



The Pragmatic Strategies of Politeness Principles and Role Balance of Interpreters in Sino-U.S. Diplomatic Negotiations

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Abstract: This study investigates the pragmatic strategies employed by interpreters in Sino-U.S. diplomatic negotiations, with a specific focus on the application of politeness principles. As interpreters serve not only as linguistic translators but also as cultural mediators, their role is critical in navigating the complexities of communication, particularly during discussions on sensitive political, economic, and social issues. The research evaluates how interpreters balance their responsibilities, ensuring linguistic accuracy and cultural appropriateness while managing the face needs of both negotiating parties. Utilizing case analyses of significant diplomatic events, including the Shanghai Communiqué and Sino-U.S. trade negotiations, the study highlights the strategic use of positive and negative politeness strategies to foster mutual understanding and respect. The findings reveal that interpreters' application of these strategies significantly impacts the effectiveness of diplomatic communication, ultimately influencing negotiation outcomes. The study underscores the essential role of politeness in international relations and its implications for successful diplomatic engagements.

Keywords: Politeness principles; Diplomatic interpreting; Sino-U.S. negotiations; Pragmatic strategies

I. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Significance

Globalization has elevated the importance of international diplomacy in shaping relations among nations. The diplomatic relationship between China and the United States, as two of the world's largest economic powers, profoundly influences not only bilateral affairs but also global geopolitics. In these high-stakes diplomatic negotiations, interpreters serve as essential participants. Their responsibilities extend beyond linguistic translation; interpreters act as cultural mediators who bridge both cultural and linguistic divides, ensuring precise and effective communication of ideas.^[1]

In diplomatic negotiations, interpreters do much more than convey words from one language to another. They function as cultural intermediaries, tasked with accurately transmitting both the intended meaning and the tone of the original speaker. Adherence to social norms and the maintenance of politeness are essential. Diplomatic interpreters must constantly consider politeness alongside linguistic and social factors. This approach sustains mutual respect, facilitates amicable interactions, and fosters mutual understanding among negotiating parties.

Politeness theory, particularly as formulated in the work of Brown and Levinson, offers a theoretical foundation for analyzing how individuals manage social relationships through language. In cross-cultural settings such as Sino-American diplomacy, interpreters must skillfully navigate cultural subtleties and employ politeness strategies to maintain effective communication.^[2-4] The application of politeness principles helps prevent misunderstandings and reduces the risk of conflict, especially in sensitive political contexts.

This research aims to investigate the practical strategies interpreters employ in Sino-American diplomatic negotiations, with a focus on the application of politeness principles. The study examines how interpreters manage their dual roles as information transmitters and cultural mediators. Interpreters must ensure the accurate delivery of messages while adhering to cultural conventions and diplomatic etiquette. This analysis will assess the impact of these strategies on the outcomes of diplomatic negotiations and demonstrate the tangible importance of politeness in the context of international relations.

1.2 Research Objectives and Questions

In high-level political negotiations between China and the United States, interpreters play a crucial role that extends beyond mere linguistic translation. They facilitate effective cross-cultural communication, ensuring clarity and mutual respect. This study aims to analyze the significance of politeness principles in diplomatic interpreting within Sino-U.S. negotiations. The research investigates how interpreters navigate the complexities of communication, particularly when addressing sensitive political, economic, and social topics. It also explores how interpreters manage their dual responsibilities as language specialists and cultural intermediaries, striving for both linguistic accuracy and cultural appropriateness.

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Research Objectives

- (1) Identify the pragmatic strategies interpreters use to facilitate smooth and respectful exchanges between negotiators from distinct cultural backgrounds.
- (2) Examine how interpreters address and manage cultural disparities during discussions on controversial issues such as trade, human rights, and security.
- (3) Uncover the specific politeness strategies interpreters employ to bridge cultural divides, including indirect expressions, ambiguous language, and mitigating phrases.
- (4) Investigate how these strategies contribute to achieving mutual understanding and preserving respect throughout the negotiation process.

