



# The Characteristics and Translation Strategies of Fuzzy Language in Diplomatic Communiqués

Yuqi HUANG<sup>1</sup>, Jian LI<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*School of English for International Business, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies E-mail: Hyque216@126.com*

<sup>2</sup>*Corresponding author, School of English for International Business, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, E-mail: 200411210@oamail.gdufs.edu.cn*

## Abstract

Fuzzy language mainly refers to the vagueness of words, phrases, and fuzzy meanings. In the official documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, the appropriate use of vague language can make the language more polite and show the position and attitude of the issue. After collecting the information of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' communiqués of China from 2019 to 2021, this paper uses the software of AntConc to build a corpus and sort out the data about the use of fuzzy language in the documents. Under the guidance of the Politeness Principle, this paper summarizes the frequency and characteristics of the four fuzzy hedges in diplomatic communiqués. In addition, the Skopos Theory is further employed to explain and analyze the characteristics of relevant translation strategies.

**Keywords:** fuzzy language, translation strategy, diplomatic communiqués

## 1. Introduction

Under the background of the new era, the voice of the Chinese government can be heard further, and China now is more influential worldwide than before. The accurate and convincing articles symbolize the position and actions of the Chinese government that must eliminate any tiny mistakes. This paper discusses the functions of different types of fuzzy expressions in language, covering the implied meaning behind the sentences and analyzing their structure via the software AntConc. By analyzing the various semantic roles of different types of fuzzy words, their function to refine the corresponding and practical strategies behind the sentence can be determined. This research will use the corpus analysis method and detailed text analysis to advance the research on translation. Compared with the mainstream studies mainly focusing on the research of the colloquial content like speeches and talks, this research pays attention to the official communiqués of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the writing perspective and practical application. This paper mainly studies the official English communiqués issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2019 to 2021. Under the guidance of the Politeness Principle and the Skopos Theory, it uses the corpus method to analyze the characteristics of fuzzy language and then summarize the translation strategies. Feasible strategies could be put forward based on China's unique conditions to help solve the difficulties in the translation of ambiguous language.

This paper mainly answers these questions:

- (1) What are the main types of fuzzy language and their frequency of usage?
- (2) What are the fuzzy language's main characteristics in the Politeness Principle framework and the Skopos Theory?
- (3) How can the characteristics contribute to the translation practices in the context of foreign affairs?

## 2. Literature Review

Professor Zadeh (1965) of the University of California published a paper on fuzzy sets, which first mentioned the concept of fuzzy language or hedge. As soon as the concept came into being, it attracted significant attention and was widely used in various natural and social sciences disciplines. Later on, Geogry Lakoff (1972), a famous Generative semantic linguist in the United States, clarified hedges as "words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy." Then, Brown and Levison (1987) explained hedges as a particle word or phrase that modifies the degree of membership or a noun phrase in a set.

Zadeh (1972) divided hedges into four categories based on grammar, which contained adjectives and adverbs, adverbial and expressions, affixes, and some politeness structures. According to Prince et al. (1982), there are two types of hedges: approximators and shields. Approximators are the fuzzy words that limit the degree of variation. It enables the listener to hear from the speaker new concepts related to, but different from, the original topic. Shields are fuzzy words that limit variable

norms. This kind of variable hedge is often used in measuring things. There is no need to pay attention to how close the actual situation is to the topic because specific numbers are often provided.

He (1985) followed the classification of Prince and made the further investigation. Then he subdivided approximators into rounders and adaptors. Adaptors indicate a change in some degree, like sort of and a little bit, are a way of saying something close to being accurate, but not exactly true, closer to the actual situation and avoiding being too dogmatic. The use of rounders in verbal communication gives the listener the range of the subject and enables him to understand things within that scope. He also divided shields into two types: plausibility and attribution. The reason for using variable language is that the speaker does not want to exaggerate the figures to deviate from the facts or because he cannot give an exact figure at once.

In addition, Hyland (1998) also carried out different categories from a semantic perspective: lexical hedges and strategic hedges. Moxey et al. (1993) explored the problem of fuzzy quantifiers from pragmatic and psychological perspectives, and their research objective was how people understand and use quantifiers in natural language.

