

# A Study on the Characteristics and Translation Strategies of English News Headlines

LU Danli, ZHANG Le

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

With the rapid development and gradual maturity of the information age, the news media has become the basic media for people to obtain information from all over the world. Due to the differences between English and Chinese in cultural background, rhetoric tradition, and linguistic expression, news translation is confronted with the challenge of overcoming language barriers in information transmission. The headline is the soul of news and determines the attention of news. Mastering the headline information can help readers effectively understand the gist of the news. Therefore, when translating English news headlines, we should first understand the characteristics of the headlines and apply translation strategies in a targeted way. By analyzing the characteristics of news headlines, this paper studies the principles and strategies of translation of English news headlines.

*Keywords:* linguistic characteristics, English news headlines, translation strategies

## Introduction

The headline of a newspaper story usually gives the main idea or the gist of the story. It is a very important part of a news report. This paper will discuss the characteristics and translation strategies of English news headlines. This paper consists of three major sections. Section one introduces major characteristics of English news headlines. Section two describes the translation principles of English news headlines. Section three discusses the translation strategies of English news headlines. The final section will conclude the whole paper.

## Characteristics of English News Headlines

### Concise and Vivid Expression

The purpose of a headline is to give a summary of what is going on in the news so that readers can quickly get to the heart of the story. In order to meet the requirements of the popularity of English news headlines, short and simple words are often used. This can not only save the space of the newspaper, but also enable more readers to understand English news and improve the readability and practicability of English news. So, acronyms appear frequently in English news headlines, especially in the description of organizations. Appropriate shortening of some common words in news headlines can not only reduce the length of news headlines, but also enhance their novelty. Abbreviations are roughly divided into two categories. One category includes shortened words. For example, “expo” is the abbreviation of “exposition”. The other category

---

LU Danli, Master, postgraduate student, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

ZHANG Le, Doctor, associated professor, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

combines the capital letters of each word in a phrase into one word, such as AQ (Adversity Quotient), EST (Eastern Standard Time). No matter readers are familiar with them or not, they can find the full names or definitions of them in news chapters.

“Newness” is the life of news language, which is determined by the content of news reports. In order to keep close to social life and grasp the pulse of the times, news reports need to create a large number of new words to spread new ideas and fashions, so as to attract public attention. Therefore, frequent use of new words is a prominent feature of English news, which usually includes two types of situation (Xu, 2018). In one situation, a new meaning is derived from an old word, such as “clone”, which means “copy” now. In the other situation, a new word is purely created, such as “computernik”, which means someone addicted to computers.

News reports have a high requirement for information dissemination and effectiveness, so words often change their part of speech (such as from a noun to a verb, or vice versa). For example, the headline “Cooperative Operation Profits Farmers” has changed “Profit” from noun to verb, making the headline more concise and clear. In addition, English news has wide audience, so a large number of easy-to-understand words are used to enhance the overall accessibility of the headlines. Among them, using proper nouns and special names to refer to specific meanings is one of the ways to improve the popularity of the headlines. For instance, it is common to use the name of a building or place to refer to a country, such as “the White House” for the United States and “the Louvre” for France.

### **Distinct Grammatical Features**

The grammar of English news headlines is different from that of normal use and has its unique characteristics. The news story that appears in the newspaper has already happened; so according to the basic rules of grammar, it needs to be expressed in the past tense. But the use of past tense deviates from the essential characteristic of news. In order to enhance readers’ experience of news events, editors should abide by the special principle of “news present tense”, and use the simple present tense to formulate news headlines (Zhu, 2008).

A news headline should be a complete sentence, but in order to be concise and highlight important information, function words such as articles, auxiliary words, link verbs, conjunctions, and pronouns are often omitted from the headline on the premise of not affecting the expression of the main theme of the news. In this way, the length of the headline is shortened to a large extent, so as to avoid procrastination and redundancy. For example, the headline “It’s Time to Organize Your Book” could be shortened to “Time to Organize Your Book” and the headline “Japan Is in Danger of Reform” could be shortened to “Japan in Danger of Reform”.

Punctuation marks are auxiliary recording symbols of the written system, which can divide meaning groups, substitute words, emphasize information, and highlight the sense of reality (Zhang, 2020). Punctuation marks can make news headlines simple and lively, leaving people with thinking space. Headlines focus on structural clarity and often use three types of punctuation. The first is comma, which is used to replace the conjunction “and” to save space, such as in the headline “US, Japan Meet in Women’s World Cup”. The second is dash, which is often used to quote a statement to make the headline more intuitive and clear. For instance, the headline “Next iPhone Update Will Let You Disable Intentional Slow Down—Tim Cook” means that Tim Cook says that next iPhone update will let you disable intentional slowdown. The third is colon, which is used to mean “to say” or “to think” or to replace the related verb “to be”, so as to make the headline more direct.

