

# Study on Ethics of Wechat News Headlines

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**ABSTRACT.** From different levels of language expression, Wechat news headlines can be divided into three types: formulas marked by specific words, sentence patterns and discourse patterns. It can be seen from the expression of language form and content that the characteristics of Wechat news are different with traditional ones in news ethics, language ethics and social ethics guidance.

**KEYWORDS:**Wechat news headline formulas, new ethics, language ethics, social ethics

## 1. Introduction

News and language researchers have been concerned about Wechat news, and have given special attention to the titles of the news. Previously, some scholars studied clickbait titles[1-2], some studied optimal relevance in title and content of the articles [3], while some compared titles of Wechat news with traditional news[4]. This paper starts from the formulas of Wechat titles and studies its unique guiding trend in aspects of news ethics, language ethics and social ethics.

## 2. Studies on Wechat News Formulas from Three Aspects

Headline formulas of Wechat news can be studied from three aspects: firstly, from the level of language components, the formulas marked by specific repeated words are studied; secondly, from the level of combination of language components, the formulas of special combinations within or between sentences as headlines are studied; thirdly, from the level of discourse analysis, discourse patterns formed through combination of discourse content and language expression are studied.

### 2.1 Formulas Marked by Specific Words

The formulas of Wechat news headlines are commonly marked by specific words like mood adverbs, interjections, onomatopoeic words, network neologisms and personal pronouns, etc.

### 2.1.1 “Modal Adverbs+s” Patterns Frequently Appear

From June 1, 2018 to November 30, 2018, 117 titles of Wechat News in *People's Daily* included modal adverb “*Jing*” which means unexpected, among which 34 were “*Jingran*” and 20 were “*Juran*”, both meaning unexpected. For example:

(1) Reporters reported “illegal sand mining”. The response unexpectedly came from the owner of the sand factory. What happened? (13 November 13, 2018)②

The “*Jing*” phrases express unexpected (unconventional, unconventional) events, through reading which the readers’ attention would quickly concentrate on the parts that follow “*Jing*”. Mood adverbs, at the same time, indicate the speakers’ general attitude or evaluation of the basic propositions expressed in the sentences [5]. In different contexts, dissatisfaction, ecstasy and other attitudes can be interpreted to help arouse emotional resonance.

### 2.1.2 Abundant Use of Interjections and Onomatopoeic Words

Formulas of interjections and onomatopoeic words are repeated and compound use of interjections and onomatopoeic words. This type of formula is highly descriptive and appealing, through which behaviors of opinions are vividly described. For example:

(2) [Recommendation] The unhappiest seller show in history is prevailing! Ha ha ha ha ha ha

ge~ (November 22, 2018)

The “*Ha ha ha ha ha ha ge~*” in Example (2) are different from the commonly used onomatopoeic words “*ha ha ha*”. Repeated “*ha*”, which means laugh out loud, here increases the degree of happiness and prolongs the time of happiness; the coupled “*ge*”, which means the sound of a burp, depicts a three-dimensional acoustics effect of laughing to burp; the multi-modal form of “*~*” has been supplemented to depict that laughter beats on after another. There is a sense of immersion, as if the hiccup is by the ear, and the smiling face is in front of readers.

### 2.1.3 High Frequent Use of Network Neologisms

In Wechat news headlines, short but meaningful network neologisms are often used to reflect the language’s characteristics of the times and to narrow the gap between the news and the readers who are mainly netizens and the youth. For example:

(3) How strong is the power grid in our country? This group of answers given by the netizens

has been lighted up! (June 8, 2018)

In example (3), the popular Internet phrase “X<sup>3</sup> has been lighted up” usually means “X” is different and attracts people's attention.

#### **2.1.4 Admission of Pronouns**

Three types of personal pronouns are widely used in the headlines of Wechat news. Generally speaking, they have the functions of shortening the readers' psychological distance with the writers of the article and enhancing interaction. However, different personal pronouns have different admission effects, thus forming into different types of pronouns.

