

Chinese-to-English Translation of Political Discourse: A Feature-Oriented Analysis

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Abstract

The translation of political discourse differs from the translation of texts in non-political contexts in which political discourse is highly profiled in terms of political sensitivity and policy orientation. It may potentially influence global peace and security. Understanding the features of translating China's political discourse from Chinese to English is of great help to political translators and researchers in studying the problems and strategies of political translation for attaining the above expectation. It is expected to help the international community understand clearer and better the stance, response, and policies adopted by the government in national and international affairs. Therefore, the translation of China's political discourse should deliver the intended information accurately and adequately the national characteristics of the source text and conduct flexible adjustments to conform to the language habits and ways of thinking of the target audience while mainlining the correct political position. This article aims to review and identify the essential characteristics of translating China's political discourse from Chinese to English. It is apparent in understanding the desired political translation effect and some relevant translation problems. The bibliometric research method concludes that the Chinese-to-English translation of China's political discourse has four distinctive features: accuracy, international-audience-centeredness, national characteristics, and political rightness. It is recommended that the translator pay great attention to these features while selecting translation strategies and methods and raise the acceptability of the translated text among the global recipients for promoting an authentic national image of the country.

Keywords: Chinese-to-English translation, feature, political discourse, target text, translation of political discourse

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Introduction

“Political discourse can be interpreted as “an act of communication used in formal or non-formal political contexts that relates to, deals with or describes any political event, organization or actor” (Bánhegyi, 2014, p.140). A widely shared definition of political discourse comprises all forms of political contexts, such as parliamentary debates, bills, laws, policies, and regulations issued by the government or its departments, documents of other agencies, and political advertisements, speeches and interviews produced by political actors. “The vast bulk of political discourse studies is about the text and talk of professional politicians or political institutions... both at the local, national and international levels” (van Dijk, 1997, p.12). Political discourse has become one of the cores of international communication.

Translation of political discourse distinguishes itself from other forms of translation by its potential influence on global peace and security. The key to the translation of political discourse (TPD) is how to do the perlocutionary act so that the target text (TT) could effectively influence the concepts, decisions, and acts of the international recipients (Yuan, 2020). Furthermore, different from many other pragmatic contexts, TPD emphasizes the truthful delivery of the TT and the intended communicative effect on the target audience (TA) since the international audiences are expected to “hear,” “understand,” and “accept” China through the translated text. In this regard, understanding the features of translating China’s political discourse from Chinese to English is of great help to political translators and researchers in studying the problems and strategies of political translation for attaining the above expectation.

Features of Translating China’s Political Discourse

This article identifies four leading features of TPD, namely, accuracy, international-audience-centeredness, national characteristics, and political rightness.

Accuracy

Accuracy is widely considered a fundamental element in TPD. It relies on comprehension and expression, two significant stages of the translation process. And without the correct understanding of the source text (ST), there would be no way for a correct TT and the achievement of translation purposes. It is more challenging to comprehend the implied meaning of a discourse, mainly when special terms, vague expressions, jargon in dialect, and figures of speech are involved.

Take political terms. Concise and condensed in the form of expression, terminologies in China’s political discourse are long held, featuring the popular political proposition of the governments in tenure. For example, the phrase “完善制度(*wánshàn zhìdù*)” is frequently used in Chinese political documents and was once translated into “further perfect the system” (Fu & Lan, 2019, p.77; Qiu, 2018a, p.14; Jia, 2003, p.28). However, “perfect” in *Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries* means “faultless, ideal, free of any defects” and needs not to be “improved” (Oxford University Press, n.d.). From this sense, the English translation fails to convey the intended meaning of the Chinese term since it refers to the situation that the current system needs to be improved due to some flaws or defects. “Improve the system of” is therefore considered a more accurate translation in this case (Qiu, 2018a, p.14). And improper comprehension of the ST leads to the inaccurate TT that would impair intended information's understanding, acceptability, and

persuasiveness.

Metaphor is another discursive feature in China's political texts. It is an effective tool for introducing China's policies and expressing its national position to other countries (Van, 2012). Moreover, this rhetorical device provides a shortcut for the audience to understand complex political issues and situations and plays the role of cognitive interpretation and rhetorical persuasion in political discourse (Yuan, 2020; Miller, 2012). And the translator is supposed to comprehend both the literal and implied meanings of these vivid metaphorical expressions, which is a prerequisite to a correct TT with conviction.

For instance, “一场没有硝烟的战争(*Yìchǎng méiyōu xiāoyān de zhànzhēng*)”, “白衣战士 (*báiyī zhànshì*)” and “扶贫攻坚战(*fúpín gōngjiān zhàn*)” (Qiu, 2018a, p.15). Literally and neglecting the political context, the translator may put these Chinese metaphorical expressions as “a smokeless war”, “white-coated soldier,” and “poverty-relief battle” (Qiu, 2018a, p.15). The translations, unfortunately, fail to deliver the actual political viewpoints in the ST but sketch China with some war preference, which probably misleads the international audiences into considering China as a belligerent country. Such an inaccuracy in TPD harms the desired persuasion effect on the TA, but also the national image and discourse power of the government in the global arena. The above-mentioned metaphorical expressions are suggested to be translated into “invisible efforts”, “medical worker,” and “poverty-relief” (Zhang, 2016, p.14; Zhang, 2013, p.25).

