

Interpreter Intervention: Balancing Objectivity and Subjectivity in Business Negotiations

Huimin Zhao

School of Foreign Studies, Northwestern Polytechnical University, Xi'an Shaanxi, 710072, China

*Correspondence Author

Abstract: *In the era of economic globalization, interactions and collaborations between China and the global economy have significantly intensified. This trend has led to increased foreign investment in China and a growing number of Chinese enterprises expanding their operations internationally. Successful business negotiations are crucial for these endeavors, yet they face challenges such as linguistic barriers, cultural differences, and divergent thought processes. In such high-stakes scenarios, an experienced interpreter serves as a vital communication link between Chinese and international parties. This paper aims to examine the role of dialogue interpretation in business negotiations and to investigate how interpreters can effectively leverage their subjective judgment alongside strategic translation techniques. By doing so, interpreters can facilitate smoother negotiations and contribute to mutually beneficial outcomes. The study will explore specific strategies that enable interpreters to bridge cultural and linguistic gaps, thereby promoting successful and harmonious negotiations.*

Keywords: Business Negotiation; Translation Strategies; Interpreter Subjectivity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Interpreters hold a pivotal position in facilitating business negotiations between Chinese and foreign parties. These negotiations often involve high stakes and require meticulous communication to achieve mutual understanding and agreement. To effectively support these interactions, interpreters must balance objectivity and subjectivity, employing strategic interventions that reflect both the literal and nuanced meanings of the discourse. This requires not only a deep understanding of the languages involved but also a keen awareness of the cultural and contextual subtleties that underpin the negotiation process. The role of the interpreter extends beyond mere translation. Interpreters must act as cultural mediators, bridging linguistic and cultural gaps while ensuring that the intentions and nuances of each party are accurately conveyed. This involves making judicious decisions about when and how to adapt the message to suit the context, audience, and objectives of the negotiation. For instance, interpreters may need to adjust the formality of language, clarify idiomatic expressions, or provide explanations for culturally specific references. Furthermore, the interpreter's subjectivity plays a critical role in interpreting. While it is essential to remain as objective as possible, interpreters must also use their judgment to interpret the unspoken intentions behind words, the subtext of messages, and the emotional tone of the conversation. This ability to navigate the fine line between literal and interpretive translation is what enables interpreters to foster a productive and harmonious negotiation environment.

This paper delves into the complexities of interpreter intervention in business negotiations, examining the strategies and techniques that can help achieve a balance between objectivity and subjectivity. It explores the challenges faced by interpreters and the methods they employ to overcome these obstacles, ultimately contributing to the success of the negotiation process.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Business Negotiation Interpreting

Business negotiation interpretation is a pivotal form of two-way communication, functioning as a cross-linguistic, cross-border, and cross-cultural interactive activity. Unlike interpretation in other domains, it transcends mere language transformation, serving as a catalyst for mutual understanding and effective communication, as well as reinforcing international business ties within a complex global marketplace (Di Ming & Ao Lian, 2013). As a targeted cross-cultural communication activity, business negotiation interpretation requires flexible translation standards that can be tailored based on the nature of the text, the intended audience, and the specific needs and goals of the clients. This flexibility allows interpreters to adopt a wide range of strategies to achieve the desired outcome, ensuring that the communication is not only accurate but also culturally appropriate and effective (Tao

Youlan, 2010).

Li Kun (2019) identifies three primary areas of cross-cultural differences relevant to business interpretation: (1) Cultural Accumulation Differences. Chinese culture, with its rich historical background spanning over 5,000 years, has produced a plethora of idioms and proverbs that carry distinct cultural traits, presenting challenges in direct translation into English. (2) Cognitive Differences. Different nationalities possess unique cognitive perspectives on various concepts, leading to distinct cognitive styles that influence how information is processed and interpreted. (3) Differences in Thinking Patterns. Chinese often emphasizes human subjects, leading to the frequent use of active voice, whereas English tends to prioritize objective facts or things, resulting in a greater prevalence of passive constructions. These differences underscore the complexity of business negotiation interpretation, which requires not only a deep understanding of the languages involved but also a keen awareness of the cultural and contextual nuances that underpin the negotiation process.

