

# Three-Dimensional Transformation in the English Translation of China's Foreign Ministry Spokespersons' Conflictive Responses

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## Abstract

This study investigates the translation of conflictive responses in Chinese diplomatic discourse into English. Utilizing the three-dimensional transformation framework of eco-translatology, encompassing linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions, the research identifies strategies and challenges in achieving semantic equivalence, cultural appropriateness, and communicative effectiveness. The study employs a qualitative approach, combining descriptive translation studies and content analysis. The corpus is sourced from the official website of China's Foreign Ministry's press conferences in 2020 delivered by the spokesperson Zhao Lijian. Findings reveal that idiomatic expressions and neologisms with negative connotations characterize conflictive responses and present significant translation challenges. The three-dimensional transformations are not always fully realized, particularly in neologisms lacking direct equivalents in the target language. Adaptation and description are frequently adopted, and the literal translation is not often applicable when dealing with culturally-rendered expressions. This study underscores the importance of a translator-centered approach that highlights the critical role of translation in shaping diplomatic discourse.

**Keywords:** Three-dimensional transformation, conflictive responses, idiomatic expressions, neologisms, cultural differences

## 1. Introduction

Diplomacy, defined as the execution of a nation's foreign policy goals and objectives (Kennedy & Lucas, 2005; Mark, 2009), is evolving to encompass a more comprehensive understanding of diplomatic culture (Dittmer & McConnell, 2016). As described by Van Dijk (1997, p. 2), discourse is the medium through which ideas and beliefs are conveyed within complex social contexts. It encompasses both spoken and written language, with text serving as the written manifestation of discourse (Donahue & Prosser, 1997, p. 2). Diplomatic discourse pertains explicitly to the language employed in diplomatic communication (Donahue & Prosser, 1997). Accordingly, diplomatic texts can be viewed as formal written representations of diplomatic discourse, which govern how institutions are portrayed as entities in both professional and public arenas to achieve a nation's foreign policy objectives (Semenov & Tsvyk, 2021). With the advent of globalization, diplomatic engagements have surged among political entities, necessitating diplomatic discourse to facilitate these activities.

In the era of globalization, China's discursive influence is increasingly drawing attention (Zhang et al., 2021). That gives the Chinese government a valuable opportunity to shape its diplomatic identity on the global stage, a crucial aspect of national soft power (Hartig, 2016). However, the perception of China's image abroad often starkly contrasts with its domestic portrayal, owing to factors such as biased reception, publication mechanisms, ideological differences, and cultural disparities (Kurlantzick, 2022; Wang, 2018; Yang & Zhang, 2020). To cultivate a more positive global perception of China's national and diplomatic standing, the Chinese government has embarked on a concerted effort to construct a favorable national image since the eighteenth National Congress of the CPC (Fan & Wang, 2021). In this context, diplomatic discourse translation is increasingly vital in conveying China's image to the international community.

Spokespersons are required to craft diplomatic discourse that effectively tells China's story and projects a positive image in the international community (Zhang, 2023). During the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing trade war between China and the US, journalists at regular press conferences have posed increasingly sharp and challenging questions. The regular press conference of the Foreign Ministry is an official platform to communicate with the media and the audience. In response, China adopted a "wolf warrior" diplomacy to safeguard its interests (Huang et al., 2023; Langendonk, 2022), especially as pandemic-related information tarnished China's positive image (Chen et al., 2021). Consequently, spokespersons often avoided, denied, or rebutted questions, leading to a confrontational dynamic between journalists and spokespersons. Eisenberg and Garvey (2009) proposed that expressions of opposition and dissent can be directed towards specific actions, requests, assertions, among other things, leading to a confrontational response from the listener. In essence, typical conflictive responses arise from such verbal behaviors as dissent, debate, argument, criticism, reproach, and questioning, which stem from cognitive, attitudinal, and emotional differences and even outright opposition between the

communicating parties (Norrick & Spitz, 2008).

Studies concerning the translation of conflictive responses in China's diplomatic discourse are crucial to the whole knowledge body of translation studies, but the number is limited. Therefore, this study explores the transformation of conflictive responses by China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson from Chinese to English, highlighting the rich cultural connotations and national stances embedded in these responses. By employing Hu Gengshen's (2003, 2013) Eco-translatology, the research examines this transformation across the dimensions of language, culture, and communication. In doing so, it contributes to the existing knowledge of diplomatic translation practices. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the critical role of translation in international relations and public diplomacy, particularly in our increasingly globalized world where cross-cultural communication is paramount. By combining translation studies with pragmatics, this research offers a new interdisciplinary perspective on Chinese diplomatic philosophy and intercultural communication, deepening the understanding of eco-translatology and expanding insights into using conflictive language in diplomatic discourse.

