

Functional Comparison of Chinese Diplomatic Discourse and Their English Translations

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Abstract

This thesis aims to compare Chinese diplomatic discourse and their English Translations using Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics. The goal is to identify similarities and differences between Chinese diplomatic discourse and their English translation. It provides a comparison and description of Chinese diplomatic discourses and their English translations from the perspective of the three meta-functions: ideational function, interpersonal function, and discourse function. In terms of ideational function, the comparison is primarily based on the clause's process, which is the only material process in transitivity. In terms of interpersonal function, the comparison is mainly based on modal verbs. In terms of discourse function, the comparison is mainly based on four grammatical cohesive devices in discourse: reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction.

Keywords

Halliday; Systemic Functional Linguistics; Diplomatic Discourse.

1. Introduction

As a growing global power, China's diplomatic texts have a crucial role in international affairs. These texts serve as windows into China's national image and as links for communication and cooperation in international relations. However, accurately and appropriately translating these texts into English presents complex challenges of language conversion and cultural interpretation. As a growing global power, China's diplomatic texts have a crucial role in international affairs. These texts serve as windows into China's national image and as links for communication and cooperation in international relations. However, accurately and appropriately translating these texts into English presents complex challenges of language conversion and cultural interpretation.

This paper examines the functional differences between Chinese diplomatic texts in the original language and their English translations. The focus is on changes in expressions, conveyed messages, and cultural connotations in different contexts.

To enhance the study, we have selected significant speeches delivered by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) in recent years, particularly in 2023, from the official MOFA website. The objective of this study is to analyze these diplomatic discourses and identify functional comparisons that can aid in the study of Chinese diplomatic discourse alongside their English translations. Therefore, we can better understand the Chinese government's language choices and message emphasis when addressing different audiences. This study will also highlight the crucial role of English translation in shaping the international community's perception of China's attitudes. Ultimately, the goal is to gain a better understanding of the impact of Chinese diplomatic texts on cross-cultural communication and to provide insights for promoting international exchanges and mutual understanding.

2. Theoretical Framework

Systemic Functional Linguistics is a theory centered on semantics and linguistic functions. Its research focuses on function rather than form, semantics rather than syntax, and discourse rather than sentence structure.[1]. Systemic functional linguistics is a field of study that examines language systems and language use based on the underlying meaning of the language. It places particular emphasis on the analysis of language in context and the examination of discourse.[2]. Since the establishment of the theoretical framework in the 1950s and 1960s, the maturation of the theoretical system in the 1970s and 1980s, and the continuous expansion and refinement of the theoretical constructs since the 1990s, there has been a consistent and significant growth of the theoretical framework.[3]. Halliday believes that language has three meta-functions, ideational function, interpersonal function and textual function.[4].

The ideational meaning refers to language use for talking about the experience of the outside world or the inside world. And it can be further divided into the experiential and logical, the former one referring to the grammatical choices that enable speakers to make meanings about the world around us and inside us while the latter one to those systems “which set up logical-semantic relationships between one clausal unit and another.”[5]. One important way to realizing the ideational function is transitivity system which “specifies the different types of process expressed in the clause and potentially consists of three components: process, participants in the process and circumstances associated with process.”[6]. Halliday and Matthiessen pointed out that transitivity mainly includes six process types: material process, mental process, relational process, behavioral process, verbal process and existential process.[7].

Interpersonal function refers to language can be used to enact social relationships.[8]. Interpersonal meaning is conveyed through the grammatical choices made by the speaker to express ideas, maintain relationships, and influence the receiver's behavior.

Distinct from ideational and interpersonal function, textual meaning takes language itself as its object, through which, as Halliday points out, language “creates a semiotic world of its own: a parallel universe, or ‘virtual reality’ in modern terms.” [10]. Textual function refers to the function of language to organize and form a discourse. In a language there must be different kinds of discourse forming devices that organizes different isolated pieces of language into an integrated whole. Generally speaking, these discourse forming devices mainly fall into two groups: One is structural cohesion, the other is non-structural cohesion. Structural cohesion functions within clause structure and helps to bind clauses together. Non-structural cohesion functions across sentences and helps to bind different sentences into a discourse. Cohesive devices create cohesion to bind sentences into discourse and in this way perform non-structural discourse functions. When the interpretation of one element in a sentence is dependent on another element in a different sentence, cohesion occurs.

3. Methodology

3.1. Corpus Design

There are three corpora about this research. The first is about 33 political discourse in Chinese, the second is about their English translation versions, and the last is Chinese-English parallel corpus of 33 political discourse. Most of discourse are Chinese diplomatic speeches in 2023. Most of documents and their translations are downloaded from the website of Ministry of Foreign Affairs. All in all, 33 files were collected, totalling 39844 Chinese characters and 53497 English words.

