On Identity Construction of News Headlines: A Multimodal Perspective

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ABSTRACT. *The headline of a news report is a window to display the central idea of the passage, and it often lays a foundation for the bias of the whole passage. Under the guidance of communication bias, different media from China and the West sometimes establish different pragmatic identities. It is the use of lexical semantics in different situations that often leads to the identity differences of media people. Based on the traditional discourse analysis, this study uses the concept of multimodal semantics to analyze the use of vocabulary to judge the pragmatic identity constructed by different media, and finally, attempts to summarize the rules and significance of identity construction.*

KEYWORDS: *Identity Construction; Multimodal Semantics; Communication Bias*

1. Introduction

News headlines are the eyes of the whole news. It plays an important role in displaying the news value and function of the article. With the rapid pace of modern life, more and more people like to search news headlines to find the news they are really interested in. To a large extent, news communication, especially network news, needs to be prompted and guided by headlines. Therefore, the quality of a news headline determines the effect of news dissemination, the number of readers and so on. The wording of a news headline also reflects the dissemination bias of the full text. The characteristics of news headlines require that the language of headlines must be concise and unique, so as to stimulate the interest of target reader in reading the news. If the title is not good enough to attract readers, it will be difficult to arouse their interest in reading. It is precisely because news headlines play such an important role that media writers often start from here to construct pragmatic identities and convey biased information in the headlines.

According to the approach of multimodal semantics, semantic meaning is actually just a part of the meaning of a word or sentence, and so does pragmatic meaning[1]. The semantic meaning is the meaning of the word or the sentence itself, while the pragmatic meaning is the speaker meaning derived by the hearer. This view, to a certain extent, is in parallel with the pragmatic identity theory. In the course of a dialogue, the choice of identity is the result of mutual negotiation

between the two parties. The theory of pragmatic identity holds that multiple identities are only part of the underlying context, and only the activated identity (intentional or unintentional) constitutes a pragmatic identity[2]. Taking context as the interface intersection, this study will attempt to use some concept of multimodal semantics in the research of pragmatic identity construction, and combine some examples about news of Huawei to analyze the identities constructed in headlines by different media entities.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Multimodal Semantics

The term multimodality can be traced back to the fourth century BC when classical rhetoricians used it to emphasize voice, gesture and expressions in public speaking [3]. Nevertheless, time has witnessed the definition of multimodality varying from one school to another. According to physiology, smelling and tasting, for instance, are two different modes, or rather two different modal systems because we smell via the olfaction system while we taste via the gustatory system. Physiological perspective lays the foundation for different schools to explain multimodality. Physiology usually interprets modality as a specific sensory system directly, which is different from the perspective of functional linguistic. In this study, multimodality mainly refers to the sensory system raised by physiological school, namely visual modality, auditive modality, tactile modality, olfactory modality, gustatory modality, emotional modality and so on. Based on the study of multimodality by cognitive linguists and psychologists, Liang Ruiqing explored the phenomenal approach to multimodality. Liang holds that the subject of experience usually needs to use a variety of sensory systems (such as visual, auditive, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory system, etc.) to form a relatively complete cognition for the object of experience, or that the object is presented in front of the subject of experience in a variety of perceptions. This phenomenon is also called "multimodal perception" by Gu Yueguo[5]. In this very process, the phenomenal information we gain about the object is multimodal or the experienced object presents itself in various modes of perception. That is to say, phenomenal meaning comes from perceptual experience. The process of perception is multimodal, thus multimodality also exists in phenomenal meaning. Generally speaking, phenomenal meaning is usually a psychological representation of salient or typical phenomenal attributes of a perceived object or experience, which are generally well known to most members of the linguistic community.

The concept of multimodal perception derives from the perceptual symbol system approach. The theory of perceptual symbol system was put forward by Barsalou[5], who is a cognitive psychologist, based on neuroscience. The theory regards "involvement" as the core of information processing, and human language,

as the symbol system formed by cognitive externalization, has "involvement" as opposed to things themselves. Man obtains experience of feeling through his own body and sensory systems. Therefore, most of the philosophers advocate that our body and its functions construct the concepts we use to think. The process of operation is: with the participation of mind, the objective outside world is absorbed by eyes, ears, nose, tongue and limbs. After mental processing, mental representation is represented by linguistic expression.