## 2. Literature Review

Conflictive discourse is a common linguistic phenomenon in everyday life and is prevalent within institutional conversational contexts (Baker, 2006). Questions raised by the media during regular press conferences of the Foreign Ministry are often sensitive and pointed. When the content of the question conflicts with the interests of the country being questioned, it can easily trigger conflictive language (Gong, 2011, 2020). In such situations, the spokespersons make a response to the questions, giving rise to the conflictive response, referring to a deliberate use of direct or indirect means by one party in communication to express disagreement or disapproval, manifesting as confrontational language behavior (Bousfield, 2008; Gong, 2011).

As Fairclough (1996) pointed out, discourse serves as a battleground for power struggles, mirroring the values upheld by an institution. This idea is echoed in Gambier and van Doorslaer's (2010) work, where what they discussed was similar to the conflictive responses in institutional discourse. Diplomatic discourse represents a distinct form of political discourse that reflects various social, political, economic, and ideological concerns (Eco, 2000). Faithful translation is imperative to accurately convey the official and authoritative nature of the discourse, ensuring the objective and equitable construction of its image (Lyu, 2022; Mao & Zhao, 2020). The successful transmission of the conflictive response plays a pivotal role in shaping the image and position of the Chinese government but cannot be achieved without effective translation.

Translators employed by the institution undergo institutionalization and are trained to prioritize faithfulness and invisibility, as invisibility can enhance the impact of an institutional text, with translation shifts often slipping unnoticed (Gambier & van Doorslaer, 2010). However, political institutions may consciously or subconsciously exert influence over translators, leading to alterations in meaning that can reshape information within translations (Wang, 2023). Whether intentional or not, translation shifts in diplomatic discourse are intricately linked to the institution and carry implications for the target society (Gagnon, 2010).

The idiomatic expressions are frequently used in the diplomatic spokespersons' conflictive responses, showing cultural confidence and official attitudes and safeguarding the diplomatic discursive right (Fan & Wang, 2021). For example, in criticizing the US launching the trade war between China and the US, the usage of “合则两利,斗则俱伤” (hé zé liǎng lì, dòu zé jù shāng) showed the bilateral relationship between China and the US should be cooperative and beneficial to both sides (Fan & Wang, 2021). This expression was translated into different versions on diplomatic occasions, such as “We stand to gain from cooperation and lose from confrontation,” “Cooperation benefits both while confrontation serves neither,” and “A peaceful and harmonious bilateral relationship between these two countries will make both winners, while a confrontational one will make both losers.” Translators are tasked by the institution with achieving communicative equivalence and conveying political messages to the target audience while simultaneously delivering the national image. That aligns with the frame of the three-dimensional transformation of eco-translatology (Hu, 2013).

Eco-translatology emphasizes a translator-centered approach, positing that translation is a process of selective adaptation (Hu, 2020). The translation methods are succinctly summarized as “three-dimensional transformations,” which involve adaptive transformations focusing relatively on the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions (Hu, 2003). The transformation in the linguistic dimension refers to the adaptive transformation in linguistic forms during the translation process, conducted at different levels and aspects. Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family, whereas English belongs to the Indo-European language family. Hence, the two languages exist in different “ecological environments,” and their modes of thinking differ. Therefore, in the translation process, the translator should fully consider the overall environment of translation and make adjustments in terms of lexicon or syntax to achieve transformation in the linguistic dimension (Hu, 2020).

The transformation in the cultural dimension requires the translator to be culturally aware, recognizing that translation is an activity that spans languages and cultures. This entails paying attention to transmitting and interpreting cultural connotations in both languages, overcoming cultural communication barriers, and avoiding misinterpreting the original text in the target language culture (Hu, 2020). It focuses on the adaptive selection and transformation of bilingual communicative intentions during translation. That requires the translator to focus on whether the communicative intent of the original text is reflected in the translated text, in addition to converting linguistic information and transmitting culture (Feng, 2021; Jin & Yang, 2022).

The three-dimensional transformation in eco-translatology is an integrated approach that requires the translator to balance linguistic, cultural, and communicative adaptations. Case studies provide practical examples of how translators can apply the three-dimensional transformation in different contexts, such as subtitling (Cao et al., 2022), advertisement (Bo, 2014), and public signs (Yu, 2019),

demonstrating the effectiveness of this approach in producing high-quality translations that are faithful to the original text and accessible to the target audience.

