Original Paper

Identity Construction of Government Staff Interpreters in China

—A Corpus-based Study of Shifts in Political Interpreting

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a corpus-based empirical study on the role of government staff interpreters in the political context of China. Based on a qualitative analysis of discourse documented in authentic encounters between top leaders of Guangdong Province and their foreign visitors in interpreter-facilitated communication, the paper attempts to question the long-held view that government staff interpreters serve as a neutral, transparent non-person. To provide perhaps a new perspective from which the interpreter's role may be revisited, this paper looks at personal angle shifts in the interpretation done by six staff interpreters of Guangdong Foreign Affairs Office, including shifts between first person and third person angles, and second person and third person angles. With what corpus data reveal, the paper argues that the interpreter's role as a mediator is conspicuous even in high-level political interpreting. Rather than a transparent non-person, the interpreter constructs and represents her identity as well as the identity of the institution she belongs to by discursive means, and therefore acts as an active party of communication.

Keywords

role, staff interpreters, political setting, personal angle, shifts

1. Introduction

Interpreting is a socially-situated process of communicative interaction in a given context, in which the interpreter acts as an individual participant with embodied agency in the exchanges of discourse. Understanding the role of the interpreter both as a constructed and constructing subject in the society can therefore shed some light on the social function of interpreting. Previous research on the role of interpreters has been conducted mostly in the area of community interpreting, where interpreters are

not only directly involved in the communicative process, but are also drawn into decision-making in cases of unequal power relations and diverging interests.

In terms of the role of the interpreter, a much-ignored area has been interpreting done in political settings. More than a decade ago, Baker (1997, p. 124) argues that "'political' interpreting as a genre deserves to be studied more closely in view of its importance in shaping cultural images and aiding or obstructing the cause of world peace", and that it is, with its many non-cognitive constraints, at least a distinct area of study in the domain of interpreting studies. However, mostly due to lack of access to authentic data and the sensitiveness of political interpreting itself, considerably less input has been made into this area by researchers worldwide.

This paper looks at a particular field of interpreting—the People's Government of Guangdong Province, and analyzes the role government staff interpreters play in interpreting. The paper departs from defining "political setting" as a general working environment of official dialogue interpreting in which important government officials are involved, and the topics of discussion are mostly issues of politics, economy and international relations, and focuses on one aspect of the role performance of the interpreters—how they distinguish between "us" and the "other", and construct the self as well as institutional identity in the process of interpreting. With quantitative data from a corpus of 25 political meetings conducted in Guangdong Province, and qualitative analysis of the interpreters' renditions, the paper will revisit the role of government staff interpreters in the political context of China as an active mediator of discourse.

2. Questioning the Interpreter's Role as a Non-person

Settings as the "social context of interaction" (Pöchhacker, 2004, p. 13) not only constitute the social context of professional interpreting, but also place certain constraints on how interpreting is done. In previous studies of the role of interpreters in various community settings, as researchers got to accept the idea that interpreting is far from an objectivistic transformation of utterances, they shifted to a discursive approach to interpreting as a socio-culturally-driven interactive activity. In the many works that have been produced since the turn of the century (e.g., Wadensjö, 1998; Metzger, 1999; Roy, 2000; Angelelli, 2001, 2004a, 2004b; Ren, 2010), the relations between the parties of communication in the process of community interpreting has been explored and discussed. The view that community interpreters serve as a "non-person" or a "conduit" has already been challenged by researchers using authentic ethnographic data.

The activity of interpreting in political settings, when in the form of conversational events, involves a process in which ideologies from the interacting participants get negotiated in the given social field then and there. Nor is it free from ideological factors which form the meta-narratives of the interpreter-facilitated political encounters. The role of the interpreter in such a process can therefore be thrown into question, as how the interpreter's identity is constructed and represented should be an issue

under serious investigation. To quote Inghilleri (2003, p. 261), interpreters are "forever trapped inside their socially constituted selves".

