

Stance Taking in English and Chinese News Headlines

Xiuling Shi¹, Lifang Wei^{2*}

¹College of English, Zhejiang Yuexiu University of Foreign Languages, Shaoxing, China

²School of Foreign Languages, Shaoxing University, Shaoxing, China

Email: *764499355@qq.com

How to cite this paper: Shi, X. L., & Wei, L. F. (2022). Stance Taking in English and Chinese News Headlines. *Advances in Journalism and Communication*, 10, 40-52. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ajc.2022.101004>

Received: February 10, 2022

Accepted: March 22, 2022

Published: March 25, 2022

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Abstract

This study conducts a small corpus-assisted investigation on the linguistic epistemic markers and attitudinal stance markers of English and Chinese news headlines and discusses the possible similarities and differences. Results show that in the Chinese news headlines, certainty stance markers and evidentiality markers are more frequent, whereas in the English news headlines, hedging stance markers and evaluation stance markers are more common. These differences may be due to the differences in English and Chinese news value and news writing modes.

Keywords

Stance Markers, News Headlines, English, Chinese

1. Introduction

Recent two decades have witnessed the growing interest in the study of stance and stance-taking in linguistics and related disciplines (Biber et al., 1999; Du Bois, 2007; Channon, et al., 2018). Du Bois (2007) points out that one of the most important functions for people to use language is to express a certain stance. Stance is defined as the speakers' "emotions, attitudes, value judgments or evaluations" (Biber & Finegan, 1989) on the propositional meanings or the hearers' utterances. So far, researchers have investigated the definitions, features, categories of functions of stance markers as well as their applications. Most studies concentrate on stance markers in academic discourse. However, similar studies in news discourse, especially in news headlines, are still insufficient.

News headlines entail the summary and essence of contents of news reports, functioning as a significant role in reporting news events. In other words, news

headlines, as speech acts, mainly function to highlight the main contents of the news reports and provide the most accurate information to readers and convey emotions and evaluations regarding the stance of news contents. Therefore, news headlines can highlight the opinions and stances of news reports. At present, the vivid and objective states are more on the discourse features, functions, critical analyses and interpersonal meanings of headlines, while the attitudes and stances revealed in the news headlines are understudied.

It is evident that news headlines play a significant role in both English and Chinese news, and they share some similar features: for instance, the meanings of news headlines cannot deviate from the contents of news reports; the language of news headlines should be concise and vivid to objectively state the information in the news. In other words, both English and Chinese news headlines attempt to deliver the most important and most novel information in the news reports to the readers. Meanwhile, both English and Chinese news headlines potentially reflect the evaluations and attitudes of the reporters on the news contents. However, due to the differences of English and Chinese languages in terms of vocabularies, grammar, rhetoric devices as well as different conventions in English and Chinese media reports, English and Chinese news headlines would be likely to have potential differences regarding the specific expressions and stances. Additionally, since English news reports feature vivid languages and up-to-date information, increasing English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners tend to learn English by reading English news reports, which plays a vital role in motivating learners, enhancing their writing skills and acquainting themselves with foreign cultures. However, Chinese EFL learners are often reported to have difficulty in interpreting the ideologies behind the literal expressions of the news headlines and the contents of news reports. Therefore, it is believed that knowing the differences of stance markers in English and Chinese news headlines would constitute a good start to help them obtain a deeper understanding of the “soul” of English news reports.

Therefore, the paper aims to analyze the use of stance markers in news headlines and compare the similarities and differences of stance markers in both English and Chinese news headlines, with a view to exploring the possible impact of different news values and interpersonal and interactional ideologies in English and Chinese on the use of stance markers.

Before introducing the research design of the study in detail, we will discuss the previous relevant studies on stance-taking and news headlines in English and Chinese in the next section.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Previous Studies on Stance-Taking

Since 1970s, relevant studies on stance-taking have seen constant in-depth development. In general, there are three main themes in the studies on stance-taking abroad. The first theme focuses on the theoretical foundations and ana-

lytical modes on stance-taking. For instance, Biber & Finegan (1989) have proposed three categories of stance markers, and Hyland (2005) has put forward analytical framework for stance markers from academic discourse perspective, while Du Bois (2007) has developed the mode of “stance triangle” from interactional perspective. The second theme on stance taking studies concentrates on comparative studies on stance taking, including stance taking expression between different genres, genders, cultural backgrounds or disciplines. For example, Neff et al. (2003) and Marinze (2005) compare the differences of stance markers between users of native speakers and foreign language learners; and Coates (1996) compares the similarities and differences between the use of stance markers by males and females. The third theme of study concerns the diachronic study of stance markers, and such studies include Biber (2004), who studies the use of stance markers in four genres (plays, letters, newspapers and medical articles) from 1650 to 1990. To sum up, these studies on stance taking provide a comprehensive basis for the research on stance taking and good reference for scholars in China.

