Genre Analysis and Comparison of Chinese and American Presidents’ New Year Messages

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Abstract

New Year messages offered by political leaders are important media events every year. However, as a special political discourse, the New Year message is a scarcely explored area. Adopting a genre approach (e.g., Halliday, 1978; 1985; Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Martin, 1984; Martin & Rose, 2003; Paltridge, 2006), this study systematically analyzed a small corpus of six New Year messages given by Chinese and American presidents in the years 2007, 2008 and 2009 at three levels: sociocultural context, discourse structure and language features. This study shows that New Year messages do form an independent genre because of their shared communicative functions, relatively fixed generic structure and salient lexical-grammatical features (Bruce, 2008). It also reveals similarities and differences between New Year messages given by the two presidents from different cultures and political systems. This study argues that despite their respective features, all these New Year messages, as a special political discourse, target a large audience and aim to promote public relationships and obtain political support. It also demonstrates that the genre approach is a very powerful tool to uncover a discourse’s communicative functions and the rhetorical strategies and linguistic resources available to realize these functions.

Key words: genre analysis; New Year messages; political discourse; communicative functions

1. Introduction

New Year is celebrated by the whole world today. On New Year’s Eve people gather together to see off the old year and welcome the coming of a new year. The central theme at this
moment is nothing but hope, which helps people forget the hardships and misfortunes in
the past and encourages them to look ahead and expect a better future.

At this moment people can often receive greetings and good wishes from their
political leaders via television or other media. Because of their salient nature as mass
communication events and special status as part of the yearly celebration routine, New
Year messages by political leaders as a special political discourse are made the target of
this study. A genre approach (e.g., Halliday, 1978; 1985; Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Martin,
1984; Martin & Rose, 2003; Paltridge, 2006) is employed to systematically analyze a small
corpus of 6 New Year messages from year 2007 to 2009. Half of them were delivered by
the Chinese President Hu Jintao and the other half by the American President George W.
Bush.

The main aim of this study is to check whether this kind of political discourse forms
an independent genre and, if the answer is positive, what their common generic structures,
linguistic features and communicative functions are. To reveal culture’s (including political
culture’s) regulation on this kind of political discourse (Lauerbach & Fetzer, 2007), cross-
cultural comparison will also be made between messages delivered by the two presidents.

2. Literature review

2.1 Genre approach to discourse analysis

“Genre” is a lexical item borrowed from French, meaning “type” or “kind”. In English
it was first used in literary studies to categorize texts with different organizational
sequence and linguistic features, for example, tragedy and comedy, romance and detective
stories. Later this term was introduced to more fields like drama, film and linguistic
studies. Because of its emphasis on both structure and function in meaning-making
and communication, it has become an important concept and analytic tool in discourse
studies. In a broad sense, discourse is “social construction of reality” (Paltridge, 2006: 1)
through “meaningful symbolic behavior” (Blommaert, 2005: 2), while, genre is

a type of discourse that occurs in a particular setting, that has distinctive and recognizable
patterns of organization and structure and that has particular and distinctive
communicative functions. (Richards & Schmidt, 2002: 224)

The relationship between genre and reality is complicated. In Johnstone’s (2008: 183)
words, “recurrent text-types mark recurrent social occasions, but they also categorize
occasions”. Bazerman (2002) stresses that genre shapes not only discourse but also
people’s identities. The interaction between genre and reality together with institutional,
ideological and communicative purposes make genre both relatively stable and flexible.
Coe, Lingard and Teslenko (2002: 2.5) specially highlight the rhetorical nature of genre
in saying that new genre theories “focus on stable discursive forms as socially standard
strategies for responding to recurring situations” and new genre theories are marked by
the shift of emphasis “from language as representation to discourse as action”.