3.2. Data Collection

Data collection proceeds as follows: Firstly, with ParaConc, the ratio of six progress(material process, mental process, relational process, behavioral process, verbal process and existential process) can be detailed. Secondly, Halliday & Matthiessen defined modality as the intermediate ground between positive and negative polarity, which refers to the area of meaning that lies between yes and no.[11]. Considering that there is a possibility that different levels exist in the system of intermediate value, Halliday proposed the value of modality. It is proposed that attaching high, median, and low modal values to modal judgments can more clearly express the semantic intensity of modal judgments. We collect all modal verbs dividing into three parts according to modal values through Antconc. Thirdly, with ParaConc, the ratio of grammar cohesion (reference, ellipsis, substitution and conjunction) and non-cohesion are collected.

4. Data Analysis

This thesis intended to analyze the different ratio in transitivity, modal verbs and grammar cohesion between Chinese political discourse and its English translation.

Table 1. Ratio of Material Process in the ST and TT

	ST	TT
material process	66.00%	70.40%

According to Table 1, we can see that material processes is 70.4% in Chinese texts and 66.0% in English texts, which was more than half of the total, so the high proportion needed to be paid more attention. It means that both English and Chinese texts mainly reflect what happens and what people do in the field of diplomacy. To be more specific, it shows that China's attitude toward actively participating in international affairs, especially in development, and putting it into action.

According to rough statistics,the most frequently used verbs in material process clauses in TT are: support, work, promote, make, build, continue, uphold, advance, keep, achieve, take, pursue, join, share ,create, provide, need, help, safeguard, bring, oppose.

The most frequently used verbs in material process clauses in ST are: 发展, 合作, 推动(推进, 加快, 加强, 促进), 提供, 继续(不断, 持续)坚持, 支持, 开放, 实现, 维护, 增长, 建设(构建), 提出, 解决(落实), 治理, 反对, 创新(创造), 共建, 参与, 发挥, 作出, 携手

Example 1:

ST: 双方要继续推高人文交流热度, 促进文化交融深度, 拓展民心相通维度, 支持双方智库、媒体、民间组织和青年、妇女等加强交流合作, 推动习近平主席提出的全球文明倡议在非洲加速落地, 让中非文明之花绽放得更加绚烂多彩。

TT: Our two sides should continue to stimulate public interest in people-to-people exchanges, deepen cultural interactions, and foster new bonds connecting the hearts of our peoples. We need to support stronger exchanges and cooperation between our think tanks, media, private organizations, youth and women, and speed up cooperation in Africa under the Global Civilization Initiative put forth by President Xi Jinping, to add vibrancy to the Chinese and African civilizations.

In this example ,we can see that the verb “促进”(facilitate) and “加强”(strengthen) are transferred into none and “stronger”. “加强” refers to “search”. However, the verb “推动”(promote) is not translated in the English sentence. In this sentence,the noun “深度”(depth)

is changed into the verb “deepen”. This Chinese sentence is a typical run-on sentence which means End-of-sentence intonation also occurs in non-end-of-sentence segments. This happens with loosely semantically linked, seemingly disjointed, and unrelated clauses. Generally, this kind of sentences will be broken into two or more sentences in translation. In the example, the translation consists of two sentence. In the second sentence, the main verb is “support”, therefore other Chinese verbs will be changed into other words.

Example 2:

ST: 今天的中非关系，国际协作更加有力，已成为维护国际公平正义的重要力量。

TT: Sixty years on, China and Africa enjoy stronger coordination on international affairs, serving as an important force for international fairness and justice.

In this example ,we can see that the verb “维护” (safeguard) is not translated in the English sentences. In the last clause, the translation treats this part as a adverbial. This part has two verbs “成为” (become) and “维护” (safeguard) . The translation chooses to translate only one verb “成为” (become) as serving. English is a static language, meaning that it often expresses the underlying meaning of sentences in a static way, using only nouns, prepositions, adjectives, and their phrases. It is important to note that this characteristic of English can sometimes lead to ambiguity and lack of clarity.What’s more,the emphasis on being a positive force in international affairs inherently implies the idea of upholding or maintaining principles without the need for a direct translation of the term "维护" (safeguard) .