Studies on stance-taking started in the beginning of 21st century in China, and both theoretical guidance of stance-taking and empirical applications have emerged. For instance, Wang (2001), Yang (2003) and Hu (2009) have systematically introduced the concepts of stance-taking and illustrated the specific realization forms of stances. Meanwhile, empirical studies on stances have also increased in recent years. Many scholars use second language learners as subjects of study to Chinese EFL learners’ use of stance markers. For instance, Wang & Ma (2009) have conducted a corpus-based study of the use of evaluation by Chinese EFL learners in oral English, written English as well as speeches. All these studies have enriched the understanding of the use of stance markers of EFL learners. However, the research subjects relatively focus only on the EFL learners, while studies of stance markers on other data are relatively rare.

2.2. Previous Studies on News Headlines

As one of the most striking features of modern newspapers, headlines have attracted the attention of many scholars (Mardh, 1980; Van Dijk, 1988; Ludwig & Gilmore, 2005). One theme of previous studies is related to the linguistic features of English news headlines. For instance, Mardh (1980) conducts a thorough study on the English newspapers and identified the typical linguistic features such as the omission of articles, nominalizations, frequent use of complex noun phrases in subject position and so on. Another theme concerns the functions of headlines in news report. For example, Ludwig & Gilmore (2005) identifies four important functions of headlines. A third perspective is a critical discourse analysis of news headlines, and Van Dijk (1988) is one typical researcher in this field, with an emphasis on exposing the ideologies implied in the news headlines. In addition, there are a few comparative studies of headlines in English and Chinese, though not that many. For instance, Guo (1995) compares English and Chinese news headlines

in terms of contents, forms and languages. Scollon (2000) conducts a study of five consecutive days of three editions of the same newspaper in its Chinese and English editions, namely the *People's Daily* (Overseas and Home editions) and the *China Daily*, and he concludes that the English headlines put the main points in the headlines while the Chinese headlines mainly function to establish the setting or background.

To sum up, though recent years has seen thriving development in the areas of stance taking research and news headlines both abroad and in China, stance taking in news discourse remains as an understudied area of exploration, let alone the comparative studies of stance markers in English and Chinese news headlines, and this offers a potential interesting topic to explore.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Theoretical Framework

The study adopts Biber et al. (1999)'s framework for classification of stance markers to investigate the stances revealed in English and Chinese news headlines. In accordance with different semantic meanings of stances, Biber et al. classify stance markers into three categories: epistemic stance, attitudinal stance and style stance.

Epistemic stance evaluates the certainty, possibility and authenticity of the propositional contents, and contains three sub-categories: certainty, hedging and evidentiality. Certainty mainly emphasizes the degree of commitment to the information in the proposition, helping establish authoritative stance; hedging implies the unwillingness or inability to make completely certain expressions or evaluations towards information in a proposition; and evidentiality refers to the evidence for the judgment of the discourse, pointing out the connection of the textual information to other discourse information.

Attitudinal stance refers to speaker's attitudes, emotions or value judgments towards a proposition and can be classified into two sub-categories: affect and evaluation. Affect mainly indicates the affective attitudes of the speaker towards the topic, while evaluation reflects the value judgments of the speaker towards the contents.

Style stance concerns evaluation of the speaker on the style of statement of the proposition, reflecting the manners of the following discourse.

The theoretical framework is displayed in Table 1.

3.2. Methods and Research Questions

The study adopts a small-corpus-assisted mixed method by combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative approach is used marginally, only aiming to provide an overview of distribution of various types of stance markers in English and Chinese data, while a mainly qualitative approach is employed to analyze the specific expressions of detailed epistemic and attitudinal stance markers in the context of the English and Chinese data.

Table 1. Categories of stance markers.