Inghilleri is right in pointing out that interpreter's identity construction is a complex and even conflicting process. The social and cultural conditions of interpreting shape interpreters' behaviour and constitute them to become the subjects for the "self" and the "other". Barker and Galasinski (2001, p. 28) suggest that "identities are discursive-performative in the sense that they are best described as constructed through discursive practice which enacts or produces that which it names though citation and reiteration of norms or conventions". The "self" is a given content, and is embodied, construed not perhaps unlike a character we encounter in a novel or a play, in that he/she is always expected to perform a certain role. The construction, development and representation of the self in any narrative performance should be considered the most characteristically human acts that justifiably remain of central importance to both our personal and our communal existence. What takes to be a person is culturally-constructed and therefore is variable. Such must also be the case for interpreters in political encounters. The simple truth therefore is, if the interpreter can be observed to have ways of representing himself or herself and actually does so, he/she is no longer a neutral and transparent "non-person", as is normally believed to be the situation for the politically-conditioned dialogue interpreting.

3. Revisiting Interpreter's Role from Personal Angle Shifts—What Corpus Data Suggest

For this research project, I shall look at staff interpreters working for the Protocol Department of the Foreign Affairs Office (FAO) of the People's Government of Guangdong Province. In the Chinese political system, governments from the central to the local levels employ staff interpreters for language service in international relations. The dual role of these civil servant interpreters as both a professional service provider and a government functionary certainly makes their role performance an interesting topic to explore.

For this research project, I have collected a total of 25 meetings, held in a five-year span between 2005 to 2009 between a senior official of the People's Government of Guangdong Province and a foreign counterpart or several members of a high official delegation. The length of each meeting ranges from 40 minutes to 100 minutes, making the total length of audio data 40 or so hours. Consecutive interpreting is used in all these meetings. Six interpreters of the Guangdong FAO with professional working experience of 6 to 13 years interpreted for these meetings. All of them happened to be female interpreters.

In analyzing the corpus data, I have identified one specific aspect of the interpreter's identity construction and representation—the shifts in their personal angles in interpreting. Davies and Harré (2001, p. 263) suggest that the processes of acquisition and development of personal sense,

> ... arise in relations to a theory of the self embodied in *pronoun grammar* in which a person understands themselves as historically continuous and unitary. The experiencing of contradictory

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positions as problematic, as something to be reconciled or remedied, stems from this general feature of the way being a person is done in our society. (my emphasis)

Informed by the "pronoun grammar" discussed by Davies and Harré, I shall analyze, but not limit myself to, the pronoun usage in the interpreted utterances of the interpreter. To incorporate a greater variety of observed phenomena into my analysis, I shall adopt the term "personal angles", an analogy to the terminology "camera angles" in photography for the investigation of such shifts in the corpus data. The "personal angle" relates to the "camera angle" from which a scene is presented, which Sanders (1994) calls "vantage point". It involves time, place and person indicators. As far as "person" is concerned, it defines the "I", "you" and "he/she" about which the interlocutors are speaking. During the interaction, the vantage point may change, meaning that the "I", the "you" and "he/she" do not have to refer to the same persons throughout a verbal exchange or throughout a text. In interpreter-mediated oral encounter, the indicator of person thus refers directly to the issue of "who is talking" and to the different attitudes towards the re-narration by the interpreter.

Setting out from the use of personal angles therefore will offer us interesting evidence of how the interpreter justifies his/her being as a participant of the interpreted communication. In the political meetings that I investigate for this research project, this kind of shift between identities is two-fold. For one, the interpreter moves between representing the speakers and representing herself; for the other, the interpreter moves between narrating for the provincial leader, or "us" and narrating for the foreign statesman or business leader, or the "other". Such constant shifts in identities, when occurring frequently in the linguistic activities taken, may become a problem for the interpreter.

The total number of valid turns rendered by the interpreters into the target language (either English or Chinese) in all the 25 meetings studied amounts to 2296, out of which there are 297 observed shifts in personal angles, which sets the shift rate at 12.94%.

