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*Original Paper*

## Proximization: Its Development, Application and Limitation

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### Abstract

This paper provides a detailed overview of the origin and development of Proximization Theory, as well as the related literature review both abroad and in China. The author also discusses its limitations and the trend for development, in the hope of providing useful reference for further research and development of PT on the one hand, and looking forward to further innovation and breakthrough in the theoretical framework of critical cognitive linguistics on the other. Thus discourse analysis can provide people with better criteria for judgement and help people better reshape their positive cognition of the world through language resources and enjoy the beauty of diversity and harmony.

**Keywords:** proximization, development, critical discourse analysis, limitation

### 1. Introduction

Proximization Theory (PT) belongs to the category of critical cognitive linguistics. An interdisciplinary research area connecting critical discourse analysis (CDA) and cognitive linguistics (CL) is called critical cognitive linguistics, also known as cognitive linguistic critical discourse studies (CL-CDS). CDA emerged in the late 1970s to early 1980s. In the book *Language and Control*, Fowler (1979) and several other linguists originally proposed discourse analysis, which later developed into one of the critical paradigms in linguistic study. Compared with conventional linguistics, CDA emphasizes the social attributes of discourse, highlighting the interaction between language and society to illuminate hidden meanings and problems like inequality, unfairness and discrimination through discourse. However, the lack of understanding cognitive variables is one of the complaints that CDA has faced throughout its more than 40 years of development from other academic fields and research perspectives.

In the late 1980s, cognitive linguistics came into being and developed. According to cognitive linguistics, human beings can conceptualize objects in their minds based on their experiences and perceptions of the outside world. The use of language is considered to be founded on daily experiences. Although there are substantial distinctions between critical linguistics and cognitive linguistics in terms of their theoretical foundations and research methodologies, there is a definite trend toward cross-integration between the two as linguistics keeps progressing. Van Dijk (1998) first proposed the cognitive orientation of critical discourse analysis, pointing out that neglecting social cognition has always been one of the main theoretical flaws in critical linguistics and discourse analysis. Afterward, Wodak & Meyer (2009) suggested several main methods of critical discourse research, including Fairclough's dialectical relational approach (2001), Van Dijk's social cognitive approach (2008), and Wodak's discourse historical approach (2005). In addition, Van Dijk further demonstrates in his works *Discourse and Context: A Socio-cognitive Approach and Society and Discourse: How Social Contextures Influence Text and Talk* that discourse and society are not directly related but rather are mediated by the psychological representations of the communicator. With the continuous expansion of CDA research scope and deeper integration with the cognitive field, Hart & Cap (2014) summarized the latest research approach of CDA in the past decade: critical metaphor analysis, discourse space theory, critical cognitive pragmatics and PT, with PT receiving most attention at present.

## 2. Discussions

### A. ORIGIN OF PT

PT is based on the study of discourse space. In *Language and Power*, Fairclough defines discourse as “a series of symbolic sequences that are stated” through which the real world can be comprehended, and the power and representation connection between the subject and object is established (Fairclough, 2001). It is Chilton (2004) who fundamentally conceptualizes the notion of “discourse space” and, as illustrated in Figure 1, applies it to the analysis of political discourse, which is constructed from a variety of discourses. According to Chilton, people construct a discourse world by positioning entities other than themselves (the speaker) on the three axes of space (S), time (T), and modality (M) that are all centered on self-deictic. The Deictic Center is the intersection of three axes, namely “I”, “we”, “here”, and “now”, while the second- and third-person pronoun and “there” are located along the spatial axis. The modality axis includes cognition and morality, namely “right or wrong” and “true or false”. The producer of discourse places the discourse receiver (addressee) at the center of deixis, and the receiver constructs the discourse space desired by the discourse maker based on the positioning of other entities in the discourse space. The distance between the entities in the discourse space and the center of deixis plays a crucial role in the conceptualization process.

Figure 1 is a planar representation of discourse space, while Figure 2 is a three-dimensional spatial diagram, which also serves as the foundation for the later STA model.

