

Interpreting as Critical Discursive Action: A Speech Act-Based Analysis of Diplomatic Interpreting in Chinese-English Cross-Cultural Negotiation

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Abstract: Diplomatic interpreting is a highly sensitive form of mediated political communication in which linguistic choices are inseparable from power, ideology, and international relations. Drawing on speech act theory, this study examines Chinese-English interpreting during the 2021 China-US High-Level Strategic Dialogue, using the Chinese interpreters' renditions as a qualitative corpus. By analyzing how locutionary and illocutionary force is rendered and strategically adjusted in interpretation, the study explores interpreters' agency in conveying China's diplomatic stance, managing confrontation, and shaping international discourse. The findings suggest that interpreters operate not merely as neutral transmitters of meaning, but as active discursive agents whose linguistic decisions contribute to the construction of diplomatic authority and national image. This study contributes to critical humanistic social theory by demonstrating how micro-level interpreting practices participate in broader structures of power and ideological contestation in global diplomacy.

Keywords: Speech Act Theory; Diplomatic Interpreting; Foreign Affairs Interpretation; Discourse Agency; Critical Social Theory

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1. Introduction

Diplomatic encounters are not only political events but also discursive struggles in which language functions as a primary site of power negotiation. In high-level diplomatic dialogues, particularly those conducted under intense international scrutiny, interpretation becomes a crucial mechanism through which national positions, ideological boundaries, and power relations are articulated and contested. The 2021 China-US High-Level Strategic Dialogue, held in Anchorage, marked a pivotal moment in contemporary Sino-US relations and was widely perceived as a rare instance of public diplomatic confrontation.

Within this context, interpreters played a decisive yet often overlooked role. Their renditions constituted the immediate linguistic reality received by the opposing side and the international audience. Rather than functioning as a neutral conduit, diplomatic interpreting in such settings involves strategic linguistic choices shaped by political sensitivity, institutional constraints, and ideological considerations. These choices inevitably influence how speech acts, such as accusations, rebuttals, warnings, and appeals, are realized across languages.

This study adopts speech act theory as an analytical framework to examine Chinese-English interpreting during the 2021 dialogue. By focusing on interpreters' handling of culturally and politically loaded discourse, the paper investigates how

locutionary meaning, illocutionary force, and discursive agency are negotiated in interpretation. In doing so, it situates diplomatic interpreting within a critical humanistic social theory perspective, emphasizing the interpreter's role in reproducing, mediating, and sometimes reshaping power relations in international communication.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Speech Act Theory and Discursive Agency

Speech act theory, initially formulated by J. L. Austin^[1], conceptualizes language as a form of action rather than a mere vehicle for conveying information. Austin distinguished among locutionary acts (the act of saying something), illocutionary acts (the act performed in saying something), and perlocutionary acts (the effects produced by saying something). While foundational, Austin's framework left unresolved questions regarding the relationship between intention, effect, and participant roles in communication.

John Searle^[2] further refined the theory by emphasizing the rule-governed nature of speech acts and distinguishing more clearly between illocutionary force and perlocutionary outcomes. Subsequent scholars, such as van Dijk^[3], extended the discussion by introducing the notion of agency, arguing that successful speech acts depend on both intentional agency and effectual agency, mediated through interpretation and contextual understanding. Critics such as Sadock^[4] challenged the linear causality between illocution and perlocution, highlighting the indeterminacy and contextual contingency of communicative effects.

In the Chinese scholarly tradition, it's emphasized the dialogic and interactive nature of speech acts, arguing that perlocutionary effects emerge from the joint actions of speakers and listeners. This perspective foregrounds the role of multimodal and contextual factors in meaning-making, an insight particularly relevant to interpreting studies. Later contributions by Sun Shufang and Lian Yiqing^[5] further stressed the interdependence of different types of speech acts and their realization through linguistic and pragmatic choices.

For interpreting studies, speech act theory offers a powerful lens for examining interpreters' discursive agency. Interpreters do not merely reproduce locutionary content; they actively participate in reconfiguring illocutionary force and managing potential perlocutionary effects. This study builds on this insight to analyze diplomatic interpreting as a form of critical discursive practice.