The researchers mentioned above all emphasize the importance of cultural awareness and the need for interpreters to understand the cultural contexts of both parties to avoid miscommunication. Additionally, they argue that interpreters must be adept at managing the dynamics of power and hierarchy within negotiations, as these elements can significantly impact the effectiveness of communication. Moreover, the role of the interpreter in business negotiations is multifaceted. Not only do interpreters need to accurately convey the literal meaning of the discourse, but they must also navigate the subtle nuances of the negotiation process, including the emotional tone, non-verbal cues, and the unspoken intentions behind words (Tao Youlan, 2010). This requires a high degree of subjectivity, as interpreters must make decisions based on their understanding of the context and the goals of the negotiation.

In the international arena, researchers have also highlighted the importance of strategic interventions in business negotiations. For example, Karanasiou (2016) notes that interpreters must be able to adapt their approach to the specific needs of the negotiation, sometimes prioritizing clarity over precision to ensure that the key points are understood by all parties. Similarly, Cohen (2019) suggests that interpreters should have a deep understanding of the business context and be able to provide culturally sensitive interpretations that align with the broader goals of the negotiation.

In conclusion, the overarching goal of business negotiation interpretation is to facilitate successful cross-cultural communication. Beyond the basic function of transforming language symbols, the interpreter plays a crucial role in conveying the client's intentions effectively. Thus, the manifestation of the interpreter's subjectivity becomes indispensable in this process.

2.2 Interpreter's Subjectivity

In the realm of business negotiation interpretation, the concept of subjectivity holds significant importance. Sheng Zhicheng (2020) highlights that subjectivity is the foundation for initiative, enabling interpreters to choose suitable grammar and vocabulary based on the speaker's intentions, thus manifesting their subjective influence. Building on this idea, Venuti (1996) underscores the importance of visibility and creativity in interpretation. He posits that interpreters should be positioned at the center of the process, actively shaping the outcome and making their presence evident. Antoine (2009) further emphasizes the interpreter's role as the subject of the interpretation, advocating for a focus on critical theory. According to Antoine, the interpreter's subjectivity determines the stance and strategies employed in the interpretation process.

Cha Mingjian and Tian Yu (2003) argue that, while respecting the original text, the interpreter, as the subject of translation, demonstrates subjective influence to achieve the purpose of the translation. Hu Gengshen (2014) elaborates on this point, noting that during the translation process, the author and the reader are passive participants, whereas the translator is always in an active position. Hu emphasizes that the translator's subjectivity is a form of dominance, initiative, and creativity. This means that the translator exercises subjective initiative, actively mobilizing their existing knowledge system, language foundation, personality traits, and inner cultivation, integrating their own knowledge with the original context.

In the context of business negotiation interpretation, it is evident that interpreters operate independently of the original text, engaging directly with the target audience. As a result, their subjectivity plays a vital role in the progression of the interpretation (Sheng Zhicheng, 2020). To further support the notion of the interpreter's subjectivity, additional scholars have contributed to the discourse. For example, Schäffner (2018) discusses the interpreter's role in shaping the interactional dynamics of negotiations, emphasizing the need for interpreters to

exercise strategic interventions. Similarly, Pöchhacker (2016) highlights the interpreter's agency in navigating the complexities of high-stakes negotiations, suggesting that effective interpreters must be proactive in their approach.

In conclusion, the interpreter's subjectivity is a critical component in the success of business negotiations. Beyond the basic function of language transformation, the interpreter plays a multifaceted role, actively shaping the communication process to achieve the goals of the negotiation (Venuti, 1996).