As illustrated above, accuracy is a crucial feature and criteria for TPD in determining whether China's voice, responses, and attitudes could be transmitted truthfully. At the same time, to help the international reading public with an easy and clear understanding of the country's ideas and concepts presented by its political discourse, the translator should take full care of their demand, reading habits, and way of thinking.

International-audience-centeredness

In *Reader's Response Theory*, it is suggested that translation evaluation must have the reader and his response at the center since he is the target of the translation product (Nida & Taber, 2001). In other words, instead of correspondence at the lexical and grammatical dimension, the focus should be on whether the target audience could be informed correctly and convinced by the TT. TA's acceptance of the translated text is the primary consideration in global communication (Qiu, 2018b). Therefore, putting the international audience at the center is the second key feature of TPD.

However, domestic and foreign audiences differ significantly in demand for information, language use, and way of thinking. Therefore, as Huang (2004) proposes, Chinese-to-English TPD should adapt to the realities of China, the needs of foreign recipients in terms of information acquisition, and their thought patterns. In this case, annotations for background information are necessary. Take the translation of two political words “五大发展理念(*wūdà fāzhǎn lǐniàn*)” (Xi, 2015) and “四个自信(*sìgè zìxìn*)” (Xi, 2016) for example. They can be translated as five concepts for development and four matters of confidence. However, such a TT is vague and puzzling to the foreign recipients who, without knowledge of China's national strategies and ruling philosophy, have no idea about what the “five” and the “four” actually refer to. And this problem calls translational annotations into existence.

In other words, the given TT of “五大发展理念(*wǔdà fāzhǎn lǐniàn*)” (Xi, 2015) and “四个自信(*sigè zìxìn*)” (Xi, 2016) would be better understood when annotated respectively with “innovation-driven development, coordinated development, green development, development for global process, and development for the benefit of all” and “four matters of confidence in the chosen path, guiding theories, political system and China’s culture” (Qiu, 2018a, p.18). In this way, the international audiences could understand clearer and deeper the intended information by China’s political discourse.

On the other hand, the translator should think and express like the original English speakers, taking their habits and custom of language use. As members of two different language families, Chinese and English vary from each other in many, such as pronunciation, grammar, lexicon, and logical argumentation. And the most significant lies in parataxis and hypotaxis (Nida & Taber, 2001). The Chinese language emphasizes parataxis, conveying meaning through word order and context instead of linguistic form, while the English language features hypotaxis, the expression of intention through syntactic devices. At the stage of expression in TPD, the translator must consider these linguistic differences and be audience-centered.

For another example, “军队革命化、现代化、正规化建设继续加强，国防实力和军队防卫作战能力提高(*jūnduì gémìng huà, xiàndài huà, zhèngguī huà jiànshè jìxù jiāqiáng, guófáng shíli hé jūnduì fángwèi zuòzhàn nénglì tígāo*)” (Jiang, 2002). The two subject-predicate constructions separated by a comma in the Chinese sentence seem to be parallel in linguistic form. Still, the latter is actually subordinated to the former in logical, communicative meaning. In other words, there is a casual relationship: the strengthening of national defense and military power (the latter) relies on the enhancement of army building (the former). A participle phrase “leading to” is thus suggested to help convey the underlying logical connection in the following TT “The revolutionization, modernization and standardization of the armed forces were carried forward, leading to a rise in our country’s military capability and our army’s defensive combat readiness” (Jiang, 2002). Such an accommodation aims at more accessible and idiomatic English translations that are more adaptive and acceptable to the TA.

National Characteristics

Another feature of translating China’s political discourse is the transmission of Chinese national characteristics. With continued social development, its distinctive cultural and political characteristics persist and rise. Many China-featured abbreviations and collocations are perceived in China’s political discourse, presenting the unique governance philosophy, political initiatives, and views on peace and development.

However, many such expressions have no correspondence in English, and that translates more challenging in helping the TA understand the retained political, cultural, and historical characteristics unique to China. When transferred insufficiently, they would leave the TA in a daze and haze. And this is explained well by the condition that most Chinese leaders prefer the use of numbers in their speech to emphasize the fact, significance, or innovative proposals.

For example, “一带一路(yīdài yīlù),” or “丝绸之路经济带(sīchóu zhīlù jīngjì dài)” and “21世纪海上丝绸之路(èrshíyī shìjì hǎishàng sīchóu zhīlù)” (The Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative, 2017). As a popular political term among domestic and foreign media reports, 一带一路(yīdài yīlù) and its English translation has aroused extensive solicitude and discussion since it was first raised in 2013. The translated texts of the term include “one belt and one road”, “one belt, one road”, “the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road”, “one belt and one road” initiative, “the belt and road strategy”, and “the Belt and Road Initiative” (Qiu, 2018a, p.19). It is found that most of these translations use “one” to refer to “一(yī)” in the Chinese political term, but what does “一(yī)”, the Chinese way of writing the Arabic numeral “1”, mean in “一带一路(yīdài yīlù)” exactly?

