Problems and Strategies: Teaching C-E Interpreting of Ceremonial Speeches

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Ceremonial speeches, with their special stylistic characteristics and communicative functions, play a significant part in social as well as reception activities involving foreign affairs. Stemming from the differences in culture and mode of thinking, the Chinese and English ceremonial speeches exhibit their differences in style and expressions. College students who are beginners in learning interpreting ceremonial speeches tend to come up with inappropriate or incorrect interpretation. By means of comparative and contrastive studies, this paper aims to explore the problems encountered by Chinese students in C-E interpreting of ceremonial speeches, thereby proposing some strategies to address them.

Keywords: ceremonial speeches, C-E interpreting teaching, problems and strategies

Introduction

Interpreting is a communicative activity in which a spoken message is rendered into another spoken language, preserving the register and meaning of the source language content. In terms of contents, it covers a wide range or areas including ceremonial speech interpreting. Different from others types of speeches, a ceremonial speech aims to extend welcome or thanks, open or conclude an event, give or accept an award, etc. As an important part of communication in social life and foreign affairs, ceremonial speeches are often seen as an integral part of banquets, ceremonies, conferences, and business. Chinese and English languages exhibit different rhetoric characteristics and cultural differences in ceremonial speeches. In this context, interpreters are supposed to be resourceful and tactical in their transferring efforts. In their interpretation endeavor, college students who are beginners in interpreting are apt to generate misunderstanding and inappropriate wording. In order to avert this situation, it is highly necessary to give an analysis of the characteristics of ceremonial speeches in both languages, in the course of which pointing out some common problems and thereby proposing certain strategies in handling the interpretation task.

Characteristics of Chinese and English Ceremonial Speeches

Special Communicative Functions

Ceremonial speeches in either Chinese or English have similar frame of structure, generally consisting of address, opening remarks, body part and conclusion. Delivery techniques, like parallel, quotation, and humor, are employed occasionally (Zhou, 2013) to achieve certain rhetorical effects in a bid to heighten the atmosphere or reflect the seriousness of solemnity of the occasion.
Fixed Patterns or Expressions

Ceremonial speeches in most cases convey information regarding welcome, greetings, congratulations, or wishes, although the linguistic forms of the speeches vary from each other in Chinese and English, reflecting the differences in culture and mode of thinking. Speeches of this kind usually follow certain structural patterns and expressions. Overall the Chinese speeches tend to use large number of four-character phrases or idioms as well as some quotes or famous sayings. The language is relatively flowery teeming with some regularly used polite expressions to show courtesy and respect. A case in point is the Chinese welcome speech which is typical of Chinese rhetorical characteristics. The host often greets the guests with courteous statements, like “您的大驾光临令寒舍蓬荜生辉”, “感谢您舟车劳顿不辞辛苦”, which sound unnatural and pretentious in English if interpreted literally.

The English speeches are relatively more straightforward and concise. But like Chinese ceremonial speeches, they follow certain sentence patterns and also use some polite expressions in delivery, such as “distinguished guests”, “It is my honor to …”, and “I’d like to extend my sincere thanks to … for …”. The interpreter therefore should familiarize himself or herself with those sentence patterns and expressions so as to do a great job.

Problems Encountered by Students in Interpreting Chinese-English Ceremonial Speeches

As an instructor of interpreting for non-English major for years, the author has been very familiar with the mistakes and problems students often come across. In the classroom setting, they are likely to come up with some misinterpretation and inappropriateness at the beginning stage of learning to interpret Chinese ceremonial speeches. Their problems are mainly centered on inappropriate wording or incorrect collocation, the negative transfer of the mother tongue and redundancy, which run counter to the context and the demand for conciseness. The above three aspects are further elaborated in the following.

Inappropriate Wording

Example 1: 今年是我校建校110周年，我想借此机会谨代表全体师生，并以我个人的名义，致以热烈的祝贺和良好的祝愿。

Students tend to use inappropriate words to interpret this sentence, like “代表” is interpreted as “represent” or “stand for” instead of “on behalf of”. “借此机会” is translated as “take this chance” rather than the more idiomatic “take this opportunity”. Most students will interpret “以我个人名义” as “personally” but not “in my own name”. Such misuse of words indicate that students do not master sufficient vocabulary and phrases typically used in ceremonial speeches, thus causing them to randomly use whatever words coming to their mind in the first place.

