

[Translation Studies]

# On Translation of Modal Verbs in Political Documents from Systemic Functional Linguistics

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses the translation of modal verbs in political papers and the translation strategies used by translators from the perspective of systemic functional linguistics, exemplified by the report of the 19th National Congress. The result shows that the translators' use of equivalent translation and adaptation for different situations when translating high-value modal verbs can not only reflect the Chinese government's firmness on matters of principle but also enable the international community to better accept the Chinese government's positions and propositions. Besides, the collocation "we will," which appears frequently in the strategy of amplification, reflects the authority of the information in the 19th National Congress Report and brings Western readers closer, calling on them to answer China's call on international issues.

**Keywords:** systemic functional linguistics; modal verbs; translation; the report of the 19th National Congress of the CPC

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## 1 Introduction

A political essay is a kind of argumentative essay that addresses and comments on current major events and social issues from a political perspective (Liu Zhongde, 1998). As important carriers of national policy and political development, political essays can not only clearly explain the national policies formulated by the Chinese government but also make authoritative information about China more accessible to people from other countries. The translation of political documents, therefore, exerts a great impact on the efficiency of political propaganda.

To a large extent, it is also closely related to China's image in the international community. There is no denying that the translation of political essays is one of the most important channels for China's foreign propaganda and is closely related to the shaping of the image of great power. Most of the previous studies of political documents have focused on culture-loaded words (Cheng Bing & Bao Chenglian, 2018), metaphors (Liang Na & Chen Daliang, 2020), and ecological translation (Fang Xiaoqin, 2019), but few scholars have conducted in-depth studies on modal verbs in political documents. Systemic functional linguistics considers modality as an important means of realizing interpersonal functions, which can change interpersonal relations and construct new linguistic facts. Based on the above status quo, this study investigated how translators achieve interpersonal equivalence in the translation process from the quantitative value of modal verbs in the 19th National Congress Report (report for short) within the framework of Halliday's systemic functional linguistics.

## 2 Systemic Functional Linguistics and Modality

The definition of modality was first proposed by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle to discuss the three concepts of necessity, possibility, and impossibility (Wang Weixian et al., 1989). There are many scholars from different fields who have studied modality from different perspectives, both at home and abroad. Three fields are most important abroad: traditional linguistics, represented by Jespersen; semantics, represented by Lyons and Palmer, and systemic functional linguistics, represented by Halliday. The earliest studies of mood in China were found in *Ma Shi Wen Tong*, and later, through the efforts of many scholars, the framework of the Chinese mood system was gradually refined.

Halliday (2004) suggested that language performs a variety of functions, of which three meta-functions — textual function, ideational function, and interpersonal function — play a crucial role. The interpersonal meaning is achieved by the modal system. Whereas in traditional grammar, modality is represented by modal verbs, in systematic functional grammar, modality is expressed in a variety of ways. In addition to modal verbs, adjectives, adverbs, nouns, and corresponding structures can all express modalities. He argued that the interpersonal function plays an important role in determining the potential meaning contained in a language. The interpersonal function means that a speaker can use language as a tool to express his attitudes, evaluations, purposes, and the relationship that he establishes between his audience and him. Listeners can also understand the feelings and emotions of the speaker, and their thoughts and attitudes can be influenced by the speaker. Since its introduction into China, systemic functional linguistics has played an important role in the study of translation, and more and more scholars have begun to apply the theory to explain the phenomena and problems in translation. For example, Hu Zhuanglin and other scholars (1989) have used the above three meta-functions of languages to analyze and explore in-depth the concept of equivalence, which is crucial in translation, reflecting the possibilities and broad prospects of combining systemic functional linguistics with other disciplines. The translation is a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural act of communication, where the original text and the translated text are addressed to a different audience, and the translator is bound to make modifications to achieve interpersonal functional equivalence.

### 3 Classification of Modal Verbs

#### 3.1 The classification of English modal verbs

People have positive or negative attitudes towards things in their daily lives, and Halliday argued that if the two attitudes can be considered as two polarities, then the middle range between them can be regarded as a modality. He classified moods into high, medium, and low values on four dimensions: probability, frequency, obligation, and willingness. Low-valued modal verbs express possibility, medium-valued modal verbs convey probability, and high-valued modal verbs express necessity, with the three values of modality decreasing in the order of modal intensity. Tables 1 and 2 show his classification of the three levels of values for modality and modal verbs, respectively.

	probability	frequency	obligation	willingness
<b>High</b>	certain	always	required	determined
<b>Medium</b>	probable	usually	supposed	keen
<b>Low</b>	possible	sometimes	allowed	willing