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According to Bruce (2008), the genre approach has at least three advantages over the traditional atomistic approach to linguistic studies: a focus on beyond-sentence level, attention to organization and staging, and understanding linguistic resources in relationship with communicative functions. The main method of genre approach is to examine and deconstruct sample texts of a certain genre at two levels: schematic/generic structure and lexical-grammatical features.

Schematic/generic structure in systematic functional linguistics (e.g., Halliday, 1978; 1985; Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Hasan, 1985/1989) refers to recursive functional stages. Martin (1984: 25) defines genre as “a staged, goal-oriented, purposeful activity in which speakers engage as members of our culture”. He and Rose (2003: 7) further explain that genre is “goal-oriented because we use genres to get things done; staged because it usually takes us a few steps to reach our goals”. Lexical-grammatical features are realized by subtle manipulation of language in specific context and interact with schematic structure. The manipulation of language is called register in Halliday’s (1978) framework.

### 2.2 Political discourse analysis

Edelman (1976) distinguished the expressive dimension of politics from its instrumental dimension, or in Sarcinelli’s (1987) term, “presentation and production” of politics. The political discourse accessible to the public is only the presentation dimension, so political discourse is often called “symbolic politics” (Lauerbach & Fetzer, 2007: 5). The complexity of political discourse lies in its hybrid nature. It is both institutional discourse and media discourse but different from them at the same time. The most salient features of political discourse are clear institutional goals, procedures and a large target audience and its main goal is to persuade. Lauerbach and Fetzer (2007) think that the communicative genre is an ideal tool for analyzing political discourse.

In political discourse analysis, most studies are situated in the general framework of critical discourse analysis (CDA), aiming at uncovering the hierarchical social relationships and hidden political intentions. Quite a lot of research has been done on political talk shows, news interviews, and election campaigns. However, a comprehensive survey of mainstream discourse study journals and paper collections shows that the study of festival messages delivered by political leaders is a scarcely explored area. The only contribution found is Sauer’s (2007) article on Christmas messages. Using a functional-pragmatic and semiotic approach, he investigated the multimodal quality of Christmas messages on TV by several heads of European states. To give a more complete picture, he defined Christmas messages as communicative events/genre rather than pure texts and focused his analysis on other semiotic systems than language, like background layout, use of color and music, change of camera angle, dress, body language, gaze, etc. He argues that different semiotic resources are employed to “establish the meaning-making potentials of the event” (Sauer, 2007: 231).

Due to the gap identified above, this study aims to contribute to this line of research. To better manage the study within the designated scope, the focus will only be placed on the analysis of written texts, because, even though these messages were delivered by political leaders orally, they are in fact “secondary orality” (Ong, 1982) and the speakers...
only acted as “declamators of texts written by others” (Sauer, 2007: 233). Analysis of other semiotic systems, which is indeed an interesting area, will be left for future follow-up studies. This study will try to answer the following three questions: First, whether New Year messages form an independent political genre? Second, if they do, what are their common generic structures, linguistic features and communicative functions? Third, what are the similarities and differences between these messages delivered by presidents from two cultures and political systems?

3. Research methodology

3.1 Data collection

Data for this study is a small corpus of 6 New Year messages on New Year 2007, 2008 and 2009. Three were delivered by current Chinese President Hu Jintao, the other three were given by former American President George W. Bush. President Hu’s messages are believed to best represent this kind of political discourse in a socialist social system and President Bush’s messages are believed to best represent this kind of political discourse in a capitalist social system. Selecting messages given by one president rather than several presidents in the same political system is believed to best maintain consistency of this kind of discourse. Selecting two presidents from two different political systems serving the same period of time is believed to best facilitate discovery of similarities and differences of the same political discourse in two different social systems. All the 6 texts were collected from official websites. The three original messages by President Hu are in Chinese, but the international channel of China Central Television Station (CCTV 4) provided English subtitles simultaneously. The complete texts of the English subtitles were found online and checked by the researcher himself. The three messages by President Bush are in English. Table 1 shows the online sources of the 6 original texts.

