

Chinese Passive Sentences Interpretation Strategies in the Perspective of Skopos Theory

Jiahong Han^{1,a,*}

¹Xingzhi College, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, Zhejiang Province, 321000, China

a. cheryl.han@stu.cuz.edu.cn

*corresponding author

Abstract: Due to different language families and cultural backgrounds, Chinese and English have much disparity, among which the passive voice is one of the most significant differences. Therefore, developing appropriate strategies for passive voice interpretation is essential. However, current translation community has relatively little research on the Chinese - English translation of passive sentences, and even the existent research on this field is not systematic. This study aims to find out common strategies for English interpretation of Chinese passive sentences (abbreviated as CPS) on the basis of Skopos Theory. The present study conducts Corpus Linguistics as the research method, and focuses on the structures, components, and semantic meanings of both source and target sentences to discuss whether the interpretation strategy employed achieved its purpose. By collecting and analyzing CPS in political speeches between 1997 and 2017 and their English interpretations from CEPIC corpus, three strategies are proposed in this study: 1) Interpreting CPS into English passive sentences; 2) Interpreting CPS into English active sentences; 3) Interpreting CPS into English structures without active or passive voice. The choice of strategy is contingent but must conform with the translation purpose and take into consideration the target audience and target setting, so to improve the quality of interpretation activity as an efficacious trans-national communication.

Keywords: Chinese passive sentences, Chinese - English interpretation, interpretation strategies, Skopos Theory

1. Introduction

Passive voice has been frequently used in English, which can demonstrate objectivity and detachment of the statements [1]. However, the use of passive voice in Chinese is limited [2]. And passive voice in Chinese was even once called inflective voice [3]. The main structure of English passive voice is “Noun Phrase + Be + V-past participle (+ By + Noun Phrase)”, while Chinese passive voice has no fixed structure, just with certain Chinese characters as passive signals like “被 (bèi)”, “受 (shòu)”, etc., or even without passive signals. These disparities pose difficulty on Chinese - English passive sentences interpretation. Furthermore, there are few systematic studies on English interpretation for CPS, and previous research only takes it as a component of Chinese - English translation study. Current studies mainly focus on the Chinese translation of English passive voice. As Wu puts it, the strategies of English - Chinese passive sentences translation include: 1) translate English passive

voice into Chinese active voice; 2) translate English passive sentences to Chinese passive sentences without passive signals; 3) use the synonyms of “被” to transmit the passive meaning in English sentences; 4) use “可以 (which means “can” in English)” to replace English passive voice, especially in scientific and technical literature [4]. Whether CPS can be interpreted accurately has a bearing on the communicative purpose and quality of the interpretation. Thus, certain strategies must be found out to help interpreters give more efficacious translations for target audience. This paper develops some common strategies for interpreting CPS into English through gathering and analyzing CPS on CEPIC corpus based on Skopos Theory. Instances collected are CPS with “被” as a passive signal, excluding other forms of Chinese passive voice. Then the paper explores the application rule of those strategies in real interpretation practice, offering suggestions for interpreters.

2. Analysis and Suggestions on Interpretation Strategies for CPS

2.1. Case Description

The Chinese/English Political Interpreting Corpus (CEPIC), containing about 6.5 million word tokens collected from 1997 to 2007, aims to offer assistance for the research concerning Chinese/English political interpreting and translation [5]. Both the transcripts as well as translated/interpreted texts of speeches delivered by prestigious figures in the political field from representative cities in China, the U.S., and the U.K. (Hong Kong, Beijing, Washington DC, and London) are presented on this website. In addition to Part-of-Speech (POS) annotation, CEPIC also provides information of prosodic and paralinguistic features conducive to language study [5]. By entering Chinese character “被”, the signal of passive voice in Chinese, the author finds relative Chinese passive sentences and their English interpretations for subsequent comparisons.

While passive voice is frequently detected in English, that is not the case for Chinese. But that does not mean Chinese has no passive voice. If interpreters mistook the modification parts in CPS or fail to render CPS with authentic English structures, the translations will be obscure or unnatural. Therefore, it is important to find common strategies or formula for interpreting CPS into English so that interpreters can react more accurately and quickly to passive voice in Chinese.

