



[Translation Studies]

Researching the Translation of Implicit Modifiers in Chinese Chunks

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Abstract: This research aims to investigate the correlation between translators' construal of implicit modifiers in Chinese political chunks and their performance in target English translation. Five major types of the explication of Chinese implicit modifiers in English translation have been found, namely, zero, varied, partial, identical, and mixed ones. In addition, significant differences were found between student and expert translators in construing and manifesting the implicit modifiers in Chinese ST. These findings shed light on bilingual education in Chinese universities and the importance of raising awareness of implicit modifiers for proficient translation.

Keywords: Chinese chunks; implicitness of modifier; explicit translation

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1. Research Background

Language chunks, or formulaic sequences, multi-word expressions are pivotal as the “building blocks” of languages, accounting for 50% – 80 % in different corpora. It holds true in Chinese, which features a high proportion of Chinese chunks featuring implicit semantic and pragmatic implication (WANG, 2020). When such chunks are translated into English, the implicit meanings in Chinese chunks are critical for the source text (ST)

to be effectively transferred to the target text (TT). This process normally involves the identification of implicit semantic and pragmatic implications in chunks exhibited by words, phrases, and sentences (Cabezas–García 2023; Ji 2010; Naciscione, 2011; Núñez–Román 2016). Based on the spatiotemporal theory (WANG, 2013; 2019), Chinese chunky language is featured by separateness and discreteness, as opposed to English cohesiveness and continuity. Such bilingual differences pose significant challenges for translators (particularly student translators) in dealing with the Chinese–English (C–E) translation involving the transformation from ST chunks to temporality–featured English TT (LIU, et. al. 2021).

Specifically, in C–E translation, Chinese university students prove to be weak at recognizing chunks in Chinese STs. A comparison between expert and student translations reveals that modifiers in Chinese chunks are extremely difficult for student translators to identify (ZHU, 2014). However, systematic research, both domestically and internationally, on implicit modifiers hidden in Chinese ST chunks and their C–E translation remains scarce (LIU, 2021; CAO et al, 2023). Thus, investigating the implicitness of chunks and their effect on student English translation turns out to be necessary.

In recent years, China has witnessed some relevant research achievements in this domain. There is consensus that understanding Chinese implied meaning relies primarily on contextual and chunk analysis, which falls mainly into three research perspectives: Chinese chunks, Chinese chunk translation, and Chinese current–affair chunks. The three fields of chunk research in China are represented by XUE (2013), Wang and LIU (2020), Zhang and YANG (2023) respectively. In the field of Chinese chunk research, XUE and SHI (2013) and HONG (2021) pointed out that the relationship between chunks and constructions, and the hierarchical relationship of Chinese chunks should be systematically analyzed. In the field of Chinese chunk translation research, scholars have concluded that English translations must prioritize explicating the implied meaning of Chinese chunks (WANG & LIU, 2020; DAN, 1996). Research on Chinese characteristic chunks in the field of political discourse revealed that translators’ grasp of the implied meaning will directly influence the translation process and translation quality (ZHANG & YANG, 2023; LIU et al. , 2021).

Studies abroad typically focus on three relevant aspects of research. Nattinger (1992) and Alwhan (2019) define chunks as lexical phrases of varying lengths and characterize them as a distinct multi–word lexical phenomenon in English. Chinese scholars stress that the implied meaning of Chinese chunks should be explicitly translated into English for the sake of successful dissemination and thus the interpretation of such implied meaning is critical for the accuracy of C–E translation (WANG, 2020; LI, 2021). In political translation, the characteristics of chunks and the factors affecting translation quality of Chinese chunky expressions are unveiled to offer theoretical framework for a deeper understanding of socialism with Chinese characteristics and China’s political system and provide the practical guidance of C–E translation that promotes cross cultural and political communication (DU, 2022; SUN, 2022; CHEN, 2023).

These studies highlight the critical relationship between implicit meanings in Chinese and their English translation outcomes. The theoretical framework of Chinese spatiality and English temporality further illuminates the implicitness of chunks in the Chinese language. However, previous research, both domestically and internationally, has yet to fully explore the correlation between the construal of implicitness in Chinese chunks and their explicitation in English translation. Therefore, this study demonstrates the rationality of a multidimensional theoretical framework grounded in C–E spatiotemporal difference theory.