Eco-translatology posits that in the translation process, translators can only produce high-quality translations by adapting to different translational ecological environments and making multi-dimensional choices and transformations, at least in the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions (Hu, 2020). These “three-dimensional” transformations are often inseparable and interwoven; sometimes, one dimension may stand out remarkably. Regardless of how the diplomatic discourse will be translated, the ultimate aim remains to achieve the diplomatic objective. Therefore, the framework is suitable for analyzing this current analysis.

However, the study on this aspect is underexplored and needs more scholarly attention. Against this background, this present study is proposed, and two questions are to be answered under the guidance of the three-dimensional transformation of eco-translatology: What are the main negative expressions that characterize the conflictive responses of China’s Foreign Ministry spokespersons? How are the conflictive responses transformed in the three dimensions of English-translated diplomatic discourse?

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Design

This study is conducted with a qualitative approach. It is structured to identify the language usages that characterize conflictive responses, explore the three-dimensional transformation in translating the spokespersons’ conflictive responses, and discuss how the three-dimensional transformation affects the English translation. This qualitative approach is implemented by combining descriptive translation studies and content analysis.

#### 3.2 Corpus

The bilingual corpus is sourced from the statements in the regular press conferences section on the official website of China’s Foreign Ministry throughout 2020, with 2587 questions of about 946,000 Chinese characters and 606,000 English characters. The conflictive responses are extracted from the statements made by Chinese diplomatic spokesperson Zhao Lijian during regular press conferences. The media asked 1079 questions, and he made 276 items of conflictive responses. These press conferences serve as a crucial platform for the Chinese government to communicate its official positions on various domestic and international issues, providing information and updates to both domestic and global audiences. The year 2020 was particularly significant for China and the world, marked by the COVID-19 pandemic and the escalating trade war between China and the United States, which profoundly impacted global dynamics. Conflictive responses are selected from Chinese diplomatic spokespersons’ discourse.

#### 3.3 Data Collection

The data collection involves the data source, data retrieval, data categorization, and cleaning. The source material for this study is selected from Chinese diplomatic spokespersons’ responses to the media throughout 2020. These remarks are accessed from the official website of China’s Foreign Ministry, which has recorded all bilingual remarks since 2014. The selected spokesperson is Zhao Lijian, one of the influential Chinese diplomatic spokespersons. He had regular press conferences, including online sessions, where spokespersons addressed questions and statements from the media. The remarks were translated into English and published on the official website. The published version was edited and reviewed, different from the on-site real-time interpreting. In this study, we focused on the written texts and translation, instead of interpreting.

#### 3.4 Inclusion Criteria

The conflictive responses should meet the following requirements: the questions posed by the media are contradictory to China’s official stance and policy or stand against China’s positive national image or interests; the spokesperson responded to the media with negative expressions to show their criticism or condemnation directed at the related parties including the third-party recipients involved in the Q&A; the responses of the spokespersons must imply negative connotations.

#### 3.5 Data Analysis

The analysis follows the steps of identification, categorization, and interpretation. In answering the first question, the conflictive responses in these confrontational discourses were selected. Having identified the conflictive items in the selected diplomatic discourse of the spokespersons, the researcher categorizes corresponding English translations. This allows the overall discussion of revealing the transformation. Then, the language characterizing the conflictive responses is marked and categorized into independent databases. In answering the second question it is interpreted in a qualitative manner of how the translation transforms at three levels: linguistic, cultural, and communicative.

### 4. Findings

#### 4.1 Negative Expressions Identified in the Spokespersons’ Conflictive Responses

In the spokespersons’ diplomatic discourse at the regular press conferences, the spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s responses were selected, and two main categories stand out and characterize the conflictive responses: idiomatic expressions and neologisms with negative connotations.

#### 4.1.1 Idiomatic Expressions with Negative Connotations

China's diplomatic spokesperson is to answer relevant foreign affairs questions on behalf of the Chinese government. They release official information on China's diplomatic activities and authoritatively explain China's policies, positions, and attitudes. The diplomatic discourse of the spokespersons is an essential mouthpiece for expressing China's attitude and an important carrier for transmitting Chinese discourse. Therefore, idiomatic expressions with negative expressions convey defensive, solid, critical, and aggressive attitudes towards the journalists or the involved parties in the questions. In Zhao Lijian's conflictive responses through 2020, 183 items of idiomatic expressions with negative connotations were identified, taking up 66.3% of the total 276 occurrences of conflictive responses. Here is a demonstration of the partial idiomatic expressions.

