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A contrastive ecological discourse analysis of the General Debate statements by the US and China at the United Nations General Assembly (2017–2020)

Abstract: This article adopts an ecolinguistic approach to study the thematic choices in the General Debate statements by the US and China at the United Nations General Assembly (2017–2020) to reveal the eco-characteristics of the two countries' thematic choices and their impacts on the constructions of international relations. Findings suggest that, from the perspective of ecosophy, a significant proportion of the US's thematic choices are destructive to international relations, while China's thematic choices are mostly beneficial and ambivalent. The US's thematic choices are frequently used to portray "us versus them" and "America first", which displays a message of egocentrism instead of ecocentrism. China's thematic choices are typically used to show China's willingness to undertake global responsibility and to jointly work with other stakeholders to safeguard our planet, echoing China's global vision of "building a shared future for mankind".

1 Introduction

Ecological discourse analysis (EDA), as a central approach in the discipline of ecolinguistics, studies the impacts of discourses on the life-sustaining relationships among humans, other species, and the physical environment (Alexander and Stibbe 2014; He et al. 2021). Taking a different path than that of critical discourse analysis (CDA), EDA bases itself not on power relations but on the preservation of

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life and avoidance of suffering (Couto 2018: 156). It emphasizes the peaceful coexistence between people, and between people and nature (He et al. 2021: 46). In recent years, EDA's application has become increasingly popular in studying environmental discourses (Gong and Liu 2018; Poole 2016; Zhang 2020; Zuo 2019), while only a few works have used EDA to analyze discourses not specifically written to address environmental issues (Cheng and He 2021; Ning 2020). This research limitation is identified by Zhou and Huang (2017) as they point out that ecolinguistics should not only concern human-nature harmony but also interso-cietal and interpersonal harmony, so as to build a truly ecological world.

Today's world is connected as never before. In a commonly shared world, the concept of "worldness" can only be embraced if there is a system to protect the maximization of compatibility of different civilizations and their peaceful coex-istence, and the United Nations (UN) is an effort to this end (Zhao 2019: 49). Every September, national leaders and other high-level officials will participate in the UN General Assembly to discuss the world's most critical issues. Their statements delivered at the General Debate (GD) can offer invaluable information on their countries' perspectives and preferences (Baturo et al. 2017). If viewed ecolingu-istically, the GD statements can reflect how political leaders attempt to solve conflicts between various interests, and how they see the relationships between their national governments and other stakeholders.

Observing this, this paper adopts an ecolinguistic approach to analyze the GD statements made by the US and China. The timespan covered by our dataset is from 2017 to 2020, during which period the Trump administration has led the US to become increasingly protectionist and isolationist, while China has been pursuing inclusive and sustainable development under Xi's leadership (Foot and King 2020: 215). Previous studies mostly used the techniques of CDA to reveal the power relations and ideologies created through countries' GD statements (Lafta et al. 2021; Luo 2021; Nasuha and Ekawati 2021; Sibtain et al. 2021). Zhu and Wang's (2020) research combined Fairclough's three-dimensional discourse analysis and Martin's Attitude analysis to explore the underlying messages of the US's and China's GD statements suggested by their preferences of words. However, there is yet no attempt to draw on ecolinguistic ideas to study countries' GD statements. In order to reveal the eco-characteristics of the chosen GD statements, this article applies He et al.'s (2021) ecological Theme system to study the impacts of the US's and China's thematic choices on the international social ecosystem. The research questions are as follows: (1) What are the similarities and differences of the eco-characteristics of the thematic choices in the US's and China's GD statements? (2) What impacts can the two countries' thematic choices have on the discursive construction of international relations?

2 The ecological Theme system

In Systemic Functional Linguistics, the structure that gives a clause its character as a message is the Theme-Rheme structure (Halliday 1994: 37). Theme is the "point of departure of the message; it is that with which the clause is concerned" (Halliday 1994: 37–38). In English, the element put in the first position of a clause is Theme, functioning as the "psychological subject" of the message (Halliday 1970: 161).

To cater to the need for EDA, He et al. (2021) modify Halliday's (1994) Theme system and develop it into the ecological Theme system (see also He and Ma 2020). By Halliday's (1994: 53) criterion for identifying Theme, Theme goes up to and includes the first experiential element which is either the participant, the circumstance, or the process positioned at the beginning of the clause. In the ecological Theme system, however, the boundary of Theme extends up to and includes the first participant or the process of the clause, and the circumstance cannot be Theme on its own (He et al. 2021: 242). The reasons for pushing the boundary of Theme beyond the fronted circumstance are as follows: Firstly, the circumstance does not have the same thematic status as the participant and the process do (He 2017: 942–944). Whilst the participant and the process can be the topic of the message on their own, the circumstance only indicates the time, space, manner, or cause for the ensuing message to develop, and it is more of a "contextual frame" or "orienting Theme" (Downing 1991: 126; Thompson 2014: 180). Secondly, unlike the fronted participant which is directly involved in the process, the fronted circumstance is only attendant on the process, and it is usually not obligatory. In fact, Halliday and Matthiessen (2004: 103) have purposed to use "displaced Theme" to refer to the Subject following a circumstantial Adjunct as the real "topical element", and the fronted circumstance has been seen as the "marked topical Theme". Hence, He et al. (2021) argue that if a clause begins with a fronted circumstance, its topical Theme should be the combination of that circumstance and the first participant or process. Table 1 presents the differences between the Hallidayan approach and the EDA approach to identifying Themes.