In Figure 1, the horizontal axis corresponds to the 6 interpreters coded A to F, while the vertical axis corresponds to the number of shifts in personal angles out of the total valid turns the interpreter reproduces. From interpreter A to interpreter F, the personal angle shift rates as calculated against each interpreter's total valid turns are 10.09%, 17.33%, 11.49%, 14.55%, 9.54% and 10.37% respectively.
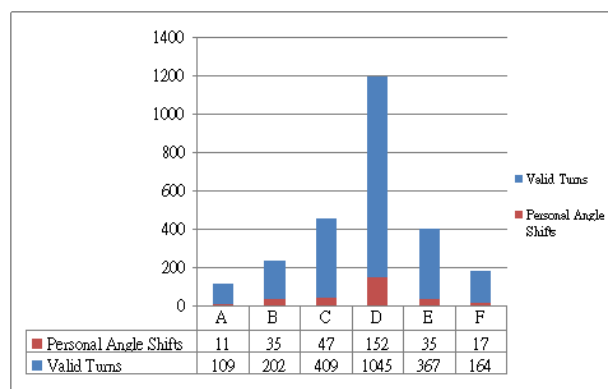
Figure 1. Each Interpreter's Shifts in Personal Angles out of Her Total Valid Turns

4. Personal Angle Shifts as Means of Identity Construction

A qualitative study of the shifts in personal angles show that shifts occur in a certain pattern, which can be categorized into the following two types:

(1)   The speaker uses a first person pronoun or concept, either singular or plural,

in the sentence, and the interpreter renders it into a third person pronoun or concept, either singular or plural, animate or non-animate, or the other way round (third person into first person pronoun or concept);

(2)   The speaker uses a second person pronoun or concept, either singular or

plural, in the sentence, and the interpreter renders it into a third person pronoun or concept, either singular or plural, animate or non-animate, or the other way round (third person into second person pronoun or concept).

4.1 First Person vs. Third Person as the Constructing of "Us"

In the corpus data of the 25 meetings, a number of shifts of personal angles between the first person and the third person can be observed, clearly indicating the way the interpreter understands what is means to be "us", and the decision she makes in shifting between different ways of signifying the concept of "us" so as to realize the construction and assertion of the identities of the imagined community.

4.1.1 First Person Angle to Third Person Angle

I shall start with some typical corpus data that show how the interpreter shifts from the first person pronoun in the start text (ST), a personal angle clearly an indication of "us", to the personal angle that is third person in the target text (TT).

Case 1:

ST: 因为我们有五千多年的华夏的文明历史。

(For the reason that we have a Chinese civilization and history of more than five thousand years.)

TT: China is the country with a history of five thousand years.

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In this case, the speaker talks about the five thousand years of history of "us", but does not suggest what he means by "us". The interpreter thus has to make a judgment of who is "我们" (we). In the target text, "我们" is rendered into "China". The not only does the interpreter make use of the existing narratives of China's history, but also equates China to "us".

Case 2:

> ST: 为了解决这些问题，我想你一定注意到了，我们提出了一个，新的理念，或者叫重要的战略思想，就是科学发展观。
>
> (You must have noticed that to solve these problems, we have proposed a new idea, or a new important strategic thinking, the scientific outlook on development.)
>
> TT: To meet these challenges, the CPC has proposed a new, um, idea of development, which maybe you have already known. That is the scientific outlook on development.

In this case, the speaker talks about a new strategic thinking "the Scientific Outlook on Development" proposed by "us". Here the boundary of "us" is very fuzzy, as it can be the leaders of the province, the province itself, or China. The interpreter in this case renders "我们" into "the CPC", which is a clear indication of mediation on the part of the interpreter. It reflects the belief system of the interpreter that the Communist Party of China is the ruling party of the country and is responsible for the orientation of development for it. Though this rendition is certainly not erroneous, it nevertheless is a sign of the interpreter's voice on the party system as well as the political structure of the country.

4.1.2 Third Person Angle to First Person Angle

In this part, I shall move on to typical corpus data that show how the interpreter shifts from the third person subjects to the first personal pronoun, thus showing the territory of "us" in her outlook.

Case 1:

> ST: 也非常想了解呀，呃，在最近啊，中挪两国，以及挪威广东的环境保护，经济文化交流各方面的合作能够有什么作为。
>
> (We would also like to know what can be done in the near future in all sectors including environmental protection, economic and cultural exchanges between the two countries of China and Norway, and Norway and Guangdong.)
>
> TT: And we would also like to cover our cooperation not only in the environmental protection, but also in trade, culture and other sectors.

