

On the Consecutive Interpreting of Chinese Governmental Discourse from the Perspective of Adaptation Theory: The Interpreting of Premier Li Keqiang Meets the Press in 2022 as an Example

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Abstract: The consecutive interpreting of governmental discourse shoulders the responsibility to represent the official stance of the country, and the seriousness of the discourse puts forward higher standards for interpreting output: interpreters should reasonably choose and adapt to various internal and external factors of both the source language and target language in order to assume the role of an accurate, authoritative, and immediate intermediary of information transfer. Adaptation theory just provides interpreters with standards for making choices and adaptations. Taking Verschueren's adaptation theory as the theoretical framework, this study analyzes the consecutive interpreting of Premier Li Keqiang Meets the Press in 2022, a representative example of consecutive interpreting of Chinese governmental discourse, from the angles of contextual correlates of adaptability, structural objects of adaptability, and salience of the adaptation processes, aiming to explore how could interpreters adapt through language choices in Chinese governmental discourse, and to reveal the adaptation theory's role as the standard and guidance for consecutive interpreting.

Key words: Adaptation theory, consecutive interpreting, Chinese governmental discourse, Premier Meets the Press.

1. Introduction

1.1 Consecutive Interpreting and Pragmatics

Interpreting is a communication activity that converts two language symbols. In order to improve the quality, practices of interpreting and translation have long been drawing on relevant linguistics theories. However, the conversion between two language symbols is not carried out in a pure and idealized environment. Therefore, interpreting and translation theories based on structural linguistics fail to effectively guide and explain translation activities from time to time (Song 2004). As interpreters and translators begin to pay more attention to elements such as contextual relations and language structure, the research results in the field of pragmatics are more frequently and widely applied in translation and interpreting practices.

Compared with written translation, consecutive interpreting is a special form of translation highly influenced by the specific situation in which the interpreting takes place, as well as factors such as the context and the structure of both the source and target language. Therefore, pragmatic theories take on greater guiding meanings to consecutive interpreting.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

Adaptation theory is a pragmatic research model proposed by Jef Verschueren, the founder and the then Secretary General of the *International Pragmatics Association*, in his monograph *Understanding Pragmatics* in 1999. Since the adaptation theory was put forward, it has received extensive attention and attracted numerous relevant researches. Among them, studies focusing on the theory's application in translation and interpreting account for the largest proportion (Liu 2013), helping adaptation theory play a crucial role in guiding translation and interpreting activities globally. This research will adopt Verschueren's adaptation theory as its theoretical framework to investigate the key characteristics and potential areas for improvement in consecutive interpreting of Chinese governmental discourse. To achieve this, the research will address the following research questions:

- 1) How do interpreters adapt to the internal and external elements of language in consecutive interpreting of Chinese governmental discourse?
- 2) How do interpreters choose the proper diction to convey the actual meaning of the source language?

1.3 Discourse Choice

Since 1991, it has become a regular practice for the Premier to meet the press from home and abroad after the closing of the National People's Congress. This meeting provides the media, both domestic and foreign (especially foreign media), with the opportunity to directly engage with the Premier and gain insights into China's domestic and diplomatic policies. Over the years, the press conference has garnered increasing global attention. As the Premier personally responds to journalists' questions, the conference is considered an authoritative source for studying Chinese governmental discourse. Accordingly, the Premier's speeches are interpreted by senior interpreters from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, representing the highest level of China's overseas-targeted publicity translation and is also of great research value. On 11 March 2022, Premier Li Keqiang met the press at the Great Hall of the People, and answered questions from both Chinese and foreign journalists. This research takes the consecutive interpreting performance at the very conference, the latest one in 2022, as discourse for analysis.

2. Adaptation Theory

Verschueren's adaptation theory suggests that language has properties of variability, negotiability, and adaptability. The use of language is a dynamic process of continuous adaptation and choice based on internal and external factors under different levels of conciseness. Variability defines the range of possibilities from which choices can be made. Negotiability refers to the fact that choices are not made mechanically or according to strict rules or fixed form-function relationships, but rather on the basis of highly flexible principles and strategies. Adaptability, then, is the property of language which enables human beings to make negotiable linguistic choices from a variable range of possibilities to satisfy communicative needs (Verschueren 1999). The three properties of language form a complete chain to smooth language-based communication step by step.

