Translating Political Discourse: A Critical Review of Studies in Western and Chinese Contexts

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Abstract—The translation of political discourse serves as a linchpin in promoting intercultural dialogue, strengthening diplomatic relations, and advancing international cooperation. This study offers a critical analysis of the translation of political discourse within Western and Chinese paradigms. It commences with a brief introduction to the subject under investigation, succeeded by a discussion on the intercultural salience of political discourse. Subsequently, the paper engages in a comprehensive review of seminal research in the field, elucidating pivotal findings and adopted methodologies. Building upon this analytical framework, the paper delineates prominent lacunae in existing knowledge. This endeavor seeks to galvanize focused research efforts, invigorating the domain of political discourse translation studies and encouraging a global exploration of untapped territories and cross-cultural communication strategies.

Index Terms—political discourse, translation, Western context, Chinese context, research gaps

I. INTRODUCTION

The translation of political discourse is indispensable for lucid communication across diverse sociopolitical landscapes. Serving as a conduit, it surmounts cultural impediments, engendering mutual comprehension amongst nations and entities spanning varied political architectures and linguistic heritages. This research undertakes an exhaustive exploration of the intricacies of political discourse translation, scrutinizing its nuances within both Western and Chinese milieus.

The rationale for encompassing both Western and Chinese contexts is multifaceted. Historically, politically, economically, and culturally, the Western domain has been a linchpin in steering global political dialogue. Deciphering its translational intricacies unfurls profound implications. Concurrently, as China's global stature ascends, a meticulous probe into its political discourse translation becomes imperative for deciphering evolving international communicative dynamics. The divergences in cultural imprints and historical trajectories across regions mandate bespoke translation strategies, underscoring the primacy of a comparative lens. Moreover, the geopolitical confluence between Western polities and China accentuates the need to delve into the translation of political discourse. The copious extant literature in these domains corroborates this focus, facilitating an in-depth appraisal to bridge research voids. By amalgamating these scenarios, this investigation augments our nuanced grasp of cross-cultural political dialogue, fortifying international diplomatic bonds and broadening cognizance of global politico-linguistic dynamics.

Post an elucidation of the research's methodological framework and underpinning logic, the ensuing section furnishes a panoramic perspective on political discourse and its translational realm, underscoring their cardinal roles in cross-cultural exchanges. This is succeeded by a rigorous scrutiny of seminal works on the translation of political rhetoric within Western and Chinese terrains, spotlighting salient discoveries and methodologies. The subsequent segment critiques extant scholarship's lacunae, pinpointing arenas warranting deeper inquiry. The conclusion accentuates the gravitas of the undertaken evaluation and flags domains beckoning intensified exploration.

Political discourse and its translation

The profound impact of political discourse on shaping societies and political landscapes has led to its substantial consideration as a subject of academic inquiry. Emerging from historical and cultural underpinnings, political discourse is bound by the contours of history and culture (An & Wang, 2019, p. 5). Nevertheless, despite its significance, the absence of a universally agreed-upon definition for political discourse persists, stemming from diverse interpretations across disciplines such as social science, politics, economics, and linguistics. As articulated by van Dijk (1997), "The majority of studies concerning political discourse center around the textual and spoken expressions of professional politicians or political institutions, spanning across local, national, and international levels" (p. 12). In a broader context, this concept is frequently elucidated through its symbiotic relationship with language. Conversely, within a narrower framework, political discourse can be construed as "a communicative act employed in formal or informal political

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settings, encompassing discussions of political events, entities, or agents” (Bánhegyi, 2014, p. 140). Van Dijk (1997) defines political discourse as functional political action within the political process. To avoid an excessively broad scope and ensure precision in the study, the researcher's definition of political discourse centers on the discourse of political figures during political occasions. This eliminates instances in which non-political figures participate in political events such as student marches and worker strikes, as well as instances in which political figures participate in non-political events such as ordinary talks.

In our increasingly interconnected world, the translation of political discourse plays a vital role in facilitating diplomatic relations and fostering international cooperation. It serves to convey political ideologies, policies, and opinions with cultural sensitivity, enabling meaningful engagement and informed decision-making on the global stage. However, the translation of political discourse sets itself apart from other forms of translation due to its potential impact on global peace and security. It is intrinsically tied to institutionalized political practices, heavily influenced by institutional policies and ideologies.

