On the Translation of Diplomatic Vague Language From the Perspective of Skopos Theory

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Ambiguity generally exists in the objective world, and language is a reflection of the objective world, so there are also a lot of ambiguities in language. Vague language has a unique pragmatic function. The clever use of vague language can make the expression more indirect, implicit, and flexible, leaving the speaker with plenty of room for maneuver, while also providing listeners with a variety of interpretation methods. Due to the special pragmatic function of vague words, vague words are used very frequently in diplomatic situations. How to translate these vague words is a problem that interpreters must face, and it is also a problem worthy of scholars. This article takes the skopos of translation as a guide, and uses government press conference interpretation as an example to explore the translation strategies of lexical vagueness in diplomatic interpretation. Through the observation and analysis of the interpreter corpus of the government press conference, it was found that the interpreters adopted different translation strategies such as amplification, literal translation, free translation, and word order adjustment.

Keywords: Skopos Theory, diplomatic interpretation, vague language, translation strategies

Introduction

Vagueness (uncertainty) is the essential attribute of language. With Zadeh's "fuzzy theory", many scholars have begun to study fuzzy language and its translation. "Fuzzy with precise translation" and "Fuzzy with fuzzy translation" explain and analyze the translation of diplomatic vague language (Zadeh, 1965). When this uncertainty is reflected in people's colloquial communication, it constitutes vague speech. In communication, people often use this "uncertainty" to improve the expression effect and avoid using negative language to produce negative elements that are not good for verbal communication. Linguistic ambiguity exists in various linguistic phenomena, such as the degree of ambiguity in semantics, the ambiguity of grammatical structures, and the ambiguity of speech. "The characteristic of action is its intentionality. If we give the same action a different Intention, it becomes a different action" (Von Wright, 1968, p. 23). In this paper, it mainly refers to the phenomenon that the connotation or extension of fuzzy language semantics in diplomatic activities is difficult to determine accurately, resulting in ambiguous semantic scope. The purpose is not to make the other party unable to understand what they mean, but to hope that through fuzzy rhetorical means, they can receive better results than precise expression.

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Three Rules of Skopos Theory

Skopos Rule

"The purpose of translation behavior determines the whole process of translation behavior, that is, the result determines the method" (Munday, 2001, pp. 78-79). Skopos Theory believes that the first rule followed by all translation activities is the "Purpose of Principle", that is, the translation should be able to function in the context and culture of the translation in the manner expected by the recipient of the translation.

Coherence Rule

"Coherence Rule means that the translation must meet the criteria of intra-textual coherence" (Munday, 2001, pp. 78-79), that is, the translation is readable and acceptable, enabling the recipient to understand the culture of the target language and the communicative language of the target makes sense in context.

Fidelity Rule

"The Fidelity Rule means that there should be inter-textual coherence between the original and the translation" (Munday, 2001, pp. 78-79). This is equivalent to what other translation theories call fidelity to the original, but the degree and form of fidelity with the original depends on the purpose of the translation and the translator's understanding of the original.

Introduction to Vague Language in Government Press Conferences

Definition of Vague Language

Vague language, as a kind of flexible language, is a characteristic language with indefinite extension and indefinite meaning. Compared with precise language, fuzzy language is more general and flexible. This generality and flexibility is reflected in language extension.

The accuracy of language existence is vagueness, which is its natural property. "A proposition is vague where there are possible states of things concerning which it is intrinsically uncertain whether, had they been implemented by the speaker, he would have regarded them as excluded or allowed by the proposition" (Pierce, 1902, p. 142). That is, a proposition is ambiguous. If there are possible states of something that is inherently uncertain, if the speaker considers these states, he will consider them excluded or allowed by the proposition (Vermeer, 1989).

Classifications of Vague Language

Vague diplomatic vocabulary. Materialist dialectics holds that everything is dialectically unified. The same is true for precision and blur. Blur is a precise abstraction, and precision is a materialization of blur (Newmark, 2001). In diplomatic situations, language communication needs both precision and ambiguity. Lexical ambiguity refers to words that have a clear connotative meaning but a vague extension meaning.

