Corpus-based Analysis of Social Media Headlines and English-Chinese Translation Strategies

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Abstract

In this paper, the functions, structures, language features and creations of social media headlines are analyzed, and some useful insights are obtained. It is found that the translation of social media headlines has patterns to follow, which is of great significance for guiding translation practice.

Keywords

Social Media, Headlines, English into Chinese, Translation Strategies.

1. Introduction

Social media headlines are extremely critical in both functions and structures. For publishers of social media articles, the headlines are not only highly concise summaries of the articles, but also tools to catch readers' attention and stimulate readers' interest; For social media article readers, headlines are the basis for predicting the content of the articles and judging whether the articles are worth reading; For English-Chinese translators, they shoulder dual tasks: on the one hand, they have to translate satisfactory headlines for social media publishers and help them successfully promote their articles and WeChat official accounts across different countries around the world; On the other hand, they have to provide readers with the basis for judging whether to read an article. Creations of Chinese media headlines have always required laborious thinking. As the cross-cultural bridge, translators need to consider the standardization of headlines and weigh the intercultural factors when translating headlines, which is even more difficult and painstaking. Exploring the functions of social media headlines, analyzing the structures and language features of headlines, and trying to discover the general rules or patterns of creating headlines, are of great significance to the translation of English headlines, improving translation efficiency and guiding quality translation practice.

Based on ABC Australia's social media headlines [1], this paper probes into the social media headlines, analyzes the functions, structures, language features and drafting of the headlines, and obtains very useful insights, which are of great significance for guiding English-Chinese translation practice.

2. Functions of Headlines

Headlines have multiple functions, including navigating and prompting, promotion and screening, stimulating reading, beautifying layout and increasing visual impact, among which the most important ones are navigating and prompting and stimulating reading.

2.1. Navigate and Prompt Reading

The essential function of headlines is to navigate and prompt reading. When creating headlines, we must be able to grasp the essence of the articles and put forward some topics and viewpoints that are crystal clear at a glance [2]. That is to say, headlines must be able to embody the theme

and essence of the articles, so that readers can quickly and accurately grasp the main information of the articles through the headlines.

Headlines play a vital role in discourse, and they play a dominant role in the whole text, both in terms of content and discourse structure. The headline is actually an integral part of the whole text, and the whole text is arranged around the headline. If a text is compared to a dragon, the headline is the dragon's eye. Therefore, to determine the headline of the article is to dot the dragon's eyes.

A headline often best reflects the theme of an article, and the connotation of a headline helps readers predict the content of an article, clarify the structure of the article, and activate potential problem awareness and "questioning" thinking. A headline is the "eye" of an article, which is a highly refined, generalized and condensed. A good headline can reflect the gist of an article, so that readers can successfully predict the essence of the whole article.

2.2. Stimulate Reading

The biggest function of social media headlines is to attract readers. The headline is at the first and foremost frontline to face the readers, which will directly determine the reading rate and readership scope of articles. Social media headlines should sumarize the content and theme of articles aesthetically, philosophically or in a profound way while accurately conveying information. In addition, social media headlines should actively give readers a strong visual impact through "glinting" words instead of passively waiting for readers to read. Quality social media headlines should attract readers at their first glance and stimulate readers interest at their first sight, so that social media headlines can stand out from a vast array of headlines and social media articles can be read by readers.

The key to attract readers is to meet the needs of readers and grasp people's psychology and interests. The main means are making use of readers' curiosity and increasing the interactivity of the headlines.

3. Structures of Headlines

The navigating and prompting function as well as the stimulating reading function of social media headlines needto be realized through language. Analyzing the language structures of headlines is the first step to explore and understand headlines.

3.1. Single Headlines and Compound Headlines

From the perspective of macro structures, headlines can be divided into single headlines and compound headlines.[3] Single headlines refer to social media headlines without straplines and subheadings. The headline itself can serve the purpose using a single sentence. Generally, the period at the end of the headline sentence will be omitted while the question mark will be remained. There may be words before and after the single headline to explain the characteristics of the column or channel, with punctuation marks or symbols such as colon, |, and () as a divide. For example:

(1) Decoding Australia|How do Australians "get a deal"?

Example (1) uses an interrogative sentence as a single headline with a question mark at the end of the line to arouse the curiosity of the readers.

(2) Story|Elite female athletes who immigrated to Australia shared with us her test-tube baby plan with her wife.

Example (2) uses a declarative sentence as a single headline with an idea against traditional social norm as a tool to attract the readers.

Compound headlines refer to social media headlines with a strapline or a subheading or both. There are two main forms of compound headlines, one is "strapline + headline" or " headline +

subheading" , and the other is multi-line headlines. There is a master-slave relationship between strapline and headline or headline and subheading as the names suggest. The function of the strapline or subheading is to explain, supplement the headline or pave the way for the headline. For example:

(3) Learning English|Nip in the bud; turn over a new leaf; beat around the bush: These English expressions are related the plants.