3. CASE STUDY

Business negotiations, given their significance in determining the interests of both parties, are characterized by their seriousness and rigor. To ensure the smoothness of negotiations, interpreters must not only make thorough preparations but also possess the ability to manage unexpected situations. Besides, Business English, built on the foundational grammar, syntax, and vocabulary of standard English, exhibits unique linguistic features and forms of expression. These features include: (1) extensive use of specialized terminology and technical jargon; (2) the use of formal and standardized language is prevalent; (3) certain archaic words and loanwords are utilized; (4) abbreviations are frequently employed to enhance efficiency and conciseness in business discourse (Tian Jing, 2011). This paper will explore the manifestation of the interpreter's subjectivity in business negotiation interpreting across the following dimensions: professional words, culture-loaded words and sentence structure adjustment.

3.1 Professional Words

In high-stakes business negotiations, the accuracy of translation is paramount, especially for key terms such as time, price, quantity, payment methods, commercial terms, and legal terminology. Interpreters must strive for fidelity and produce translations that are concise, rigorous, and dignified. They should also ensure the standardization and professionalism of the language, while adopting a humble tone.

Example (1):

Original: It is expensive to open a L/C, so we hope this time you may consider D/P or T/T.

Translation: 开立信用证的成本很高, 因此我们希望这次贵方能考虑采用付款交单或电汇。

In this example, the original text contains several professional abbreviations, L/C (Letter of Credit), D/P (Documents against Payment), and T/T (Telegraphic Transfer). According to Deng Daoxuan (2006), Business English abbreviations can be categorized into four types based on their composition: literalism, clipping, acronyms, and blends. The terms in the example fall under literalism, which consists of the initial letters of the primary words in a phrase, excluding the initial letters of function words such as conjunctions and prepositions. The use of abbreviations not only minimizes the potential for misinterpretation but also streamlines communication and enhances efficiency.

However, it is important to note that while abbreviations offer convenience, they can pose challenges if the target audience is unfamiliar with them. Therefore, interpreters must have a thorough understanding of these terms and convey them clearly to the target audience, avoiding literal translations that could lead to confusion. This ensures that the Chinese-speaking listener is not misled.

Additionally, in the translation provided, the interpreter chose to render "you" as "贵方", which is a more formal and respectful term in Chinese. This deliberate choice reflects the interpreter's awareness of the cultural expectations for politeness in business settings, which can help to smooth the negotiation process.

Example (2):

Original: The goods are 5 feet high and 20 inches wide.

Translation: 货物的高度为152.4厘米, 宽度为50.8厘米。

In business negotiations, the use of different measurement systems between Eastern and Western cultures can be a critical point of contention. Such details often involve the core aspects of the negotiation, and even a small error in units can jeopardize the entire negotiation. In this example, the interpreter demonstrates awareness of this

challenge by converting the measurements from feet and inches to centimeters, which is more familiar to the Chinese audience. Similar unit conversions include:

Ounce (oz) to Gram (g): Converting ounces to grams helps in providing a clear understanding of weight in a metric system commonly used in China.

Kilogram (kg) to Jin (斤): Jin is a traditional unit of weight in China, and converting kilograms to jin can facilitate clearer communication.

Cubic Feet (cuft) to Cubic Meter (m³): Converting cubic feet to cubic meters aligns with the metric system used in China, aiding in the accurate representation of volume.

Gallon (gal) to Liter (L): Gallons are commonly used in Western countries, but liters are more familiar to Chinese negotiators, making this conversion useful.

Fahrenheit (°F) to Celsius (°C): Temperature conversions from Fahrenheit to Celsius help in ensuring that all parties understand temperature specifications accurately.

In high-stakes business negotiations, interpreters should maintain a high level of sensitivity to such numerical and unit information and ensure its accuracy. If the interpreter is capable, converting units can facilitate the understanding of the target listener. Meanwhile, it is important to note that the interpreter must balance the need for accuracy with the need to communicate effectively. In situations where the numbers are too complex to convert mentally, the interpreter should ensure that the original values and units are communicated without alteration. This approach ensures that the information is not distorted, while still allowing the listener to request clarification if needed.

