

# Interpreter's Subjectivity in Interpreting from The Perspective of Interpretive Theory-- An Example of Zhang Jing's Interpretation in the 2021 China-US High-Level Strategic Dialogue

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**Abstract.** Interpreters, who are the main actors in interpretation, might even play a decisive role in some negotiations. But in conventional interpretation, they were frequently disregarded or even undervalued to the point where they were once referred to as "translation machines." This essay uses interpretive theory as a guide to analyze the subjectivity of interpreters in political and diplomatic meetings, using the 2021 China-US High-level Strategic Dialogue as the research object. It aims to further explore the factors that influence interpreters' subjectivity in diplomatic activities. According to the study, interpreter acts as a mediator between the two parties as well as a transmitter of information, and is required to have an extensive spectrum of expertise. Based on proper comprehension, he or she should be immune from the linguistic symbols of the source language, allow full display of subjectivity, and flexibly employ methodologies of interpretation to reformulate in a manner that is consistent with the conventions of the targeted language.

**Keywords:** Interpretive theory; interpretation; interpreter's subjectivity; China-US High-level Strategic Dialogue.

## 1. Introduction

Given that China and the US are the largest developing and developed nations in the world, respectively, China-US relations are among the most of significance bilateral ties in the global community. Against this backdrop, the 2021 China-US High-Level Strategic Dialogue, conducted in Anchorage, Alaska, USA, from March 18 to 19, promptly attracted considerable international attention. Interpretation, a typical type of translation, serves as a crucial hub for communication with the outside world and is thus a crucial area of study within translation studies. However, after looking through the literature, I discovered that the majority of existing studies revolve around Chinese and global politics and relevant studies in the field of translation are in shortfall. Related studies on this issue from the perspective of interpretive theory are also lacking at present. First, the event was held recently; second, given the seriousness and policy-oriented character of diplomatic interpretation, diplomatic interpreters have been entitled to less freedom compared to other interpreters (Zhang Wei, 2011). In addition, Western interpreting research had already yielded some results by the 1950s, whereas Chinese interpreting research had humble beginnings in the 1990s (Liu Heping, 2006), and Chinese interpreting research has been lagging behind translation research (Gong Longsheng, 2008). In view of this, in an effort to further discussion on the role of the interpreter in diplomatic conferences and to provide some references for the theoretical research on interpretation in China, this paper analyses the subjectivity of the main participant of interpretation, namely, the interpreter, in foreign affairs interpretation on the basis of the paramount interpretive theory in the interpretation community.

## 2. Interpretive Theory

As the first systematic theory in the field of interpretation, interpretive theory was developed in the 1960s at Ecole Supérieure d'Interprètes et de Traducteurs (ESIT) in Paris. It is the pillar theory of the Western interpreting community, leading the Western interpreting research into a new phase of practitioner-oriented research (Gong Longsheng, 2008), and has had a profound impact on the theory, instruction and practice of interpreting around the world. The fundamental tenet of it is that

the speaker's intended meaning is expressed in a way that is independent of the source language (Gong Longsheng, 2008), and the interpreter reformulates the meaning of the source language using linguistic symbols and cognitive supplements (Wu Chunxue, 2010). Since the theory's inception, it has undergone rapid development and its research stages can be roughly divided into the following categories. In 1968, French interpreter Danica Seleskovitch's national doctoral dissertation "*International Conference Parliamentarians - Conversation and Communicative Problems*" is regarded as the cornerstone for the study of interpretive theory, and its emphasis extends from the conventional perspective of language's function to the specific application (Liu Heping, 2006). In 1984, Seleskovitch and Mariana Lederer published "*The Practice and Teaching of Interpretive Theory*", a work that explored and elaborated on the interpretation process from the perspectives of linguistics, psychology and logic. The 1980s witnessed rapid development of interpretive theory when it delved from the initial study of interpretation to translation as well as scientific and technical translation, literary translation and other areas (Fan Lijuan, 2011). In 1994, Lederer published *The Interpretive Theory and Translation of the Interpretive School*, which marked the maturity of interpretive theory (Gong Longsheng, 2008), and sparked in-depth discussions on the fundamentals of translation, interpretive theory, translation practice and education.