He et al. (2021) elaborate their ecological Theme system by bringing an ecological way of thinking into the process of thematic analysis: Ecology sees the world as a holistic whole in which everything is interdependent and interrelated, and EDA should take this philosophical perspective, too. Their philosophical principle for guiding ecological thematic analysis is the ecosophy of "Diversity and Harmony, Interaction and Coexistence". This four-word ecosophy is based on the idea of universal harmony in Chinese culture, and it values the diversity,

Table 1: Different approaches to identifying Themes.

Halliday's identification of Themes		
Until the arrival of that remittance	I am cut off from my home.	(declarative)
How cheerfully	he seems to grin.	(exclamative)
If winter comes	can spring be far behind?	(interrogative)
For a sharper taste	squeeze some lime over it.	(imperative)
Theme	**Rheme**	
EDA's identification of Themes		
<u>Until the arrival of that remittance</u> **I**	am cut off from my home.	(declarative)
How <u>cheerfully</u> **he**	seems to grin.	(exclamative)
<u>If winter comes</u> can **spring**	be far behind?	(interrogative)
<u>For a sharper taste</u> **squeeze**	some lime over it.	(imperative)
Theme	**Rheme**	

<u>Underlined</u> = marked circumstantial Theme; **Bold** = unmarked participant Theme.

interactivity, compatibility, and sustainability of all species in the ecosystems (Cheng and He 2021; He and Liu 2020). Different choices of Theme can suggest different starting points for a message and make different ecological meanings. If the choice of Theme can steer the message in a direction favorable to the ecosophy, it is used in an ecologically beneficial way. If the thematic choice sends out a message that counters the ecosophy, it is destructive. If the choice of Theme neither favors nor opposes the ecosophy, it is ambivalent. As EDA aims to study how different participants and actions influence the ecosystems and how they are related to each other in the ecosystems, ecological thematic analysis focuses on the choice of topical Themes and their implications retained in the flow of discourse. Practically, topical Theme has to be combined with its ensuing Rheme and the larger context for the analysis of its eco-characteristic. For example, in discourses written to promote human rights, beneficial choices of Themes should encourage equality, empathy, and understanding between humans, as in Example (1):

(1)   **All humans** need each other to survive on this planet, so **deal with** it and **open** your mind and heart. (https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/)

Example (1) contains a declarative clause and two imperative clauses. The topical Theme of the first clause "all humans" suggests that all people are interdependent, and "deal with" and "open" serve as the Process Themes of the latter two clauses to encourage people to build closer relationships with others. The thematization of these elements can highlight people's intrinsic need to associate with each other

and work toward the benefit of their community. A beneficial discourse can be made by using more of such topical Themes to reflect care and respect for the bigger-than-the-self world, rather than by starting the messages only with the speakers' consideration of their own values or interests.

3 Data and methods

3.1 Data

In the present study, the US's and China's GD statements dated between September 2017 and September 2020 were selected to be analyzed. All data were collected from the UN's General Debate website.[1] For convenience, we use "the US dataset" and "the CN dataset" to refer to the two groups of data. Given that this study is based on the ecological Theme system in English, only the English versions of the GD statements were chosen.

Table 2: Register information of the data.

Year	Theme	Spokesman		Medium
		The US	**China**	
2020	The future we want, the United Nations we need: Reaffirming our collective commitment to multilateralism – confronting COVID-19 through effective multilateral action	Donald Trump (President)	Xi Jinping (President)	Distributed to national delegations and published online
2019	Galvanizing multilateral efforts for poverty eradication, quality education, climate action and inclusion		Wang Yi (Minister for Foreign Affairs)	
2018	Making the United Nations relevant to all people: Global leadership and shared responsibilities for peaceful, equitable and sustainable societies			
2017	Focusing on people – striving for peace and a decent life for all on a sustainable planet			

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1 https://gadebate.un.org/en/sessions-archive (accessed 21 December 2021).

Table 2 presents the register information of the data: What was the central theme of each General Debate, who delivered each statement, and the medium of communication. These register factors contextually constrain the contents of the statements. As can be seen from the table, the four years' General Debate had an overall theme – the sustainable development of the world. That is, all statements were supposed to be concerned with how to achieve the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. Each statement was delivered by a president or minister, suggesting that all statements were meant to be carefully worded to express the governments' stances on critical issues. As the statement transcripts were distributed to every national delegation who attended the meeting and were published online after the meeting, the impacts of the statements were far beyond the conference room, reaching politicians and the general public all over the world.

