

Study on Headline Construction Mechanism of WeChat: Adaptive Theory Perspective

YANG Bochao, LENG Bingbing

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

Focusing on the WeChat headlines during the post-pandemic from April 1 to June 1, 2022, this paper adopted an empirical research into the construction mechanism of 62 headlines from the perspective of adaptive theory. Research results indicate that the dynamic adaptivity between the linguistic structure and contextual changes is the result of journalists' linguistic choice and context adaption for different audiences to achieve a good communication effect. Also, it concludes journalists' way to highlight adaptivity between readers and writers.

Keywords: adaptive theory, WeChat headlines, construction mechanism

Introduction

In such a highly digitalized and fast-reading society, people are bombarded with various information from the outside world, and people's reading tendency is largely determined by their first glance at the headlines, be they politics-, culture-, economy-, or daily life-related, even the clickbaits with useless contents but for eye-grabbing purpose. As the 19th National Reading Survey by Chinese Academy of Press and Publication indicates, of the 101.12 minutes that the Chinese netizens spent on their mobile phone per day in 2021, 11.78 minutes was on e-book reading, an increase of 0.37 and 0.34 respectively compared with 2020. Mobile reading now obviously has emerged as a new normal, and in today's hectic life, appropriate headlines can rivet readers' attention and be conducive to the widespread of news or information, thus expanding the reach of media. Then a question begs an answer: What makes an attractive headline and how to bring the public's attention to real-time, accurate, and efficient information amidst the overwhelming articles in such a short span?

Research Status-Quo

Headlines, in principle, mainly have two roles to play: summarize and attract attention to the full-text newspaper article (Elly, 2009, p. 699), and a successful headline requires an understanding of the readers, including their state of knowledge, expectations, and cognitive ways.

Researches on headlines can trace back to the 1980s when people turned their eyes to news headlines, which, back then, mainly referred to newspaper titles as newspapers were the important channel for people to access information that happened around them or in the world. From the communication perspective, news headlines have an important place in news reporting as it symbolizes depth and width. Therefore, the news communication community leads the way in this field, and a wealth of research achievements have been achieved with the

YANG Bochao, M.A., College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

LENG Bingbing, Ph.D., associate professor, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

construction of news headlines as its core. But from the point of linguistics, relevant researches focus on language, grammar, figure of speech, etc., in traditional newspapers or magazines (Ariel, 1991; Wilson & Carston, 2007), and at the same time, there are also some papers that analyze newspaper headlines systematically by integrating with the newest pragmatics theory, particularly like the adaptive theory and relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986; Jucker, 1996; Kronrod & Engel, 2001). All these researches have broadened headline scope and gradually dived into a comprehensive and complete society.

However, with the rapid development of the internet and the change in people's reading style, the internet gradually becomes the main source of information, and therefore, the research direction is largely enriched accordingly and extends to online platforms as the special communication model that the internet features and spurs. But words still are the main flowing way of information. Standing in much resemblance to the research focus before from the perspective of pragmatics, modern headline researches in this field have turned to online platforms, like Li Hui (2013) who discussed the sports-news headline construction based on cooperative principle, Cheng Meili (2015), who elaborated the metaphor of online headlines with VOA network news as an example from the point of relevance theory, or Peng Hongting (2013) who took strong mem as the breakthrough to analyze the amusement news headlines from the point of adoption theory.

It's worth mentioning Daniel (2003), who once concluded that "headlines provide the readers with the optimal ratio between contextual effect and processing effort, and direct readers to construct the optimal context for interpretation" based on the relevance theory, and then listed 10 properties from the Hebrew original to illustrate what makes an appropriate headline. Fundamental and enlightening though it may seem to be, Daniel's account is overly exhaustive as, for example, properties "contain new information" and "include names and concepts with high 'news value' for the readers" to overlap to some extent, and fail to indicate whether an appropriate headline is designed so as to meet all properties. What's more, whether all of these properties remain useful in this mobile-driven society is still in doubt.