Table 1. Sources of 6 original texts of messages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>President Hu Jintao</th>
<th>President George W. Bush</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

3.2 Data analysis

Based on Bhatia’s (1993) model of genre analysis, Paltridge (2006: 98-99) proposes rather complete guidelines for conducting genre analysis. To summarize, the guidelines generally involve seven steps: 1) evaluate your current knowledge about the target genre and conduct relevant research; 2) identify the speaker or writer and audience of the text and define their relationship; 3) collect texts; 4) examine the sociocultural context in
which the genre is used; 5) identify the common discourse structure in the texts; 6) study the particular language features of the texts; 7) analyze the functions performed by this genre’s special discourse structure and language features. This study basically follows these guidelines. In the following sections, genre analysis will be conducted at three levels: sociocultural context, discourse structure, and language features. Related communicative functions will also be analyzed and discussed. Finally, the two presidents’ messages will be compared and the similarities and differences identified will be discussed and reported.

4. Findings and discussions

4.1 Sociocultural context of the genre of New Year messages

One of the basic assumptions of new genre theories is the social and cultural nature of genre (e.g., Halliday, 1978; Lauerbach & Fetzer, 2007; Martin, 1984; Richards & Schmidt, 2002; Paltridge, 2006; Swales, 1990). Genre does not exist independent of any context and the dynamic of genres lies in both their global context and local situation. Contextual demands decide a genre’s generic structure and linguistic choices. So an analysis of the sociocultural context is necessary before examining discourse structure and language features. Adapted from the outline given by Paltridge (2006), a worksheet has been composed. The general sociocultural context is deconstructed into many elements. Relevant evaluations of these elements of the New Year messages by the two presidents are presented in the second columns of Tables 2 and 3 separately.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element of Context</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting of the text</td>
<td>On the eve of the New Year which has already been made a public holiday in China; an annual formal speech directed at an extremely large population; an important national and international communication event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the text</td>
<td>Demonstrating government’s participation in social life; showing his care for common citizens; report government work to the public; stating important civil and diplomatic policies; encouraging people to work towards common goals; creating beneficial international environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target audience and their expectations of the text</td>
<td>Chinese citizens, compatriots in Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan and those living overseas, international community (mainly through foreign media)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship between writer/speaker and audience of the text</td>
<td>China’s highest political leader vs. fellow countrymen, overseas Chinese, foreign journalists, foreign politicians and citizens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship the text has with other texts</td>
<td>Sharing a lot of features of the festival messages given by foreign political leaders (follows international convention) but having distinctive Chinese characteristics at the same time; Its formal style is more like a government report or media conference briefing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Evaluation of sociocultural context of the American president’s messages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element of Context</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting of the text</td>
<td>Around the New Year’s day and shortly after Christmas; a less formal talk directed at a large population; an important national communication event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the text</td>
<td>Demonstrating his citizen membership and participation in social life; showing his care for common citizens; reporting government work to the public; encouraging people to work harder for a better future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target audience and their expectation of the text</td>
<td>American citizens To learn about the president’s evaluation of the past year and promise for the new year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship between writer/speaker and audience of the text</td>
<td>USA’s highest political leader vs. fellow countrymen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship the text has with other texts</td>
<td>Sharing a lot of features of the festival messages given by other countries’ political leaders (follows international convention) Very similar to other less formal TV talks given by the American president</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we can see from the above tables, New Year messages given by two presidents do share a lot of contextual elements. However, they also differ from each other in certain aspects.