Example 2: 最后，祝愿中国青年代表团访英取得成功！祝大家在伦敦期间身体健康、生活愉快。

In a training session, the majority of the students interpret “最后” as “at last ” or “finally” as opposed to the commonly used expressions “in closing” or “in conclusion”. Another inappropriate handling is the interpretation of “祝愿……取得成功” as “wishes … successfully” instead of “wish … a success”. Besides, the misinterpretation of “祝大家身体健康、生活愉快” shows that some students are negatively affected by their Chinese way of thinking when the sentence is interpreted as “wish everybody a healthy body and live your life happily or live a happy life”, in the case of which a proper interpretation should be “wish everybody good health and enjoy your stay (in London)”. 

Negative Transfer of the Mother Tongue

The mother tongue sometimes can impede a learner to effectively process the target language information. The negative transfer of the mother tongue is evident in Example 2. The Chinese way of thinking finds its presence when students interpret ceremonial speeches from Chinese to English.

Example 3: 我和夫人为有这次机会再次来到中国访问深感荣幸，感谢贵国对我们这次访问所作的精心安排和热情款待。

“我和我的妻子” is interpreted as “I and my wife” by most students, which has some connection with the Chinese way of thinking. In the English setting, the translation “my wife and I” is more appropriate when taking the cultural norm into consideration.

Example 4: 值此金桂飘香、明月当空繁星满天的夜晚, 我谨代表公司的全体同仁，感谢各位能在一年最繁忙的季节，从百忙中拨冗光临我们的中秋联欢会。

Interpreting this sentence is a headache to most students, who racked their brains to find the English equivalents of expressions, like “金桂飘香、明月当空、繁星满天、和拨冗光临”. One of the versions is as such:

On such an evening with the fragrance of osmanthus floating in the air, with a bright moon and numerous stars in the sky, I’d like to, on behalf of all the staff of our company, thank you for taking your time off your busy work and attending the Mid-autumn Festival Party at the busiest time of the year.

In Chinese ceremonial speeches, modifiers are often used in order to heighten the atmosphere or strengthen the tone. The handling of these modifiers turns out to be a tricky problem for beginner students in interpretation. If interpreted literally, the English sentences sound verbose and redundant, making people feel that they are overstated and insincere. When students deal with such modifiers, they usually interpret them literally and faithfully, but such Chinese way of thinking leads to cumbersome interpretation. The above-mentioned “金桂飘香、明月当空繁星满天的夜晚” can be simply interpreted as “On such a wonderful evening” to avoid redundancy and unnaturalness.

Lack of Conciseness

Another common problem students often encounter in interpreting Chinese-English ceremonial speeches is that their interpretation is not concise enough and filled with redundancy and unnecessary repetition. One of the main reasons is due to the overuse of modifiers in Chinese, such as 会议 “隆重” 召开 (solemnly convenes a meeting), 会议 “胜利闭幕” (successfully concludes a meeting), 计划 “认真” 执行 (seriously implements a plan), 政策 “坚决” 响应 (resolutely responds to a policy), etc. Too many modifiers flooding in English will appear pretentious, and the effect is counterproductive (Chen, 2014, p. 184). The famous interpreter Lin Chaolun (Kevin Lin) once said, “The most typical and common example is to interpret ‘衷心感谢你们的盛情邀请’ as ‘heart-felt thanks for your warm invitation’” (Lin, 2014, p. 12), which sounds utterly odd and unnatural to an English-speaking native.

Example 5: 借此机会, 我对国际社会为中国抗击汶川大地震提供的真诚支持和宝贵帮助, 表示衷心的感谢!

I also wish to take this opportunity to sincerely thank the international community for the warm support and valuable assistance given to China in our rescue and relief efforts after the devastating Wenchuan earthquake.

In the above interpretation version, “sincerely, warm, valuable and heartfelt” are typical modifiers, whose usage will cause foreign guests to feel over-courteous and lack of sincerity. In this sense, such usage of modifiers should be controlled to some degree and some should be avoided and omitted in interpreting.
Strategies to Handle the Interpretation of Chinese-English Ceremonial Speeches

Targeting students’ misinterpretation and inappropriateness in their interpretation practice, some strategies can be put forward to resolve the problems in question.