2.2. Analysis on the Problems

2.2.1. A Brief Introduction to Skopos Theory

Skopos Theory was put forward Hans J. Vemeer, in which the Greek word “Skopos” refers to “purpose or aim” in English. According to Skopos Theory, translation is a purpose-based activity, in which the purpose is largely determined by expected receivers, aiming at delivering a target text in a target context for target audience [6]. In other words, with different translation purposes, various translation strategies are to be chosen. Besides, Hans J. Vemeer and subsequent specialists in translation theory put forward three principles for Skopos Theory: skopos rule, coherence rule, and fidelity rule [7], which can be fully embodied in real interpretation practice. To better translate CPS, interpreters should bear in mind the purposes of their translation, and select the most proper strategy to render the essence and even the connotation in CPS.

2.2.2. Strategy 1: Interpreting CPS into English Passive Sentences

Native English speakers are accustomed to an object way of thinking and often focus on the action bearer, the patient; whereas Chinese people are used to the subjective way of thinking, usually putting the emphasis on the agent[2]. Thus, the use of passive voice in English is wider than in Chinese [8]. Relatively uncommon as Chinese passive voice is, it is still used either in formal Chinese speeches

or daily conversations. So if passive voice occurred in a certain speech, it could be the first idea for the interpreter to directly translate it into passive voice as well in English.

(1) CN: 有人担心，特区成立后，新闻自由会**被削弱**。

EN: There was some concern that the freedom of the press would **be curtailed** on the establishment of the SAR.

(2) CN: 有六萬九千名船民和非法入境者**被遣返**越南。

EN: 69,000 migrants and illegal immigrants have **been repatriated** to Vietnam.

(3) CN: 对以前**被挤占挪用的**基金要加大收回力度。

EN: Efforts to recover funds **diverted** in the past should be strengthened.

In instance (1), the speaker described the public concern, while in instance (2), the speaker stated a negative fact. It can be seen that without mentioning the agent, the originator of the action, both of the speakers wanted to put emphasis on the patients in their sentences (“the freedom of the press” in instance (1), and “69,000 migrants and illegal immigrants” in instance (2)). Therefore, in the light of the absence of agent in the source text, interpreting CPS directly into English passives saves interpreters from struggling to find out the unmentioned information, so that the focus of the original text is highlighted and some unnecessary information is blurred. Besides, when this strategy is applied, the interpreter can preserve both the semantic meaning and the form of original text to the largest extent, which also meets the translation fidelity rule put forward by Vermeer and following translation scholars that inter-textual coherence is a must between the source text and the target text [7]. It should be noted that post-positive attributive, in instance (3), which also takes a similar form of English passive voice but without relative pronoun and link verb, is also a relatively ideal way to translate CPS, especially when the passive voice in a Chinese sentence also functions as an attributive.

2.2.3.Strategy 2: Interpreting CPS into English Active Sentences

Sometimes the agent of CPS can be inferred from the contextual information, or the active structure can express the meaning of the original text more accurately, and then the strategy of transforming Chinese passives into English active voice can be considered.

(4) CN: 楼市在香港更一向**被视为**反映社会稳定的指标。

EN: [...], and the residential property market in particular **serves as** [...] a public barometer of social stability.

(5) CN: 发展中国家遇到的困难最大，也最容易**被忽视**。

EN: [...], **it is** very easy for the developing countries **to disappear from** the raider screen.

(6) CN: 在集中力量进行经济建设的时候，精神文明建设往往容易**被忽视**。

EN: When we concentrate our efforts on economic construction, **we are prone to neglect** the promotion of spiritual civilization.

In instances above, CPS were all translated into English active sentences, but there are slight differences. In instance (4), instead of using “be seen as a public barometer” to literally translate the Chinese passive structure, the interpreter chose “serves as a public barometer”, a fixed collocation with active voice, as the interpretation version, making the translation sound more natural and authentic for target listeners. Besides, in instance (5), no agent was detected, and it could be inferred from the context that the speaker wanted to avoid the mention of the agents in case of unnecessary misapprehension. So the interpreter changed the sentence structure, starting the sentence with English It-clefts and using active voice phrase to translate the passive voice in the source text. Furthermore, a new agent, “we”, was even inferred and supplemented according to the context in instance (6), which obviously made the translation clearer for audience. Under skopos rule, translation should function in the way expected by the recipient of the target language [6]. And the “skopos” takes 3 different forms: A. the basic purpose of translators (e.g., earning one’s living); B. the communicative

purpose of the translation (e.g., enlightening the audience); C. the purpose achieved by using a particular translation device (e.g., illustrating a grammar structure in the source text by literal translation) [7]. Among the three purposes, the communicative purpose was obviously achieved in instance (6), and the communicative function of the translation was improved. In short, by translating CPS into different forms of English active sentences, the target texts were more authentic and lucid.