Research Design

Research Subject and Data

Based on the two questions proposed in the Introduction section above, this paper intends to focus on the 62 headlines of the official WeChat account *Shanghai News* during the pandemic period from April 1 to June 1 as the source data from the perspective of adaptive theory to talk about the construction mechanism of WeChat headlines. On the one hand, digital technology-led media ecology empowers new media to emerge as one of the communication channels with broad influence, among which the WeChat platform gains an advantageous standpoint in terms of mobile reading and information publication of authorities due to its massive user pool. Moreover, information on it flows in a more realistic and frequent manner that can be observed directly from the click rate and following rate it embeds, thus ensuring the authenticity of the collected data. And headlines as an important part of the full text have their own unique formation features that learned a lot from that of traditional ones. On the other hand, the pandemic has been a public emergency health care issue that intertwines all of us since its outbreak three years ago, and related articles are pushed to the WeChat platform and our phones every day, which is a real embodiment of people's concern. What's more, as Verschueren suggested that language use is a social behavior closely related to cognitive, social, and cultural factors in human life and the process of using language is therefore a process of selecting language under the influence and constraints of various aspects of social life, or a process in which language structure and contextual components are mutually adaptive. Focusing

on “selecting”, adaptive theory is grounded on a relatively comprehensive theoretical framework in language use, including the complete analysis of language structure and communication strategy, and a full explanation of the nature of language use. Therefore, integrating adaptive theory into headline construction is helpful in shedding light on the features of media language.

Besides that, it's undeniable that some scholars have made researches based on the Wechat platform or adaptive theory, and gained some enlightening findings, but the background they set foot on or the material they choose to talk about is less versatile and outdated, and the majority still focus on the official account of *People's Daily* as the corpus source or other online newspaper and magazine platforms. Therefore, it is hard to identify people's real interest in headlines in contemporary society, thus affecting the objectivity of research results.

Research Theory

Adaptive theory was developed by Verschueren, who argued that pragmatics provided an overview of language use behavior from a cognitive, social, and cultural perspective. The use of language for communication is a process of language choice, which occurs at all levels of language structure, such as phonology, vocabulary, grammar, intonation, as well as linguistic forms and communicative strategies. Both sides of the communication, the addresser and the addressee, have to make corresponding choices, but these choices are of course influenced by social and cultural constraints. Variability, adaptability, and negotiability, the language features, empower language users to make choices from the language.

Variability means that the language can be selected as people in the process of language use can select different ways of speaking according to the needs of communication so that the conversation can be more flexible and smooth. Negotiability refers to the variability of language selecting in that it does not follow a constant pattern of selecting, instead, a flexible and changeable pattern. Based on the flexibility of language, adaptivity refers to the appropriate selecting of language to meet communicative needs. It is a mechanism of language use, and variability and negotiability are the main factors that must be taken into account for adaptivity to be achieved. Therefore, when analyzing and interpreting language use, attention must be paid to four aspects: the contextual correlates of adaptability, structural objects of adaptivity, the dynamics of adaptivity, and the salience of the adaptation process.

Research Analysis

Mental World

Verschueren argues that the psychological world in language use activates cognitive and emotional factors, which include the personalities, emotions, desires, and intentions of the communicative partners, and the speaker should adapt to their own psychological world and that of listeners when selecting a language style. Facing with different messages, audiences may have different emotional demands, and actively choose what they need or what resonates with their emotions so as to satisfy their inner needs. Therefore, understanding and analyzing the psychological needs of the audience becomes an important factor in the production of the official WeChat headlines of *Shanghai News* to arouse their interest in reading these headlines, and finally achieve the best connection between the headlines and the audience's psychology.

- (1) 坚定信心、毫不松懈！
- (2) 抱定必胜信心，加快工作进度，切实将各项举措落实到位！
- (3) 致全市人民的感谢信

Although the content on WeChat is close to the public's life, most of it is not first-hand experience. In response, emotional sharing is an effective way to connect both sides psychologically and bring the public closer to the content on WeChat. Therefore, when selecting materials, headline editors should consciously choose events that can easily trigger emotional resonance, in other words, emotional convergence between the public's view and understanding of things after acquiring information. All the examples listed above adopt the pattern of "emotional words + other content" to highlight the emotional factors, by which the effort required by the mass in information process decreases while the contextual effect increases. Also, such a mode will serve as a reminder for readers to arouse the same feeling with the intention preset by the writer after reading the headlines.

Physical World

The physical world refers to the referential relationship between the time and the space. The time referential relationship includes event time, speaking time, or reference time, but WeChat headlines mostly focus on event and reference time because of its one-way characteristics. The space referential relationship can be divided into absolute space relationships and relative ones, and WeChat headlines, in general, are absolute ones out of their uniqueness that the addresser and addressee present in different spaces with no specific reference object.

