



# Gender Difference in Vague Words: A Corpus-based Study in Chinese-English Political Interpreting

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**ABSTRACT.** Vagueness is often used in discursive contexts, where people often use vague concepts to avoid problems, be polite and maintain face. And due to the sensitive nature of political interpreting, the use of vague words in political interpreting is a key concern for scholars. At the same time, due to gender differences, male and female interpreters do not only handle them inconsistently in translation, but also pay attention on handling them in interpretation. This paper focuses on the choice and use of vague words by male and female interpreters in the political interpreting environment. The main purpose is to explore the frequency of the use of vague words by male and female in political interpreting, and to summarise the top 100 most frequently used vague words. There is no detailed discussion on the treatment of ambiguous words in specific contexts and principles. This paper focuses on the differences in the use of 'seem' and 'likely' between males and females. This is followed by a summary of the lexical aspects of ambiguous words in political interpreting. These studies and analyses show the differences in the use of vague words by male and female interpreters in political interpreting, and their ability to handle them, which can help us to strengthen the training of interpreters in handling this type of words in future interpreting training, especially in sensitive interpreting environments such as political interpreting, and to improve the sensitivity of vague words.

**Keywords:** gender difference, vague words, political interpreting

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The differences between males and females language use are often discussed in the translation area. With the development of feminism in European countries in the last century, people are paying more attention to this area. Also, with the development of consecutive and simultaneous interpreting, the differences in the use of words and phrases, as well as the differences in expression habits and styles between male and female interpreters in political interpreting have gradually come to the attention of scholars. For example, Collard focuses on cognitive gender differences in simultaneous interpretation in the corpus, with an emphasis on Ear-Voice-Span and disfluency [1]. Analyzing the differences between male and female translators in several languages, she concludes that translation in different languages affects male and female

translators differently in terms of EVS. In addition, as noted by Pan, there is a clear difference between male and female translators in the use of hedging in vague language [2]. More specifically, male prefer to use cognitive ambiguity to express the uncertainty of the output, while female prefer to use emotional restriction to promote human relationships. Certainly, there is a difference in the frequency of use of vagueness in political interpreting between male and female interpreters.

To investigate the differences in a political translation corpus named CEPIC, this paper will be presented in the following sections: firstly, the literature review section will review previous related work on political interpreting, gender differences, and vague words. The second section is to raise research questions. Then, the methodology will introduce the procedure of this research. The results will introduce the findings of this paper including gender differences in frequency and keywords, followed by the discussions to discuss about the phenomenon of gender differences in translation. Lastly, the conclusion will be drawn to conclude key findings and summarize the contribution of this work.

## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Political interpreting**

Political interpreting is a special kind of interpreting, which requires a very demanding interpretation not only in terms of the language used by the interpreter but also in terms of translation strategy. Many political interpreters have a high level of translation quality and adaptability.

Roy's case study of sign language interpreting discusses the interpreter's active participation in communication, which has resulted in a new understanding of the interpreter's role [3]. According to Roy, "the interpreter is not only interpreting," but also responsible for maintaining and facilitating communication. When interpreting in diplomatic situations, interpreters are not only required to translate the content of the speech, but also to interpret the tone and attitude of the speaker correctly. Even the political atmosphere needs to be conveyed with precision by the interpreter.

The sensitivity of politics also means that political interpreters are subject to greater responsibility and higher risk than interpreters in other ordinary meetings. Buri, for example, points out that political interpreters can be more susceptible to political scrutiny than other interpreters, which are likely to be the culprits of failure on both sides of a conversation if the interpretation is not done properly [4].

In general, previous research has mostly focused on discourse strategies for political interpreting, with little attention paid to the impact of the use of individual words on interpretation [5], [6], [7]. This paper, therefore, focuses on the use of ambiguous words in political interpreting.

### **2.2 Vague words**

Vague words are one of the elements of political interpretations. There are three most important principles of interpretation: timely, accurate, and efficient, under which

vague translation plays a great advantage. Therefore, the use of ambiguous words in interpretation, especially in political interpretation, is an essential method. Leech proposes that the principles of politeness complement the principles of conversation and proposes six principles of politeness that govern interpersonal communication: decency, generosity, praise, humility, consistency and sympathy, and that the use of vague language for communication is a good tool. [8].