**Table 1: Three values of modality<sup>①</sup> (Halliday, 2004)**

	low	medium	high
<b>Positive</b>	can, may, could, might, (dare)	will, would, should, is/was to, shall	must, ought to, need, has/had to
<b>Negative</b>	needn't doesn't/didn't need to, have to	won't, wouldn't, shouldn't, (isn't/wasn't to)	mustn't, oughtn't to, can't, couldn't, (mayn't, mightn't, hasn't/hadn't to)

**Table 2: Three values of modal verbs (Halliday, 2004)**

Combining the above tables with the modal verbs appearing in the English version of the Report, different kinds of modal verbs are listed as follows. High value modal verbs: must, need; medium value modal verbs: will, would, should, is to, won't; low value modal verbs: can, may, have to, dare. The frequencies of them are shown in Table 3. In English grammar, "will" can be employed as both a modal auxiliary verb to express the modality and a tense auxiliary verb to form the simple future tense, which is always inevitably intertwined with the modal sense. After analyzing the modal meaning of "will" from traditional grammar, cognitive grammar, functional grammar, and syntax and semantics, Zhang Chuchu (2009) concluded that "will" cannot simply denote tense; it will always inevitably intermingle with the modal sense. Therefore, no distinction was made between the modal and future senses of "will".

Value	Modal verbs	Frequency	Total
low	can	21	24
	may	1	
	have to	1	
	dare	1	
medium	will	272	372
	would	1	
	should	89	
	is to	9	
	won't	1	
high	must	158	167
	need	9	

Table 3: Statistics on English modal verbs in the report

### 3.2 The classification of Chinese modal verbs

Unlike the fixed range of modal verbs in English, there exists no uniform range of modal verbs in Chinese so far. In modern Chinese, the semantic and syntactic features of modal verbs are closely linked to those of notional verbs, so it is impossible to delimit the range based on semantic and syntactic features alone as that in English. Based on this situation, this paper first employed the corpus search software WordSmith 8.0 to generate a vocabulary of the original Chinese text, from which all modal verbs were extracted and ranked according to their frequencies of occurrences. As the top 11 modal words were used significantly more frequently than the other modal words, they were selected as research objects. Xu Jingning (2007) has studied the classification of Chinese modal verbs, and Li (2007) has made a more detailed classification and assignment of the Chinese modal system based on Halliday's research. The top 11 high-frequency modal verbs are classified based on Halliday's (Table 1) classification, combined with the research results of the former two scholars (Table 4). Next, this paper used ParaConc to retrieve the English translations of the above-mentioned Chinese texts, categorized the translation strategies into equivalent translation, adaptation, and amplification according to the translators' specific treatment of the original modal words, and analyzed the above translation strategies from the perspective of interpersonal function.

Value	Modal verbs	Frequency	Total
Low	能夠(Nenggou)	6	32
	會 (Hui)	10	
	能 (Neng)	16	

Table 4(continued)

Value	Modal verbs	Frequency	Total
Medium	敢於 (Ganyu)	5	12
	善於 (Shanyu)	7	
High	一定 (Yiding)	9	204
	必須 (Bixu)	60	
	堅決 (Jianjue)	33	
	要 (Yao)	90	
	不能 (Buneng)	7	
	不會 (Buhui)	5	

Table 4: Statistics on Chinese modal verbs in the report

## 4 Translation Analysis

The above statistics show that the modal verbs in the Chinese text are predominantly of high value, while the English counterpart is of medium value. English and Chinese are nurtured by different cultural soils, so the interpersonal meaning conveyed by the English-Chinese modal system is also subject to socio-cultural constraints, which means that translators cannot use literal translation most of the time.

Following a comparative analysis of the English and Chinese versions, it was found that the translator mainly adopted three translation strategies: equivalent translation, adaptation, and amplification. In order to avoid confusion with traditional translation strategies, the definitions of the three strategies are given below. Equivalent translation in this study refers to the translation of modal values that are equivalent to or basically similar to the original text in terms of modal value; adaptation refers to the transformation of modal value, and amplification refers to the translation of modal verbs that are not expressed in the original text but are added after translation. This article will focus on how to achieve modal equivalence in the translation of modal verbs and accurately convey the author's viewpoints in the original text.

### 4.1 Amplification

English and Chinese belong to different language families, with the former belonging to the Indo-European family and the latter to the Sino-Tibetan family. The former is a hypotactic language, which emphasizes the logical relationship between sentence components, while the latter is a parataxis language, with no obvious conjunctions between sentences with flexible sentence structures and various forms, which is fully reflected in a political essay like the report.

