

The Representation and Reconstruction of Interpersonal Meaning in the English Translation of the *Report on the Work of the Government*: A Modality System Perspective

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Abstract: Using Chinese–English parallel texts from the *Report on the Work of the Government* published between 2010 and 2019, this study investigates the reconstruction of interpersonal meaning in the English translations. The analysis adopts a corpus-based approach and takes the modality system as the main analytical framework. The findings indicate that a large proportion of modal expressions in the English translations do not have direct counterparts in the Chinese source texts, resulting in the reconstruction of modal type, modal orientation, and modal value. These expressions are introduced during the translation process. Their distribution is concentrated in inclination-based modality, implicit modal orientation, and median modal value. In concordance lines where modal expressions appear in both the Chinese texts and the English translations, the English versions present a lower degree of obligation in modal type. They also show a stronger tendency toward implicit modal orientation and a higher level of modal value than the Chinese originals.

Keywords: Interpersonal meaning; English translation of the *Report on the Work of the Government*; Modality system; Corpus

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1. Introduction

The *Report on the Work of the Government* functions as a key policy document for presenting China's national development agenda and major governance priorities. Its official English version has strong institutional authority and serves as an important medium through which the Chinese government communicates policy positions to international audiences. Analysis of interpersonal meaning in this translated text helps clarify how the government, as discourse producer, constructs its institutional stance and

builds communicative relations with overseas readers. A comparison between the Chinese source text and the English target text also shows how interpersonal relations are adjusted and reshaped across linguistic and cultural contexts.

Drawing on Halliday's modality framework in Systemic Functional Linguistics, this study examines the representation and reconstruction of interpersonal meaning in the English translations of the *Report on the Work of the Government* from 2010 to 2019. The analysis focuses on modal type, modal orientation, and modal value. These three dimensions are used to trace changes in interpersonal positioning over the ten-year period and to identify major linguistic and contextual factors influencing translational choices.

2. Literature review

Research on English translation of political discourse has received sustained attention in China and overseas. Existing studies on official political documents mainly discuss prescriptive translation principles^[1-2]. As these texts belong to institutional translation, related research often takes the form of textual analysis or translator commentary^[3-5]. In terms of analytical units, earlier studies tend to focus on specific lexical items, such as the Four Comprehensives, or broader linguistic features, including collocation patterns^[6-7]. Their research scope is often limited to single texts, especially the *Report on the Work of the Government*, such as translation commentary, general linguistic features, personal pronouns, and thematic keywords^[8-13]. Recent studies have examined modal verb translation in the Report from an interpersonal perspective. Tian, using a corpus-based method, analyzed modal verb translation from 2000 to 2022^[14]. The study found that translators often render high-value Chinese modal expressions as medium- or low-value English forms. This strategy reduces the psychological distance between source-text audiences and target readers. Lin and He investigated interpersonal meanings conveyed by modal verbs in English versions of the Report from 2013 to 2024^[15]. Their findings show that frequent use of we will structures reflects a translation orientation shaped by target-reader expectations. Together with Valdeón and Li's broader survey of political discourse translation in Chinese and Western contexts, these studies indicate increased academic concern with the mediation of interpersonal meaning in Chinese political text translation^[16].

Within systemic functional linguistics, modality is a major realization of interpersonal function. Halliday places interpersonal function alongside ideational and textual metafunctions. It concerns interaction and the maintenance of social relations through language. Recent translation studies have shown growing interest in this layer of meaning. Fu and Chen find that interpreters at press conferences adjust interpersonal meaning by explicating modality^[17]. Li, using corpus-based methods, identifies attenuation, subjectivisation, and de-obligationisation in Chinese-English conference interpreting^[18]. Xu and Liang further demonstrated that such interpersonal and appraisal shifts serve to negotiate intersubjectivity, reproducing the government's official ideology and existing power relations at premier press conferences^[19].

Previous research has clarified linguistic features and translation strategies in political texts. Yet limited attention has been given to the cross-cultural construction of interpersonal meaning through combined quantitative and qualitative methods. The representation and reconstruction of interpersonal meaning in English translations of the *Report on the Work of the Government* still require further examination. This study addresses that issue by comparing English translations with their Chinese source texts, with a focus on how interpersonal meaning is represented and reconstructed.

3. Research design

3.1. Research corpus

This study uses the *Report on the Work of the Government* and its official English translations from 2010 to 2019 as source data. A Chinese–English parallel corpus was then built from these texts. The corpus was aligned at the sentence level. The Chinese texts were segmented with ICTCLAS 3.0, and the English texts were annotated for part of speech with CLAWS 4.0. WordSmith 6.0 was used to generate the main corpus statistics, which are presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Basic information of the corpus used in this study

	Tokens	Types
Chinese source texts	93,233	6,047
English translations	151,985	6,111

Table 1 presents the size of the Chinese–English parallel corpus for the *Report on the Work of the Government*. The Chinese source texts contain 93,233 tokens, and the English translations contain 151,985 tokens.