First of all, the first personal pronouns, which refer to “I” and “we”, help to enhance the readers' sense of identity. For example:

(4) Morning memory is the best? We have been deceived for so many years (November 3, 2018)

Secondly, the second personal pronouns, which refer to “you” and “you”, help to create a sense of dialogue and reality, thus enhancing interaction. For example:

(5) [Health] These three things should be included in a breakfast! See if there's anything you

often eat (July 3, 2018)

Finally, the third person pronouns help to arouse readers' curiosity and increase the article's click-through rate. For example:

(6) [Health] Everyone brings their own anti-cancer power! You should protect it to avoid cancer! (November 30, 2018)

In example (6), readers cannot refer the “it” in the title to a specific object, thus their desires to obtain information are enhanced and they're guided to click on the full text and read through.

## **2.2 Formulas of Sentence Patterns**

### **2.2.1 Unconventional Form Combination in Sentences**

(7) The soldier has made a move again again again(又双叒)! This time it's a Sergeant who's on the leave that comes forward. (July 25, 2018)

In examples (7), “again again again” might also be “again again again again”(“又双叒叒”), both of which are called the pattern of “repetition of again”. [6]believes that the “repetition of again” pattern refers to a visual rhetoric of Chinese characters. Repetition of characters is used to express that something happens frequently or repeatedly.

In addition to the unconventional combination of linguistic symbols, sometimes the headline of Wechat news come in multi-modal forms. Take (2) and (8) for example:

(8) Salute! Hurricanes and hale stones and rainstorms (大=风=干冰雹+暴雨) came together.

They guarded the city as always. (June 14, 2018)

In example (8), the combination of words and symbols is adopted. The image of “大=风=干” depicts the dynamics of violent wind. The intensity of hailstorms and rainstorms can be vividly expressed through “冰雹”和”暴雨”. The symbol “+” here means that hurricanes, hale stones and rainstorms come together. Readers can feel the bad weather without any extra modifier, and thus the writer’s admiration for “them guarding the city as always” is reflected.

## 2.2.2 Unconventional Form Combination between Sentences

### 1.2.2.1 “Assessment Sentences + Events” Formulas

Assessment sentences can be formed by nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc., which might express feelings and attitudes. For example:

(9) Absurd! In order to meet the inspection, village cadres brush the walls overnight, and the

inspectors still praise the good propaganda even though they are stained with paint. (June 18, 2018)

The evaluation part can also be a sentence, which can be located in front or at the back. When it’s at the back of a sentence, it’s often expressed through the netizen’s voice. For example:

(10) Her speech made all of the present American students stand up and applaud! Netizens: “This is what international students from China should look like!” (November 25, 2018)

In fact, the writer used this pattern to express his/her attitude or opinion by the netizens’ voice so as to increase its acceptability.

### 1.2.2.2 “S + Half of a Sentence” Format

The sentence is incomplete in both form and meaning. It ends with ellipsis or semi-ellipsis. Sometimes it has words like “*Jingran*”(unexpectedly) in it which enhance the mood of surprising. For example:

(11) Something unexpected! The new response to the event of “marathon flag handing” was...

(November 21, 2018)

The omission part in example (11) is the key content of the piece of news. It leaves blanks in the key part to attract readers to click on and read, and to leave readers with imagination space. The unexpected atmosphere is rendered by the combination of mood adverbs such as “*Jing*”(unexpectedly), which further arouses readers' curiosity.

### **1.2.2.3 Inverted Sentences**

The inverted sentences are often used in the headlines of Wechat news. Sometimes an exclamation mark is used to split a long sentence into two sentences, which further highlights the importance of the inverted part. For example:

(12) Here we are! News Early Bus!

Example (12) is the title of a column pushed by the Wechat public account of *The People's Daily* every morning. The column is to summarize the news of the previous day and the hot spots on the day to come. “Here we are!” expresses the joy of the public to welcome the news after waiting all night.