Foreign hedges. The use of hedges can obscure the listener's semantic understanding. Diplomatic rhetoric is even more so. When the speaker is not confident in what he is saying or is not sure what is being said, in order to avoid disputes, hedges are usually used, such as "about", "generally speaking", "I think", "maybe", and "as far as I know". On the one hand, fuzzy restrictive words can help the spokesperson avoid being too absolute and cause resentment from others (Nord, 1997). On the other hand, if there is something wrong, you can also leave room for yourself.

Diplomatic euphemism. Euphemism is one of the characteristics of vague language. It gives the impression of elegance, subtlety, listening, and courteous (Eugene, 1964). The same is true of diplomatic

ambiguity. On diplomatic occasions, differences of opinion between leaders or diplomats are common for national interests or security considerations. At this point, they need to cleverly create words and sentences, and gently express their national opinions.

Metaphor. Metaphor is different from simile. It has no figurative words and directly describes the metaphor as the ontology. Its metaphorical relationship is implicit in the meaning of the sentence. Metaphors can explain things more profoundly, but sometimes blur the semantics.

Functions of Vague Language

To improve language flexibility. Due to the many uncertainties in foreign affairs, the development of the diplomatic situation is often unpredictable. If the discourse is too absolute, once the situation changes, the situation will become very passive. Since vague speech can be interpreted in various ways, the use of such language can leave room for speakers to avoid unnecessary trouble.

To play a role in breaking the deadlock. When reporters ask questions, they often involve sensitive topics, which make the spokesman inconvenient. However, this stalemate cannot continue to affect the process and atmosphere of the press conference. Therefore, the spokesman also needs to use vague words to eschew these sensitive topics. Some ambiguities are answered without substantial content.

An important means to alleviate contradictions. Foreign affairs are full of conflicts and contradictions. Government spokesmen often face a variety of acute issues involving other countries. In order to alleviate conflicts and maintain friendly relations between countries, the use of vague words is undoubtedly an effective means.

To make questions more euphemistic. From a reporter's perspective, vague language can make questions more euphemistic. The reporter hopes to dig out the most newsworthy content from the speaker, and these contents often involve some extremely sensitive topics. If the question is too direct and sharp, the speaker may directly avoid it, so reporters often use vagueness in their questions. Ask questions politely.

Translation Principles and Strategies for Vague Language

Translation Principles for Vague Language

To understand the meaning of vague language. Under the rule of skopos, each target text and each speech has a specific purpose (Fauconnier, 1997). In diplomatic situations, speakers sometimes prefer to use vague language to euphemistically express certain views. It is particularly important to understand the meaning of vague language. Because the purpose rule emphasizes the role of the interpreter, the interpreter can choose the appropriate interpretation strategy according to the specific situation, and then achieve a specific purpose.

To consider acceptability of TL readers. The rule of coherence requires that interpreters have an audience-oriented consciousness, that is, when translating they should consider the acceptability of the audience and the language and cultural background to make the translation coherent and readable.

To be faithful to SL. The rule of fidelity, as its name implies, is to be faithful to the source language. In view of the high sensitivity of diplomatic activities, interpreters must follow the speaker's intentions and be faithful to the speaker's remarks when translating. Of course, when vague language is involved, the interpreter should accurately convey the speech under the guidance of the principle of fidelity. The implied meaning of the person, in turn, achieves the practical effect of the speaker using vague language.

Translation Strategies for Vague Language

Amplification. The amplification is a method of adding supplementary translation content to meet the needs of target language readers (Tymoczyko, 1998, p. 43). Since the two languages of English and Chinese have different ways of thinking, language habits and expressions, in order to make the translation more consistent with the context and pragmatics of the target language when translating, the translation needs to add some words, short sentences or sentences in order to be more accurate express the meaning of the original text.