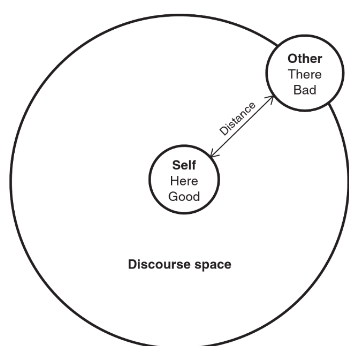


Figure 1. Discourse Space (Chilton, 2004)

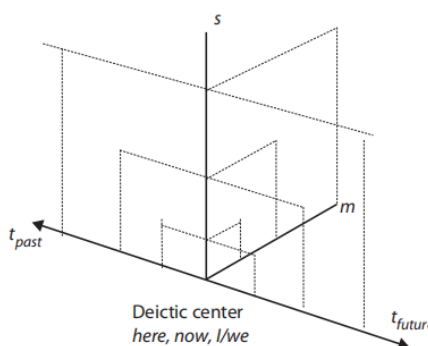


Figure 2. Chilton's S-T-M Three-Dimensional Modal (Chilton, 2004: 58)

“Proximize/Proximizing” originates from Chilton’s political discourse analysis (Chilton, 2004). Cap proposed “Proximization” based on it, indicating the effective application of cognitive pragmatic construal (Cap, 2006). In reality, proximization is a discourse strategy based on legalization. The speaker portrays distant events and actions in space or time as troubling threats that are either existent already or will occur in the future, resulting in a severe negative impact on both speakers and the audience. The speaker seeks to involve the audience in their own discourse space so that they can unconsciously identify the speaker’s discourse with their beliefs and behaviors, which will eventually end up in the legalization of measures or the eradication of harmful effects. However, Cap pointed out the fact that Chilton’s model ignores the dynamic changes of the relationship between outside-the-deictic-center (ODC) and inside-the-deictic-center (IDC) in the three dimensions and only explains how people’s psychological representations are positioned on three cognitive dimensions (Cap, 2013, 2014). Chilton left out how people establish, adapt, and complete the representations of the discourse goals pursued by political speakers. Given that, Cap (2013) proposed an extensive PT, as depicted in Figure 3, which included spatial proximization, temporal proximization, and axiological proximization in his research and added the concept of peripheral subjects moving to the deictic center.

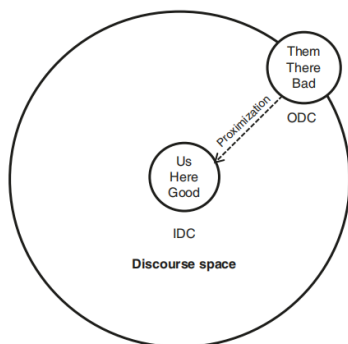


Figure 3. Discourse Space in PT (Cap, 2017:18)

*B. Development of PT from international perspective*

According to the data from WOS, SSCI and A&HCI, the author used such keywords as “proximization” or “Proximization Theory” to search the relevant full-text papers (excluding book chapters and conference papers), a total of 29 were retrieved. The number of papers published over the years is shown in Figure 4, and the distribution of countries and numbers of papers published over the years is shown in Figure 5. From Figure 4, it can be seen that papers published under the keyword of “proximization” can be retrieved from 2008, and the research popularity has been continuous, reaching a small peak in both 2015 and 2018. The popularity is still ongoing, and the number of related paper publications reached a new height in 2023.

