

Pragmatic Presupposition in the Headlines on WeChat Official Accounts from the Perspective of the Adaptation Theory

Huixia Lin¹

¹ College of Foreign Languages, Ocean University of China, Qingdao, China

Correspondence: Huixia Lin, College of Foreign Languages, Ocean University of China, Qingdao, China.

doi:10.56397/JRSSH.2024.02.06

Abstract

The research data for this paper is the headlines of official accounts on WeChat, and the author will analyze the pragmatic presupposition in these headlines from the perspective of the theory of adaptation. The paper tries to present how pragmatic presupposition adapts to the linguistic context, the mental world, the social world and the physical world, and based on this, the writer further discusses the functions of pragmatic presupposition in the headlines of the WeChat official accounts. It is found that presupposition has both positive and negative functions. On the one hand, positive functions are mainly presented from the two aspects of the passage itself and the readers. To be more specific, the main positive functions for the passage itself include simplifying headlines, and setting a suspense, and positive functions for the readers mainly include shortening the distance between the readers and the author, and creating a sense of humor for readers. On the other hand, one of its major negative functions is that pragmatic presupposition can sometimes mislead readers.

Keywords: adaptation theory, WeChat official account, headlines, pragmatic presupposition

1. Introduction

Presupposition was originally proposed by the German philosopher and mathematician Frege, and was officially introduced to the field of Western linguistics in the 1960s. Generally speaking, presupposition can be divided into semantic presupposition and pragmatic presupposition. Semantic presupposition mainly focuses on the truth condition of the sentence. However, later, linguists found that only relying on logic-semantic relationship analysis can not solve all the problems related to the presupposition, so pragmatic presupposition

came into being. Pragmatic presupposition takes into account the role and influence of contextual factors such as time, place and occasion involved in a certain presupposition. In recent years, both theoretical research and applied research of pragmatic presupposition have made great progress. On the whole, the applied research of pragmatic presupposition mainly includes its application in literary works (Bian Yongwei, 2002), language teaching (Wen Jie, 1993), advertising language (Chen Xinxin, 1998), translation (Ge Lingling, 2002), justice (Lu Shaobing, 2005) and other fields. With the

development of technology, WeChat has become a major tool for communicating and spreading information in China, but at present, few scholars combine pragmatic presupposition with article titles of WeChat official accounts. As a result, this paper will analyze the phenomenon of pragmatic presupposition in the headlines of WeChat official accounts from the perspective of the adaptation theory, in the hope of broadening the scope of applied research of pragmatic presupposition.

2. The Theory of Adaptation

This paper will explore the pragmatic presupposition of article titles in WeChat official accounts under the framework of the adaptation theory. The theory of adaptation is a pragmatic theory proposed by Verschueren, secretary-general of the International Pragmatics Association of Belgium, in the 1990s. He believes that pragmatics should study language from the perspectives of cognition, society and culture at the same time. The central point of the adaptation theory is that the use of language is a continuous process of making choices (Verschueren, 1999:55-56). The reason why people can make appropriate choices in various contexts is that language has three characteristics: variability, negotiability and adaptability. Variability denotes the fact that language has a series of possibilities to choose from, such as the lexical and syntactic forms, and negotiability means that speakers' choice of language from these various possibilities is not carried out mechanically by strictly following prescribed rules, but is completed on the basis of high flexibility. The two characteristics form the foundation of adaptability, which means that language users make flexibility from numerous language items to meet the needs of communication (He Ziran & Ran Yongping, 2009: 292).

To be more specific, four parts consist of the process of making language choices, and they are contextual correlates of adaptation, structural correlates of adaptation, dynamics of adaptation and salience of the adaptation process. Context is divided into communicative context and linguistic context. The communicative context is composed of the mental world, the social world and the physical world. The mental world includes the communicator's emotion, desire, purpose, intention and other cognitive and emotional factors; the social world refers to the principles

and norms that social occasions and social environments regulate the speech acts of communicators. The physical world mainly includes factors of time and space. Linguistic context refers to the various linguistic means chosen according to contextual factors in the process of language use (He Ziran & Ran Yongping, 2009: 292-293). Structural adaptation generally includes the choice of language, code, style, discourse components, utterance, segment and construction principles, which serve to fit with the target language, in terms of its phonetics, syntax and other levels of structure. Dynamic adaptation is embodied in the following three aspects: time adaptation, the constraints of different contexts on language choice and the flexible change of discourse structure. It focuses on how dynamic equivalence could be achieved and how choices are made by deploying communication principles and strategies. The salience of the adaptation processes refers to the fact that some language choices are conscious and purposeful, while others are unconscious.