Stance Markers	
Epistemic Stance	Certainty
	Hedging
	Evidentiality
Attitudinal Stance	Affect
	Evaluation
Style Stance	

The research questions for the study are as follows:

- 1) To what extent do the stance markers in English and Chinese news headlines differ?
- 2) What are the possible reasons for the differences of stance markers, if any, in English and Chinese news headlines?

3.3. Data Collection and Description

A small corpus is built for the current study, with both English news headlines and Chinese news headlines. English data for the study contain 200 randomly selected news headlines from *CNN News* (<https://www.cnn.com/>), while Chinese data for the study include 200 randomly selected news headlines from *People's Daily* (<http://paper.people.com.cn/>). In China, the *People's Daily*, which was first published in 1946, serves as the most influential newspaper, with a daily print circulation of 3 million. *CNN News* is also among the most influential American news media. In order to achieve comparability and narrow down scopes for selection of data, all the headlines selected are related to COVID-19 reports. The time span covers over two years from January 2020 to February 2022, when the COVID-19 pandemic attacked people all over the world. The researchers first collect as many headlines as possible in these two media containing the key words of COVID-19 pandemic, and choose about eight to ten items from these two media in each month. Altogether 200 items in each media are randomly chosen for analysis for the study for the sake of manageability. All these headlines are collected in a word file as the data sources.

3.4. Data Coding and Procedures for Data Analysis

The headlines in the data are carefully examined one by one, and all words and expressions indicating attitudes and evaluations are coded, and then the categories of these words and expressions of stance-taking are determined based on the previous mentioned theoretical framework. Two researchers with the background of applied linguistics took part in the coding and negotiated the examples with disagreement. After that, frequencies and distributions of each category of stance markers are calculated and then similarities and differences of English and Chinese news headlines are analyzed, with illustration of specific examples from the context of English and Chinese headlines.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Frequency of Distribution of Stance Markers

In general, the results show that stance markers are abundant in both English and Chinese news headlines. In the English data, there are 152 stance markers (0.76 per headline), while in the Chinese data, there are 210 stance markers (1.05 per headline). But frequencies of different kinds of stance markers vary in English and Chinese news headlines (see **Table 2** and **Figure 1** for details).

It can be seen that in the English and Chinese data, both epistemic stance marker and attitudinal stance markers account for the majority part, while style stance markers are rare. This may be due to the characteristics of news headlines. As regards to the distribution of sub-categories, in the English data, 90 instances (59.21%) of stance markers of evaluations are found, followed by 28 instances (18.42%) of stance markers of certainty, while only 34 instances of the rest three categories of stance markers (hedging, evidentiality and affect) are found, accounting for 7.89%, 6.58% and 7.89% respectively.

Table 2. Frequencies of stance markers in English and Chinese news headlines.

Categories		English		Chinese data	
		Frequencies	Percentage	Frequencies	Percentage
Epistemic Stance	Certainty	28	18.42%	64	30.48%
	Hedging	12	7.89%	8	3.81%
	Evidentiality	10	6.58%	80	38.1%
Attitudinal Stance	Affect	12	7.89%	12	5.71%
	Evaluation	90	59.21%	42	20%
Style Stance		0	0%	4	1.9%
Total		152	100	210	100

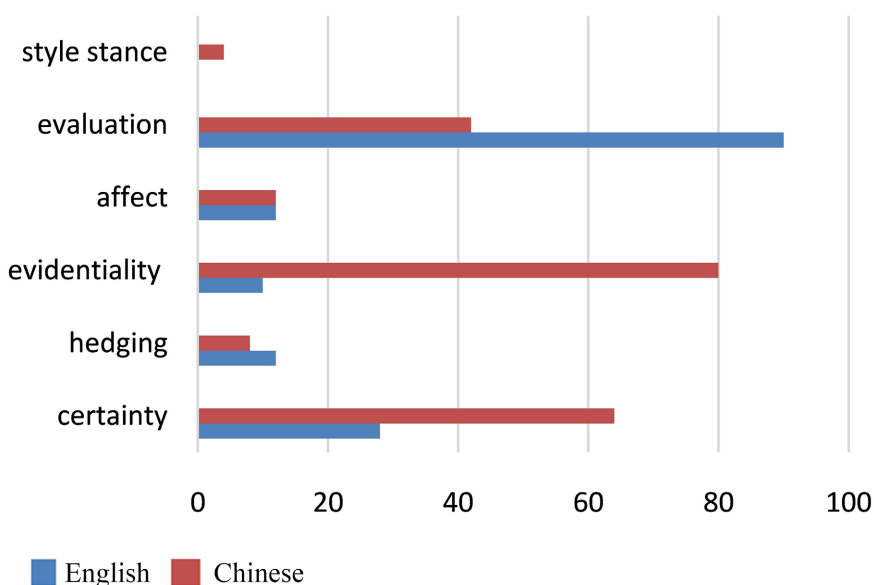


Figure 1. Frequencies of stance markers in English and Chinese news headlines.