To achieve the above objective and find solutions to student translators' problems with construing implicit modifiers in Chinese chunks and manifesting them in target English, this research focuses on two key questions:

- 1) What are the encoding features typical of Chinese political chunks loaded with implicit modifiers?
- 2) How do Chinese learner translators construe and reconstruct implicit modifiers in English translation?

An empirical corpus-based approach will be employed to classify and analyze implicit modifiers in Chinese political chunks and their English equivalents. This method will yield insights into the analysis and classification of other implicit semantic components in Chinese political chunks, such as agents, actions, patients, etc. The findings are expected to provide empirical support for bilingual education in Chinese universities and promote the synchronous development of bilingual ability among English majors.

2. Methodology

This study aims to unveil the positive correlation between the identification of implicit modifiers in Chinese political chunks and the development of C-E translation competence in student translators. The findings thereupon are expected to provide insights into the practice and reform of English education in Chinese universities. For this purpose, the research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining case studies, a translation test, and a questionnaire survey.

Based on the Chinese-English spatiotemporal theory and the initial state of corpus analysis, five Chinese chunky samples were randomly selected for the current experiment. They cover diverse syntactic constructions, including the combinations of clauses and noun phrases. Four target chunky expressions are independent sentences, while the other one (S_2) is embedded in a longer sentence. The 40 participants are fourth-year undergraduate English majors at a Zhejiang university, aged 22 on average, with over 10 years of English as a foreign language learning experience since primary school (aged 9). At the time of the test, all participants had completed relevant courses (e.g., Translation Theories and Practices, Introductory Interpreting, and Advanced Translation) in their second or third year, acquiring foundational theories and initial C-E translation training.

The paper test is then followed by a case study and a questionnaire for an in-depth knowledge of how students' proficiency influences their decoding of implicit modifiers when translating Chinese chunky expressions into English.

A mixed approach that integrates qualitative and quantitative research methods is employed during the analytical stage, with the former being supported by five types of "explicitness" of modifiers in TTs illustrated by student translators, and the latter by percentage figures regarding each type of "explicitness" in students' TTs.

3. Results and Analyses

The experiment was conducted using five C-E translation samples, with students' translations compared against expert translations, with the latter serving as reference norms. Below are examples of expert and student translations. Source texts (STs) 1-5 refer to the Chinese source texts, while expert target translations are labeled as ETTs (1-5) in contrast to STTs (1-40), which denote students' target translations. The following gives the details.

Table 1-1 Source text (ST₁) and expert target translation (ETT₁)

ST ₁	使命呼唤擔當, 使命引領未來。
ETT ₁	<i>Our</i> mission is a call to action; <i>our</i> mission steers the course to the future.

The ETT₁ in Table 1-1 shows that the modifier *our* is required for *mission* so as to emphasize that it is *we* that is assumed to take the responsibility of *mission*. The possessive pronoun *our*, by contrast, connects the internal components of a sentence, featuring the connectivity and continuity characterized by English temporality.

As opposed to experts' output, students' translations below manifest varied "manifestation" types as a result of the construal of ST implicit modifiers. The statistics, analyses, and conclusions below manifest the general tendency represented by four types of implicitness manifestation in STTs of ST₁.

Table 1-2 Various manifestations of implicit modifiers in students' translation

	Zero	Varied	Partial	Identical	Total
occurrences	28	9	1	1	40
percentage	70	22.5	2.5	2.5	100

As is clear from the above table, a majority of students (70%) fail to recognize the necessity of including an explicit statement of the shoulders of responsibility, leaving the "mission" vague for the performers. While students commonly omit the possessive pronouns, some use the noun "mission" as the shared subject (STT₃) of the translation or independent subject of two separate sentences, just as in the original STT₃ and STT₉. Two cases of student translation typical of zero manifestation are as follows:

STT₃: Mission calls for duty and leads to future.

STT₉: Mission calls for our undertaking. The mission leads to our future.