Table 1. Demonstration of partial idiomatic expressions with negative connotations

| No. | ST.                        | Literal Translation (LT.)           | TT.                                    |
|-----|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| 1   | 信口雌黄 (xìn kǒu cí huáng)    | Speaking nonsenses                  | make wanton accusations                |
| 2   | 搬弄是非 (bān nòng shì fēi)    | Manipulating right and wrong        | sowing discord                         |
| 3   | 不得人心 (bù dé rén xīn)       | Failing to win people's hearts      | it goes against the will of the people |
| 4   | 劣迹斑斑 (liè jì bān bān)      | Full of bad deeds                   | notorious records                      |
| 5   | 指手画脚 (zhǐ shǒu huà jiǎo)   | Pointing hand and drawing foot      | (omitted)                              |
| 6   | 捕风捉影 (bǔ fēng zhuō yǐng)   | Catching wind and grasping shadows  | (omitted)                              |
| 7   | 胡言乱语 (hú yán luàn yǔ)      | Nonsense words and chaotic language | talk through their hats                |
| 8   | 上窜下跳 (shàng cuàn xià tiào) | Jumping up and down                 | doing all they can                     |
| 9   | 无稽之谈 (wú jī zhī tán)       | No foundation for talk              | ridiculous claims                      |
| 10  | 颠倒黑白 (diān dǎo hēi bái)    | Turn over black and white           | absolute nonsense                      |

From the above table, it is noted that these idiomatic expressions highlight various forms of negative behavior or speech, often involving falsehoods, baseless accusations, or disruptive actions. Some of them are omitted in the TT, for example, “指手画脚” and “捕风捉影.” The leading translation strategies are free translation, adaptation, and omission. Adaptation is mainly used in dealing with the expressions of cultural elements. These idiomatic expressions have strong negative connotations used to criticize, condemn, and rebuke the involved actors in the statements or questions the media posed.

#### 4.1.2 Neologisms with Negative Connotations

Unlike other fields, diplomatic language has its own characteristics and styles, mainly due to the difference in language users. Although the users are individuals, they represent the country or culture behind them. Neologisms are common in modern diplomatic discourse. In linguistics, a neologism is a recently cast or invented word or phrase action. It may suggest new uses for old words, such as existing words or phrases based on new meanings, mainly from politics, economy, technology, and social life (Yang & Yan, 2016). Among them, political neologisms are known as words or phrases derived from politics and used to express political opinions or describe political phenomena (Xia & Huang, 2021). Eight neologisms were identified from the conflictive responses. The total number of neologisms is 72, accounting for 26.09% of the 276 conflictive responses.

Table 2. Neologisms with negative connotations

| No. | ST                                 | LT                  | TT                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Frequency |
|-----|------------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| 1   | 甩锅<br>(shuǎi guō)                  | Throw the wok       | shift the blame, pin the blame on, scapegoating, political maneuvering                                                                                                                                                                                | 7         |
| 2   | 抹黑<br>(mǒ hēi)                     | Smear black         | Smear, slanderous actions, slandering, frame, discredit, stigmatize, badmouth, vilify, tarnish the image of                                                                                                                                           | 43        |
| 3   | 炒作<br>(chǎo zuò)                   | Cook                | hype up, cook up, make-up, hyping, sensationalize                                                                                                                                                                                                     | 13        |
| 4   | 炒冷饭<br>(chǎo lěng fàn)             | Cook the leftover   | hype up                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | 1         |
| 5   | 退群<br>(tuì qún)                    | Quit the chat group | walked back on one commitment, pulled out of a string of international treaties and organizations, withdrew from treaties and organizations, quit international organizations and treaties, turned away from international treaties and organizations | 5         |
| 6   | 黑历史<br>(hēi lì shǐ)                | Black history       | infamous track record                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | 1         |
| 7   | 伤心太平洋<br>(shāng xīn tài píng yáng) | Sad Pacific Ocean   | Sadly, the “poisoning” does not stop in the Pacific.                                                                                                                                                                                                  | 1         |
| 8   | 打脸<br>(dǎ liǎn)                    | Slap the face       | denounce                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | 1         |

The total number of occurrences of the neologisms is 72, which is common in the conflictive discourse. From this table, it can be seen that the Internet buzzword with negative cultural connotations, “甩锅” (shuǎi guō), was translated as “shift the blame,” “scapegoating,” and political maneuvering. With a frequency/relevance of seven, this neologism is used in political or organizational contexts to describe avoiding accountability by deflecting responsibility onto others. Another neologism used in the discourse is “抹黑” (mǒ hēi). The high frequency/relevance number of 43 suggests it is a frequent expression, indicating its common use in the discourse and triggering the conflictive response. The provided Chinese neologisms and their English translations reflect various negative behaviors and connotations. Other neologisms are also employed, contributing to a neologism cluster implying the negative connotations, such as “炒作,” “炒冷饭,” and “退群.” However, their translation represents variations. Adaptation, literal translation, and description are used for their translation.