Verschueren points out that language users choose not only language forms, but also language usage strategies. When faced with different alternative language options, individuals naturally choose the most suitable or optimal one. The act of choice functions as a means, with adaptation being the ultimate result and purpose of the choice. Since choice and adaptation are both processes and outcomes, they are inherent in almost all aspects of language use, including different levels, stages, and users. Even when the available options do not precisely match the speaker's intention, choices still occur. Language adaptation is a two-way or multidimensional process in which language can adapt to the environment, and the environment can also adapt to language, or they can mutually adapt to each other (Ma 2006).

The adaptation of language can be analyzed from four angles: contextual correlates of adaptability, structural objects of adaptability, dynamics of adaptability, and salience of the adaptation processes. The specific connotation of the four angles of investigation will be

elaborated on before the analysis of each section. As a comprehensive pragmatic theory, adaptation theory can guide consecutive interpreting in a comprehensive manner. Under its guidance, interpreters make conscious and active choices to enhance the accuracy and efficiency of information transmission.

3. Analyses of Examples

Consecutive interpreting is the act of interpreters orally transferring the information delivered by the source language speaker to target language immediately after the speaker finishes its speech (Mona and Diriker 2019). When doing consecutive interpreting, the interpreter undertakes the three-phase thinking process of "decoding-transcoding-encoding" (Zhong 1998). During the process, the interpreter repeats the cycle of source language comprehension, language code-switching and target language choosing. This series of cognitive operations is actually an adaptive process of choosing language based on various levels of internal and external factors of language. During consecutive interpreting, the interpreter serves as the only intermediary between the two parties in the communication: Only the interpreter can transfer the journalists' questions into Chinese so that the Premier can understand; and only the interpreter can transfer the Premier's answers into English so that the foreign journalists can comprehend. Moreover, the interpreter shoulders the responsibility to deliver an official version of translation to the Premier's words that represents China's stance, so as to avoid deliberate misinterpretation and undue influence by some foreign media. Therefore, the interpreter must make the most appropriate choices and adaptations to ensure the output of interpreting decent and easy to understand.

The four angles of linguistic adaptation: contextual correlates of adaptability, structural objects of adaptability, dynamics of adaptability, and salience of the adaptation processes provide standards for evaluating and guiding interpreting and translation.

Among the four angles, the dynamics of adaptability needs to be further clarified. This angle of adaptation theory holds that meaning in language use exists dynamically. Verschueren points out that the dynamic generation of meaning is central to the processes of meaningful functioning of language. Dynamics of adaptability of language choice can be reflected in the following three aspects: 1. The temporal dimension. That is, the production and understanding of language change over time, and the change of time makes individuals conduct adaptation when they are understanding language information in the past and using language to respond; 2. Dynamics and context – the constraints of different contexts on language choices; 3. Dynamics and structure – flexible changes in the linear structure of the language (Verschueren 1999).

The author of this study believes that, the second and third aspects of dynamics of adaptability actually bears similar analytical perspectives with contextual correlates of adaptability and structural objects of adaptability, which will be covered in detail by the analyses in respective sub-

chapters. And the first aspect, the temporal dimension, is rarely embodied in consecutive interpreting due to its particularity: consecutive interpreting is an instant communicative process where the speaker, the interpreter, and the audience are in the same time and space, and the changes in meaning caused by the time factor tend to be not obvious. The analysis of dynamics of adaptability is actually integrated into the analyses of contextual correlates of adaptability, structural objects of adaptability, and salience of the adaptation processes. There is no need to open a separate chapter to analyze the discourse from dynamics of adaptability. Therefore, this study will take the three angles of contextual correlates of adaptability, structural objects of adaptability, and salience of the adaptation processes to analyze the gains and losses of language adaptation in consecutive interpreting of *Premier Li Keqiang Meets the Press in 2022*.

3.1 Contextual Correlates of Adaptability

Verschueren divides contexts into two categories – linguistic context and communicative context. Linguistic context refers to the relationship between language symbols, and the influence of language symbols on communicative participants. Communicative context is the non-verbal context, which is composed of the psychological world, the social world and the physical world. The psychological world includes cognitive and emotional factors such as the moods, personalities, and intentions of the communicative parties; the social world consists of cultural environment, social occasions, and group norms for communication; and the physical world is mainly comprised of the reference relationship of time and space.

Contextual correlates of adaptability require that, the choice of language must be adapted to the linguistic context and communicative context of both parties in the communication. The contexts constantly change during the language exchange between the communicative parties. Despite the limited time available for consecutive interpreting, the interpreter should take into account as many elements in the linguistic context and communicative context as possible, so as to reduce the understanding deviation caused by the contextual barriers between the two communicative parties.

Excerpt 1: 地方政府要当“铁公鸡”，不该花的钱一分钱也不能花，该给市场主体的钱一分都不能少。

Interpreting 1: All local governments must **count every cent and make every cent count** to ensure that all funding support for businesses will be fully delivered.