3.2. Research procedures

This study first examines the modality system in the English translations of the Government Work Reports. On this basis, the corresponding Chinese source clauses are retrieved for bilingual comparison, with attention to the rendering of modal expressions. The analysis then considers factors that may shape these translational choices. The research procedure consists of three stages.

Word frequency lists for the English translations of the 2010–2019 Reports were generated with WordSmith 6.0. Following Halliday’s model of modality, the ten most frequent modal expressions were identified, and their concordance lines were extracted ^[20]. The analysis covered modal type, modal value, and modal orientation. The selected items include will, should, must, always, can, may, would, need/needs/needed to, it is + modal/evaluative adjective, and have/has/had to. These categories do not include every modal expression in the corpus, yet they account for most relevant cases. The item ranked tenth, have/has/had to, appears seven times in the translated subcorpus. The selection thus covers all modal expressions occurring at least seven times, which supports the representativeness of the high-frequency data.

ParaConc was then used to retrieve the Chinese source clauses aligned with the English modal concordance lines. Through comparison of modal type, orientation, and value in the bilingual pairs, the study traces the representation and reconstruction of interpersonal meaning in translation.

The final stage discusses factors related to these shifts in interpersonal meaning. The discussion centers on the register features of government work reports and the institutional constraints affecting their translation.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Representation and reconstruction of modal type

ParaConc was employed to retrieve Chinese concordance lines aligned with modal expressions identified in the English translations. The comparison of modality types between the English versions and the Chinese source texts shows a frequent absence of corresponding modal markers in the originals. This pattern indicates

that many modal expressions in the translated texts were introduced during the translation process rather than transferred directly from the source texts. When English translations add modal expressions without overt modal markers in the Chinese texts, modality shifts occur between the two versions and interpersonal meaning is consequently reconstructed. The added modality types were then counted, and the statistical results are reported in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Types of modality added in the English translations of the *Report on the Work of the Government*

Modal type	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Probability	559	16.23
Usuality	8	0.23
Obligation	352	10.22
Inclination	2,525	73.32

Table 2 indicates that inclination is the most frequent modal expression added in translation, accounting for 73.32%. Probability and obligation account for 16.23% and 10.22%, respectively, while usuality represents only 0.23%. Concordance line analysis further shows that “we will” appears as the dominant added inclination expression, as shown in Example 1.

Example 1

Source text: 加强国家创新体系建设。

Target text: We will strengthen the national innovation system.

In Example 1, the Chinese source text contains no explicit modal marker. The English translation adds the subject we and the modal verb will, changing the original proposition into a proposal with clear inclination. In systemic functional linguistics, inclination modality expresses the speaker’s willingness to offer goods or services. This added modal element foregrounds the Chinese government’s readiness for proactive action.

Modal shifts also occur when modal markers already present in the source text are transformed during translation. Modal types were examined in concordance lines where both the Chinese and English versions contain modal expressions. The results are presented in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Modal verb types in the English translations of the *Report on the Work of the Government*

Target	Source	Probability	Usuality	Obligation	Inclination
Probability		62	0	56	7
Usuality		0	21	0	0
Obligation		0	0	465	2
Inclination		8	0	253	21

Table 3 shows that obligation has the highest number of concordance lines in which the source text and translation share the same modal type, reaching 465 cases. When Chinese and English modal categories remain consistent, probability accounts for 62 cases, while usuality and inclination each account for 21 cases.

The table also records clear cross-type modal variation. Source-text probability is translated as inclination in 8 cases, while source-text inclination is rendered as probability in 56 cases.

This study examines the two most frequent patterns of modal shift. One pattern involves English inclination corresponding to Chinese obligation, with 253 cases. The other involves English probability corresponding to Chinese obligation, with 56 cases. Both patterns show that obligation in the Chinese source is reconstructed as another modal type in the English translation. This process may be described as de-obligationisation. The English translations tend to reduce obligation force, as obligation markers in the Chinese texts are often rendered through inclination or probability in the target texts. Such shifts weaken the obligatory meaning carried by the source text, as shown in Example 2.

Example 2

Source text: 今明两年要解决好饮水困难人口的饮水安全问题, 提高 6000 万农村人口供水保障水平。

Target text: Remaining problems in access to safe drinking water will be resolved within two years so that an additional 60 million rural residents have access to safe drinking water.

