

A Relevance-Adaptation Approach: A Study on China Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Remarks

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Abstract

As the diplomatic organ of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China regularly holds press conferences, in which the spokesperson's remarks are important tools for expressing Chinese positions, dealing with foreign affairs and maintaining Sino-foreign relations. This paper analyzes the spokesperson's remarks from the perspective of relevance-adaptation theory to explore the essential process of spokesperson's discourse production and interpretation with specific examples. The results are based on the corpus of spokesperson's remarks from January to December, 2017. This paper attempts to shed some lights on comprehensively interpreting the spokesperson's remarks at the lexical level.

Keywords: Relevance theory, adaptation theory, relevance-adaptation theory, spokesperson's discourse, the lexical level.

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization, China's rapid development and the implement of Belt and Road Strategy, Chinese diplomatic discourse has attracted Chinese and the international community's attention through strong media communication. Scholars devote themselves to doing researches on Chinese discourse system, attempting to analyze the linguistic characteristics and authoritative translation of Chinese diplomatic keywords, actively exploring the theoretical and discipline construction of diplomatic linguistics and diplomatic translation studies, and promoting the theoretical and practical innovation of the diplomatic discourse system with Chinese characteristics. Shi Xu [1, 2] explores Chinese methodology for discourse research, which is characterized by holistic, subject-object-interlacing, dialectic, logical-global-inclusive and continuously-creative principles. He also argues that a historical and cultural awareness and critical perspective should be taken to interpret Chinese discourse. Liang Xiaobo & Tan Juling [3] indicate the research direction of national defense discourse, the features as well as great significance of constructing national defense discourse in order to build a national defense discourse system with Chinese characteristics. Shen Xianzhi [4] elaborates the concept of discourse, discourse system and expounds the ways of expression, generation mechanism and textual construction of Chinese foreign discourse system. Ye Shulan [5] and Li Zhanzi [6] review the definition and development of diplomatic discourse, and point out the significance of

constructing diplomatic discourse and military discourse.

At present, China foreign ministry, which holds regular press conferences every Monday to Friday, has been an important channel for China to release Chinese discourse. The content of the regular press conference involves political, economic, and social aspects and its function is to release information about important diplomatic activities and to elaborate on foreign policies. Reporters attending regular press conferences come from major media at home and abroad. The questions raised by reporters are often sharp and sensitive. Therefore, the China foreign ministry spokesperson's remarks are of great research value in language use and interpretation. In recent years, the spokesperson's discourse has attracted a large number of scholars to do some studies. Researches are mainly related to the study of the spokesman's language strategy [7, 8], the stylistic study of the spokesperson's language [9, 10] and researches on problems and suggestions on spokesperson's remarks [11]. On the basis of extensive reading of literature, it can be found that researches mostly focus on the study of spokesperson's language itself and they do not give a full explanation of spokesperson's discourse. Therefore, this study attempts to focus on the linguistic forms of spokesperson's discourse, attempting to explore the essential process of spokesperson's discourse production and interpretation within the framework of relevance-adaptation theory.

Theoretical foundation

Sperber & Wilson [12] initially put forward relevance theory, which combines pragmatics and cognitive science and tries to analyze the human communication from the cognitive view. The fundamental assumption of relevance theory is that human communication and cognition are governed by the search for relevance. Utterances automatically create expectations of relevance, and the hearer's goal is to find an interpretation that can satisfy his expectation of relevance. The process of communication can be considered as an ostensive and inferential process in which the speaker will produce his or her informative intention (verbal or non-verbal) and the hearer is expected to infer what the speaker means. According to Wilson [13], "An utterance is relevant if it yields a rich set of implications in a context of easily accessible assumptions, and causes the hearer no unnecessary mental effort in identifying the intended implications". From her point of view, the expectation of relevance is universal, but the degree and type of implications expected will vary from utterance to utterance and context to context.

Adaptation theory [14] pointed out that making adaptation is significant to organisms' survival to keep the dynamic balance between the environment and organisms themselves. And it is the same for language use, in which the speakers should make negotiable linguistic choices from a variety of possibilities to meet the needs of communication in the dynamic process of adaptation. Verschueren [14] stressed that "using language must consist of the continuous making of linguistic choices, consciously or unconsciously, for language-internal (i.e. structural) and /or language-external reasons at every level of language structure".