3.2 Methods

This study combines quantitative and qualitative methods to conduct a contrastive EDA. In the quantitative evaluation, the topical Theme of each clause was picked out and identified by its function (participant Theme, circumstantial Theme, or process Theme). As the selected statements are mostly composed of declarative and interrogative clauses, more than 99% of the topical Themes contain a participant Theme. Hence, the focus of our quantitative analysis is on the distribution of these participant Themes and the quantitative interpretation of their eco-characteristics. From a qualitative perspective, the participant Themes were categorized into several types according to the topic they pertain to. Based on the judgment of the ecosophy of "Diversity and Harmony, Interaction and Coexistence", each participant Theme was evaluated as either conveying a beneficial, destructive or ambivalent meaning in the clause. As has been explained in the previous section, the eco-characteristic of the topical Theme is dependent on the interpretation of what is chosen by the speaker to be the "aboutness" of the clause. Hence, the qualitative analysis of the thematic choices needs to be conducted by relating to the Rheme contents and the surrounding contexts. Below are some illustrative examples:

(2)   Over the past 40 years, **we** have worked hard and forged ahead successfully along a path of socialism with Chinese characteristics. (The CN dataset, September 28, 2018)

(3)   **We** must stick together as one big family instead of forming closed circles. (The CN dataset, September 28, 2018)

(4)   **Many countries** are pursuing their own unique visions, **(many countries)** building their own hopeful futures, **(many countries)** chasing their own wonderful dreams of destiny, of legacy, and of a home. (The US dataset, September 25, 2018)

Pronouns occupying the thematic position can denote different things in different contexts. In Examples (2) and (3), both clauses take "we" as the participant Theme. By referring to the context, we know that "we" in Example (2) means China, and it is judged as an ambivalent Theme because it simply suggests China's active role in its own development, which is neither for nor against the ecosophy that this study is based on. We can also infer that "we" in Example (3) means China and other countries, which takes all countries as the Actor of "stick[ing] together as one big family instead of forming closed circles". Judged by the ecosophy, this thematic choice suggests a close and positive connection between all nations, thus creating a beneficial message. In the case of thematic ellipsis, the omitted participant Theme needs to be completed for analysis. In Example (4), the omitted Theme "many countries" of the second and third clauses are presented in parentheses. These Themes are evaluated as beneficial because they all indicate the active role of many countries in their own pursuit of development, therefore encouraging respectful relationships among the international community.

4 Analysis and results

This section is organized as follows: Section 4.1 presents the results of the quantitative analysis at a macroscopic level. Sections 4.2–4.5 present the results and illustrative examples of the detailed qualitative analysis of some salient types of thematic choices and their ecological implications.

4.1 Results of the quantitative analysis

This study carefully examined and classified the contents of the participant Themes into several types. The frequencies of different Theme types in the US dataset and the CN dataset are presented in Tables 3 and 4, and the quantitative results of the ecological thematic analysis are presented in Tables 5 and 6.[2]

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2 Only a few Themes (less than 0.5% of the total) are left off the tables because they do not fit into any category that has ecological beneficial or destructive potential, such as the expressions of time and space. For example, "this week" in "this week gives our country a special reason to take pride". All of these Themes are considered ambivalent according to the ecosophy.

Table 3: Frequencies of Theme types in the US dataset.

Rank	Trump 2017		Trump 2018		Trump 2019		Trump 2020	
	Type	Frequency	Type	Frequency	Type	Frequency	Type	Frequency
High	America	74	America	81	America	97	America	35
	America & the Others	44	The Others	39	The Others	72	The Others	16
	The Others	36	Peace	30	America & the Others	20	–	6
	Nationalism	24	–	21	–	15	Nationalism	3
	Economy	16	America & the Others	17	Economy; Peace	6	America & the Others; the UN; Peace	2
	Peace	14	Global solutions	8	Freedom & democracy	5	Health	1
	–	14	Nationalism; Economy	7	Gender equality	4		
	Global solutions	13	The UN	1				
Low	The UN	10						
Total		**245**		**211**		**225**		**67**

Table 4: Frequencies of Theme types in the CN dataset.

Rank	Wang 2017		Wang 2018		Wang 2019		Xi 2020	
	Type	Frequency	Frequency	Type	Frequency	Type	Type	Frequency
High	The UN; China; China & the Others	35	47	China	102	China	China & the Others	47
	Peace	14	30	Global solutions	15	China & the Others; Peace	China	27
	Global solutions	13	27	China & the Others	8	The Others	Health	11
	Economy; the Others	5	23	Peace	7	Global solutions	The Others	7
	Climate	1	15	Economy	5	Economy	Global solutions	6
			9	The Others	2	Climate; I	Climate; the UN	2
			2	The UN	1	The UN	I	1
Low			1	Climate; Health				
Total		**143**	**155**		**157**			**103**

Table 5: Eco-characteristics of the thematic choices in the US dataset.

