

# Linguistic Analysis of ‘Linsanity’ Effect in English and Chinese News Headlines

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## Abstract

News headlines play important roles in informing readers about the content of news and attracting readers’ attention. Linguistically, news headlines are known to have their own grammar (Simon-Vandenberg, 1981), and vocabularies used in news headlines are characterized as being unusual and sensational (McCarthy & O’Dell, 2001; Swan, 2005). This research examines such linguistic creativity in the media’s use of wordplay in English and Chinese news headlines featuring Jeremy Lin, a professional basketball player in the NBA who is best known with his nickname, Linsanity. Particularly, this research focuses on the media’s creative use of puns made from Jeremy Lin’s name and demonstrates how the English and Chinese languages allow for wordplay in news headlines featuring Jeremy Lin.

*Keywords:* Linsanity, wordplay, puns, headlines

## Introduction

With the recent rapid expansion of the Internet and mass media, new words are constantly created through the linguistic properties of ‘productivity’ and ‘creativity.’ Haspelmath (2002) distinguishes between ‘productivity’ and ‘creativity’ by claiming that productivity refers to an unintentional word-formation process, whereas creativity refers to intentional neologisms. This research examines linguistic creativity as related to the use of wordplay or puns in news headlines featuring Jeremy Lin, a professional basketball player of the U.S. National Basketball Association (NBA).

Jeremy Lin instigated a storm in the media with his outstanding basketball performance in 2012. Lin was playing for New York Knicks that season, but he did not play many games since he was in the NBA Development League most of the time. On February 4, 2012, when the Knicks were playing against the Nets, three starters on the Knicks were unable to play due to injury and family emergency. The Knicks had already lost two games prior to this game, and it was a frustrating night for that team. Struggling to win, Coach D’Antoni sent Lin into the game. To

the surprise of all those watching, Lin scored 25 points with 7 assists and 5 rebounds, leading the Knicks to a 99-92 victory over the Nets that night. Lin's astounding performance has resulted in his overnight stardom and the development of a new expression, 'Linsanity,' which means "feelings of excitement caused by watching Jeremy Lin of the New York Knicks basketball team" (idiomeanings, 2012), in mass media covering news stories featuring Lin. Within a month of the spread of 'Linsanity' across the media, the Global Language Monitor (2012) announced that the word 'Linsanity' has entered the English lexicon based on surpassing their criteria of having 25,000 citations with depth of usage in books and on the Internet, as well as appearing in the top 75,000 global printed and electronic media.

Due to Lin's Taiwanese-American background, local news media in Taiwan began to provide detailed coverage of Lin's rise to stardom, and following the trend of Linsanity wordplay in English media, the Taiwanese media also started to cover Lin's stories by using the Chinese equivalent of Linsanity, *lin lai feng* (林來瘋). Along with the trend of Linsanity or *lin lai feng* (林來瘋) is the rapid development of other Jeremy Lin wordplay or puns. This study attempts to analyze such media manipulation of Jeremy Lin's name in the creation of puns for English and Chinese news headlines.

## Wordplay and Puns

Wordplay and puns are common phenomena in everyday communication and have received considerable attention in linguistics. Wordplay is best defined as follows:

Wordplay is the general name for the various textual phenomena in which structural features of the language(s) are exploited in order to bring about a communicatively significant confrontation of two (or more) linguistic structures with more or less similar forms and more or less different meanings. (Delabastita, 1996, p.128)

Giorgadze (2014) argues that wordplay can be conceptualized as an umbrella term, and that a pun is one type of wordplay.

According to Koestler (1964), "The pun is the bisociation of a single phonetic form with two meanings - two strings of thought tied together by an acoustic knot" (p.65). Attardo (1994) describes puns by noting that "though couched in different theoretical frameworks, all linguistic (and non-linguistic) analyses agree on the fact that puns involve two senses" (pp.127-128).