The second largest group of *modifier* explicitation is viewed as a "varied" type (22.5%), realized by students' use of the neutral modifier *the*. This type of modifier manifestation indicates that the definite article (*the*) is used instead of (*our*), and it usually appears in the first part of the sentence. The student target translations (STT₁₀, STT₁₄) in the following show the detail:

STT₁₀: *The* mission calls for responsibility and leads future.

STT₁₄: *The* mission calls for efforts, *the* mission leads the future.

The use of neutral modifiers in interpreting implicit ones in Chinese chunks entails that while students may be sensitive to grammatical correctness, they lack awareness of the implied modifiers. The definite determiner fulfills a grammatical role but carries varied indications of the speakers' stance.

As a minor type, partial explicitation of the implicit modifiers indicates that student translators recognize the need for possessive pronouns in the TTs, but they often fail to grasp the intended meaning that is conveyed through the repeated use of "使命" (*mission*) in the ST₁. However, this type of translation accounts for only



2.5% in total (STT₁₇).

Similarly, only 2.5% of participants (1 of 40) decoded and expressed an implicit modifier identical to the expert's stance awareness (STT₃₀, for example, “*Our* missions call us to take on, and *our* missions will lead to that future.”). This “identical” translation shows that student translators managed to successfully understand the original sentence and conveyed the implicit modifier.

The above STT manifestation of implicit modifier in ST₁ is probably due to the fact that student translators do not really construe the implicit modifier in ST₁ on the basis of spatiotemporal particularities between Chinese and English, thus leading to simple literal transformation of two different languages by means of various types of modifier explicitation as opposed to that in expert TT₁.

Table 2-1 Source text (ST₂) and expert target translation (ETT₂)

ST ₂	你們要把愛國之情、強國、報國之行統一起來。
ETT ₂	You are called upon to integrate <i>your</i> patriotic love, <i>your</i> aspiration to make the country strong and <i>your</i> actions to serve it, ...

The ETT₂ in Table 2–1 shows that expert translators have added *your* before expressions like “patriotic love”, “aspiration to make the country strong”, and “actions” to involve the youth in a direct way so that they may feel like being spoken to directly. This interpretation emphasizes the vocative appeal of the youth's devotion to love and service to their mother nation, China. In the meanwhile, the use of the second–person pronoun also echoes with the subject of the sentence – *you*, indicating that the summons is focused and expected of action.

The following STT examples of ST₂ indicate that students' translations tend to exhibit three types of modifier explicitation, namely “zero”, “varied”, and “partial”. By comparing and analyzing the cognitive differences between students and professional translators, this example aims to explore how translators' understanding of the implicit modifier “*your*” in Chinese political discourse influences C–E translation.

Students' translations, however, demonstrate a significantly different statistical pattern in construing the original Chinese chunky expression and rendering it into target English. Their performance is presented in Table 2-2 below.

Table 2-2 Various manifestations of implicit modifiers in students' translation

	Zero	Varied	Partial	Identical	Total
occurrences	16	21	3	0	40
percentage	40	52.5	7.5	0	100

As is obvious in Table 2–2, a significant portion (52.5%) of students demonstrate a *varied* type of modifier explicitation by using the definite determiner “*the*” instead of the expert's repeated “*your*”. Although “*the*” satisfies the grammatical requirements of the target language, it lacks the expected vocative meaning and thus fails to arouse an earnest desire for national love, aspiration, and action from Chinese young people. By using this definite article, less experienced student translators imply that the patriotic love, aspiration, and service to the nation can be carried out by anyone. Although readers will not have any problem understanding the surface meaning in English, they are less likely to be moved or inspired to take action. Thus, the intended meaning of the original chunky expression is to a large extent lost during translation processing. The following two STT

examples provide the details:

STT₃: You need to integrate *the* patriotic love, aspiration to make the country strong and action to retribute our country.

STT₄: You need to integrate *the* patriotic love, *the* aspiration that makes the country strong and *the* action that protects the country together.

The second most common interpretation is the *zero* explicitation, accounting for 40% of the total translation occurrences. With no determiners or pronouns used in the translation, the vocative meaning is vacated to a further degree. Their translations read plain and dull, with no direct involvement of any individuals. No actions can be expected to take place, either.