Time reference. Rather than an absolute value, time is a relative concept and closely relates to everything. It enables us to measure and know the change in our surroundings, and plays an inalienable part in our life. Therefore, it's incumbent to consider its necessities when making a WeChat headline.

(4) 尽锐出战, 以快制快, 用最短时间遏制病情扩散

(5) 加快拔点攻坚 有力阻断传播 全力跑赢病毒!

When talking about time, people are more likely to care about things that newly happened or will happen in the near future. Therefore, when constructing a WeChat headline, the writer should clearly label time-related words, like the underlined words above, and put them at the very beginning of a sentence to unfold its linear nature, to be specific, to organize words in a hierarchical way to highlight the core information. Therefore, the one that places at the beginning of a sentence will be perceived first, and then people might consider what these time references really mean? Finally, the first perceived word will enter people's cognitive framework and combine with other information in the headline to form a complete understanding after comparing it with its own cognitive context, thus increasing the click rate of headlines.

Space reference. The concept of space is central to the human mind, and it forms the basis of fundamental cognition in numerous domains of human experience such as the concept of time: before the end of the year; the concept of sound: high and low pitch. The space reference as an extension of contextual adaptivity goes beyond the sheer space concept and its development has shifted people's concept on space to inherent ones, such as countries, provinces, or specific places, from the basic directions, like north, south, west, or east.

(6) 全力守沪市民群众安康, 确保城市核心功能正常运转!

(7) 大上海保卫战取得重大阶段性成果!

For the local people in Shanghai, the distance among the unaffected, the affected, and confinement areas is the main concern; therefore, it's inherent for news workers to highlight the affected areas in headlines to get people concerned, like the Example (6). While for people in other cities, the places that are plagued by the pandemic are a symbol of potential dangers especially when they make, for example, travel or work plans; therefore, the news writer can construct a WeChat title that prioritizes the place information, like the Example (7) to cater people's needs.

Social World

Although there are no principled restrictions when selecting a language, communicators are individuals living in a specific social culture, and it's necessary to take social factors, also the influence of the social world, into account. As language sets borders on people's speaking behavior, communicators need to consider the social environment when determining the language they tend to use so as to fit the linguistic norms. In other words, language choices should not only conform to social conventions and habits, but also be in line with social trends, and adaptivity in the social world reflects the influence of social norms, culture, and other factors on language choice.

Life services. WeChat headlines distill the most valuable content to help the reader grasp the core and main points when being informed of the information, and have a proper understanding of the content reading, analysis, and cognition. However, the knowledge content of life services is highly operational, and the language used to express it will be less vivid and detailed enough. Therefore, headlines combined with specific idioms or metaphors will be more visualized, such as the Example (8) which borrows two easy-to-understand terms from the political texts to vividly illustrate the city's determination in ensuring the smooth operation of transportation and express services, and also increases the literacy of headline with minor mental processing effort.

(8) 加快打通“大动脉”，畅通“微循环”，为打赢上海保卫战提供坚强保障

Culture. Culture is a synthesis of society and history. It is a valuable asset created by human beings and survived with the development of history, such as lifestyle, conventions, and literature and art. Taking the Nurse Day, which falls on May 12nd, as an example, considering that medical staff plays a critical role in this pandemic response across the world and earns much respect, headline editors will select relevant information in such a special day to applaud their effort and magnify such emotion to resonate with readers. Besides that, the metaphor used in Example (8) above and the colloquial rhyming term in Example (10) also signify literature culture.

(9) 白衣执甲，挺身而出，感谢你们构筑起大上海保卫战中坚不可摧的防线

(10) 开展更大程度压力测试，在“控得住、放得开”上下功夫

Conclusion

As an effective way for information spreading, WeChat is the product of this information era, but how do its headlines, the integral part of the whole WeChat content, work, and what factors should be considered in its production? Based on these two questions, this paper adopted an empirical way from the perspective of adaptive theory to interpret the construction mechanism of WeChat headlines in the context of post-COVID-19. Research results indicate that, linguistic selection is subject to the three contextual factors of the adaptive theory, mental, physical, and social world. To be specific, mental world and physical world exert much impact on the information structure of the headlines, and physical world and social world have some constraints on word selection.

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