The Syntax of Backgrounding Controversial Issues in Media Discourse: A Critical Analysis of *New York Times* COVID-19 Reports About China

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the use of relative clauses in *New York Times* COVID-19 reports on China, aiming to reveal the manipulative strategies employed in media discourse in establishing a link between persuasive argumentation and the discourse functions of relative clauses. The study finds that through syntactically backgrounding potentially controversial issues in relative clauses regarding China's Covid containment, reporters reduce the readers to accept the tacit truth of the presupposed propositions, thus enhancing the acceptance and manipulation of their political argumentation. The study further shows that relative clauses, by virtue of providing causal-explanatory links, facilitate a biased interpretation to occupy readers' political cognitive space. The study further suggests a modification of the function taxonomy of relevance relative clauses on the basis of Loock (2007). Offering evidence from mass communication, our critical analysis is expected to shed new light on the link between syntax and manipulation.

Key words: Controversial issues; Relative clauses; Presupposition; Discourse functions

1. INTRODUCTION

Presuppositions are linguistic devices that enable propositions made by the writer/speaker to be taken for granted without actually questioning the truth value of indirectly expressed information. Given this function, uses of presuppositions in news discourse can be a powerful way for the reporter's ideology to sneak in the audience's mind through "manipulating the audience to focus on certain aspects which favour the speaker by indirectly suggesting that they are true" (Kameswari et al., 2020, p. 1). Van Dijk (1995a) thus suggests that special attention shall be paid to propositions which presuppose either false or controversial propositions, and to statements which may be true but presuppose negative opinions of those who are involved. Empirical studies have shown that biased news reports usually tend to contain higher presupposition contents (e.g., Kameswari et al., 2020). The use of unfair presuppositions helps journalists obscure certain issues in producing news articles (Bekalu, 2006). The linguistic devices adopted in presuppposing the truth value of propositions in news discourse have been extensively discussed, either in the lexical, syntactic level or the discourse level. With more information load than lexical triggers, syntactic structure may easily go undisputed by readers as backgrounded information and thus realize its manipulative goal. Yet the foci of previous studies were mainly on lexical choices, and syntactic triggers such as relative clauses have been rarely exclusively covered. Furthermore, there would seem to have been an insufficient number of pioneering studies done so far to attempt to address how relative clause as a special type of subordinate clause backgrounds controversial issues.

Taking the context of the *New York Times* (henceforth:

NYT) COVID-19 reports about China, our study sets out to fulfill the gap by examining how tendentious information is established as confirmed value judgement in relative clauses, and thereby may influence the belief in the minds of the public and even the overall social cognition. We thus set out to find answers to the following questions:

a. What types of controversial issues are presupposed within the relative clauses in NYT COVID-19 reports concerning China?

b. How do journalists in NYT manipulate readers by presupposing these controversial issues in relative clauses?

In order to make an informed and sound analysis, we structure the study as follows. Section 2 introduces the theoretical framework adopted in the work: the notion of presupposition and one of its important syntactic forms of presupposition triggers－relative clauses; the resort of presuppositive linguistic devices to achieving manipulative purposes in the domain of critical discourse analysis was subsequently discussed. Section 3 presents data collection and selection, gathered from the reports of *New York Times* covering a time of span of thirteen months. Findings and conclusion are respectively reported in Section 4 and Section 5.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present paper is concerned with the exploitation of presupposition in dealing with controversial issues; more specifically, it addresses how contentious information is backgrounded as true propositions by reporters through encoding the presupposition and assertion of information in news discourse with regard to China's Covid response. The theoretical framework in this study is presupposition on the one hand, inhering in the domain of pragmatics, and Critical Discourse Analysis on the other hand.

2.1 Presupposition: An Overview

The structure of textual information is hierarchical, with focused pieces of information foregrounded and presupposed parts backgrounded. Presuppositions are "something like the backgrounded beliefs of the speaker－propositions whose truth he takes for granted, or seems to take for granted in making his statement" (Stalnaker, 1974, p.472). Its textual function lies in contributing to:

> "the shaping of texts by distributing information into background and foreground, that is, by setting out a kind of textual frame which contains pieces of information that are given as uncontroversial by the interactants and which determine the point of view from which the text develops." (Papi, 2009, p.149)

Presuppositions are usually realized through linguistic markers, or 'presupposition triggers' or 'inducers' (Levinson, 1983). Lexical items, morphological devices

and syntactic constructions are their main categories. A list of some of the common triggers is provided in (1) (Levinson, 1983; Papi, 2009):

(1)
Definite description
a. **Sue** is dancing a **macarena**.
Factive predicate
b. I **regret that he is completely drunk**.
Temporal clauses
c. **Before leaving**, George shut the windows.
Non-restrictive clauses
d. Hillary, **who is a famous lawyer**, has four children.

