What voice is being heard?

Shifting meaning potential in a conference interpreter's utterances

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Abstract   The Chinese Premier's Press Conferences (the CPPC) offer a direct channel for the head of the Chinese government to meet international journalists face-to-face. However, the institutional voice of China that is supposedly represented by the premier is conveyed through the consecutive interpreter to the global arena. Starting from an interactional orientation in interpreting studies, the aim of this study is to explore whether there is a shift of voice and what the effects are. As the   transmission of China's voice is fundamentally realized through the interpreter's language use, I carried out my study from a linguistic pragmatic perspective, making use of the key notion *meaning potential* in Verschueren's (1999, 2012) *theory of pragmatics*. The 2017 CPPC is chosen as my data, a careful comparison between the speakers' utterances and the interpreter's utterances is carried out to identify specific structural/formal shifts and the related shifts in meaning potential and functionality. The study reveals that the interpreter's voice indeed significantly shifts the meaning that is potentially communicated.

1.   Introduction

The annual Chinese Premier's Press Conference (henceforth, the CPPC) is one of the channels to make China's voice heard directly by the 'outside world' and the Chinese general public. At the CPPC, the premier, the head of the Chinese government, meets international journalists face-to-face. However, the CPPC is mediated by a consecutive interpreter. What international audiences really hear is the interpreter's utterances instead of the premier's. Meanwhile, the

interpreted discourse is often taken for granted as the official version of China's voice and has consequential effects. For example, the interpreter's words are quoted verbatim in the headlines of international newspapers or in news tickers rolling across the screen as a part of breaking news (Gu 2018a). It is of great significance to have an in-depth investigation into how China's institutional voice, represented by the premier, is conveyed via the consecutive interpreter to the world.

The aim of this study is to see whether there are shifts between the voice of the premier and that of the interpreter, and what meaningful effects the discrepancies between the two voices bring. This research makes two new contributions to interpreting studies. First, it approaches conference interpreting directly from the perspective of language use in its most general sense, rather than to look through the lens of a specific theory of interpreting. Although the CPPC is one of the most spontaneous forms of political communication in China (Du and Rendle-Short 2016), it follows a strict structure. The situational and institutional constraints on the interaction deprive the journalists of the chance to either ask for clarification or to give feedback, and at the same time restrict the interpreter in the use of modalities and resources other than linguistic means. It is now both live-televised and live-webcast. The involvement of these media brings in a web of on-site and off-site audiences with backgrounds other than those of the journalists, and further complicates the functioning of language as a meaning negotiation process. Therefore I have carried out a case study making use of the linguistic pragmatic key notion of *meaning potential*. Second, this study is one of the few political conference interpreting studies that go beyond the dominant cognitive tradition and take an interactional view.

2.   The interactional line of interpreting studies

Interpreting studies broadly move along two lines: the cognitive tradition and the interactional orientation. The cognitive tradition mainly shows an interest in the cognitive aspects of interpreter performance (Baker 1997; Schäffner 2004) and has for a long time been dominant in conference interpreting studies. The interactional orientation is a newcomer. It shows an interest in public service interpreting in a variety of institutional settings such as hospitals, courtrooms or police stations. The foci are interpreter's roles, the power and involvement of all participants in the dynamics of meaning negotiation. From the very start, the interactional line of research has collected authentic performance data in the domain of public service interpreting as its corpus, and adopted evidence-based qualitative discourse analysis in contrast to the experimental techniques dominant in conference interpreting research.

Though these two lines mainly run parallel to each other in their respective fields of practice, there is a limited number of investigations looking into real (simultaneously) interpreted conferences in different institutional settings and going beyond the traditionally dominant cognitive perspective and beyond strictly linguistic aspects (e.g. Beaton 2007, 2010; Diriker 2004; Monacelli 2009). There are even fewer case studies on interpreter-mediated political conference settings. These take interpreting as an activity and investigate the interactional and social roles of the participants (e.g. Baker, 1997; Schäffner 2012a/b, 2015a, 2015b; Wadensjö 2000, 2009). Still, this new move of "going social" (Pöchhacker 2008) and using a "discourse-based interaction paradigm" (Pöchhacker 2004) is mainly confined to dialogic institutional interactions rather than the one-to-many ones typical of conference interpreting. Though the CPPC has the explicitly dialogic form of a Q & A exchange, it features a huge number of on-site and off-site audiences and a lack of feedback, and the interpreted CPPC is indeed an instance of conference interpreting.