Research Questions

- ① How do interpreters balance their roles as conveyors of information and facilitators of intercultural understanding?
- ② Under what conditions do interpreters adjust their translations to meet cultural and diplomatic requirements?
- ③ How does polite behavior influence negotiation dynamics and outcomes?
- ④ How do authentic examples from Sino-U.S. diplomatic negotiations illustrate the impact of politeness strategies on communication quality, the strengthening of diplomatic ties, and the achievement of mutually beneficial agreements?

Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative research approach, focusing on detailed case analyses of Sino-U.S. diplomatic negotiations to explore the application of politeness strategies by interpreters. The research will utilize three primary data sources:

- **Records of Sino-U.S. Diplomatic Negotiations:** Publicly available transcripts and documents from high-level talks will provide direct insights into the linguistic choices made by interpreters. This will allow for an examination of how interpreters navigate linguistic and cultural challenges during negotiations.
- **Audio and Video Recordings:** Recordings of diplomatic interpretation sessions will reveal the impact of delivery on meaning, capturing elements such as tone, pauses, and non-verbal cues. Analyzing these recordings will enhance the understanding of how interpreters manage their dual roles in real-time situations.
- **Academic Literature and Expert Analysis:** The study will draw upon established theories of politeness and pragmatic strategies to ground the analysis in relevant scholarly work. This literature will provide a theoretical framework for understanding the significance of politeness in diplomatic contexts.

II. Literature Review

Since the normalization of Sino-U.S. diplomatic relations in the 1970s, this bilateral relationship has emerged as one of the most significant in international affairs. In diplomatic negotiations, interpreters play a critical role not only in accurate translation but also in bridging cultural divides to ensure effective information exchange. Brown and Levinson's politeness theory is widely applied in cross-cultural communication, particularly in the context of Sino-U.S. diplomatic interactions. Positive politeness strategies foster cooperation through the enhancement of 'positive face,' whereas negative strategies seek to minimize imposition and reduce face-threatening acts. Cultural differences exert a profound influence in this process. Research suggests that interpreters must account for variations in politeness norms, power distance, and speech acts between the two countries[5-7]. For example, U.S. diplomats often favor direct expressions, in contrast to the indirect communication style preferred among Chinese diplomats. In response, interpreters should employ tactics such as hedging and indirect speech to maintain diplomatic decorum and prevent cultural misunderstandings^[8].

The dual responsibility of interpreters becomes highly visible in negotiations; they function as both linguistic transmitters and cultural mediators. Many scholars argue that interpreters need to adapt their approaches according to the cultural backgrounds of both parties, without compromising linguistic accuracy, to achieve seamless communication. Although substantial research exists on cultural adaptability and strategic implementation in diplomatic interpreting, empirical analysis on how interpreters balance their dual roles and utilize politeness strategies in the Sino-U.S. context remains limited. To address this gap, this study will conduct a detailed case analysis to investigate how interpreters effectively apply politeness strategies and manage their dual responsibilities in Sino-U.S. diplomatic negotiations^[9].

III. Theoretical Framework of Politeness Principles and Pragmatic Strategies

3.1 Definition and Classification of Politeness Principles

Politeness forms a fundamental aspect of human interaction, with heightened importance in cross-cultural contexts such as diplomatic negotiations. In linguistics and pragmatics, politeness refers to the social strategies individuals employ to reduce face-threatening acts (FTAs) and maintain social harmony during communication.

The study of politeness gained significant attention through the work of sociolinguists Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, whose influential book, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*, established a framework for understanding these strategies. According to Brown and Levinson, politeness operates through two main strategies: positive and negative politeness. Positive politeness aims to enhance the interlocutor's self-esteem, often through expressions of solidarity or admiration. Negative politeness seeks to protect the interlocutor's autonomy, using indirect or

softened language to reduce the impact of requests or disagreements, such as stating, “I understand, but...” during disputes^[10].