In this case, both "中挪两国" (the two countries of China and Norway) and "挪威广东" (Norway and Guangdong) are rendered into first person plural, as the nominative case and the possessive case respectively. Despite the difference in the scope of the subjects, both China and Guangdong are considered to be the territory of "us".

Case 2:

> ST: 从现在产业体系的建立到自主创新能力的提高等一系列的方面，为广东，尤其是珠三角地区的科学发展描绘出了一个路线图。

(In a number of areas such as industrial structuring and indigenous innovation improvement, this has painted a roadmap for the scientific development of <u>Guangdong, the Pearl River Delta in particular</u>.)

TT: It have given <u>us</u> a blueprint or a land roadmap to the construct modern industries in China and to encourage innovations of our enterprises.

The speaker first mentions Guangdong, and then adds more information by saying "尤其是珠三角地区" (particularly the Pearl River Delta area). However, neither Guangdong nor the PRD is visible in the target utterance. The two terms are simplified into one objective case of the first-person pronoun. To the interpreter, these two geographic concepts are both territories of "us", and therefore do not seem to have major differences in the representation of the meaning.

These clearly show the understanding and image constructing the interpreters apply to the world around them. By shifting among different scopes of territory, the interpreter show what is meant by the words "us" and "I" that proliferate in the discourse. It is in the linguistic paradigm that the interpreters construct and represent the identities for the speaker as well as for themselves. "us" is therefore a product of language, as the implied subject of self-referring utterances.

4.2 Second Person vs. Third Person as the Constructing of the "Other"

In his paper examining address forms and ambiguous participant roles in court interpreting, Angermeyer (2005) reviews the hierarchy of "audience roles" proposed by Bell, which primarily distinguishes between second person address and third person un-addressed. Bell's model suggests that speakers style-shift to accommodate to the speech styles of their audience, and they tend to adapt more to the addressee and less to an unaddressed ratified participant or to an overhearer. Bell then notes with the model that speakers may also accommodate to referees, persons who are not present at the interaction at all, but who possess "such salience for a speaker that they influence speech even in their absence". (Bell in Angermeyer, 2005, p. 207)

Angermeyer's review of Bell's model suggests that in the triadic exchanges of discourse in a political meeting, the interpreter not only addresses the party on-site (second person) to which the speaker (first person) sends messages, but also bears in mind and is influenced by an invisible party (the third person) which is closely related to the speaker and the party addressed. The third party, I would suggest, is an embodiment of the cultural construct of the identity that can be interpreted in relation to the speaker or the party addressed. In other words, the "the third party" is a representation of the "other" which is to be understood as against "us". Therefore, the interpreter's shifts of personal subjects between the second and the third person signifies the interpreter's knowledge of the sociocultural construct of the "other".

4.2.1 Second Person Angle to Third Person Angle

In the following cases, I shall examine the ways the interpreter renders the second person pronoun "you", singular or plural, into a third person subject, and provide possible explanation of such renditions.

Case 1:

    ST: <u>你们</u>在宏观经济管理，发展高新技术和教育等方面有很多值得我们学习和借鉴的地方。

    (<u>You</u> have a lot for us to learn and borrow in areas such as macroeconomic management, high-tech development, and education.)

    TT: There are a lot we can learn from <u>Finland</u>, in area of macro-control of economy and higher education and high-technology development.

In this instance, the speaker, Governor of Guangdong Province, addresses the foreign visitor, who happens to be the Prime Minister of Finland, using the plural form of second person pronoun. The interpreter renders "你们" in the original into "Finland", which is the country that the addressee represents, and in Bell's term, the invisible third party of the interpreted communication. A probable explanation to this is that the interpreter does this to avoid the ambiguity of the address form (as "you" can mean the Prime Minister himself, the delegation of the official visit or the people of Finland). But why does she choose to use the name of the country as the subject of address? A more probable explanation is that the interpreter brings in the third party and equates "you" to "Finland", thus defining the "other" in the way that fits in her knowledge as well as ideological system.

Case 2:

    ST: 另外呢，作为港美商会，<u>你们</u>也十分关心粤港之间的合作。

    (In addition, as American Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong, <u>you</u> are very interested in cooperation between Guangdong and Hong Kong.)

