Chapter 13
Towards a Re-Definition of Government Interpreters’ Agency Against a Backdrop of Sociopolitical and Cultural Evolution: A Case of Premier’s Press Conferences in China

Chonglong Gu
University of Manchester, UK

ABSTRACT

The sociopolitical and cultural evolution as a result of the Reform and Opening up in 1978, facilitated not least by the inexorable juggernaut of globalization and technological advancement, has revolutionized the way China engages domestically and interacts with the outside world. The need for more proactive diplomacy and open engagement witnessed the institutionalization of the interpreter-mediated premier’s press conferences. Such a discursive event provides a vital platform for China to articulate its discourse and rebrand its image in tandem with the profound changes signaled by the Dengist reform. This chapter investigates critically how political press conference interpreting and interpreters’ agency in China are impacted in relation to such dramatic transformations. It is revealed that, while interpreters are confronted with seemingly conflicting expectations, in actual practice they are often able to negotiate a way as highly competent interpreting professionals with the additional missions of advancing China’s global engagement and safeguarding China’s national interests.

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INTRODUCTION

Interpreting is not conducted in a vacuum but a “situated” (Monacelli, 2009, p. 61) and contextualized activity inextricably linked with the broader sociopolitical and cultural settings. Far from being a randomly established communicative practice, the interpreter-mediated Premier-Meets-the-Press political press conferences in China can be seen as a natural response to and direct product of the sociopolitical and cultural changes that have ensued in the wake of the Reform and Opening up in 1978, a pivotal inflection point in China’s recent history. This interpreted discursive event in turn serves to further facilitate China’s global diplomacy and engagement, thus highlighting the decisive role of interpreters from the vantage point of discourse.

Looking beyond an essentialist and thus restricted understanding of culture that is reducible to national culture (Goodenough, 1964), this chapter considers it useful to understand culture in a multifaceted, multidimensional and inclusive manner given the increasingly blurred boundary between culture and various other elements. This is in the sense that, rather than a fixed and static entity, culture is a porous concept that encompasses and internalizes other political, socioeconomic, diplomatic and even technological dimensions of a given place and is subject to change and historical (re)definition over time. Using this dynamic understanding of culture as a starting point, this chapter focuses on the interpreting practice as well as interpreters’ agency in China’s political press conferences against a backdrop of sociopolitical and cultural evolution signaled by the open-door reform since 1978. With this overarching aim in mind, the specific objectives of this chapter are three-fold: firstly to contextualize this transformative interpreter-mediated event, secondly to investigate on an empirical level how such an evolution is reflected in the official metadiscourses prescribing government-affiliated interpreters’ expected roles and responsibilities, and thirdly to illuminate interpreters’ agency through an in-depth critical discourse analysis of their actual interpreting.

This study on the underexplored area of interpreters’ agency in China’s political press conferences fills many gaps. Traditionally, political scientists and Chinese studies researchers tend to focus on political systems, policies, activities as well as the role of major political actors in effecting change (cf. Fewsmith, 2010; Wang, 1994). Within media and communication studies particularly in relation to political press conferences in China, attention is mostly paid to the communicative practice per se as well as the two-way dynamics between politicians and journalists (cf. Wu & Zhao, 2016; Yi & Chang, 2012; Yi, 2016), thereby overlooking the crucial part played by interpreters as indispensable co-participants in the meaning-making and communicative process. Even in interpreting studies, a relatively new area compared with its considerably better researched translation counterpart, scholarly research has only rather recently begun to consider various cultural, sociopolitical and ideological dimensions (cf. Beaton, 2007; Beaton-Thome, 2010), following the “cultural turn”. In the specific Chinese context, the vast majority of studies on premier’s press conference interpreting have thus far focused on various grammatical elements, norms, and interpreting strategies, largely taking a prescriptive view (cf. Deng, 2013; Li & Hu, 2015; Wang, 2012). To the best of my knowledge, no study has (systematically) investigated interpreters’ mediation from the vantage point of political discourse against the backdrop of China’s political, cultural and social evolution to date. As such, bringing interpreter into the equation as a valid player in the triadic encounter, this chapter promises to further contribute to research on interpreter agency, constituting a current addition to the existing (historical) accounts of political/diplomatic translators and interpreters’ role (cf. Baranyai, 2011; Delisle & Woodsworth, 2012; Roland, 1999). Inherently interdis-