Stance markers of evidentiality account for the biggest proportion, with 80 instances (38.1%), followed by 64 instances (30.48%) of stance markers of certainty and 42 instances (20%) of stance markers of evaluation, and the rest categories of stance markers of hedging, affect and style stance only constitute marginal proportion (less than 10%).

Style stance markers are evaluation of manners of statement of propositions, which cannot help make judgment on the contents of news, so it is more likely to adopt epistemic and attitudinal stance markers, which can more directly reveal stance taking. In the following detailed analysis, focus will be put on the five sub-categories in two categories, epistemic stance markers and attitudinal stance markers, which enjoy the most popularity in the English and Chinese data, with examples analyzed in the data.

4.2. Analysis of Epistemic Stance Markers in English and Chinese News Headlines

1) Certainty

Stance markers of certainty show a relatively high degree of belief in the proposition or viewpoint. They emphasize the writer's viewpoints and refuse other opinions or possibilities, strongly indicating the stance of the writer.

Data show that Chinese data have nearly twice as many as certainty stance markers in English data. In particular, in the Chinese data, there are more headlines with words or expressions indicating obligations (必须 (must; have to), 就该 (should), 不能 (cannot), 不应 (should not), 不要 (do not)), which are put before the verbs or adverbs, emphasizing that a certain event can or cannot happen under the current circumstance, or stressing that a certain thing cannot or should not be done. For example:

Example 1: 加强疫情防控必须慎终如始 (Strengthening Epidemic Prevention and Control Must Be Prudent all the Time) (March 4, 2020, *People's Daily*).

Example 2: 区卫健局长被停职: 疫情防控失职渎职就该问责 (The Head of the Health Bureau in the District Was Dismissed: Dereliction of Duty on Epidemic Prevention and Control Should Be Reprimanded) (February 1, 2020, *People's Daily*).

In these two examples, “必须” (must; have to) and “该” (should) are obligation modal verbs. The certainty marker “必须” (must; have to) in Example 1 stresses that it is required to be strict and prudent in carrying out the COVID-19 prevention and control. The certainty marker of “该” (should) in Example 2 emphasizes that officials with dereliction of power should be investigated for liability. Such expressions are used frequently in our Chinese data, indicating the guiding orientation of Chinese news headlines. In other words, Chinese news headlines are in the big context of direction and policy-oriented guidance, so it seems that Chinese news are more likely to adopt more certain tones to emphasize the decisive commands, thus negotiating with the reader in more powerful evaluation means. These stance markers of obligation may also indicate the authority of the news source, especially when these obligations entail the commands or orders of the leading party of Chinese government.

In the following two English examples, “must” and “should” are obligation certainty markers, indicating the certainty and mandatory requirement on people. The first one indicates the stringent mask wearing policy in Kansas and the second one highlights the scientific requirement for at-home COVID-19 test.

Example 3: Kansas governor says state employees **must** wear masks indoors regardless of vaccination status (June 28, 2021, CNN News).

Example 4: What you **should** know about taking an at-home COVID-19 test (February 2, 2022, CNN News).

However, such certainty markers with obligations are not that frequent in the English news headlines in our data. The relatively rareness of such expressions may indicate that in English news headlines, emphasis is usually put on the relatively strong awareness of avoiding being too forceful or commanding.

2) Hedging

Stance markers of hedging reveal the cautious attitude towards the opinions, extent of reliability and precision, and the use of such expressions indicates the respect of the writer towards different ideas, with an emphasis on the objectivity of the proposition and opinions. Hedging expressions leave room for negotiation with regards to the writer’s opinions and judgment, and meanwhile, they are conducive to easier acceptance of the information delivered.