### **Abundant Rhetorical Features**

In order to highlight the novelty of English news headlines, rhetorical devices are often used in order to achieve humorous, vivid, or ironic effects. The first type is pun. In a specific context, homophone or polysemy can be used to generate double meaning. In English, there are a lot of words with the same spelling but different meanings. Applying this kind of puns in news headlines can increase their connotation and arouse readers' interest. For example, the headline "Champagne Economy or Bubble Economy?" highlights the difficulty of maintaining production in France in the economic decline caused by champagne losses. And when headlines are created, champagne can be used to both illustrate economic losses and allude to the bubble economy. Pun can not only induce readers' associations, but also add humor or irony to headlines.

The second type is exaggeration, which can quickly attract the attention of readers and enhance the influence of the headline, causing readers' imagination of news content. However, editors should highlight the essence of the matter when applying exaggeration so as to avoid overreaching. For example, "A Vow to Zip His Lips" not only rhetorically indicates the action of "sew up the lips", but also can be translated as "keep a secret".

The third type is euphemism. For taboo contents in a specific culture, the direct expression is not elegant, so obscure and polite words can be used to express them, which makes the language more appropriate and generally accepted by the public. For example, after Watergate, people often use the word "Watergate" to describe similar political events, followed by "Monica Scandal" and "Korea Scandal".

The fourth type is alliteration and end rhyme. "Soldiers Salary Soars", for example, is a headline with each word starting with an "S". From the perspective of lexical meaning, "Rises" or "Goes High" can replace "Soars", but the beauty of rhythm in the original headline will be lost. It can be seen that alliteration could more easily attract readers' attention and leave a deep impression on readers. In the headline "After the Boom Everything Is Gloom", "Boom" is similar to "Gloom" in the form of final rhyme. End rhyme can not only enhance readers' audio-visual pleasure, but also stimulate readers' interest in this news content. In addition, the double rhyming rhetoric of "alliteration + end rhyme" makes English news headlines more orderly, which has a strong sense of rhythm. In the headline "From Monster to Martyr?", "Monster" and "Martyr" have completely opposite meanings but with the same pronunciation of the first and the last sound. The simultaneous appearance of alliteration and end rhyme, which concentrates on a single person in a news headline, is highly ironic and highlights the excellent writing skills of news editors.

## **Translation Principles of English News Headlines**

### **Accuracy**

In the translation of English news headlines, the first principle is to ensure the accuracy of the headlines, which is not to go against the original author's idea and which is to grasp the important content of the news. Once the key content of the news is not grasped in the translation, the translator may not be able to feel the error of the translation, trapped in the dilemma of catching the meaning of words literally. The accuracy of the news headline directly determines the quality of the whole report, so it should be regarded as the primary standard in the translation and the theme content of the news should not deviate. As Chinese and foreigners have different ways of thinking, it is necessary to take into account cultural differences and accurately express the connotation and mood of the news headlines.

**Refinement**

When the requirement of accuracy is met, another important point of translation of English news headlines is refinement. Due to the differences between languages, it is difficult to find the corresponding words in Chinese for some words in English, which leads to procrastination in translation. Therefore, it is necessary to ensure the refinement of translation. In order to ensure that the headlines achieve the effect of refinement, translators need to analyze the headlines of English news. Abbreviations are often used to make English news headlines more concise, so abbreviated words can also be used in translation, which is also a common method for translating English news headlines.

**Vitality**

With the special nature, English news headlines have a unique way of presentation. In most cases, news headlines are often made vivid by rhetorical devices. A good news headline can not only make readers understand the important content of the news, but also stimulate readers' interest and deepen reading impression. However, due to cultural differences, translators must have a deep understanding of the culture of relevant English-speaking countries, and fully consider the Chinese language and culture to translate with appropriate words. In addition to ensuring the similarity in form, it is more important to ensure the mutual communication of connotation, so as to express the original charm of language.

### **Translation Strategies of English News Headlines**

**Literal Translation**

When English news headlines are clear and easy to understand, literal translation can be used. The greatest advantage of literal translation is that it retains the language features, expression forms, and content meaning of the original text. Although there are some differences between Chinese and Western cultures, people have a lot in common in terms of feelings and thinking patterns. Therefore, literal translation is the most common translation method and also the preferred strategy of translators.

**Free Translation**

If literal translation cannot accurately express the content of the original headline, or its readability cannot be accepted by the reader of the target language, free translation can be considered. In general, free translation does not need to strictly maintain the original structure, but only needs to clearly and completely express its corresponding meaning, without paying attention to too many details in grammar. But this does not mean that the translator can freely adjust the patterns and structure; instead, the translator must translate on the basis of the original meaning. It allows readers to capture the true content of news from hidden information. For example, the headline "Believing the Believers" can be translated into "人类的信仰" and "Looking Back to Look Ahead" can be translated into "回首往昔, 展望未来". Free translation can not only accurately express the meaning of the original headline, but also better reflect the rich and profound connotation of Chinese.