The above demonstration of idiomatic expressions and neologisms with negative connotations exhibited that their translation is inconsistent and varies in specific contexts. The translator adopted different strategies to deal with them across languages and cultures. However, some of these expressions have cultural connotations, particularly political ones. In a broad sense, they cover politics, economy, folk customs, and other fields, and how to properly express their internal meaning in a limited time puts forward high requirements for the translator. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate how they are transformed in the target language’s linguistic, communicative, and cultural dimensions.

#### 4.2 Three-Dimensional Transformation in the English Translation of the Conflictive Responses

This study is designated to examine the transformation of China’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson’s conflictive responses at regular press conferences. The conflict is demonstrated by idiomatic expressions and neologisms with negative connotations, aiming to realize the diplomatic stance towards the statements and questions posed by the media. The political orientation of the diplomatic discourse and the complexity of the expressions with cultural elements require the responses to deliver political information faithfully while maintaining the balance between the source culture and the target culture to achieve the communicative effect. The three-dimensional transformation of the Eco-translatology is applicable to conduct the analysis.

##### 4.2.1 Three-Dimensional Transformation in Idiomatic Expressions with Negative Connotations

###### Example 1 (June 30, 2020)

**ST:** 赵立坚:蓬佩奥是睁着眼睛说瞎话。

**LT:** Zhao Lijian: Pompeo is telling blind words with his eyes open.

**TT:** Zhao Lijian: Mr. Pompeo is a brazen liar.

The spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, responded to the US Secretary of State Pompeo’s statement slandering China regarding the Xinjiang issue and human rights. In this example of conflictive response, the negative expression “睁着眼睛说瞎话” (speaking nonsense with one’s eyes wide open) is an idiom in Chinese, implying a deep level of dishonesty or shamelessness. The linguistic dimension is the fundamental aspect of eco-translatology, focusing on transforming linguistic forms and meanings in the translation process. This dimension emphasizes maintaining semantic equivalence between the source and target languages while considering differences in language structure, lexical choices, and syntactic arrangements. There is no similar expression of “睁着眼睛说瞎话” in English, so the translator adapted it to “is a brazen liar,” which conveys the same idea of blatant dishonesty. The translation maintains the criticism implied in the original Chinese expression. Translators must achieve accuracy and fluency at the linguistic level to ensure that the translated text conveys the original meaning precisely.

The translator is required to consider the values, way of thinking, and other cultural backgrounds across cultures. In this example, the translator adapted the cultural element of the idiom to an English phrase that retains the original meaning and impact. This cultural adaptation ensures that the message is accessible and understandable to the target audience. The translation instead avoids literal translation that might confuse the target audience and instead opts for an expression that conveys the same cultural meaning of bold dishonesty.

The communicative function requires translation is not just a transfer of language but also an effective delivery of information in the communicative process. This dimension involves factors such as the reception and the readability of the translated text, and the comprehension ability of the audience. In this example, the implied criticism is preserved in the English translation by using the term “brazen liar,” which conveys similar audacity and dishonesty, ensuring that the target audience receives the same message and understands the severity of the accusation. It effectively conveys Zhao Lijian’s criticism of Pompeo’s actions or statements. Translators must consider the target audience, the text function, and the translation purpose to ensure that the translated text achieves its intended communicative effect in the target language context.

###### Example 2 (July 2, 2020)

**ST:** 赵立坚:蓬佩奥天天撒谎造谣, 充分暴露了他的无知和偏见。在香港国安法问题上, 蓬佩奥之流之所以跳得这么高, 是因为他们不能再像过去那样为所欲为、肆无忌惮地从事破坏中国主权和安全的活动。

**LT:** Zhao Lijian: Pompeo lies and spreads rumors every day, fully exposing his ignorance and prejudice. On the issue of the Hong Kong National Security Law, the reason people like Pompeo are jumping so high is because they can no longer act as they please, recklessly engaging in activities that undermine China’s sovereignty and security as they did in the past.

**TT:** Zhao Lijian: Day after day, Mr. Pompeo's lies and rumors demonstrate nothing but ignorance and prejudice. The reason why Mr. Pompeo and his like make such a fuss about the Law is that they won't be able to jeopardize China's sovereignty and security in as reckless and unchecked ways as before.