In (a), *Sue* and *macarena* presupposes the existence of a person called 'Sue' and a dance called 'macarena'. In (b), the emotive predicate *regret* conveys the presupposition that the individual denoted by 'he' in the complement clause is completely drunk. The temporal clause in (c) presupposes that 'George' left. The non-restrictive relative clause in (d) carries the presupposition that 'Hillary' is a famous lawyer.

Presuppositions are generally believed to be shared assumptions among interlocutors. To presuppose something is to treat that piece of information on the part of the speaker as already holding in the common ground of the communication (Soames, 1979). In this case propositions implied in the utterances can help to sustain communication. However, what is presupposed can be new information for the hearer/reader, thus presupposition has been observed as having an informative function (Stalnaker, 1974; Sbisà, 1999). The non-restrictive relative clause in (d) serves as a fitting illustration of this point. The main clause that *Hillary has four children* is foregrounded and thus asserted; the non-restrictive relative clause *Hillary is famous lawyer* is backgrounded and presupposed. Whether Hillary as a lawyer is famous may or may not form the listener's prior knowledge, yet the speaker commits it to tacit truth and this proposition realizes its informative function. Non-restrictive relative clauses as a syntactic item can carry more information load than lexical triggers can, thus they can perform an even stronger presuppositive function. Although some research has been devoted to the relative clause as an important syntactic presupposition trigger, it seems to have been insufficiently studied so far in relation to political discourse.

Grammatically speaking, relative clauses (hereinafter referred to as RCs) are either embedded within an NP (thus functioning as modifiers) or not embedded (functioning as complements of the head noun of that NP) (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002). The former types of RCs refer to restrictive and the latter non-restrictive relative clauses (NRRCs hereinafter). The relative degree of 'communicative dynamism' of each subtype of relative clause, in terms of its respective contribution to the construction of discourse has been discussed by

Cornish (2018). He argues that there is a clear continuum characterizing the range of relative clauses based on the intended degree of attention-focusing on the content of the relative assumed by the speaker or writer, with non-restrictive RCs conveying discursively (relatively) foreground information (Cornish 2018). Here, 'foreground information' refers to new rather than shared known information and the new information requires more attention to be focused on by listeners. In this sense, non-restrictive relative clauses perform informative functions when presupposed in relation to main clauses.

NRRCs are appositive in function, functioning to some extent like parentheticals, i.e. they break up the flow of the discourse on some referent in order to elaborate or comment on it (Cornish, 2018). Based on their discourse function, Loock (2007) distinguishes between three subtypes of appositive relatives regarding the relationship between the main clauses and relative clauses: continuative, relevance and subjectivity.[1] What he calls 'subjective' appositive relatives are concerned about an aside, a comment or an evaluation of the host referent; a 'continuative' clause evokes a state, process or event after the one evoked by the preceding main clause. 'Relevance' relatives illustrate the relevance of the situation evoked via the main clause. According to Loock (2007), the discursive strategies of relevance relatives encompass *levelling of the shared cognitive space*, *legitimacy of the antecedent*, and *explanation, justification, concession.* Yet the primary discourse function of NRRCs is to supplement additional information to their antecedents, thus they primarily function as levelling of the shared cognitive space. See the following examples from Loock (2007, pp. 346-348).

> (2) The Governor is Bob Taft, fourth generation of a Republican dynasty founded by his great grandfather, William Howard Taft, *who was elected president in 1908.*

> (3) John, <u>*who passed his driving test,*</u> looked happy.

According to Loock, the NRRC in (2) inserts information regarding the political prestige of the governor's ancestors, and this piece of information might not be known by at least some of the addressees; so the relative clause levels the shared cognitive space between interlocutors. In (3), the NRRC explains why John looked happy, thus it provides information regarding the explanation of the main clause. Different from (2), the

NRRC in (3) adds a causal link. The explanation that *John passed his driving test* may be unknown information for some addressees, and the inter-clausal link the relative clause evokes may serve as levelling of the shared cognitive space, as (2) does. This discursive strategy is believed to be the basic function of NRRCs. Therefore, we reckon Loock's taxonomy is unsatisfactory and we prefer to look at the categorization differently, i.e., to label what he defines *levelling of the shared cognitive space* as the overarching function, rather than in parallel with the other two discursive strategies discussed above. We shall illustrate this point further in Section 4 and 5.

This differentiation of non-restrictive relative clauses into the above three subtypes offers a fresh perspective for exploring the dichotomy of presuppositions and assertions, insomuch as it helps to examine the discoursal link through which non-restrictive relative clauses achieve informative functions in relation to what is asserted in main clauses. When what is presupposed has to do with values, social norms, or with perspectives on facts which are proper to a special social agent, informative presuppositions seem to serve persuasive aims (Sbisà, 1999). Therefore, we argue that relative clauses can fulfill the persuasive function and achieve manipulative goals, to which we now turn.