Among studies of the interpreted CPPC, Wang and Feng's (2018) and Gu's (2018a/b, 2019) studies are rare cases of interactional and sociological investigations; both studies are based on self-compiled relatively large corpora. Large-corpus-based interpreting studies are advantageous in exposing the general trends or norms of a certain genre descriptively by focusing on quantifiable features, but an in-depth case study of a single contextualized interaction is more suitable to explore detailed processes. Besides, narrowly focused studies on certain specific linguistic features run the risk of not seeing other concurrent features that may eventually lead to a rather different picture.

My case study works along the interactional line, a new trend in interpreting studies in general and a much under-investigated pathway for conference interpreting in particular. In addition, I will approach it from a rather distinctive perspective: a pragmatic investigation into the interpreted CPPC looked at very generally as an instance of language use. I will use an authentic performance as my data and adopt discourse analysis as my method. My study prioritizes accurate and detailed observation of the individual case over generalization, and offers an in-depth, fine-grained investigation into various aspects of how the interpreter is at work in the process of meaning generation[1] in a mediatized, formal, public, political, institutional setting.

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[1] Meaning generation is a term used by Verschueren (1999: 8) to refer to the meaningful functioning of language in general. By the choice of 'generation', his emphasis in on the active contribution of both the speaker and hearer to the meaning negotiation process rather than on the language producer's intentionality.

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3. A linguistic pragmatic perspective

In Verschueren's view, using language is essentially an activity that involves making choices when producing and interpreting linguistic utterances, either consciously or unconsciously. It is an activity that generates meaning (Verschueren 1999, 2012, 2018). Three properties of language use are important to understand this process: *variability, negotiability* and *adaptability* (Verschueren 1999: 59-61; 2012: 52). The basic idea is that there is no fixed relationship between form (i.e. structural means) and function (i.e. meaning); thus there is always room for the negotiation of meaning on the part of both the utterer and the interpreter[2] of an utterance. This entails an inherent *indeterminacy* of meaning in language use. The product of the process of meaning generation is not meaning in any strictly identifiable or fixed sense, but a certain level of **meaning potential**, i.e. *a possible range of meanings* (Verschueren 2018: 95-99). Once an utterance is produced, the utterer no longer has full control over it and the meaning (potential) generated is the result of interadaptability between the utterer and the interpreter.

With these theoretical underpinnings in mind, my point of departure is to identify the interpreter's linguistic structural traces. Possible structural shifts (i.e., formal shifts, for example, addition) resulting in shifted meaning potential (i.e., form-induced meaning potential shifts) in relation to the speaker's utterances are observed and identified, regardless of her conscious attempts or not. A series of meaning-related structural concepts such as speech acts, carriers of implicit meaning and information structure are used to help determine the specific meaning potential shifts. Ultimately I will have a look at a possible shifted China's institutional voice presupposed to be represented by the premier. As Verschueren claims, "when the same events or state of affairs is talked about in different languages [...] and even when no conscious attempt is made to tell a different story, quite different meaning landscapes may emerge" (2016: 150).

4. Data and procedures

For this study, I've chosen as my case the 2017 interpreted CPPC and addressed the following two questions: 1) What specific structural/formal shifts that result in changes in meaning can we identify between the speakers' utterances and the interpreter's utterances? 2) What functional/meaning differences show up?

4.1. *The data*

The whole press conference lasts 2.17 hours and is rigidly structured in the formal institutional setting. The premier delivers an opening of just several

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[2] Utterer and interpreter are terms used by Verschueren to refer to speaker and hearer respectively.

utterances long, and all the rest is in the form of Q&A. The premier's answers consist most typically of one to three chunks of utterances followed by the interpreter's translation. There are, however, some exceptional cases where the speaker and the journalist have brief exchanges with each turn consisting of one or two short utterances. Each turn normally extends from one minute to over 2.5 minutes (with only three exceptional turns of just about 30 seconds). This imposes a heavy cognitive/memory effort on the interpreter, who, seen clearly from the video footage, is taking notes.