This response made by spokesperson Zhao Lijian is concerned with the Hong Kong National Security Law. In this conflictive response, the negative expressions like “天天撒谎造谣,” “无知和偏见,” “跳得这么高,” “为所欲为, 肆无忌惮” all convey strong criticism against Pompeo. Among these negative expressions, “跳得这么高” is an idiom in China, literally meaning “jump so high.” The translator did not translate literally; instead, it replaced the literal expression “跳得这么高” with the English idiomatic expression “make a fuss about.” This adjustment ensures that English-speaking readers can understand the intended meaning without needing a literal translation. The original Chinese expression conveys the metaphoric idea of someone making a big deal out of something, often in a dramatic or exaggerated manner. The English expression “make a fuss about” captures this idea effectively, conveying excessive or unnecessary concern or agitation.

The translation maintains the cultural context of the individuals involved. Zhao Lijian is criticizing Mr. Pompeo's actions or statements in the context of China's sovereignty and security, and the translation effectively conveys this context to English-speaking readers. The translator adapts the cultural element of the Chinese idiom to an English equivalent that is easily understandable and culturally appropriate for the target audience. Moreover, the translation effectively communicates the intended message across language barriers. English-speaking audiences who may not be familiar with the original Chinese expression can still understand Zhao Lijian's criticism of Mr. Pompeo's actions or statements regarding China's sovereignty and security. The communicative goal of expressing criticism towards Pompeo and his allies is preserved in the TT by using “make a fuss about.” It effectively conveys Zhao Lijian's characterization of Mr. Pompeo's actions as exaggerated and unnecessary.

#### 4.2.2 Three-Dimensional Transformation in Neologisms with Negative Connotations

##### Example 3 (September 11, 2020)

**ST:** 赵立坚: 但在如此严峻的情况下, 美方一些政客不是敬畏生命, 尊重科学, 全力救治人民, 而是仍在想方设法谋取政治私利, 忙着“甩锅”推责、转移视线, 炮制和散布抹黑攻击他国、漏洞百出的谎言。

**LT:** Zhao Lijian: But in such a severe situation, some American politicians are not respecting life, respecting science, or making every effort to save people. Instead, they are still trying to seek political self-interest, busy “throwing the wok” and shifting blame, diverting attention, fabricating, and spreading flawed lies that smear and attack other countries.

**TT:** Zhao Lijian: However, faced with such grim circumstances, some US politicians, instead of respecting life and science and protecting people's health, are busy seeking selfish political gains by scapegoating, deflecting attention, and concocting flimsy lies to smear other countries.

This conflictive response by spokesperson Zhao Lijian is to express criticism against some US politicians for spreading rumors of the pandemic. The negative expressions delivered the strong tone of the speech, including the neologisms of “甩锅” and “抹黑.” The former was translated into “scapegoating” using the translation strategy of adaptation, and the latter into “smear” with description. These two words are not common Chinese expressions but are derived from old ones. They have new meanings in the modern world and are commonly used on the Internet. “甩锅” conveys the idea of shifting blame or responsibility onto others unfairly. “抹黑” refers to the act of spreading false or damaging information about someone or something with the intention of tarnishing their reputation.

Linguistically, “scapegoating” and “smear” both translations maintain the original meanings, ensuring linguistic coherence and fidelity. Scapegoating is a cultural concept derived from the *Bible* that transcends cultural boundaries, and the translation retains the cultural connotation implied in the original Chinese expression. The concept of smearing is recognized across cultures. They all reflect the criticism of politicians who prioritize their own interests over the well-being of the people by deflecting blame onto others and highlighting the dishonesty and malicious intent behind spreading false information. In the communicative dimension, “scapegoating” and “smear” in the translation ensure clarity and effectiveness in communication. English-speaking readers can easily understand the criticism of politicians who engage in such behavior.

##### Example 4 (May 6, 2020)

**ST:** 赵立坚: 我刚才讲了, 美国个别人出于国内政治私利不断指责中国, 但他们的说法往往前后矛盾, 拿不出任何证据, 完全经不起任何推敲, 不时被科学家或医控专家“打脸”。

**LT:** Zhao Lijian: As I just mentioned, a few individuals in the United States continuously accuse China out of domestic political self-interest, but their statements are often contradictory, lacking any evidence, and cannot withstand scrutiny. They are frequently “slapped in the face” by scientists or public health experts.

**TT:** Zhao Lijian: As I said just now, some individuals in the US have been constantly accusing China out of their own domestic political interests and considerations, but their statements are often inconsistent and unfounded, thus cannot stand up to scrutiny. What they said has too often been denounced by scientists or medical and disease control specialists.

