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China's One Belt, One Road Initiative

A Discourse Analysis of Speeches by Chinese Politicians and Indonesian Newspaper Articles

Topic and Research Questions

This thesis is concerned with *the* flagship initiative of open win-win cooperation that has been propagated by the People's Republic of China (PRC) since late 2013: the so-called "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) initiative, which seeks to establish closer ties between China and Europe—and virtually any country along the way. Its fuzzy nature, however, has caused great concern over the initiative's actual aims. To find out more about China's OBOR vision and its perception by the international community as illustrated by the example of Indonesia, this thesis poses the following research questions (RQs):

RQ_1: Is there an evolutionary pattern of the OBOR discourse produced by China's high-ranking politicians?

RQ_1.1: Which OBOR goals were promoted in speeches by President Xi Jinping, Premier Li Keqiang, and Foreign Minister (FM) Wang Yi?

RQ_1.2: Does the discourse exhibit role-specific characteristics? Does it change over time?

RQ_2: Does China pursue a grand strategy in the allocation of roles with regard to the assignment of responsibilities under the OBOR framework?

RQ_2.1: Which illocutionary acts were performed by the three politicians?

RQ_2.2: What do they reveal about the responsibilities and roles envisaged by China for itself and other participating countries?

RQ_3: How is the OBOR discourse perceived in Indonesia?

RQ_3.1: How were the above-mentioned speeches and OBOR goals taken up and portrayed by the Jakarta Post, one of the major English-language daily newspapers of Indonesia?

RQ_3.2: Do the illocutionary acts and the (re)actions of Indonesia as reported by the Jakarta Post align?

The time frame considered in this thesis is 7 September 2013 (i.e. the day of President Xi's initial OBOR announcement) to 31 December 2016. This thesis provides novel insights into OBOR's nature and focal points as envisioned by China's political elite. It thus not only adds clarity to the matter but also advances both the general and the academic discourse on the initiative.

State of the Art

China's OBOR initiative has been widely discussed in the media (e.g. Brown, 2015; Brown & He, 2016; Eisenman & Stewart, 2017; Tiezzi, 2014) and in academic circles (e.g. Aoyama, 2016; Brewster, 2017; Grübler & Stehrer, 2017; Liu & Dunford, 2016; Ye, 2015). Several scholars have thereby sought to uncover the real objectives and underlying motives of OBOR (e.g. Cheng, 2016; Yu, 2016). They applied, for instance, a constructivist logic to the examination of speeches by President Xi (Callahan, 2016) and extensively dealt with Chinese-language sources (e.g. Ye, 2015; Sidaway & Woon, 2017; Swaine, 2015). There is, however, a lack of thorough analyses that combine the international with the Chinese perspective by examining the *Chinese English-language discourse* on the main goals of OBOR.

Methodology and Approach

Taking constructivism as the theoretical basis, this thesis adopts a discourse analytical approach in the style of Keller (2011). It applies Mayring's (2000, 2010) method of qualitative content analysis—more precisely the two special techniques of summarising and content structuring—to a specialised text corpus that contains 104 English-language texts (71 speech transcripts and 33 newspaper articles). Furthermore, Searle's (1976, 1979/1981) notion of illocutionary speech acts is used to allow for a better understanding of the roles and power relations involved.

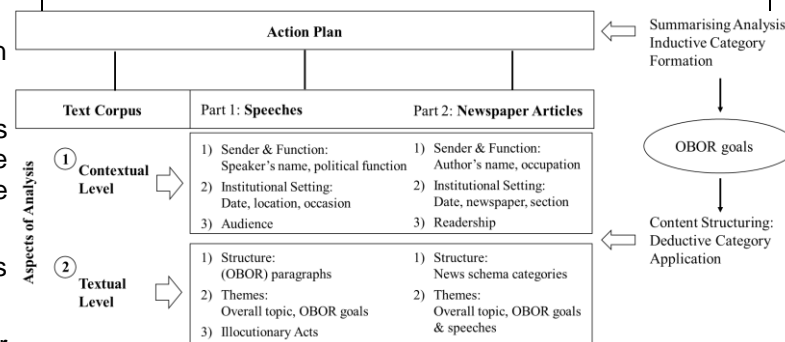


Figure 1. Analytical Framework (compiled by the author).