In Example 2, the Chinese modal item *yao* conveys obligation, while the English version uses *will* to indicate probability. This rendering shows a modal mismatch: target-text probability corresponds to source-text obligation. **Table 3** further presents this distribution. English obligation is largely preserved from source texts, with 465 instances retained and only two instances transferred from other source-text modal categories. By contrast, source-text obligation is often rendered through other modal values in English. Except for usability, which shows no transfer, probability, obligation, and inclination record 56, 465, and 253 instances respectively, all derived from source-text obligation.

From the perspective of target-text modal selection, the data indicate a tendency toward de-obligationisation. This pattern supports Li's finding on de-obligationisation in Chinese-English press conference interpreting^[18]. Through analysis of modality in written translation, this study further shows that modal markers may appear in both Chinese source texts and English translations, yet the English target texts reduce obligatory force in a clear and systematic way.

4.2. Representation and reconstruction of modal orientation

An analysis of modal orientation shows that added modality in the English translations is mainly implicit subjective modality, with 3,426 occurrences. The other three categories appear only rarely: explicit subjective modality occurs 4 times, implicit objective modality 8 times, and explicit objective modality 6 times. This distribution is closely related to corpus selection. The items extracted from the frequency lists are mostly modal verbs, and modal verbs normally carry implicit subjective orientation. They thus serve as the main means of expressing added modality in the English translations of the Report. The result indicates a clear tendency toward subjectivisation in translation, as many objective expressions in the source texts are translated into subjective forms through the insertion of implicit subjective modal verbs.

To further examine this pattern, cases where modal expressions appear in both the Chinese source texts and the English translations were compared. In Chinese grammar, the boundary between modal adverbs and modal verbs is often unstable. This feature makes it difficult to distinguish implicit subjective modality

from implicit objective modality in the Chinese corpus. For methodological consistency, these two subtypes are combined, with the analysis focusing on the broader distinction between implicit modality and explicit modality.

The comparative results indicate that 98.88% of translated modal expressions, excluding translator-added cases, maintain the same implicit or explicit status as their Chinese counterparts. This high correspondence rate suggests that when modality is present in both texts, the English translation generally follows the modal orientation of the Chinese original. The remaining mismatched cases account for only 1.12% and have limited analytical weight. They mainly involve Chinese polar modal expressions rendered into English as it is + modal or evaluative adjective structures, showing only a slight shift toward explicit orientation.

4.3. Representation and reconstruction of modal value

The values of modal expressions added in the English translations were tabulated. Results indicate that the modal expressions added in the English translations are predominantly of median value, accounting for 95.50%, while those of high and low value constitute only 1.95% and 2.56%, respectively. In point of fact, the use of any modal word inherently lowers the degree of certainty relative to a polar expression devoid of modality: “even a high-value modal (‘certainly’, ‘always’) is less certain than a polar form”^[21]. Given that the vast majority of modal words in the English translations of the Report were added during translation, the English texts as a whole exhibit a tendency toward attenuated certainty relative to the Chinese source texts.

A further analysis was conducted of those instances where modal expressions appear in both the English and Chinese texts, with a view to examining shifts in modal value. Corpus results show that the proportions of high-, median-, and low-value modality in the English translations that correspond to the same modal value in the Chinese source are 49.22%, 96.55%, and 96.55%, respectively. Clearly, median- and low-value modalities in the English translations align closely with their Chinese counterparts. By contrast, high-value modality in the translation derives primarily from median- and high-value categories in the source texts. Overall, cases of modal value intensification in translation significantly outnumber those of attenuation. Specifically, there are 138 instances of intensification, where the translated modal value exceeds that of the source. Conversely, only 15 instances of attenuation are observed, where the translated modal value is lower than the source. These figures indicate that when modal expressions occur in both texts, intensification is the predominant tendency.

5. Conclusion

This study examines the representation and reconstruction of interpersonal meaning in the English translations of the *Report on the Work of the Government* from 2010 to 2019, with the modality system as the analytical framework. The results show that modality in the translated texts is mainly marked by inclination, implicit subjective orientation, and median modal value. Most modal expressions are not directly derived from the Chinese source texts. They are introduced during translation and are largely inclination-based, with implicit subjective orientation and median value.

Where modal expressions appear in both the Chinese and English corpora, the translations show clear shifts. Modal type tends to move toward de-obligationisation. Modal orientation becomes more implicit.

Modal value is also strengthened in comparison with the source texts. Further research may focus on modality translation from the Chinese originals. A comparison between those findings and the present results can offer a fuller account of the reconstruction of interpersonal meaning in official government documents.

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