



Modulation of Obligation Strength in the English–Chinese Translation of Diplomatic Texts: A Case Study of COP29 Decisions

Fangyuan Zhu*

School of Languages and Communication Studies, Beijing Jiaotong University, Beijing 100044, China

*yuanfang20468@163.com

Abstract. This study investigates the adjustment of deontic obligation strength in the English–Chinese translation of COP29 Decisions. Integrating Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) with pragmatic equivalence, it constructs a parallel corpus (N = 830 segments) to analyze the interpersonal functions of “urges-type” performative verbs. Quantitative results reveal a systematic recalibration of obligation strength, notably negotiation-oriented mitigation (40%) for urges, action-oriented intensification (59.4%) for invites, and stance-oriented intensification (12.1%) for notes. Qualitative synthesis demonstrates that these shifts are not arbitrary but contingent upon contextual variables, specifically the interplay between agency and clause content. The study proposes a Context-Driven Modulation Adjustment Model, framing diplomatic translation as a dynamic equilibrium that balances directive force with professional prudence. These findings help clarify how diplomatic translation balances cooperative positioning with directive pressure in climate governance discourse, and they suggest the value of developing translators’ institutional sensitivity alongside lexical accuracy.

Keywords: modulation, obligation adjustment, diplomatic translation, deontic modality, Systemic Functional Linguistics.

1 Introduction

Climate change has become one of the focal issues of global concern. Climate change governance, anchored in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) system, relies heavily on the “Decisions” adopted by the Conference of the Parties (COP)^[1]. These texts serve as pivotal instruments of global policy, performing essential guiding and regulatory functions. Diplomatic texts are highly formulaic, employing performative verbs to encode varying degrees of deontic obligation. These verbs are not merely lexical choices but carriers of diplomatic stance and strategic intent. Consequently, the Chinese translation of these resolutions does not merely replicate tone but actively reconstructs the pragmatic force and diplomatic positioning of the source text.

This study addresses three central questions: (1) What strategies are employed to translate “urges-type” verbs across different obligation gradients? (2) How do these strategies systematically adjust the diplomatic stance? (3) To what extent are these adjustments correlated with contextual variables such as agency and clause content?

2 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

In Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), modality comprises modalization and modulation^[2]. Diplomatic texts strategically exploit deontic modulation to codify behavior and policy, where obligation strength functions as an important indicator of diplomatic stance. While English has a more differentiated grammatical system for expressing modality, Chinese more often realizes meanings such as possibility, obligation, inclination, and ability through lexical means^[3]. This typological asymmetry necessitates systematic modality recalibration during translation to maintain pragmatic equivalence across varying contexts^[4–5].

Performative verbs—such as *urges*, *invites*, and *notes*—simultaneously encode directive force and institutional positioning. Translators employ intensification, mitigation, or equivalence to recalibrate these forces in response to participant characteristics^[6–7]. Recent research identifies shifts like “objectivization” and “de-obligation” as mechanisms to align translations with target-language norms^[5–8–9].

However, existing studies predominantly adopt macro-level qualitative lenses, leaving a methodological lacuna in granular, data-driven analyses of specific performative verbs under rigorous obligation gradation^[10–11]. This study addresses this gap by integrating SFL with UN document features to analyze how pragmatic equivalence is achieved through dynamic modality recalibration. Drawing on Systemic Functional Linguistics, particularly its account of modulation and deontic obligation, this study classifies deontic performative verbs into four analytical gradients—high, high-median, median-low, and low—according to their directive force and the degree of expected action. For translation analysis, modulation adjustment is coded into three types: equivalence, mitigation, and intensification. This classification elucidates the translator’s strategic adaptation to policy significance—a dynamic recalibration process central to navigating the nuanced hierarchies of modern diplomatic engagement^[8–9].

3 Corpus and Research Methodology

The corpus comprises formal COP29 Decisions and their official Chinese counterparts, which are drawn from the COP29 Decisions published on the official website of the UNFCCC, excluding non-binding reports. A specialized English–Chinese parallel corpus was constructed, with noise (headers/footnotes) removed and text aligned using OmegaT combined with manual verification. Non-core diplomatic obligations, policy clauses, and annexes were filtered out, resulting in a final dataset of 830 valid segments.