3. Adaptation Analysis of Pragmatic Presupposition in Article Titles on WeChat Official Accounts

The theory of adaptation has been applied in various fields, but to the best of the author's knowledge, few scholars employ this theory to study the headlines on WeChat articles. The application of the adaptation theory to analyzing headlines on WeChat official accounts may enrich the relevant search and the findings could provide some guidance for writers in this area. Therefore, this part is devoted to analyzing how the pragmatic presuppositions in the headlines on WeChat official accounts adapt to the linguistic context of communication, as well as the communicative context including the mental world, the social world, and the physical world.

3.1 Adaptation to Linguistic Context

According to Verschueren, linguistic context mainly refers to the linguistic means that play an important role in discourse understanding, which mainly includes three aspects: contextual cohesion, intertextual relations or intertextuality, and sequencing. Intertextuality is concerned with the fact that discourse is restricted by pragmatic styles such as style, and theme. Sequencing, also interpreted as sequential relation, means that language should conform to

the context logic and be organized in a certain order. Because the research object of this paper is only the title of WeChat articles, intertextuality, and sequencing will not be discussed here. This section will analyze the adaptation of pragmatic presuppositions in terms of contextual cohesion in titles, and contextual cohesion mainly refers to the use of conjunctions, contrast, logical relations, ellipsis, substitution, mutual reference, repetition and other techniques to achieve semantic correlation (Chen Xihua, 2001).

Example 1

1 小时内就要生了，核酸要等 2 小时……怎么办？
(中国日报 2022.5.5)

The pragmatic presupposition in the title is that if normal nucleic acid testing procedures are followed, a pregnant woman is likely to give birth before that nucleic acid testing is performed. The background is that earlier that year, the COVID-19 epidemic in Shanghai was so severe that residents had to wait in a long line for nucleic acid testing almost every day. The prevention and control of this disease became a new normal, which requires that nucleic acid testing must be done, but no one can decide or change the specific time when the woman would give birth. By stating the objective facts and comparing the time between one hour and two hours, the article realizes the contextual cohesion and raises the difficult question of what to do or how to do in the face of this dilemma.

Example 2

“不要给我截肢，我还要拿枪……”(央视新闻 2022.5.24)

First of all, it can be seen that the title is in quotation marks to indicate that the sentence is said by someone. What is more, the ellipsis here implies that he/she said more than that. Direct quotation enhances the authenticity and credibility of the article, and ellipses can stimulate readers' curiosity. This presupposes that a person's arm is injured so seriously that he/she needs to be amputated, and that the person has said something else besides this utterance. If the title of the article is too long, it will not be presented completely before opening it on WeChat. If the direct quotation is going to be used as the headline of the passage, ellipses are a good choice to replace the content or the utterance that is too much to be included in a headline, so as to match the complete quotation of the speaker in the text. Therefore, the

employment of quotation marks and ellipses here adapts to the linguistic context.

3.2 *Adaptation to the Mental World*

In this section, adaptation in headlines to the mental world will be focused on, and this will be discussed from the two levels of phrase and sentence.

3.2.1 Phrase Level

Example 3

不负众望的四大明星蔬菜(健康指南 2016.3.14)

The pragmatic presupposition of this title is that some vegetables are star vegetables and some are not. According to common sense, everyone certainly hopes that the vegetables they eat are good for their body and are beneficial to their health. It is ubiquitously known that a healthy body can be said to be the guarantee of all achievements in one's life, and undoubtedly, without health, everything will become empty talk. Thus, the pragmatic presupposition implied in the title conforms to the mental world of an individual's desire for physical health.