3.2 Culture-Loaded Words

Under different cultural systems, people's life experiences inevitably diverge, leading to variations in traditional values, beliefs, social backgrounds, historical developments, and the cultural connotations of words. These differences give rise to divergences in language and culture. Therefore, culture-loaded words in one language often lack exact equivalents or compatible counterparts in another language. Consequently, the interpreter's choices, such as mis-translation, omission, or over translation, can lead to what Jing Fang and Duan Cheng (2017) refer to as "cultural vacancy". In the context of business negotiations, where different languages and cultures often intersect, the accurate translation of culture-loaded words is crucial to avoid misunderstandings and to facilitate smooth negotiations.

Example (3):

Original: 你现在在中国，必须要入乡随俗。

Translation: While you're in China, you need to do as the Romans do.

The choice of translation strategies for culture-loaded words in business negotiations should adhere to the principle of equality in cross-cultural communication. For some culture-loaded words, a similar expression can be found in the target language, as demonstrated in Example (3). In such cases, the interpreter can employ a domestication translation strategy to make the message accessible to English-speaking audiences and convey the original intention more accurately. Similar expressions include:

Robbing Peter to pay Paul (拆东墙补西墙): This idiom can be rendered as "robbing one to pay another", which captures the essence of the original phrase.

Man proposes; God disposes (谋事在人，成事在天): This proverb can also be translated as "man plans, but God decides".

One can't make bricks without straw (巧妇难为无米之炊): This saying can be rendered as "one cannot create something from nothing".

Use a steam-hammer to crack nuts (杀鸡用牛刀): This idiom can also be translated as “using a sledgehammer to crack a nut”.

However, as Jing Fang and Duan Cheng (2017) note, not all culture-loaded words have exact equivalents in the target language. When such words appear, the interpreter should adopt a foreignization translation strategy. Zheng Dehu (2016) provides specific translation strategies for the foreignization of Chinese culture-loaded words, including:

Transliteration: Using the phonetic equivalent of the original term, such as “Tai Chi” for “太极”.

Transliteration Plus Explanation: Combining transliteration with a brief explanation, e.g., “Tai Chi (a traditional Chinese martial art)”.

Literal Translation: Translating the term literally, for example, “Longevity Fruit” for “长寿果”.

Literal Translation Plus Explanation: Providing a literal translation followed by an explanatory note, e.g., “Longevity Fruit (a type of fruit associated with longevity in Chinese culture)”.

Transliteration Plus Literal Translation: Combining transliteration with a literal translation, for instance, “Tai Chi (Supreme Ultimate)”.

Free Translation: Using a term that conveys the essence of the original without literal correspondence, for example, “Dragon Dance” for “舞龙”.

Example (4):

Original: 会议结束后，我们去吃肉夹馍吧。

Translation: After the meeting, let's have “Rou jia mo”-----a popular Chinese dish consisting of chopped meat served in a flatbread bun.

As one of the traditional Chinese cuisines, the name “Rou jia mo” is a culture-loaded term. Since there is no direct equivalent in Western cuisine, the interpreter opted for a transliteration plus explanation strategy. This approach is similar to the treatment of other culture-loaded words, such as: “道” (The Tao): A philosophical concept first articulated by Laozi, traditionally translated as “Tao” (also spelled “Dao” in Chinese), which can mean “way”, “path”, or “road”. “正月” (The First Lunar Month): Referring to the period during which the Spring Festival (Chinese New Year) occurs, which can be explained as “the first lunar month of the New Year”. While domestication translation aims to make the source text more accessible to the target audience, dissimilation translation methods, such as transliteration plus explanation, may sacrifice some of the “intelligibility” of the original text. However, this can be compensated for by adding explanations that provide context and enhance understanding. Moreover, the judicious use of dissimilation can not only convey the original information but also highlight the distinctiveness of Chinese culture, facilitating its global dissemination. Interestingly, “Rougamo” has recently been officially recognized as an English name for the dish, reflecting the growing interest and curiosity in Chinese culture among Western audiences. This recognition suggests that dissimilation may be more acceptable to English-speaking listeners than domestication, as it preserves the authenticity of the cultural reference while providing necessary context.