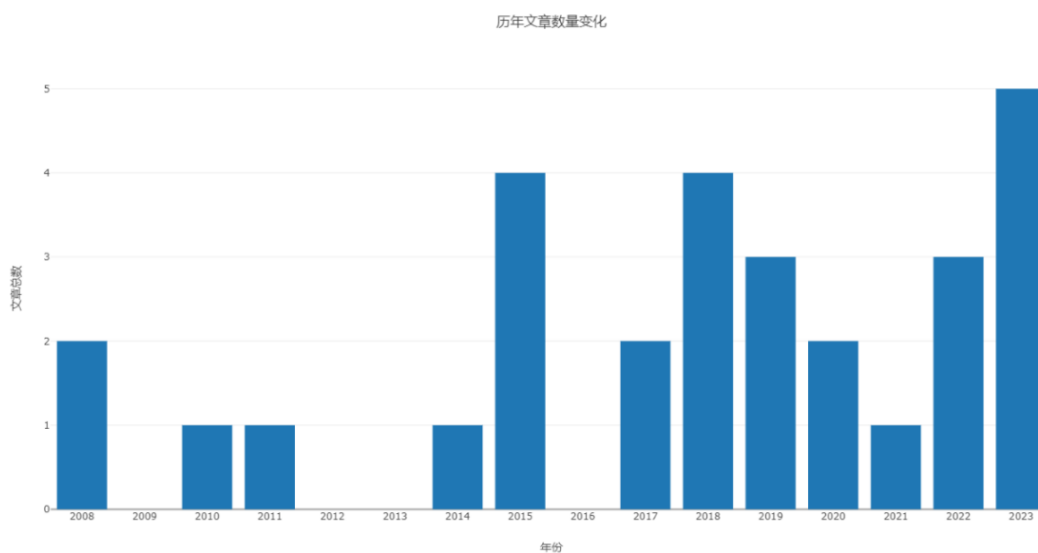


Figure 4. Overview of the International Publications on PT (made by the author)

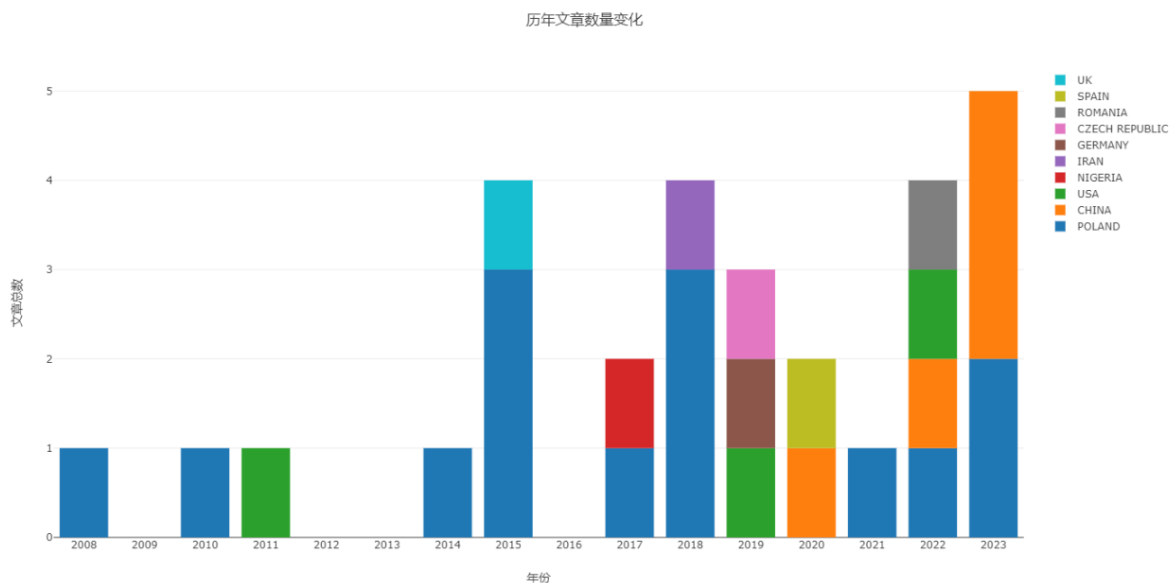


Figure 5. Overview of the Annual Distribution of Country and Number of International Publications on PT (made by the author)

According to Figure 5, it can be seen that the academic papers on PT are mainly from Poland, which is because the main founder of the theory, Piotr Cap, is a Polish linguist who published a total of 50 papers from 2006 to 2023. Apart from Poland, the number of related papers published by American scholars is also not inconsiderable. In addition, since 2020, the number of international papers published by Chinese scholars has witnessed a significant upward trend. On the other hand, Figure 6 shows the top ten journals that have published papers on PT. It can be seen that the relevant international papers are mainly published in three academic journals: *Journal of Pragmatics*, *Critical Discourse Studies*, and *Discourse & Society*. That also highlights the application of PT, a pragmatic research model, in the analysis of critical discourse related to politics.

