

A Study on the Translation of Political Speeches From the Perspective of SFL's Concept of Context

QIU Yue

Beijing International Studies University, Beijing, China

ZHAI Keyu

University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

Political speeches, to which much attention is paid, are an important type of public speeches. Since countries increasingly strengthen economic, political, and cultural exchange, the significance of political speech translation among countries in policy decisions becomes increasingly prominent. Systemic-functional linguistics (SFL) established by Halliday has shown great applicability to a variety of fields of studies. Especially, it has been applied to translation studies in recent years, which attracts much attention of domestic and overseas scholars. In the study of political speech translation, it has a high fit degree with SFL's concept of context. Although, there is a great amount of research on SFL, little importance is attached to the studies on the integration of SFL and political speech translation. Based on the SFL's concept of context, the thesis studies political speech translation from three factors, including field of discourse, mode of discourse, and tenor of discourse. SFL's contextual model is able to offer an effective tool in the comparison and evaluation.

Keywords: SFL's concept of context, translation of political speeches, non-linguistic context

Introduction

With the expansion of exchange and communication among countries, the growing need of translation nowadays has directed translators' attention not only to economy, but also to the politics. In some specific situations, the political speeches bear much more important information than other speeches. Systemic-functional linguistics (SFL)'s concept of context is a developing theory that is a complex but practical approach to translation studies.

"Speech", in Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2004 version), is defined as "a kind of talk, especially a formal one about a particular subject, given to a group of people". As one of major forms of public speeches, political speeches play an indispensable role in politics. Although some renewed Chinese scholars have been exploring SFL's concept of context, few studies focus on its adoption in actual translation. The thesis proposes to analyze translation of political speeches from the perspective Halliday's SFL's concept of context. It aims at exploring the general rules for translation of political speeches under the framework of SFL's concept of context. The attempt to demonstrate the applicability and practicability of SFL's concept of context in the translation of political speeches contributes to the applicability development of the method.

QIU Yue, Bachelor, lecturer, School of English Language, Literature and Culture, Beijing International Studies University, Beijing, China.

ZHAI Keyu, Ph.D., School of Education, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK.

Previous Studies on Translation of Political Speeches

As early as 1997, Xu Zhengzhong became the first scholar to explore Chinese translation of English speeches from the perspective of discourse. However, over the following years, few efforts were made to study translation of political speeches. Due to a great number of political and economical reasons, the translation studies see an increasing growing interest in political speech translation. For example, Liu Zhaohui studied the translation of fuzzy language in political speeches. Zhou Hong and Zhu Furong explored the translation of metaphors in political speeches. In addition, different scholars study the political speech translation from different perspectives.

Guo Dan researched translation quality assessment model for political speeches. By applying Professor Si Xianzhu's translation quality assessment model, this thesis does case analysis on the two samples both qualitatively and quantitatively. After the case analysis, the following conclusions can be easily made that Professor Si Xianzhu's translation quality assessment model is applicable to political speech. Jef Verschueren established the theory that the choice of language is determined by the internal and external factors to accomplish the communicative aims in the continuous process of making choices. Guo Chahong studied the translation of English political speeches from the perspective of ideology. The thesis covers two dimensions, the main research objects translational ideology and ideological translation in translation, combining the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework by Norman Fairclough (1989) with the existing approaches of ideology of translation within Translation Studies (TS) created by Basil Hatim and Ian Mason (1990; 1997), focusing on the meanings and functions of external ideologies, including social ideologies and translators' ideologies as well as textual ideologies in English political speech translation. We can come to the conclusion that political speech translation is influenced by external ideology and political speech itself production also has its own laws. Xiang Zhenlong studied political speech translation from interpersonal functional perspective. He finds that analyzing and discussing political speech translation from Interpersonal Function perspective is absolutely applicable and appropriate, for Interpersonal Function mainly concerns the interactive relationship between different speech roles. Besides, mood and modality are both effective way of realizing Interpersonal Function, and translation of such clauses is crucial. These findings will help the readers appreciate political speech and political speech translation. Moreover, it can shed light on the translation study of others.

SFL's Concept of Context

Systemic functional linguistics (SFL) or systemic functional grammar, founded by English linguist M. A. K. Halliday, is one of the most influential linguistic theories, aiming at describing and explaining language through the function fulfilled in the social communicative dimension. And the SF contextual theory, part of SFL, is an important but easily overlooked theory. SFL studied language from the point of semiotics. After analyzing the theory, it is evident that the concept of context can be applied well to the translation of political speeches. Political speeches contain cultural differences and situational context. Also, the cultural and situational context can explain and guide political speech translation from a new but effective perspective.

In 1923, Malinowski (1923, p. 306) came up with the concept of "context of situation", contrast to traditional view of context. After 12 years, he proposed "context of culture". Then the studies on context were initiated. Therefore, when it comes to the concept of context, scholars usually begin with Malinowski. Then Malinowski concluded that on the one hand the concept of context has to be expanded and on the other hand

the situation where words are uttered can never be passed over as it is irrelevant to the linguistic expression. So he introduced the idea of “context of situation” to refer to a “wider idea of context” or “the general conditions under which a language is spoken”.