In Chinese culture, the concept of face holds paramount importance. Politeness is frequently expressed in indirect and respectful ways. Chinese and Western cultures differ significantly in their approaches to face, communication styles, and diplomatic protocols. For example, European diplomats have developed specific conventions to soften statements, shaping their own diplomatic traditions.

3.2 Pragmatic Strategies in Diplomatic Negotiations

Pragmatics in interpreting and translation examines how language functions in real-world situations. It considers the speaker’s choice of words and phrases, the social roles of participants, and the nature of their relationships. In diplomatic negotiations, pragmatic awareness is essential for effective interaction and successful communication between parties.

One of the primary pragmatic strategies interpreters use in diplomatic settings is indirectness. Direct speech acts—such as explicitly stating demands or opinions—may come across as confrontational or disrespectful in certain cultures. Interpreters often rely on indirect speech strategies, including hedging or implicature, to deliver messages tactfully. Instead of issuing a direct rejection, an interpreter might say, “It may be difficult to accept this proposal under the current circumstances^[11].”

Mitigation represents another key strategy. This approach reduces the impact of potentially strong statements, which is vital in maintaining diplomatic relationships. For example, using modal verbs like “could,” “might,” or “may,” or phrases such as “if it is possible” or “under certain conditions,” can make a statement appear more neutral and less forceful.

Politeness markers frequently appear in diplomatic communication. Honorifics, titles, and formal terms of address do more than ensure proper interaction; they reflect the hierarchical and formal nature of international relations. In Sino-U.S. exchanges, these markers play a critical role in promoting smooth communication, showing respect for status and position, and managing the complex dynamics of diplomacy. Proper use of these markers demonstrates professionalism and good manners, both of which are essential for successful diplomatic engagements. For instance, using official titles or terms like “Excellency” helps maintain a respectful tone during negotiations.

Through positive and negative politeness strategies, interpreters skillfully address the face needs of both sides, supporting the smooth progression of negotiations. Several examples illustrate how interpreters implement these strategies in practice:

- **Shanghai Communiqué (1972): Indirect Expression and Cultural Adaptation**

During President Nixon’s 1972 visit to China, the Shanghai Communiqué marked a major breakthrough in bilateral relations. Interpreters handled sensitive issues such as the Taiwan question with care. When communicating the “One China” policy, they might use phrases like “each side has its own position” to avoid confrontation, exemplifying a negative politeness strategy aimed at protecting the interlocutor’s face.

- **Sino-U.S. Trade Negotiations: Positive Politeness Application**

In trade talks, interpreters often use positive politeness strategies to create a cooperative atmosphere. For example, translating statements such as “Your country’s achievements in this field are commendable” helps build mutual trust and collaboration. Such expressions enhance the counterpart’s positive face, encouraging goodwill and constructive dialogue.

- **United Nations General Assembly Speeches: Cultural Differences in Politeness**

At the United Nations General Assembly, American and Chinese leaders often display distinct communication styles. American presidents tend to employ more positive politeness strategies, offering praise to other countries. Chinese leaders may adopt a more direct style. These differences reveal cultural variations in diplomatic communication. Interpreters must adapt their strategies to ensure accurate and culturally sensitive translations.

3.3 Interpreter’s Role Balance

Interpreters serve as both transmitters of linguistic content and mediators of cultural knowledge. Their work extends beyond straightforward translation; interpreters convey implicit social meanings and subtle cultural cues. Achieving a balance between faithful message delivery and cultural adaptation requires careful judgment. Interpreters must maintain the original speaker’s intent, yet adjust their choices to align with the cultural context of the audience.

As information transmitters, interpreters must deliver the original message with clarity and precision, eliminating ambiguity. This level of accuracy is essential in diplomacy, where misunderstandings can lead to serious consequences and where mutual respect is paramount.

