

# A Pragmatic Study of Metaphorization in English Newspaper Headlines

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**Abstract**—This paper attempts to explore the phenomenon of metaphorization in English newspaper headlines from the perspective of pragmatic investigation. With relevance theory as the guideline, this paper makes an explanation of the processing of metaphor with a pragmatic approach and points that metaphor is the stimulus adopted by journalists to achieve optimal relevance in this ostensive communication, as well as the strategy to fulfill their writing purpose.

**Keywords**—Metaphorization, newspaper, headlines, relevance theory.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THIS study aims to explore the phenomenon of metaphorization in today's English newspaper headlines with a pragmatic approach. The main task of this paper is to explain the mechanism of metaphorization in today's English newspaper headlines.

Metaphor in this paper is not merely regarded as a type of rhetorical device, but more as a strategy in accomplishing a speech act in communication between journalists and newspaper readers [9]. What journalists want to achieve is the optimal relevance in writing a newspaper headline for their readers, by making their communicative intention better understood through the act shown by metaphor. Relevance Theory (RT) promoted by Sperber and Wilson [5] is to play a key role in analyzing the mechanism.

## II. GENERAL STUDY OF NEWSPAPER HEADLINES AND METAPHOR OVERVIEW

So far, researches on newspaper headlines at home and abroad have made continuous achievements in various aspects. For native English linguists, news language is a particular genre in linguistic studies, in which they apply various theories to analyze linguistic features in this special field. Such studies are usually part of the publications on language. Meanwhile, some journalists are transferring a part of their attention from the practice of reporting news to writing books on news reporting. Owing to the unique role of newspaper headlines, both linguists and journalists have attached great importance to them by putting their efforts into this field aiming for theoretical and practical advancement respectively.

The investigation into newspaper headlines is also a focused task among Chinese researchers. Early in the 1980s, some Chinese scholars like Peng Chaocheng [2] began to show their interests in studying Chinese newspaper headlines. Members in

the Journalism Department of China People's University took the initiative to produce the first selection book on Chinese newspaper headlines. More and more books in this field have followed to show their appearance, with different emphases on artistic appreciation, classified selection, practical writing skills, and theoretical exploration of Chinese newspaper headlines. A closer examination on current studies, either in Chinese or English newspaper headlines, reveals to us that the present dilemma in developing new study field of this subject is rooted in the researching modes prevailing in China, which restrict further exploration into the nature of newspaper headlines.

People are social animals; news reporting is just one of the social activities mainly involving journalists and newspaper readers. In this way, news language can be viewed and further analyzed from the perspective of communicative behavior, to be specific, the journalistic behavior. In communication, news language is to realize a preset goal set by the journalist, thus a kind of speech act indeed. To construct the speech act mode, modern pragmatics and news communication theories form the theoretical bases, but the primary task is to find the converging point between the two fields. Hu Fanzhu [6], a Chinese scholar in rhetoric, has made related studies to develop this mode. He affirms that to study rhetoric as an artistic selection of language is undoubtedly meaningful, but its limitations in defining certain concepts restrict the development on this subject. Actually, he tentatively proposes the four-step operational route for the speech act mode. He even boldly argues that rhetoric is pragmatics to some extent, and speech act is the core of rhetoric study. Investigation into the speech act mode functions as the precondition to the core pragmatic analyses of metaphorization in English newspaper headlines. This mode works with pragmatic principles in explaining the processing of metaphor in English newspaper headlines [8].

To sum up, the study of newspaper headlines has focused too much attention on the composition, rhetorical and stylistic aspects. Excess efforts have been made to summarize the linguistic features of newspaper headlines, mainly from the artistic or rhetoric angle; few efforts have been made to investigate the mechanism behind those linguistic or stylistic features. Against this background, the suggestion of the speech act mode paves an encouraging way for researchers to update their views and review relevant issues in this field. This paper is to probe into one of the features in English newspaper headlines---metaphorization, within the framework of the speech act mode and a key pragmatic principle---the principle of relevance. It is hoped that such a study can help newspaper readers, as well as news reporters, to get closer to the nature of

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newspaper headlines.

As commonly believed, the first person in studying metaphor is Aristotle, who wrote in *Rhetoric* and *Poetics* almost 1600 years ago that “metaphor consists in giving a thing a name that belongs to something else; the transference being either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or on the ground of analogy”[3]. This definition reveals a primary view of metaphor as the substitution in discourse of one idea for another.

This paper would adopt Cameron’s generalization on this issue [10]. He points out that there are three levels of analysis: a theory level, a processing level and a neurological level.

Level 1---The theory level concerns metaphor identification, categorization of metaphor types, the goal and the logic of the production, interpretation and noticing of metaphor in discourse as processing tasks.

Level 2---The processing level concerns the activation of concepts, as constructed through interaction between individuals and their socio-cultural environment, in the processing of metaphorical language in discourse, how an interpretation of metaphor is reached and how a particular metaphor comes to be used, the structuring of conceptual domains through metaphor and conceptual change through encounters with metaphor.

Level 3---The neural level concerns neural activity that brings about metaphor processing at Levels 2 and 1.