Flexible Use of the “Formula” Expressions

Ceremonial speeches have their special stylistic features, usually with fixed discourse structure. For this reason, we can summarize and generalize some fixed pattern of expressions that the author calls “formulas” concerning address, welcome, toast, etc. Students are required to master the frequently used sentence patterns and expressions regarding giving welcome, expressing gratitude, extending congratulations, sending greetings and wishes and the like.

Proper Handling of Cultural Differences

Language as the carrier of culture reflects the differences in the way of thinking and expressing feelings. What is taken for granted in one language will be considered an offence or embarrassment in another. Given these differences, the interpreter should follow the norms of expressions in English while doing C-E interpretation. For instance, when a Chinese host says "招待不周还请多多包涵", the proper interpretation should be “Hope you enjoy yourself”, and “你们一路一定辛苦了” might as well be interpreted as “You must have had a pleasant trip”.

Turning Redundancy Into Conciseness

Chinese ceremonial speeches usually are filled with modifiers and polite expressions which pose the problem of redundancy. In C-E interpretation, some redundant information can be omitted and adapted for just extracting the core message. For example, the frequently used polite expression “欢迎多提宝贵意见” can be interpreted directly as “Your advice is most welcome”.

The following is a New Year’s speech clipped with only the beginning and the ending. The above-mentioned three strategies can be adopted in interpreting the excerpt.

Example 6: 各位老师新同学们：你们好！

金风送爽，月朗星稀，在这个恬静的秋夜，我们相聚在这里。你们送走了十年寒窗苦读日，迎来了今朝金榜提名时，我首先向你们表示最诚挚的祝贺！相逢是首歌，相聚是欢乐，你们的到来带给了我们欢乐，在此，我谨代表全体师生，张开热情的双臂向你们表示最热烈的欢迎！

……

最后祝大家学业有成，生活愉快！

Here is the reference interpretation version:

Dear faculty and freshmen members,

Good evening. On such a wonderful autumn evening, we gather here in celebration of your arrival. Let me extend my warm congratulations on your admission to this university thanks to your unremitting efforts over the past years. Your coming will instill new vitality into our university. Allow me, on behalf of all the faculty and fellow students to extend our warm welcome to you all.

Wish you academic success and enjoy your time!

The original Chinese version of the speech includes welcome, congratulation and good wishes, which can find equivalent English formulas of expressions. However, the original speech is full of flowery language and exaggeration, in which case adaptation and information processing are needed in interpretation to avoid
wordiness and redundancy. For instance, “金风送爽，月朗星稀，在这个恬静的秋夜” is simply rendered as “on such a wonderful autumn evening”, “张开热情的双臂向你们表示最热烈的欢迎” is interpreted as “extend our warm welcome”. “寒窗苦读，金榜提名” involves cultural allusions, which is not advisable to be translated literally. So such expressions involving cultural connotations are paraphrased and given their figurative meanings. The original sentence “相逢是首歌，相聚是欢乐，你们的到来带给了我们欢乐” actually doesn’t carry much sense except for its sake of heightening the atmosphere. In the interpretation version, it is interpreted simply as “Your coming will instill new vitality into our university” by reducing the original exaggerating tone to its core message.

Conclusion

Interpreting ceremonial speeches is not a tough job if the trainees understand well the characteristics and recognize the problems in existence. After some training sessions, the problems that students encounter in interpreting C-E ceremonial speeches will be generally resolved. However, the most effective approach to handling the interpretation of C-E ceremonial speeches is to “accumulate as many words, expressions and sentences as possible to the extent that one can speak out automatically and that as long as we store different contents in different locations in our memory, we will just need to retrieve each content according to its location” (Wang, 2005, p. 42). What’s more, students’ cultural awareness should be fostered and the importance of comparative and contrastive studies should also be highlighted in interpretation teaching in an effort to avoid translationese and language redundancy. Of course, large amounts of practice in and out of class are highly necessary for students to reach the level of authenticity and even automation in interpretation.

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