Type	Tag	Token	Rank	Frequency (%)
America	Destructive	16	9	2.14
	Ambivalent	271	1	36.23
The Others	Beneficial	50	5	6.68
	Destructive	109	2	14.57
	Ambivalent	3	19	0.40
America & the Others	Beneficial	82	3	10.96
	Destructive	2	21	0.27
I	Ambivalent	56	4	7.49
Peace	Beneficial	34	6	4.55
	Destructive	14	10	1.87
	Ambivalent	4	17	0.53
Nationalism	Destructive	34	6	4.55
Economy	Beneficial	3	19	0.40
	Destructive	7	13	0.94
Global solutions	Ambivalent	19	8	2.54
	Beneficial	12	11	1.60
	Destructive	9	12	1.20
The UN	Beneficial	6	15	0.80
	Destructive	7	13	0.94
Freedom & democracy	Beneficial	5	16	0.67
Gender equality	Beneficial	4	17	0.53
Health	Ambivalent	1	22	0.13

As can be seen in Tables 3 and 4, the two datasets contain many common Theme types, especially the ones used to refer to different participants in the international ecosystem. These Themes fall within the the-Self type (namely America or China, depending on which side the speaker is representing), the-Others type (namely the participants who are seen by the speaker as "the other side"), the-Self-and-the-Others type, and the-UN type (namely the UN and its agencies). The two datasets also have some common Theme types which are related to important aspects of the Sustainable Development Goals, including peace, global solutions, economy, and health. Few Theme types occur only in one of the datasets, including the nationalism type, freedom-and-democracy type, gender-equality type in the US dataset, and the climate type in the CN dataset. This suggests that while both countries chose to thematize many similar contents to be the point of departure of the message, some particular topics were elaborated on and discussed only by one country but excluded by the other. The consequences are that, according to Baturo et al. (2017: 2), the GD statements "can be used as a resource from which estimates of government preferences can be derived".

Tables 5 and 6 present the eco-characteristics of the thematic choices in both datasets. Overall, the distributions of the eco-characteristics of many Theme types are saliently different between the two countries' statements, which is indicated by the reported frequencies. Focusing on the overall differences between the two countries' eco-orientations of thematic choices, we found that the frequency rate of destructive Themes in the US dataset is significantly higher than its counterpart in the CN dataset. The frequent use of destructive Themes is especially worthy of in-depth investigation because the purpose of the General Debate is meant to resolve conflicts and disputes between countries, and the choice of wording should be consistent with this purpose instead of invoking negative effects on international relations. A detailed analysis of the eco-characteristics of thematic choices and their underlying ecolinguistic implications will be provided in later sections.

4.2 Thematic representations of the Self

The-Self type of Themes includes the ones used to refer to the speaker himself, his personal attitude, and his own country or administration (e.g. "I", "my highest honest", "the United States/China", "our country", "my administration"). Analysis of the eco-characteristics of this type of Themes reveals both similarities and differences between the two datasets.

Table 6: Eco-characteristics of the thematic choices in the CN dataset.

Type	Tag	Token	Rank	Frequency (%)
China	Ambivalent	211	1	37.81
China & the Others	Beneficial	120	2	21.51
The Others	Beneficial	22	6	3.94
	Destructive	4	12	0.72
	Ambivalent	3	13	0.54
Peace	Beneficial	55	3	9.86
	Destructive	1	16	0.18
Global solutions	Beneficial	44	4	7.89
	Destructive	2	15	0.36
	Ambivalent	10	10	1.79
The UN	Beneficial	40	5	7.17
Economy	Beneficial	14	7	2.51
	Ambivalent	11	8	1.97
Health	Beneficial	11	8	1.97
	Ambivalent	1	16	0.18
Climate	Beneficial	6	11	1.08
I	Ambivalent	3	13	0.54

As can be seen from Tables 5 and 6, the-Self type of Themes judged as ambivalent are the most frequently used Themes in both the US dataset (36.23%) and the CN dataset (37.81%). These Themes are used to orient the clause to go on talking about the speakers' own side of the story about how they or their countries think and act, without carrying any implication for or against the ecosophy. In terms of the differences, we noted that among all the-Self type of Themes in the US dataset, 16 tokens are used destructively (2.14%), but there is no equivalent in the CN dataset. Here's an example selected from the US database to illustrate the destructive use of the-Self type of Theme:

(5)   <u>As we defend American values</u>, **we** affirm the right of all people to live in dignity. (The US dataset, September 25, 2019)

In Example (5), the speaker uses the marked circumstantial Theme "as we defend American values" to orient the clause within a context of self-advocacy, and then he uses the exclusive pronoun "we" (which refers only to people who defend American values) as the participant Theme to be the Subject of the clause. Here the implied meaning seems to be that "the right of all people to live in dignity" is highly valued by some people but not all people around the world. Such use of Theme is counter to the ecosophy and is thus evaluated as destructive to international relations.

We also found that among all three spokesmen, Trump is especially keen on using I-talk. In the US dataset, first-person singular pronouns are taken as the participant Theme 56 times (7.49%), while the counterparts in the CN dataset have only 3 occurrences (0.54%). In political discourses, I-talk is considered as a display of the politician's arrogant personality, because the frequent use of "I" words can make a serious political statement sound informal and disrespectful (Casañ-Pitarch 2018; Chung and Pennebaker 2007). Especially in Trump's statements, such thematic choices are often used to suggest his self-sufficient personality. For example:

(6)   <u>As long as I hold this office</u>, **I** will defend America's interests above all else. (The US dataset, September 19, 2017)

In Example (6), Trump took "as long as I hold the office" as the circumstantial Theme and "I" as the participant Theme to emphasize his identity as the US president. Any president will defend his/her national interests, and this is not something that needs to be emphatically underlined in the UN. Relating this Theme to the following Rheme, the implication of the whole message becomes destructive – the president should always defend his/her national interests even if

it counters the interests of other nations. Here, the choice of wording is consistent with Trump's "America First" foreign policy, which could potentially be seen as a sign of arrogance and egocentrism.

