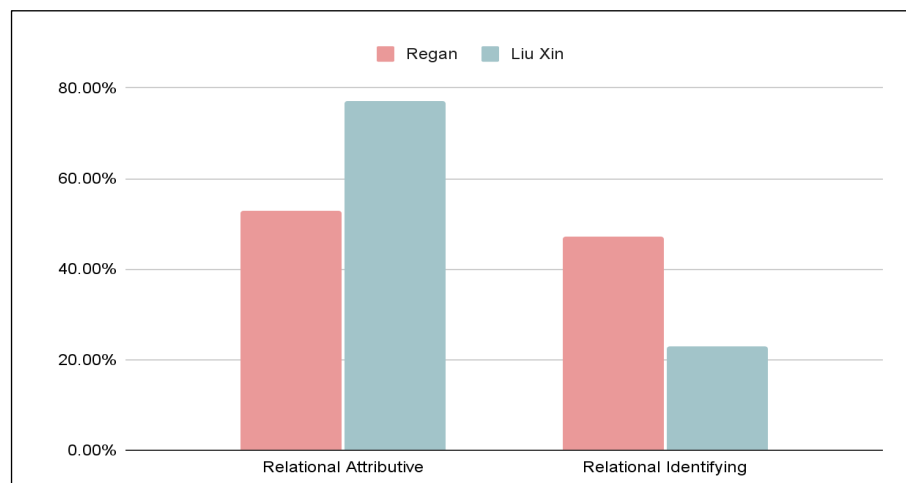


Figure 4 - Ratio of Relational Attributive and Relational Identifying Processes by Regan and Liu

In Figure 4, Regan’s speech has significantly more Relational Identifying Processes than Liu’s. Examples 4a and 4b below by Regan indicate that the individual or a smaller entity was (made) aligned with or a part of a bigger entity. When this happens, an individual’s personal or organizational identity often becomes intertwined with a broader entity that the individual is classified into, making it difficult for one to assert that they represent solely themselves.

Example 4a Regan: ...World Trade Organisation, the WTO, that China **is** a member of...

Example 4b Regan: ...My guest however **is** part of the CCP

Classifying someone as part of a larger entity can also be seen as a rhetorical strategy that diminishes the other person’s *ethos* by reducing their individual credibility, autonomy and characteristics. Instead of boosting the credibility of the speakers themselves, this strategy may achieve the effect of devaluing the opponent off their credibility as an individual, personal characteristics, and trustworthiness. Hence, the audience might be influenced to swing their status of support. Example 4b was also uttered before Liu joined the debate, which worked like a

classifying statement even though Liu immediately denied this statement while inviting Regan to check the public record of Liu not being a Party member.

At this point of discussion, it is worth differentiating the two situations below,

1) Actively joining the entity's side of the dialogue as if the speaker is a part of the negotiation team (e.g., "Entity as Sensor" in the use of Mental Process)

2) Intentionally labeling the opponent under an entity to deprive the opponent of their personalization and credibility as an individual (e.g., the use of a Relational Identifying Process for classification)

In situation 2), the speaker being associated with an entity made it more difficult for them to defend themselves as an individual. This is because defending an entity involves accounting for its collective actions, history, and broader context, which can be more complex than defending one's personal actions or opinions. However, in situation 1), the speaker actively aligns themselves with the entity with the freedom to bring the speaker's comments on the topic as well as "interrogating" the opponent as if the speaker he or herself sits in a higher position beyond the individual he or she is.

Another rhetorical advantage that the Relational Identifying Process might have can be the certainty and accuracy they establish through such language use. For example,

Example 5a Regan: Well, it's not just a statement, it's multiple reports...

Clauses such as Example 5a show the speaker's certainty in her statements. While the Relational Attributive Process usually shows a part of the features of the target that is talked about, the Relational Identifying Process usually gives a definition or a classification of this target. To a certain extent, the latter kind of Process might add to the *logos* and *ethos* of the rhetorical appeal by enhancing the evidence and credibility of the speaker.

5. Conclusion

Guided by Systemic Functional Linguistics and referring to classic rhetorical appeals, this research conducted a Transitivity analysis of the television debate between hosts Trish Regan and Liu Xin in 2019 over the theme of the China-US trade dispute. Adopting a two-tiered research framework that investigates the text via both the experiential aspect (the Transitivity analysis) and the rhetorical aspect (the rhetorical analysis), this research contributed to the findings surrounding four major Process types and their relevant Participants.