2.2 Chinese-English Diplomatic Interpreting

Foreign affairs interpreting is distinguished by its high political sensitivity, institutional embeddedness, and potential impact on international relations. Unlike other forms of interpreting, it requires not only linguistic competence but also acute awareness of diplomatic protocol, political ideology, and national interests. Misinterpretation in this domain may have consequences that extend far beyond communicative failure.

Scholars have emphasized that diplomatic interpreters function as representatives of the state, operating under strict norms of accuracy, appropriateness, and confidentiality^[6]. Zhou Enlai's well-known principle for diplomatic interpreters—"stand firm, grasp policies, be familiar with business, and strictly observe discipline"—captures the expectation that interpreters align their work with national diplomatic objectives.

Recent studies increasingly view diplomatic interpreting as a form of mediated political discourse in which interpreters exercise constrained but significant agency.^[7] From this perspective, interpreters' lexical choices, syntactic adjustments, and pragmatic strategies contribute to the construction of national image and the negotiation of power in international arenas. This study advances this line of inquiry by integrating speech act theory with a critical analysis of Sino-US diplomatic interpreting.

3. Data and Methodology

3.1 Corpus Selection

The corpus for this study consists of Chinese-English interpreting produced by the Chinese interpreter during the first two rounds of the 2021 China-US High-Level Strategic Dialogue, held in Anchorage on March 18, 2021. The main Chinese speakers were Yang Jiechi and Wang Yi, while the US side was represented by Antony Blinken and Jake Sullivan. Zhang Jing

served as the Chinese interpreter.

The dialogue was extensively covered by international media and widely characterized as an unusually direct and confrontational diplomatic exchange. The selected corpus is therefore highly representative of high-stakes diplomatic discourse, making it particularly suitable for analyzing interpreters' handling of politically sensitive speech acts.^[8]

3.2 Analytical Framework

This study adopts a qualitative discourse-analytical approach informed by speech act theory. The analysis focuses on how interpreters render locutionary content, reconstruct illocutionary force, and enact discursive agency through tense, lexical choice, and syntactic restructuring.^[9] While perlocutionary effects are acknowledged, they are not empirically examined here and are left for future research.

4. Analysis: Speech Acts in Diplomatic Interpreting

4.1 Locutionary Fidelity and Cultural Signification

Example 1: 中国和国际社会所遵循和维护的，是以联合国为中心的国际体系，是以国际法为基础的国际秩序，而不是一小部分国家所倡导的基于规则的国际秩序。(Source)

What China and the international community follow or uphold is the United Nations-centered international system and the international order underpinned by international law, not what is advocated by a small number of countries of the so-called rules-based international order. (Interpreted)

The “rules-based” mentioned by Director Yang Jiechi in the second half of this sentence refers to the so-called “rules” of a small number of countries such as the United States, not the rules under the United Nations system framework, nor the rules that comply with international law. The translator's treatment here is so-called rules-based international order. By adding so-called, it shows that the “rules” advocated by some countries led by the United States are not recognized. China firmly upholds the United Nations international conventions and conducts active diplomatic activities in accordance with international law and will not be threatened or unwarrantedly accused by certain countries. This echoes what Yang Jiechi said in his subsequent speech: “The United States has American-style democracy, and China has Chinese-style democracy.” The translator supplemented the connotation of the source language discourse by supplementing the discourse information and manifested the discourse connotation of the Chinese spokesperson through verbal expression.

4.2 Illocutionary Force and Pragmatic Adjustment

Example 2: 我们两国之间过去是有过对抗，这个结果并没有给美国带来好处。美国从这场对抗中得到了什么？我没有看到任何好处，唯一的结果是对美国的损害。这样的对抗，中国是挺得过来的。(Source)

Well between our two countries we've had confrontation in the past and the result did not serve the United States well. What did the United States gain from that confrontation? I didn't see any, and the only result was damages done to the United States. And China will pull through and has pulled through such confrontation. (Interpreted)

The translator handled the sentence “China can pull through such confrontation” in the source language as follows: “And China will pull through and has pulled through such confrontation.” The translator used the future tense and the present perfect tense to translate “China can pull through”. This translation method actually shows the connotation of the source language through the semantic behavior of speech. Analyzing in combination with the context, the source language expresses that the United States once had conflicts and confrontations with China. In the confrontation, the United States damaged its own interests, but China pulled through. The translated sentence “has pulled through” shows that China has suffered such an experience but has pulled through; “will pull through” shows that if the United States wants to have a conflict with China again, China has the confidence and strength to overcome the difficulties again. The translator showed the connotation of the discourse through the subtle changes in the tense of the translated language, highlighting China's confidence and growing strength.