期刊名	文章总数	总被引用次数	平均被引次数
JOURNAL OF PRAGMATICS	6	43	7.17
CRITICAL DISCOURSE STUDIES	4	17	4.25
DISCOURSE & SOCIETY	4	4	1.00
JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND POLITICS	1	3	3.00
DISCOURSE & COMMUNICATION	3	2	0.67
JOURNAL OF LITERARY SEMANTICS	1	2	2.00
TEXT & TALK	2	1	0.50
ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION-A JOURNAL OF NATURE AND CULTURE	1	1	1.00
LINGUA	1	1	1.00
SUSTAINABILITY	1	1	1.00

Figure 6. Top 10 Academic Journals Publications on PT (made by the author)

At present, the PT has developed from the study of a single type of discourse to analyzing a variety of

types of discourse, and it has been applied from the early political discourse, which covered such topics as war, immigration and national security, to the fields such as the environment and health. In the discourse on immigration and anti-terrorism, Cap looked at the legalization model of national policies based on proximization strategies (Cap, 2016, 2018). Cap also believed that in environmental discourse, the use of proximization strategies is reflected not only in external threats like severe weather but also in such internal threats as inaction and a lack of environmental awareness (Cap, 2016). Mando & Stack (2018) continued to apply PT to environmental discourse by analyzing the regulatory issues of invasive alien species in American waters from the perspectives of proximization and metaphor. In terms of political and media discourse, Kopytowska (2015) takes the crisis in the Horn of Africa reported by CNN as an example to analyze the proximization strategies behind real-time news, emerging topics, and live reporting in media discourse, which not only manipulates the audience's emotions, but also enables them to have a cognitive co-occurrence of being present in the present moment across time and space. In addition, Kopytowska (2020) provides an explanatory analysis method for social media critical discourse analysis by using anti-immigration discourse from two YouTube videos speeches as examples. After that, Irshad (2022) analyzed the AIDS prevention guidelines in Pakistan and the use of convergence strategies in COVID-19 prevention measures, further confirming the applicability of PT in health discourse.

### C. Studies on PT in China

Using the academic platform China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) to search with such keywords as “Proximization Theory” and “proximizing”, we could obtain 120 papers. The use of visual models can provide an overview of the publication of those papers as is seen in Figure 7.

