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Exploring the framing effects in mediated or translated news narratives

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact of (re)framing strategies used in global news transmission with a special focus on the competing news narratives, news translation and the role of translators. Media and communication studies broadly agree that news narratives do not necessarily mirror reality, instead they represent only selective aspects of news events or social reality in a certain context. This is equally impacted when news is translated into English from non-English original sources. Given the different social, cultural, and political elements between the source news and target news, the paper argues that news or journalistic translation is not a faithful reflection of original news in another language, rather it is a process of selective representation or (re)framing of news items in the target context. The article critically analyses competing news narratives at both the textual and contextual levels of news content through selected examples. Drawing concepts and theories from an interdisciplinary perspective, the study aims to present an important and yet to be further explored topic undervalued by many scholars of media and translation studies.

Introduction

According to a survey conducted by Wanning Sun (2019) comparing the objectivity of different media outlets in the eyes of Mandarin-speaking migrants in Australia, more than 70 per cent of the participants view both mainstream Australian media outlets and official Chinese media (state-owned media) as either 'basically objective' or 'very objective'. However, those such as politicians, who are often exposed and criticised by the media, have argued otherwise. Former Australian prime minister Malcolm Turnbull once commented, 'in the media and sometimes you'll see from politicians ... a lot more negativity presented than is actually the case' (Karp, 2018). Chinese government officials also believe that due to the 'Western-dominated structure of information flow', many of the 'positive accomplishments and aspects of Chinese society' are overlooked by global media coverage (Hu & Ji, 2012, p. 32).

Academic studies (Fairclough, 1995; Gambier, 2006; Pan, 2015) have confirmed that news texts not only 'mirror reality' but also 'construct versions of it' (Gambier, 2006, p.9). News translation—an embedded task in both news gathering and formation characterised by a combination of trans-editing and interpreting without necessarily a source text (Palmer, 2020) — further implies the social aspects of news as a form of cross cultural or cross-context communication. Given the different social, cultural and even political implications driven by, how does news translation further shape the way that the eventual published story is framed?

This paper aims to provide a fresh perspective on analysing news texts through the angle of (re)framing, and to identify the effects of them both at textual and contextual levels through adopting Baker's (2006) framework on narrative strategies. It begins with the broad definition of news and news values, and then outlines the narrative theory with an illustrative description on a few devices/strategies that can be used to re(frame) narratives. Following that, framing, news translation, and the correlation between them is elaborated in detail before the conclusive argumentation on the importance of interdisciplinary studies on news-related topics such as news narrative and news translation in future.

What is 'news' and what are 'news values'?

Traditionally, the concept of news involves quite a few layers. On one hand, it is viewed as a documented representation of the social reality (Fürsich, 2009) and on the other hand, as the end-product of a systematic and complex process, news production invites the participation of various social activities such as topic selection and story formulation or structuring to match certain values or expectations (Hall, 1978, cited in Conboy, 2007). From a perspective of functionality, news is also regarded as an 'interruption' of normal information flow which people desperately need to make informed decisions in critical situations (Mencher, 1997, p. 58). With the continues development of internet and new technologies, challenges and opportunities will follow. News values, thereafter, also need to be revisited given the wider and more diversified access brought about by social media for news readers (Harcup & O'Neil, 2017).

Specifically, the power of controlling public opinion through directing people's attention from one topic to another has been diminished when more readers become 'browsers', 'users' and even 'producers' (Bruns, 2008). As a result, news has shifted from its traditional role of being a 'relatively static product' to the one of a 'dynamic, evolving, expanding resource' that is 'co-developed' by its users (Bruns, 2008, p. 178). Fundamentally, news can be described as 'the things journalists write about' (Sheridan Burns & Matthew, 2018, p. 63). In other words, it is the daily events that form the news stories we encounter on the media.

However, not every interesting or attractive event becomes news as the decision of choosing news depends on their values to a great extent (Sheridan Burns & Matthew, 2018). Loosely speaking, they are like the criteria used by journalists when they work on the news information collected (Bell, 1991). So what constitutes news values or how are news values defined?