By contrast, only a minority of students (7.5%) interpret and realize the vocative intention in the original when translating into English. As shown in the following STT₁₇ and STT₁₉ examples featuring *partial* explicitation, the students are satisfied with “*your*” being used at the beginning of the translation of chunky expressions, believing it makes communication personal and direct.

STT₁₇: You should integrate *your* patriotic love and aspiration to make the country strong into practical actions.

STT₁₉: You should integrate *your* patriotic love, aspiration to make the country strong and behavior to devote the country.

The above examples of partial explicitation show that while a small group of students noticed the intended meaning to a certain degree, they fail to stress this intention by using the second-person pronoun repeatedly in their translation. Therefore, the comparison between STTs produced by student translators with those of experts shows that student translators rarely recognize implicit modifiers (e. g. , *your*) correctly, and their recognition of implicit possessive pronoun modifiers, particularly regarding “*your*” is relatively weak.

Table 3-1 Source text (ST₃) and expert target translation (ETT₃)

ST ₃	人民有信仰, 國家有力量, 民族有希望.
ETT ₃	When the people have ideals, <i>their</i> country will have strength, and <i>their</i> nation will have a bright future.

Despite the various purposes of expressing a vocative intention by using *our* and *your*, expert translators may also use the third-person plural pronoun to fill the grammatical slot that is normally required in the target language. As ST₃ in Table 3-1 indicates, a direct possessive relationship can be read between the components of the ST chunky expression. The modifier “*their*” is added before nouns like “*country*” and “*nation*”. This type of modifier explicitation is also used to refer to those unspecified individuals and hence allows the original expression to be applicable to any country or nation in the world.

As evident in the translation, experts have added “*their*” before “*country*” and “*nation*”, emphasizing that when the people have ideals, *their* country has strength, and only then can *their* nation have hope. Experts have



translated the implicit and explicit elements in Chinese, allowing the target reader to better recognize them. What has been emphasized is that the country is the people's (or *their*) country, and the nation is the people's (or *their*) nation. The translator uses the possessive pronoun (*their*) to make the implicit modifiers in the target English as explicit as possible for the reader.

Student translations can also be classified into four types, namely “zero”, “varied”, “partial”, and “mixed”. By comparing and analyzing the cognitive differences between students and professional translators, the researcher intends to explore how translators' understanding of the implicit modifier (*their*) in Chinese ST influences their C-E translation.

Table 3-2 Various manifestations of implicit modifiers in students' translation

	Zero	Varied	Partial	Mixed	Total
occurrences	16	22	1	1	40
percentage	40	55	2.5	2.5	100

As evident in Table 3-2, a dominant tendency in students' translation is the zero (40%) and varied (55%) explicitation of the implied modifier in the ST original chunky expression. The other two types (partial and mixed) of explicitation in STTs are rarely found, with only one occurrence each. The following examples show how a majority of students interpret the intended meaning or latent modifier in terms of zero and varied types.

STT₂: People have ideals, country has strength, nation gets future.

STT₅: As long as people have ideals, then country has strength and nation has hope.

STT₈: It is the country's hope that people have ideals and the country has strength.

A closer examination of these three STTs reveals that zero explicitation may result from two reasons, namely the inability to identify the implied meaning in this type of chunky expressions like ST₃ and, more importantly, the under-proficiency of the target language. Nouns like *country* and *nation* are countable, which require either plural modifiers or determiners (definite or indefinite) to be used.

The following STTs are labeled as partial (+ mixed) explicitation (STT₁₇), mixed (STT₂₃), and varied explicitation (STT₆). In these examples, pronouns like “*their*” and “*this*” or the definite article “*the*” are added prior to the two nouns – “*country*” and “*nation*”.

STT₁₇: When people possess ideals and *their* country is full of strength, *this* nation can have a hopeful future.

STT₂₃: People has ideals, and *the* country have strength, thus *our* nation will have the hope.

STT₆: The people have ideals, *the* country has strength, *the* nation has hope.

The above types of modifier manifestation suggest that some student translators fail to notice that translating ST₃ chunky expressions involves an attachment of translators' emotions to the words. The use of *this* and *the* in the STT₁₇ and STT₆ above shows a subjective and less involvement on the part of the student translators. “*our*” in



STT₂₃, though different from “*their*” in ETT₃, may be considered reasonably plausible.