Example 4

给现在缺钱的女生一个大胆的建议!(蔡雷英语 2022.5.24)

The presupposition of this headline is that at present, some girls are relatively short of money. As the old Chinese saying goes, "If you have money, you can make the devil push the millstone for you." In any society and in any country, almost everyone wants to become rich, and wants to have enough money to meet their material needs. Unfortunately, the truth is usually that even rich people constantly compare themselves to those who are better off than them, and then mistakenly believe that they are not rich enough, thus aspiring to make more money. There is no doubt that this is a universal human psychology, and the pragmatic presupposition here corresponds to human's desire for money, and for earning more money.

3.2.2 Sentence Level

Example 5

为什么长胖很容易，减肥却“难比登天”？背后的原因终于找到了...(科普中国 2022.5.26)

The first half of the title presupposes that gaining weight is particularly easy, but losing weight is extremely difficult. Today's society takes thinness as a symbol of beauty, so almost everyone, especially women, is eager to have a

slim figure and does not want to become fat. As a matter of fact, many women are now deeply troubled by body anxiety. Some of them try to achieve the purpose of slimming through dieting because they are not satisfied with their own body. They dare not eat, and dare not eat more even when they are very hungry to try to suppress their desire for food. In the long run, when the body is crushed by the last straw, the situation becomes out of control. Either they will have a formidably great desire for food, resulting in the debilitating disease of bulimia nervosa, or they will completely lose interest in any food and develop anorexia nervosa. Weight loss in modern society can be regarded as an unprecedentedly hot topic, so this presupposition is very well in line with human's mental world for a slim body. In addition, the title also clearly points out that the reason for easily gaining weight has been found, so that it will attract more readers to open the WeChat push and browse the full text.

Example 6

为什么跟越亲密的人脾气越差? (央视新闻 2022.5.22)

This question presupposes that some people are more angry with people who are close to them. In our daily life, this is a particularly common phenomenon. In social interactions, under normal circumstances, we all follow the principles of cooperation and politeness, and try to avoid unpleasant conflicts with others. Usually, compared with living in harmony, human beings are less likely to argue and be unhappy with each other. However, whether it is online comments or books and magazines, whether it is street interviews or opinion polls, many people admit that they will suppress their negative emotions in school, work and other places, and then vent anger on their parents, spouses, children and other very close persons. They often realize in hindsight that the person they are angry with is actually the one who cares and loves them the most. We all sincerely hope that we will not hurt the people who love us and the people we love, so this presupposition is in line with people's wish to maintain a good relationship with the people close to them and adapts to the human's psychological world of wanting to live in harmony with the people close to them.

3.3 Adaptation to the Social World

Besides the mental world, pragmatic

presuppositions in WeChat headlines also adapt to the social world. Likewise, this will be discussed from phrase and sentence levels.

3.3.1 Phrase Level

Example 7

劳动最光荣!懂得奉献的人,自带光芒!(安基金 2022.5.1)

The title assumes that some people know how to give, which adapts to the spirit of devotion in the social world. Selfless dedication is one of the traditional virtues of our society. Many sayings and poems, like "Make a gift of rose, hand stay lingering fragrance", and "till the end of life a silkworm keeps spinning silk, till burning itself out a candle goes on lighting us", have been educating us to be willing to help others and to learn to contribute. This is the spiritual quality that our society has always advocated, and it is also a social norm.

3.3.2 Sentence Level

Example 8

全世界都不懂,为什么中国人如此爱国?(无故事 2019.10.2)

Example 9

为了孩子,他喝下了 100 份疫苗(科普中国 2022.5.16)

"Why Chinese people are so patriotic" presupposes that Chinese people love their country very much, and Chinese people are especially patriotic. The second headline presupposes that children face health threats and that someone is desperate to develop a life-saving vaccine. In the 1950s and 1960s, the poliomyelitis epidemic broke out. The sick children's muscles atrophied, their bodies twisted, and some even suffered from a severe loss of breathing function, suffocating to death. At the height of the epidemic, in major cities there were "backpackers"—parents carrying their disabled children on their backs with clothes and moving around major hospitals to seek medical treatment for their sick kids. It is in such a difficult situation that Gu Fangzhou, the protagonist of the article, kept working tirelessly day and night to develop vaccines in order to cure the polio that has plagued thousands of families. More importantly, vaccines must be tested on animals and humans before they can be used widely. Animal testing is fine, but who is willing to risk their lives to test a new vaccine, even if they are paid much more? If something