Early in the 1980s, interpretive theory was introduced to China, but it wasn't systematically expounded until the end of 20th century (Gong Longsheng, 2008). Since 1976, ESIT has cultivated more than 50 PhDs, five of them being Chinese (Fan Lijuan, 2011), mainly represented by Bao Gang, Liu Heping, and Cai Xiaohong (Gong Longsheng, 2008). Bao Gang discovered that "deverbalization" in the context of the interpretive theory was grounded in practice, but that it needed to be examined from the vantage points of psycholinguistics, information theory, and neurolinguistics (Liu Heping, 2001). The first monograph on interpretation in China, his 1998 book "*Overview of Interpretive Theory*" presents in-depth discussions on the evolution of interpretation, bilingual interpretation, and interpretation procedures from the standpoint of interpretive theory. Liu Heping is credited with helping to publish some of the first works on interpretive theory in China and adapting the discipline to the context of the nation as a distinguished student of Professor Seleskovitch, the founder of the interpretive school (Gong Longsheng, 2008). Liu Heping (2001) elaborated on the history, traits, application areas, and growth trajectories of the interpretive school theory, which had significant ramifications for enhancing and advancing the study of interpretive theory in China. The idea was further developed by Cai Xiaohong (2001) from the perspective of consecutive interpreting. With a multidisciplinary approach, she investigated the thinking process, characteristics, and interference factors and then advanced the hypothesis of the theoretical model of the process and ability development of consecutive interpreting.

The foundation of interpretive theory, however, is based on English French interpretation research since Paris, France, is where it was first developed. In contrast, Chinese and French are members of two different language families, with Chinese descended from the Sino-Tibetan language family and French from the Latin language family, resulting in significant structural differences between the two languages. Consequently, there are inevitably some restrictions on research of Chinese-English. As a consequence, further research has to be done on the localization and advancement of interpretive theory (Gong Longsheng, 2008).

### 3. Interpreter's Subjectivity

In 1923, Benjamin first proposed the concept of "Interpreter's Subjectivity" in "*The Task of Interpreter*" (Chen Jianbo, Yan Hongmei, 2022). Interpreter's Subjectivity refers to the subjective initiative of the interpreter on the premise of respecting the interpretation object, aiming to achieve the interpretation purpose, which is basically characterized by the conscious cultural awareness and cultural aesthetic creativity of the interpreter (Cha Mingjian, Tian Yu, 2003). In traditional interpretation activities, the author and the original text are considered to hold the dominant position, while the interpreter is frequently undervalued as "translation machine" or "cultural porter", whose

mission is to obey the speaker or author and interpret between languages (Liu Yujuan, 2012). Due to the particular requirements of the field, interpreters' "invisibility" is frequently more in accordance with professional standards, particularly in grave political diplomacy (Fu Linna, Sun Chen, Mao Yansheng, 2022). Interpreters should, from my perspective, unquestionably state their positions clearly and avoid drawing undue attention to themselves in serious diplomatic settings. However, if the interpreters' subjectivity is not taken into account during the interpretation process and they serve solely as transmitter for the speaker or the source language, this will have little to do with successful bilingual conversion.

In the 1970s, inspired by the "pragmatic turn" of Western philosophy and the "cultural turn" of translation study in the 1990s, Chinese translation academics gave adequate weight to the subjectivity of the interpreter (Hou Linping, Jiang Shiping, 2006). According to the the research's focus, there exist roughly two stages to domestic translation scholars' research on the subjectivity of interpreters: the preliminary stage, which lasted from 1996 to 2001, during which the translation community paid little attention to the subjectivity of interpreters and were mainly defined by the appeal for the status and role of interpreters; the development stage of the research on interpreter's subjectivity occurred between 2002 and the present and was characterized by an emphasis on a multifaceted and multilevel examination of interpreter's subjectivity and contemplation and multi-genre inquiry of it (Hou Linping, Jiang Siping, 2006).

The research perspectives on interpreter's subjectivity include hermeneutics, feminism, deconstructionism and so on. According to the hermeneutics, interpretation is pluralistic and the interpreter's and the text's respective horizons should be integrated to produce "horizon fusion" (Tang Pei, 2003). It rejects the conventional idea of a "translation machine" and places a spotlight on the interpreter's active participation. Feminist interpreter subjectivity research's major goal is to eradicate gender discrimination in translation studies and fight for women's equality and dignity (Xu Lai, 2004). The subjectivity of interpreters has also been substantially expanded in the deconstructionist environment. While deconstructionism holds that the text has no ultimate meaning, the traditional view of translation maintains that the original work is superior and that the interpreter's job is to ascertain the ultimate meaning of the original text (Pang Xuefeng, 2010).