Example 3: 在人权问题上，我们希望美国在人权问题上做得更好……美国在人权方面面临的挑战是根深蒂固的。它们不是在过去四年就存在的，对黑人的屠杀，早就存在这个问题。所以我想，我们两国最好自己管好自己的事儿，而不是转移矛头，把国内的事情没解决好，转移到国际上去。(Source)

On human rights, we hope that the United States will do better on human rights.....And the challenges facing the United

States in human rights are deep-seated. They did not just emerge over the past four years, such as Black Lives Matter. It did not come up only recently. So we do hope that for our two countries, it's important that we manage our respective affairs well instead of deflecting the blame on somebody else in this world. (Interpreted)

There are two obvious characteristics in this part of the dialogue. The first is the expression of the first sentence, "On human rights issues, we hope that the United States will do better on human rights issues." This sentence seems peaceful, but the actual expression effect is quite tough. The translator also translated it undisguisedly as "we hope that the United States will do better on human rights." There are many similar words expressing urging and expectations, such as: "So we do hope that the United States will develop sound relations with all countries in the Asia-Pacific"; "You can't blame this problem on somebody else"; "China urges the U.S. side to fully abandon the hegemonic practice of willfully interfering in China's internal affairs." In the translation of such words, the translator used we do hope, you can't blame, China urges the U.S. to restore the solemn attitude and tone of the spokesperson, which further completes the verbal agent on the basis of the verbal expression. The translator fully reproduces the discourse meaning and attitude of the source language in the English language. The explicit discourse characteristics allow the US side to clearly understand China's attitude towards the relevant matters referred to by the US. Another feature of this discourse is the treatment of "black massacre". The translator did not directly translate "massacre of black people" here but translated it into Black Lives Matter. Black Lives Matter is the slogan of the black human rights movement, which is usually translated into "Black Lives Matter" and "Black Lives Matter" in Chinese. Due to the racial incidents that occurred again in the United States in 2020, the word was announced by the German Language Association as the annual word of the top ten hot words in 2020 in November 2020.^[10] This is not long before the 2021 China-US high-level strategic dialogue. In the dialogue, the translator reiterated this word to keep up with international hot current events and reveal the racial and human rights issues currently facing the United States. To a certain extent, it is to put pressure on the other party through the agent of discourse and let the other party know their own problems. Both points in this passage reflect the characteristics of the speech agent behavior of the discourse. Through the adjustment of the discourse and the screening of information, the translator not only expresses the connotation of the source language but also shows the explicit behavioral reference of the discourse.

4.3 Discursive Agency and Strategic Reframing

Example 4: 只要中国的制度对头，中国人民是聪明的，要卡住我们是卡不住的。历史会证明对中国采取卡脖子的办法、采取打压的办法，最后受损失的是自己。 (Source)

Well, as long as China's system is right with the wisdom of the Chinese people, there is no way to strangle China. Our history will show that one can only cause damages to himself if he wants to strangle or suppress the Chinese people. (Interpreted)

Chinese is a semantic language, while English is a syntactic language. Sometimes, Chinese expressions do not require clear discourse connections or logical markers to clearly express the internal logic of the development of events, while English requires the rationality of the speech structure to express its internal logic. In this case, some adjustments need to be made to the speech structure during interpretation. In Example 4, the first half of the source sentence is three independent small sentences, without any conjunctions in the middle. If the translator interprets this sentence in the way of the source language, it may confuse the US representatives. Therefore, in the interpretation of this sentence, the translator used standard English logic to adjust the source language discourse structure. In the expression of "strangle", there was no attempt to correspond to Chinese vocabulary, but strangle was used to clearly translate the discourse meaning of the source language.