Puns are known to have different types, and the distinctions are being made

between homonymic puns (identical sound and spelling) and homophonic puns (identical sound but different spelling) (Reah, 1998). Partington (2009) further distinguishes puns into ‘exact puns’ and ‘near puns’ and describes them as follows:

In an exact pun, two sound sequences which are identical are called into play, whereas in the near pun, two sequences are involved which resemble each other phonologically (sometimes visually). Each of the sound sequences is designed to be associated in the context of the particular joke text with a distinct meaning. (p.1795)

Reiss (2000) argues that “In translation puns and other kinds of play with language will have to be ignored to a great extent so as to keep the content invariant” (p.169). Newmark (1988) argues that if the purpose of the pun is to provoke laughter, alternative words with associated meanings in the target language can be used to compensate in translation.

## News Headlines

Since Staumann’s (1935) pioneering work on the language of newspaper headlines, studies of headlines have received considerable attention. According to Ungerer (2000), a headline “describes the essence of a complicated news story in a few words. It informs quickly and accurately and arouses the reader’s curiosity” (p.48). Crystal and Davy (1969) provide a detailed description of headlines as follows:

Headlines have to contain a clear, succinct and if possible intriguing message, to kindle a spark of interest in the potential reader, who, on average, is a person whose eyes moves swiftly down a page and stops when something catches his attention. (p.174)

In a nutshell, headlines are seen as the short-cut to the content of newspapers (Bowles & Borden, 2000; Ellis, 2001; Saxena, 2006), and they are used to attract readers’ attention (Reah, 1998).

The importance of attracting readers to the news story is also suggested by Garst and Bernstein (1933) who explicitly state that “the product to be sold is the news story” (p.103). To make headlines attractive, “semantically weak words are avoided in favor of rich, striking adjectives, nouns, or verbs” and that puns and quotations may also be used (Simon-Vandenberg, 1981, p.55). According to Reah (1998), in order to attract the reader’s attention, writers employ techniques such as homophones (words with identical sound but different in spelling), polysems (words with several closely related meanings), and homonyms (words with more than one meaning that are not closely related) in news headlines.

A study by Ifantidou (2009) has revealed that readers show more interest in ‘attractive/creative’ headlines than ‘informative/standard’ headlines. To produce attractive or creative headlines, neologisms can be used in news headlines. Newmark (1988) defines neologisms as “newly come lexical or existing units that acquire a new sense” (p.140). Neologisms can simply be formed by prefixes or suffixes (Richardson, 2007). Crystal (2003) argues that neologisms in newspaper headlines result from space constraints.

From linguistic perspectives, the language of news headlines has its own grammar (Simon-Vandenberg, 1981), and vocabularies used in headlines are characterized as being unusual and sensational (McCarthy & O’Dell, 2001; Swan, 2005). The register of newspaper headlines can range from the use of alliteration and rhyme, to the creation of sensational phrases to attract readers’ attention (Reah, 1998).

## Data Collection Method

News articles featuring Jeremy Lin in both English and Chinese in 2012 were collected. The data was collected by typing keywords related to Jeremy Lin on the Google search engine and setting the search period from February 4<sup>th</sup> to December 31<sup>st</sup> in 2012. The reason for selecting this particular period of time is because it was during this period when Jeremy Lin puns most frequently appeared in the media around the world.

## Jeremy Lin Puns in English News Headlines

The most frequently used Jeremy Lin pun in English news headlines is ‘Linsanity’; this is also known as the earliest Jeremy Lin pun. The following examples show ‘Linsanity’ puns used in various news headlines.

- (1) **Linsanity** takes over the NBA after new Knicks hero (*Reuters*, 2/10/2012)
- (2) ‘**Linsanity**’ hits Taiwan as Jeremy Lin conquers NBA (*BBC*, 2/15/2012)
- (3) What **Linsanity** says about New York (*Wall Street Journal*, 2/15/2012)
- (4) Jeremy Lin causes **Linsanity** in the NBA (*The Washington Post*, 2/16/2012)
- (5) **Linsanity** is even bigger than that and so are we (*Forbes*, 2/17/2012)
- (6) China’s new sports problem: Stop the **Linsanity**? (*The Economist*, 2/20/2012)
- (7) **Linsanity**! (*Time*, 2/27/2012)
- (8) Asian fans cheer ‘**Linsanity**’(*CNN*, 8/24/2012)

Analysis in this study has shown that most of the Jeremy Lin puns used in English news headlines are a result of blend. Algeo (1977) describes the concept of blend as follows:

The term BLEND has been used in a number of ways, most often to denote a combination of two or more forms, at least one of which has been shortened in the process of combination. The shortening may be by simple omission of some part of a form, or it may result from overlapping of sounds (or letters). (p.48)

Blend is “very easy to perform” (Pyles, 1952, p.181), and the use of blend is especially frequent by magazine and newspaper writers (Bryant, 1974).

