

STRATEGIES FOR TRANSLATING PUNS AND WORDPLAY IN POLITICAL NEWS

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Abstract. *This thesis examines the challenges of translating puns and wordplay in political news discourse. It argues that such elements are not merely stylistic devices but perform important communicative functions, including framing, evaluation, and attracting reader attention. The study highlights the tension between maintaining factual accuracy and preserving the pragmatic effect of wordplay, especially within the constraints of journalistic clarity and brevity. Using comparative textual analysis, the research explores linguistic mechanisms such as homonymy, polysemy, and idiomatic variation. It proposes a set of translation strategies, including preservation, substitution, neutralization, and compensation. The study also introduces an evaluation matrix based on informational, pragmatic, and cultural load to guide strategy selection. The findings suggest that effective translation of political wordplay requires a functional and context-sensitive approach rather than purely lexical equivalence.*

Keywords: *Pun, wordplay, political discourse, news translation, pragmatic equivalence, functional approach, framing, implicature, translation strategies.*

Translating puns and wordplay in political news presents a compound challenge in which linguistic form, communicative intent, and institutional constraints intersect. Unlike literary wordplay, news puns are typically compressed, headline-driven, and tied to topical references that may quickly become obsolete. At the same time, political journalism operates under stricter expectations of factual clarity and reputational responsibility. Consequently, the translator faces a dual obligation: to convey information accurately while also reproducing—or functionally compensating for—the evaluative and attention-directing role of wordplay. A purely semantic translation often neutralizes rhetorical impact, whereas overly creative adaptation risks distorting implicatures or introducing unintended bias. Therefore, this study argues for an evidence-based strategy selection model that prioritizes text position, communicative function, and audience inferencing capacity.

In political discourse, puns frequently function as framing devices. They signal an interpretive stance while maintaining a seemingly playful tone, allowing journalists to imply criticism or skepticism without explicit editorialization. From a pragmatic perspective, such wordplay operates as an implicature trigger, compressing evaluative meaning into linguistic form. The translator must therefore determine whether the pun is primarily ornamental, evaluative, or mnemonic. Loss of ornamental puns may be acceptable; however, loss of evaluative or mnemonic functions can significantly alter reader perception and engagement. This diagnostic stage requires discourse analysis, since meaning is shaped not only by lexical form but also by co-text, intertext, and shared cultural knowledge.

A functionalist framework provides a useful theoretical basis for this analysis. According to functionalist translation theory, equivalence is not absolute but negotiable, depending on communicative purpose (Nord, 1997). In political news, the primary purpose is rapid and accurate information delivery, yet headlines also serve a competitive, attention-grabbing function. Therefore, headline puns allow greater creative flexibility than those in leads or factual passages,

where clarity is paramount. Controlled adaptation is acceptable as long as the informational core remains intact and the evaluative tone is preserved without amplification or reduction.

Methodologically, this study employs comparative textual analysis, focusing on micro-level mechanisms of wordplay such as homonymy, polysemy, paronymy, idiom variation, and phonetic similarity. Each mechanism imposes distinct translation constraints. For instance, homonym-based puns are often language-specific and resistant to transfer, whereas polysemy-based puns may allow partial equivalence if semantic overlaps exist across languages. Idiom-based wordplay can sometimes be recreated through equivalent idioms, though cultural alignment remains a challenge. To address these issues systematically, the translator should follow a structured decision process: identify the pun trigger, distinguish its multiple meanings, determine which meaning carries factual content and which conveys evaluation, assess transferability, and select the strategy that minimizes overall communicative loss.

Based on this framework, several translation strategies are proposed. Direct preservation is ideal but rare, requiring parallel ambiguity in both languages. Functional substitution allows the creation of a new pun with equivalent pragmatic effect, particularly suitable for headlines. Explicitation with neutralization prioritizes clarity by removing ambiguity, which is necessary in sensitive or high-stakes contexts. Compensation shifts rhetorical effect to another textual location, maintaining overall tone without compromising comprehension. Partial retention with glossing preserves some wordplay while adding minimal clarification, though it must be used sparingly due to stylistic constraints in journalism.

Strategy selection must also consider genre-specific constraints such as brevity, neutrality, and editorial standards. Puns may inadvertently signal bias, especially when targeting individuals or institutions. Therefore, an important ethical principle is stance equivalence: the translation should neither intensify nor weaken the original evaluative tone. The goal is not to enhance humor but to reproduce communicative intent within acceptable journalistic norms. In this context, pragmatic equivalence—where the reader derives a similar interpretation—takes precedence over formal equivalence.

Intertextuality introduces an additional layer of complexity. Political puns often reference slogans, idioms, or culturally embedded expressions. When such references are unfamiliar to the target audience, direct translation may fail. In these cases, substitution or compensation is preferable. However, intertextual adaptation must preserve both evaluative polarity and stylistic register. Inappropriate shifts in register—such as moving from formal to colloquial tone—can undermine credibility and distort the perceived seriousness of political reporting.

The scientific novelty of this research lies in the development of an evaluation matrix and a stepwise strategy-selection algorithm tailored specifically to political news translation. The matrix evaluates wordplay along three dimensions: informational load, pragmatic load, and cultural load. High informational load favors preservation or explicitation; high pragmatic load supports substitution or compensation; high cultural load often necessitates substitution, glossing, or neutralization. The algorithm integrates these factors with textual position and editorial constraints to recommend an optimal strategy. This model transforms subjective decision-making into a transparent, justifiable process suitable for professional and academic contexts.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that puns and wordplay in political news are not merely stylistic embellishments but functional elements that influence framing, interpretation, and reader

engagement. Their translation requires a balance between accuracy, readability, and pragmatic equivalence. A structured approach—combining discourse analysis, functionalist theory, and strategic evaluation—enables translators to make informed decisions that preserve communicative intent while adhering to journalistic standards. The proposed evaluation matrix and algorithm provide practical tools for improving translation quality, ensuring consistency, and enhancing editorial accountability in the translation of political discourse.

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