The difference in the percentage of material process can be explained by the differences between the Chinese and English languages, particularly in their syntactic features, as well as differences in society, culture, or foreign policies. As is well known, English sentences are compact and complex, resembling a family tree, and utilizing various grammatical means such as subordinate clauses, phrases, and verbal nouns. There are additional classes or inflections that can indicate relationships and connections. Additionally, in English, nouns are more prevalent. To express the same meaning, Chinese tends to use more sentences, such as 'running-water', dividing a long and complex English sentence into shorter clauses. In Chinese, verbs are more prevalent.

Table 2. Ratio of the Modal Verb in the ST

	Low	Medium	High
positive	10.64% (60)	73.70% (440)	10.05% (44)
negative	1.86% (11)	0.50% (3)	3.35% (20)

Table 3. Ratio of the Modal Verb in the TT

	Low	Medium	High
positive	10.00% (92)	66.00% (605)	18.10% (166)
negative	0% (0)	2.20% (35)	3.70% (18)

According to the Table 2 and Table 3 , we can know that in ST and TT,the majority of modal verbs is of medium-positive degree. However, it is 66.00% in English,and 73.70% in Chinese. There is nearly 8% difference between English and Chinese. Besides, there is also difference ratio about modal verb of high degree in ST and TT.

Example 3:

ST: 任何国家都没有资格当人权“判官”，人权不能成为干涉别国内政、遏制别国发展的借口。

TT: No country is qualified to act as the judge on human rights, and human rights should not be used as a pretext for meddling in other countries' internal affairs or holding back other countries' development.

Example 4:

ST: 国际上的事应由大家商量着办，不能搞强权政治、甚至阵营对抗。

TT: Global affairs should be handled by all through discussion. No one should engage in power politics or even bloc confrontation.

From the two examples, we can find that in Chinese, the word“不能” (cannot) features on high-value modality, while its corresponding expression in English sentence is “should not” which expresses medium-value modality. In Chinese sentence, the word “应” (should) features on high-value modality, while its corresponding expression in English sentence is “should” which expresses medium-value modality. Therefore, there is a clear change of modality value.

These two sentences were spoken by a spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the March 27, 2023 China Development High-Level Forum (CDHF). The 2023 China Development High-Level Forum is hosted by the Development Research Center of the State Council and organized by the China Development Research Foundation. The China Development High-Level Forum, which focuses on the economy, is the first national-level forum held after the annual National People's Congress, and is an important platform to serve the central government's decision-making and the country's foreign economic exchanges, and to promote exchanges and cooperation between China and foreign countries. Its aim is to revive the economy and strengthen cooperation. Therefore, it is less appropriate to use high modal verbs on this occasion, but use “should” which is more susceptible to express China's attitude and shape China's image. Meanwhile, it is more likely for participant to agree China's initiatives.

Example 5:

ST: 坚持以共商共建共享带动投资合作，提升合作水平，密切全球产业链供应链联系。

TT: We should follow the principle of extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits to boost and upgrade investment cooperation, and forge closer bonds in global industrial and supply chains.

We can see that there is no corresponding word in Chinese text in terms of the word “should” from English sentence. Due to the difference which are hypotaxis and parataxis between Chinese and English, sometimes deontic modality is implicit in the original Chinese text and does not need any lexical device to be expressed. While, it must be expressed with lexical device to conform to the English grammar. This is the “obligatory explicitation”.

In example 5, the Chinese sentence structure of the source texts is a topic followed by relevant descriptions, which pays attention to the tacit meaning of the contents. However, the translation uses the form of a main sentence followed by an object clause to integrate the source contents. Persist corresponds to “坚持” in the source texts. As the predicate of the main clause, maintain expresses the deontic modal meaning of insistence and demands. Therefore, subject “we” and modal verb “should” are added in translation for information transmission.

Example 6:

ST: 一是相互尊重，恪守联合国宪章宗旨和原则，坚持国家不分大小、强弱、贫富一律平等，不同制度、宗教、文明一视同仁，尊重彼此核心利益，尊重各方合理安全关切。

TT: First, mutual respect. The purposes and principles of the UN Charter must be observed. The equality among countries regardless of size, strength and wealth should be upheld. Different systems, religions and civilizations should be treated as equals. The core interests of all countries and legitimate security concerns of all parties should be respected.

In this example, we can see that there is no corresponding word in Chinese text in terms of the word “must” from English sentence.