In 1973, Lakoff analyzed examples from semantics and summarized the functions of the hedge. Using these fuzzy languages, he found his words became more objective and gained authority, and the speaker's tone softened. Joanna Channell (1994) outlined the various forms of fuzzy words under the pragmatic principles. She emphasized that interpreters cannot separate interpretations of fuzzy language from specific contexts and inferences. She also found that "semantics + pragmatics = meaning," which means the fuzziness of language should be analyzed not only from the semantic level but also from the pragmatic sense. She concluded ten fuzzy language functions by analyzing several examples, including self-protect, politeness, and persuasion.

In short, hedges are those expressions that make things fuzzier or less fuzzy, displaying a speaker's commitment. From the various explanations above, it can be inferred that the primary function of fuzzy language is to avoid being dogmatic and to be polite. To better explain the characteristics, this thesis follows the Prince's and He's categories of hedges because of its clear classification standard and widespread usage. After the fuzzy concepts' first appearance, many scholars conducted further investigations in this topic, and until now, the fuzzy language is still appealing to scholars and attracting them to take efforts on it.

### **3 Theoretical Framework**

#### *3.1 Politeness Principle*

English famous linguist scholar Leech G.N. (1983) combined the previous studies like Brown and Levinson's and then put forward the Politeness Principle. This principle has six maxims: the Approbation maxim, Agreement maxim, Tact maxim, Generosity maxim, Modesty maxim, and Sympathy maxim. Accordingly, two sub-maxims are divided under each maxim. Among these maxims, the Tact maxim is of great importance because it is used for avoiding conflicts in communications. Furthermore, people inherently attribute to the invisible rule under explicit configuration (Goffman, 1986).

Some euphemisms can make the original statements pleasant, decent, and elegant, thus reducing the purpose of insulting others in the expression. That action is the embodiment of the Tact maxim. The maxim of agreement mainly refers to reducing the expression of their differences with others, minimizing the differences with others, and increasing the agreement with others as much as possible. The translator should appropriately choose euphemisms and use polite wording to make the translation clear and indirect. Furthermore, this thesis mainly discusses fuzzy language in the two maxims.

#### *3.2 Skopos Theory*

Skopos comes from the Greek word Skopos, meaning aim. In the book *A Framework for a General Theory of Translation*, published in 1978, Vermeer first elaborated the Skopos Theory's basic principles, claiming that translation belongs to intercultural interaction. Moreover, translation is a type of social activity. The writer defines the intention, while function refers to the introducing context. The intention of the original author may differ from the translator. Translation can have multiple purposes, which can be further divided into three categories:

1. The general purpose of the translator (such as making a living)
2. The communicative purpose of the translation (like enlightening or instructing the reader)
3. Special needs acquired by the context (such as literal translation to explain the particular aspects of the grammatical structure of a language)

In most cases, "purpose" refers to the communicative purpose of the target text. It also means "the communicative function of the translation to the target readers in the social and cultural context" (Vermeer, 1989). In the Skopos Theory, translation means to produce a text in the target context for the target recipient in the target language. In contrast, the source text is

subordinate (Nord, 2001). In other words, the source text is not at the center of authority but an open entity with infinite possibilities. The primary principle of the Skopos Theory in all translation processes is to understand the “principle of purpose,” which means translation should be able to function not only in the context and culture of the target language but also in the expectation of targeted readers. The whole translation process is determined by the goal to be achieved; that is, the result handles the method. Therefore, the translator should clarify his specific purpose in the given translation context and decide which translation method to adopt according to this purpose.

## 4 Results and Analysis

### 4.1 Data Collection

Corpus is a crucial tool used for collecting statistics and analyzing. Without its help, efficiency and accuracy could not be guaranteed. This research chooses to use the software AntConc (Version 3.5.9) because of its easy accessibility and economy. AntConc was developed by a Japanese professor Laurence Anthony at Waseda University, and it is famous for its neat interface and simple operation. AntConc can generate a list of the total occurrence of the targeted word from all texts provided and locate it in the passage. Then the frequency is calculated and stated within a second.

Diplomatic communiqués in recent three years (2019-2021) have been collected from the official website, and there are a total of 70 articles and about 150 thousand words. According to Prince’s and He’s classification, the hedges can be categorized into two main types: shields and approximators. Of the two types, each includes two subtypes. Shields include plausibility and attribution, while approximators contain adaptors and rounders. Based on this category, each type of hedge’s overall frequency and distribution are calculated. Here is the detailed statistic.