Example (3) is in the format of "strapline + headline" using the English expressions to pave the way for the headline naturally.

(4) Guidebook|What if I hit wild animals such as kangaroos while driving in Australia? Please help them like this.

(5) Popular science|The history of cross-cultural love and marriage of Australian Chinese: it can be traced back to the gold rush period in the 19th century.

Examples (4) and (5) are in the format of "headline + subheading" with subheadings as a supplement to and further explanation of the headlines respectively.

A multi-line headline actually consists of several headlines and occupies more than two lines in traditional media with each headline describing the same event from a different perspective. Usually, there is one main headline and the rest headlines can be classified as subheadings, which are placed in square brackets. There are no multi-line headlines in ABC Australia' social media, so we will not discuss them here.

3.2.   Sentence Structures

From the perspective of sentence pattern, social media headlines can be divided into declarative sentences, interrogative sentences, exclamatory sentences and imperative sentences with each sentence type having its own unique advantages.

3.2.1. Declarative Sentences

A sentence with declarative sentence tone that narrates or explains facts is called declarative sentence. A declarative headline refers to the headline that narrates or explains facts and has the tone of declarative sentences. Declarative headlines are widely used in social media. Generally speaking, a declarative headline is a highly abstract and summary of the whole article, and declarative headlines attracts readers' desire to read through built-in pronouns or hot topics. For example:

(6) Art|in the past 99 years, Australian aboriginal artists have finally won famous art awards by these portraits.

(7) Popular science|Australian university experts talk about social problems brought about by marriage of convenience and same-sex wife.

Example (6) uses pronoun"these" to arouse the readers' curiosity while example (7) is a hot topic about emerging trends in contemporary Australia in terms of relationships.

3.2.2. Interrogative Sentences

Interrogative sentence refers to a sentence with interrogative sentence tone, which indicates a question. Compared with declarative sentences, interrogative sentences can directly arouse readers' curiosity, empathy and interest in reading. As far as discourse structure is concerned, readers can quickly find out the answer from the article according to the questions in the headline, so it has a significant guiding function. For example:

(8) Close up|Two Chinese female dancers in Melbourne: learning dance+performing+ creating in Australia, What magical experiences have they encountered?

(9) Culture|After COVID-19 lockdown is released in Australia, if artists are encouraged to restart the central business district, what magical effect will it have?

Examples (8) and (9) use two Wh-questions to stimulate the reader's reading interest.

3.2.3. Exclamatory Sentences

Sentences with strong feelings are called exclamatory sentences. Exclamatory sentences express strong emotions such as happiness, surprise, sadness, anger, disgust and fear. Exclamation sentences arouse readers' empathy, thus attracting their interest in reading. For example:

(10) Anecdote|After Australian beauty salons were unlocked, puppy owners have to wait for a haircut appointment until next March!

(11) Australian animals|Wild foxes on Melbourne streets!

Examples (10) and (11) use exclamatory headlines to express hard-to-believe surprise and amazement to arouse the readers' empathy.

3.2.4. Imperative Sentences

The function of imperative sentences is to ask and invite others to act. It is summoning and highly interactive, giving readers a sense of active interaction. For example:

(12) There are so many sceneries in the distance, and and activities around the corner: share the beauty within 5 kilometers of your neighbourhood with ABC Australia!

(13) Learning English|What's trending online? Let's start a trip to the English social platform together.

Examples (12) and (13) use imperative headlines to invite the general readers to share and participate in their interesting activities.

4. Linguistic Features of Headlines

Social media headlines have distinctive language features. In addition to accurately reflecting the content of articles and avoiding the undesirable tendency of "headline party", social media headlines need to be highly summarized and has the characteristics of culture and network language.

4.1. Clear and Accurate

The language used by headlines needs to be clear and accurate, sumarizing the content of the article, giving the targeted readers a feeling of down-to-earth simplicity rather than a sense of being misled or cheated by using flowery words, so that the time-sensitive readers can save their time and really find the useful articles they are interested in. For example:

(14) Guidebook|How can people resist domestic violence in Australia: learn to identify violent acts and remember these support and rescue agencies.

Example (14) uses plain language to offer practical advice to possible victims of domestic or family violence.

4.2. Brief and Concise

Social media headlines should be brief, concise and tersely reflecting the content of the corresponding articles. However, conciseness does not necessarily means shortness in length, but rather to showcase the keywords for the readers to catch a framework of the articles. So a headline should contain as much information as possible. For example:

(15) Happy marriage and cultural differences: love stories of several Australian Chinese cross-ethnic couples.

Example (15) uses keyword-type language to describe a framework of the article content.

4.3.   Cultural Connotations

Headlines is a kind of language art embedded with cultural connotations. Cultural grafting in headlines can increase the identity of the readers and the sense of humor of headlines and stimulate readers' interest. For example:

(16) Decoding Australia|Teach you to understand the "Spring Festival Gala" of Australians——What is the charm of Australian rules football AFL?