Different from the traditional research on identity construction, this paper will analyze the lexical differences in news headlines when different media report similar events from a multimodal perspective of lexical semantics, explore the differences in identity construction and communication bias of different media, and put forward some strategies for pragmatic identity construction of news headlines.

2.2 Pragmatic Identity Construction

The study of identity construction is not only the central stage of social sciences, but also a frontier topic in pragmatics. At present, there are two main theoretical perspectives: one is essentialism, which regards identity as a static and fixed entity; the other is constructivism, which regards identity as a dynamic, consultative and changeable entity. The former seldom considers the process of identity construction, thus neglecting the dynamic characteristics of identity construction; the latter seldom defines identity construction in the process of conversation, and seldom regards identity as part of the pragmatic resources that the speaker can call to promote the realization of communicative goals. In view of the current controversy over identity definition, this study argues that the definition of identity needs to consider the speaker's multiple social identities and self-construction, thus demonstrating the necessity and significance of pragmatic identity.

Speech act have an interactive relationship with identity, which is, identity affects the implementation of speech act, and speech act also stereotypes the corresponding identity. Chen Xinren[6] reviewed the previous studies and put forward the concept of pragmatic identity. He defined identity as the pragmatic resources that communicators need to call through the social positioning of others and themselves in order to achieve communication. In view of the communicative and pragmatic attributes of identity, three explanations about the definition of pragmatic identity can be made.

First of all, identity is related to communicative needs. The main ideas of pragmatics pays attention to the realization of communicative purposes. The construction of different identities may ultimately point to the realization of communicative needs. Communicative needs can be determined either before the conversation or as the conversation progresses. Communication needs should also include specific contextual needs and face needs.

Secondly, identity is related to the social orientation of the communicator towards others and himself. As Bucholtz and Hall[7] put it, the choice and construction of communicator's identity requires two-way consideration of the identity characteristics of the speaker and the hearer.

Finally, identity is a pragmatic resource that can be invoked. As a communicator in conversation, in order to achieve communicative goals, the speaker always generates pragmatic power through the use of pragmatic resources, and strives to achieve a balance between pragmatic power and communicative needs.

News narration is a kind of language communication activity. In news reports, media narrators undoubtedly become one of the most important narrative subjects. Its importance is mainly embodied in the creation process of narrative text, and news headlines are the starting point for the establishment of its pragmatic identity, which can display the construction of identity and the bias of communication. The construction of pragmatic identity is an important factor affecting the success of communicative purposes and needs.

3. Comparison of Pragmatic Identity Types: A multimodal perspective

2019 was a turbulent year for Huawei. Affected by the Sino-US trade war, Huawei has been treated unfairly. This part chooses the news reporting of ABCNEWS and China Daily in 2019 from May to August as corpus, and compares the news reporting terms of different news narrators from the perspective of multimodal semantics. It mainly compares the differences of the modality of vocabulary, the information quantity (granularity) and the pragmatic effect.

A comparative analysis would be made to find out what kind of pragmatic identity two different news media construct when dealing with the same news event, and what kind of communicative purpose and communication bias they embody. After the corpus collecting and sorting out, the differences in vocabulary between the two news subjects are summed up. These vocabulary differences highlight the identity built by these authors. The writing characteristics of news headlines are very distinct. It must represent the main body of news in a limited space, so as to generalize the full text or attract readers. Therefore, the most common vocabulary types in news headlines are verbs, nouns and prepositions. Sometimes there are conjunctions, but adjectives and adverbs are relatively rare. According to the characteristics of the corpus, the following will mainly analyze the differences between verbs and nouns in corresponding news reports. Because of the particularity of headlines, News reported by different media has the greatest difference in the use of verbs. The differences of news headlines between the two news media will be compared from a multi-modal perspective.