2.2 Presupposition and Critical Discourse Analysis

Van Dijk (1995b, p. 273) points out that "presuppositions are among the staple of ideological content". To cite one of the examples from Van Dijk's (1995b, p. 274) study on the op-ed fragment in NYT: *Are they going to wake up and **understand** that what is happening is a way to disqualify huge numbers of women from high government service?*, the factive verb 'understand' presupposes the truth of the dependent clause, i.e., *what is happening is a way to disqualify huge numbers of women from high government service.* This proposition, (among others not listed here for the sake of place), is ideological, since the speaker is advocating women's rights. The speaker does not assert that huge numbers of women have been disqualified from high government service, rather he/she backgrounds the information as assumptions that ought to be shared by listeners.

Presupposition is a useful tool for conveying ideological content since it often goes unchallenged (Sbisà, 1999, Masia, 2020). Compared with assertions whose truth is easily questioned by listeners, presupposition "stealthily introduces dubious notions, tendentious interpretations and value judgments keeping them from critical discussion" (Sbisà, 2007, p. 90, cited in Masia, 2020, p. 133). This manipulative function of presupposition has been verified in previous studies either examining the political or media discourse. For example, in analyzing the evidential function of presupposition and assertion among political speeches, Masia (2020) found that presuppositions are

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[1] Three examples are respectively provided here for the three subtypes of non-restrictive relative clauses (Loock 2007; Loock uses appositive instead of non-restrictive):
Continuative: She was found face down in the water and airlifted to hospital, *where she died hours later.*
Relevance: John, *who past his driving test,* looked happy.
Subjectivity: Such defensive reactions are, in part, a response to the growing problem of litigation, *which is creating a culture of punishment.*

more often found in more challengeable content types (i.e. attacks and self-praises), whilst less challengeable content types (i.e. neutral informative and stance-taking) are more likely to be asserted. The reason for such a difference, as is explained by Masia, lies that the former reduces the speaker's commitment to truth and thus is rendered less challenged. So presuppositions successfully fulfill their goals of attack/self-appraise. Likewise, Ingham (2019) examined early political discourse during the English Civil War and revealed how legitimacy was constructed discoursally in written exchanges between the King and Parliament. He found that hegemonic actors made use of syntactic backgrounding (factive predicates, adjunct subordinate clauses) "in such a way as to enhance the acceptance by an audience of potentially contentious propositions" (Ingham, 2019, p.142).

Media discourse is also a fertile terrain for the use of presuppositions (e.g. as revealed by Van Dijk, 1995b, Sbisà, 1999, Bekalu, 2006, Bonyadi, 2011, Kameswari et al., 2020). In Sbisà (1999, p. 497)'s study of the Italian press, she demonstrated that presupposition is suitable for transmitting ideological contents: assumptions about how our human world is and how it should be. In her study, the example *Professor Di Bella's treatment, which has been boycotted and opposed by the Ministry of Health (...), ends up in Parliament* shows an accusation levelled at the government through a presuppositional construction: the non-restrictive relative clause. Through quantitative calculation of a dataset of over 1,000 articles in terms of the extent of presupposition, Kameswari et al. (2020) found biased news reports usually tend to contain higher presupposition content.

Previous studies thus demonstrate the necessity and importance of considering how presupposition as a linguistic device is adopted in presenting biased information. What is presupposed by speakers is treated by them as a non-controversial element in the context of utterance (Papi, 2009, p. 147). Given the nature of presupposed propositions as assumed to be true by speakers, presuppositions are able to introduce ideological propositions whose truth is by no means uncontroversial (Van Dijk, 1995b). Inasmuch as what is presupposed is given as non-controversial by the speaker, it achieves the persuasive and manipulative purpose when information that is controversial is backgrounded. Among the linguistic features focused by the critical linguistics, namely, agents, time, tense, and modality, a critical analysis on how the role of syntactic structure affects the power, ideology and sociological pattern embedded in the media discourse is still relatively scarce and thus deserves an in-depth investigation. Subordinate structure, in particular relative clauses as discussed above, is a convenient linguistic form for language users to background presupposition contents. Compared with other linguistic forms such as lexis, syntactic structure as such may easily conceal

itself and go undisputed by readers and thus realize the conscious or unconscious manipulative goal on the part of the speakers. This study targets the syntactic forms triggering presupposition, specifically non-restrictive relative clauses, and examine how they embed contentious information to commit it to tacit truth.

3. METHODOLOGY

To investigate how controversial information is handled in mainstream journalism, we selected reports on China's fight against COVID-19 in 2020 from one of America's most influential quality newspapers: the *New York Times.* The reason for such a selection is based on an observation that the unprecedented and long-lasting epidemic leaves many issues (e.g., the origin of the virus) unresolved and many virus containment measures (e.g., whether a lockdown is necessary under that specific situation) not justified. The other motivation for choosing NYT in presenting China's tackling of the crisis arises from findings of previous literature that China's image is predominantly negative in American media (e.g., Peng, 2004; Li, 2020; Mao, 2020). Thus it is assumed that under that broad negative representation of China, controversial issues may be covered in this area in NYT.