In this conflictive response, the spokesperson also showed a critical attitude towards certain US politicians for accusing China of the pandemic origin. The neologism “打脸” literally means “slap in the face.” It is an old expression, but in the modern world, used in the

diplomatic context, it is used as a metaphoric behavior meaning to be publicly proven wrong or embarrassed by being corrected, referring to publicly exposing someone's inconsistency, contradiction, or hypocrisy. It implies the humiliation or embarrassment of having one's false claims or actions debunked or contradicted. In the translation, the translator transferred it into "denounce."

"Denounced" captures the essence of being publicly criticized or corrected but does not fully convey the physical imagery and intensity of "slap in the face." However, it maintains linguistic appropriateness and fluency in English. In the cultural dimension, the physical imagery of "slap in the face" is not directly conveyed, but "denounced" captures the cultural significance of public correction and criticism, which is understandable and appropriate in the target culture. To realize the communicative function, the translation ensures that the target audience understands the severity of the refutation and the impact of the experts' disapproval. "Denounced" doesn't directly convey the physicality or immediacy of the action implied by "打脸." At the same time, it effectively communicates that the false claims made by the individuals in question are being publicly discredited or exposed as unfounded by scientists or medical and disease control specialists.

The above analysis shows that the idiomatic expressions and neologisms with negative expressions triggered the conflict of the spokespersons' response. However, translating them renders a challenge for translators, and the three-dimensional transformation is not always realized, particularly in the usage of neologisms that have no equivalent between the ST and TT.

## 5. Discussion

This study is designated to analyze the English translation of the conflictive responses delivered by China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian. Different translation strategies, such as adaptation and description, are used in the English translation of the idiomatic expressions and neologisms with negative connotations that characterize the conflictive responses. In dealing with these expressions in conflictive responses, however, the literal translation is seldom considered, which is different from some past studies (e.g., Xia & Huang, 2021; Yang & Yan, 2016), unless there is an equivalent in the target language. Translating conflictive responses in Chinese diplomatic discourse into English requires careful consideration of the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions, as posited by the three-dimensional transformation framework of eco-translatology (Hu, 2020).

It is necessary to analyze the factors that influence the translation transformation in the three dimensions. The spokesperson system of the Foreign Ministry of China is an official platform to present the Chinese government's political attitudes and stance. In their diplomatic discourse, spokespersons tend to employ more idiomatic expressions and neologisms to keep up with the times and present the official attitude. They are responsible for conveying the original message to the intended recipients. Behind the spokespersons, the institutional translators are responsible for transforming the original intent through translation. When encountering conflictive responses, the translator must deftly balance transmitting the intended message with adherence to cultural values. This balance necessitates strategic mediation, not just literal translation. However, the translation of the conflictive responses in diplomatic discourse is influenced by the institution, which can be called agency presented in past studies (e.g., Sch äffner, 2012; Wang, 2023).

The eco-translatology framework suggests that translators should adapt translations to the target audience's cultural and communicative needs, yet this raises questions about the translator's agency and potential bias. In the case of translating diplomatic neologisms or conflictive language, ideological manipulation could occur, either consciously or unconsciously, as translators navigate the delicate balance between maintaining neutrality and aligning with the political or cultural sensitivities of the target audience. It underlines a broader ethical dilemma in translation studies, where the translator's role as an intermediary between cultures can become compromised by external pressures or personal biases, potentially deviating from the intended message of the original text. Translators of the institution are hired and affiliated with it, and most of them are members of the Communist Party of China. Therefore, their translations must be aligned with political correctness (Yang, 2008). That seems contradictory to the translator's role in translation, which is generally agreed that the translator is the subject of the translation activity and the translator's subjectivity is throughout the translation process (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1998), while the translation in the political field was argued influenced by politics and ideology, consistent with the rewriting theory by Lefevere (2016). Therefore, the institutional translators have to mediate between politics or ideology and the three-dimensional transformation, be it for language, culture, or communicative purposes.

The analysis cases are taken from real examples translated from the spokespersons' conflictive responses. It helps to understand better the translation of culturally rendered expressions and newly-connotated old expressions across languages and cultures. Translating them concerns cultural differences, social contexts, and target reception. The successful transformation in three dimensions benefits the official representatives to reshape a new version of China's national image and discursive approach, thus realizing the ultimate diplomatic goal. However, due to the natural cultural differences between Chinese and English, the literal translation of the cultural-rendered conflictive responses may not successfully deliver the original information. It aligns with the past analysis of metaphors and culture-loaded words (Al-Harrasi, 2001; Ren & Ji, 2021). They all agreed that cultural expressions are a thinking reflection and a mirror of empirical experiences.