In addition, we have to acknowledge that interpretation research is text-based, culture-based, and interpreter-centered (Hou Linping, Jiang Siping, 2006). It is obvious that a smooth translation will not occur if we place an excessive emphasis on the interpreters' subjectivity and disregard the contribution of other elements. Second, taking into account various viewpoints on the subjectivity of interpreters calls for us to go beyond the interpretation area and engage in interdisciplinary study rather than limiting ourselves to it (Hou Linping, Jiang Siping, 2006). Finally, there is still a research gap in the field of interpretation, whereas the majority of the research on interpreter's subjectivity concentrates on the field of translation, particularly in literary translation.

#### **4. Interpreter's Subjectivity in the Triangular Model in the 2021 China-US High-level Strategic Dialogue**

In 1977, Seleskovitch first proposed the three procedures of interpretation in an article: comprehension, deverbalization and reformulation; in 1984, Seleskovitch and Lederer co-authored the book *Interpréter pour traduire*, which clearly explained the triangular model of the interpretation process (Zhang Jiliang, 2008). According to the conventional theory, interpretation is essentially a code conversion between two languages and is separated into the stages of "comprehension" and "reformulation" (Gong Longsheng, 2008). Based on this, the interpretation school proposes that "deverbalization," which is an indispensable phase between "comprehension" and "reformulation," serves as a crucial criterion for assessing the quality of interpretation. As the central tenet of the interpretive theory (Gong Longsheng, 2008), the triangular model is of the utmost significance to further enliven the interpretive theory and guide interpenetration practice.

#### 4.1. Interpreter's Subjectivity and Comprehension

Successful interpretation is based on accurate comprehension, which calls for understanding both the literal and intended meaning of the source language. According to the school of interpretation, meaning combines the linguistic meaning of the source language and the interpreter's cognitive complement, with the latter consisting of cognitive compliments, also known as encyclopedic knowledge or background knowledge, and context cognition, also called contextualized language meaning (Gong Longsheng, 2008).

##### Example 1

**Source Language:** In China, we have just concluded the two sessions. The plenary session adopted the 14th Five Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and the long-term goals by 2035.

**Targeted Language:** In China, we have just concluded the Lianghui, or the two sessions of the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. During the sessions, we adopted the outline for the 14th five-year economic and social development plan and the long-range objectives through the year 2035.

People in China who are somewhat politically aware should understand what "two sessions" refers to, but for most foreigners, including Americans, "two sessions" may be an unfamiliar term. If the interpreter reads it directly as "lianghui" or the initialism "NPC and CPPCC", the counterparts may end up getting perplexed. In addition, in diplomatic translation, interpreters are also tasked with foreign interpretation (Shi Yanhua, 2007). Especially two weeks before this dialogue, China had just concluded its two sessions domestically, so it was necessary for the interpreter to make further introductions about the conference. Therefore, the interpreter calls on her encyclopedic knowledge to expound the full meaning of "the two sessions", namely, "the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference", not only making it convenient for the American audience to understand but also fulfilling the mission of the diplomatic interpreter better.

##### Example 2

**Source Language:** We have achieved comprehensive victory in our poverty alleviation campaign, with China's per capita population only one-sixth that of the United States. However, we have managed to lift our extremely poor people out of poverty.

**Targeted language:** China's per capita GDP is only one-sixth of that of the United States, but we have managed to end absolute poverty for all people in China.

In this sentence, the meaning of the Chinese spokesperson's expression "人均" is incomplete, while the contextualized knowledge within the sentence relates to China's achievements in poverty eradication. Besides, considering the semantic transitions, it is clear that the spokesman is emphasizing China's historic achievements in poverty eradication despite the fact its economic power is only one-sixth that of the United States. In addition, "GDP per capita" is also a universal term in the speeches of Chinese leaders. Therefore, the interpreter combined the cognitive environment and personal background knowledge to expand the literal meaning of "per capita" to its intended meaning of "per capita GDP", thus making the bilingual conversion successfully carried out.