In their role as cultural mediators, interpreters navigate the cultural differences between negotiating parties. This task extends beyond the translation of words to include interpretation of non-verbal cues, tone, and the underlying cultural context that influences message reception. For example, in Sino-U.S. negotiations, interpreters need a deep understanding of differing attitudes toward hierarchy, face-saving, and directness. Their goal is to ensure cultural nuances are faithfully and appropriately conveyed.

Consider a situation where a diplomat wishes to express an opinion in a direct manner. Such directness may be inappropriate in the Chinese context. The interpreter must then decide whether to adapt the message according to the target culture’s conventions or retain the original phrasing, which could risk miscommunication.

Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory, discussed in the theoretical framework, highlights the use of positive and negative politeness strategies. These approaches help interpreters balance the need to protect dignity and foster

cooperation in diplomatic settings. Interpreters also encounter challenges related to power dynamics and must adjust their strategies to reflect varying levels of respect and protocol.

For instance, when a senior diplomat addresses a junior counterpart, the interpreter needs to maintain the existing power balance and adjust expressions of deference, such as by using formal titles. This study aims to examine how interpreters apply these strategies in practice through case analysis. The analysis will focus on specific examples from Sino-U.S. diplomatic negotiations, particularly those involving power differentials and sensitive topics.

IV. Case Analysis of Interpreter's Politeness Strategies in Sino-U.S. Diplomatic Negotiations

4.1 Case Analysis Method and Data Sources

This chapter examines how interpreters implement politeness strategies in Sino-U.S. diplomatic negotiations through detailed case analysis. Selected real-world negotiation examples illustrate how interpreters maintain linguistic accuracy and apply politeness strategies flexibly, balancing the roles of information transmission and cultural mediation.

Analyzing these cases clarifies the practical application of politeness principles and highlights the complex responsibilities interpreters manage within diplomatic settings. Data for this research comes from:

- (1) Records of Sino-U.S. Diplomatic Negotiations: Publicly available transcripts and documents from high-level talks provide direct insight into diplomatic language and demonstrate how interpreters address linguistic and cultural challenges under pressure.
- (2) Audio and Video Recordings: Recordings of diplomatic interpretation sessions reveal the impact of delivery on meaning, including tone, pauses, and non-verbal cues.
- (3) Academic Literature and Expert Analysis: The research draws on established theories of etiquette and pragmatic strategy, grounding the case studies in relevant scholarly work.

4.2 Interpreter's Politeness Strategies in Sino-U.S. Diplomatic Negotiations

The primary responsibility of interpreters is to ensure factual accuracy and prevent misunderstandings. In Sino-U.S. diplomatic meetings, interpreters must go beyond literal translation to respect the customs and protocols of both countries. This section analyzes two main types of politeness strategies: positive politeness and negative politeness.

4.3 Use of Positive Politeness Strategies

In negotiations between China and the United States, interpreters often employ inclusive language, such as “we,” to foster understanding and cooperation. For example, when an American official emphasizes shared responsibility for global security, the interpreter might render this as, “We are all working together to create a better future.” This approach creates a sense of unity and highlights a positive image, encouraging mutual understanding and collaboration.

Another example involves reinforcing goodwill: an interpreter translates a statement as, “We highly respect the role your country has played in world peace.” This not only conveys the speaker's intent but also promotes harmony through recognition and praise of the other party's contributions^[12].

4.4 Application of Negative Politeness Strategies

Sensitive topics, such as trade disputes or the Taiwan issue, require careful management through negative politeness. The goal is to respect the interlocutor's desire for autonomy and avoid imposing on them. Strategies such as softening tone and using indirect expressions help prevent face-threatening acts.

For instance, if the Chinese side rejects a U.S. proposal, the interpreter might avoid a blunt “cannot accept” and instead say, “May need to reconsider the feasibility of the proposal.” The use of “may” softens the rejection, preserving diplomatic decorum.

In high-stakes discussions, interpreters often choose indirect language to prevent direct confrontation. When a U.S. representative expresses dissatisfaction with a Chinese policy, the interpreter might say, “Maybe we can look more closely at this and identify more areas of agreement.” This approach not only reduces the intensity of the message but also protects the dignity of both sides and keeps the dialogue constructive.