“铁公鸡” (“Iron rooster”) is an authentic Chinese idiom expression, and the entire Xiehouyu (enigmatic folk simile) “铁公鸡——一毛不拔” (“Iron Rooster – Never Pulls Out a Hair”) is often used to describe people who are stingy and mean in life. The Premier adopts this expression here to show that the government is carefully budgeting, reducing non-essential expenditures, and fully utilizing the government’s wealth to serve market entities. If the interpreter literally translate “铁公鸡” here into “Iron rooster”, it will confuse the audience who only

understand English. For those native English audience with some basic knowledge in Chinese but are not very familiar with Xiehouyu, they may superficially grasp the meaning of “铁公鸡”, but misunderstand the inner emotional connotation of this phrase. Therefore, the interpreter at this conference adopts the domestication strategy and uses the typical rhetoric devices in English – alliteration and repetition to translate “铁公鸡” as “count every cent and make every cent count”. By reversing the order of the two phrases “count” and “every cent”, the rhetorical effect is achieved. Moreover, the interpretation conforms to the cultural context of English, so the native English audience can immediately grasp the meaning as well as enjoy the literary attainment of the Premier. The interpreter here fully comprehends the connotation of the source language of Chinese, and adapts the information into the target language.

Excerpt 2: 大家可以想象，市井长巷店铺林立、热气腾腾，那就是熙熙攘攘的人间烟火。

Interpreting 2: We may well imagine a lively city life is very much about the **hustle and bustle** in marketplaces and shops.

“熙熙攘攘” is a Chengyu (a type of traditional Chinese idiomatic expression) from the *Records of the Grand Historian* (《史记》), one of the most important history classic in China. The Chengyu “熙熙攘攘” describes the very busy and crowded scene where people coming and going. “人间烟火” is a buzz word on Chinese Internet in the past three years, reflecting people’s wish to return to the normal and bustling life before the pandemic. The diction by the Premier is close to the mass’ daily discourse, and is naturally very easy for Chinese audience to understand. But the specific expressions are difficult to interpret into English. The interpreter takes into account the context as well as the cultural background of the English language, adapting the Chengyu to the English idiom “hustle and bustle”, which is commonly used in English to describe the busy and boisterous scene. This adaptation not only breaks down the barriers for English-speaking audiences to grasp the Premier’s message, but also resonates with their own cultural experiences.

Excerpt 3: 我们相信普通人有上上智，把他们的特长、聪明才智发挥出来，那就业的大舞台会绚丽多彩。

Interpreting 3: We believe that there is great intelligence and potential in each individual. When their talent and potential is fully brought out, we can **open great prospects for employment**.

Employment is one of the priorities of the Chinese government. Governments at all levels pay full attention to employment and regard employment as the greatest livelihood of the people. The expressions of “就业舞台” or “就业大舞台” (“stage of employment” or “grand stage of employment”) appear in the various documents and publicity texts. It is a widely used and well-known expression in the Chinese context that links employment with the “stage” where talents can fully demonstrate their strength and play their roles. However, there is no corresponding expression in the English context, and a blunt literal translation will deviate the meaning from the

English cultural background. Although Interpreting 3 does not find a perfect equivalent in the English context like Interpreting 1 and 2, it still accurately conveys information through a clear expression that is consistent with English habit of diction, which is also a very successful interpreting output given the time limit of consecutive interpreting. Interpreting 3 satisfies the core requirement of consecutive interpreting – accurate and fluent transmission of information, and adapts properly to the English context as well.

3.2 Structural Objects of Adaptability

The angle of structural objects of adaptability puts forward the requirement that communication should conform to the structure of languages at all levels and the principles behind structures, macroscopically to the choice of language code and style, and microscopically to all elements of discourse construction (from phonetic structure, morpheme, word, clause, and sentence to propositional structure and various super-sentence units) (Wu and Cui, 2016). There may be great differences in the language structures used by the two parties in the communication. When doing consecutive interpreting, interpreters should make appropriate choices in language code and style; then, they are supposed to pay attention to the choice of discourse construction components, including the sound structure, vocabulary, sentence structure, etc.; moreover, interpreters ought to take into consideration the choice in textual level, such as speech acts, discourse coherence, information structure, and the order of sentences.

Excerpt 4: 我们退税优先考虑小微企业，因为小微企业量大面广。

Interpreting 4: **Priority will be given to micro and small firms** in the refunding of VAT credits, because these firms cover a wide range of sectors.