4.2 Discourse structure and its communicative functions

The rhetorical nature of genres (e.g., Halliday, 1978; Coe, Lingard & Teslenko, 2002; Lauerbach & Fetzer, 2007; Martin, 1984; Richards & Schmidt, 2002) makes their structures linear but not simple. For most of the time, genre structures display multi-layered features. In other words, a genre is usually constructed by several sections, while each section has its own mini-structures. To better capture the multi-layered nature of the discourse structure of the presidential New Year messages, Swales’ (1990) rhetorical move and step approach is adopted in this study. “Moves” and “steps” are very similar to the concept of “functional stages” in functional linguistics (e.g., Halliday, 1978; Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Hasan, 1985/1989; Martin, 1984). However, “moves” are used to refer to stages at macro-level and “steps” are used to refer to stages at micro-level that contribute to the realization of “moves”.

4.2.1 Discourse structure of the Chinese president’s messages

Despite slight variations, the New Year messages offered by President Hu demonstrate many commonalities. The moves and steps shared by the three messages are presented in Table 4. The salient difference in 2008’s message is the invitation to the Beijing Olympic Games. The salient difference in 2009’s message is the mentioning of the Wenchuan earthquake and the appreciation of the Chinese people’s bravery and the international community’s aid. This finding confirms the statement of previous literature that genre is relatively stable but flexible at the same time. Its specific structure is negotiated with the requirement of an ever changing situation. In addition, as can be seen from Table 4, President Hu’s messages are quite long and involve many moves (9 in total), and each move in the body sections (M2 to M7) is constructed by more than one step. This is first probably determined by the formal nature of this kind of political talk and the general
serious and cautious political style of Chinese statesmen. Second, this may also be due to the multi-layered target audience of this talk.

Table 4. Shared structure of Chinese President’s messages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rhetorical moves</th>
<th>Rhetorical steps</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M1: Salutation</td>
<td>• Salutation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2: Orientation and greetings</td>
<td>• Orienting to the special occasion and atmosphere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Extending greetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M3: Looking back at the past year</td>
<td>• Praising people’s performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Domestic achievements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• International cooperation and contribution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M4: Looking ahead to the coming year</td>
<td>• Significance of the coming year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Ambitions in the year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Consistency in policies for special administrative regions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Restating the policy towards Taiwan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M5: Evaluating international situation</td>
<td>• Summarizing positive trends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Listing challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Expressing readiness to cooperate and share international responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M6: Restating diplomatic stance and political promise for peaceful development</td>
<td>• Sticking to the principle of peaceful development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Supporting multilateralism and diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M7: Showing alignment with the Third World and international friendship</td>
<td>• Reminding people of the suffering of their fellow men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Expressing readiness to help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M8: Offering good wishes</td>
<td>• Offering good wishes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M9: Appreciation</td>
<td>• Appreciation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A look at the specific functions or communicative purposes of each move falls in place. Genres as “social strategies for responding to types of situations” (Coe, Lingard & Teslenko, 2002: 5) facilitate both cognitive processing and social interaction through both their structures and language use. For example, the salutation in M1 (short for Move 1) not only specifies addressees but also serves as an attention seeker to inform the audience of the beginning of his talk. The appreciation in M9 not only signifies the president’s modesty and courtesy but also signals the end of his talk. The festival message is offered twice in this genre, first in M2 as greetings and second in M8 as good wishes. The greetings in the beginning sets the theme of talk, the good wishes in the end recapture the theme and draw a conclusion of the talk. M3 and M4 respond to the special moment when people tend to summarize the past and plan for the future. So as head of the country, President Hu takes this chance to summarize the government’s work in the past year and publicize work plans and policies in the New Year. The last two of the four steps in M4 are indispensable parts of every year’s message. This is because of the special political status of Hong Kong and Macao and the importance of the Taiwan issue to the Chinese government. The evaluation of the international situation in M5 is important for China, especially in these globalized times. Such evaluation helps China to correctly position herself and make effective foreign
policies. M6 is apparently directed at the international community in response to the theory of “China Threat” because of China’s fast development and increasing influence on regional and international affairs. It is important to take this chance to justify China’s rise and ensure the international community that China has no intention at all to expand or invade their national interests and that such expansion and invasion are against the Chinese people’s philosophy and the Chinese government’s national policies. As the biggest developing country in the world, China shares and understands the sufferings and difficulties the less developed world is experiencing today. As the biggest socialist country, China values international humanity. In addition, the third world countries are also loyal supporters of China in international politics. Due to the above reasons, it is also important to take this chance to restate China’s status as a developing country and align herself with the large number of developing countries in M7.