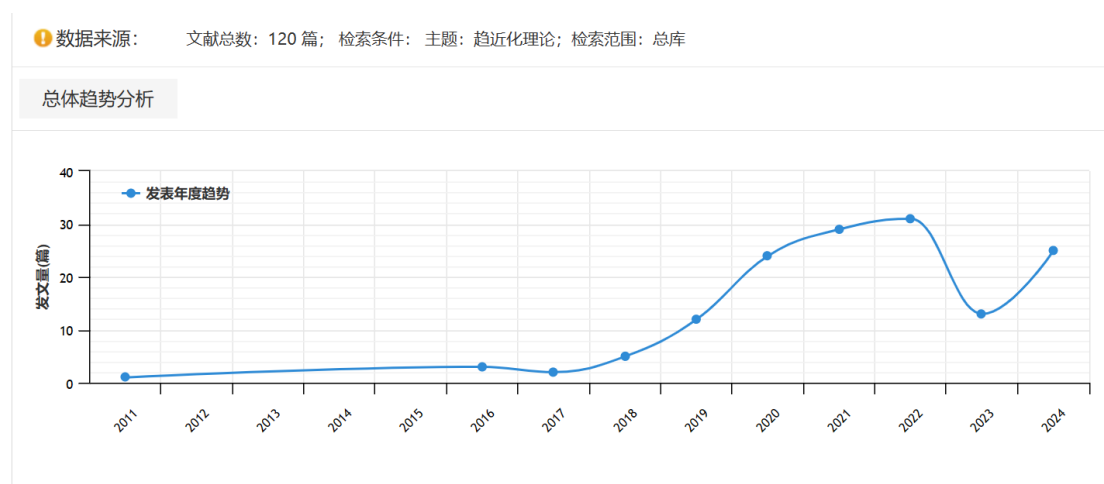


Figure 7. Overview of PT-related publication trend from CNKI

Figure 7 shows that the first academic paper on PT in China was published in 2011. However, through specific content identification, it was found to be about the fuzzy convergence law in aerospace control instead of proximization in discourse analysis. In fact, the first relevant paper was published in 2016. In March of that year, two graduate students, Jingrong Lin and Yi Li from South China University of Technology both submitted their MA theses on PT. The former applied Cap's PT model to study the news report texts about “Chinese Dream”, while the latter's thesis is a translation report based on Cap's academic paper “Applying Cognitive Pragmatics to Critical Discourse Studies: A Proximization Analysis of Three Public Space Discourses” which was published in 2014. About six months later, in September of the same year, their supervisor, Jianguo Wu, together with the two students, published a paper introducing proximization theory in the CSSCI *Journal of Foreign Languages*, making the first introductory academic article on PT in China. It was not until 2016 when a scholar from Beijing Foreign Studies University, Tianwei Zhang applied the theory to study the discourse construction of

political leaders, and had his paper published in another CSSCI *Foreign Languages in China*, contributing the first paper on PT in the applied research in China.

Since then, the PT-related publications in China has been on the rise year by year, especially in 2020 when there was a big increase with 24 papers on the related topic being published. The publication reached a peak of 31 papers in 2022, attracting much academic attention and indicating a promising development. Figure 8 shows the disciplinary distribution of PT-related papers in China. It can be seen that PT-related research from the discipline of foreign language and literature accounts for the main part (53.42%), followed by Chinese language and literature, news and media, and politics. The reason may be that the theory was initially based on critical discourse analysis, which is a linguistic theory applied in the interpretation of political discourse, and currently PT shows expansion to other types of discourse.

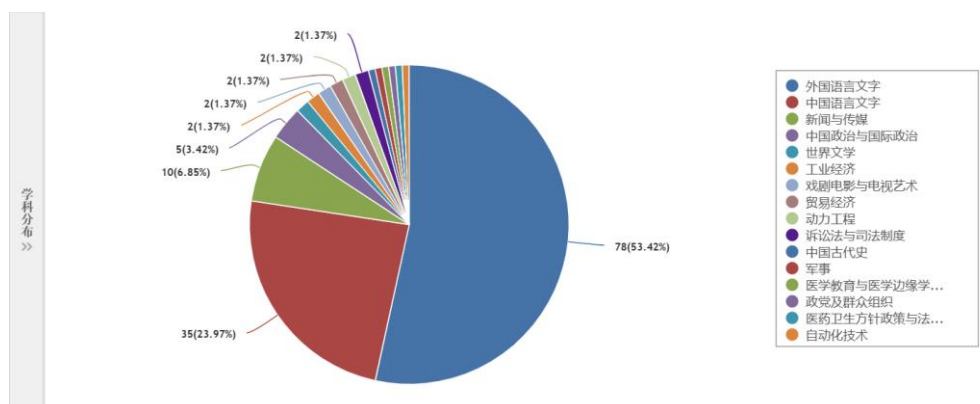


Figure 8. Disciplinary distribution of PT-related papers in China (from CNKI)

The research of PT in China is primarily split into two types: theoretical research and empirical research. Many scholars have given a thorough introduction to the fundamental ideas and framework of PT since Wu et al. first introduced it in China (Wu et al., 2016; Pan, 2017; Zhang & Yang, 2019). PT is frequently observed in political speech as far as empirical research is concerned, with a few studies focusing on public health discourse. Taking Trump's immigration policy as an example, Wu & Niu (2018) began the empirical research on PT in China by analyzing the characteristics of immigration discourse and the proximization strategies for achieving legitimization. Subsequently, Yan & Zhang (2018) established a small corpus based on the discourse related to the Sino-U.S. trade war, analyzing the differences in the use of proximization strategies among China, the United States, and the UK. Liu & Xu (2018) applied PT to conduct a case study of the "US National Security Strategy Report" from such three dimensions as spatial proximization, temporal proximization and axiological proximization, demonstrating the solid explanatory power of PT on critical discourse analysis. Taking Trump's State of the Union address as example, Zhao (2020) further affirmed the important function that PT contributes to political legitimization.