In our data, it is shown that there are not many hedging expressions in both data sets, and more hedging expressions are found in English news headlines. A further analysis reveals that the majority of the hedging expressions in Chinese news headlines belong to precision hedging expression, as indicated in the example below, with “余” indicating “more than”:

Example 5: 不放弃!湖北成功治愈 3600 余名 80 岁以上新冠肺炎患者 (Never Give up! More than 3600 COVID-19 Patients Aged over 80 Years in Hubei Were Successfully Cured) (April 13, 2020, *People’s Daily*)

In comparison, in the English data of news headlines, both precision heading expressions and reliability hedging expression are found. For instance:

Example 6: US reports **more than** 900,000 total COVID-19 deaths (February 4, 2022, *CNN News*)

Example 7: CDC study: Unvaccinated 11 times **more likely to** die from COVID-19 (September 11, 2021, *CNN News*)

In the first example, “more than” refers to precision hedging expressions, and in the second English example, “more likely to” presents reliability hedging expressions, which enhances the reliability of the proposition, leaving room for the reader to make judgment. In addition, Example 7 also has “CDC study”, indicating source of the information (which is an example of evidentiality to be discussed in the next section). Therefore, in the English news headlines, it seems that the reporters would be more cautious in writing so as to avoid sounding too absolute.

3) Evidentiality

In the data, it is shown that there are more evidentiality expressions in the Chinese data than the English data.

In terms of the use of evidentiality markers, reporting evidentials are frequently applied in both data. More specifically, the data of Chinese news headlines are usually accompanied with authorities or experts, as indicated in the example below:

Example 8: 不接种新冠疫苗不能出行? **国家卫健委**回应 (No Traveling without Getting a COVID-19 Vaccine? Response from the National Health Commission) (July 18, 2021, *People's Daily*).

Example 9: **张文宏**: 最坏的日子在慢慢过去, 中国知道怎么对付新冠病毒 (Zhang Wenhong: The Worst Days Have Been Gradually Gone, and China Knows How to Deal with COVID-19) (February 2, 2022, *People's Daily*).

In the first example, the organ “卫健委” (National Health Commission) is in the headline, indicating official source of reply. The second example cites the sayings of expert Zhang Wenhong, and this direct quotation increases the credibility of the opinion in the report.

Such expressions are also found in the English data, and English news headlines normally have indications of source of information, as indicated in the examples below:

Example 10: Omicron is a concern but the US is in a “**different place**” in the pandemic, **US surgeon general says** (December 2, 2021, CNN News)

Example 11: COVID-19 vaccination rates are lower among adults with disabilities, **according to Census Bureau survey data** (August 6, 2021, CNN News)

In the first example, both the clear data source of “US surgeon general” and his statements of “different place” are used to increase the authenticity of the report. In the second example, “Census Bureau survey data” achieves similar effect.

4.3. Analysis of Attitudinal Stance Markers in English and Chinese News Headlines

1) Evaluation

Evaluation stance markers express praise or condemnation on some acts, events, words, belief, or motivations, so they can indicate the attitudes and stances of the writers. Such uses are found in both English news headline data and Chinese news headline data, and it seems that positive evaluations are frequently seen in the Chinese data for the study, whereas negative evaluations are more frequent in the English data. The following are some examples:

Example 12: 战“疫”一线, 这些 90 后**好样的**! (Well Done, Post 90s at the Front Line of Fight against COVID-19) (February 13, 2020, *People's Daily*).

Example 13: 世卫组织: 中国成功控制疫情值得**庆贺** (World Health Organization: China's Successful Control of COVID-19 Is Worthy to Be Praised) (September 8, 2020, *People's Daily*).

In these two example, both “好样的” (well done) and “庆贺” (worthy to be praised) deliver positive evaluation.

Example 14: Long COVID is a bigger **problem** than we thought (September 29, 2021, *CNN News*)

Example 15: Omicron vs. Delta: More mutations **don't necessarily** make a mea-

ner COVID-19 virus (November 30, 2021, *CNN News*)

In these two examples, “problem” and “don’t necessarily” both convey negative evaluation. Example 14 focuses on the negative aspect of long duration of COVID-19, describing it as “a bigger problem”, and Example 15 indicates the relationship between the two variants of COVID-19, Omicron and Delta, and “don’t necessarily” conveys the negative evaluation of the expected common inference of people, *i.e.*, “more mutations make a meaner COVID-19 virus”.