3.3 Sentence Structure Adjustment

In high-stakes business negotiations, the dynamic often resembles a tug-of-war. After prolonged and challenging discussions, if the parties remain at an impasse on certain issues, emotions may escalate, potentially leading to impolite or hurtful language, culminating in a language conflict. As the intermediary, the interpreter must adeptly navigate these situations by accurately gauging the speaker's intentions and objectives. Given the high stakes, the interpreter must not merely translate the source language verbatim. Instead, they must consider both the linguistic nuances and the broader context of the negotiation. This requires a balance between fidelity to the original message and the facilitation of productive dialogue. The interpreter's role extends beyond mere language expression and content; they must craft translations that contribute to the smooth progression of negotiations and ultimately support the achievement of business objectives (Di Ming & Ao Lian, 2013).

Li Peng (2011) offers strategies for adjusting sentence structure to mitigate conflict and facilitate smoother negotiations, including:

Ambiguous Restrictive Modifiers: Using vague qualifiers that soften the impact of strong statements, such as “somewhat” or “to some extent”.

Indirect Expression: Employing indirect language to avoid direct confrontation, for example, using phrases like “it might be considered” instead of “it is”.

Subjunctive Mood: Utilizing the subjunctive mood to express hypothetical scenarios or desires, such as “it would be beneficial if” rather than making a direct demand.

Past Tense of Modal Verbs: Using the past tense form of modal verbs (e.g., “would have”) to suggest a hypothetical or softened stance.

Conditional Statements: Incorporating conditional clauses to present alternatives or options, such as “if we were to consider”.

By employing these strategies, interpreters can help to de-escalate tensions and maintain a constructive negotiation environment, contributing to the overall success of the business negotiation.

Example (5):

Original: 我需要请示董事长之后才能给你答复。

Translation: Could we perhaps revisit this after I've consulted with our board chairman?

In this example, the interpreter transforms a declarative statement into a more polite and indirect question. This not only softens the tone but also conveys the Chinese party's sincerity and willingness to engage constructively. Moreover, in contrast to Western business practices, where decision-making authority is often more decentralized, Chinese employees typically require approval from higher-ups before finalizing agreements. This can sometimes be misinterpreted by foreign counterparts as a lack of commitment or decision-making power. However, the tone of seeking input demonstrates respect for the foreign party and a genuine desire to reach consensus. By expressing the need to consult with superiors, the interpreter reassures the foreign party of the Chinese side's diligence and thoroughness, alleviating any concerns and paving the way for further discussion.

Example (6):

Original: 不行的话，我们就取消订单。

Translation: If this isn't feasible, then I'm afraid we may have to cancel our order.

In Example (6), the original sentence carries a tone that could be perceived as threatening. Direct translation could jeopardize the negotiation process. To mitigate this, the interpreter modifies the sentence structure and employs conditional statements. The use of “I'm afraid” in the main clause softens the negative connotation and moderates the tone. Additionally, the conditional construction employed in the subordinate clause renders the content tentative, polite, and euphemistic, making it more acceptable to the listener. Furthermore, the modal verb “may” introduces a tone of negotiation, reducing the forcefulness of the request and avoiding provoking any adverse reaction from the foreign party. This approach aligns with the interpreter's role in balancing objectivity and subjectivity, ensuring that the communication remains constructive and conducive to reaching a mutually beneficial agreement.

4. CONCLUSION

In the context of increasing international trade activities in China, the role of interpretation is paramount. The interpreter's judicious exercise of subjectivity is essential in business negotiations, not only to minimize misunderstandings of intent but also to facilitate the smooth progress of negotiations and deepen cultural exchanges. To effectively fulfill this role, interpreters must undertake several key practices:

Preparation: Before negotiations, interpreters should conduct thorough research and compile a glossary of professional terms relevant to the industry. They should also familiarize themselves with the accents and dialects of potential clients to ensure clear communication.