For this applied metaphor research, this paper is going to touch the first two levels---the theory level and the processing level of analysis, but what is most important for this paper is to reach a congruence between the two levels through a pragmatic investigation into the mechanism working behind metaphorization in English newspaper headlines. The neurological research is absent in this paper due to its derivation from the purpose of this paper, together with difficulties in the maneuverability and its immaturity in metaphor studies.

### III. RELEVANCE THEORY AND METAPHORIZATION IN NEWSPAPER HEADLINES

Relevance Theory (RT) proposed by D. Sperber and D. Wilson [5] is known as a theory of pragmatics, which has developed into the extent of being a sub-branch of pragmatics, cognitive pragmatics. Its potential power in interpreting the natural language lights up interdisciplinary studies among pragmatics, psycholinguistics and cognitive science. Metaphor, viewed as “a matter of thought and action” [7], has actually entered into the study field of cognitive science. It is because of its cognitive nature that this paper will investigate metaphor with reference to the concept and principle of RT.

#### *A. Metaphor and Key Concepts in Relevance Theory*

The key principle in Sperber and Wilson’s relevance theory [5] is the communicative principle of relevance, which indicates that every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance. Some main theory of it concludes: ostensive communication, optimal relevance and presumption of optimal relevance.

For communicators, the principle of relevance plays a key role in their choosing a particular stimulus to have an effect on the addressee’s cognitive environment [4]. For addressees, this principle mainly contributes in steering them to the most plausible interpretation of the utterance by implying that communicators always try to be relevant. In this sense, relevance is a result of interactions between the stimulus and the cognitive environment of the addressee. However, to process a stimulus always costs energy, so the effect it achieves is always against the effort it takes. Consequently, relevance can be defined as a combined function of effect and effort, a kind of cost-benefit balance indeed. The more cognitive effects derived the greater the relevance of the input; the greater the processing effort the less relevant the information. Hence, if a communicator conveys a message in a way that requires least efforts and ends in more effects on the addressee, it can be said that optimal relevance is attained.

Sperber and Wilson’s remarks on metaphor are embedded in a passage in which they explain the difference between descriptive and interpretative dimensions of language use. Utterances can be used to represent the truth or falsity of some states of affairs in the real or a conceivable world, as well as to represent by resemblance. Sperber and Wilson call the first type of representation descriptions such as in assertions, and the second interpretations as shown by direct quotations, translations and summaries. We can say that there exists a gap between thought and language. It is on this plane linking utterance and thought that Sperber and Wilson locate metaphor.

Let us say that an utterance, in its role as an interpretive expression of a speaker’s thought is strictly literal if it has the same propositional form as that thought. To say that an utterance is less than strictly literal is to say that its propositional form shares some, but not all, of its logical properties with the propositional form of the thought it is being used to interpret. From the standpoint of relevance theory, there is no reason to think that the optimally relevant interpretive expression of a thought is always the most literal one. The speaker is presumed to aim at optimal relevance, not at literal truth [5].

To put it simply, the communicator’s utterance can vary in the degree to which it resembles his/her thought. The greater the “gap” between, the less literal the utterance.

Optimal relevance can either be achieved by high degree of literalness, or by a low degree of literalness. After all, the gap between thought and language predetermines the existence of metaphor. Although Sperber and Wilson’s views on metaphor are not worked out in detail, the basic concepts of RT have provided a framework for studying metaphor in communication. An investigation into those concepts helps me commensurate RT with the metaphor study, as can be summarized in the following three aspects:

- 1) Sperber and Wilson’s view on the gap between thought and utterance sets the precondition for the existence of metaphor in real communication. The communicator’s utterance is not necessarily a literal interpretation of his/her thought.
- 2) To achieve optimal relevance, there must be some overlaps

between the network of assumptions of communicators and addressees. Metaphor, which involves two domains in its operation, helps to construct the mutual manifestness.

- 3) The key feature of metaphor lies in the projection of features upon the target subject from the source subject. Such projection results in activating the right assumptions, or "associated implications" from the cognitive environment of the addressee. Therefore, metaphor is a stimulus in achieving optimal relevance in communication [1].

To sum up, the principle of relevance helps to position metaphor in communication, and consequently rules the interpretation of metaphor. Among various forms of stimuli, metaphor finds its way to activate the cognitive environment of the addressee, thus leading communication to optimal relevance. The way how metaphor works in communication is to be discussed in the next section.

#### *B. Processing Metaphor in Communication*

Both the communicator and the addressee are involved in the process. So far as stimulus activation is concerned, the process is closely related to the mutual cognitive environment of those involved in the communication.