Table 1. Frequency and Distribution of Hedges

Category		Number	Percentage
Shields	Plausibility	19	3.00%
	Attribution	14	2.21%
Approximators	Adaptors	312	49.29%
	Rounders	288	45.50%
Total		633	100%

From this table, it can be found that the most frequently used hedges are approximators, which account for 94.79% of all the hedges. As for the shields, only 33 words are used and take the percentage of 5.21%. It’s obvious that the fuzzy expressions used in communiqués are mainly approximators. It can be inferred that shields are not very welcomed in diplomatic communiqués because shields are often used to strengthen the speaker’s politeness and avoid a sharp tone accompanied by a personal style.

### 4.2 Frequency Distribution

Table 2. Frequency and Distribution of all Types of Hedges

Hedge	Type	Word	Frequency	Percentage
Shields	Plausibility	we believe	19	3.00%
		according to	13	2.05%
	Attribution	is reported	1	0.16%
Approximators	Adaptors	more	220	34.76%
		some	21	3.32%
		only	20	3.16%
		even	19	3.00%
		large	13	2.05%
		many	9	1.42%
		almost	7	1.11%

	kind of	2	0.32%
	little	1	0.16%
Rounders	over	108	17.06%
	more than	56	8.85%
	about	38	6.00%
	recent	25	3.95%
	most	24	3.79%
	around	21	3.32%
	nearly	12	1.90%
	less than	3	0.47%
	roughly	1	0.16%
	Total	633	100%

Here are the details. From this table, the shields are used less than approximators in these diplomatic communiqués. Among the shields, “we believe” and “according to” contribute significantly. The phrase “we believe,” which contains hope and implies calling on for something, displays writer’s position and can often be seen at the article’s end. Also, the “according to” expresses the source of the content, making readers convinced that the articles are reliable and genuinely subjective.

Adaptors are words that supplement and modify the original meaning of utterances to some extent, serving writers with more accurate expressions (He, 1985). The word “more” appears most frequent, holding 34.76% of total hedges. In further investigation, it is found that most “more” is used to modify nouns and adjectives. Compared to other adaptors, “more” ranks top frequency, conveying information that The Ministry of Foreign Affairs picks up formal and more concrete expressions and makes the passages exact and convincing. Among all the articles, all the adaptors only account for 0.2%.

He (1985) also mentioned that a rounder is a word or phrase that limits the range of movement. If all the rounders and compare them with all research materials, it can be seen that only 0.19% of the whole words are rounders. Among all the rounders, “over” accounts for 17.06% and is used 108 times. After a deeper check, it is obvious that “over” is also used in modifying nouns, especially on the time and numbers. These fuzzy words are tools to make figures less absolute and ideally convince readers.

Now, after collecting enough data about the categories and frequency of the fuzzy words, the core principle of the usage can be refined. In the table, “more” and “over” stand for maximum frequency among all the hedges. Some examples are listed to help elaborate better on the characteristics.

#### 4.3 Content Analysis

This part makes an explanation on the reasons and effects based on the Politeness Principle and the Skopos Theory. The tact maxim and empathy maxim are fundamental in diplomatic translation, which should be paid more attention to.

##### 4.3.1 Plausibility Analysis

On behalf of the Chinese position, the communiqués should show their readers not only polite but also friendly words. Plausibility plays a vital role in making proposition less assertive and absolute, thus building a comfortable reading experience. The most frequently used plausibility, “we believe,” is analyzed below.

##### Translation Example 1:

Source text: 互联互通是国家间、人民间、社会间的纽带。我们相信，共建“一带一路”促进不同民族、不同文化、不同文明之间交流互鉴、对话互鉴。(2019.4)

Target text: “Considering connectivity as a means of bringing countries, peoples and societies closer together, we believe the Belt and Road Cooperation promotes exchanges, mutual learning and dialogue among different peoples, cultures and civilizations.”