Continuous Learning: Engaging in regular training and broad reading is crucial to maintaining and enhancing their linguistic and cultural competencies. This ongoing education ensures that interpreters are equipped to handle unexpected situations and maintain a high level of professionalism.

Pacing and Skillful Translation: Maintaining a steady pace during negotiations, rather than rushing to keep up with the speaker, is important. Utilizing various translation techniques, such as paraphrasing and clarification, can help create a harmonious atmosphere and ensure that the negotiation proceeds smoothly.

Cultural Competence: Understanding the cultural nuances, including differences in living habits, religious customs, and ways of thinking, is critical. Interpreters should strive to anticipate and mitigate misunderstandings that may arise from these differences, fostering a more inclusive and respectful negotiation environment.

In summary, the interpreter's role in business negotiations is multifaceted and requires a balance between objectivity and subjectivity. By adhering to these principles and practices, interpreters can contribute significantly to the success of negotiations, promoting mutual understanding and cooperation between parties from diverse cultural backgrounds.

REFERENCES

- [1] Lawrence Venuti. *The translator's invisibility: A history of translation* [M]. Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2004.
- [2] Berman Antoine. *Toward a translation criticism: John Donne* (Translated and Edited by Françoise Massardier-Kenney) [M]. Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2009.
- [3] Karanasiou Panagiota-Penny. *Public Service Interpreting and Business Negotiation Interpreting: Friends or Foes*[J]. *Challenges and opportunities in public service interpreting*. 2016:191-211.
- [4] Cohen Raymond. *Meaning, interpretation and international negotiation*[J]. *Global Society*. 2019(3):317-35.
- [5] Schäffner, Claudia. *Strategic Interventions in Business Negotiations: The Interpreter's Role*[J]. *The Translator*. 2018(2):189-212.
- [6] Pöchhacker, Franz. *Interpreting and Agency in High-Stakes Negotiations*[J]. *Interpreting*. 2016(1):55-78.
- [7] Zhiming J, Tian Y. 2003. *On Translator's subjectivity: From the marginalization of Translator's cultural status* [J]. *Chinese Translation* (1):19-24.
- [8] Deng Daoxuan. *The application of abbreviations in Economic and trade English* [J]. *Market Modernization*,2006(30):32-33.
- [9] Di Ming, Ao Lian. *On the application of the three Principles of Skopos Theory in business interpretation* [J]. *Journal of China University of Geosciences: Social Sciences Edition*, 2013(S1):118-120.
- [10] Hu Gengshen. *From "Translator Center" to "Translator Responsibility"*. *Chinese Journal of Translation*, 2014 (1): 29-34.
- [11] Jing Fang, Duan Cheng. *On the translation of culture-loaded words from the perspective of Register Theory* [J]. *Chinese Culture Forum*,2017(03):110-116.
- [12] Li Kun. *Research on cross-cultural Differences in Business Interpreting: A Review of the Course of Business Interpreting* [J]. *Leadership Science*, 2019(18).
- [13] Li Peng. *A study on Business English negotiation interpreting strategies: from the perspective of face Theory* [J]. *China Commerce and Trade*,2011(09):222-223. (in Chinese)
- [14] Sheng Zhicheng. *On Translator's Subjectivity* [D]. China Foreign Affairs University,2020.
- [15] Tao Youlan. *Corpus-based Construction of interpreting textbooks for translation majors* [J]. *Foreign Language Circle*, 2010.
- [16] Tian Jing. *Research on the application of Business English in International trade* [J]. *China Commerce and Trade*,2011(09):193-194.
- [17] Zheng Dehu. *Chinese Culture going Global and the translation of culture-loaded words* [J]. *Shanghai Translation*,2016(02):53-56.