The following news headlines show Jeremy Lin puns developed after Linsanity. These puns function as nouns and, like Linsanity, they are derived by blending Lin with another noun (Lin+noun). Similar to ‘Linsanity,’ for these blends, the final part of the first word (Lin) overlaps the first part of the second word.

- (9) From Linsanity to **Linsomnia** (*ESPN*, 3/2/2012)
- (10) A good **Linvestment**: Five pun-based endorsements for Jeremy Lin (*SB Nation*, 2/16/2012)
- (11) **Linfatuation**: Fans and retailers rush for Jeremy Lin merchandise (*Time*, 2/11/2012)
- (12) Jeremy Lin: A **Linspiration** to benchwarmers everywhere (*The Washington Post*, 2/17/2012)

It can be said that these puns shown in examples (1) to (12) are all created through the process of syntagmatic blend. Algeo (1977) maintains that “the syntagmatic blend is haplogistic, the first form ending in the same sound or sequence of sounds as that with which the sound form begins, with consequent overlapping” (p.56). Examples (1) to (12) are consistent with Algeo’s framework of syntagmatic blend in that they keep the first form, ‘Lin,’ and overlap the ending of Lin with the beginning of other words such as insanity, insomnia, investment, infatuation, and inspiration to form Linsanity (Lin+insanity), Linsomnia (Lin+insomnia), Linvestment (Lin+investment), Linfatuation (Lin+infatuation), and Linspiration (Lin+inspiration), respectively.

Some type of news headlines employ hyphens at the morpheme boundaries for puns created through blends. Consider examples (13) and (14).

- (13) A lesson in **Lin-guistics**: The best (and worst) Jeremy Lin puns

(*Time*, 2/16/2012)

- (14) New York Knicks legend Willis Reed gives ringing **Lin-dorsement**  
(*ESPN*, 2/17/2012)

Bauer (2003) argues that “hyphenation in English is totally random and does not necessarily prove anything at all about the linguistic status of strings of elements” (p.134). A study conducted by Verhoeven and Perfetti (2011) shows that slower readers have a tendency to process hyphenated compounds faster than concatenated compounds and suggests that hyphenation aids in the process of processing compounds. Therefore, the hyphenation for Lin-guistics (Lin+linguistics) and Lin-dorsement (Lin+indorsement) makes Lin stand out and allows for easy recognition and processing of the blended words by readers.

Another type of blend that also functions as noun is a blend that involves not only overlapping of sounds, but also clipping of the first part of the second word. Consider examples (15) and (16):

- (15) A fairytale start to the **Linderella** story (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 2/18/2012)  
(16) Super **LINTendo** (*The Gothic Times*, 3/8/2012)

In example (15), Linderella (Lin+Cinderella) is derived through blending Lin with Cinderella, and the blending process not only involves overlapping of the sounds between Lin and Cinderella, but it also involves clipping the first sound of second word, namely ‘C’ in Cinderella. The same applies to LINTendo (Lin+Nintendo) in example (16). The first sound in second word, namely ‘N’ in Nintendo, is clipped as it overlaps with LIN. This type of blending process is referred to as what Algeo (1977) calls ‘blends with clipping and overlapping.’