Chinese scholar Yang Ping [15] examined the merits and demerits of relevance theory and adaptation theory. She claims that relevance theory more focuses on the interpretation of theory, but it is insufficient in describing the specific laws of language use, failing in providing specific speakers' relevance hypothesis and the exact relationship between the contexts and language choices. Adaptation theory provides sufficient theoretical description of language use and interpretation, however, the explanatory force and operability is not as strong as the relevance theory. It cannot explain how the discourse understanding is realized during the adaptation process. Thus, she proposes the relevance-adaptation model from the angle of utterance producer and she demonstrates that language use is a process of seeking relevance while adapting to various contexts. According to Yang Ping [15], the arguments of the theory are as follows:

- The purpose of discourse communication is to seek the optimal relevance.
- The speaker's presumption of relevance determines his or her choices of discourse style;

- The speaker's presumption of relevance is the result of the speaker's adaptation to contexts that are in accordance with relevance principle.
- Relevance-adaptation is an inter-adaptable process between contextual correlates (material world, social world and psychological world) and linguistic structures (phoneme, accent, intonation; lexical structure and content; length of sentence; proposition structure and content; text structure and content).
- Relevance-adaptation is the process of making choices of strategies. This paper will present the language choice of spokesperson's discourse at the lexical level based on the Sperber & Wilson's relevance theory, Verschueren's adaptation theory and Yangping's proposal of relevance-adaptation model.

Spokesperson's remarks as relevance-oriented

In the verbal communication of regular press conference, the spokesperson and journalists must seek relevance for both sides. The spokesperson aims at delivering the country's policy and standpoint and informing some specific issues through the journalists. And the journalists want to obtain some information and news which are related to international politics and the public. The production of spokesperson's remarks is the process of searching for cognitive relevance. On one hand, as the representative of Chinese foreign ministry, the spokesmen have to do their best to seek the public's (the journalist, common people, even the international community, etc.) optimal relevance at the regular press conference, and the remarks of spokesmen must be worth processing effort of the hearer. On the other hand, the remarks of spokesmen must correspond with the public's cognitive ability and relevance assumption as much as possible.

Example 1:

Q: Trump said that China did not help on the DPRK. What is your response?

A: I just said that the efforts we have made towards resolving the Korean nuclear issue are clear for all to see, and our contributions are also widely acknowledged by the international community. Everyone should be very clear of China's hard work and what had been achieved because of our work as the chair of the Six-Party Talks.

The above example is quoted from regular press conference of China foreign ministry on January 3, 2017. In this process of question and answer, the journalist asked China's attitude towards the United States' slander of China's no help on Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The mutual knowledge in the communication is that the United States strongly insisted on North Korean giving up its nuclear weapons programme and China also called for a denuclearized, peaceful and stable Korean Peninsula. The cognitive context is the mutual knowledge shared by both the

spokesperson and journalist. However, Donald Trump's speech in the context actually expressed his dissatisfaction about China's action on resolving the Korean nuclear issue, aiming at inciting public opinions to put pressure on China's taking further measures. In response to this question, the spokesperson firstly clarified China's positive efforts and contributions in this issue, which is an ostensive stimulus that can create a presumption of relevance. That is, as a chair of the Six-Party Talks, China positively promoted dealing with the Korean nuclear issue and "our contributions are also widely acknowledged by the international community. Everyone should be very clear of China's hard work". In this way, the spokesperson unconsciously create expectation of relevance---the international communities and everyone confirmed China's efforts, but only the US. ignored China's endeavor regardless of the fact. Based on the contextual effect provided by the spokesperson, the hearer will require less processing efforts to satisfy the spokesperson's expectation of relevance, thus, the spokesperson's remarks can achieve the optimal relevance of the hearer. Therefore, it can be easily inferred that the spokesperson's remark expresses the denouncement of the United States in an implicit way and it is also the seeking for relevance of the public to show China's responsible and sincere international image.