It is a typical structural feature for the Chinese language to use more verbs (Chen 2021). Meanwhile, the first person perspective is often applied in Chinese texts to shorten the distance between the speaker and the audience (Yu and Wu 2020). In the original text, “优先考虑小微企业” is a verb-object phrase, and the first-person pronoun “我们” (“we”) is used by the Premier to refer to the Chinese state government. In English, verbs are far less frequently adopted than nouns, and the English language tend to use noun structures to deliver meanings. Moreover, English-speaking countries’ official governmental documents will try their best to avoid first person perspective, so as to embody objectivity. The governmental discourse of Chinese and English are significantly different in language structure. When interpreting, the interpreter at this conference fully takes into account the differences in structures of both languages, and interprets “我们退税优先考虑小微企业” (“We will firstly consider small firms when refunding VAT credits.”) into “Priority will be given to micro and small firms.” This piece of interpreting output applies a noun as the subject, and adopts passive voice to avoid the emergence of the actor of the verb, sufficiently adapting to the English language structure of.

Excerpt 5: 疫情发生以来，我多次与国际组织负责人、跨国公司负责人、企业家对话，他们都希望保证必要的商务往来。

Interpreting 5: **In my many conversations with heads of international institutions and multinationals as well as business leaders** since the pandemic started, many expressed the hope for ensuring necessary business exchanges.

Excerpt 5 is a typical run-on sentence in Chinese. In Chinese run-on sentences, several things, although seem to be disconnected with each other, are congregated together. Commas, instead of conjunctions, link different small units, and there is only one full stop at the end of the sentence. A Chinese run-on sentence tends to describe more than one participant, so the sentence probably has several subjects and multiple topics. Run-on sentences are an important feature of Chinese syntax. The sentences end when all the meanings are conveyed. The information capacity of a run-on sentence is not limited by the grammatical form but is highly flexible, with one unit after another, just like running water (Wei and Hu, 2005). Verb structures, at the same time, are frequently adopted in run-on sentences. The phenomenon of run-on sentence is closely related the paratactic characteristic of the Chinese language. English, however, is a hypotactic language: a sentence can only have one subject, and sub-sentences must be connected by punctuation marks and conjunctions. Meanwhile, as pointed out in the analysis of Interpreting 4, Chinese adopts more verbs while English adopts more nouns. Therefore, interpreting Chinese run-on sentences requires adaptation to the structure characteristics of both the source and target languages. Interpreting 5 cleverly addresses these structural differences. The first sub-sentence in the entire run-on sentence is reorganized as an adverbial, and the verb structure in the first sub-sentence is transformed into a noun structure which is commonly used in English. This piece of interpreting output completely and accurately expresses the meaning of the source language. The adaptation not only conforms to the characteristics of English structure, but also makes the entire sentence output concise, which fully meets the time constraint of interpreting that the typical interpreting output should be completed in less time than the speaker’s speech length. The adaptation in the run-on sentences here saves time, and allows for more efficient interpreting of subsequent information, helping the press conference to be carried out more smoothly.

Apart from the adaptation to language structure at the syntactic level mentioned above, the adaptation to structure at the sound level is also an important part in the investigation angle of structural objects. The interpreters at this press conference properly controls her sound quality and achieves good effects. The first question in the press conference comes from the Associated Press, who mentions the conflict between Russia and Ukraine with unfriendly implications. The Premier responds calmly, pointing out that China sincerely hopes that the situation in Ukraine can be eased, affirming that China has always pursued an independent foreign policy of peace, and never targets third parties in developing bilateral relations.

However, the subsequent Reuters journalist remains unrelenting and continues to question China's attitude towards Russia during its conflict with Ukraine. The Premier, with an even firmer tone, reiterate once again China's pursuit of an independent foreign policy of peace, and China's claim that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries should be respected. When interpreting this part, the interpreter follows the Premier to become firmer in the tone, thus more confidently conveying China's stance in front of global journalists. Here, the interpreter accurately adapts to the sound characteristics of the source language, one of the structural objects of adaptability, making the interpreting output more accurate, vivid and natural.

3.3 Saliency of the Adaptation Processes

Saliency of the adaptation processes describes the degree of self-reflexive awareness regarding certain pragmatic features in language use (Verschuere 1999). When communicators make choices to realize adaptation, they are actively adjusting the discourse, and the process is guided by their self-awareness as communicators.