2.2.4.Strategy 3: Interpreting CPS into English Structures without Active or Passive Voice

English and Chinese have disparity in word diction. Chinese, as a dynamic language, includes more verbs in its sentences, while English, a language more static, contains more static vocabularies, like prepositions and nouns, in its expression [9]. So for CPS interpretation, passive verb structures can be interpreted into preposition phrases or nouns to create a well-structured translation.

(7) CN: 创意产业竞争激烈，香港优势被邻近地区所侵蚀。

EN: [...], our leading position is under threat.

(8) CN: 随着人民币在国际上愈来愈被广泛应用， [...]

EN: **With the wider use of** RMB in the international arena, [...]

Sometimes a Chinese phrase, if literally translated, will be an unnatural collocation in English. As in instance (7), the sentence will be “the leading position is eroded” by literal translation. However, “the leading position” is an abstract concept, which cannot be “eroded”. Thus, when the verb in CPS can’t be interpreted word-by-word, it is acceptable to use a preposition structure to refer to original meaning. What is more, sometimes a Chinese sentence has more than one verb (e.g., instance (7)), but an English sentence can only contain one predicate verb. So by selecting one verb in the Chinese sentence as main predicative verb while translating the others into prepositions phrases, the target sentence will be more logically cohesive, and the primary and secondary information is also distinguished. Besides, another instrumental approach is the flexible use of existing fixed expressions. In this way, the interpreters can make use of existing collocations instead of coining new ones, which not only speeds up their interpretation process but also aids target listeners’ comprehension. Take the case of instance (8), “with” structure is frequently used in English, and the interpretation here can be derived from a set phrase “with the advent of”. These transformations of POS mentioned above is in concert with coherence rule, which holds that translations must have interpretability and acceptability so that they will be coherent with target listeners’ communicative context [7].

(9) CN: 第一个原则就是，我们要保障工人的人工不会被剥削。

EN: First we have to ensure that there will be no exploitation of workers.

(10) CN: 严肃查处假脱贫、“被脱贫”、数字脱贫， [...]

EN: [...], stern measures will be taken to address deception, falsification, and the manipulation of numbers in poverty elimination work.

According to skopos rule, translation process should be adopted to its purpose [7]. Therefore, original sentence forms and structures sometimes can be changed to fulfill the translation purpose such as a better functional text for expected receivers. In instances (9) and (10), although each passive voice in Chinese was wiped out and was replaced by a concise English noun in the target text, each meaning of the original sentence was remained - the translated versions were pellucid and even more succinct than source texts. Especially in instance (10), the bold part “被脱贫” does not mean the real poverty elimination among the poor; instead, the quotation marks here mean exactly the opposite. So the interpreter’s choice of the noun “falsification” not only conforms to the predilection of static words in English, but also avoids the misunderstanding probably caused by word-to-word translation.

2.3. Suggestions

From 10 instances above, three main strategies are extracted. In this part, the author generalizes these strategies from concrete circumstances to wider application.

2.3.1. Suggestions for Strategy 1

Randolph Quirk, a famous British linguist, points out that the widespread use of passive voice in English is a major feature that distinguishes English from Chinese [10]. Therefore, if Chinese passives occurred in the speech, translating them into English passives makes translations more close to the English expression feature. Besides, compared with other two strategies, when the agent in a Chinese speech is omitted or ignored by the speaker out of politeness or tactful skills, Strategy 1 reserves the sentence form to the most by using an agent-less English passive voice.

2.3.2. Suggestions for Strategy 2

Furthermore, in real interpretation practice, CPS can also be translated into English active sentences - Strategy 2. But the subject preceding the predicate verb sometimes varies in the interpreted sentence considering the contextual factors. From instance (4) to (6), the interpreters used three different ways to choose subjects: A. using the same subject as in the source text; B. using “it” as dummy subject and changing the sentence structure into English It-clefts; C. supplementing an extra subject inferred from the context. The sentence forms increasingly change in three examples, but the changes still stick to Skopos Theory, taking into consideration the translation purpose from the perspective of the target audience and preserving the meaning of original texts. Although the sentence form may be different from the original one, the expected audience still receive the perspicuous information expressed by the speaker.