In this study, translation of political discourse specifically pertains to the translation of diverse political text types, including speeches, interviews, party declarations, directives, editorials, government press conference releases, news reports, white papers, and columns, among others. These texts are initiated by political leaders, political organizations, societies, and institutions and disseminated to international audiences through various mediums such as books, newspapers, television, radio, conferences, and the internet (Huang, 2015).

II. COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS: POLITICAL DISCOURSE TRANSLATION IN WESTERN AND CHINESE RESEARCH

This section presents a comprehensive examination of notable scholarly investigations pertaining to the translation of political discourse in both Western and Chinese settings. It outlines significant discoveries and approaches employed in these studies.

A. Western Perspectives: Evolving Dynamics in Political Discourse Translation

Understanding the ramifications of discourse translation is necessary given the historical, political, economic, and cultural dominance of the Western environment on the world. Political discourse translation is critical in the Western setting because it serves as the foundation for effectively communicating ideologies, policies, and socio-political goals among linguistically different people. This section investigates the many facets of translating political discourse in Western societies.

The pioneering work of Schäffner (2004), Political Discourse Analysis from the Point of View of Translation Studies, marks an important beginning. It is believed that exploring political discourse from the perspective of translation can provide a new perspective for understanding politics. She (2004) suggests interpreting political writings from a utilitarian standpoint and opposes the requirement to abide by the text type conventions of the target group as political texts rarely show the characteristics of high tradition. “The most important factor determining the particular textual make-up of the target text (henceforth, TT) is its function in the target language community” (Schäffner, 1997, p. 138).

As each political text type has unique text-typological and contextual features, different translation strategies are required for its desired functions in the target language community and such functions are often distinct from those of the ST.

Monday's (2007) contribution fills some gaps by studying the basic problems of language form and ideology from the perspective of translation studies. He credits van Dijk’s notion of ideology that is not limited to an exclusively political context to “encompass the knowledge, beliefs and value systems of the individual and the society in which he or she operates” (p. 196). Despite that he purposely steers clear of the typology of 'overt' or 'covert' translation (House, 1997, 2008), this phenomenon has attracted people's attention because some texts are typically read as if they were produced in the target language and presented as “an unmediated work” (Munday, 2007, p. 197).

Kang (2007) discusses ways to reconstruct the representation of North Korea in translation by doing a comparative examination of the Newsweek articles and their Korean translation. Despite the fact that his work is about a different genre, it has many similarities with the present study in terms of the sophisticated set of constraints and exigence in political discourse and the appeals for persuasion on the rhetorical audiences.

Political translation analysis in recent years has diverted to power and ideological relations. Bánhegyi’s (2008) work benefits from a comprehensive approach to translation of Canadian political texts, including propositional analysis, social cognitive analysis and critical discourse analysis. It shows that the complication of the translation and the choice of translators are ideology-driven. Similarly, Gagnon (2010) focuses on the relationship between ideological considerations and translation shifts by the translator.

Inspirations behind political translation today involve “informing the target culture readership about a foreign country’s political event and the personality of its leader” (Romagnuolo, 2009, p. 23). This statement brings insights to the process of translation in terms of communicative purposes. Focusing on the loss and the compensation of information during translation, Shamaileh (2022) presents another attempt to the translated parallelism which is used frequently as a figure of speech by Arabic political leaders in their discourse in order to persuade, assure and impress the recipients. It concludes that the recurrence of certain sentence structure in the TT is a deliberate operation by the translator for reproducing the desired stylistic and rhetorical effect of the original text.
Upon the role of the translator, Bánhegyi (2014) reviews and classifies the critical-discourse-analysis-based studies into six categories, one of which is the studies on the translator who plays a role as mediator in conditions of political conflict. Doerr (2018) posits political translation as a twofold model of radical democracy that transcends the conventional understanding of linguistic interpretation and counters the traditional notion of a “neutral” facilitator role of translators (p. 4). Also, Ghessimi (2019) discusses the role of the translator as producer of new knowledge by subverting the traditional allegiance of translation or interjecting his own world view of politics into the translation and it helps facilitate political changes in Iran of the 1970s.