(7)   <u>Here</u>, **I** announce that China has initiated the domestic legal procedures to join the Arms Trade Treaty. (The CN dataset, September 27, 2019)

(8)   <u>To support the UN in playing its central role in international affairs</u>, **I** hereby announce the following steps to be taken by China. (The CN dataset, September 22, 2020)

Examples (7) and (8) show how the Chinese spokesmen, on the other hand, make use of the "I" Theme. As can be seen in Example (7), the participant Theme "I" functions as the Communicator of the clause, and the message being communicated is about China's efforts to join the Arms Trade Treaty, which is an international treaty for eradicating illicit arms trade under the UN regulation. Hence, although the "I" Theme here is in itself ambivalent, the entire clause could have a beneficial influence on global governance and world peace. In Example (8), the marked circumstantial Theme introduces the speaker's purpose, and the participant Theme "I" suggests the speaker's active role in supporting the UN's peacemaking mission. As pointed out by Casañ-Pitarch (2018: 176), humble leaders tend to avoid I-talk and use the inclusive form of "we" instead. Such careful choice of wording can be seen in China's statements, which will be further discussed in Section 4.4.

4.3 Thematic representations of the Others

The Theme type used for describing the Others (any other participant that is not "we") ranks second among all Theme types in the US dataset and ranks third in the CN dataset. Results show that 109 tokens of this type are destructive in the US dataset (14.57%), which outnumbers the combination of the beneficial (6.68%) and ambivalent tokens (0.40%). This means that most of the-Others types of Themes are used to construe other people, organizations, or nations as negative. For example:

(9)   **OPEC and OPEC nations**, are, as usual, ripping off the rest of the world […] (The US dataset, September 25, 2018)

(10)   **You** are empowering criminal organizations that prey on innocent men, women, and children. (The US dataset, September 25, 2019)

In Example (9), the participant Theme "OPEC and OPEC nations" functions as the Actor of "ripping off the rest of the world", which in the context implies Trump's blame on OPEC and OPEC nations for manipulating the oil price in the international market. In Example (10), the participant Theme "you" refers back to the "organizations that promote human smuggling" in the previous context. The use of "you" suggests that Trump is talking directly to people in these organizations. This kind of directness can be seen in informal communication but is considered as rude and impolite in formal or serious discourses (Casañ-Pitarch 2018: 176–177). In both examples, the speaker deliberately chooses nations and people he sees as the negative Others to be the point of departure, which could lead to a sense of hostility between different stakeholders.

Though the statements were made inside the UN, the-UN type of Themes are rarely seen in the US dataset. Among them, 7 tokens are evaluated as destructive (0.94%), and the others are beneficial (0.80%).

(11)   If the United Nations is to be an effective organization, **it** must focus on the real problems of the world. (The US dataset, September 22, 2020)

(12)   **This institution** was founded in the aftermath of two world wars to help shape this better future. (The US dataset, September 19, 2017)

In Example (11), the circumstantial Theme seems to imply that the UN is not yet an effective organization, and the Rheme further suggests that the UN should focus more on "the real problems". Here the UN is being concerned by the speaker as an incompetent participant to resolve world issues, and the connotation behind this message is harsh and destructive. Example (12) illustrates a beneficial use of the-UN Theme. In this example, "the institution" refers to the United Nations, and it is described in the Rheme as a helpful institution to the world's development. The shifting attitude towards the UN can be seen elsewhere in Trump's statements, which suggests that Trump has remained skeptical of the UN for making the world better. Such belief could potentially pose threat to the vision of global governance.

In China's statements, the-Others types of Themes are mostly beneficial (3.94%), and the frequencies of destructive (0.72%) and ambivalent (0.54%) ones are relatively low. Below is an example of the beneficial use of the-Others type of Theme in the CN dataset:

(13)   **The US and others** undertook to normalize their relations with the DPRK. (The CN dataset, September 21, 2017)

In Example (13), "the US and others" are taken as the participant Theme, and they are further described as those who promise to normalize their foreign relations with the DPRK, which releases a positive signal for world peace. In this example, countries and parties outside the speaker's own nation take the thematic position to be emphasized as the ones who work actively to build up their relations with

another country. Here the implication is that China recognizes the importance of the efforts that other countries have made in promoting international relations.

We also found that the-UN type of Themes are significantly used more frequently in the CN dataset than in the US dataset, and these Themes in the CN dataset all fall within the beneficial category (7.17%). That is to say, the UN is always described by China as an organization conducive to global peace and development. For example:

(14)   **The meeting** was a significant one, as it reaffirmed our abiding commitment to the purposes and principles of the UN Charter on the basis of reviewing the historical experience and lessons of the World Anti-Fascist War. (The CN dataset, September 22, 2020)

In Example (14), the participant Theme "the meeting" refers to the high-level meeting to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the UN, and it is given the topical prominence to be further elaborated as a significant achievement for the world to radiate peace and to review lessons of wars. A message that is beneficial to promoting international peace and cooperation is therefore created.