On the one hand, as a recent appellation of ancient trade routes, “the Silk Road Economic Belt” consists of a network of several different overland routes: the “northern route,” the “southern route”, and the “southwestern route” (sometimes referred to as the Tea Horse Road), with more minor routes branching off along the way; on the other hand, the “21st-Century Maritime Silk Road” refers to the proposed modern-time version of the ancient Maritime Silk Road that connected China with the rest of Asia, and even parts of eastern Africa (Zhao, 2020). It actually comprises of two routes: the first extends from China's coastal ports to the South China Sea, through the Strait of Malacca to the Indian Ocean and to Europe, and the second is to cross the South China Sea from China's coastal ports to the South Pacific Ocean.

Based on the those mentioned above, there is more than one road involved in the strategic initiative of “一带一路(yīdài yīlù)”, and this term is only used as an abbreviation for the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and “21st-Century Maritime Silk Road”, the two great concepts of President Xi Jinping (2013) seeking joint development with West Asia and ASEAN countries (Qiu, 2018a, p.19). In other words, “一(yī)” in “一带一路(yīdài yīlù)” does not mean “every” or “one” as an article. More than being inaccurate, the given English translations with “one road” are also insufficient in terms of national characteristics intended by the ST. They are misleading to the TA in that only two roads or routes are covered by the initiative, which undermines both the value and purpose of the unprecedented proposal by China.

Therefore, the National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce have standardized the English translation of “一带一路(yīdài yīlù)” into “the Belt and Road Initiative” (Souhu, 2019; Qiu, 2018a, p.19). Therefore, this TT is intact and expressive with retained Chinese characteristics.

Political Rightness

The influence of politics on translation has always governed the translation activities of the translators: from the selection of source materials to translation strategies and from macro-dimension explorations to micro-dimension operations (Chen, 2014). Among all the influences, however, political rightness is considered one of the most crucial and fundamental criteria in translating China's political discourse into English (Si & Zeng, 2021; An & Wang, 2019; Xie & Wang, 2018; Mo et al., 2016).

Political rightness is a judicial term derived from the United States in the 19th century. It requires that the court language follow the principle of rightness; that, the vocabulary and rhetoric must conform to the judicial regulations or meet the laws and principles prescribed by the Constitution. Along with the wave of liberalism in the 1980s, the judicial concept was introduced to the political field, specifying the rightness for mass media in racial discrimination, gender discrimination, and other phenomena. And the purposes of political rightness in that historical context is to prevent discrimination or prejudice.

In TPD, however, political rightness usually refers to the correct position of the translator on issues of national interests, such as sovereignty, territorial integrity, state system, social stability, etc. The translator is supposed to be qualified for both cross-cultural communication and speaking for the position of China (Zhao, 2011).

For example, the translation of the political term “*独立关税地区(dùlì guānshuì dìqū)*” concerning Hong Kong (National People’s Congress, 1984, p.13). It is from Article 3 in the Sino-British Joint Declaration on the Question of Hong Kong: “Hong Kong Special Administrative Region will maintain its status as a free port and an independent customs territory”, where the Chinese term “*独立关税地区(dùlì guān shuì dìqū)*” was initially translated into “independent customs territory” (National People’s Congress, 1984, p.13). The word “independent” in Cambridge Dictionary is explained as “not influenced or controlled in any way by other people, events, or things; an independent country is not governed or ruled by another country” (Cambridge University Press, 2021). In other words, it generally refers to the freedom of the country from any colonial rule.

However, instead of being an independent political entity, Hong Kong has always been a part of China in history. Under this knowledge, the previous translation of “*独立关税区(dùlì guānshuì dìqū)*” is a political mistranslation that goes against China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. A TT devoid of political rightness tends to convey China’s untrue stand and status, giving rise to misinterpretations and doubts from the international community upon China’s national image. The term was then re-translated into “a separate customs territory,” which is accurate and sufficient in meaning transfer and correct with the political stance in the ST (Qiu, 2018a, p16).

Another typical example is the English translation of “*台湾问题(táiwān wèntí)*” (www.gov.cn, 2021). There is an indisputable fact that Taiwan has been an inalienable part of China’s territory since ancient times. Therefore, the Chinese political term “*台湾问题(táiwān wèntí)*” should be translated into “the Taiwan question” or “the question of Taiwan” rather than “the Taiwan issue” or “the issue of Taiwan” (ENGLISH.GOV.CN., 2021). Since the word “issue” means “a disputed event” or “an event worth talking about”, it would be a seriously wrong delivery of China’s position was it used in the TT (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

Conclusion

To conclude, as the core of discourse content for international communication, political discourse bears witness and clarifies China’s successful practice and incredible achievements

within the course of the revolution, construction and reform. TPD, therefore, serves the proper comprehension of a truthful national image of China and enhances discourse power in the international community. Its key features are of positive reference and significance for political translators and researchers in fully understanding the desired purpose of political translation as well as helping locate some relevant translation problems and proposing translation strategies that contribute to higher acceptability of the translated political discourse by global audiences.

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