4.2.2 Discourse structure of the American president’s messages

Probably because of the less formal nature of the talk, or because of the less inclusive target audience, the American president’s messages are comparatively shorter. These messages also involve fewer moves and steps. There is a strong resemblance in both structure and content between the two messages for New Year 2007 and 2008, while the message for New Year 2009 is very different from the first two. Compared with the one given by President Obama for New Year 2010, the first two could be regarded as representative of American presidents’ common practice, while the third one presents a variation. The significant variance in the 2009 New Year message is probably due to the coming administration transfer. So President Bush spent most of the time on summarizing his service and expressing his gratitude to his supporters and his welcome to the new President. This once again reminds us that genre is subject to changes even though it is socio-culturally regulated and relatively fixed. The rhetorical moves and constituent steps identified in New Year messages 2007 and 2008 are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Shared structure of the American President’s messages for Year 2007 and 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rhetorical moves</th>
<th>Rhetorical steps</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M1: Preface</td>
<td>• Lead in summary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2: Detailed summary</td>
<td>• Domestic achievements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Praising the American people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Promising to people in the new year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M3: Highlighting wars</td>
<td>• Justification and determination for war</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Stating security policies and determination in the new year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Praising overseas soldiers and their families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M4: Stressing hope</td>
<td>• Stressing hope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M5: Offering good wishes</td>
<td>• Good wishes from the First Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Blessing from God</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

President Bush’s messages always start with a preface stressing that New Year’s day is a
good time to reflect and hope, and then detailed summaries of the past year (M2) follow. In this part, whenever achievements are mentioned, common American people and their spirit are highly evaluated and appreciated. He also takes this chance to guarantee the American people a better life ahead. The most interesting feature of an American president’s messages is that an independent section (M3) must be dedicated to war issues. This is probably because of America’s at-war situation, even though the wars are not present on their territory. As a result, the “off territory” wars need to be justified at this moment to ensure people’s understanding. Security policies and determination need to be stated in order to obtain support and a budget. Finally, the contributions of those who defend national interests and freedom at the risk of their lives and their honorable families are acknowledged. Before good wishes are offered, hope is always stressed in M4.

4.3 Language features and their communicative functions
Since the New Year messages delivered by the same president share common speech style and linguistic features, the messages for New Year 2007 by the two presidents are made samples of language feature analysis. Because of the limitation of the scope of the study, only salient language features will be analyzed and discussed.

4.3.1 Language features of the Chinese president’s messages and their functions
In the salutation part of the message (M1), President Hu used “Ladies and Gentlemen, Comrades and Friends” to address his audience. This is a very cautious choice of words. “Ladies and gentlemen” is for general reference and not only is inclusive but also conforms to international practice. The use of a “Western salutation” demonstrates the open attitude and modern changes in China. “Friends” not only refers to those who have already become China’s friends, but also expresses an intention to make new friends. Finally, the use of “Comrades” indexes China’s identity as a socialist country. In M2, President Hu used “I’m very happy to extend New Year’s greetings to…” to greet all his audience. This formal, formulaic expression reflects the formal nature of his talk and at the same time sets the formality level for the rest of his talk. In addition, he specified his target audience in a quite explicit way. The inclusion of all Chinese living in Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan sends a strong message to the international community that the People’s Republic of China has sovereignty over these regions. The inclusion of overseas Chinese and all friends around the world signifies the international nature of this communicative event and its intention to reach and influence more people.