4.4 Thematic representations of the Self and the Others

The-Self-and-the-Others type of Themes is the ones used to refer to the community of the speaker's own group and other groups of people. The typical thematic choices include the inclusive use of "we", "the world", "the planet", "the international community", "all countries", and so on. These Themes are typically used in the initial position of the clause to show the speaker's intention to blur the distinction between "we" and "you" for the ensuing message to develop.

In both countries' statements, the beneficial the-Self-and-the-Others type of Themes are typically used to imply the common identity between the narrow sense of "we" and the audiences, therefore delivering a message of "we are one". The frequency of this Theme type in the CN dataset is relatively high (21.51%), and it is significantly higher than its counterpart in the US dataset (10.96%). This suggests that compared with the US's speaker, China's speakers are more likely to express their positions from a bigger-than-the-self starting point. Below are examples chosen from the two datasets:

(15)   **Each of us here today** is the emissary of a distinct culture, a rich history, and a people bound together by ties of memory, tradition, and the values that make our homelands like nowhere else on Earth. (The US dataset, September 25, 2018)

(16)   Increasingly, **China and other countries** have become stakeholders sharing a common future. (The CN dataset, September 27, 2019)

In Example (15), "each of us here today" is taken as the participant Theme to refer to all people in the conference room. It offers a point of departure that involves everyone's participation in cross-cultural exchange and in making the world more open and connected. In Example (16), the circumstantial Theme "increasingly" and the participant Theme "China and other countries" combine to serve the topic of the message, showing that China and other countries are becoming more and more connected in a commonly shared world. These two examples are good cases in point of how to tell a beneficial story of "one world".

The destructive choices of the-Self-and-the-Others type of Themes are typically used to include some of the audiences while excluding the others. Such Themes are not found in the CN dataset, while there are 2 tokens in the US dataset (0.27%). One of the instances is as follows:

(17)   **No responsible government** should subsidize Iran's bloodlust. (The US dataset, September 25, 2018)

In Example (17), the speaker uses "no responsible government" as the Theme to imply that some governments are evaluated by him as responsible and some as irresponsible, and the distinction between these two groups is pretty clear-cut to him: Anyone who subsidizes the Iranian Government would be judged as irresponsible. In this clause, the choice of Theme and wordings like "bloodlust" might encourage verbal and actual attacks against other countries, and could possibly incite international hatred. The message as a whole is therefore considered as destructive and it is inappropriate within the UN's peacemaking context.

Besides, we found that in China's statements, marked circumstantial Themes are particularly likely to be used before the-Self-and-the-Others type of Themes, so as to provide a contextual framework for the message to develop in a direction of celebrating mankind's common interests. For instance:

(18)   As we celebrate mankind's proud achievements and progress in an ever-changing world, **we** must never lose sight of the challenges and difficulties we face, and must remain vigilant. (The CN dataset, September 28, 2018)

In Example (18), the audience can easily infer that the participant Theme "we" refers to every individual because the circumstantial Theme at the very beginning of the message suggests that "we" are everyone who celebrates mankind's achievements and progress. As is pointed out by Wang (2021), the frequent use of the inclusive "we" is a salient linguistic feature of China's GD statement, which echoes China's global vision of "building a community with a shared future for humanity".

On the other hand, the inclusive uses of the participant Theme "we" are sometimes ambiguous in the US's statements. For example:

(19)   When our nations are greater, the future will be brighter […] <u>With God's help, together</u> **we** will cast off the enemies of liberty and overcome the oppressors of dignity. (The US dataset, September 25, 2019)

In Example (19), although the participant Theme "we" in the second clause is used to refer to "our nations" (namely "my" nation and "your" nations) in the previous clause, its denotation still lacks conciseness. This is because the circumstantial Theme "with God's help" excludes the nations which do not share the same religious belief as America. As a result, the thematic choice "we" in this clause is considered to be somehow destructive, as it implies a certain degree of self-focus and egocentrism.

4.5 Thematic representations of peace, global solutions, and nationalism

In the UN's General Debate, world peace and global solutions to world problems are the two things that cannot be left undiscussed. In the US dataset, the beneficial uses of the peace type of Theme comprise a proportion of 4.55% of the total, and the destructive and ambivalent choices of this Theme type account for 1.87 and 0.53% of the total. The peace type of Themes is mostly beneficial in the CN dataset, accounting for 9.86%, with only one exception (destructive, 0.18%).

Interestingly, we discovered that in the US's statements, the wording of the Themes related to peace issues is typically realized by concrete actions or things. In China's statements, however, the peace type of Themes are typically realized by more abstract concepts and contents. For example:

(20)   **The missiles and rockets** are no longer flying in every direction. (The US dataset, September 25, 2018)

(21)   **Peace, reconciliation and harmony** are the surging trend, while **war, conflict and terror** are opposed by all. (The CN dataset, September 28, 2018)

In Example (20), the speaker uses "the missiles and rockets" to depict a threatening war scene at the very beginning of the clause. What is implied here is that the missiles and rockets used to be flying in every direction, but now they are stopped. The message in itself is not about the situation in any specific country. But if related to the previous context which is about the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, the implication of the message would be quite obvious: Trump is still

attempting to describe the DPRK as a dangerous place. The hidden message behind the thematic choice here is easy to be captured by the audiences, which might have a destructive impact on international peace. In Example (21), the participant Themes of the two clauses are all abstract nouns. The antithesis between "peace, reconciliation and harmony" and "war, conflict and terror" emphasizes the speaker's pro-peace and anti-war attitude, and the thematic choices are therefore evaluated as beneficial.