Through a comprehensive examination of significant studies on political discourse translation in the Western context, the researcher has identified several noteworthy advancements. Among these, the prominence of critical discourse analysis and functionalist techniques stands out, shedding light on power dynamics and effective translation strategies. Additionally, progress in corpus linguistics and technology enables data-driven research, while reception studies explore audience interpretations. Ethical considerations, such as cultural sensitivity and neutrality, also play a crucial role in this evolving field. These collective developments contribute significantly to our understanding of the intricate interplay between language, politics, and culture in the translation of political discourse within Western cultures.

However, China's growing worldwide political and economic influence necessitates an examination of political discourse translation in this setting in order to get insights into international communication and power dynamics. Furthermore, the different cultural foundations and historical antecedents in both locations can lead to diverse translation processes, necessitating a comparative investigation. Based on that, the subsequent section of this study undertakes a thorough review of prior research focusing on the political translation practices within the Chinese context.

B. Chinese Perspectives: Evolving Dynamics in Political Discourse Translation

China's political discourse constitutes a vibrant system that elucidates the nation's developmental path, novel concepts, and emerging expressions (Huang, 2015). It stands as a comprehensive discourse system, reflecting the guiding principles and policies of the Communist Party of China. The translation of Chinese political discourse serves the purpose of disseminating China's accomplishments in politics, economy, culture, military, science, and technology. Moreover, it articulates the views and positions of the Party and the government on international matters, while also promoting China's rich traditional culture (Si & Zeng, 2021, p. 12). Understanding the current state of political discourse translation in the Chinese scholarly context is paramount for obtaining a well-rounded comprehension of this field.

In China, research on political discourse translation primarily revolves around two distinct approaches: the practically-oriented and the theoretically-oriented. The practical dimension of this inquiry is spearheaded by professional and official Chinese translators, drawing from their expertise and institutional knowledge of political translation operations.

Many practically-oriented studies in this field have centered on delineating criteria and methods for political translation (Huang, 2004; Yuan, 2013, 2017; Zhao, 2018). Notably, early exploration derived insights from translating Mao Tse-Tung's Selected Works, acclaimed in English-speaking circles and lauded as a domestic Chinese political translation masterpiece. A pivotal principle highlighted in these studies is the paramount significance of precision in political translation. This entails faithfully representing source text political terms, customized to diverse political contexts (Azhari, 2017; Qiu, 2018a; Yuan, 2013). Consequently, prior research on translating political discourse has esteem accuracy as the "dominant institutional norm governing political text translation" (Lu, 2013, p. 27).

However, translators of political texts, no matter which country’s political system it concerns, must have a firm grasp of the political interests in the original. The need for worldwide communication has necessitated a change in the agenda of political discourse translation wherein greater emphasis is placed on a goal-oriented research approach so as to foster cross-national and cross-cultural understanding (Chen, 2021; He & Geng, 2020; Huang, 2004; Li & Li, 2015; Liang, 2019; Qiu, 2018a). In this regard, a novel concept of “Three Adherence” is promulgated as guidance to translation practice, and it is expressed as “adhere to the realities of China, adhere to the needs of foreign recipients in terms of their information acquisition, and adhere to the thought patterns of foreign recipients” (Huang, 2004, p. 27). In another, translators must also take cultural and language disparities into full consideration, and strive to overcome the cultural gaps in translation. Under this direction, a number of translation practitioners have highlighted novel points in this field.


The exploration on methodologies and principles underpinning the translation of political discourse not only enriches the field of translation studies but also provides a robust foundation for subsequent theoretical examinations, such as the present study, within this purview. China's commendable progress through its revolutionary, developmental, and
reformative phases has catalyzed a burgeoning body of Chinese academic literature that probes into the translation of political discourse from a multitude of angles (Fu, 2018; Li & Xu, 2018; Yu, 2020). These scholarly perspectives span communicative, functionalist, pragmatic, cognitive linguistic, eco-translatological, constructivist, and rhetorical persuasion frameworks.