As mentioned above, the interpreter in consecutive interpreting assumes the role of the only intermediary in the entire communication process. Accordingly, the saliency of the adaptation processes in interpreting is of even more significance. The excellent output of consecutive interpreting is the result of accurate choices and adaptations made by the interpreter after integrating various internal and external factors. These choices may have little things to do with the language itself, but are made under the requirements of the specific situations and the identity as an interpreter. During the adaptation process, the interpreter's self-awareness is always clear. The interpreter is supposed to know well about the reason for making a certain choice and giving up other choices, and has a clear understanding of the outcome of the choice.

Excerpt 6: Associated Press: ... Are you concerned that China's **support** for Russia could harm those relationships and then in turn the Chinese economy itself?
Interpreting 6: 美联社记者:中国是否担心会因为目前对于危机的**处理**影响到与欧洲的良好关系,甚至影响中国自身经济的发展?

In his question, the journalist from Associated Press of the United States describes China's attitude towards the Russo-Ukrainian conflict as "support", which is a trap question in order to deceive China to admit. However, the interpreter skillfully alters the source language, eliminates the hidden connotation, and circumvents the trap by changing the verb "support", a positive action, into "处理" ("handle"), a neutral verb. Although this interpretation deviates from the original text, it highlights the saliency of awareness in the interpreter's adaptation process. The interpreting output by the official interpreter directly represents the Chinese government's attitude towards the conflict. If the source language was translated literally, the interpreter would fall into the trap specially designed by the American journalist and means that the Chinese government admit the so-called "support" substantially. The interpreter at this conference is fully aware of her

country's stance, as well as her responsibility as an interpreter to ensure smooth communication. The deviation from the original meaning of the word "support" here is just the result of the interpreter's saliency of identity awareness, which enables her to maintain the national stance while minimizing the impact of the trap from the American journalist, and to keep the press conference running as smooth as possible. The interpreter's subjectivity is fully evident in her adaptation of the word.

Excerpt 7: Reuters: ... and growing worries about the prospect of nuclear escalation. Yet China has **refused to condemn** Russia's conduct or call it an "invasion".

Interpreting 7: 路透社记者:人们对核态势升级前景也感到担忧,但中方一直没有对俄的行为进行谴责,或者将其称之为"入侵".

In the previous analysis in Interpreting 5, the implied defiant intention of the Reuters journalist in his question was already mentioned. The connotation behind the word "refused" in his question is that China is threatened, oppressed or coerced by other countries to condemn Russia, but China refuses to give in to these pressures. The interpreter does not literally translate the word "refused" into Chinese, but instead changes the sentence structure to China as the subject of the action. This adaptation clearly state that China makes its diplomatic decisions independently and in full accordance with its own diplomatic principles, and that China's foreign policy and decisions do not need and will not be interfered with by other countries. Here the interpreter's awareness of identity as the communication intermediary representing China's official stance is once again demonstrated during the adaptation process. The adaptation breaks the trap of the Reuters journalist, and reaffirms China's independent stance as well as its status as a major power with dignity.

4. Conclusion

Taking Verschuere's adaptation theory as the theoretical framework, this study analyzes the consecutive interpreting of *Premier Li Keqiang Meets the Press in 2022*, a representative example of consecutive interpreting of Chinese governmental discourse, from the angles of contextual correlates of adaptability, structural objects of adaptability, and saliency of the adaptation processes, so as to draw a general picture of the consecutive interpreting of Chinese governmental discourse.

Consecutive interpreting is a special form of translation activities which highlights the process of language choice. Consecutive interpreting requires the interpreter to be able to understand the source language in a timely and accurate manner, and choose appropriate target language to transfer the information. The interpreter makes choices by referring to the vocabulary, syntax, style, context, and cultural background of both the source language and the target language, so as to better achieve communicative purpose. Any deviation in choice may lead to halt of communication or even negative impacts. The seriousness of consecutive interpreting of governmental discourse

puts forward higher requirements for interpreters in making choices and adaptations (Tan 2022). Verschueren's adaptation theory just provides interpreters with standards for making choices and adaptations in different dimensions, equipping the choices in consecutive interpreting with theoretical basis. By following the principles of adaptation theory, interpreters are able to produce more fluent and appropriate output of target language, and faithfully convey the meaning of the source language.

With extremely superb bilingual proficiency and a mature identity awareness, the interpreter at this press conference, Premier *Li Keqiang Meets the Press in 2022*, makes dynamic adaptations to the contextual relationship and language structure between the source language and the target language, and fully demonstrated her identity awareness as the intermediary in communication who represents the official stance of Chinese government. The consecutive interpreting at this press conference is a clear practice of Verschueren's adaptation theory, which can serve as a valuable model for professional interpreters and interpreting learners. And the adaptation theory provides the interpreters with guidance and evaluation criteria for interpreting Chinese governmental discourse.

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