    TT: I know <u>this council</u> is also highly concerned with the cooperation between Guangdong and Hong Kong.

In this case, the interpreter combines the second person pronoun "你们" with its modifying structure "作为港美商会", and renders the combination into "this council". Not only does the interpreter shifts from an animated subject into a non-animated one, but she also brings in a larger community (American Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong), of which "你们", presumably the two co-chairs of the chamber addressed by the speaker, are part of.

4.2.2 Third Person Angle to Second Person Angle

Now I shall move on and analyze the ways the interpreter renders the third person angle of discourse into the singular or plural form of second person pronoun "you".

Case 1:

    ST: <u>美国</u>这些方面的技术啊、经验啊都很好，唯一的缺陷就是价格太贵了。

    (These technologies and experiences of <u>the United States</u> are certainly very good, but the only drawback is the high price.)

    TT: <u>You</u> have good technologies and experience, but the difficulty for us is that the price is very high.

In this instance, the speaker talks about the United States as charging too high a price for its technologies. The interpreter renders "美国" not into "The United States", but as "you", which in effect

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makes the message more directed to the American official on-site of the political meeting. Rather than giving people the impression of talking about a third-party country in an objective manner, the interpreter chooses to equate the representative of the American government to the country itself, thus allocating the territory for the addresses as the "other", and makes him the target of the issue that is brought to the surface of the table.

Case 2:

ST: 但是现在的所有的这些学习确实都有个结合中国国情的问题，因为我们知道这个<u>发达国家</u>所有的这些技术啊，这个在引进的过程中间，是好东西，但是确实也是价格昂贵的东西。

(All this kind of learning should be conducted with consideration of the Chinese national condition. We know that all these technologies from <u>developed countries</u> are great things in the process of introduction to our country, be they are also very expensive things.)

TT: And in terms of all the introduction and digestion of the foreign technologies, it is, em, very important to adapt them to the Chinese reality. <u>You</u> have very good technology, but it's very expensive.

In his case, the speaker talks about "发达国家" (developed countries) and signifies it as the "other" in binary opposition to "us" (China, which is a major developing country). In fact, the scope of "developed countries" is actually lager than the addressee of the message, who represents an entity that is undoubtedly not equal to the collection of developed countries. However, in rendering the "发达国家" into "you", the interpreter not only equates the addressee with the developed countries as the "other" of the cultural and political construct, but also in effect narrows the scope of the message.

As the sociocultural construct of identity is not something fixed and final but is something continuously refigured and adjusted by linguistic means in different context, the interpreters have established the identities of the "other" in relation to the narration and re-narration of human experiences, and through this, constructed the identities of the "self". An utterance can be rendered in a number of different ways, so the process of interpreting always involves decision-making. Therefore, the interpreter's choice of shifting between the personal angles between "us" and the "other" cannot be said to occur without the mediation from the interpreter and thus reflects the voice of the interpreter.

5. Conclusion

Despite the general belief that government staff interpreters in political settings should act in strict accordance with government policies and professional rules, corpus data of the 25 audiotaped authentic meetings between top officials of the People's Government of Guangdong Province and foreign statesmen or corporate leaders suggest forcefully that actual instances of consecutive interpreting in a

face-to-face mode is far more complex than the general belief or universal rules. The idea that interpreters in this kind of situations are a "faithful echo" is therefore questioned and challenged.

The quantitative analysis of the corpus data suggests that interpreters do far more than accessing and transferring original messages and semantic contents in a transparent and neutral way. The qualitative analysis of the corpus data suggests that in performing their role(s), interpreters cannot be totally non-present, and that the single speaker-position reserved for the presentation as well as representation of the speaker do not always exist in a real-life interpreting situation. In order to perform the negotiator position, rather than a conduit role in a highly-complex network of communication and constraints, interpreters put themselves in the actual contexts and use personal angle shifts to regulate and mediate discourse.

With the corpus data, hopefully I have been able to prove that interpreters working in the political setting are far from a commonly perceived echo machine of their speakers, but perform the role of a mediator clearly with embodied agency. Their not only speak with a voice in the political meetings, but project their own voice and show their presence as well as positions in a context charged with distinct political and cultural features.

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