Apart from puns that function as nouns, there are also puns that are derived by combining Lin with an adjective through blending. Consider the following examples:

- (17) **Linstant** entertainment: where to watch the Knicks tonight  
(*Gothamist*, 2/10/2012)  
(18) ‘**Lin-sational**’ Knicks win over Lakers (*USA Today*, 2/10/2012)  
(19) **Linspiring**: Asians love the **Linfamously** Jeremy Lin (*Gothamist*, 2/11/2012)  
(20) **Lin-conceivable** puns have run out for Jeremy Lin? (*USA Today*, 2/15/2012)  
(21) The **Lin-Credible** rise of US basketball star (*Sky News*, 2/17/2012)  
(22) Jeremy Lin’s ‘**Linning**’ streak and 8 unbelievable active runs around the NBA (*Bleacher Report*, 2/15/2012)

One noticeable pattern that can be observed from examples (17) to (22) is that puns that function as adjectives tend to appear more at the beginning of headlines, perhaps to make headlines more attention-getting to readers.

Compared with the derivation of nouns and adjectives, deriving verbs with the morpheme ‘Lin’ was relatively rare. Examples (23) to (26) show such rare examples of verbs derived from ‘Lin’:

- (23) New Knick is **Linning** fans over (*NY Daily News*, 2/9/2012)
- (24) All he does is **Lin** (*ESPN*, 2/11/12)
- (25) **Lin-vestigating** history (*ESPN*, 2/15/2012)
- (26) Jeremy Lin’s tremendous play **LINspiring** fans across New York City (*CBS New York*, 2/15/2012)

It can be argued that the reason why there are so many possibilities for Lin to generate new puns in English is because as a surname it has just one syllable. A syllable can be viewed as a structural unit providing melodic organization to a phonological string (Belvins, 1996). The phonological sound of Lin, /lin/, is a CVC that is composed of a consonant (C) followed by a vowel (V) and another consonant (C). This structure makes Lin easily blended with other words or morphemes without much of a phonotactic constraint, and words beginning with the syllable /in/ can easily be blended with the syllable /lin/ to create new puns.

### Jeremy Lin Puns in Chinese News Headlines

A Jeremy Lin pun that appeared most frequently in Chinese news headlines at the time when Lin rose to global media stardom was the Chinese equivalent of Linsanity, which is *lin lai feng* (林來瘋). This expression sounds similar to the Chinese expression *ren lai feng* (人來瘋), which is a Taiwanese idiom meaning ‘people become excited in front of others’, and it resembles the meaning of Linsanity in English. Examples (27) to (30) show *lin lai feng* (林來瘋) appearing in news headlines in Taiwan.

- (27) **林來瘋** 狂飆38分 (*Apple Daily*, 2/12/2012)  
*lin lai feng* *kuang biao 38 fen*  
“**Linsanity** reigns for 38 minutes.”
- (28) 擋不住 “**林來瘋**”! 麥克父豎大拇指 (*Chinese Television System*, 2/19/2012)  
*dang bu zhu “lin lai feng”! mai ke fu shu da mu zhi*  
“Can’t stop ‘**Linsanity**’! Thumbs up from Michael’s father.”

- (29) 林來瘋讓我們也暴紅 (商業周刊, 2/23, 2012)  
*lin lai feng rang wo men ye bao hong*  
 “Linsanity let us earn fame too.”
- (30) 林來瘋 帶動學習英語熱潮 (中央通訊社, 2/27/2012)  
*lin lai feng dai dong xue xi yin yu re chao*  
 “Linsanity brings trend in learning English language.”

In contrast to the English puns derived from Lin, many of the Jeremy Lin puns found in Chinese news headlines in Taiwan tend to keep the number of morphemes and syllables to three, and many of them are homophonic puns. In addition, many of those puns are developed through compounding. Compounding refers to the “word formation process by which words are formed through combining two or more independent words” (Mihalicek & Wilson, 2010, p.687).

Examples (31) and (32) show homophonic puns in which Jeremy Lin’s Chinese name is written as *ling shu hao* (零輸豪) instead of *lin shu hao* (林書豪), which is how his name is written originally.

- (31) 「零輸豪」太神！歐巴馬也成粉絲 (Yahoo 奇摩新聞, 2/16/2012)  
*“lin shu hao” tai shen! Ou ba ma ye cheng fen si*  
 “‘Undefeated Jeremy’ is so amazing! Even Obama became his fan.”
- (32) 零輸豪 7 連勝 13 助攻寫新高 (自由時報, 2/17 2012)  
*lin shu hao 7 lian sheng 13 zhu gong xie xin gao*  
 “Undefeated Jeremy wins 7 consecutive games with 13 assists achieving new record.”