During 1960s, SFL has emerged and developed a lot. Although systemic functional linguistics holds different views on how context affects semantic expression, they know deeply that context influences semantic expression.

In the SF context theory, context is classified into two main aspects: situational and cultural context. As proposed by Halliday, studies on context of culture are different from that from the view of tradition, which is mainly concerned with a nation’s customs, beliefs, and particular life styles. “Context of culture in SFL is probed in a complete systemic linguistic way that is a system of potential meaning realized by a language” (Halliday, 1999, pp. 1-18). We can easily find that in SFL, context of culture is rooted in context of situation. About this, Halliday offered the following explanation:

we have not offered, here, a separate linguistic model of the context of culture but in describing the context of situation, it is helpful to build in some indication of the cultural background and the assumptions that have to be made if the text is to be translated or produced in the way the system intends. (Halliday & Hasan, 1985, p. 47)

Halliday inherited and developed Firth’s thoughts. As a consequence, he put forward the register theory. It is one of the fabulous accomplishments of him.

We can consider register as the fact that the language we use varies according to the kind of situation. So we can conclude that register is a notion of variation in language which goes with variation in the context of situation. (Halliday, 1976, p. 23; 1978, p. 31)

Political Speeches

“Speech”, in Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, is defined as “a kind of talk, especially a formal one about a particular subject, given to a group of people” (Longman, 2004, p. 1914). Faced with reality, it is obvious that political speeches play an indispensable role in politics.

When discussing the content of political speeches, we can divide them into election speeches, inauguration speeches, and diplomatic speeches, etc. In addition, speakers can make full use of political speeches to refute their opponents, promote programs, and persuade the public to accept their political opinions. In order to make an excellent speech, it is very crucial to prepare a well-qualified speech transcript. Because political speech discourse is written-to-be-spoken, which bears the characteristics of both written and spoken language, political speech discourse is totally different from others. The speeches addressed by government officials are rooted in one nation’s certain political, cultural, and historical background.

Faced with the importance of political speeches, in some degree, they reflect a nation’s political system, and always bear the audience to a certain political purpose, the statement of their political claims. With the expansion of exchange and communication between countries, political speeches can be seen as a nation’s important intention and purpose in global stage. So, the language style of political speeches should be realistic and artistic, encouraging but also precise. Due to these distinguished features of political speeches, the translation of political speeches is destined to be a tough challenge for translators. It is crucial for us to conclude the skills and methods that instruct us how to transfer both content and form of the political speeches and how to reproduce the effect and power of the source text in the translated version.

Application of SFL's Concept of Context to English Political Speeches

Context of culture and context of situation are two significant terms. Context of culture and context of situation can be well applied in political speech translation. We can acquire some specific rules of translation of political speeches in the guidance of context of culture and context of situation.

Context of Culture

Political speech translation is rather than a communicative activity between Chinese and English, but between two cultures. And as pointed out by Halliday, SF context of culture is totally different from the traditional views. The theory is researched in a systemic linguistic way that it is a system of potential meaning realized by a language. Thus, mastering both Chinese and English cultures is of great significance. Above that, the following examples extracted from political speeches, which contain plenty of cultural factors, are collected.

Example 1

ST: We have never been just a collection of individuals or a collection of red states and blue states. We are, and always will be, the United States of America. (Victory Speech, 2008)

TT: Version 1: 我们不是无数个体或红州和蓝州的松散组合,我们是“美利坚合众国”,现在如此,将来也如此。

Version 2: 我们从来都不是共和党和民主党的政治堆砌,我们是,而且永远是美利坚合众国。

As is known to all, in American culture, the “red states” is referred to the Republic Party, and “blue states” to the Democratic Party. Without the cultural knowledge, we will translate the “red states” and “blue states” literally. If we ignore the context of culture here, we will not make the target audience understand fully, and even worse bringing some misunderstandings. Besides, “collection” carries somewhat negative meaning when the context of culture is noticed. There are plenty disputes between the Republic Party and the Democratic Party. According to American politics, the “collection” is properly translated in both Versions 1 and 2. Yet, in the Version 2, the “政治堆砌” bears the more negative meaning. In Chinese culture, “政治堆砌” is more formal than “松散组织”. In addition, “政治堆砌” can express the negative meaning. In the usage of Chinese language, “堆砌” is more vivid than “松散” in expressing the situation of politics.

Context of Situation

In SFL, context of situation consists of three variables: field, tenor, and mode. The three factors together determine the political speeches are, to a great extent, formal speeches. Such unique register has an influence on the choice of language on the levels of phonology.