The present study aims to contribute to the existing knowledge body of the English translation of the three-dimensional transformation. Enlightened by the framework of three-dimensional transformation under the eco-translatology postulated by translation theorist Hu Gengshen (2003, 2013), this study analyzed how the main language usages in spokespersons' conflictive responses are transformed from linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions. In translating the idiomatic expressions, the transformation is realized in three dimensions. For example, the idiom "睁着眼睛说瞎话" was translated as "brazen liar," and "跳得这么高" was rendered as "make such a fuss." In the linguistic dimension, these translations demonstrate a successful adaptation that ensures the target text remains accurate and

understandable, avoiding literal translations that could confuse the target audience. In the cultural dimension, the adaptation of choosing culturally equivalent expressions, translators ensure that the translated text resonates culturally with the target audience, preserving the original intent and criticism. In the communicative dimension, effective communication requires the translation to be linguistically and culturally accurate and maintain the original discourse's functional purpose, ensuring that the diplomatic message is conveyed with the intended assertiveness and clarity. It is similar in the transformation of the neologisms with negative connotations, such as “甩锅,” “抹黑,” and “打脸.”

However, applying the eco-translatology framework also reveals certain limitations and areas for further exploration. Firstly, the flexibility of adaptation in this model, while beneficial in capturing the essence of culturally loaded expressions, raises concerns about subjectivity in translation decisions. The broad latitude granted to translators in selecting culturally equivalent terms may lead to variations in the target text that diverge from the original intent. For instance, the translation of “睁着眼睛说瞎话” as “brazen liar,” while effective in conveying a similar message, may oversimplify the metaphorical richness of the original idiom, which paints a vivid picture of deliberate deception. Such translations, though functionally communicative, risk eroding the rhetorical and aesthetic qualities of the source language. Although it may be declared that diplomatic translation is a political action, the purpose is to realize the diplomatic goals.

Moreover, while the study highlights the importance of cultural adaptation, it overlooks the potential loss of specificity inherent in such adaptations, and there is a risk of diluting the unique sociopolitical context embedded in the original expressions. For example, the term “甩锅” is about deflecting blame and carries a connotation of public accountability and failure within Chinese political culture, which the English equivalent may not fully capture. It raises the question of whether complete cultural equivalence is achievable or whether translation inevitably involves some degree of cultural reduction. The balance between linguistic fidelity and cultural adaptability remains a delicate one, and further research is needed to explore how translators can navigate the tension between preserving the integrity of the source text and making it accessible and relevant to the target audience. Nevertheless, it is noted that there is a limitation of the theoretical concepts due to their inherently inseparable and interwoven nature, making them less universally applicable to texts that do not require cultural or linguistic adaptations. Additionally, more attention should be given to the ideological dimensions of translation, particularly in politically sensitive contexts, where the translator's choices can have significant implications for how messages are received and interpreted.

## 6. Conclusion

This study identified the main language patterns employed by spokesperson Zhao Lijian in delivering conflictive responses at regular press conferences of China's Foreign Ministry. Idiomatic expressions and neologisms with negative connotations characterize the conflictive responses. With the three-dimensional transformation framework under the umbrella of eco-translatology, this study emphasizes that the translation of conflictive responses in Chinese diplomatic discourse involves intricate transformations across linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions. This study highlights the challenges and strategies in translating idiomatic expressions and neologisms with negative connotations, emphasizing the need for a translator-centered approach that considers the translational ecological environment. The framework provides a methodology for achieving high-quality translations that preserve diplomatic objectives and convey the intended messages accurately to the target audience. By ensuring linguistic fidelity, cultural appropriateness, and communicative effectiveness, translators play a critical role in shaping diplomatic discourse and international relations.

It is essential to recognize the limitations of this study. Firstly, the research relies on a single corpus, specifically focusing on the year 2020 and the responses of one representative spokesperson during regular conferences. Consequently, the examples provided are limited in scope. Secondly, the dynamic nature of the translator's translation strategies poses a challenge in generalizing the findings to other studies concerning translation strategies. Besides, professional requirements and institutional ideologies, several other factors should be considered, including the spokespersons' speech styles, social contexts, and political landscape.

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## Authors' contributions

Wei Yang was responsible for the study design and manuscript draft. Dr. Syed Nurulakla and Dr. Lay Hoon Ang were responsible for revising it. Mingxing Yang was responsible for data collection and proofreading. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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