Themes that fall within the global-solution type include the ones that refer to the decisions or achievements made to resolve global problems. In the US dataset, the choices of this type of Themes are beneficial (1.60%) and destructive (1.20%) mixed, whereas, in the CN dataset, there are many more beneficial choices (7.89%) than destructive ones (0.36%). We found that when using the global-solution type of Themes, Trump tends to develop the message in a direction of self-advocacy while Xi and Wang do not show such a tendency. Here are two examples:

(22)   <u>As far as America is concerned</u>, **the ICC** has no jurisdiction, no legitimacy, and no authority. (The US dataset, September 25, 2018)

(23)   **The Paris Agreement on climate change** charts the course for the world to transition to green and low-carbon development. (The CN dataset, September 22, 2020)

In Example (22), the marked circumstantial Theme functions to orient the clause in a direction of "as far as America is concerned". Then the ensuing participant Theme "the ICC" (namely the International Criminal Court) is described negatively. But in fact, Trump's blame on the ICC has no solid ground. As the world's first permanent international criminal court, the ICC does have jurisdiction over international crimes, and the authority of the ICC is given by all the participant nations. Example (23) illustrates the beneficial use of the global-solution type of Theme in a statement delivered by Xi. In this example, "the Paris Agreement on climate change" occupies the thematic position, and the following message is about some facts of this agreement. Here the Paris Agreement is appreciated by the speaker as an important achievement toward sustainable world development, and the implication is ecologically beneficial.

Themes that fall within the nationalism type constitute 4.55% of all Themes in the US dataset, whereas there is no sign of them in the CN dataset. In the US's statements, these Themes are frequently used to highlight a patriotic appeal for national growth, but they are also used to defend national interests rather than promote global interests. The nationalist sentiment can be seen througout Trump's GD statement (Cherkaoui 2018; Sibtain et al. 2021; Zhu and Wang 2020). For example:

(24)   **The true good of a nation** can only be pursued by those who love it: by citizens who are rooted in its history, who are nourished by its culture, committed to its values, attached to its people, and who know that its future is theirs to build or theirs to lose. (The US dataset, September 25, 2019)

In Example (24), "the true good of a nation" functions as the topical Theme of the whole message, and the following Rheme elaborates on this topic by talking about how people should love their country and commit to their national values. It should be noted that the theme of the year 2019s General Debate was titled "Galvanizing multilateral efforts for poverty eradication, quality education, climate action and inclusion", which means the love of one's own nation is not appropriate to be the focal point of the debate. The thematic choice in this example should be interpreted as destructive because the ideology behind it is a plain populist nationalism, which can be used to reinforce boundaries against other parts of the world or against immigrants and minorities (Joppke 2021). In the current era of rapid globalization, the belief that the true good of a nation is irrelevant to other nations and their people should be rejected.

5 Discussion

As Wodak (2011: xiii) suggests, political discourse analysis should not stop at revealing the linguistic features and pattern, but should shed light on the study of "how politics is done" and "what politicians actually do". The organization of political discourse is always driven by the speaker's motivation to talk the audience into believing or doing something. It is the analysts' duty to investigate how this is realized through the politicians' deliberate use of language. As the present study focuses on the eco-characteristics of thematic choices and their impacts on the international ecosystem, we attempt to take an ecological perspective to understand the thematic strategies behind the US's and China's GD statements.

Some of our findings match those of the previous studies. First of all, it is found that even though the statements are delivered at one of the world's most esteemed events for international cooperation, the thematic resources in Trump's statements are frequently used in a way that is destructive to forging mutual understanding among different societies. A significantly large number of his thematic choices are used to portray "us versus they" (Lafta et al. 2021; Sibtain et al. 2021), "American First" (Riaz and Hasan 2020), and the frequent use of "I" Themes are used to show that the statements are largely based on his personal experience (Nasuha and Ekawati 2021). From an ecolinguistic perspective, these findings suggest that the

speaker is intentionally representing his own circle of friends and allies, his country, and himself as positive, while other groups of people as negative, which foreshadows a somewhat hostile relationship between the speaker and his audience and can bring harm to the establishment of a harmonious system of world politics. Such a thematic strategy is found in line with Trump's nationalist political discourse which bolsters post-truth fear-based anti-globalism (Mosler and Potrafke 2020: 3). The voting data on UN General Assembly showed that the political alignment between America and other countries decreased significantly during Trump's presidency, which was driven by the increased ideological distance between the US and other nations, including many of the United States' longtime Western allies. After Trump took office, the US's financial support for the UN's peace efforts has historically decreased, and it has announced and acted to retreat from several multilateral agreements such as the Iran Deal, the Paris Agreement, and the Tran-Pacific Partnership (Cherkaoui 2018; Diehl 2019). These actions can all be seen as a result of of Trump's attempts to put a higher value on his own national interests than on global interests. As a consequence, Trump's divisive thematic choices might sound beyond political correctness in the UN, but they can help Trump to put his personal opinions on national interests front, express direct criticism of opponents, rallying supporters to his side while putting pressure on dissidents and others. It can be seen that a large amount of Trump's thematic choices are used to deliver a political message that is resonant with his supporters, but is socially divisive and dangerous for a stable long-term coexistence for all humans. These destructive discourses need to be resisted.

