Research on Pragmatic Presupposition in English News Headlines-A Case Study Based on *China Daily*

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Review Article

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Abstract: Headlines remain the most significant part in news reports, for which they provide readers with the major information. Meanwhile, pragmatic presupposition focuses on the study of the relationships between utterances, context and participants in communication, thus being widely used in the design of news headlines. So this paper mainly analyzes English news headlines selected from *China Daily* from the perspective of pragmatic presupposition to explore how readers can quickly correlate news headlines with the news. The results confirm the functions of presupposition to provide worthwhile information and attract readers' attention. Through the study, it's intended to enable the readers with a better understanding of news headlines behind presupposition and help the news editors create more attractive headlines.
Keywords: presupposition, news headlines, pragmatic functions.

INTRODUCTION

In the information age, news has penetrated through every area of our life, which is mainly used to disseminate various informations. An item of news usually consists of three parts: a headline, the lead and the body. As title of news, the headline will firstly come into readers' view and catch their eye. Therefore, headlines are always considered as the essence of the news. *Longman Dictionary of the English Language* [1] defines news headline as "a head of a newspaper story or article usually printed in large type and devised to summarize the story or article that follows".

So we can see that the headline is essential to summarize and appraise the content of news, whose functions are primarily embodied in refining the content as well as drawing the readers' attention.

Scholars at home and abroad have conducted researches on news headlines from different perspectives. E Robert [2] has classified vocabulary frequently used in news headlines. Also, he attaches more importance to headlines writing and language use in his book *Headlines and Deadlines*. Van Dijk [3] analyzes the contents and structures of headlines in order to obtain the implicit meanings. In China, Wu and Chen [4] study on presupposition mechanism in news headlines in English and Chinese. Cheng [5] discusses the grammatical features of English news headlines. Liu [6] focuses on the rhetorical devices and translation techniques of English news headlines.

Based on the previous studies on news headlines, we can see that researches from presupposition perspective by scholars are rarely conducted. Therefore, this study primarily aims to discuss pragmatic presuppositions in specific English news headlines selected from *China Daily*. Some examples are classified according to the pragmatic functions they implement, and then their specific functions on how to attract readers and to reveal the real intention of news will be analyzed. Meanwhile, this paper intends to shed light on the importance of presupposition in news headlines theoretically and furthermore extend its pragmatic use to other fields.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Presupposition was originally studied in the field of philosophy. German philosopher Frege [7] firstly put forward the concept of presupposition. In the 1960s, it was introduced to the field of linguistics. Stalnaker [8] classified presupposition into semantic presupposition and pragmatic supposition. Semantic presupposition refers to a semantic relationship between two sentences or propositions, which is the basis for the formation of sentence meaning and is closely related to the meaning of the sentence itself. Edward Keenan [9] firstly gave the definition of pragmatic presupposition. He regarded pragmatic presupposition as "the relation

between speech and context, or the prerequisites that must be satisfied for an appropriate sentence". Furthermore, he observed that pragmatic presupposition must be the mutual knowledge of both sides in communication. That means pragmatic presupposition is concerned with the mutual knowledge presupposed beforehand between two sides of verbal communication. It focuses more on the background information of the conversation rather than the meaning of sentence itself. Such background knowledge can make it possible for the speaker to say what he says to the hearer and at the same time make the hearer correctly understand what the speaker says to him. Besides, presupposition is related to the use of a large number of words, phrases, and structures. These language forms that are considered to produce presuppositions in specific context are called presupposition triggers. Levinson [10] briefly listed thirteen types of presupposition triggers, such as proper nouns, factive verbs, state change verbs, emphatic structure, repetition adverbs and so on.