Galtung and Ruge's (1965) seminal taxonomy of news values lists some key factors or criteria which together determine an event's news value. For example, bad news such as conflict and tragedy always attract public's attention while stories addressing celebrities including politicians are considered more topical (Galtung & Duge, 1965; Bell, 1991; Harcup & O'Neil, 2017). Even this is not a definitive list of what constitutes news values, it provides a footing for studies of journalistic practice, particularly with regards to the process of news selection or 'partial explanation of what lies behind journalistic news decisions' (Harcup & O'Neil, 2017, p. 1471). On one hand, news narratives based upon some innate news values constantly reinforce our perceptions of the real world (Fulton, 2006), while on the other hand, news values have been challenged and influenced by digital development to the extent that audience's 'likes' and/or 'shares' might become one of the most important considerations for news selection (Bell, 2015; Harcup & O'Neil, 2017). News language and news narratives, therefore, are not unmediated and are often constrained by the 'conventions' of different media institutions (Leeuwen, 1987, cited in Conboy, 2007, p. 21). Many studies have explored news work from an approach of narratives (Buozis & Creech, 2018), but what exactly is narrative and how does it involve in facilitating the process of new production?

The role of narrative in news translation

The study of narrative has a long history, starting from Aristotle's 'plot' theory to the development of structuralism — 'the structuralist-led theory of narrative' (McQuillan, 2000, p. 324) — and then the post structuralism. Unlike structuralism which studies text as an object only, post structuralism places more emphasis on the subjective perspective of narrative including people who produce or interpret the narrative as well as the ideology of those who produce or interpret it (Fulton et al., 2005). This section will review a few important studies which have explored both the nature of narratives and their application in news (translation) studies.

Walter Fisher, famous for his research in narrative, proposed the theory of 'narrative paradigm' which states that all meaningful and sequential 'words' or 'deeds' happen with human participants as their creators or storytellers (cited in Johnson-Cartee, 2004, p. 150). Huisman defines narratives as 'ways of structuring and representing lived experience' (cited in Fulton et al., 2005, p. 27). Thus, in a similar manner to the way we recount our experiences, narratives can be used to help us construct and understand new experiences. On the other hand, Ochs argues that the term 'narrative' can be defined both as a specific genre of a story and a social activity in which different actors participate and are involved (cited in van Dijk, 2011). Similarly, Baker (2006, p. 19) views narrative as 'public and personal stories' that we not only consume daily, but ones also steer our actions.

Scholars such as Fulton et al., (2005) and Johnson-Cartee (2004) have recognised the narrative aspect of news regardless of their categorisations (e.g., soft news or hard news), and the role journalists play in the news selection and news formation. Buozis and Creech (2018) further point out the dual implications of news narratives as not only a result of daily journalistic practice but also of the substantial social and cultural that drive these. As an example, a case study of media's influence on people's perceptions toward Latino immigrants in America reveals that individual's attitude and emotions can be impacted by news media narratives (Wei, Booth & Fusco, 2019). Participants of the study reported higher level of negativity when exposed to news reports or narratives with an emphasis on the 'economic burden' (realistic threat) caused by Latino immigrants, however, when news stories of 'assimilation problems' (symbolic threat) are presented, participants' attitudes become more positive and pleasant (Wei, Booth & Fusco, 2019, p. 232).

News media narratives play a critical role in constructing public's perceptions on controversial issues such as immigration (Leavitt et al., 2015), they can also amplify public stigma and discrimination. From national media quoting or deliberately adopting the phrase 'China Virus' or 'Wuhan Virus' as referred to by some politicians in relation to COVID-19, to the negative framing of government interventions such as mandatory mask-wearing or temporary lockdowns, the social and cultural influence or aspects of news narratives can be seen.

Another important theory which is often employed in the study of news narrative is the 'framing paradigm'. According to Tannen (1993), the 'journalist's structure of narrative expectation' constitutes frames (cited in Johnson-Cartee, 2004, p.160). Specifically, journalists collect existing information and reformulate them into certain news frames (Wolfsfeld, 1997). There are many strategies that are being used to (re)frame narratives in news texts, however, before further discussion on the strategies, we need to clearly define what frame is and how it relates to news and news translation.

The role of news framing

The notion of framing is closely related to media studies as one of its important functions is to construct 'social meaning' in media or news discourse (Reese, 2001, cited in Zhang, 2021, p. 91). In the context of linguistics, a frame is defined as the 'schemata of interpretation' through which individuals can 'locate, perceive, identify, and label' information around them (Goffman, 1986, p. 21). The process of framing, therefore, refers to the selection of certain aspects of reality and by ensuring that specific definitions, interpretations, evaluations or recommendations are more conspicuous or salient in a piece of news narrative or text (Entman, 1993). However, unless people go and compare the narratives, frames are not easy to identify, and certain framing devices such as 'unremarkable choices of words' or 'images' can be deemed as 'natural' in appearance (Entman, 1991, p.6).