The methodology adopts a “quantitative-to-qualitative” pipeline. First, AntConc was used for KWIC (Keyword-in-Context) searches to identify the frequency of the eight most representative performative verbs (see Figure. 1). The choice of these verbs was

based on their high frequency and their role as primary indicators of deontic force. Next, SublimeText and Excel were employed to annotate typical examples individually, recording obligation strength, types of modulation, and contextual factors. From these, urges, invites, and notes, were selected as the focal units of analysis based on two criteria: (1) their high frequency and significant ratio of modulation adjustment, which represent typical deontic shifts; and (2) their high sensitivity to contextual variables, where adjustment directly alters diplomatic stance. Subsequently, 30 prototypical examples were selected for contextual annotation, recording the agent (who), addressee (whom), and object (what). This ensures methodological rigor and high replicability in analyzing the modulation mechanism.

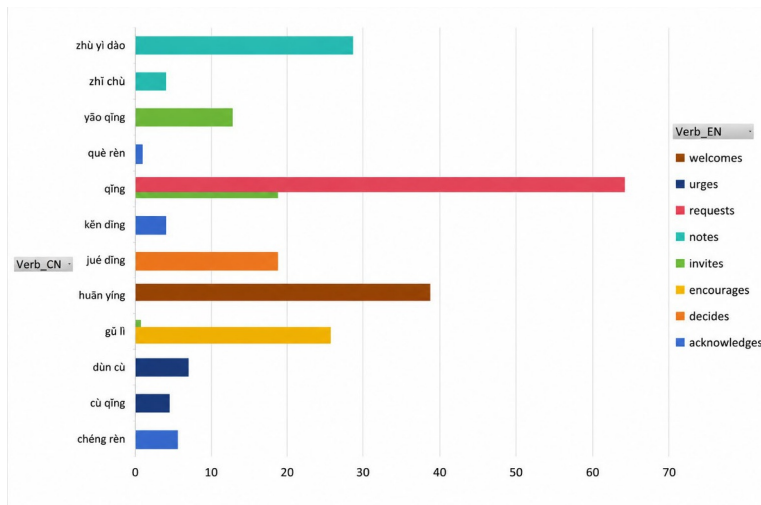


Fig. 1. Frequencies of “Urges-Type” Performative Verbs in the COP29 Corpus.

4 Data Analysis and Discussion

The systematic analysis of the data suggests that while maintaining a stable overall modal range, the modulation adjustment of “urges-type” performative verbs is not arbitrary but governed by the nature of the clause and the diplomatic status of the actors involved, which in turn shapes the degree of obligation and the diplomatic stance realized in specific contexts. The following discussion focuses on three representative verbs (urges, invites, notes), illustrating their modulation adjustment patterns and the underlying pragmatic mechanisms in the process of Chinese translation.

4.1 Urges — Negotiation-Oriented Mitigation

In SFL, “*urges*” signifies High-Median Obligation, functioning to exert pressure for policy execution. While typically rendered as “*dūn cù*” to preserve its directive force—especially when addressing executive bodies on strategic mandates (e.g., Decision

3/CP.29)—a significant 40% of cases exhibit strategic mitigation to “cù qǐng.” This modulation adjustment is predominantly observed in administrative or resource-related clauses.

Example 1: (Decision 20/CP.29) “Urges Parties to further contribute to the trust fund for participation in the UNFCCC process ...

Translation: “cù qǐng dì yuē fāng xiàng cān yù ‘qì hòu gōng yuē’ jìn chéng xìn tuō jī jīn jìn yí bù juān kuǎn.....”

Since the clause addresses parties as a collective (sovereign states) and involves voluntary contributions and procedural arrangements rather than core policy decisions, excessive forcefulness is diplomatically inappropriate. Hence, *urges* is mitigated to “cù qǐng.” The translator aligns the interpersonal function with the principle of voluntary participation, balancing policy intent with diplomatic prudence.

Summary: The translation of *urges* follows a **Negotiation-Oriented Mitigation model**. Equivalence is maintained for institutional mandates to ensure accountability, whereas mitigation is triggered when clauses involve sovereign states or procedural affairs. This creates a gradient distribution of modality that preserves the original policy orientation while maintaining the collaborative posture essential to diplomatic discourse.