Example

Original: ……多只大老虎落网了。

Translation: …brought down many "big tigers", or high-ranking officials who have committed corruption

(Press Conference of the "Two Sessions" in 2019)

This sentence originated from a question raised by the Voice of the People's Broadcasting Center reporter on anti-corruption work. The original meaning of "大老虎" refers to big tigers. If translated directly according to big tigers, it will definitely cause some misunderstandings in foreign media. Here, the big tiger refers to the corruption of senior officials, so the interpreter added high-ranking officials after the big tigers, and then explained what a big tiger is, achieving the purpose of conveying the original text. According to the rule of purpose, the information delivered by the interpreter is accurate and faithful and the target language receiver can understand and accept it.

Literal translation. Literal translation is a translation method or translated text that maintains both the original content and the original form (Nord, 2001). It is estimated that about 70% of sentences are processed by literal translation, so literal translation is widely used by translators, which shows the importance of literal translation. The names and certain proper nouns in English are literal translations.

Example

Original: ……增长7%左右

Translation: …at approximately 7 percent

(2018 "Two Sessions" Press Conference)

In this example, "7%左右" is a vague quantifier at the lexical level. It can be seen from the contents of the sentence that under the new normal economy, the expected economic growth this year is close to 7%, but it is true that the number is not yet clear. In view of this, the speaker used vague quantifiers to express this approximate number, and the interpreter translated it into "approximately 7 percent" from the perspective of teleology, which was not only true to the original text, but also achieved the purpose of communication.

Free translation. Free translation refers to translation according to the general idea of the original text, and does not translate word by word (separate from "literal translation"). It is often used when translating sentences or phrases (or larger meaning groups). Free translation is mainly used when the source and target languages show great cultural differences. From the perspective of cross-cultural language communication and cultural exchange, free translation emphasizes the relative independence of the target cultural system and the original cultural system.

Example

Original: ……打掉寻租的空间，铲除腐败的土壤

Translation: …to limit the breeding ground for corruption—including rent-seeking

(2018 "Two Sessions" Press Conference)

When Premier Li Keqiang answered questions about the development of anti-corruption work, he mentioned about the sentence "打掉寻租的空间，铲除腐败的土壤". It would be particularly blunt if it was literally translated as "break the renting space and root out the soil". Premier Li used rhetorical ambiguity here and used the breeding of soil to refer to the problem of corruption. Therefore, the translator translated it into "breeding ground for corruption", which not only vividly expressed the rhetorical intention of the speaker, but also achieved the purpose of understanding.

Word order adjustment. It is one of the language skills. Use the method of changing the normal word order to increase the expression effect, such as subject-verb position, subject-object upside-down, and host-resident object, guest-adjective position, adverbial displacement, attributive postposition, etc. (Gold, 2004).

Example

Original: 如果我们能够注重质量、效益，促使中国经济由中低端向中高端升级，那就可以在较长时期保持中国经济在中高速水平增长。

Translation: We want to further upgrade China's economy to a medium high level of development and maintain China's economic growth at a medium high speed. We want to pursue growth with improved quality and performance.

(2018 "Two Sessions" Press Conference)

In answering a question from the Singapore Straits Times reporter about the new economic normal, Premier Li used a conditional adverbial clause of "if" to indicate a possibility. If translated according to the original word order, it would be translated into "if ..." But if we further understand this sentence, we will find that what Premier Li emphasized was a vision, a strong hope, with syntactic ambiguity, and the interpreter translated the sentence into the two parallel sentences, "we want to ... we want to ..."; this adjustment of the word order not only makes the semantics more coherent, but also allows the audience to appreciate the Premier's outlook on the good momentum of China's economic development.

Conclusion

Vague language is widely used in diplomatic situations because of its special pragmatic functions. The government press conference is an important diplomatic occasion, and both sides of the question and answer use a lot of vague words. For the translation of vague words in government press conferences, interpreters have adopted different translation strategies such as vague translation, vague translation with precise translation, and vague translation with blank translation. The choice of different translation strategies is not random, but guided by the Skopos Theory.

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