3.1 Data Collection

Reports on the topic at issue were collected from NYT. We set the time span of thirteen months: from January 2020 when the virus began to receive extensive press coverage, to January 2021, one year after Wuhan's lockdown was implemented in China. Altogether 286 reports were collected.

Relative clauses introduced by 'which', as the most diffused and represented type in our data, were retrieved with the aid of corpus concordancing software. Before selecting relative clauses that contain controversial information, a definition of what constitutes a controversial issue is in need of clarification.

3.2 A Working Definition of 'Controversial Information

According to Entman (2007), "almost any nontrivial reality will be controversial—susceptible to two or more framings" (p.166). This means any important issue reported in the media, by and large, is controversial. To make the sense of "controversial issues" clearer, Kuypers (2002) pointed out that controversial issues are "by their essential nature, unresolvable to everyone's satisfaction. Such issues are open to discussion—debatable, questionable—and generally in dispute by contending groups" (p.1). In this study, we adopted Kuypers' characterisation of controversial issues, defining a piece of information as controversial if it has different interpretations. Taking into consideration of the context of our study, we categorised an issue reported in NYT as

controversial if there are divergent reports on a matter of substance from an official Chinese media outlet or from other international papers. In other words, if there are different voices concerning a targeted issue, this issue is controversial. We tend to make such a simple and operational characterisation as we aim to conduct the present study within the sphere of linguistics. The official English paper we chose was *China Daily*, which enjoys a wide audience within China and abroad. Although reports in the paper may be considered tendentious, it cannot be assumed that their accuracy was any less than those of the NYT.

3.3 Retrieval of Relative Clauses Presenting Contentious Issues

Given the above definition of 'controversial issues', we removed from our data sentences like (4) and (5), retaining sentences like (6) and (7).

(4) And with hundreds of millions of people in China expected to travel for the Lunar New Year holiday, *which begins Friday,* public health officials are working to stop a major outbreak. (NYT-18 Jan. 2020-*Deadly Mystery Virus Reported in 2 New Chinese Cities and South Korea*)

(5) There is no evidence that the new virus is readily spread by humans, *which would make it particularly dangerous,* and it has not been tied to any deaths. (NYT-8 Jan. 2020-*China Identifies New Virus Causing Pneumonialike Illness*)

(6) China's health commission, *which has tightly controlled news about the toll of the outbreak,* released on Thursday its most detailed list of the people who have died of the disease. (NYT-23 Jan. 2020-*Coronavirus Death Toll Climbs in China, and a Lockdown Widens*)

(7) The New York Times asked Chinese readers all over the world to share their views on how the country responded to the coronavirus outbreak, *which originated in Hubei Province in central China.* (NYT-4 Mar. 2020-*'A Slap in the Face'- Chinese Readers Share Their Coronavirus Stories*)

Statements in the relative clauses in (4) and (5) are non-controversial because they are factual. Propositions made in (6) and (7), by contrast, are contentious because the National Health Commission[2] published updated coronavirus situation in China on its website every day since the Covid outbreak and didn't withhold 'the toll of the outbreak'. The relative clause in Example 7 concerns the origin of the virus, which as we shall show is still unresolved. These two issues are further discussed in the next section.

Using the above procedure, we gathered all the *which*-initial relative clauses containing controversial information for investigation. This produced 25 sentences in total, to which we now in the next section.

4. FINDINGS

Themes producing controversial issues were identified in our data: Chinese government, its propaganda, China's anti-Covid measures, the economic impact on its economy and the origin of the virus. In this section, we examined the presupposing function of NRRCs in presenting these controversial issues, within the framework of their discursive functions in relation to their preceding main clauses. In what ways they are controversial and how cognitive manipulation is achieved will be discussed in Section 4.1. Discourse strategies utilised in the NRRCs in strengthening the tacit truth are presented in Section 4.2.