First of all, the use of Material Processes in an effective-passive voice can be a positive way to lay out evidence and statistics by moving them to the beginning of the clause (e.g., 80% of Chinese

exports were done by private companies). Using the “happening” type of Material Process instead of the “doing” type may, under certain circumstances, tilts the spotlight away from the “less virtuous deeds” accused on the speaker’s side while still discussing the issues happening around the relevant matters (that is, without immediately turning away from the question or theme). This strategy was considered to be aligned with Confucius’ notion of *the rectification of names*.

Secondly, unlike the conventional thinking that journalists or news anchors should avoid the frequent use of Mental Processes to prevent subjectivity in their speech, this research found that by using a specific type of Mental Process (i.e., “Entity as Sensor”), the speaker can still gain advantage on the rhetorical appeal of *ethos*. Previous research pointed out that Regan’s use of Mental Processes made her seem as if she was “a part of the negotiation team” (Cui, 2020), which constructed a certain level of subjectivity. However, while not objecting to Cui’s argument, this present study holds the viewpoint that it is precisely this kind of Mental Process that gained Regan the rhetorical advantages: earning credibility as an individual through acting as a part of the negotiation team that is beyond what an individual’s capability. Rhetorically, it can be considered as intentionally enhancing the *ethos* of the speaker. The discourse marker/filler type of Mental Processes was also discussed mainly to acknowledge the possibilities of Liu to “detach” herself from being classified beyond representing herself by Regan and the fact that the debate happened in her second language and through her opponent’s prime-time show with her being the guest. This created an imbalance in the roles of speakers’ between these hosts, which shall be taken into consideration during the analysis.

Thirdly, the classification or identifying function of the Relational Process was used more by Regan in an attempt to classify Liu and the channel she works for as a part of the Party in China, even though this classification was immediately rejected by Liu with an invitation to check the public record. Unlike the “Entity as Sensor” strategy in which the speaker actively involves him or herself in the dialogue as if their capability is beyond the individual scope, such classification strategy may deprive the other speaker of their credibility or “personalization”, which can be seen as a rhetorical tactic to reduce the *ethos* of the opponent speaker. However, in a different direction, the use of the Relational Identifying Process might contribute to the enhancement of certainty and the involvement of evidence, which might further increase the credibility of the speaker.

Last but not least, using Existential Processes in one’s argument might create a justification for a centered issue by regulating or normalizing the event on a larger scale. This, along with the use

of Material Processes, can usually contribute to the rhetorical appeals of *logos* with facts and evidence laid out.

Due to the nature of the debate transcript, its argument value usually overweighs its narrative value. Even though the Verbal Process shows a difference between the two hosts, the occurrences did not generate many more findings other than their verbal functions. The researcher then omitted the part of the analysis.

Methodologically, this current research attempted to innovatively combine Transitivity analysis with rhetorical analysis. As demonstrated by the results, it is proven that such a method can be used for similar texts to go one step further from the sole Transitivity analysis or rhetorical analysis. One possible limitation is that the chosen text of this current research is not entirely balanced as Regan tends to ask more questions while Liu tends to answer them, which is usually not the common case in a debate. This research method can also be used in television debates of Presidential elections among other events. Another possible limitation is that the length of the analyzed text only includes a 16-minute debate, which might include some personal preferences if not analyzed in a larger context. The manual encoding might unavoidably generate the researcher's subjectivity as well. On a larger scope of research, it might be possible to include data that is more abundant to provide sufficient support and prevent the randomness of speech to a certain extent. For example, news articles and commentary sections regarding this debate can be used as references to further comprehend how the media framed this event and received by the audiences. Because to understand rhetorical strategies in mediated discourse is not only to comprehend how the event is "told" but also how it is "heard". Further research may include the audience reception of such a debate as a part of the data to be analyzed so that the rhetorical appeal can be evaluated based on the audience's feedback.

In the case of a trade dispute between two major world powers, intercultural communication and mutual understanding heavily influence public reception, national images, media content, and even policymaking. Therefore, the comprehension of the issues to be investigated in this research supports both bilateral communication and intercultural understanding to better cope with cross-cultural dialogues like this from the angle of language use and language ideologies. The inclusion of different, culturally situated rhetorical traditions in a cross-cultural debate helps to understand the dialogue from alternative perspectives, thereby diversifying interpretations of rhetorical tactics.

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