According to Williamson, Used as a technical term, “vague words” is not pejorative [9]. Indeed, vagueness is a desirable feature of natural languages. For example, some vague words used in the interpretation area include “quite” “likely” and “several.” Vague words often suffice for the purpose at hand, and too much precision can lead to time-wasting and inflexibility. Channell argues a more general point, that “vagueness in the language is neither all ‘bad’ nor all ‘good.’ The most important issue is that vague language is used appropriately.” [10] Taking the interpretation area as an example, if the interpreter uses too many vague words, it might cause misunderstanding among the audience about the certainty of their interpretations. Especially in political situations, speakers usually avoid some sensitive issues, which means interpreters need to use some vague words when interpreting their sentences from them at that time. Wang has mentioned in her corpus-based hedging restriction language interpretation for Chinese-English meetings that the use of hedging restriction language can help focus on politeness and avoid risks in political interpretation [11].

Wu, the pioneer who studied fuzzy linguistics in China, mentioned in his paper about the detailed concept of vague words [12]. Meanwhile, the literature on vague words has highlighted several transformations of fuzzy words: contextual words, cognates, antonyms, etc. He also emphasizes that the use of vague words is influenced by political, geographical, economic, social, and other factors. In interpretation, especially in political interpretation, the principle of pragmatic is extremely important, and the proper use of ambiguity can help interpreters' translations become more fluent, thereby meeting the needs of political discourse translation. A further question is whether the usage of vague words in political situations can help audiences understand clearly and interpreters interpret politely. This has been previously assessed to only a very limited extent, because few Chinese scholars talk about the influence of ambiguous words on discourse communication in political interpretation.

To sum up, the use of ambiguous words in political interpreting is common. However, a number of authors pay more attention to the usage of hedging and single vague words in writing or talking, which causes only a few discussions on their large ranges. To fill in this research gap, this paper will focus on the frequencies of these vague words in political interpretation.

### **2.3 Gender difference in interpreting**

The 16th century saw the rise of feminist thinking in England and France, where women under long-standing patriarchal social domination began to advocate for equal rights in politics, society, and education. Due to the long-standing oppression by men, women were unable to enjoy the same basic rights as men, without mentioning the

right to create and translate, etc. Therefore, the traditional perspective of translation is often from the male's perspective, placing women in a subordinate position in terms of language and culture. Influenced by the feminist movement, the field of translation has gradually put the perspective on both male and female translators. In modern times, with the development of interpretation, people have also gradually started to pay attention to the translation differences between male and female interpreters in interpretation.

When it comes to sensitive topics in interpreting, using ambiguous words and euphemisms by interpreters can help shelter the speaker to a certain extent when the interpreter is reluctant or afraid to talk about a topic or word directly. If the interpreter translates too clearly, it can be invasive. In Magnifico's study, he also mentioned that female interpreters are more skillful in handling ambiguous translations [13]. There have been two studies to investigate females in communication. For example, according to Lakoff and Tannen, women are more indirect and gentle to communicate with others, and also they can avoid rude forms which are impolite and offensive [14], [15].

Sex differences in interpreting have been widely documented. For example, research has provided evidence for that women have a better memory than men. Kimura has talked that no matter in verbal or in nonverbal tasks, women can deal with these problems better and perform perfectly [16]. Despite the maturity of the research on gender in translation and interpreting, a comprehensive usage of vague words between male and female has not been conducted. Therefore, this paper will discuss in detail the use of vague words by men and women in the interpreting environment.

### **3 THE STUDY**

#### **3.1 Research questions**

To examine the use of vague words in Chinese-English political interpreting between male and female, this study gives the following research questions:

What is the frequency of male and female interpreters' usage of vague words respectively? (Table 1)

What are the differences between males and females in interpretation? (Table 1.2)

What is the order of the fifty most frequently used vague words in political interpretation?

#### **3.2 Methodology**

This paper is based on CEPIC data, collected manually and using EXCEL for data statistics.