Field and Mode

Field of discourse refers to message and aims of the speaker. In political speech, field of discourse determines main content and language style, and the language of political speeches is rather formal. In political speeches, political, economic, cultural areas are covered. Therefore, the field of discourse determines the political speeches are formal occasions, which allow no mistakes in translation.

The mode of discourse is the function of the text in the event, including the channel (spoken, written), the genre or rhetorical mode (narrative, didactic, persuasive). The target of political speeches delivered on various media is the public, so the mode is between written political diction and oral communication.

Example 2

ST: For us, they packed up their few worldly possessions and traveled across oceans in search of a new life. For us, they toiled in sweatshops, and settled the West, endured the lash of the whip, and plowed the hard earth. For us, they fought and died in places like Concord and Gettysburg, Normandy and Khe Sahn. Time and again these men and women struggled and sacrificed and worked till their hands were raw so that we might live a better life. (Inaugural Address)

TT: Version 1: 为了我们, 他们整理起自己不多的物品开始穿越大海寻找新的生活; 为了我们, 他们在血汗工厂辛苦劳作, 忍受着皮鞭的抽打并且犁开坚硬的土地; 为了我们, 他们在诸如康科得、盖茨堡、诺曼底等等地方作战并献出生命。这些男男女女们不停地奋斗和牺牲, 一直工作直到双手生疼, 目的只是为了过上更好一些的生活。

Version 2: 为了我们, 先辈们打起寥寥行装, 远涉重洋, 追求新的生活。为了我们, 先辈们在条件恶劣的工厂忍受鞭答之痛, 辛勤劳作; 在西部原野拓荒, 在坚硬的土地上耕耘。为了我们, 先辈们奔赴疆场, 英勇捐躯, 长眠于康科德、葛底斯堡、诺曼底和(越南)溪山。为了让我们过上更好的生活, 先辈们前赴后继, 拼搏牺牲, 竿路蓝缕, 胥手眠足。

By comparison, the Version 2 is not as faithful as the Version 1. Translation of Version 2 is more like free translation, but it is a litter of different from the original meaning. We can consider the Version 2 as literary translation containing too many meanings which original version has. The paralleled clauses that are similar to the style of proeses are not appropriate in political speeches. Especially, the “奔赴疆场”, “竿路蓝缕”, and “胥手眠足” bear evident features of the Chinese language. However, the overuse of them changes the ideational meaning, and even causes the translation version to be pedantic and affected.

Tenor

Like field, tenor also has an important effect on the degree of formality of language. Tenor roots in the social relationships. The relationship between language users determines degree of formality of speeches. It is obvious that the speakers represent their governments, thus the speeches are mainly objective and cooperative. In addition, the political speeches carry respect. As a way to communicate between speakers and listeners, political speeches bear appropriate words and sentences which show respect for the audience. Therefore, according to the tenor of discourse, appropriate words and structures are crucial in political speech translation. The study of tenor of discourse is focused on the person. Especially, the translation of political speeches is paid more attention to the change of person.

Example 3

ST: 总理, 您好, 我是新华社记者, 也是中国新华社新闻电视网的记者, 今年是本届政府任期的最后一年, 请问总理, 您如何评价自己的工作?

TT: Mr. Premier, I'm from Xinhua News Agency and Xinhuanet.com. This year is the last year of the term of this government. How do you evaluate your work?

Here, the translator translated the “您” into you, because this is no counterpart of “您” in English. When we translate Chinese into English, we have to adapt to the usage of English instead of just considering the tenor of discourse. On the contrary, when we translate English into Chinese, we must observe of the tenor of discourse. Mostly, we have to translate “you” into “您” in order to show respect in political speeches.

Conclusions

The thesis makes an integrated study on political speech translation from the perspective of SFL's concept of context. My findings are as follows:

Firstly, the application of SFL's concept of context to political speech translation is applicable and appropriate. Translators must attach great importance to the context in political speeches. Both of cultural context and situational context must be contemplated in translation. Ignoring any component of context may change the original meanings of speakers.

Secondly, in order to deal with the two cultures well, it is rather necessary to consider the cultural differences. When translating political speeches, we should transfer the culture knowledge between two cultures. Translator must consider the culture of the targeted audience in order to make the audience understand. It could be seen as foreignization.

In addition, it is crucial to notice situational context. When situational communication is referred, it is necessary to consider the field, tenor, and mode of discourse. And in translation, according to the field, tenor, and mode of discourse, translator should fully consider the three factors, using appropriate words and sentences to appeal to the target audience. In other word, the language ought to be formal but easy to accept from politeness principle. Under the circumstances, honorifics sought to be widely used in translation of political speeches, especially in E-C translation.

In summary, the ultimate aim of the thesis is to reveal that studying source version carefully and understanding the implied ideational, interpersonal, and textual meaning are crucial thoroughly. And then, according to context, plenty of adaptations in translation of political speeches are necessary to conform to the usage of target language. Due to the limited resources and space, the present research cannot cover every aspect of translation of political speeches in the framework of SFL's concept of context.

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