This statement was made at the Blue Room Forum on the Global Security Initiative (GSI): Implementing the Global Security Initiative to Solve the Security Challenges Facing Humanity. The statement is not only one of the five principles that China will adhere to in promoting the implementation of the GSI, but also China's attitude towards international security issues. The Charter of the United Nations is the fundamental law of the organization. It establishes the purposes, principles, and organizational structure of the United Nations, as well as the responsibilities, rights, and obligations of Member States. The Charter also outlines the basic principles and methods for handling international relations and maintaining world peace and security. It has been endorsed by all United Nations Member States. China is a strong supporter of the United Nations Charter. Although the sentence does not contain a modal verb indicating high value, the translation reflects China's determination to support the United Nations and maintain international security.

In conclusion, there are two reasons for the difference between English and Chinese in terms of modality values. The first is the political text. Translator Cheng Zhenqiu (2003, 18) once pointed out that compared with literary translation, the requirements for faithfulness in translating political literature are much stricter. Since it is the political text, its translation is influenced by many factors, such as national interests and political stance, so the translation represents the attitude and image of the country. In diplomatic discourse translation, a crucial guiding principle is "political equivalence." This concept underscores the necessity for diplomatic translations to precisely and faithfully convey the political ideology of the speakers and the political context of the source texts. Moreover, the translated content should be comprehensible to the target audience while maintaining the same impact and significance as the original texts in conveying political meanings. The second is language difference. Translation is not simply a literal equivalence. In addition, English sentences emphasize hypotaxis, so the structural integrity and rigorous morphology are paid with close attention, while Chinese sentences are featured by parataxis, emphasizing the integrity and logic of the content.

Table 4. Ratio of Cohesion Types in the ST and TT

	Reference	Substitution	Ellipsis	Conjunction	Non-conjunction
ST	43.60%	10.10%	3.50%	12.50%	30.30%
TT	26.70%	12.30%	7.20%	7.00%	46.80%

From Table 4, in Chinese texts, sentences with cohesive devices (reference +substitution +ellipsis +conjunction) cover 53.2%, while sentences without cohesive devices cover 46.8% of the whole sentence relationships. In English texts, sentences with cohesive devices account for 69.7%, while sentences without cohesive devices cover 30.3% of the whole sentence relationship.

So the conclusion can be drawn that there is a higher percentage of cohesive devices among English text sentences than among Chinese text sentences. In brief, it is more likely for Chinese text sentences to have no cohesive devices among them. In this section, we will analyse a cohesive devices (Reference) that has the largest proportionality difference.

Example 7:

ST: 近代以来, 无数仁人志士为了救亡图存, 向西方寻求现代化出路, 但都遭遇挫折, 未能挽救民族于危难。

TT: During modern times, many patriots looked to the West for a formula of modernization to save the Chinese nation, but they all failed.

In example 7, “they” is a third person pronoun, which is the subject and refers to the patriots. However, there is no corresponding word in Chinese sentence, so “they” is added into the translation. Because repeated expressions are not suited for English. The pronoun “they” is added which is more in line with the English language. On the contrary, the meaning of “仁人志士” (patriots) only appear once, which is an omission in person reference, an obvious semantic articulation in Chinese discourse with implicit features.

Example 8:

ST: 我们听到最多的声音就是要抢抓中国实现高质量发展和高水平对外开放带来的新机遇，听到最一致的观点就是反对与中国“脱钩”，期盼与中国同行。

TT: The most repeated call we heard was to seize the new opportunities that will come along with China’s high-quality development and high-standard opening-up. The Number One unanimous view was to reject decoupling and move forward with China.

In the Chinese sentence, the modification of new opportunities in the original text is too much and too long. Therefore, this kind of sentence will be processed to be treated as a definite clause in English. The meaning of new opportunities will appear twice in English. However, in order to avoid repetition, there are other words, such as that, to take the place of it.

5. Conclusion

This study employs systematic functional linguistic analysis to identify differences between the Chinese and translated texts in their three main functions. The analysis reveals that the most significant differences are primarily linguistic, with some cultural factors also playing a role. Linguistic differences between Chinese and English are primarily due to the fact that English sentences emphasize hypotaxis while English prefers parataxis. Additionally, English is a statically typed language while Chinese is dynamically typed language. Furthermore, the difference between Chinese and translated texts is also evident in the unique genre of diplomatic texts. The translation of this type of text is influenced by many factors, and it must take into account the maximization of national interests. Therefore, Chinese and translated texts do not correspond to a significant extent.

Nevertheless, there are still some limitations to this thesis: First, only 33 Chinese diplomatic discourses and its English translation version are selected as examples of statistics. Second, this comparative study covers only some aspects of Halliday’s three meta-functions. Other aspects of SFG remain to be explored. Third, this study is a macro and comprehensive comparison or description of Chinese diplomatic discourses and its English translation version. There are few more specific studies about the detail data.

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