From an operational point of view, framing theory has been used or applied in the research of mediated or translated news texts (Valdeón, 2014; Zeng et al., 2015). Through the perspective of framing strategies, Valdeón (2014) explores the nature of news translation by comparing the concepts of 'transediting', 'adaptation' and 'appropriation' (p. 51). To Valdeón, the concept of framing is more applicable in the study of news translation since it 'considers the linguistic and paralinguistic elements of news texts' for the purpose of promoting recognisable ideas to the target audience and news translation, as a process, entails 'adaptation' and 'appropriation' of source texts (Valdeón, 2014, p. 51).

A detailed comparison of different framing strategies used in the reporting of a crisis by both Chinese state media (Xinhua) and two major Western media (Reuters and Associated Press) can be found at Zeng et al.'s (2015) case study of the 'July 5th' Urumqi event. An examination of the similarities and differences in news frames between Xinhua, Reuters and the Associated Press (AP) covering the 'controversial event' ('conflict-related issues') reveals that while the three news agencies displayed 'similarities in news frames' at the early stage of the crisis — for example, damages are identified as a common theme during the first three weeks of coverage — they then tended to vary their coverage at the later stage when more 'contextual information' was provided. For example, Xinhua focuses on peripheral matters while Reuters and AP emphasised the responsibilities between weeks 2 and 4 (Zeng et al., 2015, pp. 51-53).

This phenomenon mostly echoes the three-stage model of crisis coverage discussed by Graber (1980). According to Graber (1980), the first stage of media coverage mainly focuses on some factual elements of the crisis with the purposes of informing the public and perhaps coordinating the relief work with authorities. In the second stage, the focus moves to causes, plans, and actions, while the third stage draws more information from the context of the crisis. However, the sequence of the three stages is not strictly followed by the media in the above study since the crisis develops in an unforeseeable way and media could always change frames according to their agenda (Zeng et al., 2015).

Key strategies to (re)frame narratives in mediated or translated news texts

Further discussion of the framing strategies in media discourse including news texts can be found in Baker's (2006) book *Translation and conflict: A narrative account*. Baker illustrates four key strategies that are often used to (re)frame narratives in news texts which can be a reference of future investigation on how news items were (re)framed in the process of news translation. The four strategies are 'temporal and spatial framing', 'selective appropriation', 'labelling' and 'repositioning of participants' (Baker, 2006, pp. 112-139). These strategies are useful to explore potential framing effects on mediated or translated news texts. The selected examples are from both Australian and Chinese media titles during the period of COVID-19 pandemic.

The first one, temporal and spatial framing, is realised through placing a text in a particular 'temporal and spatial context' to not only stress the narrative of the text but also to help build a connection to the 'current narratives' of our lives (Baker, 2006, p. 112). In the context of news media, a particular event can be reported in a different temporal or spatial context rather than its original one to promote a connection between the narrative and the current situation of target audiences. For example, an article was published by *The Sydney Morning Herald* (McClymont, 2020) reports how a Chinese company put its best effort into sourcing bulk supplies of essential medical items to ship back to China. Although the article mentions that the exercise took place in January and February, the time of publication on 26 March — coincided with the surge of coronavirus cases in Australia. As a result, the headline conveys to Australian readers that China is taking away emergency medical supplies from Australia when Australia is in an urgent need of these supplies. The headline and the lead paragraph of the report are as follows:

– Chinese-backed company's mission to source Australian medical supplies

As the coronavirus took hold in Wuhan earlier this year, staff from the Chinese government-backed global property giant Greenland Group were instructed to put their normal work on hold and source bulk supplies of essential medical items to ship back to China (McClymont, 2020, March 26).

Selective appropriation takes place through 'omission' and 'addition' to play up, play down or explain in detail some aspects of the source text or the bigger narratives it embedded (Baker, 2006, p. 114). In the context of news media, several sources of news can be 'selected', 'combined' and 'reformulated' into a single piece of target news to promote the pre-set 'facts'. In May 2020, one of China's leading news media, *Global Times* published a news report on the recent trade dispute between Australia and China (*New Media Global Times*, 2020, May 13). One of the 'selective' translations of the comment made by the Australian Trade Minister in regards of China's retaliation for Australia's pursuit of a global inquiry into the coronavirus is as following:

SN: 'I think right around the world, people would expect that when hundreds of thousands of people have died, millions of people have lost their jobs, and billions of people have had their lives disrupted, of course, there should be a thorough investigation and inquiry into it,' he said. 'But it's in no way related to the export arrangements for Australian beef or for Australian barley or for anything else.' (Foley & Bagshaw, 2020, May 12)

TN: 在《悉尼先驱晨报》的报道中，伯明翰就表示，虽然他认为国际社会应该对新冠肺炎疫情一事有一个彻底的调查，但澳大利亚对这种调查支持，与澳大利亚部分牛肉在中国被暂停进口、大麦将被加征关税'绝无关联'（原话为 'In no way related' (*New Media Global Times*, 2020, May 13).