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This paper mainly uses the open source political interpretation corpus created by the Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU), mainly by HKBU professor Jun Pan et al. The CEPIC corpus consists of parallel representation of speech segments in Can-

tonese, Putonghua and English. The main speech types of CEPIC include the reading of government reports such as policy addresses and budget speeches, Q&A at press conferences, parliamentary debates, as well as remarks delivered at bilateral meetings from 1997 to 2017. There are 16 speech types and 6,393,994 words in this corpus.

CEPIC can be queried for data by searching for: speaker name, form, role, gender, language, delivery mode, interpreter gender, language and mode of interpretation, and time range.

This paper focuses on the analysis by querying keywords, searching for different genders, and then downloading the data.

## 4 RESULTS

### 4.1 Frequencies of ambiguous words used by men and women

To answer the research question 1, below is the frequency that males and females shown in the CEPIC corpus when they are doing the interpretation:

**Table 1.** Frequency of the male and female

Word list	Word	female	male
1	seem	5	1
2	kind	12	24
3	quite	45	37
4	often	25	23
5	normally	0	2
6	likely	12	10
7	several	59	42
8	clearly	48	41
9	widely	22	15
10	almost	29	20

According to Table 1, males' and females' usage of vague words have some differences, in which females tend to use more vague words than males. The frequency of vague words is higher for women. Vague words are related to the principle of politeness, this data reflects that they are more cautious in the process of interpretation and avoid some sensitive topics in political diplomacy. However, when looking into some specific usage of words, for example, "seem," it is interesting to find that there are not only the same interpretations between males and females in one sentence, but also differences between the other four sentences. The details can be shown in the following tables:

**Table 2.** The Usage of “seem” in the CEPIC Corpus

Gender	Front	Keyword	Rear
1.Female	... United States even if they don't	seem	to like you ?
2.Female	... impressed to see how little Chinese citizens	seem	to care for the changes in ...
3.Female	... However , events in recent years	seem	to have impacted on the system ...
4.Female	... to employment and consumption .And people	seem	to get quite excited when they ...
5.Female	... where their expenses occur . It may	seem	a very concrete and specific issue ...
6.Male	... . However , events in recent years	seem	to have impacted on the system ...

According to Table 2, it is shown in line 3 and line 6, the interpretations between these male and female translators are the same. However, in other line 1,2,4, and 5, 60% of female translators tends to use vague words to describe “PEOPLE,” with only 40% of them tend to use vague words to describe “EVENTS” (i.e., the specific issue about the translated context). But in males, 100% of the only use of vague word was just to describe “EVENTS.”

**Table 3.** The Usage of “likely” in the CEPIC Corpus

Gender	Front	Key-word	Rear
1.female	... and the means and it 's highly	likely	that we will stand all new ...
2.female	... some time to increase , it is	likely	that there will still be upward ...
3.female	... are strong . Domestic demand will very	likely	remain a major driving force of ...
4.female	... further financial liberalisation in the Mainland is	likely	to consolidate Hong Kong 's position ...
5.female	... taken around the world , it is	likely	that the global economy will take ...
6.female	... mean fewer jobs but it is also	likely	to cause economic recession . We ...
7.female	... series featuring Hong Kong, you are	likely	to come across these scenes : ...
8.female	... and enforcement actions in industrial buildings more	likely	to have subdivided units . The ...
9.female	... has sustained for years . It is	likely	that there will be larger and ...
10.female	... , global economic growth and inflation are	likely	to stay modest , and global ...
11.female	... The global economy as a whole is	likely	to stay on a slow-growing

male			path ...
12.fe male	... the emergingG markets along the routes are	likely	to become the new impetus for ...
1.mal e	... put forward , some of which are	likely	to be implemented shortly while others ...
2.mal e	China will very	likely	join the World Trade Organisation ...
3.mal e	... some time to increase , it is	likely	that there will still be upward ...
4.mal e	... are strong . Domestic demand will very	likely	remain a major driving force of ...
5.mal e	... further financial liberalisation in the Mainland is	likely	to consolidate Hong Kong 's position ...
6.mal e	... taken around the world , it is	likely	that the global economy will take ...
7.mal e	... series featuring Hong Kong , you are	likely	to come across these scenes : ...
8.mal e	... The global economy as a whole is	likely	to stay on a slow-growing path ...
9.mal e	... since mid-2015 , and the fall is	likely	to be more severe in 2016 ...
10.m ale	... the emergingG markets along the routes are	likely	to become the new impetus for ...

