A Parallel Corpus-based Study on C-E Translation Shift of Modal Value in Chinese Political Texts

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Abstract: Based on modality in functional theory and a parallel corpus concerning political texts, this paper compares frequency of modality value in both Chinese and English version, aiming to discuss features of translation shift in modality value. Results of the study shows that weakening shift is commonly used in C-E translation due to cultural differences of targeted recipients and communication intention of the authority.

Keywords: Modality value; Translation shift; Corpus-based study

1. Introduction

Modal operator, an essential marker of interpersonal function, could convey intention and stance of the speaker and is of high frequency in daily use, whereas, improper use of modal operator is common for Chinese in English writing and translation (Li Qian, 2017; Cui Tiantian, 2019).

White paper, a typical political publicity text, presents stances of China and great achievements china has made in certain fields, thus its translation shift is after careful deliberation in presenting an accurate picture of China to the world(Li Yang, 2020). As corpus can provide valid statistics to generalize translation features and process, this paper will discuss modality values based on a self-built corpus concerning political texts, aiming to address following questions:

1)What are the frequency of modality value in the ST and TT?

2)How are modality shifts realized in C-E translation?

3)Why translation shift in modality value display such features?

2. Research Design

2.1 Value of modality

Halliday (1994) defines "the degree of modality" as modal value and classifies it into three scales: high, median and low. Modality value is a scale in measuring the speaker's judgement to the validity of information and his or her desire to bear obligation. That is, modal operators with higher value represents stronger commitment or assertiveness of the speaker.

2.2 Data source and collection

The author chose the White Paper published in 2019 and corresponding English version as the source of this corpus. The value distribution of main modal operators is guided by the Table 2.1. Translation shifts in modality values, including techniques used in value shifts, the regularities and causes behind the reconstruction of modality values.

2.3 Case Analysis

Chinese scholars like in the classification of Chinese modality value. Given modality definition and values classified by previous scholars in both English and Chinese as well as the actual data in the corpus(Xuying, 2018), the author list a table as a theoretical basis of this study (See Table 2.1)

Table 2.1 Value of modal operator in English and Chinese

Modality value	English modal operator	Chinese modal operator
High	must, need	bi/bixu/biran,yao,ying
Median	will, shall, would, should	jiang/hui
Low	can, may, could, might	keneng, keyi, neng/neng-gou

3. Case Analysis

3.1 Distribution of modal operator in ST and TT

Table 3.1 Distribution of Modality value in the ST

Value	Modal Operator	Frequency	Percentage	Percentage of value
High	ying/yinggai	23	13.52%	38.8%
	yao	29	17.06%	
	bi/bixu/biran	14	8.24%	
Median	jiang	44	25.88%	47.7%
	hui	37	21.76%	
Low	neng/nenggou	16	9.42%	13.5%
	keyi	5	2.94%	
	keneng	2	1.18%	
Total		170	100.00%	100.0%

Table 3.2 Distribution of Modality value in the TT

Value	Modal Operator	Frequency	Percentage	Percentage of value
High	must	4	1.85%	1.85%
Median	will	116	53.70%	85.65%
	should	64	29.63%	
	would	5	2.32%	
Low	can	25	11.57%	12.50%
	may	2	0.93%	
	could/might	0	0.00%	
Total		216	100.00%	100.00%

By comparing data shown the Table 4.1 and 4.2, it can be found that: 1). the ST contains much more modal operators with high values than that of TT, with the ST accounting for 38.8% of all while the TT taking up 1.85% of all. 2). The proportion of modal operators of low value is similar in the ST and TT.

3.2 Case Analysis of translation in modality shift

The preference of modal operator is relevant to different sociocultural background (Ren, 2017; Zhao et al. 2020). Through comparison of modality value in the parallel corpus, shift of modality value can be classified into weakening shift

and strengthening shift(Li, 2018). Strengthening shift refers to transfer modal operators of lower value to higher value, while weakening shift is the opposite. Because modal operators intermediates between certainty and uncertainty(Halliday, 1994). In this study, addition of modal operators during translation belongs to weakening shift while omission of modal operators are categorized into strengthening shift.

Table 3.3 Distribution of C-E modal operator translation

	Equivalent translation		89
Shift of modality value	Weakening shift	Value shift	30
		Addition	48
	Strengthening shift	Value shift	4
		Omission	0

3.2.1 Equivalent translation

Example 1

ST:中国的这条发展道路，将随着时代前进越来越显示出光明的发展前景

TT: China's development path will look on brighter and brighter prospects as time moves on.

Jiang is closely equivalent to will. They are at the same modality value and has no shift in translation, thus it belongs to equivalent translation. And similar coupled pairs such as bi to must, neng to can, keneng to may all can belong to equivalent translation in most cases.

3.2.2 Weakening shift

Example 2

ST:大国之间要坚持换位思考和相互理解。

TT: Big countries should treat small ones as equals rather than acting as hegemonies imposing their will on others.

In a contrast study on modal operators should and yinggai, Liu(2014) concludes that should is equivalent to yinggai in English due to their similar semantic meaning and modality category. Although yao sometimes can be translated into should, the choice of yao implies that the speaker take the command for granted, which conveys a strong tone of obligation.

As for the Example 2, "yao" here, as a Chinese modal operator with high value, carries a mandatory tone in presenting China's strong command that big countries have to do this. While in the TT, a modality shift is the corresponding translation is "should", a median-value modal operator in English. The weakening of modality value makes the statement less aggressive and more polite.

3.2.3 Strengthening shift

Example 3

ST:推动全球治理体系变革是国际社会大家的事，应坚持共商共建共享原则。

TT: This is a common cause of all countries and regions, so we must pursue the

transformation of the global governance system by following the principle of extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits.

Strengthening shift is rarely seen in this corpus, and only 4 cases are found. The modal "ying" with median value is shifted into "must" carrying high value. Higher the value is, more assertive the speaker appears towards his or her judgement or commitment. And it should be noted that "must" in the TT is collocated with the subject "we" added during the translation process, the addition of first-person subject and "strengthening" shift reduce aggressive tone to the external, conveying solemn commitment of the Chinese government to participate in the global governance transformation.

4. Conclusion

This study finds that: Firstly, modal operators of high values are frequently used in the ST, accounting for almost half of the all. While in the TT, such modals are the least used. The proportion of low-value modality are similar in the two texts. Secondly, in C-E translation of political texts, weakening shifts of modality value is widely used especially in rendering operators of high values to median values. Thirdly, modal shifts between the ST and TT can attribute to cultural differences and communication intention. As China worships collectivism and authority, its people are accustomed to high-value expressions carrying a strong tone, thus such expression are considered as convincing and inspiring. While the English version is released to the western people who pursue equality and freedom, thus an median-value modality is preferred in expressing attitudes, propose or commitment to avoid disputes and express a friendly national image to the rest of the world.

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