Here, “we believe” shows a wish that China wants to build up Belt and Road Cooperation to strengthen development and calls on other countries to join our cooperation instead of demanding and ordering other countries. Moreover, if “we believe” is deleted, the meaning of the content becomes a little bit arrogant. Without the plausibility, the sentence’s tone would be aloof

and stiff, as if ordering other countries to cooperate. Shields used to avoid too direct and absolute saying. In this regard, the tact maxim is extensively represented, making the tone persuasive and polite. This communiqué aims at enlightening other countries to join the Belt and Road, so advantages are put forward to persuade.

#### 4.3.2 Attribution Analysis

Attribution is a symbol of the quotation from authorities, and it can indirectly show the attitude of China in communiqués.

Translation Example 2:

Source text: 我们呼吁所有国家与相关利益攸关方合作，提高国家、区域和全球能力，按照世界卫生组织（世卫组织）规定的严格标准开展疫苗研发和生产，提供安全、有效、高质量的新冠疫苗。（2021.8）

Target text: “We call upon all countries, in cooperation with the relevant stakeholders, to increase national, regional and global capacities, carry out vaccine research and development as well as production in line with strict standards according to the World Health Organization (WHO) regulations, and provide safe, effective and high-quality COVID-19 vaccines.”

Here “according to” contains many functions, including quoting authoritative documents from WHO, expressing wishes to other countries, and implying our vaccines are high-quality and up to standards. This attribution intends to display authority and calls on other countries to provide vaccines that reach standards. According to the Skopos Theory, this context is persuasive, and the attribution can help the translator achieve this intention.

#### 4.3.3 Adaptors Analysis

About adaptors, they are used to modify a change to some degree. They are a way of saying something closely true but not exactly true. The most frequently used adaptor is “more” in these communiqués, appearing 220 times. Here are the details.

Table 3. Frequency of “More”

Function	Determiner	Adverb	Pronoun
Frequency	148	67	5

Translation Example 3-1

Source text: 双方将鼓励在“一带一路”倡议下开展更多项目，体现马中密切、友好和相互信任的伙伴关系。（02/2020）

Target text: “Both sides would encourage more projects to be enlisted under this initiative as the reflection of the close and warm partnership and mutual trust between Malaysia and China.”

Translation Example 3-2

Source text: 各国利益交融、前途交融前所未有。（12/2019）

Target text: “The interests and future of all countries are more intertwined than ever before.”

Translation Example 3-3

Source text: 中国对非合作坚持多予少取、先予后取、不求回报的原则。（11/2021）

Target text: “In its cooperation with Africa, China applies the principles of giving more and taking less, giving before taking, and giving without asking for something in return.”

“More” mainly serves as a determiner to adjust the range of targeted objects, showing a fuzzy description of the number. In example 3-1, “more” is a determiner to modify the projects to show the strong desire of both two countries to enlist projects; it obeys the Tact maxim. Adaptors are used widely to modify the progress and benefits in the countries’ relationships, expressing the future rewards of the cooperation plan and convincing readers that this cooperation is helpful and beneficial. In example 3-2, “more” functions as an adverb to picture the intertwined situation, implying all countries share a common future reasonably. “More” also emphasizes that the relationships among all countries would be even more critical in the future. It shows persuading and seeking deeper cooperation. This adaptor obeys tact maxim and agreement maxim and expresses the intention clearly. In example 3-3, “more” serves as a pronoun, hiding the detailed information of benefits but serving China’s

selfless and polite image. Based on the Skopos Theory, a translation should serve the intention, and the “more” here perfectly fulfills its mission of clarifying the Chinese position.

#### 4.3.4 Rounders Analysis

Rounders are words that limit the range of the utterance, often accompanied by numbers. Sometimes it is hard to get the precise number, or the exact number is not so acquired to understand. Then it is time for rounders to make efforts. The use of rounders in communication gives the listener a scope of the subject and enables him to understand things within that scope. Below are the most frequently used rounders “over.”

Example 4:

Source text: 同时，中国对外提供援款 4000 多亿元人民币，向近 170 个国家和国际组织派出 60 多万名援助人员。(9/2019)

Target text: “Meanwhile, China has provided over 400 billion RMB yuan in foreign aid and sent over 600,000 aid workers to nearly 170 countries and international organizations.”