#### 4.2. Interpreter's subjectivity and deverbilization

One of the interpretation procedures proposed by the interpretive school that distinguishes it from traditional interpretation is that meaning can exist independent of linguistic symbols and forms. The interpreter should extract the main message and detach the linguistic symbols when performing bilingual conversion (Gao Lulu, Zhu Yuncui, 2013).

##### Example 3

**Source Language:** Cooperation is beneficial for both parties. Especially, this is the expectation of people from all over the world. As for the perseverance of the American people, they are certainly great people, and the Chinese people are also great people.

**Targeted language:** Cooperation benefits both sides. In particular, this is the expectation of the people of the world. Well, the American people are certainly a great people, but so are the Chinese people.

We discovered that the interpreter did not translate the sentence "As for the perseverance of the American people". In the context of the original video, it can be inferred that such treatment here was intentional: the speaker paused slightly after speaking "As for the perseverance of the American people" and signaled the interpreter to translate, but the interpreter just waited for the speaker to continue his speech. As a result, I can reasonably conclude that, first, the existence of this sentence does not affect the integrity of the meaning of the source language, and second, the meaning of this sentence is slightly abruptly connected with the context for the interpretation of "As for the perseverance of the American people" lacks a specific context, making it difficult for the interpreter to accurately grasp the speaker's intended meaning. This demonstrates that, in interpretation practice, the interpreter does not need to adhere to the exact word-for-word correspondence and linguistic symbolic form of the source language but can instead make the required deletions to convey the main idea.

#### Example 4

**Source Language:** The United States has American style democracy, and China has Chinese style democracy. American democracy is not only evaluated by the Americans, but also by the people of the world. The United States is not the sole the final say of how well American democracy is doing.

**Targeted language:** And the United States has its style - United States-style democracy - and China has the Chinese-style democracy. It is not just up to the American people, but also the people of the world to evaluate how the United States has done in advancing its own democracy.

Here it is clear that the Chinese speaker's speech contains semantic repetition, because "American democracy is not only evaluated by Americans, but it is not the United States that has the final decision." signify the identical meaning. However, the interpreter expresses the meaning in one complete sentence rather than interpret the repeated information step by step. This serves as a good illustration to show that when practicing interpreting, the interpreter only needs to bear in mind the general ideas in the source language, extract the main information and structure, express the central meaning quickly and accurately, and delete the repetitive information as needed.

### 4.3. Interpreter's Subjectivity and reformulation

The process of reformulation should revolve around the elaboration of meaning, not by reproducing the source language form, but by expressing it in a way that conforms to the linguistic conventions of the targeted language in line with the communicative purpose (Gong Longsheng, 2008). The process of reformulation requires two conditions to be satisfied: first, the basic meaning must be comprehensive and complete, and second, it must be simple enough for speakers of the targeted language to comprehend (Wang Binhua, 2008).

#### Example 5

**Source Language:** However, there have been confrontations between our two countries in the past, and this result has not brought any benefits to the United States. What did the United States gain from this confrontation? We didn't see any benefits; the only result was damage to the United States. China will definitely survive such a confrontation.

**Targeted language:** But between our two countries we've had confrontation in the past, and the result did not serve the United States well. I didn't see any, and the only result was damages done to United States. And China will pull through and has pulled through such confrontation.

According to the literal meaning, the source language "China will definitely survive" is in the future tense, but the interpreter translates it as "And China will pull through and has pulled through such confrontation." On the one hand, the speaker in the address above emphasized that although China and the U.S. had confrontation in the past, neither party has benefited from it. In order to help the U.S. side better understand the attitude of the Chinese counterpart and achieve the communication's goals, the interpreter interpreted outside of the literal framework of the language,

took into account the speech above as a whole, and appropriately added "China has pulled through" to express the implied meaning of the speaker. On the other hand, the interpreter dealt with it in this way based on the specific historical and cultural backdrop, especially in political diplomacy, where the interpreter reflects the image of the country (Sun Fei, Li Hongbin, 2021), and should therefore stand firm with the nation when interpreting. Here the tone of the targeted language is obviously more assertive than the source language, which conveys the firm mentality that China is not afraid of any confrontation and effectively communicates the Chinese position. This demonstrates that, rather than mindlessly copying the linguistic form of the target language, the interpreter must make flexible use of the interpretation approach and fully embrace subjectivity in an effort to promote audience understanding in the targeted language.

#### **Example 6:**

**Source Language:** Especially, is it correct for you to put a hat on the Chinese side and say that we are being coerced before exchanging views with them? Of course, the Chinese side cannot accept it.