goes wrong with the new vaccine, it could kill the subject. At this crisis point, Gu Fangzhou first drank 100 doses of the vaccine solution by himself and showed no adverse symptoms. Then he made an even more difficult decision — to let his own son drink it, because most of the sick are children and the fact that adults are fine does not mean that the children are also fine with the vaccine. Fortunately, the vaccine was successful and both Gu Fangzhou and his son were safe, and it is no exaggeration to say that the vaccine has saved all the children in China. It can be said that every Chinese will be moved by the spirit of putting the whole country first, and by the noble quality of self-sacrifice. Since ancient times, we have always believed in the values of collectivism and patriotism, and the interests of the country and the people always come first. The patriotic spirit is forever engraved in our cultural genes, conveyed by many ancient poems, such as “Everyone must die, let me but leave a loyal heart shining in the pages of history.” “Don’t laugh if we lay drunken on the battleground, how many warriors ever came back safe and sound?” It can be seen that the presuppositions of the two headlines adapt to the traditional spirit of patriotism and collectivism in the social world of our country.

3.4 Adaptation of the Physical World

The last adaptation analysis is for the physical world. Time and space are two major relevant factors and next they will be demonstrated in detail.

3.4.1 Phrase Level

Example 10

2019 年的那个春天,你在干什么? (拾遗 2022.4.5)

The sentence presupposes that the spring of 2019 has become the past. This passage, published in 2022, is about life before the COVID-19 epidemic. As you all know, at the end of 2019, the epidemic broke out. Fortunately, through unity and strength, we have won the battle against the epidemic. It can often be seen on the Internet that users express their sorrowful feelings by saying something like “youth is only a few years, but the epidemic accounted for three years”. After the outbreak of the epidemic, many people realized how wonderful life was before the epidemic, and everyone hoped that the epidemic could end as soon as possible so that they can do what they want to do. This presupposition conforms to the time factor in

the physical world, pulling readers’ thoughts back to before the epidemic and prompting readers to reflect on the present, cherish life, and love life.

3.4.2 Sentence Level

Example 11

520 送什么礼物? 央行又提前帮你想好了…… (中国日报 2022.5.14)

The question, the first half of the title, denotes that 5.20 is a day to send gifts, and the rest of the headline presupposes that the People’s Bank of China has helped you think about what gifts you should send on this special day. As we all know, May 20th is Valentine’s Day, a day for lovers and couples to show their love by giving gifts to each other. Therefore, the presupposition of the first half adapts to the special time factor of Valentine’s Day in the physical world.

Example 12

为什么鸟喜欢在白车上拉黑屎,黑车上拉白屎? 万万没想到竟是因为... (科普中国 2022.5.9)

The pragmatic presupposition of the sentence is that birds like to take black shit on white cars and white shit on black cars. Here, the spatial factor of the car in the physical world is used to remind readers of the scene in real life, and then stimulate the reader’s desire to know the actual answer. Admittedly, this assumption does make sense, and the article gives the answer: for birds, their urine and shit are mixed, with the white being urine, and the black being poop. That’s why this seems to be so in the headline.

4. Functional Analysis of Pragmatic Presuppositions in Article Titles of WeChat Official Accounts from the Perspective of Adaptation Theory

This part attempts to analyze the function of pragmatic presuppositions in article titles of WeChat official accounts from the perspective of adaptation theory, and the author divides them into two categories: positive function and negative function. Generally speaking, the positive functions in terms of the article itself, include simplifying the title of the article to improve the pertinence, as well as setting a suspense to increase the number of clicks. Positive effects at the reader level include bringing the article closer to the reader and creating a sense of humor for the reader. Negative function mainly refers to misleading readers.