4.1 The Presupposing Functions of NRRCs in Presenting Controversial Issues

The discourse functions identified in the 25 NRRCs were analysed with reference to Loock's (2007) taxonomy reviewed in Section 2. Controversial topics are open to verification or falsification and thus can be subject to biased judgement. So the sentences in our dataset are believed to primarily fulfill a subjectivity function. Take the following NRRC for example ((6) in Section 3, repeated here for convenience):

(8) China's health commission, *which has tightly controlled news about the toll of the outbreak,* released on Thursday its most detailed list of the people who have died of the disease. (NYT-23 Jan. 2020-*Coronavirus Death Toll Climbs in China, and a Lockdown Widens*)

As discussed above, a test for 'subjective' relatives suggested by Cornish (2018) could be to insert discourse markers like *in my view* after the clause. This example survives this test without changing the meaning of sentence. Whether the Health Commission tightly controlled the news about the toll of the outbreak is controversial, as according to its official website, daily bulletins on the Coronavirus cases were released as early as 20 January at the national level, and at the local level Wuhan Health Commission released Covid information much earlier,[3] i.e. it reported 1 death and 41 confirmed cases on 10 January and updated the data on daily basis.[4] In addition, the NRRC, subjective in judgment and controversial in nature, functions as a concession in relation to the main clause. It can be paraphrased as: though China's health commission withheld information regarding Covid death tolls, on Thursday it published detailed information on Covid deaths. Therefore, in evoking a concession relation to the main clause, the NRRC *successfully* and *reasonably* presupposes the truth of a controversial statement.

All the examples identified in our data are found to fulfil the dual function of relevance and subjectivity. We didn't find the type of NRRC fulfilling the function

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of legitimacy, which 'is quite common in journalistic prose when the ARC is apposed to an antecedent that is generally a proper noun' (Loock 2007, p.346). Nevertheless, there existed a few proper nouns as antecedents in our data. So we divide our data into two types based on their relevance categories in relation to the main clauses: 1) explanation, justification and concession; 2) providing circumstantial information.

4.1.1 NRRCs Backgrounded as Explanation, Justification or Concession to the Main Clause

A majority of the clauses (16 out of 25) were found to serve a subjective explanation, justification or concession to the referent of the antecedent or to the main predication, as in (9).

> (9) Beijing has leaned into that approbation in its propaganda push, saying it promptly alerted the world to the threat of the virus. But its narrative is oversimplified, *leaving out the ways in which it played down the epidemic*. (NYT-8 Apr. 2020-*China's Coronavirus Battle Is Waning. Its Propaganda Fight Is Not.*)

The subordinate relative clause in (9) serves as a causal explanation of the main predication: *Beijing's narrative is oversimplified*. Here the non-finite verb phrase 'leaving out' presupposes the truth that *Beijing played down the epidemic*, which according to reports from *China Daily*, is controversial. After the first case began to show symptoms in Wuhan on 8 December, epidemiological investigation was soon started. On 11 January Chinese medical team identified and shared the genome sequence on Virologic.org. China published the genetic sequence of the novel coronavirus in a timely fashion with the WHO and relevant countries and regions.[5] This evidence shows China's constant scientific research into the virus and its adoption of containment policies. As more was known about the virus, the Chinese leadership publicly pointed out its severity. As early as January 7th, in the standing committee conference of the Central Committee of the CPC Political Bureau, President Xi called for awareness of the disease, and assigned containment measures. On the 20th of that month, he urged 'resolute efforts to contain' the epidemic and 'make people's lives and health a first priority'.[6] It should be clear that China has investigated the virus and warned the public once more was known about it. Far from playing down the epidemic, the government took stringent measures to deal with the Covid crisis. The NYT journalists give the biased interpretation *that the Chinese government played down the epidemic* as an explanation, which it assumes the readers to take as a neutral explanation, but in reality, it is a biased interpretation, used to occupy the readers' political cognitive space.

Similarly, the following example is another tendentious

criticism of Chinese leadership:

> (10) The response by the Chinese leadership, *which has come under intensifying criticism that it has been slow to acknowledge the severity of the outbreak*, came as fatalities from the disease tripled to at least nine.(NYT-21 Jan. 2020-*The Test a Deadly Coronavirus Outbreak Poses to China's Leadership*)

In (10), two propositions are successively presupposed:

i) The Chinese leadership has come under intensifying criticism;

ii) The Chinese leadership has been slow to acknowledge the severity of the outbreak.

The proposition in (ii), by explaining what the criticism is, stealthily strengthens the existence of such a criticism. Within the NRRC in (10), a presupposition is embedded in another presupposed proposition, thus a critical assessment from the readers about their truth value is discouraged. Yet both the propositions are contentious as we examined these issues in the previous example. The central government in January of 2020 did not receive criticism from the WHO, which 'hailed China's political resolve, openness and transparency, effective system, and swift sharing of the genetic sequence of the new virus.'[7] Admittedly, as reported by *China Daily*, 'Wuhan local health commission officials might have been hasty in considering human-to-human transmission unlikely',[8] thus there are chances that the local leadership is criticized for being slow to acknowledge the severity of Covid, but not the Chinese leadership.

The NRRC in (10) is therefore a good example of how a biased interpretation is conveyed to the reader as if it were uncontroversial established knowledge.