In addition, inverted sentences in Wechat news headlines have formed into many new formats. For example:

(13) Just now, Kim Jong-un met with Trump. (June 12,2018)

Since the Wechat Public account of Xinhua News Agency, launched a short piece of news entitled “Just now, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Was Abandoned” on June 21, 2017, the title has quickly spread to the Internet and has become a target for all media public accounts to emulate. Thus the “just now” pattern has formed into a style named “ganggang (just now)” style. According to the interpretation in *Modern Chinese 800 Words*<sup>[7]</sup>, “just now “means that an event occurred not long ago. It is mainly used to modify verbs and adjectives in sentences in spoken language. However, in “ganggang (just now)” style, “ganggang” breaks through the traditional grammatical pattern and is used solely at the beginning of a sentence, highlighting the timeliness of news reports. In addition, the use of colloquial formulas in the headlines of major events news reports makes the national events more lively. Thus the events' distance with ordinary people are shortened, and the events are more adaptable to the relaxed and lively context of network news.

## **2.3 Formulas of Discourse Model**

Besides the traditional narrative formula, there are two new types of Wechat news headline formulas: question-and-answer formula and direct quotation formula.

### **2.3.1 Question-and-Answer Headline Formula**

Question-and-answer headline phrases consist of two sentences: the one is the question and the other the answer. However, rather than directly giving answers to the questions, the answer sentence often highlights the unexpected and authoritative nature of the answers. For example:

(14) [Health] Why walking for 6,000 steps a day? We'll explain to you thoroughly here!

(November 1, 2018)

The academic word "explain thoroughly" in the title stimulates the readers to click for a further reading.

### **2.3.2 Direct Speech Formula**

In a direct quotation formula, words of the characters in the news are often quoted in the headlines. Since the direct quotation has a strong sense of authenticity, it might be more easily for the readers to accept the emotional attitude and cognitive experience expressed in the titles. For example:

(15) "Run, it's baby's life that matters!" (November 20, 2018)

Example (15) reflects both the urgency of the situation and the courageous and resolute attitude of the speaker. A thrilling scene has been created through one sentence, which makes the readers wonder what happened in the end, thus arousing their desire to keep reading.

From the analysis above, we can see that the headlines of Wechat news have formed into many new linguistic types. New forms will inevitably bring new functions, and we will try to discuss the new guiding trend from the perspective of journalism, linguistics and sociology.

## **3. Ethics in Wechat News Headlines**

The headlines of Wechat news are as authentic and time-limited as traditional news, meanwhile, they have their own unique features as well.

### **3.1 From Objective Reporting to Subjective Guidance**

From the adverbial markers, interjections and "evaluation sentences + events" formats that appear in Wechat news headlines, we can tell that obviously the headlines no longer guide readers imperceptibly through objective narration, instead, they have been evolved into exaggerated transmission of subjective tendencies through subjective description, emotional catharsis and sensory experience.

### **3.2 From Strict Publication to Interactive Chatting**

From the colloquial words as well as the discourse patterns of question-and-answer and quotations in headline formulas, we can see that news communication has become an interactive process rather than a one-way statement, paying more attention to the response of the audience. With the admission of pronouns and the filling of discourse formulas, the Wechat headlines have evolved from formal news

release into interaction through chatting, seeking for emotional identification. The news has been more and more entertaining, as we can see, “*Ganggang* (just now)” formula has been used widely in reports regarding affairs of the country.

### ***3.3 Headlines Turning into Leads***

As the headline and content of Wechat news are on different pages, it is particularly important to attract readers in the headline section. Therefore, the headline phrases are lengthened and have various types, which are similar to the lead words in traditional news. There are many eye-catching words in the formulas, such as mood adverbs, network neologisms, etc. however, in order to increase the click-through rate, the core of the news should not be as fully displayed in the headlines as in the leads, thus half a sentence functions as a formula, which is against the language standardization.