4.5 Challenges and Responses in Balancing Interpreter Roles

In practice, interpreters must balance two core tasks: accurate information transmission and cultural sensitivity. In Sino-U.S. negotiations, interpreters do far more than convert language—they help bridge cultural gaps and uphold the dignity of both parties. Below are primary challenges interpreters face and the strategies they use to address them.

Challenge 1: Balancing Directness and Indirectness

Significant differences exist in communication styles between China and the United States. U.S. diplomats often prefer direct language, whereas Chinese diplomats typically use more indirect and nuanced expressions. Interpreters must carefully decide whether to preserve the directness of the original message or adapt it to a more culturally appropriate, indirect form. For instance, when a U.S. representative offers direct criticism, the interpreter may soften the language to avoid unnecessary conflict.

Response:

Interpreters manage this challenge through controlled modulation of directness, ensuring both parties' face needs are respected and information remains accurate.

Challenge 2: Adapting to Power Dynamics

Sino-U.S. diplomatic negotiations often involve power imbalances. The United States, as a global power, frequently assumes a dominant role in discussions. Interpreters should signal and respect these power relationships using honorifics, formal titles, and appropriate language to reflect the hierarchy.

Response:

Interpreters respond by selecting proper honorifics and titles and adapting tone and formality in alignment with the power

structures and cultural customs of both sides. This approach maintains respect and reduces diplomatic risks associated with inappropriate expressions.

V. Practical Significance of Interpreter Politeness Principles and Impact of Role Balance on Negotiation Quality

5.1 Impact on Diplomatic Negotiation Effectiveness

The use of politeness principles directly influences the effectiveness of diplomatic negotiations, especially in high-stakes settings such as Sino-U.S. talks. These principles help manage interpersonal and group dynamics, which often determine negotiation outcomes. Strategic use of politeness shapes message reception, fosters rapport between negotiators, and supports the overall diplomatic process.

One major benefit of politeness strategies is the reduction of misunderstandings. Diplomatic negotiations are prone to miscommunication, especially between culturally distinct countries like China and the United States. Misunderstandings often arise from differing views on politeness, not just language barriers. For example, Americans tend to speak directly, which Chinese diplomats may perceive as confrontational. Interpreters can address this with softening language, indirect phrasing, and other mitigating techniques, helping prevent cultural missteps that could derail negotiations.

Politeness strategies also help manage face-threatening acts (FTAs), such as criticism, rejection, or disagreement. These acts, if handled poorly, can escalate tension and disrupt negotiations. In Sino-U.S. talks, interpreters need to ensure that such remarks are delivered in a face-saving manner, maintaining harmony. For example, when translating criticism, the interpreter might soften the expression or use indirect language to minimize negative impact. This ability to protect the social face of both parties is essential for stable diplomatic relations.

The appropriate use of politeness principles can strengthen relationships between diplomats. In international diplomacy, maintaining positive interpersonal relationships is as important as reaching political or economic agreements. Interpreters reinforce mutual respect through their linguistic choices, signaling deference, appreciation, and readiness for cooperation. Positive politeness strategies—such as expressing solidarity or acknowledging achievements—help build trust and promote long-term collaboration.

5.2 Cultural Sensitivity and Diplomacy

An interpreter's ability to manage cultural dimensions of communication is critical for negotiation success. Careful adjustment of translation choices ensures diplomatic norms are respected and cultural expectations are met. Interpreter flexibility and cultural awareness contribute to a smooth negotiation process. For example, when translating statements involving national pride or historical sensitivities, interpreters must apply the appropriate level of politeness to avoid offense and prevent escalation.

