Study on Chinese Lettered Words in Business News Headlines from the Language Economics Perspective

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Abstract

Language use in the cross-cultural era has led to the surge of lettered words in non-Romanized languages. Particularly in China, Chinese lettered words have established themselves as an inevitable linguistic phenomenon. Chinese lettered words are defined as words borrowed from English and composed of Latin alphabet (including Chinese phonetic alphabet) or Greek letters or of their respective combinations with symbols, numbers, or Chinese characters. This study examines the use of Chinese lettered words in business news headlines collected from Chinese Business News Network (Comnews) based on the theory of language economics. The research finds that Chinese lettered words employed in business news headlines demonstrate their economy and logic since they adhere to the language economics principles of market demand, least effort, satisfaction adequacy, convergence, and equilibrium. As a product of cross-cultural communication, Chinese lettered words not only witness the integration of Chinese and foreign cultures, but further promote the cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries.

Keywords

Chinese lettered words, language economics, business news

1. Introduction

Language use in the cross-cultural era has led to the surge of lettered words in non-Romanized languages, especially in Chinese (Li & Gong, 2018). Chinese lettered words are defined as words being composed of Latin alphabet (including Chinese phonetic alphabet) or Greek letters or their respective combinations with symbols, numbers, or Chinese characters (Liu, 2002). With the increasing use of Chinese lettered words, researchers have paid much attention to their influence. Some scholars opposed the widespread of lettered words and mentioned that lettered words destroyed the purity of Chinese (He & Hao, 2013). In contrast, most scholars hold an eclectic attitude and mentioned that the Chinese lettered words added a new language form into Chinese (Zhi, 2010; Han, 2015). Although considerable research has been devoted to Chinese lettered words, most discussions separated Chinese lettered words from a specific language context. Therefore, this paper focuses on Chinese lettered words in business news’ headlines and explores their rationality from the perspective of language economics.

2. Theoretical Framework

“Language economics” was firstly introduced by Marschak (1965), which means the close relationship between economics and the search for the optimization of language. However, due to the diversity of economic principles
and methods, there is no fixed analytical framework in language economics. According to Ren (2003), the principles of language economics can be summarized as the principle of economy, least effort and equilibrium. Liu (2004) supported the principle of convergence, least effort and equilibrium. Furthermore, Yan (2013) added the principle of market demand on the basis of the first two researchers and borrowed the principle of proximity from Xiang (2002). Based on their discussion, this paper summarizes five principles involved in language economics as follows:

Table 1. The Principles of Language Economics Summarized in this Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principles</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>principle of market demand</td>
<td>Language producers should fully meet the market demand in language and adapt to the changes of the market demand brought by economic development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>principle of least effort</td>
<td>Language producers tend to use the simplest language to make the consumers receive as much information as possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>principle of satisfaction adequacy</td>
<td>Language producers and consumers choose or interpret topics based on their existing knowledge in order to maximize their utility.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>principle of convergence</td>
<td>Language producers tend to use majority languages in pursuit of utility maximization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>principle of equilibrium</td>
<td>Language producers tend to balance the form and concept of language when using language, and promote the equilibrium between visual and auditory aspects of language, thus facilitating the wider spread of language in the balanced transition.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Analyses of Chinese Lettered Words in Business News Headlines

Economic and business terminology make up a significant share of the commonly used Chinese lettered words, and are widely used in business news headlines. Their function to meet the requirements of journalism pursuing professional words and the accuracy of expression conforms to the principles of language economics.

3.1 Principle of Market Demand

Language producers adapt to the changes of economic development to make their words in business news headlines meet the market demand. There is one example from Chinese Business News Network (Comnews):

Example 1: G20 成员国货物贸易今年第二季度继续下降 (Trade in goods among G20 members continued to fall in the second quarter of this year, 2019-09-05)

In 2003, the phrase “G20” was first used. After China assumed the G20 chairship in 2016 and hosted the trade ministers’ meeting in Shanghai, the term “G20” erupted in the online media. China’s election as chair has made “G20” turn into a buzzword in the economic society once more. It demonstrates the close connection between vocabulary’s popularity and the social economy. And popular Chinese lettered words can also reflect the development of the national economy and the international economic status of a country. Furthermore, there is no difference in meaning between “Group of Twenty members” and “G20 members”, but the former expression is less concise and less highlighted than the latter. In this regard, the appearance of English letters in the Chinese context is not abrupt, and the harmony between the two can attract readers’ attention, bring a sense of visual impact, and leave a deeper impression on readers.