## **4. Language Ethics of Headline Phrases in Wechat News**

Traditional news idioms are often praised by people because of their obvious stylization, lack of innovation and interesting. However, Wechat news idioms have made remarkable progress in flexibility, interesting and interactive aspects, reducing the negative impact of the use of idioms, and reflecting the characteristics of the times of language development.

### ***4.1 Enhancing the Reporting Efficiency by Using Headline Idioms***

Firstly, in order to satisfy the reader's “fragmentation” reading mode, a flexible and diverse set of headline phrases of micro-news has been formed. According to different news events and themes, appropriate vocabulary, sentence patterns and patterns can be selected to quickly form news reports, improve reporting efficiency and enhance timeliness.

### ***4.2 Multimodality of Headline Formulas Adapts to Shallow Reading Habits***

In order to meet the readers' psychological needs for relaxation, network words, colloquial expressions and multi-model writing styles are added to the language expression to help forming interesting micronews formulas. Multi-modality mobilizes all human senses and has the artistry of modern media. However, strong long-term sensory stimulation replaces readers' thinking and imagination with visualized pictures, and it is bad for the formation of a good reading habit- thinking while reading.

### ***4.3 The Serious Phenomenon of Language Anomie***

Language is constantly changing, new vocabulary and expressions are widely used in Wechat news headlines, which helps to promote language change. However, too many new forms of language are not conducive to the development of language standardization, meanwhile, non-standard language using has aggravated the proliferation of language violence. For example:

(16) [Concern] It's shameless to ask a boss to pay a meal for an official! (November 30, 2018)

Example (16) is a quoted headline phrase. Although the condemnation of the act of "letting the boss to pay a meal for an official" conforms to the core values of socialism and creates an honest character, the use of "shameless" in news headlines is a kind of language violence, which can be regarded as language anomie.

## 5. Social Ethics

On the whole, the micro-news of *The People's Daily* still focuses on the promotion of positive energy and excellent traditional ethics. Nowadays, diligence, patriotism, dedication and commitment are the main themes of the time. But in the new era, social ethics are also changing. People's public images turning out to be inconsistency, moral kidnapping, gender discrimination and so on also appear in the headlines of Wechat news. For example:

(17) [Reminder] Female driver causes 4 deaths and 13 injuries in downtown area! Police ,

Notice: Use the throttle as the brake and moreover... (August 10, 2018)

The "female XX" marked by "female" is stigmatized[7]. We found that from June 1 to November 30, 2018, there were 10 reports about "female drivers" in the public account of People's Daily, 7 of which were related to negative news such as traffic accidents. Overemphasizing the driver's gender in the report tends to make the readers ignore the event itself and make a fixed connection between "female driver" and traffic accident behavior, resulting in "female driver" being labeled as "road killer". This stigmatized title is also a manifestation of gender discrimination.

## 6. Conclusion

Wechat news is a platform for information exchange and communication among the general public. The headlines of Wechat news show the civilian-based characteristic in terms of news ethics, language ethics and social ethics. Take the audience as the starting point, News headlines evolve from formal news release to chat interaction and emotional identification, while weakening the seriousness and rigor of news, and at the same time increase the audience's acceptance scope and acceptance degree. It should be said that the formulas have played the role of real-time news, which is to broadcast the current events. Headlines functioning as leads, as well as subjective sentimentalization, cater to the psychology of fragment and shallow reading, while the novelty of language forms especially attracted the

attention of young audiences. Although there is anomie phenomenon in the language form and expression ethics of headline formulas to varying degrees, these anomie phenomena will be gradually curbed as time goes, with the improvement of people's self-orientation, social requirements and the need of returning to pure language consciousness.

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### Notes:

- ① S refers to the form of phrases or sentences.
- ② All examples are from Wechat news of The People's Daily's public accounts.
- ③ X refers to phrases.

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