One of the possible reasons for this is due to the difference of values in news report. Mainstream news reports in China like *People’s Daily* not only function to deliver news contents, but also play the vital role of guiding social opinions, carrying forward the main tone of society and advocating the policy of “positive publicity”. Therefore, it is not surprising that in typical news report in *People’s Daily*, it may be natural to have reports to praise the truth and glorify the model examples, while it is relatively rare to have negative aspects of social reality, negative or pessimistic emotions. Consequently, Chinese news headlines aim to achieve the goal of positive guidance of news report, and the seriousness of Chinese news reports in mainstream newspapers and political nature determine the positive perspective of Chinese news report. In contrast, in the American news report, generally speaking, individualism is advocated and conflicts are usually unavoidable, and thus one of the main tasks of news report in CNN is to expose the poor performances or negative acts, and its political orientation may not be that obvious.

The tendency of more positive evaluations in the Chinese news headlines and more negative evaluations in the English headlines in our data is consistent with Lv (2020)’s study of COVID-19 reports in Chinese mainstream media and English mainstream media. Lv (2020) states that the tradition of praising tones in Chinese official reports can be dated back to the *Introduction to the Book of Songs*, and the kings and heroes in various dynasties were praised. In contrast, the mainstream media in America usually criticize the president and the government. This tradition is well reflected in the general tone of news reports in these two cultures.

2) Affect

Affect stance markers can be used to convey personal emotions and subjective attitudes, including both positive and negative markers, such as happy/sad, love/hate, /interested/bored, etc. For example:

Example 16: 致敬抗击疫情急先锋 (Salute to the Pioneers in Fighting against COVID-19) (March 9, 2020, *People’s Daily*).

Example 17: The NBA is back! **Unfortunately**, so are its COVID-19 skeptics (September 28, 2021, *CNN News*)

In the examples above, “致敬” (salute) and “unfortunately” indicate the emotions of the news reporters, and they have clearly convey their attitudes to the readers.

It is noteworthy that in both English and Chinese data, not many affect mark-

ers are found. Maybe that is because too many affect markers would undermine the objectivity of news report, so news reports try to minimize the involvement of personal emotions and affect.

5. Conclusion

This study has analyzed the linguistic features of stance makers in English and Chinese news report headlines in *People's Daily* and *CNN News* on the COVID-19 pandemic. As to the answer to the first research question of the study, “to what extent do the stance markers in English and Chinese news headlines differ”, the results show that both English and Chinese news headlines contain varied stance markers. Comparatively speaking, certainty stance markers and evidentiality stance markers are more frequent in the Chinese data, whereas hedging stance markers and evaluation stance markers are more frequent in the English data. In addition, style stance markers are rare in both English and Chinese news headlines.

Regarding the second research question, “what are the possible reasons for the differences of stance markers, if any, in examples of English and Chinese news headlines”, through the analysis of the use of stance markers in English and Chinese news headlines, some tentative answers may be provided. For one thing, these differences may reflect the possible differences in the writing of the genres of news reports in English and Chinese. For another, these differences may, to some extent, be attributed to the news values and news writing modes in Chinese and Western news reports. In addition, as the data for the study come from two mainstream media in America and China, the language and culture differences, as well as political ideologies entailed in these two media, are sure to contribute to the differences in stance markers of headlines. It is hoped that the study could shed some insights into the teaching of English newspapers, news writing, translation of news headlines between English and Chinese as well as the textbook compilation of news discourse in English and Chinese.

Due to the limitation of the size of the small corpus used for this study, the results may not be generalizable to other bigger data size, but hopefully, it can offer a point of departure for further studies in this field.

Based on this study, regarding potential directions for future studies, researchers may conduct a large-scale study of stance markers of news headlines in various types of English and Chinese newspapers, both local and national, and expand the subjects of study to news contents. Meanwhile, another potential interesting area to explore would be an empirical study of translation strategies of various types of stance markers based on parallel corpora of news headlines in English and Chinese. Furthermore, analysis of stance markers in news headlines and headlines in other genres such as magazines or new media forms like blogs may shed new insights into studies in this field.

Funding

This work was supported by a grant from the Department of Education of Zhejiang Province “A Study on the Stance-taking in News Interviews” (No.: Y201839502)

and a grant from Start-up Research Fund of Shaoxing University (No.: 13011002002/024).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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