According to the data in the table above, when women use “likely,” it is mostly in the adjectival form, and only in the line 3, it is used in the adverbial form. This shows that the same vague word tends to be used in its adjectival form by a women interpreter, which has 91% tends. On the contrary, in the line 2 and line 4 of the male data, there are two males use the adverbial form of “likely”, with 18% tends of using the adjectival form.

#### 4.2 The top 100 most frequently used vague words in political interpretation

**Table 4.** The top 100 most frequently used vague words in CEPIC

Ranking	Words	Frequencies
1	Can	5742
2	Would	3523
3	Some	2939
4	Think	2187
5	Believe	1150
6	May	1116
7	Could	1071

8	May	990
9	Around	764
10	Most	491
11	About	475
12	Particularly	451
13	Might	366
14	Really	360
15	Almost	338
16	Kind	322
17	Quite	274
18	According	260
19	Clearly	245
20	Often	226
21	Often	226
22	Light	224
23	Several	220
24	Likely	144
25	Generally	141
26	Probably	130
27	Widely	98
28	Considerable	98
29	Fairly	91
30	Sometimes	88
31	Seem	88
32	Wonder	82
33	Entirely	80
34	Largely	68
35	Roughly	55
36	Possibly	49
37	Primarily	44
38	somewhat	37
39	Somewhat	37
40	Numerous	36
41	Usually	31
42	Personally	31
43	Regularly	30



44	Mostly	25
45	Typically	20
46	Normally	20
47	Notably	18
48	Slight	11
49	Commonly	11
50	Incredibly	10

From the above Table 4, there are key findings that: in political interpreting, interpreters tend to use vague words of modal verbs, such as: "can" and "would". In the corpus, "can" is used 5742 times, followed by "would" 3523 times. And throughout the table, you can see that the lexical forms of vague words are mostly adverbial forms. The number of vague words of adjective and verb lexical forms is smaller than the percentage of vague words. This is an important finding in the table that most of the ambiguous words in political interpretation are in the form of adverbs.

## 5 DISCUSSION

According to the previous results, it is found that females would use vague words to describe people and events, whereas males only describe events with the use of "seem." This is in line with Pan, which is the main reference of this paper, who argues that females use vague words to facilitate interpersonal relationships [2]. Therefore, females in political interpreting may use ambiguous words to a higher frequency when translating texts related to people.

The Figure 4 in the above results investigates the fifty most frequently used words in political interpreting, which shows that the political interpreting environment is more serious than that of accompanying interpreters and tourist escort interpreters, so the vague words in political interpreting are mostly adverbs.

Overall, the study of the frequency of vague words used by male and female interpreters in political interpreting will improve the translators' training of male and female interpreters for future generations. The use of vague words by male and female interpreters in interpreting can, to a large extent, avoid sensitive issues and provide good feeling for the speakers and themselves. Training in the use of ambiguous words and sensitive areas will help interpreters to become more sensitive and adapt to the specificities of the political interpreting environment and atmosphere. At the same time, subsequent scholars can also explore more about the vague use of adjectives and pronouns in political interpreting, which has expanded the deeper connotation of vague words in the area of interpretation.

## 6 CONCLUSION

To sum up, the aim was to investigate the frequencies in vague words between male and female interpreters. This study has found that females use more vague words than

males in political interpreting. Analyzing individual words revealed that the usage form of one vague word is different in gender. Another obvious finding to emerge from this study is that interpreters are likely to use adverbs in political interpretation. Although some results were obtained, the major limitation of this study is that the difference in the use of vague words in specific contexts is not discussed in detail, for example, the impact of vague words on the principle of cooperation in interpreting, and on the specific use of face-saving avoidance. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the use of ambiguous words by different gender interpreters and their usage bias, to generalise the categories of ambiguous words attempted in political interpreting, and to provide a targeted approach for future translation training.

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