The Reconstruction of Modality in Chinese-English Government Press Conference Interpreting
Xin Li (2019)

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With the increasingly influential role of foreign exchanges and China’s proactive influence in the international community, Government Press Conference Interpreting, abbreviated as GPC interpreting, has attracted worldwide attention from researchers in both the political and linguistic fields. It refers to interpreting at the central-government-level press conferences during the annual ‘Two Sessions’ (known as Lianghui in Chinese), including the National People’s Congress (NPC, the national legislature of China) and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC, the top political advisory body) (p. 4). The convening of GPCs showcases the Chinese government’s latest policies and attitudes towards national and international events, presenting the desire to communicate with the world, which elucidates Li’s motivation for choosing GPCs as a case in point for this study.

As Sun (2013) points out, during the process of conferences, the quality of interpretation will exert direct influence on the image and reputation of China, the world’s view of the country and even international relations. Therefore, it is of great significance to investigate diverse interpretative means, among which modality shift, distinguished from previous studies at the macro level, should be given priority. In addition to its highly condensed linguistic realization (i.e., the truth value or credibility of statements about the world), modality can also be
found in social communication, in which the speaker’s viewpoints or stances are fully construed to convey interpersonal meaning. This book familiarizes us with how modal meaning is reconstructed in Chinese-English GPC interpreting and the potential sociocultural motives beneath it.

The volume reviewed is a condensed version of Li’s doctoral thesis completed at Shanghai Jiao Tong University (China). It is compactly structured into seven chapters with four appendices about corpus data and a detailed glossary of abbreviating key concepts. This structure does indeed make for pleasant reading, particularly for those who may not be specialized in translation, interpretation and SFL (Systemic Functional Linguistics). The introductory chapter encapsulates the research background and research questions, in which Li recaps the evolution of corpus-based studies, GPC interpreting in China and modality in GPC interpreting, and then presents the focus of this study (i.e., how to reconstruct modality in GPC interpreting and explain it from the sociocultural perspective). Praise should be given to Li’s articulated account of some key concepts, such as GPC interpreting and modality, which can often seem inaccessible to those outside the community of linguistic specialists. Li also suggests that those readers with doubts should refer to Halliday and Matthiessen’s Halliday’s Introduction to Functional Grammar (2014; see also Thompson, 2008) for a more friendly reading of some tricky terminologies.

Chapter 2 reviews relevant studies in both corpus-based interpreting and modality relevant to translation. On this basis, Li underlines the sociocultural aspects of interpreting verified by some Western scholars, including context-specific norms (Harris, 1990; Gile, 1999), politeness (Monacelli, 2005) and interpreters’ personal ideologies (Beaton, 2007), which provide practical clues for delving into the performance of interpreting in the Chinese context. In alignment with domestic and foreign interpreting studies, Li continues to discuss how modality can be translated between Chinese and English (i.e., from English to Chinese and from Chinese to English). With the consideration of limitations of previous studies, Li investigates the feasibility and applicability of the present study to fill in the blanks in both the interpreting and modality fields, focusing upon a general pattern of modality shift and corresponding sociocultural factors for interpreting choices.

In Chapter 3, a comprehensive theoretical framework and methodology are precisely specified. The interplay of theoretical enlightenment and sociocultural context makes this book stand out, which requires scholars to transcend language itself and focus on hybrid influential factors, such as cognitive, ethical, social and cultural explanations (Straniero Sergio and Falbo, 2012). Li employs a descriptive-explanatory method for GPC interpreting. Specifically, the former stands on the quantitative study of comparison between the use of English modality markers
and the translation of Chinese ones; the latter attempts to construe the relationship between modality shifts and corresponding social contexts (p. 48). The remaining part of Chapter 3 is situated with the corpus-based research data and methods. Firstly, the author attempts to identify the high-frequency modality markers to establish a parallel corpus. Secondly, semantic shifts of translation are coded within three dimensions, that is, modality type, value and orientation. Next, the author describes modality shifts in detail in order to compare Chinese source text and English target text as coupled pair for translation studies. Finally, based on data explanation, the relationship between modality reconstruction and its sociocultural context is fully investigated.

The next three chapters function as the main body of this book, clarifying the analytical process and research findings respectively. In Chapter 4 and 5, Li refers to quantitative and qualitative approaches to exploring modality shifts of both English and Chinese modality markers in GPC interpreting, as well as their interpersonal effects, and then sums up the similarities and differences from the two directions. The innovative breakthrough lies in the fine-grained description of general patterns of modality shift at the micro level, i.e., three dimensions of modality system. Regrettably, the data analysis is confined to positive modal meanings, which overlooks the dimension of polarity, i.e., negative modal expressions due to the lack of representative samples. The restricted size of the chosen corpus is another deficiency of this book.

With the enriched data and case studies well established, Chapter 6 examines the parameters affecting the reconstruction of modality shift from the perspective of sociocultural context, which can be elaborated as the meta-discursive devices of institutional norms and the typological features of Chinese-English GPC interpreting. Both of them are devoted to contextual consideration for interpreters’ choices in modality reconstruction. One factor, for instance, as one of the multi-parameters of GPC interpreting, is ‘participants and goals of communication’ (p. 120). The dual roles of interpreters (professional interpreters and government representatives), power relations (the speaker, interpreter and journalist) and communicative goals (accurate translation, policy publication and face protection) provide the basis for the interpreter’s preference for ‘weakening, subjectivization and de-obligation’ shifts in modality reconstruction of official speeches (p. 122). Such an illuminating interplay makes a substantial contribution to our perception of interpreting as a socially interactive communication.

The book concludes with the major findings, implications, limitations and suggestions for future research in Chapter 7. Despite its pioneering achievements in corpus construction, methodology, research perspective and practical application, Li holds an unbiased stance to the study’s limitation and recommends further
research areas, such as the extension of the sub-corpus of English-Chinese interpreting data, the involvement of interpreters’ personal attitudes and evaluations and the comparative analysis of modality choices between experienced interpreters and untrained students (pp. 138–139). Although these proposals are feasible and convincing, this book leaves room for more modifications. For instance, as the collected statistics come from 2014 (i.e. five years ago), further efforts should be made to update the corpus with the latest interpreting data.

In summary, this book broadens present approaches to decoding modality shifts in Chinese-English GPC interpreting. It will not only arouse great interest among intercultural translators and interpreters, corpora researchers and modality analysts, but also shed light on political discourse studies and interpreting teaching and learning. Therefore, this book deserves more attention from those who are committed to studies in translation and interpretation, corpus linguistics, systemic functional linguistics, political discourse analysis and pedagogy.

References


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