BT: In the report of *Sydney Morning Herald*, Birmingham indicates that although he believes that there should be a thorough investigation into COVID-19, Australia's support of it is 'in no way related' to the suspension for the import of Australian beef or the increased tariff for Australian barley (the original words are 'In no way related').

The omission of a large chunk of Senator Birmingham's justification makes the position of Australia's pursuit appear less rational and may even pose risks to the objectivity and impartiality of news items.

'Labelling' refers to a discursive behaviour that uses a specific term to point to a 'person', 'place', 'group', 'event' and a 'key element of a narrative' (Baker, 2006, p. 122). For example, one of the headlines in the *Herald Sun* on 29 January 2020 labelled the coronavirus as 'Chinese virus pandemonium' (Figure 1) (Argoan & McArthur, 2020, January 29) and the other from *The Daily Telegraph* included part of the headline 'China kids stay home' (Figure 2) (Armstrong & Hildebrandt, 2020, January 29) on their front page. The consequence of such labelling not only impelled a public petition seeking apologies from the media outlets concerned, but also led to concerns raised at diplomatic levels between China and Australia. For instance, the news about China's warning to its citizens not to travel to Australia due to the increased 'racist attacks', and the news on Australian's accusation of China's move as a 'ridiculous propaganda' to 'kill' Australia's travel industry (Lathouris, 2020; Smith, 2020; *SkyNews*, 2020).



Figure 1. Screenshot of the front page of *Herald Sun* (29 Jun 2020)



Figure 2. Screenshot of the front page of *The Daily Telegraph* (29 Jun 2020)

Repositioning of participants means the change of positions between different participants in interaction since it varies the narratives they were embedded in (Baker, 2006, p. 132). Repositioning of participants can achieve multiple effects such as encouraging readers to take sides or create an 'us' versus 'them' mentality among audiences. The front page of *the Courier Mail* on 30 July 2020 is such an example (Figure 3). The amplified part of the headline reads 'Enemies of the State', while the images of two teenage women of African appearance were not pixelated (Marszalek, 2020). Given the potential risk of the virus transmission due to their breaching lockdown regulations and later confirmation of COVID-19, the deliberate choice of subject and such a headline can only be intended to evoke a sensationalised reaction or response.

Figure 3. Screenshot of the front page of *The Courier Mail* (30 July 2020)

In general, critical analysis of the (re)framing process of narratives can provide us with a fresh method in investigating news narratives and news translation, in particular in relation to conflict or divisive issues. The English examples cited above mostly are sourced from tabloid publications owned by News Corp run by the Murdoch family. The political bias of the Murdoch media has long been researched including by Fielding's (2023) report on the influence of the Murdoch media which explicitly comments on the failure of News Corp in adhering to the 'usual journalistic standards of truth, accuracy and impartiality' (p. 3). Interesting findings according to the report include that over half of the audiences who read or listen to News Corp outlets such as *The Australian*, the *Herald Sun*, the *Daily Telegraph* or *Sky News* voted 'No' to the Voice campaign, and the coverage of the four outlets also contain a high percentage of 'No' argumentations (Fielding, 2023). Framing strategies such as amplifying 'radically charged language and arguments', reinforcing 'extreme narratives', and less or no coverage of undesirable information, for example, the benefits of the Voice campaign in the scenario made the efforts of the historical initiative or event in safeguarding the rights and interests of First Nations people in vain (Fielding, 2023, pp. 10-12).

News Corp titles are the biggest players in the Australian media market, which is also considered as the most concentrated market in the democratic world (Flew & Goldsmith, 2013; Hobbs & McKnight, 2014). Given Murdoch's enthusiasm for using media power to intervene politics in Western world, his news media played a significant role in manipulating the presentation of key government policies (mainly Rudd's government) during the 2013 Australian federal election (Hobbs & McKnight, 2014). Specifically, framing strategies adopted by the Murdoch press include 'biased representations', 'negative' or even 'aggressive' coverage of policies which do not favour Murdoch's commercial interests such as 'the carbon price' and 'the Resource Super Profits Tax (RSPT)' (Gilding et al., 2012; Hobbs & McKnight, 2014, pp. 4-5). As a result, the Murdoch press with its superiority of market share (Flew & Goldsmith, 2013), succeed in setting the agenda for the election through (mis)representing issues they chose and reinforcing the 'political voice' they prefer (Hobbs & McKnight, 2014, p. 8).