In M3, where achievements are summarized and people are praised, President Hu specially mentioned “all ethnic groups” and the way they work together (“united with one heart and one mind”) to stress the good relationship between different ethnic groups and effectively respond to the doubt raised by unfriendly foreign politicians about China’s ethnic relationship and ethnic policies.

Political slogans are also very frequent in this section, e.g., “push forward socialist economic construction”, “building a well-off society in an all-round way”, “building a harmonious socialist society” and “scientific outlook on development”. All these reflect the Communist Party of China’s political culture and its emphasis on unifying
and motivating the masses. The use of various modifiers is another feature of political discourse in China, e.g., “solid step”, “all-directional exchanges and cooperation”, “widely participated”, “actively given impetus”, and “fully implement”. These modifiers not only make the description more accurate but also make conveyed messages more forceful and motivating.

In M4, when looking ahead to the coming new year, a lot of “we will” are used. “We” implies that President Hu is speaking on behalf of his political party and government rather than himself. “Will” assures people of his promises.

In M5, when evaluating international situations, a lot of parallel structures are employed, for example, “sporadic regional wars and conflicts, the widening gap between developed and developing countries and the growing prominence of global issues—like terrorism, transnational crime, environmental protection, natural disasters and highly communicable diseases—pose new challenges.” These parallel structures not only facilitate the summary but also help present the complexity of the international situation.

In M6, when stating China’s diplomatic stance and making political promises, a very formal sentence structure (“I would like to avail myself of this occasion to reiterate that…”) is used. The formality of this structure indicates the solemnity of his statement.

In M7, when aligning with the Third World and demonstrating the Chinese people’s international friendship, modifiers to express degree and strength like “deeply sympathetic” and “all the assistance” are used to express China’s strong emotional ties with the less developed world and a willingness to help.

4.3.2 Language features of the American President’s messages and their functions
Parallelism is frequently used by President Bush, e.g., “we move forward with trust in the power of the American spirit, confidence in our purpose, and faith in a loving God” in M1 and “the number of jobs steadily increased, wages grew, the unemployment rate dropped” in M2. This type of rhetoric makes the flow of speech both rhythmic and persuasive.

Probably because of the sensitivity of war issues, euphemisms are used a lot in M3. For example, the war on Iraq is referred to as “promote liberty” and the “attack first” strategy is called “remain on the offensive”.

A lot of evaluative words are used in the last part of M3 to confirm American army’s contribution, e.g. “fine men and women”, “valor and distinction”, “dedication and sacrifice”, “great character” and “respect and admiration”. Apparently, all these nice words are helpful in pacifying accusation and complaints.

An interesting thing about this message is that “God” is mentioned both at the beginning and the end despite the fact that America is a multi-religion country. It is very likely that this design and routine aims at strengthening the mainstream ideology (Christianity) or indexing the President’s loyalty to his religion.

In addition, when sending out good wishes in the end, the President’s wife—“Laura” is made present. This is probably because of the ceremonial function of the “First Lady” in America. It could also be the President’s intention to project his image as a good husband or to align the First Family with millions of common American families. Once again, the mainstream ideology is promoted and solidarity is improved.
4.4 The similarities and differences between the two presidents’ New Year messages

Generally speaking, the discourses of Chinese and American presidents’ New Year messages have many similarities and differences as well. Some salient points will be reported below.

4.4.1 Similarities

In the sociocultural context (particularly in communicative purpose and function), the New Year messages delivered by both presidents are more than simple festival greetings. To put it in a straight way, they are all conscious “top-down” political communicative events directed at a large population. They are all important means to promote public relations and to spread mainstream ideologies. They all aim to justify government policies and obtain public support.

In discourse structure, the New Year messages delivered by both presidents are composed of several rhetorical moves and steps. They all include an orientation before the real messages, a summary of the past and expectation for the future. They all take the chance to praise common people and make political promises. They all offer explicit good wishes in the end.