To this end, a category system reflecting the initiative's five main goals as set out by the official OBOR Action Plan—namely policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bond—was developed to serve as the

centrepiece of analysis. The text corpus was then examined at the textual and the contextual level via the computer program MAXQDA Plus 12 to uncover *who* said *what* to *whom*, *when* and *how* (see Figure 1).

Main Facts

The empirical analysis showed that speeches addressing OBOR were given in 23 different countries on 4 different continents (Asia, Europe, North America, Oceania). The initiative, however, was mainly addressed as a sub-topic, with the three politicians only touching upon 1 to 3 main goals at once.

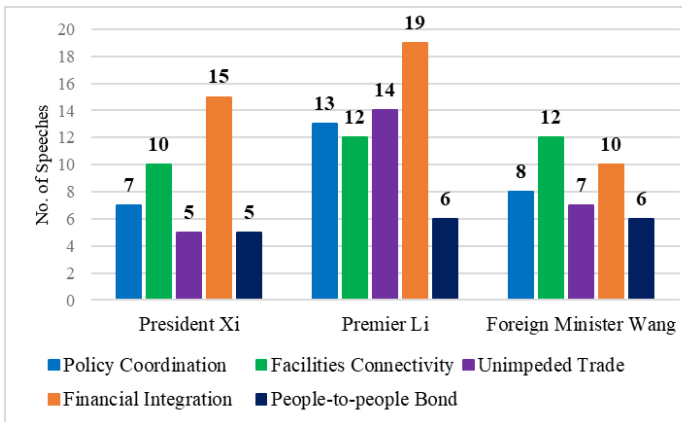


Figure 2. OBOR Goals by Speaker (compiled by the author).

Based on both the number of speeches (see Figure 2) and the number of goal-specific references it can be said that the Chinese politicians primarily talked about the OBOR goal of (1) financial integration, followed by the goals of (2) facilities connectivity, (3) policy coordination, (4) unimpeded trade and (5) people-to-people bond. The information content of the OBOR references, however, was generally low. It further turned out that there was not only *one* standard OBOR message that got reiterated in an unreflective manner; the contents were rather adapted to fit the respective speech situations. What is more, all three politicians performed three types of illocutionary acts: mostly commissives, followed by directives and expressives. They were all, however, of a weaker type.

The analysis further revealed that the OBOR coverage of the Jakarta Post barely featured any references to the above-mentioned speeches. Most articles dealt with the initiative as a sub-topic and touched upon 1 or 2 goals at best. They thereby mainly addressed the goals of (1) facilities connectivity and (2) financial integration,

which is largely reflective of Indonesia's own political as well as developmental priorities.

Results

The findings of this thesis suggest that China's political elite discursively prioritises the OBOR goals of financial integration, facilities connectivity and policy coordination. The Chinese OBOR discourse further peaked in 2015, and the speech behaviours of the three politicians are largely in line with their political roles as the head of the state (President Xi), the head of the government (Premier Li) and the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (FM Wang). Through the performance of commissive and directive illocutionary speech acts, they sought to present China in the best light possible whilst encouraging deeper engagement with OBOR. China was thereby implicitly positioned as *primus inter pares*. A grand strategy of responsibility assignment or role allocation as part of the OBOR scheme, however, could not be observed.

Unfortunately, the data did not allow the OBOR coverage of the Jakarta Post to be directly related to the analysed speeches. Nevertheless, the analysis of the newspaper articles suggests a great fit between Indonesia's own development strategy and the Chinese initiative. It also indicates the acceptance of China's central role and envisioned focal points of OBOR.

References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at <http://othes.univie.ac.at/>.

About the Author

Anna Holzmann holds a BSc in International Business Administration and a BA in Chinese Studies. She gained some work experience in the area of Human Resource Management, Marketing and practical research. Her research interests include China's OBOR initiative as well as environmental and policy-related issues.

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