Regarding the thematic choices in China's statements, we found that the majority of the Themes fit into the category of beneficial Themes. The use of these Themes can help the flow of information to develop in a way that reflects political customs and conventions. Among these beneficial Themes, the Self-and-the-Other type of Themes are most frequently used, allowing the audience to feel part of something bigger than themsleves, and feel part of the common good. It is also found that the marked circumstantial Themes are typically used by the Chinese spokesmen to provide a context of growing global integration instead of international competition, emphasizing the significance to combine multilateral efforts to find long-term solutions to global problems. Moreover, when placing other people, countries or organizations in the thematic position of a clause, the Chinese spokesmen do not tend to see them as the contenders or oppositions of China. There is no evidence that the Chinese spokesmen organize the thematic contents to brag their personal achievements or to cater only to their national interests, which sharply contrasts with the destructive thematic choices in the US's statements. Overall, the thematic choices of the Chinese government are used to promote a worldview based on the maximization of mutual interests and understanding.

The thematic strategy adopted in China's GD statements is in line with China's implementation of the peaceful development strategy. A study of Coleman's (2020) reported that, during 2017–2020, China had been underlying its willingness to provide further financial and personnel assistance to the UN-led peace operations and it had actually expanded its budget scale to support this career, while the US had used financial leverage to force size deductions in these peacekeeping operations. Among the 5 permanent members of the UN Security Council, only China is a major uniformed personnel contributing country to foster world peace with the UN, ranking the 9th among all countries in the year 2021 (The United Nations 2021). Recently, China has been acting to help foster worldwide cooperation by launching the Belt and Road Initiative and construct a new type of international relations by virtue of the concept of "building a community with a shared future", and the idea that "the Self" and "the Others" are interwoven with each other has been repeatedly carried out in China's diplomatic discourses (Wang 2021). If viewed ecolinguistically, the beneficial thematic choices in China's GD statements overall reflect China's intention to construct the world as an all-inclusive system, which is helpful to encourage communication and understanding between countries.

6 Conclusions

This article focuses on the eco-characteristics of the thematic choices in the US's and China's GD statements (2017–2020), aiming to reveal the similarities and differences between the two countries' typical thematic choices and the impacts of the underlying messages. The ecosophy that our analysis is based on is "Diversity and Harmony, Interaction and Coexistence", which calls for compatibility and equal dialogue among all people, all cultures, and all civilizations for an inclusive world. Thematic choices aligned with this ecosophy are beneficial, the ones counter to this ecosophy are destructive, and the rest are ambivalent.

Combining both quantitative and qualitative methods, the analysis shows that although both countries' statements contain thematic choices of all three types of eco-characteristics, the destructive type of Themes makes up a significantly larger proportion of all Themes in the US's statements than in China's statements. The US's statements exhibit more alternations between destructive Themes and beneficial or ambivalent Themes, while China's thematic choices are overall beneficial-and-ambivalent mixed. A more detailed analysis of the thematic contents and functions shows that the most prominent focal point of both countries' statements are their own country and people, as this type of Themes is most frequently used to contribute to the development of the text. One vital difference is that the thematic representation of the Self is completely positive and that of the Others is

usually negative in the US's statements, but both the Self and the Others types of thematic representations are positive at most times in China's statements. Besides, the US's spokesman Trump tends to take himself and his personal experience as the starting point to develop the discourse, which is not seen in China's statements. The positive Self and negative Others representations in the US's statements can create an atmosphere of confrontation and the repetitive I-talk is a sign of egocentrism, which reveals the Trump administration's intention to emphasize its separate national identity from the rest of the world, especially from its declared enemies. Likewise, the thematic choices that encourage populist nationalism, and blames and sanctions for other countries or country groups are considered destructive to international relations and can produce a disharmonious sound within an integrated world. In the case of China's thematic choices, the analysis demonstrates how formality and politeness are created by the frequent use of all-inclusive Themes (e.g. "we", "all countries") and the avoidance of I-talk. Taking information that concerns peace, global solutions, and the UN into the thematic position nicely fits the context, and by using circumstantial Themes to particularize a global context, the notion of "building a community with a shared future for mankind" is further reinforced.

This article proves EDA to be a useful approach to analyzing the eco-orientation of political discourse – particularly in the Chinese context, as the Chinese Government has pledged to incorporate ecological civilization into all aspects of social development (Hou 2021). National leaders' language has the power of shaping the reality, and their language forms and strategies would have far-reaching effects on how different people see their places in the world system. Hence, it is vital for both the creators of the political discourses and the readers to enhance the awareness of promoting the beneficial forms of language while resisting the destructive ones. The ultimate goal is to inspire people to take action to build a truly ecological and harmonious world.

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