**Amplification Method in Translation**

If the readers of target language lack the relevant background knowledge, the addition of annotations or related information becomes necessary. For instance, the translation of "Tyson's Trade Treatment" is "美国女贸易经济学家泰森的贸易对策". For the readers familiar with the content of the original text, "Tyson" in the headline is easy to understand. Accurately grasping the main point, however, can be difficult for the target readers, who will mistake "Tyson" for a champion boxer. Therefore, it is necessary for the translator to add

some information about Tyson as an economist, so that the target audience can accurately receive the information. As another example, the translation of “Jack Ma: Don’t Use Trade as a Weapon” is “马云出席达沃斯：不要把贸易当作武器”. The original headline only tells what Ma said, but the translator added specific conference details to help the target readers better know the news information. The translated version gives the readers background information on Ma’s stance on the trade war. Such translation is helpful to improve the accuracy of expression and shorten the distance between events and readers. More importantly, it can stimulate the reader’s interest to continue reading.

### **Method of Using Rhetorical Devices**

Although news needs to be concise and accurate, distinctive headlines are a magic weapon to attract readers. The use of various rhetorical devices can make a news report sparkling. If the headline contains some rhetorical devices, such as puns, metaphors, and rhymes, the translation should also use the corresponding rhetorical devices, in order to achieve the same rhetorical characteristics as the original as much as possible. For instance, the headline “After the Booms, Everything Is Gloom” is translated by “一别繁荣，一片愁容”. “Boom” and “Gloom” form the end rhyme and the Chinese translation perfectly shows the rhyme feature of the original through “Rong” and “Rong” with the same pronunciation to form the end rhyme. Also, the two “yi” achieve the effect of alliteration, fully showing the rhetorical effect with a feeling of unity. As another example, the headline “A Bowl of Soup a Day Could Keep the Pounds at Bay” applies the pattern of an old saying “An Apple a Day Keeps Doctor Away”, achieving the rhyme effect. So, it can be translated by “一天一碗汤，脂肪减光光” by imitating the format of this proverb. This translating method not only accurately conveys the intended meaning of the original headline, but also makes the news headlines more interesting.

### **Conversion Between Positive and Negative Words**

In the process of translation, we should also pay attention to the different nature of words between countries and understand the context of the original news. For example, in the headline “The Chinese Market, a Bottomless Pit”, the phrase “A Bottomless Pit” in Chinese has a negative meaning. If we literally translate it into Chinese, the Chinese market will be described as derogatory. Through reading the content of the news, the phrase “A Bottomless Pit” comes from the mouth of the president of the famous sports brand Nike, which happened when he inspected Shanghai. After analyzing the context, it can be found that what he wants to express is that the market potential of China is great. In this headline, if the relevant context and expression of the words are not analyzed, it is easy to cause negative understanding and even affect the relationship between the two countries. Therefore, in the process of translation, we should focus on the meaning of each word in different countries to make it fit with the original context, so that we can translate and express it accurately and play a positive role in communication.

## **Conclusion**

News headlines, whether in Chinese or English, reflect their own language and cultural characteristics. So, the translation of news headlines is not only the conversion between different languages, but also a cultural communication which must be carried out on the basis of the characteristics of English news headlines. In the process of translation, translators will be affected by many cultural differences, such as different cultural backgrounds, thinking patterns, and historical allusions. Therefore, it is particularly important to adopt different translation strategies according to the specific situation.

The purpose of news headline translation is to enable the readers of the target language to accurately obtain the information in the source language. Readers tend to pay more attention to the content of the original news headline, but less to its form. In order to ensure the readability of the news headlines, translators should not only accurately convey the information of the original headline, but also make the target language conform to the reading habit and thinking mode of the readers. Only in this way can the cultural information hidden in the original news headlines be excavated and transmitted accurately and effectively, which helps readers of the target language better understand the news content.

### References

- Duanmu, Y. W. (2011). Functions and language features of English newspaper headlines. *Foreign Languages Research*, (2), 43-45.
- Dou, H. L. (2016). Lexical features and translation strategies of news English. *News Junkie*, (2), 66-68.
- Xu, M. W. (2018). *News English and translation*. Beijing: China International Translation Press.
- Zhu, Y. G. (2008). *Linguistic features & translation*. Shanghai: Shanghai Jiaotong University Press.
- Zhang, X. (2020). English news headline translation based on functional theory. *Journalistic Research Guide*, (1), 225-226.