4.2. *The procedure*
Since the downloaded transcript has been extensively post-edited, I re-tracked and checked it against the videotape of the press conference in detail so that a verbatim transcription of the 2017 interpreted CPPC was produced before going under careful scrutiny. The original, the interlinear glossing, the literal translation and its real interpretation were aligned, the interpreter's utterances were carefully studied in contrast to the corresponding primary participants' utterances, namely the premier's, the journalists' and the chairlady's. Due to the features of spoken language interpreting requiring the interpreter to retrieve the information from her memory and with the help of her notes, I took into consideration chunks of neighboring utterances when identifying the formal/structural shifts. After all the shifts were manually picked out, the specific semantic/pragmatic functions of these shifts were looked into in depth.

5. Shifting meaning potential in the interpreter's utterances

5.1. *The formal shifts*
Sifting through the whole data, I find ample evidence for the following types of formal shifts: addition, omission, splitting, lumping, reordering, 'shifting' (general term, used when none of the others apply), and complex shifting (combining two or more types).

These seven types of formal shifts identified in the data stretch from a simple word to a complete sentence, even to whole exchanges composed of several turns. They occur at all structural levels. To illustrate how I identify formal shifts, I will present one typical example from the category of additions, the most frequently occurring type of formal shifts.

In the following examples, I will use Q for a journalist's question, A for the premier's answer, I for the interpreter's translation. Original utterances are always followed immediately by their literal translation, put between square brackets to indicate that it is my own. In example (1), the interpreter's *additions*

are italicized and put in round brackets. Words in square brackets in my literal translation are my own additions needed for the whole sentence to make sense.

(1) A:

(就是要向依法依规的市场主体发出前行、前行、再前行，向依靠劳动创新创业者发出可以、可以、再可以的绿灯，对那些违法违规不良行为,那就是要及时亮出黄牌,甚至啊, 出红牌,罚他下场).

[[the government] just wants, to the law and regulation abiding market entities, to send a moving forward, moving forward, keeping moving forward [signal], to the entrepreneurs and innovators who depend on their work, send yes, yes, yes again the green light, to those law-violating and regulation-breaking bad behavior, [the government] just needs to timely show a yellow card, even a red card to punish them off the field.]

I: *(what the government should do)* is to send a resounding message of 'Yes' to *(all)* the law-abiding market entities, to flash the green light of 'go ahead' to *(all)* the hard-working entrepreneurs and innovators, and to *(seriously deal with)* *(all)* violations of laws and regulations by showing them *(resolutely)* a red card, yellow card *(of a signal of warning)*, and even red card to send them out *(of the market)*.

Example (1) shows that in this single utterance, the interpreter makes as many as eight additions. The interpreter employs very flexibly varied structural devices from a single word up to a clause as her linguistic toolkit. All the formal shifts carry with them meanings/functions which I am going to discuss in section 5.2.

5.2. *Form-induced meaning potential shifts*

I do find ample evidence of meaning potential shifts in the interpreter's utterances, but the semantic-pragmatic functions are diversified and scattered. I even find conflicting and opposing linguistic forces.

Here is a succinct overview before I move to some illustrative examples. Although there is a large number of cases indicating a move to the more explicit end (288 occurrences), which means linguistically more overtly expressed (propositional) content, there are also half as many occurrences (112) of moving to the implicit end (e.g. by means of presuppositions). There are modality shifts of the epistemic (60), deontic (21) and evidentiality (17) types. In the case of epistemic modality shifts, they mainly reduce certainty and explicate subjectivity. In the case of deontic modality, deontic value is sometimes increased, sometimes reduced, and sometimes lost altogether. There is also a shift of deontic subjectivity to objectivity. Evidential shifts mainly involve explicating (rather than hiding) the information source. There are also shifts of evidential types from