With the concept of pragmatic presupposition, linguists also started exploring its features to make it comprehensively understood. Some linguists, Keenan [9], Stalnaker [8], etc, summarized its two main features, appropriateness and mutual knowledge, which are mostly acknowledged. Appropriateness refers to that presupposition must tightly connect with context, which is the necessary prerequisite to speech acts. Mutual knowledge means that pragmatic presupposition must be mutually known to both the speaker and the hearer, which is an essential condition for a successful communication. In addition, a scholar, Chen [11], added three more features to perfect the theory, that is one-sidedness, concealment and subjectiveness. Pragmatic presupposition is uttered by the speaker, thus we can say it is one-sided. But this feature isn't in contradiction with mutual knowledge. Because mutual knowledge is acquired by the conversations of both sides as well as the information they complement instead of being provided. Concealment means it is always implicit in the utterance. The speaker hardly expresses the information directly, thus making it connotative. Subjectiveness indicates that presupposition itself can't be characterized by authenticity and precision. It can be represented by objective facts, the facts the speaker believes to be true, or hypothetical facts.

There are a number of studies on presupposition. As for foreign scholars, Fillmore [12] connects presupposition with the theoretical framework of cognitive semantics, making it become more accessible to practical use. Bonyadi and Samuel [13] start paying attention not only to the power of presupposition on discourse production, but also to its communicative effects. Lepore [14] analyzes the relationship between presupposition and context

sensitivity. Also, many scholars in China have studied presupposition theory in recent years. Chen [11] discusses and analyzes the functions of pragmatic presupposition on Chinese advertisements, and depicted the presuppositions in different forms. Wei [15] studies the rationale for the change of sentence patterns from the perspective of pragmatics and cognition. Guided by relevance theory, Jing [16] investigates the features of pragmatic presupposition in cognitive context, and interprets functions of presupposition from a new perspective.

So based on the theoretical foundation, this paper will stress the application of presupposition in English news headlines to enrich the research in this area.

ANALYSIS OF PRAGMATIC PRESUPPOSITION IN NEWS HEADLINES

We have found that there are lots of presuppositions in news headlines, which actually can satisfy readers' needs to capture the information. So based on the English news headlines selected from *China Daily*, we primarily discuss and analyze the specific functions that pragmatic presupposition can perform.

Function of Conciseness

The wording of news headlines should be concise to attract readers. In a highly competitive era, speed or efficiency is very necessary in newspapers. So news headlines are required to be concise. Pragmatic presupposition can just meet this standard for the following reasons. Firstly, only one sentence always fails to express comprehensive information, which calls for the background information that presupposition can provide. Secondly, presupposition can contribute to shortening words and saving space. Here are some specific examples.

Example 1: Urbanization: Not just about building homes (2014, Sep, 12).

The news reports that a whirlwind of hot real estate has blew up as economy speeds up. Therefore, more and more property developers choose to speculate in building houses. However, behind the seemingly prosperous phenomenon, it is reflected that urbanization also demands the improvement of the residents' living standards as well as the environmental quality. In this headline, the phrase "not just", as the presupposition trigger, presupposes that we have lots of things to do in the course of urbanization. So through the presupposition, a great deal of information can be inferred behind the headline which is thought-provoking. Meanwhile, it demonstrates that the use of "not just" is concise enough to allow the reader to guess what the news is about.

Example 2: Chinese firm adds more coaches to boost Nigeria's Rail Transport (2018, Jan, 3).

This event occurred when China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC), the Chinese construction firm, launched 10 additional coaches besides the existing ones in order to boost the Nigeria's first standard gauge railway modernization project. In the headline, the word "more", as the presupposition trigger, presupposes that China has ever assisted Nigeria in railway construction and now it still gives further help. Such information is provided by only one word that readers can infer that China has helped Nigeria's rail transport a lot and there exists a positive relationship between the two countries. This headline can achieve the conciseness of language and provides readers with a large amount of information to attract their attention. The conciseness is exactly the function of presupposition. Through the use of the presupposition trigger, readers can infer a great deal of presupposition information.

Example 3: Xi reaffirms support for private firms (2018, Oct, 22).

This news reports that Xi has given support for the private sector for the second time. This is because more and more private businesses actively assume their social responsibility in "devoting themselves to the battle against poverty and helping many poor people live better lives". So the use of prefix "re-" in the headline, which is also the presupposition trigger, can help readers infer that Xi once expressed support for private firms due to their contributions to society. And now, he affirms their important roles again. Meanwhile, such presupposition information can be provided by only one word "reaffirms" to avoid using too much words.