In language features, New Year messages by both presidents are carefully composed and delivered. Many different linguistic devices are found to be employed to maximize the power of language in constructing reality (Gee, 1990; Johnstone, 2008). For example, parallelisms and evaluative modifiers are widely used in all the messages and much subtlety is identified in both lexical and rhetorical choice in both presidents’ messages.

4.4.2 Differences

In the sociocultural context, the Chinese president’s messages are higher in formality and thus demonstrate more intertextuality (Johnstone, 2008) with a government report, while the American president’s messages are less formal and are closer to a routine TV talk. Compared with his counterpart’s messages, the Chinese president’s messages are directed at more layers and a larger audience. In other words, the Chinese president’s messages are more internationally-oriented, while the American president’s messages are more nationally-oriented. In addition, the positioning of the speakers (Johnstone, 2008) is different. The Chinese president is speaking on behalf of his political party and government, while the American president for most of the time is speaking for himself and his family.

In discourse structure, the Chinese president’s messages are much longer and involve more content and more sophisticated move and step structures. Chinese president begins his messages with a formal salutation, but the American president doesn’t. The Chinese president offers festival greetings at both beginning and end, but the American president only extends his greetings at the end of his talk. In summarizing the country’s contribution to the international community, the Chinese president stresses China’s constructive role in maintaining world peace and promoting development, while the American president highlights America’s dedication to world-wide freedom and democracy (wars on terrorism and dictatorships). In stating policies, the Chinese president restates China’s determination...
in maintaining sovereignty and territorial integrity, while the American president renews America’s national security policies. The Chinese president also spends quite a lot of words on evaluating international situations and expressing his concern about the Third World. In contrast, the American president shows little interest in the world outside America.

In language features, compared with the American president, the Chinese president uses more formal and distant language, thus demonstrating less personal involvement. Accordingly, the Chinese president uses many long and complicated sentence structures, while the American president uses many short and parallel structures. In addition, the Chinese president tends to use more political slogans and degree modifiers in his New Year messages.

5. Conclusions

Situated in the general framework of discourse analysis (DA) and adopting a genre-analysis approach, this study examined a small corpus of six New Year messages delivered by Chinese and American presidents. The result shows that these messages do share many similar communicative functions, discourse structures and language features. It could be concluded that festival messages given by political leaders constitute an independent genre. In addition, this study also uncovers similarities and differences between New Year Messages by the presidents of the world’s two big countries.

This study contributes to our knowledge about political discourse and mass communication by investigating the less explored area of New Year Messages. It successfully reveals that this kind of political discourse is also subject to minor changes despite its high consistency in generic structure and linguistic features and both relative stability and occasional flexibility serve the purpose of communication. In other words, all the rhetorical and linguistic resources are employed to project a positive image, to promote public relations and to seek political support (Lauerbach & Fetzer, 2007; Sauer, 2007). In addition, this study demonstrates that the genre approach (e.g., Halliday, 1978; 1985; Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Martin, 1984; Martin & Rose, 2003), especially the guidelines for genre analysis refined by Paltridge (2006), is an effective analytic tool for discourse and communication studies. This approach can help researchers not only capture certain discourse’s structure and linguistic features but also gain an insight into the hidden dimension of the sociocultural context. To put it in another way, the genre approach helps people see the social end of linguistic means (Coe, Lingard & Teslenko, 2002; Halliday, 1978; 1985; Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Martin, 1984).

One limitation of this study is the failure to cover other modes of this special political discourse. Halliday (1978: 111) points out that genre should be understood as “configurations of semantic resources that members of the culture associate with a situation type”. Many other scholars (e.g., Coe, Lingard & Teslenko, 2002; Jaworski & Coupland, 2006; Kress, 2010) also remind us that in fact all texts are multimodal and communicative purposes are realized as the result of coordination of resources from all the modes involved. So finely designed multimodal analysis should be made the direction of
future research. In addition, genre comparison between New Year Messages and speeches delivered by political leaders on other occasions would also generate interesting findings.

References


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