(1) 堅持人人盡責、人人享有。

We will see that everyone performs their duties and shares in the benefits.

From the above examples, it is obvious that the original text is subject-free with no obvious conjunctions between the sentences and no obvious modal words. To adapt to the differences in language structures, the

translator divided a long sentence in the original text into two short sentences and added a subject. There are many options for the subject, which can be “China”, “the Chinese government” or “we,” and the first two were found much less frequently used as subjects than the latter. When retrieving the original text, the word “我們” appeared 65 times, while its English equivalent “we” appears 509 times, among which “we will” appears 272 times, fully demonstrating the high frequency of that kind of sentence. A detailed analysis of the difference is provided in this study.

In modern Chinese, in addition to the word “我們”, “咱們” can also express the first person plural, which is mostly found in northern Chinese dialects. The Modern Chinese Dictionary explains the difference between them as “including the other side of the conversation with ‘咱們’ and excluding the other side of the conversation with ‘我們’”. The dictionary interprets “我們” as “a number of people that include ourselves”, which, according to the first note, includes the speaker and other people in most cases. Due to the conventional usage of Chinese, the number of “我們” in the original text of the report is still small compared with the number of “we”. In terms of interpersonal meaning, the report, as an important political document of historical significance, is aimed at the general public. Because the word “我們” tends to exclude the audience, it appears less frequently in the Chinese text to avoid alienating the native audience at large. At the same time, the large number of non-life subject sentences has left enough space for the use of imperative sentences, which can better appeal to the general public.

The “we” in the English text conveyed a message that reflects the collective wisdom and represents the authority of the report, while it also avoids distancing itself from foreign readers compared to other subjects, delivering a sense of intimacy and unity. For example, many foreign governments and expatriates are concerned about the latest development in China and want to know how the Chinese government presents and evaluates its five-year plan and the arrangements for the next five-year plan, so adding “we” can not only reflect the authority of the information but also bring the readers closer.

According to Shi Yuzhi (2007), the modal meaning of modal verbs can be divided into three magnitudes: necessity, possibility, and virtuality. “Will” can express subjective beliefs and logical and social obligations of necessity when expressing modal meaning. Translators continued to consider adding modal verbs to convey interpersonal meaning after the addition of the subject. “Will,” as a medium-valued modal verb, does not convey as strong an attitude as a high-valued modal verb, nor does it call into question the reliability of the message as a low-valued modal verb. It can express the speaker’s truthfulness about the events taking place, can reflect the confidence of the country’s leaders in all their work and the determination of the Party and the country to achieve the people’s growing need for a better life, playing a certain politically motivating role in conveying subjective beliefs. In Example 1, the original text is a juxtaposition of unattributed statements, and the translator has taken the social implications of the modal verbs used into account, constructing a medium modal value through the collocation of “we will” to achieve interpersonal equivalence between the original text and the translated text. On the one hand, it reflected the representativeness and authority of the report. On the other hand, it also brought the text closer to Western readers and called on them to heed China’s call on international issues.

#### ***4.2 Equivalent translation***

The high-value modal verbs occur 203 times in the original text, of which 93 were transformed into their

English equivalent high-value modal verbs, 59 into low- and medium-value modal verbs, while the remaining 52 were transformed into other forms that are not modal verbs but are part of the modal system, for example, adjectival verbs and adverbial forms, with the main words in this part being “必須” and “堅決”. In this study, we will only discuss the part where the quantitative transformation has taken place.

From the statistics above, it can be seen that 2/3 of the high-value modal verbs were transformed into their corresponding values in the English translation, and the remaining 1/3 were transformed into medium and low values. When searching the data, it was found that equivalent translation was mostly found in those emphasizing the duties of Party members, Party affairs, and the governance philosophy of the CPC. A more interesting phenomenon lies in the different translation strategies adopted by the translators for modal verbs towards international affairs, mainly in terms of the positions held by China on domestic hotspot issues and its diplomatic philosophy. For example, when talking about the Hong Kong-Taiwan issue, the central government stated that:

(2) 必須把維護中央對香港、澳門特別行政區全面管治權和保障特別行政區高度自治權有機結合起來。

We must ensure both the central government’s overall jurisdiction over the Hong Kong and Macao special administrative regions and a high degree of autonomy in the two regions.