Table 4-1 Source text (ST₄) and expert target translation (ETT₄)

ST ₄	主旋律更加响亮, 正能量更加强劲,
ETT ₄	<i>Our country's</i> underlying values hold greater appeal than ever before, and the wave of positive energy <i>felt throughout society</i> is building.

Implicit modifiers are not always decoded as pronouns. Sometimes nouns may be added to facilitate readers' comprehension, as seen in ST₄, where the modifier *our country's* is supplemented for “*underlying values*” and “*felt throughout society*” is added for “*the wave of positive energy*” in ETT₄ – the expert target translation. Student translations feature two types, “zero” and “varied”. Notably, expert translators have added “*our country's*” before “*underlying values*” and “*felt throughout society*” before “*positive energy*” to emphasize the main theme of our country and the positive energy of the entire society. The English translation reveals the implicit elements in the Chinese ST — “*our country*” and “*felt throughout society*”. By comparing and analyzing the cognitive differences between students and professional translators, one can find the impact of translators' understanding of implicit nominal and post-participle modifiers in Chinese ST on their C-E translation.

Table 4-2 below shows the overwhelming “priority” of varied explicitation (75%) over zero one (25%) and two other types (0%) as well.

Table 4-2 Various manifestations of implicit modifiers in students' translation

	Zero	Varied	Partial	Mixed	Total
occurrences	10	30	0	0	40
percentage	25	75	0	0	100

By comparing and analyzing student translations with expert translations, it can be found that student translators rarely recognize implicit modifiers (e. g. , *our*) as reflected in ETT₄, and their recognition of implicit possessive-pronoun modifiers appears relatively weak. Moreover, the majority of student translators employ the definite article “*the*” to simply replace noun-phrase modifiers, as indicated by the following varied explicitation cases (75%) in STTs:

STT₁: *The* main melody holds greater appeal than ever before, *the* positive energy shows stronger power than ever before.

STT₂: *The* mainstream holds greater appeal than ever before, *the* positive power has strengthened than ever before.

STT₃₈: *Our* main melody holds greater appeal than ever before, *our* positive energy becomes stronger than ever before.

The possessive pronoun “*our*” in the STT₃₈ seems preferable to the high-percentage determiner “*the*”, even though the former does not fully fit the context or match “*our country's*” in the expert translator's ETT₄. The participle modifier “*felt throughout society*” proves to be particularly challenging for student translators to



recognize or apply, as it is deeply embedded in the ST₄. A significant amount of non-linguistic knowledge is strongly required of student translators.

Table 5-1 below presents a sentence-based chunk in which expert translators construe the implicit nominal modifier:

Table 5-1 Source text (ST₅) and expert target translation (ETT₅)

ST ₅	持之以恆正風肅紀.
ETT ₅	Working ceaselessly to improve <i>Party</i> conduct and enforce <i>Party</i> discipline.

Evidently, expert translators have recognized and thus manifested the concept of “*Party*” conduct and “*Party*” discipline. In other words, improving conduct and enforcing discipline typically require the involvement of “*Party*” members, who must strictly demand self-standards, improve self-discipline, abide by laws and “*Party*” regulations, and keep the *Party*’s purpose and mission in mind. It is unimaginable in the Chinese context for there to be no manifestation of “*Party*” to “restrain” or “modify” *conduct* and *discipline*. But it is no easy undertaking for student translators to identify “*Party*” as Table 5-2 in the following gives the statistical details.

Table 5-2 Various manifestations of implicit modifiers in students’ translation

	Zero	Varied	Partial	Mixed	Total
occurrences	7	31	0	2	40
percentage	17.5	77.5	0	5	100

The statistics in the table reveal three types of modifier explicitation in students’ translation of ST₅, where varied explicitation (77.5%) takes overwhelming priority over zero explicitation (17.5%) and mixed explicitation (5%). Partial explicitation is entirely absent in students’ translations, as also shown in Table 4-2. By comparing and analyzing the cognitive differences between student and expert translators, the impact of understanding the implicit “*Party*” modifier in ST₅ on student translations turns out to be striking. The following examples of STTs illustrate specific types of modifier explicitation: zero (STT₁), varied (STT₃) and mixed (STT₃₈).