(1)US gives Huawei a 90-day reprieve on technology trade ban (ABCNEWS)

US to extend Huawei's temporary license for 90 days (China Daily)

In Example 1, ABCNEWS uses a word group in which the noun reprieve shows the central meaning and bias of the headline, while China Daily uses just a word extend. As we can find in Oxford dictionary, giving somebody a reprieve means to officially cancel or delay plans to close or end something. Extend means make something longer, larger, or wider. Obviously, the two words differ greatly in visual modality. The two news reports are all about the U.S. trade policy toward Huawei, of which the core is a 90-day extension. The word reprieve implies that something will close or end in the future, implying a prediction of the future development. However, extend is a neutral word, in which visual modality is the extension of time and space, without emotional meaning and result orientation inside. Apparently, the granularity of the word "extend" is much bigger thus the word "reprieve" conveys more information. These two headlines seem objective with no differences, but judging from the words of ABCNEWS, the reader can find that it not only construct the identity of an information transmitter, but also implicitly construct the identity of an opinion-formers.

(2)Huawei unveils phone system that could replace Android (ABCNEWS)

Huawei launches its own operating system Harmony OS (China Daily)

The bias of transmission in example 2 is more obvious. Replace means to remove somebody or something and put another person or thing in their place. ABCNEWS uses the word replace to convey the message that China Daily did not give, which says Huawei's new system will surpass Android or even work as an alternative to Android. On the same day, China Daily sent out another report entitled Huawei says Hongmeng operating system not for smartphones, intends to continue with Android. This report indicates that Hongmeng System will not replace Android. As an American media, ABCNEWS tends to treat Huawei unfairly in its reports and to guide public opinion in secret.

(3)Huawei says sales up 23% despite US controls (ABCNEWS)

Huawei revenue rises 23.2% despite US restrictions (China Daily)

The difference of words in Example 3 reflects two different identities constructed by these two news media. ABCNEWS uses the word says to construct the identity of an information provider, telling readers that Huawei's growth is what they claim. As a public media, they only objectively reproduce the news and are not responsible for its accuracy. China Daily directly uses the notional word rise to state Huawei's growth as a fact, implying their trust to the data from Huawei. The two nouns control and restriction also reflects the difference. Control means the power to make decisions about how a country, an area, an organization, etc. is run. Restriction means a rule or law that limits what you can do or what can happen. Control and restriction are synonyms, but their implicit modalities are still different. Control represents power and indicates one party's control over the other. Such kind of

words elevates the status of the United States. Restriction refers to the limit of regulations and laws. The prejudice of the American media towards Huawei and its confidence in its own policies can be seen from the analysis of these words.

(4)China threatens retaliation for Trump's planned tariff hike (ABCNEWS)

Ministry: US urged to fulfill Huawei pledge (China Daily)

The conflict can be seen in the headline of the news. If a person threatens to do something unpleasant to you, or if they threaten you, they say or imply that they will do something unpleasant to you, especially if you do not do what they want. But urge means to advise or try hard to persuade somebody to do something. These two words are quite different in emotional modality. China Daily apply the word urge to show the force or impel in an indicated direction. However, Threaten is often used to utter intentions of injury or punishment against somebody. The use of such words by American media has obviously intensified the contradiction between the two sides. They are trying to build a vicious identity of China in words.

4. Conclusion

News reporting is a kind of communication activity, in which the narrator undoubtedly becomes an important communicative subject. The construction of pragmatic identity influences the realization of communicative purposes and needs. Through the analysis of Huawei's news in the summer of 2019, it can be seen that media persons always construct different pragmatic identities in news headlines, and the differences in vocabulary usage between Chinese and Western media also reflect their communication bias. In the process of dynamic communication, various pragmatic identities constructed by communicators play certain pragmatic functions and have their own communicative value. They are pragmatic resources that can be invoked. The construction of these pragmatic identities is characterized by diversity, dynamism and strategy. The process of their construction of pragmatic identity embodies certain tactics, and some pragmatic motivations are hidden behind it. In order to achieve the communicative purpose smoothly and meet the current communicative needs, the media from different standpoints embody different communication bias in their manuscripts. However, in order to ensure the objectivity of the media, the official news reports should grasp the accuracy of vocabulary, control the accurate transmission of information quantity and objective construction of identity.

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