Spokesperson's remarks as choice-making of words

The production and interpretation of spokesperson's remarks are the process of interaction between all sides of communicative subject, namely, the spokesperson, the journalist and the public. For the spokesperson, the remarks are ostensive behaviors, trying to seek the optimal relevance. For the journalist and the public, the interpretation of remarks is an inferential process to identify the spokesperson's intention, thus expanding the mutual cognitive environment of both parties. Therefore, the production and interpretation of spokesperson's remarks is an integrated ostensive-inferential process, in which the spokesperson's relevance presumption determines the choice of discourse, and journalist and the public make the inference based on the spokesperson chosen discourse to search for the communicative intention of the spokesperson. This paper will mainly focus on the spokesperson's choice of words. Word is the smallest unit of syntax that can convey rich meanings and achieve specific pragmatic meanings. The author will analyze the spokesperson's remarks from the perspective of hedges, deixis as well as adjectives and adverbs.

Pragmatic Meaning of Hedges

Hedge is an intrinsic property of natural language. Lakoff [16] defined hedge as "words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy". He Ziran [17] classified hedges into four categories: hedges of degree, such as almost, entirely, sort of, somewhat,

quite, etc; hedges of scope, for example, "loosely", "about", "around", "strictly speaking", "approximately", etc; hedges of plausibility shields, in which the words show the tendency of speaker's hesitation or estimation towards something, such as "I think", "as far as I know", "seem", "probably", "wonder", "I believe", etc; hedges of attribution shields, such as "as is well know", "presumably", "it is assumed that...", "it is said that...". Hedges are frequently found in the spokesperson's remarks to make their utterance more vague to deal with some journalists' tricky questions. Here are some examples for further explanation.

Example 2:

Q: US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson recently said that the United States is considering to impose sanctions on the enterprises which have business contacts with the DPRK. What are the comments of the Chinese side?

A: Actually, we have answered this question many times in our recent regular press conferences. In principle, we hope that, under the current circumstances, all relevant parties can take the measures which are conducive to easing the tensions on the Korean Peninsula, improving mutual trust between relevant parties, thus creating enabling conditions for relevant parties to come back to the negotiating table and resolve the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue through dialogue and consultation. I believe this remains a pressing task.

The above example is quoted from regular press conference of China foreign ministry on June 16, 2017. The journalist asked Lu Kang, the spokesperson, the comments on America's imposing sanctions on the enterprises which have contacts with the DPRK. The spokesperson used the hedge of scope "actually" and the hedge of plausibility shields "we hope that" and "I believe" to show the cautious attitude in his statement because how America dealt with the relationship with DPRK is a matter of America's diplomatic policy, and it is sensitive to make comments on other countries policy. However, the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue has been dealt with by the UN Security Council, and America's sanction on DPRK is beyond the framework of the resolutions of the UN Security Council. Under such circumstances, when the journalist's asked about China's comments, the spokesperson had to clarify its standpoint on the issue in order to seek the journalist's relevance as much as possible.

In the process of the spokesperson's choosing words, the spokesperson's presumption of relevance is made during the inter-adaptation between the linguistic form of hedges and the contextual correlates. The use of hedges embodies the characteristic of cautiousness of spokesperson's remarks. For the journalist, he or she should also make choices in interpreting the spokesperson's remarks according to the language form

of hedges the spokesperson has chosen. Thus, it can be inferred that China calls for feasible measures to ease the situation in DPRK but it still has a long way to go.

Pragmatic Meaning of Deixis

Deixis is believed to be a feature of all natural languages [18]. In linguistics, deixis refers to words and phrases that cannot be fully understood without additional contextual information. Words are deictic if their semantic meaning is fixed but their denotative meaning varies depending on time and/or place and the deictic words or phrases require contextual information to convey meaning. Deictic words and phrases appear frequently in the diplomatic spokesperson's responses. To make full use of deictic expression is also one of the wise tactics to avoid mentioning the exact countries or definite state leaders directly, thus avoiding the international media overstating the reports and distorting news fact in news operation.

Example 3:

Q: The office of the President of Botswana announced Thursday that the president will meet with Dalai Lama during his visit to the country next month. What is China's response to this? How will the visit affect China's investment in the country?

A: The 14th Dalai is a political exile who has long been engaged in anti-China separatist activities under the cloak of religion with the attempt to split Tibet from China. China is firmly opposed to Dalai's trip to any country for activities aimed at splitting China in any capacity or name, and contact with any official in any form in any country. China's stance is clear. We hope relevant country can see clear the nature of Dalai, faithfully respect China's core concern and make correct decision on the relevant issue.