Another type of relevance NRRC in our study evokes a relation of 'cause-consequence' between the main clause and the subordinate clause:

> (11) The authorities have never explained in detail how the system decides the color of someone's code, *which has caused bewilderment among people who have received yellow or red ones without understanding why.* (NYT-26 May 2020-*China's Virus Apps May Outlast the Outbreak, Stirring Privacy Fears*)

In (11), the main clause discusses Chinese authority's inability to explain how the health code of Covid works; as a result, Chinese users are faced with bewilderment. Through back grounding this controversial consequence, the reporter successfully reinforced its criticism of the Chinese authorities by concealing that whether such bewilderment really exists among Chinese.

However, both the main clause and the subordinate clause are controversial. The QR code system has been widely used in China to reduce the risk of virus transmission. As reported by China Daily, since its application as early as February 2020, authorities have

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[5] https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202001/31/WS5e33ba30a310128217273dd2.html
[6] https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202001/20/WS5e259030a310128217272521.html
[7] https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202001/30/WS5e323747a310128217273aaf.html
[8] https://epaper.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202001/21/WS5e2631cca310a2fabb7a1ab8.html

explained how it worked. Possibilities of infection or transmission are graded by trace check and are based on contact with infected people. Accordingly, the code displays three colours: 'the green code means people have little chance of having been infected, while residents with yellow and red ones must be held under quarantine for a few days'.[9] So explanations of how the health code worked were given in early February of 2020 contrary to the NYT's report in late May that such explanations didn't exist.

Therefore, the explanatory link between the main clauses and the NRRCs examined above functions as a persuasive device that makes it less likely for the reader to question the truth of subordinate clauses. Through reinforcing the proposition in the reader's mind as a plausible explanation, NRRCs make the presupposed propositions more credible and persuasive. Presupposition in itself is a device to manipulate readers' mind, so with embedded causal-explanatory link between the main and subordinate clause, this manipulation is cognitively strengthened through using a biased interpretation to occupy readers' political cognitive space.

4.1.2 NRRCs Backgrounded for Providing Circumstantial Information

We found contentious information is presupposed via evoking another type of relevance to the main clause, i.e., providing circumstantial information. Although circumstantial information should be neutral, it is on the contrary controversial. Among the 25 examples, 9 were found to fulfil such a function. Take (12) as an example:

(12) The economic cost of the outbreak, *which has paralyzed China,* the world's second-largest economy, also continues to grow. (NYT-18 Feb. 2020-*Coronavirus Epidemic Keeps Growing, but Spread in China Slows*)

Discoursally, both the antecedents of the NRRC, the economic cost of Covid and the coronavirus outbreak, are referentially independent. Yet syntactically they are followed by a non-restrictive relative clause, breaking up the flow of the discourse and elaborating on the costs Covid brought to China's economy. However, the circumstantial information in the subordinate clauses is controversial. The Covid outbreak at the beginning of 2020 posed great challenges to China's economy. Yet it was not reported to collapse. The economies in different regions exhibited different degrees of drop. The economic growth in the eastern region, whose economy relies more on international trade was seriously undermined. However, the western region showed less economic decline in the first quarter.[10] Some sectors of economy even maintained a growing momentum. For example, in terms of foreign investment, Chinese investment in Belt and Road countries and regions increased by 11.7 percent year on year in the first quarter of 2020, along with a 3.2-percent growth in trade.[11] These figures demonstrate that the proposition conveyed in the relative clause is in nature controversial.

Also, Example 13 (Ex. 7) illustrates the origin of the coronavirus that is provided as circumstantial information:

(13) The New York Times asked Chinese readers all over the world to share their views on how the country responded to the coronavirus outbreak, *which originated in Hubei Province in central China.* (NYT-4 Mar. 2020-*'Slap in the Face': Chinese Readers Share Their Coronavirus Stories*)

The clause *which originated in Hubei Province in central China* in (13) is reckoned by journalists as a piece of unknown information for some addressees. However, the supposedly new information is controversial and it may be taken as true by addressees. We now turn to the discussion of the origin of virus. Although it is a question subject to scientific endeavour, we will present different voices in this regard.

The NYT reported that the coronavirus originated from China. However, *China Daily* reported the possibility that the virus came from a U.S. lab and 'was associated with the winter influenza flu outbreak in the United States'. The virus was suspected of being carried into China by American military personnel who joined the Military World Games held in Wuhan in October'.[12] It further pointed out by quoting from a researcher with the Chinese Academy of Sciences' Institute of Microbiology that China was unable to comment on the above speculation till more research was done and definitive conclusions reached. Similar possibilities, i.e. a leak from the US bioweapons lab at Fort Detrick,[13] or created by the Massachusetts-based pharmaceutical company Moderna,[14] were reported by other media outside of China. With the breakout of the Ukraine-Russia conflict, more doubts about the virus origin began to emerge. On 27 April, 2022, an online English news media *The Expose* published a document showing that "the United States Department of Defense issued a contract for Covid-19 Research in November 2019, at least one month before the alleged emergence of the novel coronavirus and three months before the novel coronavirus was officially named Covid-19. The contract was awarded to a company based in Ukraine and was part of a much larger contract for a 'biological threat reduction program in Ukraine'.[15] This