Example 5: 中国过去肯定不会，将来也不会接受美方的无端指责。近年来，中国的正当权益受到公然压制，中美关系进入了前所未有的严重困难时期。这损害了两国人民的利益，也损害了世界的稳定与发展，不能再这样下去了。 (Source)

And China certainly in the past has not and in the future will not accept the unwarranted accusations from the U.S. side. In the past several years, China's legitimate rights and interests have come under outright suppression, plunging the China-U.S. relationship into a period of unprecedented difficulty. This has damaged the interests of our two peoples and taken its toll on world stability and development, and this situation must no longer continue. (Interpreted)

Similar to the situation in Example 4, in Example 5 the translator uses the discourse adjustment method of...outright

suppression, plunging... to express the causal relationship implicit in the source language, attributing the “difficult period in Sino-US relations” to “the US suppression of China’s legitimate rights and interests”, explicitly reproducing the discourse logical relationship and connotation of the source language, and achieving verbal action through verbal expression, showing the US side China’s dissatisfaction with this and its attitude of not accepting the US’s groundless accusations and suppression.

5. Discussion

From a critical humanistic social theory perspective, the findings of this study suggest that diplomatic interpreting should be understood as a form of institutionally embedded discursive action rather than a neutral linguistic service. The Chinese interpreters’ reliance on predominantly literal translation, supplemented by selective explanation and syntactic restructuring, is not merely a technical preference but a strategy conditioned by political legitimacy, ideological accountability, and international visibility. At the level of locutionary acts, interpreters largely preserve the propositional content of the source discourse, ensuring institutional accuracy and minimizing interpretive ambiguity. However, this apparent fidelity does not equate to passivity. Through tense modulation, evaluative lexical choices, and discourse reorganization, interpreters actively recalibrate illocutionary force, transforming implicit stances into explicit diplomatic positioning.^[11] In this sense, interpreting functions as a mechanism through which state authority is linguistically stabilized and projected.

More importantly, the analysis reveals interpreters as constrained agents. Their agency is neither fully autonomous nor mechanically determined. Operating within diplomatic institutions, interpreters are subject to normative expectations regarding appropriateness, discipline, and alignment with national interests.^[12] Yet within these constraints, they exercise meaningful discretion that shapes how confrontation, criticism, and persuasion are enacted across languages. This form of agency aligns with critical social theory’s emphasis on the dialectical relationship between structure and action, where social actors reproduce institutional power while simultaneously enacting it through situated practices.

From a broader socio-political perspective, diplomatic interpreting emerges as a micro-level site where macro-level power relations are negotiated. The 2021 China-US Strategic Dialogue exemplifies how linguistic mediation participates in ideological contestation, particularly in moments of heightened geopolitical tension. Interpreters’ discursive decisions contribute to the construction of legitimacy, the management of face-threatening acts, and the international circulation of national narratives. As such, interpreting is inseparable from the symbolic power of the state and the global struggle over discourse authority.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined Chinese-English diplomatic interpreting during the 2021 China-US High-Level Strategic Dialogue through the lens of speech act theory, situating interpreting practice within a critical humanistic social theory framework. The analysis demonstrates that interpreters do far more than transmit linguistic meaning: they actively mediate illocutionary force, manage ideological confrontation, and participate in the construction of state authority in international discourse.

By foregrounding interpreters’ discursive agency, this study challenges traditional instrumental views of interpreting as a neutral communicative tool. Instead, diplomatic interpreting is shown to be a form of socially situated action shaped by institutional norms, political sensitivity, and power asymmetries. Interpreters function as pivotal actors at the intersection of language, ideology, and international relations, where micro-level linguistic choices have macro-level symbolic consequences.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the integration of speech act theory with critical social inquiry by demonstrating how illocutionary force is recontextualized through institutional mediation. Methodologically, it highlights the value of qualitative discourse analysis in uncovering the social functions of interpreting in high-stakes political settings. Practically, the findings underscore the importance of cultivating interpreters’ critical awareness of discourse, power, and responsibility in diplomatic contexts.

Future research may extend this analysis by examining perlocutionary effects through media reception studies or comparative analyses across different diplomatic systems. Such work would further illuminate how interpreted discourse circulates globally and contributes to the ongoing negotiation of international power relations.

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