**Targeted language:** So, to accuse China of coercion even before sharing the relevant views with China, is this the right act to do?

The modern Chinese dictionary defines "给人扣帽子" as: to add a ready-made bad name to someone or something without researching and analyzing it carefully. Foreign readers, however, might not be able to fully comprehend the meaning behind the imagery "帽子" in their thoughts owing to the cultural differences between China and the United States. Taking into account the interpreter's creative interpretation process as opposed to mechanical symbolic conversion, the interpreter looks beyond the source language, interprets the phrase "给人扣帽子" as "accuse" rather than the literal word "cap", and better upholds the reader's awareness (Cha Mingjian, Tian Yu, 2003) so that listeners of both the source language and the targeted language can understand the utterance equally. According to the definition of Longman Dictionary, "accuse" means "to say that you believe someone is guilty of a crime or of doing something bad", which is equivalent to the emotional meaning expressed by the Chinese phrase "扣帽子" and better fits the needs of readers in the targeted language.

#### **Example 7:**

**Source Language:** Let me now say that the United States has no right to say in front of China that you are talking to China based on your strength and status. Even 20 or 30 years ago, you were not qualified to say such things because Chinese people did not eat this kind of thing. If the US wants to deal well with China, then it should follow the necessary agreements and act in the right way.

**Targeted language:** So, let me say here that, in front of the Chinese side, the United States does not have the qualification to say that it wants to speak to China from a position of strength. The U.S. side was not even qualified to say such things even 20 years or 30 years back, because this is not the way to deal with the Chinese people. If the United States wants to deal properly with the Chinese side, then let's follow the necessary protocols and do things the right way.

There are various versions of the translation of "Your behaviors will not influence us at all", like "This old trick of yours is of no use at all" "The Chinese people are not afraid of any threats." (Wang Yin, 2021) On the one hand, the word "trick" is interpreted in Collins' dictionary as "a trick that is intended to deceive someone", with the meaning of accusation, and this word is naturally not conducive to the smooth negotiation; on the other hand, the phrase "we are not afraid" seems to shake the Chinese side's position for the Chinese speaker does not use any word similar to the meaning of "fear" in the source language. As a result, it ends up as a negative version, especially at a serious and official political discussion. Additionally, taking into account the interpreter's "buffer" function in the political meeting (Sun Fei, Li Hongbin, 2021), the interpreter should steer clear of verbal conflicts as much as possible when interpreting and firmly take firm hold of state of affairs and her position. From here, we can see that the source language of the Chinese spokesperson is obviously more derogatory, but the interpreter, in the process of interpretation, combined with the latter context "if the U.S. side wants to deal with the Chinese side properly" which noticeably mitigated the tone of "Your behaviors will not influence us at all" to "this is not a way to deal with the Chinese side". This not only transmits

the speaker's message but also gives the interpretation a more impartial appearance, which helps to improve communication and facilitate the smooth operation of the conference.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the Triangular Model of Interpreting, namely, comprehension, deverbalization and reformulation, the paper explores the subjectivity of the Chinese interpreter at the China-US High-Level Strategic Dialogue in 2021. The study concludes that during the comprehension stage, the interpreter must fully comprehend both the literal and implied meaning of the source language in conjunction with contextual knowledge, while also fully mobilizing his or her own cognitive reserve to try to accurately understand the speaker's intention. In the deverbalization stage, the interpreter should get rid of the restrictions of the source language's linguistic symbols and make any necessary additions or deletions to quickly and accurately convey the speaker's core meaning. In the reformulation stage, the interpreter must elaborate on the speaker's intended meaning, take into account the linguistic preferences of the targeted audience, use flexible language strategies and take on a role beyond that of a messenger.

The study of political diplomatic interpretation has far-reaching implications for many subjects, including translation studies, intercultural communication, and international politics since it plays a significant role in how a country is perceived and how smoothly a negotiation goes. There is, however, undoubtedly still considerable space for development in this study because of the writer's limitations. To precisely and thoroughly understand the role of interpreter subjectivity in various interpretation genres and practices under interpretive theory, subsequent research can therefore delve further into other translation fields, such as literature, science and technology, medicine, law, and and so forth, so as to assist in making Chinese voices heard in the international community and sharing Chinese cultures with the rest of the world.

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