The above example is quoted from regular press conference of China foreign ministry on July 14, 2017. The reporter asked about China's reaction to the issue that president of Botswana would possibly meet with Dalai Lama. The context is that Dalai Lama supports "Tibet independence" and carries out activities of armed rebellion to split Tibet from China. Dalai's visit to other countries is also a reflection of seeking support for Tibet independence, which is the issue of China's domestic affair. If the president of Botswana would meet with Dalai Lama, China would strongly oppose that. In this case, Geng Shuang used lots of deictic words, such as "any country", "any official", "any form", "any country", "relevant country", "relevant issue" to refer to the country of Botswana and the president of Botswana's possible meeting with Dalai Lama instead of directly referring to the exact name or issue. The choice of linguistic form of deixis is the adaptation to the context in order to observe the polite principle and save the positive face [19] of the present journalist. Besides, the choice of these deixis can also make the atmosphere of regular press conference more harmonious.

Moreover, the journalist and the public can get inferential results from spokesperson's remarks to interpret China's attitude towards this issue. That is, China has consistently insisted that Tibet is an inalienable part of Chinese territory, and no foreign government, organization or individual has the right to interfere because the Tibet issue is purely China's internal affair. Therefore, any country which has a meet with Dalai Lama would receive warnings and condemnation from China and would pay the price for their deeds. It can also prove that the choices are made both in the process of producing and interpreting the spokesperson's remark, and both types of choice-making are of equal importance to the communication and the way in which meaning is generated.

Pragmatic Meaning of Adjectives and Adverbs

At the press conference, journalists usually ask the spokesperson China's standpoint or comment on some issues. By analyzing the corpus from the spokesperson in 2017, the author found that a lot of adjectives and adverbs were used to clarify spokesperson's views. Generally speaking, some of the adjectives and adverbs are used to express the validity and the truth of a basic assertion.

Example 4:

Q: Some equipment for the THAAD system has been delivered to the ROK for deployment. What is China's response to that?

A: We have noted the latest development. China's position on the issue of THAAD is fairly clear and I will not repeat it here. What I want to stress is that we are resolutely against the deployment of THAAD by the US and the ROK in the ROK, and will take firm and necessary steps to safeguard our security interests. All the consequences entailed shall be borne by the US and the ROK. We once again strongly urge the relevant parties to stop the deployment process, instead of traveling further down the wrong path.

The above example is quoted from regular press conference of China foreign ministry on March 7, 2017. The reporter asked the spokesperson about the China's response to the fact that some equipment for the THAAD system has been delivered to the ROK. It is a mutual knowledge for both the spokesperson and journalist that THAAD system is a powerful American anti-ballistic missile defense system designed to shoot down short-range, medium-range, and intermediate-range ballistic missiles by intercepting with a hit-to-kill approach. If such a plan would be successfully carried out, it could detect at least one-third of China's land coverage and effectively offset China's limited nuclear deterrence against the United States, seriously threatening China's national defense security. The THAAD system is America's strategic deployment in the continent of Asia, which would threaten China's strategic security. Under such circumstance, the spokesperson chose many adjectives and adverbs such

as “fairly”, “clear”, “resolutely”, “firm”, “necessary”, “strongly” to show a tough stance towards the issue of THAAD system. To adapt to the discourse delivered by the spokesperson, the journalist and the public can know China’s strong opposition to the deployment of THAAD system and China’s uncompromising and intolerable stand on the issue.

CONCLUSION

With the rapid rising of China, fostering a Chinese discourse system has been many Chinese scholars’ research subject [2, 4]. The author chooses the spokesperson’s remarks of China foreign ministry in 2017 as the research corpus. The newly presented relevance-adaptation theory is employed to analyze the spokesperson’s discourse, which is comprehensive in explaining how the spokesperson’s remarks are produced and interpreted under various diplomatic contexts. By the analysis of spokesperson’s remarks at the lexical level, the author gives a descriptive and qualitative analysis of the choice of words in the spokesperson’s discourse under the relevance-adaptation theory. It is found that the spokesperson seeks for the optimal relevance to the journalist and the public and the spokesperson connects his or her relevance presumption with the journalist and public’s contextual correlates. Moreover, the spokesperson has to choose the proper linguistic forms by adapting to various factors. The choice of hedges, deixis and some adjectives and adverbs help the spokesperson give specific pragmatic meaning under specific diplomatic contexts. It is hoped that the study could be beneficial to the public to have deeper understanding of the spokesperson’s remarks and explore the motivations behind the remarks.

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