3.2 Principle of Least Effort

Chinese letter words are used to avoid ambiguity while simplifying complex Chinese expressions, which is in line with the principle of least effort.

Example 2: PMI 显示：新加坡 10 月份制造业萎缩略改善 (PMI shows that Singapore’s manufacturing contraction improved slightly in October 2019-11-06)

If “PMI” is observed separately as an English acronym, it refers to “Program Management Instruction” or “Project Management Institute”, which can cause confusing since English abbreviations are mostly polysemy. But as a Chinese English-origin lettered word, “PMI” in Modern Chinese Dictionary is interpreted only as “purchasing
managers’ index”, which results from the meaning of letters is defined when they are combined with Chinese characters. At the same time, as a part of the headline, “PMI” is used to combine with other Chinese words, thus further framing its meaning. Therefore, the use of Chinese lettered words in business news headlines achieves the effect of driving out ambiguity and avoiding complexity.

3.3 Principle of Satisfaction Adequacy

The use of familiar Chinese lettered words can reduce the cognitive burden on people.

Example 3: 中日韩 FTA: 前景光明道路曲折(The future of the China-Japan-Korea FTA is bright but also tortuous, 2020-01-15)

The word-formation of “China-Japan-Korea FTA” embodies the principle of satisfaction adequacy. As early as 1994, the United States, Canada, and Mexico declared to establish the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA). From then on, the application of the term “FTA” has been widespread. The Chinese translation of “FTA” is “自由贸易区 (free trade area)”. As is known to all, reinventing new words takes time and effort. Driven by the desire to save effort, people tend to express new things and concepts in familiar and existing forms. Therefore, directly borrowing the concept of “NAFTA” to create the term “China-Japan-Korea FTA”, is in line with the principle of satisfaction adequacy at the level of vocabulary creation.

3.4 Principle of Convergence

Language producers frequently utilize lingua franca or majority languages in business news headlines to maximize utility.

Example 4: 在优先保障人民健康和福祉的前提下, 尽快复工复产, 帮助企业积极扩大出口, 因为约旦别无选择, 没有B计划!(With the priority of protecting the health and well-being of the people, Jordan has no choice or plan B but resume work and production as soon as possible to help companies actively expand exports, 2020-06-17)

In this case, the letter B originally had no practical meaning. But as the second letter of the alphabet, the implicit concept of Plan B was an alternative Plan if Plan A did not work. As soon as this metaphor enters the Chinese context, it is understood and accepted by Chinese people, and spreads like a virus. More and more businessmen and laymen are familiar with it, and compound phrases like “life Plan B” and “Plan B anxiety” are constantly derived. Therefore, when it comes to “备选方案” or “备选计划” in Chinese, people still choose the term “Plan B” in order to maximize utility and achieve convergence.

3.5 Principle of Equilibrium

The use of Chinese lettered words can help the proposed news headlines to achieve a balance in vision and auditory sense more than written directly in Chinese.

Example 5: 什么是“中日韩+X”合作早期收获项目 (What is the “China, Japan, ROK +X” project, 2019-12-25)

Word-creation of “中日韩+X (China, Japan, ROK +X)” shows the balance between form and concept, which is the equilibrium in the first state. “X” is just a letter in English, but the “X” in “中日韩+X” refers to a country. The existing “X” mentioned in the news includes Mongolia, Myanmar, Cambodia, Philippines, Indonesia, and ASEAN countries. In addition, “X” has been deeply stamped with the brand of Chinese, which has extended the meanings of “unknown”, “infinite”, “hopeful”. Therefore, the “X” also contains the hope for future cooperation with more countries. These unutterable meanings are expressed by the letter “X” to achieve the equilibrium in the second state. The equilibrium transition from the first state to the second improves the effective value, the efficiency of expression, accompanying with the richer connotation and the faster spread of the word.

4. Conclusion

Chinese lettered words are created and used to express economic and social growth, and they also follow the rules of language economics. They represent the inclusivity of Chinese characters, which may foster the energy and inventiveness of Chinese, and are the result of language diplomacy between China and other nations throughout the globalization era. Using Chinese lettered words in business news can help readers understand business information and integrate with the international economy as well.
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References