Like “over” or “nearly,” rounders always appear near the numbers, showing a slight vagueness in the sentences. In Example 4, “over” modifies the number of money and aid workers. The numbers here are fuzzy, but the figures are still reliable and straightforward due to the large base of the nouns. The translator takes a method of ellipsis in which the total number is not written entirely. If translators just put all the exact numbers here, the sentence would be messy, and readers may be distracted by the complex information. Avoiding exact numbers releases readers’ reading pressure and helps them receive information quickly. By doing this, the readers’ attention will be focused on the Chinese contribution. The usage of rounders does not affect the intention of conveying information, so it is acceptable based on the Skopos Theory.

The fuzziness of official documents is mainly reflected in the following aspects:

1. The ambiguity brought by the indeterminacy of the thing itself. For instance, “more.” More time can be a few days, a month, even years. These similar words contain ambiguity itself and are also widely used.
2. The vagueness caused by the variability of things. For example, teenagers.
3. The uncertainty of the meaning of words. Among the words that describe the nature, degree, and scope of things, the specific boundaries of some words are difficult to define, and there are always fuzzy intersecting areas, for example, “a bit” and “a little.” They both show a small degree, and it is not easy to distinguish them just by understanding the degree.

The function of these fuzzy expressions is mainly reflected in three aspects: firstly, they are used to show some words that are nearly but not entirely correct in degree or quantity to avoid being too arbitrary. Secondly, they can be used to modify or restrict the expression of some content that is not necessary or cannot be precise. Third, implying some messages and making articles look clear and polite.

As a content text, the communiqué clarifies China’s position on many areas and issues, provides guidelines for work, and veritable authoritative information. The specific function of these official articles is to let readers home and abroad know about China’s national conditions and government work. It represents the official thoughts and actions of the Chinese government.

## 5 Translation Strategies

### 5.1 Criteria

As a practical language communication and social practice, translation is always full of infinite possibilities. The criterion of the Skopos Theory to evaluate the quality of translation is adequacy rather than equivalence (Duan, 2000). Adequacy refers to the translation text being suitable to the requirements of the translation purpose. That is to say, and the translated text should fulfill its communicative function in the target language context and culture.

Compared to other translation content, the diplomatic translation needs more accurate and proper expressions, which is a high demand for translators. Diplomatic content always includes national issues, international affairs, bilateral cooperation, and official announcements with solid political characteristics and significance. Therefore, the translators should use standardized strategies and faithfully convey the information.

According to Pan (2010), the Skopos Theory advocates that translation is a kind of behavior with a specific purpose like any other action. The most crucial role of the Skopos Theory is to guide the selection of translation strategies. Purpose or intention is the most direct and fundamental factor in determining strategy. Purpose determines every process and detail of translation.

The fundamental criterion of translation works under the guidance and demand of the author (Duan, 2000). It means that no matter how hard the translator tries to catch the author's thoughts and feelings, the translation is not a pure reproduction of the author's actual psychological process but a re-creation of the text, which is also guided by the translator's understanding of the text. Any tiny misunderstanding may cause considerable trouble, especially in the diplomatic translation. Therefore, during the translation process, the translator should concentrate on the purpose of translation and get the work done accordingly.

### *5.2 Tactics*

Based on the Politeness Principle and the Skopos Theory, to conclude the characteristics and usage of these types of hedges is now available. Whether oral or written, the Chinese often use fuzzy expressions or rhetoric to share ideas, while other people from western countries are likely to use logical and direct ways. Therefore, some adjustments are needed to help foreigners better understand what the author wants to convey. Below are some suggestions for translators based on what is discovered from the statistics elicited from the corpus.

#### *5.2.1 From Precision to Fuzziness*

The precise translation is the norm, but sometimes ambiguity is a better choice. For example, it is ubiquitous to translate figures and data into official documents. Not all figures need to be placed directly in the communiqués. To ease the reader's pressure, translators often omit some data details, leaving only the central part. That is where the hedges come in. Adaptors play an essential role in modifying the degree, while rounders do well in adjusting ranges. Regardless of the specific data or the scope of something, approximators can help translators better convey the original meaning without causing difficulties for readers. At the same time, adding shields can make the article read less aggressive, which also shows the connotation of the Politeness Principle. Plausibility makes the translation subjective and highlights the official position, while attribution attaches importance to quotation authority and convinces people. The use of these fuzzy words often makes the translation more palatable to readers, ensuring the intention of conveying information and giving people a polite impression, which is also conducive to the official agreement of readers.