Li and Liu (2011) delve into the impact of translating international communication material, adopting a communicative approach. In a similar vein, Mao (2012) scrutinizes the criteria and tactics employed in translating Chinese political lexemes into English, while Li (2014) conducts an inquiry into the peculiarities of political texts through this same lens. The communicative methodology underscores the primacy of the target audience (henceforth, TA), taking into account the cultural and cognitive nuances that differentiate languages. Its predominant objective is to optimize the transfer of information from the source text to facilitate comprehension by the TA, as elucidated by Zheng (2015). Nevertheless, this approach lends less emphasis to augmenting the acceptability and persuasiveness of the translated text for the TA, as noted by Qiu (2018b).

The academic landscape is rife with studies that have delved into political discourse translation and compilation through the functional translation framework (Be, 2018; Dong, 2011; Li, 2012; Wang, 2010). For instance, Li (2021) critically assesses the translation methods employed in the publicity text of the 2021 Report on the Work of the Government, grounding his analysis in Vermeer's tripartite principles—skopos rule, coherence rule, and fidelity rules (Schäffner, 1998). Rooted in the ethos of this functional translation perspective is the idea of moulding translation strategies to align with the designated purpose of the TT.

Although this perspective is invaluable when addressing political discourse translation geared for international communication, it sometimes prioritises the translation's objective at the expense of the source text's cultural nuances and political standpoints (Luo & Li, 2020; Qiu, 2018b; Shen, 2015; Yuan, 2017). Furthermore, this functional methodology grapples with the challenge of offering nuanced specificity, which is crucial for persuasively engaging the TA in the pursuit of augmenting national image and international discourse power.

Additionally, the discipline of pragmatics has furnished several theoretical constructs, notable among which are relevance theory, adaptation theory, and meme theory. Within this prism, Liao (2016) embarked on the ambitious endeavour of constructing a memetic corpus tailored for bilingual political discourse translation. Wang (2019), adopting the relevance theory framework, underscores strategies such as cultural implantation and domestication, which aid in the meticulous reconstruction of cultural imageries. Concurrently, Zhan (2019) casts a discerning eye on the intricate interplay between language and context in the English translation of the white paper titled "On the construction of ecological civilization on the Qinghai Tibet Plateau", leveraging the adaptation theory.

Nevertheless, it's noteworthy that studies centred on a pragmatic lens, much like their communicative counterparts, often accentuate linguistic and societal pragmatic equivalences by instituting discourse-level juxtapositions (Mo, 2011; Yuan, 2014, 2017). And, while this lens foregrounds the importance of efficacious information dissemination, it frequently neglects pivotal functional dimensions and overarching translation objectives, such as amplifying a nation's international standing and discursive prowess. It is evident that this realm warrants a more profound scrutiny to holistically address the manifold nuances of political discourse translation.

Furthermore, beyond the paradigms previously elucidated, Long and Li (2020) champion a pioneering approach with their "political equivalence + cognitive convergence" compound translation standard, which is underscored by a cognitive underpinning. In a vein similar to this, Yang and Wang (2020) employ a cognitive lens to deconstruct the cognitive representations inherent in the Chinese term “新型大国关系” and its subsequent English translations. Liu and Wang (2021) draw upon Lakoff and Johnson's seminal conceptual metaphor theory in conjunction with Newmark's translation paradigms to critically evaluate metaphor translations embedded in President Xi Jinping's orations.

Central to these cognitive inquiries is the emphasis on the translator's pivotal role in facilitating unobstructed information dissemination. This is further accentuated by the incorporation of empirical psychological testing tools to authenticate the process (Chen, 2013). Nevertheless, one can't overlook the cognitive approach's potential shortcoming—its somewhat narrow focus on gauging the TA's response, especially in the context of the desired outcomes of political translation endeavours. Engaging with this dimension is instrumental for a holistic comprehension of the ramifications and efficacy of political discourse as it is translated and received by the TA. As such, comprehensive studies, inclusive of the TA's perceptions and reactions, would substantially augment the existing scholarship on political discourse translation, particularly when viewed through the cognitive lens.