STT₁: We should keep it and never give up that we can improve customs and enforce discipline.

STT₃: We need to preserve to improve *the* style of work and enforce *the* discipline.

STT₃₈: Remember our responsibility and keep going, improve *our* ethics and enforce *the* rules.

To sum up, based on the above presentations and their analyses of five C-E translation samples by student translators, it is evident that student translations face multiple challenges in manifesting implicit modifiers in C-E translation. This is reflected in the problematic types of modifier manifestation in students’ English TTs. The key reason for these issues probably lies in students’ insufficient awareness of Chinese linguistic spatiality and its implicitness, as embodied by the latent modifiers in ST chunks. This is corroborated by the fact that most student translators fail to identify implicit possessive pronouns or nominal modifiers in Chinese political chunks, resulting in a particularly high prevalence of zero and varied explicitation in their English translations.

4. Findings and Implications

4.1 Findings

The most important findings obtained as a result of the above description and analysis are as follows:

Student translators are facing many problems in manifesting the implicit modifiers in C-E translation, as reflected in their problematic types of modifier manifestation in English TTs. The possible reason for these problems probably lies in students' insufficient awareness of Chinese spatiality and its implicitness as embodied by the implicit modifiers in Chinese chunks.

A positive correlation is found between the ability to identify the implicit modifiers in Chinese chunks and the ability to translate them into English, thus revealing the bilingual relationship of ST Chinese and TT English. This implies the necessity and importance of synchronous training and consistent development of the mother tongue and English in Chinese universities, particularly for the part of university English majors.

The awareness of bilingual differences featuring Chinese spatiality and English temporality is assumed to affect the quality of English translation and to be conducive to translators' cognitive processing in C-E translation, as shown by professionals' efficient processing outcomes and students' zero and varied manifestation of implicit modifiers in English TT although student translators do not seem to have linguistic problems in both Chinese and English.

Chunks loaded with implicit modifiers appear to be hierarchical, ranging from the lexical level to the sentence level, and even to the discourse level, as reflected by independent and dependent chunks. The difficulty of "implicitness" construal at different levels of chunks proves to increase from less idiomatic chunks to more idiomatic ones, suggesting the differing impact of the Chinese mother tongue on English translation regarding ST implicit modifiers in particular.

Student learners with a better understanding of implicit semantic features turn out to use diverse translation strategies while translating. More strikingly, student translators with a strong ability to understand implicit modifiers are inclined to adopt more flexible and innovative translation strategies regarding the awareness of cultural background and application of context in STs to manifest implicit meanings in English TTs.

The interactive competence of cognitive construal and bilingual efficiency proves to be crucial. In other words, the ability to understand implicit modifiers is closely related to students' cognitive ability and bilingual processing efficiency, suggesting that the improvement of such competence is expected to promote the efficiency and accuracy of C-E translation, particularly concerning ST implicit chunks.

4.2 Implications

The current investigation reveals the close relationship between the identification of Chinese implicit meanings and the enhancement of English majors' competence in bilingual translation. The results provide a systematic and comprehensive educational scenario for English education in Chinese universities. Notably, sensitivity to and mastery of implicit meanings in Chinese can help students better interpret implicit meanings in Chinese chunky texts for the sake of TT translation. Meanwhile, this study highlights the importance of cross-



cultural competence in developing English translation ability, especially when dealing with texts with rich and implicit cultural and ideological connotations. Cultivating such competence not only benefits C-E translation but also helps students enhance their knowledge of and proficiency with implicit modifiers in various languages. Therefore, English education in the future is expected to focus on cultivating students' ability to understand implicit meanings in Chinese political chunks, so as to promote their comprehensive C-E translation proficiency.

Finally, it is necessary to point out the limitations of this study as normally shown in similar studies: 1) limitations of sample scope, 2) limited research tools and methods, 3) limited data analysis, and 4) limitations of spatiotemporal difference and cultural background. It is hoped that future studies will address these limitations and make progress in further investigation.

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