#### *5.2.2 From Fuzziness to Precision*

Fuzzy messages in diplomatic primitives are retained in translation in some cases. Most semantically fuzzy words can be translated directly by using fuzzy words corresponding to the literal meaning and political standpoint.

Due to the historical differences of each country, the social and cultural development is also various. If the information in the original language is not explained, the translation cannot be equivalent to the targeted ones, which confuses readers. Therefore, the background and needs of readers must be fully taken into consideration in translation, and the original language should be supplemented so that readers can understand it better.

For the cultural ambiguity caused by metaphor, quoting idioms, common sayings, and ancient poems, it would be better to adopt similar sayings in English on the basis of a correct grasp of the literal meaning and political connotation. Combining with the diplomatic and overall context, the expression of Chinese characteristics certainly helps spread Chinese culture. Fuzzy language itself has excellent uncertainty and selectivity, resulting in many implicated meanings.

In addition, some fuzzy information should be deleted considering the whole content and its core meaning. Based on the analysis of specific diplomatic context, some fuzzy expressions with similar meanings that are not politically strong or repeated frequently can be discarded, and the translation workload can be reduced.

#### *5.2.3 From Fuzziness to Fuzziness*

Although humans use different languages, the core structures that determine their organization is very similar, making the two languages equivalent in meaning. Some words with equivalent meanings can be found in the target language in translation. Therefore, it is an excellent method to match these equivalent meaning words accordingly and appropriately. When fuzzy information only affects a part and is reflected in a particular word, literal translation can be used for word-to-word translation so that fuzzy information can be perfectly preserved.

Based on the Skopos Theory, the purpose of translation determines the process of translation. In order to show our politeness and avoid conflicts, translators should avoid sensitive topics and issues. Besides, sometimes it is unsuitable to tell the details or concrete plot to the other. Ellipsis and fuzzy language are the most common methods of dealing with these problems. In addition, the logic between sentences is often reflected in mood and semantics. There are many long sentences in English, and the sentence structure is very complex and rigorous. A large number of connectives reflect the logic between sentences.

The translation needs to be flexible and avoid unnecessary and redundant words so that the translation conforms to the target expression habits.

In diplomatic translation, translators must clarify their position and get rid of the troublesome dilemma. There are implied meanings behind the sentences; how to deal with them makes a significant difference in many cases. Sometimes the author wishes to preserve preliminary information, so the translator should try to preserve the characteristics of fuzzy language as faithfully as possible. Otherwise, if fuzzy information is translated clearly, it does not truly reflect the author's will but brings unnecessary trouble to communication.

## **6 Conclusions and Limitations**

In this paper, the software corpus AntConc is used to calculate the distribution of four types of hedges used in the communiqués and carry out the theory. In the translation of the official communiqués, the translators should consider the entire content and background and then leave some room to adjust and explain. The official document generally requires plain and direct. Nevertheless, in some cases, considering different readers and sometimes it is difficult to speak frankly, the utterance needs to be euphemistic and implicit. The need for confidentiality or etiquette also factors matters. In official documents, the situation analyzed, the questions raised, the experience summed up, and the appeal is all universal and complex to a certain extent. Suppose there is a lack of accurate generalization. In that case, the article is bound to be protracted, and vague language has a high degree of generalization, making up for the lack of precise words in generalization. The use of these words makes the text concise and believable. The contents reflected in the official document must be objective, and no one can express his subjective color and feelings in the official document. Therefore, fuzzy words should be used appropriately when writing articles.

Despite the hard work of this research, the study still has some limitations that further study could improve. This paper mainly focuses on the guidance of the Politeness Principle and the Skopos Theory. Due to the limited practice experience and translation knowledge, there is a large room that can be improved on the analysis of the cases. It takes a lot of effort and time to do further research. In the translation study, only the translator's strategy is studied from the perspective of the reader's acceptance level and language level, and other specific situations are not studied. Besides, they also need to have a high political acuity and translation ability of political documents. The author of this paper still cannot meet the requirements in these aspects, meaning the possibility of mistakes and errors.

Over the past decades, China has played a more critical role in international affairs and gained a better reputation worldwide. It is hoped that further studies can supplement the translation of the Chinese diplomatic and contribute more to the Chinese political propaganda, thus strengthening the communication between China and other countries.



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