Example (16) uses "Spring Festival Gala" or "Chun Wan" to depict the fun of Australian football games, helping the Chinese readers to have a immediate and better understanding of the event.

4.4.   Online Buzzwords

Online buzzwords give readers a sense of freshness, closeness and humor. Clever use of online buzzwords can increase affinity and win the readers' approval. For example:

(17) Story|The Australian photographer once "sharented" on the Oprah show. During the epidemic, she once again warmed the netizens around the world.

Example (17) uses catchy words such as "sharented", " Oprah show " and "netizen" to win the interested readers.

5.   Creation of Headlines

Headlines can be divided into two categories, namely descriptive titles and suspense headlines. Descriptive headlines are usually expressed in the form of declarative sentences. Declarative headlines attract readers by grasping their interests with the importance of things themselves. Suspense headlines are usually presented in the form of interrogative sentences. In addition, breaking the convention, cleverly constructing contrasts or adding comments to arouse the readers' psychological desire of seeking differences or seeking common ground are also commonly-used skills in making successful headlines.

5.1.   Create Suspension Headlines

Curiosity is one of the strongest motives of human behavior. Creating suspense through interrogative sentences can arouse readers' curiosity to the greatest extent. Suspension headlines can be expressed by asking questions and answering questions, or by asking questions but not answering them, giving the readers enough space to seek the answer by themselves. For example:

(18) Aussie gourmet|What is so magic about oven fried rice? Simpler, larger and less oil smoke!

Example (18) is a questions asked and answered by the creator of the headlines, stressing the advantages of frying rice using an oven with the answer ending with an exclamatory mark.

(19) Health|Australian nutritionists interpret various kinds of online celebrity "plant milk": which one is suitable for you?

Example (19) asks a question and prods the readers to find the answer by reading the article.

5.2.   Create Contrastive Headlines

Contrastive headlines usually create freshness by breaking the conventional key information, and arouse readers' surprise and concern by being different [4]. For example:

(20) Popular science│Research shows that women are more like to fail the challenge of "seven-year itch" and encourage open relationships? Analysis of Australian Emotional Experts.

Example (20) surprises the readers with a shocking statement which is contrary to the common beliefs that it is some men who can not survive the "seven-year itch".

5.3. Create Commentary Headlines

Add a comment after a statement, separating it with a colon. Commentary headlines show the author's position and viewpoint, give readers a sense of equality and interactive participation, and are also a good way to attract readers. For example:

(21) Close up│The "Chinese marriage witness" authorized by Australian government shares the industry experience: love and fun.

Example (21) uses a comment at the end of the headline to arouse readers' interest.

6. Translation Strategies of Headlines

There are many cultural differences between English and Chinese. When translating, we should consider transforming English headlines into ones that conform with Chinese habits, then consider whether the translated headlines can serve the due functions or not, and finally consider language features of the headlines, so as to not only help Chinese readers get a clear picture at a glance, but also stimulate readers' interest in reading. Many headlines of social media articles cannot be translated literally or on a word-for-word basis, and they often need paraphrasing translation (freestyle translation) or or even rewriting (copywriting).

6.1. Freestyle Translation

Most English social media headlines cannot be translated literally due to the fact that there are many differences between English and Chinese languages and cultures. Such headlines will appear mechanical, unnatural and unattractive when translated literally. In this case, translators should be creative and boldly translate in a free style according to the patterns of Chinese social media headlines. The original headline of the following example is "Japanese prisoner of war artworks shine light on dark period of WWII history in Australia" [5], which is translted as:

(22) Art│During World War II, there was a less unknown "Japanese Art Boom" in Australian prisons.

Example (22) is a freestyle translation example with the sentence order adjusted, terms made easy to understand in Chinese and ellipsis employed to create suspensions.

6.2. Copywriting

Copywriting is an active translation strategy which means abandoning the original headlines and recreating new ones based on Chinese headline patterns to serve their purpose. The original headline of Example (23) is "What you need to know before getting pet insurance".[6] Based on the function of the original headline, it is rewritten according to the content of the article and the Chinese headline pattern instead of translating literally or using freestyle translation techniques:

(23) Guidebook|Pet owners' must-read: The advantages and disadvantages of buying Australian pet insurance, and the common "pits".

For another example, the original headline of Example (24) is "Tasmanian cider gum ferment 'a drink that shaped Australia', says celebrated wine writer". [7] On the basis of Chinese headline pattern, it is rewritten as the following headline to attract the readers' interest.

(24) Culture|'A drink that affects the whole of Australia': Some eucalyptus sap in Tasmania tastes like toffee cider.

7. Conclusion

Taking the headlines of ABC Australia's WeChat tweets as a corpus, this paper analyzes the functions, structures, language features and creation skills of Chinese headlines, and obtains

practical and useful insights. It is found that the localization of social media headlines needs creativity, but there are certain essential patterns to follow, which is of great significance for guiding the practice of English-Chinese translation.

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