Framing and news translation

While examples of selective framing for political or ideological purposes are widely evident, but what happens when the news story needs to be converted into other languages for different cultural and/or ideological groups? Are similar impacts of framing also reflected within translated news texts? Gutierrez (2006) argues that translation plays a key role in 'achieving international impact' since without it, 'a worldwide community of debate and opinion' would not be available due to language barriers (Gutierrez, 2006, p. 30). Further, the mission of global media is both 'intercultural communication' and 'translation' (Aktan & Nohl, 2010, p. 2). As the functions of target texts take precedence in the process of news dissemination (Bassnett, 2005; Zeng et al., 2015), news translation cannot be interpreted as a form of linguistic transfer but rather as a type of information transfer 'designed to meet the needs of the target audience' or 'a text (rewritten) for a new public' (Bassnett, 2014, p. 134).

Pan and Kosicki (1993) further point out that words or lexical choices are important components of news narrative construction, and the final choice often indicates an embedded theme or frame. By the same token, news or journalist translators do not choose words in the target language or new discourse randomly, rather they play important role in (re)framing the news items in the target context. For example, given the strict lockdown policies imposed by the then Victoria Premier Daniel Andrews during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Australian media outlets, particularly those owned by Rupert Murdoch in Victoria, spared no effort to render the negative image and impact of Andrews' governance. *9News* depicted the lockdown as 'hell' (*9News*, 2020, July 7), while *The Australian* framed Andrew's policies on the extension of stay-at-home restrictions as a 'strangulation' of Victorian residents (Baxendale & Lunn, 2020). However, when we look at the Chinese version of the same news reports, the frame of the Chinese headline becomes more factual-based and informative to the public (see the Chinese headline and its translation below):

TN: 维州漫长解封路线图公布 每日病例低于5例墨尔本才会取消宵禁 (2020, September 7).

(Translation: Victoria's lengthy roadmap out of lockdown unveiled, with a night curfew to lift only when average daily case numbers fall below five).

Another example comes from the study of Ahmad Ayyad (2024) who examined the 'contested naming practices' in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (p. 333). Illustrations of such naming practices given in the study cover 'places', 'events and actions', 'protagonists', and 'military offensives' (Ayyad, 2024, p. 336). An example can be found in the different translations of the wall set up by Israel within the West Bank they occupied. The Israeli authority (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) literally translated the Hebrew source into English as 'the Security Fence' to emphasis the 'legitimacy' and 'protective function' of the construction (Ayyad, 2024, p. 341). In contrast, the Arabic translations of 'the Security Wall' and 'the Separation Wall' adopted by Palestinian human rights organisation (PCHR) and Al-Jazeera (an Arabic news agency) with a negative connotation of 'human rights violations' and illegitimacy of 'Jewish settlements', reveal a Palestinian perspective of the conflict (Ayyad, 2024, p. 341).

These examples illustrate the extent to which ideology, news agenda and social-political factors all contribute to the (re)framing effect of news narrative construction and/or news translation. Therefore, systemic comparison of news frames and narratives among different media or even different language versions of the same news item (such as a conflict or crisis) can assist in understanding the reconstruction process of news production, and may even unveil the deeper layers, for example, ideological biases or political motivations behind each news report or text.

Conclusion and limitations

This paper explores the (re)framing effects of competing news narratives and news translation. Specifically, it illustrates the extent to which the translation and framing strategies may promote or prevent comprehension of the source information on competing or divisive issues. The role of framing in news narrative construction and its ultimate impact on our comprehension of news translation and news narratives including mediated and/or translated news texts deserve our further investigation. In other words, framing analysis, rooted from the framework of constructivism, as an approach to analysis news discourse can be a useful tool in conducting research on news translation or mediated news texts.

Given the limited space, the illustrative examples provided in this paper should not be treated as a comprehensive representation of the (re)framing effects of news translation and should not be viewed as the best angle available to analysis competing news narratives. A more robust framework of data analysis should be sourced for future research through drawing concepts and approaches from multiple disciplines such as journalistic studies, social linguistic studies and translation studies including those of audiences' perspectives or experiences with reconstructed or mediated news narratives.

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