Based on the above examples, we can know it is because of its mutual knowledge and presupposition triggers that presupposition can make language concise and readers can infer much information.

Function of Information

When exposed to a news headline, the reader and the news actually conduct a mutual communication the moment the reader looks through it. In this communication, the speaker (the news) usually transmits new information to the hearer (the reader) based on the given information that is presupposed in the headline. So we find that with the help of presupposition, news editors can provide the new information in headlines to make readers impressive. Therefore, widely used, presupposition has served as an effective means to stress important information.

Example 4: Beijing makes big gains in air quality (2018, Jan, 4).

Through the headline, such rich information can be deduced: Beijing had poor air quality before; the government has taken corresponding measures to deal with air pollution; now the measures has taken effects and its air quality has become better and so on. Actually, the above information we deduce can be regard as its presuppositions, which make readers figure out what the news is about. Getting the basic information from pragmatic presupposition, the readers can make choices whether they go into further reading or not. In this way, presupposition can make the headline concise but more informative because presupposition includes the background information that people can easily infer in daily life.

Example 5: Airliners collide at Toronto's Pearson Airport, passengers safe (2018, Jan, 6).

Also, we can speculate about much information between the lines because the headline itself presupposes many facts. First, we can clearly know there was an air accident at Toronto's Pearson Airport. Second, the accident might be resulted from the collision between two planes. Third, fortunately, there were no casualties. So by reading the headline, we can infer such hidden information. This function can help the readers save time to comprehend the main idea of the news. In addition, readers can clearly know whether they are interested in the news or not. According to these presuppositions behind the headline, it is easily for readers to gather the information and keep the news in their mind.

Example 6: Trump bashes globalism at UN, claims US now 'stronger, richer' (2018, Sep, 27).

Reading the headlines, we find that plenty of background information has served as the presuppositions. So we can know that Trump still tout his America First foreign policy and trade stance so he rejects globalism. Besides, he trusts his administration has brought great changes to America. But his attitudes just reflects Trump's style and his policies. All above the information is got by people's knowledge of Trump administration so that readers can know about this news and decide to take a closer look if they're interested. Therefore, based on people's background information, the headlines can use presuppositions to provide more information.

The examples above which can play the role in providing much information are based on the presuppositions' features of appropriateness and mutual knowledge so that the hidden information can be found.

Function of Attraction

There is no doubt that attraction is the most significant characteristic of news headlines, which is also the standard to testify whether the news is worth reading. In this part, we will explain how news headlines can catch the readers' eye due to the use of pragmatic presuppositions. According to the above elaboration, we know presupposition is mainly about the mutual knowledge of the both sides in communication or the information the speaker assumes the hearer knows. Therefore, when the information conveyed by the headlines is inconsistent with people's background information, it will attract readers' attention to read in depth the specific news content. The examples are listed below.

Example 7: Have You Experienced the Unwritten Rules of Interview? (2017, Dec, 14)

Actually, a question itself can appeal to readers to probe into the answer. What's more, as for readers' background information, "interview" in general is formal and regular. In other words, unwritten rules in interview are rare and few people may experience them. But this headline presupposes that there are unwritten rules in certain interview. In this news, a job-hunter was rejected because she was still single at the age of 25. So seeing the headline, most of the readers may find out what the unwritten rules are with great curiosity. Here the readers' attention is not aroused by the question form, but by the content expressed in the question that is inconsistent with readers' background information. It is so attractive when news idea that the headline presents disobeys the common knowledge. At the same time, this title creates a suspense for the reader, so that readers will be eager to know the news content.

Example 8: Talking to yourself is a sign of higher intelligence. (2018, Oct, 4).

Obviously, whoever sees the headline must be full of curiosity and doubt. In readers' background information, they usually consider someone crazy if he often talks or mumbles to himself. What's more, talking to yourself indicates a sign of mental illness in people's view. On the contrary, the presupposition hidden in the headline can be found that the men who talk to themselves are smart, which can form a sharp contrast to what readers have known. So this headline seems more attractive when the information it provides indeed goes against common sense so that readers can't wait to figure out why talking to yourself can improve the level of intelligence.