sensory to inferential-epistemic, bringing about increased commitment and shifted subjectivity. Explicated deontic source and implicit dialogic expansion can also be identified, though more rarely. The picture of illocutionary acts is pretty clear-cut: there is a loss of almost all the interpersonal speech acts of thanking, greeting and introducing which are explicitly expressed predominantly between the journalists and the premier. Shifts in information structure bring about changes in the prominence of different semantic/thematic roles (18); they affect personalized views (4) and produce shifts from subjectivity to objectivity (5). Marked themes are found to either achieve extra prominence or implicit contrast. Shifts in person deixis reveal the opposing forces of distancing (37) and involvement (50), building ingroupness and detachment. Temporal deixis mainly shows an anchorage shift. The picture for discourse deixis is blurry, and there seems to be opposing trends: both added (20) and omitted (12) metapragmatic description can be identified, but in general metapragmatic descriptions are reordered to be put closer to their propositional contents. Cohesive markers are almost equally dropped and added (45 and 57 respectively). Social indexicals and social formulae are closely related to the speech acts concerning interpersonal relationship, and they mainly get lost. All the idioms get split and unpacked from their respective cultural or literary roots and (re)contextualized either directly into their figurative meanings or simplified into plain language. There are more boosters than mitigators (143 in contrast to 46). And I do find rare cases in which it is hard to decide to what end they are put (e.g. explicit or implicit, boosters or mitigators); thus there is a small category of what seems like 'paradoxical shifts'. See table 1 for specific types and counts of the meaning potential shifts.

Table 1 An overview of types/counts of the meaning potential shifts

Types of meaning potential shifts	Counts
Shifts to the explicit/implicit	
shifts to be more explicit	288
shifts to be more implicit	112
paradoxical	1
Modality	
Eepistemic	*60*
explicated subjectivity	41
reduced certainty	12
increased certainty	7
Deontic	*21*
increased deontic value	11

reduced deontic value	3
loss of deontic value	2
deontic subjectivity to objectivity	3
explicating the deontic source	2
Evidential	*17*
increased commitment	4
implicit dialogic expansion	2
explicating information source	9
hiding information source	4
Illocutionary acts	
lost interpersonal speech acts	all
Information structure	
shifted prominence of semantic/thematic roles	18
more personalized	4
subjectivity to objectivity	5
marked themes for prominence or implicit contrast	7
Indexicality	
Person deixis	
distancing	37
involvement	50
Temporal deixis	
temporal anchorage	16
Discourse deixis	
add metapragmatic description	20
omitted metapragmatic description	12
added markers of cohesion	57
omitted markers of cohesion	45
Social deixis	
lost social deixis	all honorifics
Social formulae	
lost social formulae	all but one
Idioms	
lost cultural roots and recontextualized into plain language	all
Modulation	
boosters	143
mitigators	46
paradoxical	3

This enumeration is only meant to indicate the great extent to which meaningful shifts take place in the interpreter's utterances. To make some of the processes more concrete, I am going to give three illustrative and representative examples. Back to example (1), four added boosters *all* (twice), *resolutely* and *seriously* reinforce China's voice of being resolute in taking actions. The added nominalization *what the government should do* is topicalized, contrasting with the premier's subjectless utterance; thus the government's action is given extra salience. Both *a signal of warning* and *of the market* are forms of pragmatic enrichment, the former explicates what a yellow card means, the latter fills in information that is inferable from the context and is thus made explicit. In this example, the interpreter emphasizes the clear and strong voice of a pragmatic, resolute and action-taking government.

In example (2), shifts are indicated by italicization.

(2) A:
> *(我在参加代表团讨论的时候许多地方政府啊, 得有都有也都有这样的表示, 我们就是要...)*
>
> [I, during *my participation in the delegation discussion*, many local governments also *expressed* that we just want to...]

I: And in *my discussions with officials from local governments*, they all *agreed* that this is what the government needs to do, too.

This is the premier's answer to a question by a Xinhua New Agency's journalist. The question is about the Chinese businesses' complaints about the heavy burden of fees. The premier is trying to explain that the central government will take the lead in cutting the general expenditures in order to help reduce the fees of the businesses and so will the local governments. In saying this, he mentions his earlier discussions with the local officials. The expression *delegation discussion* is perfectly fine in the Chinese context. In the convening session of the National People's Congress (the Chinese legislative body), delegates representing a specific area of people's life are convened, ministers attend the discussion to listen to people's opinions in that specific field voiced through the delegates. This is called, literally, *delegation discussion*. Here in this question, the premier refers to one of the group discussions he once attended with the local officials.