In these news headlines, *ling shu hao* (零輸豪) shown at the beginning of these headlines can be literally translated as ‘zero-loose-Hao’ to signify Lin’s undefeatable skills in basketball. This expression sounds very similar to *lin shu hao* (林書豪), which is Lin’s full name in Chinese, and by using different Chinese characters, the headline creates a word with an entirely new and different meaning to celebrate and highlight Lin’s stardom. To let readers notice the pun easily, the headline in example (31) used Chinese quotation marks around the pun to make it stand out in the headline.

Some news headlines deliberately used part of Lin’s name in the form of the Chinese character, *hao* (豪), in places where another character, *hao* (好), is normally used.



- (33) **豪小子**有魅力！全場爆滿看“奇蹟” (*Chinese Television System*, 9/3/2012)  
*hao xiao zi you mei li! quan chang bao man kan “qi ji”*  
 “**Young Jeremy** has the charm! The stadium was a full house with people wanting to see ‘miracle.’”
- (34) **豪神**小祕密最討厭芹菜 (*Apple Daily*, 9/19/2012)  
*hao shen xiao mi mi zui tao yan qin cai*  
 “**Amazing Jeremy** has a small secret. He hates celery.”
- (35) 舉手投足**豪榜樣** 角逐最佳運動精神獎 (*Apple Daily*, 4/18/2012)  
*ju shou tou zu hao bang yang jue zhu zui jia yun dong jing shen jiang*  
 “**Jeremy is a great role-model** for what he does. He will compete for the NBA Sportsmanship Award.”

In Chinese, there is an expression, *hao xiao zi* (好小子), which means ‘good kid’ or ‘good fellow.’ In example (33), the media gives Lin a nickname by calling him *hao xiao zi* (豪小子) by replacing the Chinese character of *hao* (好), which means ‘good’, with part of Lin’s Chinese name, *hao* (豪). By giving Lin the nickname of *hao xiao zi* (豪小子), the meaning of the word changes to ‘young Jeremy,’ and readers can easily identify the news story as being related to Jeremy Lin. Similarly, in example (34), *hao shen* (豪神) is modified from the original expression, *hao shen* (好神) to mean ‘amazing’, and in example (35), *hao bang yang* (豪榜樣) is modified from *hao bang yang* (好榜樣) to mean ‘good role-model,’ and both expressions can easily be identified by readers as being related to Lin.

Jeremy Lin is also known for his great interest in playing video games, and this caused the media to give him a nickname related to Nintendo video games as shown in example (36):

- (36) **林天堂**破關 連吞3大新星 (*Apple Daily*, 3/2/2012)  
*lin tian tang po guan lian tun 3 da xin xing*  
 “**Lintendo** wins the game surpassing three big new stars.”

The wordplay, *lin tian tang*, (林天堂) resembles *ren tian tang* (任天堂), which is the word for Nintendo in Chinese, and both expressions can be said to have phonetically close sound.

## Conclusion

Cross-linguistic comparison of Jeremy Lin puns in English and Chinese news headlines has shown that English allowed for the creation of puns more flexibly than Chinese.

Unlike surnames of other basketball legends such as Michael Jordan or Charles Barkley, Jeremy Lin's one-syllable surname made it possible to work effectively and harmoniously with other words in creating new puns through the process of blending. It is with such a great possibility of creating puns out of his surname that enabled media to create attention-grabbing and humorous effects in developing news headlines related to this celebrity.

The Chinese language, on the other hand, allows for wordplay on Jeremy Lin news by either translation puns or homophonic puns through the process of compounding. Due to the limited phonetic inventory in Chinese, the possibility of creating puns out of Lin's full name in Chinese, *lin shu hao* (林書豪), was seen as limited in the news headlines investigated.

Despite the differences between English and Chinese media in creating puns, based on the analysis of wordplay on news headlines in both languages, it can be concluded that both English and Chinese have their own creative systems in pursuing wordplay on the Linsanity phenomenon.

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