Example 9: These 10 "bad" habits tell your smartness. (2017, Nov, 18).

Generally speaking, it's mutually known that bad habits actually contradict "smartness". Here, the headline with the presupposition that bad habits can bring something beneficial is obviously contrary to the common sense. So the readers tend to be eager to know how "bad habits" can leave favorable influence on people. And then they will be attracted to explore the news content. These effects can be achieved by the function of pragmatic presupposition. Besides, the above examples can achieve attractive effects due to the one-sided feature of presupposition, which the news editor can provide information according to the editor's cognition.

Function of Humor

Undoubtedly, humor can play a major role in relaxing people. As for news headlines, it can make readers willing to have access to the news if they consider the headline witty and interesting. Meanwhile, with the humorous words in headlines, the news information can be conveyed in a positive way.

Pragmatic presupposition can create a humorous atmosphere because it can provide some unexpected information. Specifically, when people's normal expectation, i.e. their background information, contradicts the presupposition information in the headline, the two kinds of information will come into sharp contrast, achieving unpredictable humorous effects. For example:

Example 10: Smiling pig rescued from flood becomes online celebrity (2017, Aug, 29).

When exposed to the headline, you definitely feel humorous and funny. Because smiling is the motion peculiar to people, which impossibly happens to a pig. In addition, it sounds really amusing that a pig can become online celebrity because celebrities must gain their fame by doing something influential. However, the presupposition information in the headline tells that a pig can smile and becomes a "star" online. Due to so many contradictions with the presuppositions, it's easy for the headline to capture readers' attention to this news. In this way, we can see that the contradiction between the pragmatic presupposition information and the people's background information has produced such an effect.

Example 11: Monkeys can write better than Shakespeare (2017, May, 16).

This headline can cause much laughter when it compares monkey with Shakespeare who is widely acknowledged as the greatest writer and the world's pre-eminent dramatist. Based on the mutual knowledge, monkeys have no ability to write let alone surpass Shakespeare, while the headline presupposes that there

are some monkeys that are more capable to write than Shakespeare. In fact, this news reported that monkeys did produce the complete works of Shakespeare with a typewriter through "The Turning Test", a criterion for a truly intelligent AI. But the headline written in a humorous way is indeed inconsistent with what people have known and increases people's expectation to read the news. It is precisely because the information provided by the news headline contradicts people's background information and can produce humorous effects that it attracts readers to know what on earth happens in the news.

Example 12: Dogs are real kings of facial expressions (2018, Jan, 1).

From this headline we can know that dogs can make different facial expressions and some of them are even superior to human's expressions, which indeed amuses readers. Because in people's background information, dogs have no ability to express their joy or sorrow by showing facial expressions, let alone become the "real kings". But this headline provides the presupposition that dogs can make facial expressions best. When such information obviously contradicts people's mutual knowledge, inconsistency will come into being and result in humorous effects. Meanwhile, people also have great interest in reading the news to find out why the headline may be true.

All of the functions of pragmatic presupposition mentioned above can play an important role in news headlines. Through the analysis, it can provide more reference for news editors to improve their expression techniques.

CONCLUSION

The requirement for timely and rich news information is getting higher and higher in the information era. With plenty of news in people's lives, they always make choices whether the news is worth reading. As a result, the headline, a condensed form of news, is very helpful to news reading, which is of great research value.

Through the analysis, the findings show that pragmatic presupposition can perform such functions as conciseness, information, attraction and humor in news headlines. Combined with the specific examples published in *China Daily*, it indicates that in order to capture readers' attention to read news in depth, its headline must be concise enough to save time; cover as much information as possible to enrich meanings; add more attraction to fulfill readers' needs as well as produce humorous effects to stir up reading desire.

So on the basis of the paper, it's expected to enrich the researches on pragmatic presupposition in news headlines and help the news editors better apply presupposition in practice, which can make the language use in headlines more rational and attractive. Besides, this paper arouses enough attention on such case studies so that the future research can be more valuable and more meaningful.

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