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[9] https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202003/27/WS5e7dd30da310128217282956_1.html

[10] https://epaper.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202005/28/WS5ecef320a3102640f4a63871.html

[11] https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202005/31/WS5ed2e690a310a8b241159a73.html

[12] https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202004/23/WS5ea18d43a3105d50a3d186e2.html

[13] http://english.cctv.com/2021/08/16/VIDEOzxu23qoYHkm5JoqYFjP210816.shtml

[14] https://dailyexpose.uk/2022/03/03/evidence-confirms-moderna-created-covid-19/

[15] https://dailyexpose.uk/2022/04/16/d-o-d-issued-contract-for-covid-19-research-3-months-before-covid-was-known-to-exist/

allows for the possibility of the virus having originated as a result of U.S.－supported research in Ukraine before it was found in Wuhan in December 2020.

Therefore, while they do not offer conclusive proof, alternative theories about the virus origin exist, the claim conveyed in the relative clause of (13) that Wuhan is the origin of the virus can thus be questioned.

The origin of the virus is extensively presupposed in NYT reports as having originated with China. Accordingly, we searched the word 'originated' in our data, with an aim to compare whether it appears more in main clauses or subordinate clauses. Results turned to be that among the sentences －the virus/coronavirus/Covid + originated + Wuhan/China, 29 out of 37 (78%) instances are backgrounded in subordinate clauses, e.g., *The victim was an 80-year-old man who had lived in the city of Wuhan, <u>where the outbreak originated</u>*; *The city of Wuhan, <u>where the new coronavirus originated</u>, is struggling to get the epidemic under control.* This means in respect of the origin of the virus, NYT reporters more often present the information as backgrounded, rather than in the main clause, where the truth value of the proposition is asserted, not presupposed.

4.2 Discourse Strategies to Intensify the Tacit Truth of Controversial Issues

In the process of examining the presuppositive functions of NRRCs, we noted several discourse strategies that are employed in strengthening the 'truth' of controversial issues. These strategies merits further study.

4.2.1 Broadening the Scope of the Antecedent

(14) The news media has been helped by the Chinese public, *which has shown determination and inventiveness in squaring off with internet censors.* (NYT-13 Mar. 2020-*As China Cracks Down on Coronavirus Coverage, Journalists Fight Back*)

The strategy of broadening the referential scope of the antecedent from "some specific groups" to "the Chinese public" can be found in (14). It helps the reporter to achieve insidious manipulatory intents in the following way: the proposition that some specific groups of people have shown determination and inventiveness in squaring off with internet censors is non-controversial to the readers; but 'the Chinese public' has in fact broadened the referential scope to the whole Chinese population, thus turning the presupposed proposition into "the whole Chinese population have shown determination and inventiveness in squaring off with internet censors", an obvious controversial one. In this process of shifting stealthily the scale of representative, the reporter induces his readers to accept the presupposition as it is while hardly paying any attention to the change of the scope of the antecedent.

4.2.2 Blurring the Lines Between Facts and Controversies

Another effective strategy in constructing an indisputable conviction in the minds of the readers is to mix the facts with contentious information. Therefore, readers may accept the presupposed contents as a whole without a distinction between the two.

(15) American officials who see the Chinese Communist Party as malevolent are irate at what they view as the party's efforts to reshape the narrative of the pandemic, *which spread quickly beyond central China in part because of cover-ups by officials.* (NYT-14 Apr. 2020-*China's 'Donation Diplomacy' Raises Tensions With U.S.*)

The factual part of the relative clause in (15) that the pandemic spread quickly beyond central China is a factual proposition, according to the actual Covid situation in the first three months of 2020. This fact may induce the readers further to accept the proposition directly following it. The propositions that Chinese officials have covered up the pandemic and that it is their cover-ups that caused the quick spread of the pandemic would otherwise be critically assessed. This judgement on officials' misconduct is biased, according to *China Daily*. As discussed in Section 4.1.1, Wuhan local health commission officials might have been hasty in considering human-to-human transmission unlikely at the start of the outbreak, they were not reported to cover up, because at that time not enough clear evidence of degrees of transmission was found about the virus. This NRRC serves well for the manipulation of readers' cognitive space in terms of a mixture of fact and biased interpretation.

4.2.3 Applying Reported Speech

The realization of subjective evaluation in our data is mostly monoglossic, i.e., via the reporters' own voices. However, discourse markers as 'in my opinion', and 'I think' are omitted, with the effect that the proposition sounds more objective or even seems to a fact. This can be regarded as a common technique for journalists.