Actually, the meaning potential of *delegation* itself is wide. Those who have no idea of how the Chinese political system works, may be unable to figure out who is part of the delegation at all so that there is a missing link between the *delegation* and the ensuing *local governments*. What works implicitly perfectly well in the original Chinese context becomes a problem when the context shifts into an international one. The interpreter specifies and explicates the speaker's *delegation discussion* by pragmatic enrichment into *discussion with officials from local governments*, making it context-insensitive, thus culturally transparent.

The premiere's *express* is shifted into the interpreter's *agree*, narrowing the scope of meaning into one of its possible specific aspects. This example illustrates the interpreter's clearer voice, risking fewer chances of misinterpretation than the original.

In example (3), the speaker is a foreign journalist. He asks a question in English, and the interpreter renders it into Chinese. Italics indicate shifts, and round brackets in the interpreter's utterances mark additions. There are two utterances in this example, numbered separately.

(3) Q:

(i) The European Union is China's second largest commercial partner, with a trade deficit of 137 million euro, *in favor of China.* (ii) *A large number of* European businesses *complain about* that...

I:

(欧盟是中国第二大贸易伙伴，但欧盟对华贸易赤字高达一亿三千七百万欧元,这是欧方的统计数据. 所以欧盟一些企业对此呢颇有微词.)

[(i) The Europe Union is the second largest trade partner of China, but the *EU's* trade deficit *to China* is *(as high as)* 137million euro, *(this is the EU's statistics).* (ii) *Some* EU businesses *have some dissatisfying remarks on* this...]

If we compare utterance (i) with its translation, we find both mitigating and intensifying tides running parallel there. The strongly topicalized pointer *in favor of China* is slightly mitigated by turning the idea into an existential presupposition as part of the definite description "the *EU's* trade deficit *to China*". But at the same time an intensifier *as high as* is added in front of the figure itself. The addition offers a frame of reference that helps to key it into a value judgment. Hatim and Mason (1990: 57) talked about a statistical statement in their analysis of the translation of an article in the *World Health Forum*:

4% of the national health budget is spent on dental care.

There are at least three possible readings: a mere 4 percent (4 percent to be understood as too little), as much as 4 percent (too much) or just a neutral state of affairs. In our terms, this decontextualized utterance has three aspects of meaning as its meaning potential, both *mere* and *as much as* are explicit markers that are used to make the pragmatic reading transparent. In example (3), the interpreter adds a "pragmatic gloss" (ibid: 58) *as high as* for the figure to 'speak for itself'. The de-emphasized *in favor of China* mitigates China's role and gains, but on the contrary, *as high as* in front of the figure seems to boost the effect. The numerical aspect of the utterance is stressed whereas the 'actor/beneficiary'

aspect is becoming less prominent. The final holistic effect is that the opposition is downplayed between the two sides in a game presupposed as zero-sum.

Again in utterance (i), there is also an interesting addition of an evidential marker *this is the statistics from the EU*. It offers a point of departure that is actually used by the premier to refute and develop his own counterargument in his answer.

We now look at utterance (ii) in the same example. In Chinese, *po-you-weici* is an idiom, of which *weici* means *criticism or dissatisfying remarks usually implicitly expressed*. *Po* in Chinese is an adverb showing *a certain degree* but not much, similar to *a little bit*. Implicitly expressed dissatisfying remarks of a certain degree are weaker than the speaker's *complaints*. The interpreter's s*ome* in contrast to the speaker's *a large number of* is a lower value variable along the scale of quantity. Combined, a clearly mitigated voice emerges: both the range of businesses involved and the degree of their dissatisfaction are downplayed.

6.   Conclusion

This kind of careful heuristic investigation of the 2017 interpreted CPPC gives us much evidence of the interpreter's shifts at various structural levels resulting in many shifts of meaning potential in the interpreted utterances. The shifted meaning potential indeed leads to the interpreter's clearer, softer or stronger voice than the speaker's. The next step of my project will be to dig further into the dynamics of the interpreter's role in meaning generation. I will further zoom in on situated and identifiable forces, and eventually explore the overall pragmatics that may reflect the interpreter's power and agency in transmitting China's voice into the 'outside world'.

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