In terms of energy strategy discourse, Zhao & Zhao take the Trump administration's energy strategy discourse as research object, revealing the characteristic ideology and position behind the discourse. As for the research on public health discourse, it primarily focuses on the use of three proximization strategies in discourse (Wang & Luo, 2020; Li & You, 2020; Yao, 2021). In addition scholars have started to analyze media discourse in recent years. Zhang & Zhang (2020), for instance, examined the distinct proximization strategies as well as legitimate representation techniques utilized by Chinese and American media in the same public health emergency. Zhou (2021) takes the German media's "Huawei threat" report as an example to analyze the stance of media discourse. Zhang et al. (2021) used PT to investigate how Chinese and American news media produced ecological discourse on climate change in order to elucidate the ecological ideology reflected in the discourse.

Along with the studies above, experts in China have since 2019 indicated a new approach in empirical research on PT, namely the examination of national image. Liao & Wu (2019) used PT as the analytical framework and picked the materials related to China policy from the US White House official website to dissect how the Trump administration has portrayed China. Zheng & Zhang (2022) found that since PT had been constructed, most of the research objects were the dominant political discourse, with lack of positive international political discourse, and therefore they analyzed the PT strategy used by Chinese leader in the Video Speech at the 2022 World Economic Forum, and explored the national image constructed by the speech.

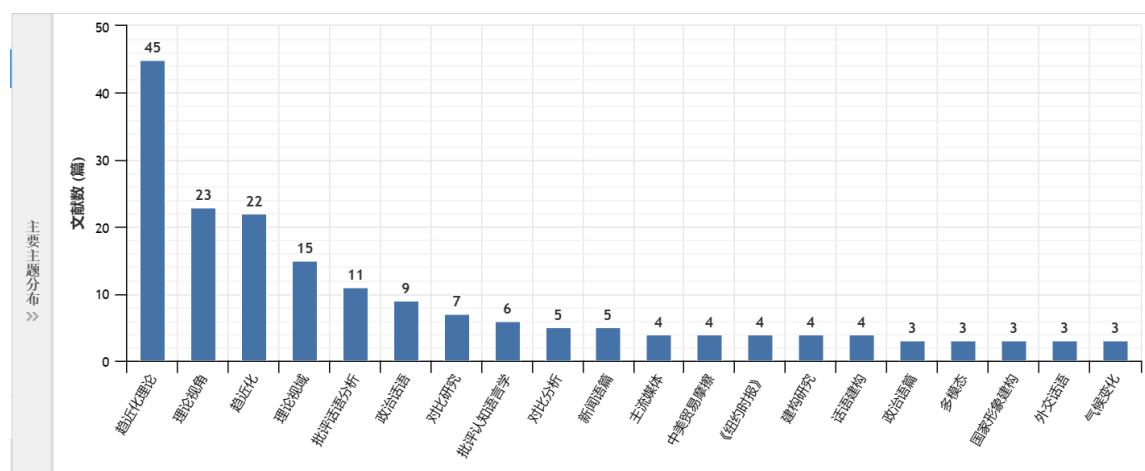


Figure 9. Major Research Fields of PT in China (from CNKI)

Overall, PT has demonstrated its strong explanatory power across various discourse types. However, both domestic and international research and applications of PT are still on their early stages of development, with its primary application remaining within the realm of political discourse analysis. While some foreign scholars and a few Chinese researchers have applied the theory to public health, environment and health discourse, its potential for the analysis in other types of discourse still warrants further exploration.