Continuing from the previously discussed paradigms, Liu (2020) directs attention to the eco-translatology framework, shedding light on the intricate ecological underpinnings of contemporary Chinese political discourse. A detailed thematic scrutiny of both the Chinese and English iterations of Xi Jinping: The Governance of China (Volume III) (Xi, 2020) allows Liu to discern the translator's nuanced decisions geared towards striking a balance across communicative, cultural, and linguistic spheres. It is observed that eco-translatological research, especially those centred on English translations of government documents and speeches of President Xi (Chen, 2021; Chu, 2020; Li, 2019; Zhang, 2020; Zhu, 2018; Wen, 2017), is vocal in its endorsement of a comprehensive adaptive strategy. However, a note of caution resounds: if such adaptive selections are decoupled from the overarching intent of political discourse geared for international audiences, the resultant text might inadvertently lean towards being excessively TA-centric, potentially
compromising the balance of the translation (Qiu, 2018a; Yuan, 2014).

Progressing further, the constructivist translation perspective emerges as a tangible manifestation of constructivist principles within the realm of translation studies, anchored firmly in philosophical bedrock. Scholars embracing this particular orientation in the context of political discourse translation frequently mine insights from practical philosophy and communicative rationality. To illustrate, Hofferberth and Weber (2015) embark on a rigorous examination of constructivist norms. Their work illuminates normative oscillations in international politics that materialise in the course of translating constructivist assertions. Their interpretive approach discerningly captures normative transitions in political interfaces (p. 75), thereby unravelling the intricate weave of language, ideological tenets, and communicative dynamics.

Huang (2020) follows a parallel trajectory, probing the intricacies of political position translation while foregrounding the significance of constructivism within international relations. Complementing this research are studies that evaluate translated governmental communiqués and writings attributed to Chinese statesmen (Li & Zhu, 2019; Song, 2017; Wu, 2016), all of which collectively enrich our comprehension of the kinetic nature of political discourse translation. A point of contention, however, emerges from the observation that numerous studies tend to overemphasise the subjective construction of translation, largely from a macro-philosophical purview, inadvertently sideline the pivotal objectives underscoring political discourse translation and the instrumental role of the translator (Li & Chen, 2017; Qiu, 2018a; Yuan, 2013). Such an oversight arguably attenuates the pragmatic viability of this approach. To bolster the efficacy and resonance of the constructivist framework within this context, there’s a palpable need for scholarly endeavours that harmoniously integrate both translation objectives and the agency of the translator.

Over the years, there has been a marked upsurge in scholarly engagement with the theoretical and methodological facets of Western Rhetoric’s persuasive paradigms in the context of political translation studies. Chen (2007) elegantly juxtaposes Kenneth Burke’s identification theory with international communication translation, underscoring the imperative of fostering “identification”. Zhang and Lu (2012) delve into the merits of leveraging rhetorical instruments for facilitating cross-cultural communication, while Yuan (2013) accentuates the pivotal role of heightening translators’ rhetorical acumen and harnessing Western modes of persuasion. Furthermore, this line of inquiry has been expanded by some academics to cover a broader spectrum of political translation topics (Biber et al., 2007; Upton & Cohen, 2009; Zhang & Zhu, 2020).

For instance, Luo (2017) casts a critical eye on the strategic compilation of foreign news through the lens of rhetorical persuasion. Simultaneously, Ren (2018) interrogates the role of rhetorical elements in realising objectives within political translation. Venturing further, Yuan (2020) employs these principles while translating metaphors present in Fu Ying’s orations. Collectively, these endeavours firmly underscore the burgeoning relevance of rhetorical persuasion as an analytical and applied tool within the sphere of political translation.

Such contributions emblematically capture the burgeoning interest permeating the academic corridors of China with regard to political discourse translation. Researchers, equipped with an array of approaches, are capitalising on technological advancements to facilitate meticulous analyses, elucidating prevalent translation trajectories and their attendant ideological ramifications. Studies centred on reception offer invaluable insights into audience hermeneutics, while the translation of cultural significations, particularly evident in the Chinese Premier’s Report on the Work of the Government, is experiencing heightened attention. The incorporation of interdisciplinary methodologies serves to present a comprehensive tableau of the intricate dynamics governing political discourse translation within the Chinese milieu. However, in a parallel with its Western counterparts, Chinese research is not devoid of lacunae. The subsequent segment is geared towards delineating these areas of deficiency within both academic landscapes.

III. RESEARCH LACUNAE IN WESTERN AND CHINESE POLITICAL DISCOURSE TRANSLATION

While significant progress has been made in both Western and Chinese scholastic arenas concerning political discourse translation, there remain discernible gaps in research across both contexts.