The Hong Kong-Taiwan issue has always been a hotspot issue to the foreign media, and the facts were often distorted in the report on related topics. For example, in the past two years, we have often seen foreign media reports implying Taiwan as a country or treating the terms “Taiwan” and “China” as juxtaposition rather than as a form of subordination. As we all know, territorial integrity is a matter of principle and bottom line, and the use of the high-value modal verb “必須” in the original text expressed the translators’ full consideration of this situation, therefore the translation employed equivalent translation and high-value modal verbs to express China’s firm position on the Hong Kong-Taiwan issue, safeguarding national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Cheng Zhenqiu (2003), a senior foreign affairs translator in China, has pointed out that translators doing political translations must have political awareness, as such texts often involve important national guidelines and policies, and the slightest carelessness could lead to a major mistake.

### 4.3 *Adaptation*

When writing about the initiative to build a human community with a shared future, the report put forward “five principles” for international relations, all of which use the high-value modal verb “要”.

(3) 要同舟共濟, 促進貿易和投資自由化便利化, 推動經濟全球化朝著更加開放、包容、普惠、平衡、共贏的方向發展。

We should stick together through thick and thin, promote trade and investment liberalization and facilitation, and make economic globalization more open, inclusive, and balanced so that its benefits are shared by all.

The original text used the high-value modal verb “要”, but the translator has adapted it into the medium-value modal verb “should” rather than the equivalent one “must”. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary interprets “should” as “to show what is right, appropriate, etc.,” and “must” as “to say that something is necessary or very important.” Different countries have different ideologies due to many factors such as religion, culture, and geographical location. For example, China advocates trade and investment liberalization, but some countries, represented by the United States, have frequently launched trade wars against China on the grounds of trade deficits, which have cracked down on many Chinese high-end technology companies. The “five principles”

was just China's initiatives, indicating the right approach to international affairs in China's belief, but it is not necessary for all countries. The high-value modal verbs convey a strong sense of inevitability, as a result, foreign readers will read them with a threatening, arbitrary and even coercive image of the Chinese government in their mind. The translators took full account of the international situation and the ideological differences between countries, and turned high values into medium values, making the Chinese government's positions and initiatives more acceptable and thus better play the role of an appeal. The same applied to topics like "Belt and Road Initiative" and socialism with Chinese characteristics, which were often viewed differently by foreign media due to ideological and historical-cultural differences. Most of the developed Western countries follow a capitalist path, and the fact that China and the West follow different paths in terms of fundamental political systems also determines the ideological gap between them.

(4) 要以「一帶一路」建設為重點。

We should pursue the Belt and Road Initiative as a priority.

First proposed in 2013, the "Belt and Road Initiative" referred to the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road", and was officially translated as "One Belt, One Road" at first. It was later translated as "Belt and Road Initiative" to indicate that it was not a unilateral project promoted by China and to distinguish it from the Marshall Plan, indicating that it was only a Chinese initiative to build a regional cooperation platform for a human community with a shared future, which requires all countries to work together. In Western societies, where human rights and freedom of worship are the hallmarks, translating such initiatives in equivalent translation will inevitably leave the reader with the impression of being preachy, contrary to their deeply rooted cultural background. The readers, as one of the subjects of the translation activity, do not passively understand and accept the translation, but more actively and dynamically understand the translation by mobilizing his or her previous knowledge and cognitive potential, and absorb richer cultural knowledge through the translated text (Li Xiaochuan, 2012). In the process of translating modal verbs, the translators should be familiar with the language habits and acceptance of the readers, so that the translation will conform to the habits of the target language, and make appropriate adjustments to avoid overly rigid translations. In dealing with these issues, the translators used the method of adaptation, which not only clearly stated the position of the Chinese government, but also avoided the negative effect of causing disputes.

## 4 Conclusion

In an increasingly internationalized world, how to tell Chinese stories, build Chinese images, and spread Chinese voices are crucial to China's international status. Taking the report of the 19th National Congress and its English translation as the study text, this paper explored how translators achieve interpersonal equivalence in the translation process of modal verbs. Results showed that translators mainly adopted three strategies of equivalent translation, adaptation, and amplification. In general, the translators have been faithful to the original text in the translation of the report, taking into account the cultural differences between readers in different countries and realizing the reconstruction of interpersonal function. The study further analyzed the translation of modal verbs on the basis of previous comparative studies of the English and Chinese modalities, but modality is a large and complex system, and due to limited space, it is inevitable that the analysis will be incomplete in the process, so



it is worth expectation to study the political documents from other dimensions of the modal system.

## Notes

① The examples in this paper are all from *China Daily*. Here is the link: [http://language.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201711/06/WS5d034782a3103dbf1432840b\\_5.html](http://language.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201711/06/WS5d034782a3103dbf1432840b_5.html).

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