4.1 Positive Functions

4.1.1 For the Article Itself

4.1.1.1 Simplify Article Titles to Improve Pertinence

Example 13

拜登又“嘴瓢”了……（中国日报 2022.4.30）

To express as much meaning as possible with as few words as possible, that is, to realize economy is a basic function of pragmatic presupposition. This sentence assumes that Biden has been “mouthing off” before. Instead of saying that there is a man named Joe Biden, who is the current president of the United States, he has been “mouthing off” before, and now he is “mouthing off” again, the headline just uses six Chinese characters to convey the same meaning. In real life, we don’t talk like that since it’s extremely verbose. Moreover, the headlines on WeChat passages have higher requirements for conciseness of discourse because of the limited layout. As a result, pragmatic presupposition is often used in news headlines, titles on WeChat texts, advertising, and other places where concise expression is needed.

4.1.1.2 Set a Suspense to Increase Clicks

Example 14

见到此人，立刻报警！（中国日报 2022.5.17）

Example 15

超 10 万人向德国总理请愿：不要！（中国日报 2022.5.2）

Example 16

美国终于承认了！（中国日报 2022.5.1）

Pragmatic presuppositions can also set a suspense, thus increasing the number of clicks on the article. For example, the presupposition of the first title is: Someone has committed a crime. In almost every country, crimes are not allowed and criminals must be punished by law, which is the general consensus of the international community. Therefore, this presupposition conforms to the social principle that crimes must be duly punished in the social world. But readers can not infer from the title who committed the crime, what crime has been committed, and why the person committed such a crime. The second title presupposes that many Germans petition the chancellor not to do something, which conforms to the human’s mental world of not wanting something to happen, but the reader cannot know what the

German people do not want the chancellor to do, without clicking on the article. Similarly, the third title presupposes that the United States has admitted to some wrong practice or action, but what exactly it has admitted cannot be inferred from the title alone. Therefore, these presuppositions create suspense and arouse the curiosity of readers, who can’t help but click on the push, thus increasing the number of articles read.

4.1.2 For Readers

4.1.2.1 Narrowing the Distance Between Articles and Readers

Example 17

社恐的你，很了不起（小林 2022.1.11）

Example 18

没说的话，我们冬天慢慢说（小林 2021.10.25）

The first sentence presupposes that you have a social phobia. The second sentence presupposes that we have something to say to each other. Because humans are social animals, so we don’t want to be isolated. As the saying goes, “No one is an island”, people are eager to have good interpersonal skills, and to get along well with others. In this sense, these two presuppositions adapt to the human’s mental world of desiring to get along with others. Using “you” and “we” to refer to the reader, as if the two parties are talking face to face, which shortens the distance between the article and the reader, so that the reader will probably get a sense of closeness. If readers feel close, they will naturally pay more attention to the text published by this official account.

4.1.2.2 Generating Humor

Example 19

上班摸鱼神器（诀窍一点通 2022.2.8）

Example 20

跟老板同时在厕所蹲麻了，除了辞职还能怎么办？（毕导 2022.5.30）

Example 21

如何优雅吃完薯片的碎渣？不掉进鼻孔里的那种（毕导 2022.5.8）

The first sentence assumes that some people will slack off during work time. Though this is not what our social world advocates, it has to be admitted that human beings tend to be lazy, which conforms to people’s mental world. The second assumption is that some employees may go to the bathroom at the same time as their

boss. In many cultures, going to the bathroom is not a decent thing to talk about in public, so writing about this kind of workplace embarrassing events on WeChat official accounts that spread information can create a sense of humor and make readers find it funny. The third one pragmatically presupposes that for most people, when they almost finish eating potato chips, it is difficult to eat the crumbs in a graceful way, and many people have experienced the embarrassment of crumbs falling into their nostrils. If we think about it carefully, this situation does often happen in real life, but such a small topic is also not appropriate to talk about in public passages, not to mention the need to write a special article to teach everyone how to prevent potato chip crumbs from falling into the nostrils. In brief, these presuppositions will generate humor and make readers can't help laughing.

4.2 Negative Functions

4.2.1 Misleading Readers

Example 22

长期吃苹果的人，竟然会变成这样！（爱家爱生活 2015.12.21）

Example 23

白象方便面的秘密，终于藏不住了（拾遗 2022.3.19）

Example 24

免费！免费！免费！（青春山东 2022.5.24）

Example 25

曹俊毅、陆鸣洲，你们做的这件事瞒不住了！（央视新闻 2022.6.1）

Pragmatic presupposition has not only positive functions, but also negative effects sometimes. Misleading readers is one of the negative functions of pragmatic presupposition. For example, the assumption in the first headline above is that some people become ill because they eat apples for a long time. Clicking on the push, however, readers will find that in fact, it is all about the benefits of eating more apples, and the text does not say what is the harm of eating apples for a long time. The second title presupposes that the corporation of White Elephant Instant Noodles has done something bad, but after reading it, you will find that the article actually says that this company has hired many disabled people to help those people with physical defects find jobs, and what this passage presents is the positive image of this company.