### 3. Limitations and Future Research Prospect of PT

Firstly, the negative implications of the theory have been controversial. Zhang & Yang (2019) believe that the rise of critical cognitive linguistics reflects both the “social shift” of cognitive linguistics research and the “cognitive shift” of critical discourse analysis. PT is a critical discourse analysis (CDA) model based on “cognition”. As is mentioned in section II. A above, the basic assumption of the theory is to construct two opposing centers in discourse space, outside-the-deictic-center (ODC) and inside-the-deictic-center (IDC). ODC is often defined as a destructive and disruptive entity, and when approaching ODC from the dimensions of time, space, and value, IDC will feel the arrival of danger. Thus the speaker for IDC would warn the audience to take precautions or take preemptive measures to prevent the invasion of ODC. The speaker tries to seek support from the audience and legitimize his own behavior. Therefore, PT can be considered as a negative discourse strategy used for CDA from the beginning of its construction. At present, the theory is still under construction and in development, and although its application is no longer limited to CDA, it is still difficult for PT to break away from its “negative” feature. The focus of discourse research based on PT is gradually turning from war discourse and political discourse to the study of ecological environment discourse and media discourse. However, regardless of the register types of the discourse, the basic pattern is that the speaker creates a tense atmosphere by depicting something dangerous approaching, and constantly stimulates such needs as safety, territory, survival and health from the audience, in order to gain the audience’s support for their position and induce them to take actions correspondingly, thereby achieving legalization while

projecting the tension with negative connotation.

While some Chinese scholars are currently trying to apply PT to the study of positive discourse, such as Luo & Cao (2023) who take the famous Chinese writer Ziqing Zhu's essay "Spring" as example to construct positive discourse. They believe that ODC can also be friendly, and coexist harmoniously with IDC. However, due to the opposition and the irreconcilable nature of the IDC and ODC in discourse space, it is far fetched to identify the image of "spring" with the usually rejected ODC which is often constructed as the dangerous object approaching IDC and must be on guard and kept away. Whether the discourse model that is originally negative can be integrated into the positive texts still remains open to discussion.

Another limitation about PT is that there are different criteria for determining IDC and ODC for different types of discourse (Wu et al., 2016). It is hoped that there will be appropriate frameworks for different types of discourse in the future development. For instance, we can use the current negative framework for the discourse in opposition, and construct another framework for ODC to approach IDC for cooperative and positive discourse, so as to achieve a harmonious and win-win situation. In that regard, Martin's positive discourse analysis framework (Martin, 1999) provides us with a good solution. In China, as early as in 2006 and 2012, Yongsheng Zhu and Zhuanglin Hu, two leading Chinese linguists, both mentioned the role of positive discourse analysis in refuting and supplementing CDA. The positive CDA represented by Martin does not aim to subvert the theoretical foundation and the analytical method of CDA to form antithesis, instead it proposes to deal with various social conflicts in a positive attitude, and advocates to build a harmonious society through discourse analysis, which is just in accord with the core values of Chinese socialism as well as our new cultural mission to promote exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations and create a new form of human civilization. Hu (2012) further pointed out two aspects of the Appraisal Theory based on the meta-function theory of systemic functional linguistics: on the one hand, it can be a critical and deconstructive discourse analysis, and on the other hand, it can be an active constructive discourse analysis. The two cannot be absolutely separated and are actually complementary. In other words, complementary to CDA, positive discourse analysis focuses on the harmonious relationships between life organisms and various positive energies in discourse, aiming to raise the audience's awareness to pursue good and beauty, and thus build a harmonious, healthy, and beautiful society to meet people's appeal for emotions, safety, health and happiness (Luo & Cao, 2023). Therefore, we need to adopt a pragmatic attitude in the analysis of different contexts with different frameworks, and deal with the complex linguistic materials in social life with more open and inclusive frameworks in order to explore the cognitive meaning and relationships in human interaction.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The present paper provides a detailed overview of the origin and development of PT, as well as the related literature review both abroad and in China. The author also discusses its limitations and the trend for development. On the one hand, it provides some reference for further research and development of PT, and on the other hand, it looks forward to further innovation and breakthrough in the theoretical framework of critical cognitive linguistics from the perspective of the people and life. Thus discourse analysis can provide people with better criteria for judging right from wrong without falling into others' trap to maintain their own power and interests, so that people can better reshape their positive cognition of the world through language resources and enjoy the beauty of diversity and harmony.

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