2.3.3. Suggestions for Strategy 3

In addition, before giving interpretations, the interpreters should process the content in their mind, which means they should fully understand the source text and reconstruct the sentence if necessary rather than directly translating the sentence verbatim. As Nida proposes, when the meaning and the form of the original text cannot be preserved at the same time during translation, the translator can transmit the original message through the transformation between dynamic and static words from the source language to target language [11]. Thus, if there were no equivalence in the target language, or if the speaker used rhetoric words, it would be interpreters’ duty to decipher the sentence and select the most appropriate words and phrases to translate the original sentence - they can even paraphrase the passive voice in Chinese into some English static structures without active or passive voice. The static characteristic in English reflects in noun-oriented and preposition-oriented expressions. Function words as English prepositions are, they contain rich lexical meaning and have a high frequency of use [12]. It is expected that interpreters can use preposition structures to translate Chinese passive structures properly, thereby enabling target listeners to understand the speech with more familiar and authentic expressions. Besides, the nominalization phenomenon in English is in line with Westerners’ emphasis on logical thinking, which can simplify the expression of the relatively complex content [13]. Therefore, using nouns to interpret passive voice in Chinese can make interpreted sentences more succinct and conform to language culture in the target setting.

3. Conclusions

Based on Skopos Theory, this paper studies collected Chinese passive sentences from CEPIC corpus, and three strategies are developed and discussed through contrasting and analyzing. These strategies

are: 1) Interpreting CPS into English passive sentences; 2) Interpreting CPS into English active sentences; 3) Interpreting CPS into English structures without active or passive voice. Since Skopos Theory puts the purpose of the translation text first, aiming to provide the target text with adequate function for target audience, these strategies can be flexibly employed to realize the translation purpose. For novice interpreters, translating CPS into English passives might be more helpful, for it requires less transformation of the sentence form, reducing the possibility of language errors and increasing the rendering speed. As interpreters accumulate more experience, wise equilibrium between different strategies will make their interpretations sound more professional.

With the guideline of Skopos Theory and the strategies developed in this study, chance of miscommunication is expected to be reduced. Nevertheless, CPS selected in the paper is limited in its quantity, so the conclusions drawn need cautious treatment. Further studies can test the feasibility of these three strategies and put forward more strategies.

References

- [1] Baker, M. (2018). *In Other Words* (3rd ed.). Oxfordshire: Routledge (Taylor & Francis Group).
- [2] Lian, S. N. (2002). *Comparative Study Between English and Chinese*. Beijing: Higher Education Press.
- [3] Wang, L. (1984). *Theory of Chinese Grammar, Collected Works of Wang Li (Volume I)*. Jinan: Shandong Education Publishing House.
- [4] Wu, F. (2011). *To Break Through English - Chinese Translation in Twelve Days*. Beijing: Peking University Publishing House.
- [5] Pan, J. (2019). *The Chinese/English Political Interpreting Corpus (CEPIC)*. Retrieved from <https://digital.lib.hkbu.edu.hk/cepic/>
- [6] Vermeer, H. J. (2001). *A Framework for a General Theory of Translation*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- [7] Vermeer, H. J. (1989). *Skopos and Commission in Translational Action*. Helsinki: Oy Finn Lectura Ab.
- [8] Chen, X. H. (1981). *Guide to English-Chinese Translation*. Hubei: People's Publishing House.
- [9] Wang, W. H. (2001). *Between Dynamic and Static*. *Translation in China*, 22(2), 44-47.
- [10] Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G. and Svartvik, J. (1985). *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London: Pearson Longman.
- [11] Nida, E. A. and Taber, C. R. (1982). *The Theory and Practice of Translation*. Leiden: Brill Academic Pub.
- [12] Lindstromberg, S. (2010). *English Prepositions Explained (Revised Edition)*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- [13] Feng, Q. Z. (2016). *The Comparison of Dynamic and Static Characteristics in English and Chinese and Their Translation*. *Sino - Foreign Exchanges*, 000(013), 51-52.