In Western scholarship, despite substantial advancements, there exist foundational deficiencies in political discourse translation research. A disproportionate emphasis on Indo-European language pairs has limited a comprehensive exploration of translation challenges particular to Western societies. This focus necessitates a deeper investigation into challenges presented by non-Indo-European language pairs. Additionally, while a plethora of research considers translation from the perspective of the source language, limited attention is given to the consequences of translated political discourse on the TA and potential shifts in its rhetorical efficacy.

In the Chinese context, a review of predominant studies reveals an inclination towards detailed translation methodologies. This approach, however, often overlooks the broader strategic dimensions of the translation process, especially concerning translational strategies. Though numerous studies address translation techniques, a conspicuous gap remains in the examination of how political narratives are strategically reframed to align with audiences, given China’s distinct cultural and ideological fabric. Current scholarly trends largely focus on linguistic, pragmatic, and translatological examinations, with minimal engagement with Western principles of rhetorical persuasion.

The integration of rhetorical persuasion theories is on the ascent, but a more rigorous research approach is essential to understand their integration with China’s diverse sociopolitical and cultural context. Despite discussions on TT reception and the ideological positioning of recipients—and the growing emphasis on reception analytics—a detailed
analysis is crucial to unravel complex reception and interpretative processes across diverse audience segments. Furthermore, academic investigations into cultural nuances in translated Chinese political rhetoric and the foundational reasons for their concurrent prevalence appear to be restricted.

The research gaps in political discourse translation, spanning Western and Chinese frameworks, are intricate and interconnected. Both models confront similar translational dilemmas: the Western inclination for Indo-European language pairings results in a narrowed view on inherent challenges with non-European languages—a challenge also observed in the Chinese paradigm. Both structures also reveal disparities in understanding and assessing the impact of translated political discourses on their respective audiences. Ethical considerations, especially cultural sensitivity and neutrality, remain central in both Western and Chinese translation contexts.

Identifying these research gaps in the realm of political discourse translation across Western and Chinese settings holds paramount importance. These gaps serve as an academic guidepost, directing scholars to areas that demand intensified examination, promoting a more holistic and integrated understanding of the multifaceted nature of political translation. Addressing these gaps has the potential to refine translation practices, elucidating the intricate relationship between cultural and ideological facets in communicative dynamics.

Furthermore, addressing these gaps encourages a nuanced and context-sensitive approach in political discourse translation, crucial for enhancing intercultural dialogues, promoting mutual understanding, and bolstering effective political communication across language and cultural boundaries. A dedicated endeavor to identify and bridge these shared deficiencies can lead to a more globally-aware and comprehensive understanding of political discourse translation, emphasizing intercultural competence and facilitating informed political discussions.

IV. CONCLUSION: SIGNIFICANCE AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Political discourse translation emerges as an instrumental mechanism for surmounting linguistic and cultural impediments, thereby enabling constructive dialogue and fortifying international cohesion and collaboration. This manuscript provides an exhaustive synthesis of extant research on political discourse translation, traversing both Western and Chinese milieus. Through an amalgamation of prevailing scholarship, this investigation probes into the multifaceted challenges, methodologies, and accomplishments experienced by translators navigating these discrete sociopolitical terrains, whilst simultaneously spotlighting salient lacunae in the contemporary academic corpus.

This exposition lays the groundwork for prospective scholarly endeavors to zero in on and redress pivotal voids within this academic sphere, thus propelling the evolution and refinement of political discourse translation scholarship. It aspires to galvanize global academicians and practitioners to pioneer nascent investigative avenues, charting novel frontiers in political discourse translation, and fortifying the edifice of best practices in cross-cultural dialogue. This treatise stands as a robust infrastructural platform, catering to intellectuals captivated by the confluence of politics, linguistics, and translational studies.

While the present discourse predominantly orbits around Western and Chinese paradigms, it is crucial to underscore the potential significance of alternative sociopolitical contexts within the ambit of political discourse translation scholarship. Ensuing scholars might consider broadening their analytical purview to encapsulate diverse landscapes, contingent upon the ambit and objectives of their scholarly explorations. Such an expansion stands poised to augment our holistic understanding of political discourse translation, fostering a more integrative and encompassing purview.

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