Similarly, because there are many sensational headline writers online now, and telecom fraud is very common, most readers will subconsciously think that it is a fraud, when they see “Free! Free! Free!” in the headline. There's no such thing as a free lunch in the world, so most people are on high alert and think that this is just a publicity stunt or gimmick of the official account. But in fact, this article introduces the recently launched national lifelong education platform, which is open to the whole society and provides free course resources from many famous universities, so this headline, not like what most readers think at the beginning, is really in line with the fact. The title of the CCTV News push on June 1st presupposes that there are two people, Cao Junyi and Lu Mingzhou, and that they have done something bad since they prefer not to make it public. As a matter of fact, however, the story in this article is that two college students in Jiaxing, Zhejiang Province, who saw an old man fall down on his bike at the intersection, took the initiative to help the old man and did their best to protect him from secondary injury. What is supposed to be from the headlines does not match what is actually being presented in the text, which makes the reader feel like they have been cheated. Thus, pragmatic presuppositions may sometimes mislead readers. In fact, this is also a means for online writers to attract people's attention and improve the number of clicks.

5. Conclusion

Based on Verschueren's adaptation theory, this paper analyzes how the pragmatic presuppositions in the article titles on WeChat official accounts adapt to different kinds of contextual factors, and discusses the function of pragmatic presuppositions in this field. Through analysis, for one thing, it is found that WeChat official accounts, as the main communication channel of today's new media, use a lot of pragmatic presuppositions in the title setting, and that most of these presuppositions meet the needs of language context and communicative context. For another thing, the function of pragmatic presuppositions can generally fall into two categories. In other words, it can have both positive and negative effects in some cases. The former refers to the functions of simplifying the headline, setting a suspense, shortening the distance between the author and the reader, and generating humor, while the latter is concerned with the function of misleading readers. It is

hoped that the combination of the theory of adaptation and the titles of the articles on WeChat official accounts can provide some inspiration for future research on pragmatic presupposition.

References

- Bian Yongwei. (2002). On the role of presupposition in Dramatic Discourse. *Journal of University of International Relations*, (03), 49-55.
- Chen Xihua. (2001). On Contextual adaptation in translation. *Journal of Hunan University (Social Sciences)*, (S2), 158-160.
- Chen Xinren. (1998). Pragmatic presuppositions in advertising. *Journal of Foreign Languages*, (05), 54-57.
- Dryer M S. (1996). Focus, Pragmatic Presupposition, and Activated Propositions. *Journey of Pragmatics*, (26), 475-523.
- Ge Lingling. (2002). Presets and translation techniques. *Chinese Translators Journal*, (03), 44-46.
- He Ziran, Ran Yongping. (2009). *A new edition of Pragmatics*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- Karttunen, L. (1974). Presupposition and Linguistic Context. *Theoretical Linguistics*, (1), 182-194.
- Lu Shaobing. (2005). Pragmatic Analysis of Presupposition in Court questioning. *Journal of Jiangnan University (Social Sciences Edition)*, (03), 68-70.
- Stalnaker R. (1974). Pragmatic Presuppositions. Munitz M K and Unger P (eds.). *Semantics and Philosophy*. New York: New York University Press, 179-213.
- Stalnaker R. (1970). Pragmatics. *Synthese*, (22), 272-289.
- Verschueren, Jef. (1999). *Understanding Pragmatics*. London and New York: Arnold.
- Wang Yueping. (2012). A review of domestic presupposition research in recent 30 years. *Journal of China University of Mining & Technology (Social Science)*, (01), 130-137.
- Wen Jie. (1993). The application of "presupposition" in teaching Chinese as a foreign language. *Chinese Language Learning*, (04), 39-44.