Based on the understanding of the principle of relevance, this paper try to present the processing route of metaphor in two processes. Process 1, from relevance to metaphor, stands for the production of metaphor by the communicator, while process 2, from metaphor to relevance, and refers to the interpretation of metaphor on the addressee's side. The working mechanism of metaphor can be understood in four steps:

- 1) In process 1, the communicator first assesses the cognitive environment of the addressee with respect to his informative and communicative intentions, and then chooses the right stimulus based on the result of the assessment.
- 2) Once the communicator adopts metaphor as the stimulus, metaphor will start activating certain assumptions among the addressee's cognitive environment by projection of features from the source domain upon the target domain. As the gap between thought and language, metaphor requires the addressee's efforts to process it. This leads to metaphor cognition or interpretation.
- 3) In process 2, governed by the principle of relevance, the addressee, aware that the communicator aims to achieve optimal relevance, searches in his/her cognitive environment for any implicature of the metaphor, either strong or weak. Meanwhile, the addressee also bears in mind that the communicator does not want to cause unnecessary efforts, so he/she will finally depend on mutual manifestness to reach the most intended interpretation from the contextual assumptions.
- 4) Once the addressee recognizes and then interprets the metaphor, he/she may process the new information in an old context, or add new assumptions to his/her cognitive world, or reject the assumptions, or just strengthen or weaken to a certain degree some existing assumptions.

In whatever cases, the addressee's cognitive environment is

affected, thus realizing the optimal relevance presumed by the communicator at the very beginning. In the whole process, both the communicator and the addressee are governed by the principle of relevance.

#### IV. EXPLANATION OF METAPHORIZATION IN NEWSPAPER HEADLINES

According to the speech act mode, newspaper headlines perform a certain act set by journalists based on their writing purpose and the nature of the news fact. Along this process, metaphor is viewed as the strategy to perform the act. Meanwhile, within the framework of RT, metaphor functions as the stimulus to affect potential readers' cognitive environment in attaining optimal relevance in communication. Drawing on the speech act mode and the relevance principle, this paper will make an explanation of the processing of metaphor in newspaper headlines.

This paper aims to combine the speech act mode with the framework of RT in processing metaphor in newspaper headlines. For a newspaper headline, relevance is no longer the aim and the end of communication, but a key step in fulfilling the purpose through an act. This act-performing nature of communication decides that in writing a headline for a piece of news, journalists must firstly make clear their writing purpose by assessing the nature of the news fact and the cognitive environment of their target readers, and then choose the right stimulus to achieve optimal relevance. As for readers, their notion of being optimally relevant expands to performing an act. In the end, so it is not only about the cognitive effects on them, but also concerning their response to the newspaper headline.

From these two theories, metaphor in newspaper headlines can be positioned from the four perspectives: An interaction between the cognitive environment of journalists and readers;

A strategy for journalists to perform a preset act, mainly to inform and to attract; A stimulus in attaining optimal relevance; A key environment for journalists to build mutual manifestness among readers.

From all those abstract findings achieved so far, the working mechanism of metaphorization in newspaper headlines could be interpreted in the following way:

- 1) The journalist, according to the nature of the news fact, sets one or several purposes in writing a newspaper headline after assessing the cognitive environment of target readers;
- 2) To achieve the preset goal, the journalist decides on the act to perform through the newspaper headline based on the writing purpose;
- 3) In performing such an act, the journalist has to make both his/her informative intention and communicative intention clear enough, so he/she decides to rely on a proper stimulus to activate right assumptions from target readers;
- 4) In the case of choosing metaphor as the stimulus, the journalist actually activates the context in which the metaphor is to be processed, namely the mutual manifest environment of the journalist and the reader. Metaphor does have such contextual effects thanks to its main feature of involving two domains. Projection of features from the

source domain upon the target domain contributes to this activation process; In performing such an act, the journalist has to make both his/her informative intention and communicative intention clear enough, so he/she decides to rely on a proper stimulus to activate right assumptions from target readers;

- 5) At the sight of the metaphor in the newspaper headline, readers, governed by the relevance principle, recognize the communicative intention of the journalist and thus put efforts into processing it. Their interpretation of metaphor depends on the mutually manifest assumptions, which are either conveyed in other parts of the news or embedded in their own cognitive environment. Anyway, they finally settle on the most relevant interpretation, a strong implicature of the metaphor for them. This is the key step which involves interactions between the journalist and the reader, as well as interactions between the stimulus and the cognitive environment of the reader; In performing such an act, the journalist has to make both his/her informative intention and communicative intention clear enough, so he/she decides to rely on a proper stimulus to activate right assumptions from target readers;
- 6) While comprehending the most relevant assumption, readers modify their views or thoughts about the news and the metaphor itself, by adopting, rejecting, strengthening or weakening certain assumptions involved. In this case, the readers' cognitive environment is affected, thus optimal relevance attained;
- 7) At last, readers act out those cognitive changes in a certain way. Meanwhile, the journalist succeeds in performing the act set at the beginning of writing the newspaper headline, thus the end of communication.

#### V. CONCLUSION

This is a pragmatic study on a particular phenomenon in English newspaper headlines---metaphorization. Its main task is to make an explanation for the processing of metaphor in newspaper headlines, based on the speech act mode in news language study and Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory.

After a review on metaphor study, we could find that metaphor is the result of interactions between two different domains, which involves projection of features from the source domain upon the target domain. In this study metaphor is more viewed on its cognitive aspect. This paper has made in modifying the cognitive environment, especially on people's understanding of metaphor and newspaper headlines.

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