5.3 Impact of Interpreter's Role Balance on Negotiation Quality

Interpreters in diplomatic negotiations must navigate multiple roles effectively, balancing their responsibilities as accurate communicators and cultural intermediaries. They are tasked with conveying messages faithfully while ensuring that communications align with the cultural expectations and norms of the target audience. This dual function significantly influences the negotiation process, as the effectiveness of communication can determine the outcome of discussions. The precision and clarity of interpretation are vital; interpreters serve as conduits for information, and their ability to communicate clearly and accurately prevents misunderstandings. Additionally, cultural sensitivity plays a critical role that cannot be overlooked. In diplomatic settings, the quality of communication extends beyond mere accuracy. Interpreters must possess the skills to select appropriate linguistic forms that convey respect and clarity, all while preserving the original content and tone. This intricate balancing act is essential to ensure that both sides feel understood and respected, which can ultimately lead to more productive negotiations.

Interpreters also function as cultural mediators, a crucial aspect of diplomatic negotiations. In Sino-U.S. discussions, they bridge cultural divides, translating not just words but also the nuances of underlying intentions. This cultural role necessitates the adaptation of expressions, phrases, and strategies to align with the diplomatic norms of the target culture. Achieving this requires a profound understanding of language, power dynamics, and social norms. For instance, Chinese diplomats may anticipate a more formal style of communication, whereas American diplomats might favor a direct and relaxed approach. Interpreters must adeptly balance these expectations, adjusting their delivery while remaining true to the core message. This balancing act is essential for maintaining trust and ensuring that negotiations progress smoothly, as any misalignment in communication styles can lead to confusion and potential conflict.

In the realm of diplomatic interpreting, maintaining neutrality and objectivity poses significant challenges. Interpreters must serve as impartial channels of information and cultural mediators, suppressing personal views, emotions, and biases to ensure professional objectivity. This neutrality is particularly crucial when addressing sensitive or contentious topics. For example, when a U.S. diplomat issues a controversial statement regarding China's policies, the interpreter must convey the message faithfully, without introducing personal judgment or altering its meaning. This professional neutrality extends to cultural mediation, requiring interpreters to attend to subtle cultural nuances without imposing their own interpretations. Such an approach ensures that they convey both truth and respect for each side's cultural expectations. Effective cultural mediation and accurate communication can foster mutual trust and understanding, ultimately leading to more successful negotiations and better agreements. The interplay of the interpreter's roles can significantly impact the outcomes of diplomatic discussions.

Failure to maintain this balance can complicate the interpreter's responsibilities, leading to misunderstandings and, in severe cases, the breakdown of negotiations. When interpreters successfully balance their roles, they contribute to a constructive atmosphere characterized by mutual respect and cooperation, which is essential for effective negotiations. Interpreters are pivotal in resolving diplomatic conflicts, particularly in times of rising tensions. They must navigate these

situations with care, adjusting language and tone to defuse potential conflicts. For example, when one party delivers harsh criticism, the interpreter can employ strategies to soften the message, fostering a constructive dialogue. This ability to manage the complexities of communication not only helps maintain the flow of negotiations but also builds a foundation of trust between the negotiating parties, ultimately enhancing the likelihood of reaching a successful agreement.

VI. Conclusion

This study investigates how interpreters employ politeness strategies, specifically positive and negative politeness strategies, within Sino-U.S. diplomatic negotiations. The findings indicate that interpreters effectively balance the face needs of both parties through the flexible application of these strategies, thereby facilitating the smooth progression of negotiations, particularly in the context of cultural differences and sensitive issues. Through analysis of specific diplomatic cases, such as the Shanghai Communiqué and Sino-U.S. trade negotiations, the research highlights the significant role of politeness strategies in diplomatic communication.

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. The case selection primarily focuses on Sino-U.S. diplomatic negotiations, which may not fully represent diplomatic interactions in other cultural contexts. Additionally, the theoretical framework employed does not comprehensively address the impact of non-verbal communication and other cultural differences, potentially affecting the applicability and effectiveness of specific strategies. Future research should expand to encompass a broader range of cross-cultural backgrounds and diverse diplomatic contexts to further validate and refine the use of politeness strategies.

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