Apart from monogloss where reporters' voices hide behind the proposition, we found that heterogloss, citing other voices in making a proposition, is equally frequent in the 'subjective' relatives. Journalists were found to involve a second voice in the discourse. See the following example:

(16) For the fiercest critics of China within the Trump administration, the global panic over the coronavirus has provided a new opening to denounce the rule of the Chinese Communist Party, *which they say cannot be trusted to disclose what it knows or properly manage the outbreak.* (NYT-19 Feb. 2020-*Coronavirus Worsens U.S.-China Ties and Bolsters Hawks in Washington*)

As shown in (16), the NRRC involves the voice of 'the fiercest critics of China within the Trump administration', thus mitigating the opposition and avoiding a direct face to face conflict with the target the reporter criticised－ the Chinese Communist Party. That is, the harshness of the accusation backgrounded in the NRRC has been blurred and the reporter therefore attacks the CCP in an indirect way. The use of reported speech not only makes 'the

writer's discourse more objective and credible', but 'frees him/her from any responsibility' (Calsamiglia and Ferrero, 2003, p.149). The controversial issues are opportunistically reckoned as established facts on the one hand, on the other, reporters successfully evaded responsibility and made their comments more objective through hetergloss. However, the accusations that China is not trustworthy and not able to manage the outbreak are controversial. As is discussed in Section 4.1.1, the WHO appraised China's openness and transparency in fighting against Covid. It turns out that China managed the outbreak quite well in 2020. The number of daily infections in China dropped to single digit since 11 March, 2020, after which the situation was mostly brought control.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

What our current study sought to analyse is the manipulative strategies employed by media reporters in establishing a link between persuasive argumentation and syntactic structures. It has been found that through syntactically back grounding potentially controversial issues regarding Chinese government, its propaganda, China's containment measures, its economy and the origin of the virus in NRRCs, the reporters incline the readers to take the presupposed propositions as tacit truth, thus enhancing the acceptance and manipulation of the journalists' political argumentation. These criticisms are subjective in nature but may slip to recipients' mind subliminally, without questioning the truth value of this proposition. We also demonstrate that, apart from the use of relative clauses, journalists adopt discourse strategies in NRRCs including mixing facts and controversies and use of reported speeches to strengthen the readers' commitment to truth of the presupposed propositions and lower down their sensitivity to the challengeablility of their political statements.

Our study further suggests a modification of the terminology in Loock (2007)'s differentiation of relevance NRRCs: levelling of the shared cognitive space, legitimacy of the antecedent, and explanation, justification, concession. All of our data perform the function of levelling shared cognitive space between the reporter and the readers. Therefore, we argue that the overarching and primary function of NRRCs in media political reports is to level shared cognitive space between participants, regardless of the other two functions.[16] Below is a diagram of our categorisation of relevance NRRCs.
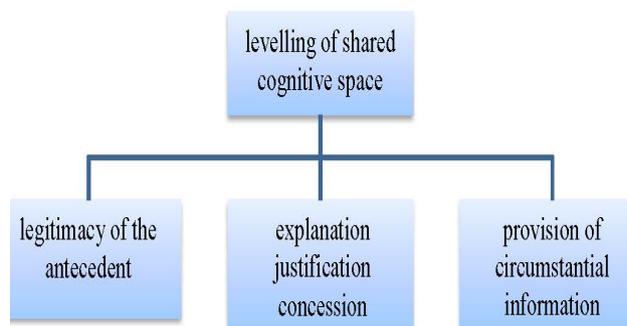
Figure 1
Modified discourse functions of NRRCs from Loock's (2007) taxonomy

Levelling shared cognitive space at the top of the hierarchy is a higher-order function, subordinated by three other functions. In cases where no discoursal links like explanation and legitimacy between the relative clause and main clause are found, we therefore define its function as providing circumstantial information, e.g., the NRRCs providing the origin of the coronavirus. In this regard, it is expected that our study can usefully supplement Loock's taxonomy by providing empirical support to it in the genre of media reports.

This study also contributes to a deeper understanding of the discourse functions of non-restrictive relative clauses. In our data, they are concerned with controversial issues, and thus all NRRCs are of relevance and subjectivity types. Our study shows how the explanatory link between the main clause and subordinate clause functions as a persuasive device that disinclines the reader to question the truth of the subordinate clause, making the presupposed contentious propositions more credible and persuasive.

We argue that the overarching function of NRRCs in levelling of cognitive space is generally a manipulative action in media political discourse by the political journalists of geopolitical awareness to influence the readers' political beliefs. The present study is expected to contribute to revealing how the manipulative power of language is achieved through syntax with a further body of evidence from mass communication. Persuasive devices used implicitly by journalists in political reports form an increasingly studied area, in which our critical analysis has aimed to shed new light on the link between syntax and manipulation.

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[16] We have confirmed this categorisation through personal communication with Loock, who acknowledges this specific hierarchy structure of functions of NRRCs in the genre of media reports, where levelling shared cognitive space is a higher-order function.

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