4.2 Invites — Action-Oriented Intensification

“*Invites*” represents Median-Low Obligation, typically conveying a consultative and polite suggestion. However, corpus analysis reveals a intensification in 59.4% of cases, where it is rendered as the more direct “qǐng” instead of the literal “yāo qǐng.” This modulation adjustment is highly prevalent in operational and institutional clauses.

Example 2: (Decision 3/CP.29) “Invites the Board to consider how to strengthen direct access ...

Translation: “qǐng dòng shì huì kǎo lǜ rú hé jiā qiáng zī jīn de zhí jiē huò qǔ.....”

While “yāo qǐng” implies a polite, non-binding gesture, “qǐng” in Chinese policy discourse functions as a standard prompt for specific institutional action. When the addressee is an executive body (e.g., GCF) and the object involves functional mandates like climate finance or capacity-building, the translator elevates the obligation strength. This allows the translation to move beyond a purely interpersonal reading and to reflect the institutional expectations of the COP more clearly.

Summary: The translation of *invites* follows an **Action-Oriented Intensification model**. By substituting a social formula with a procedural directive, the translator strengthens the deontic force within the low-to-median range. This adjustment serves the pragmatic goal of policy implementation, transforming a mild suggestion into a clear call for operational engagement.

4.3 Notes — Stance-Oriented Intensification

“*Notes*” expresses Low Obligation, typically used to state facts or introduce background information. While usually translated as “zhù yì dào,” approximately 12.1% of instances—particularly those involving principled issues—undergo a intensification to

“zhǐ chū.”

Example 3: (Decision 5/CP.29) “Notes the importance of converting pledges to contributions in a timely manner...”

Translation: “zhǐ chū jí shí duì xiàn rèn juān de zhòng yào xìng.....”

While “zhù yì dào” denotes a neutral cognitive state, “zhǐ chū” carries an assertive and evaluative undertone. When the object involves value-laden concepts like “importance” or sensitive policy areas (e.g., loss and damage, gender equality), the translator enhances the pragmatic force. This adjustment reconstructs the interpersonal function of the clause, shifting from objective observation to normative judgment. Furthermore, “zhǐ chū.....de zhòng yào xìng” aligns with Chinese diplomatic conventions, providing a more authoritative and resolute diplomatic stance.

Summary: The translation of *notes* follows a **Stance-Oriented Intensification model**. Triggered by evaluative objects and principled contexts, this adjustment allows the translator to reinforce the target text’s ideological weight. Even within a low-modality range, such recalibration ensures that the diplomatic positioning of the source text is effectively amplified in the Chinese policy landscape.

4.4 Synthesis: A Context-Driven Modulation Adjustment Model

The cross-analysis of *urges*, *invites*, and *notes* reveals a systematic deontic recalibration governed by the diplomatic context—specifically the interplay of agent, addressee, and object. This study identifies a tripartite modulation adjustment mechanism: Equivalent Transmission maintains modal stability for routine mandates; Negotiation-Oriented Mitigation attenuates obligation strength when addressing sovereign “Parties” to respect national autonomy; and Action/Stance-Oriented Intensification reinforces deontic force for institutional execution and normative judgments. By navigating these three paths, the translator fine-tunes the interpersonal function and diplomatic stance, ensuring that the target text achieves pragmatic equivalence while optimizing the communicative efficacy required for global climate governance.

5 Conclusion

This study identifies a context-driven pattern of modulation adjustment in the English–Chinese translation of COP29 Decisions. The findings suggest three recurrent tendencies through which obligation strength is recalibrated in relation to diplomatic stance and contextual variables. This balance between directive force and professional prudence is shaped by contextual variables, especially the interaction between agency and clause content, which influences how modality is adjusted to achieve pragmatic equivalence. Pedagogically, this framework provides granular metrics for deciphering the obligation equilibrium in global governance and underscores the imperative for specialized translator training to transcend lexical substitution, prioritizing the cultivation of “institutional sensitivity”. By mastering these modulation patterns, practitioners can more effectively navigate multifaceted interpersonal functions while upholding institutional accountability in international discourse.

Despite these insights, limitations remain regarding corpus scale and taxonomic breadth. The current analysis focuses exclusively on COP29, potentially constraining the generalizability of the identified modulation patterns. Furthermore, the diversity of verb types and semantic coverage requires more exhaustive verification. Future research should therefore undertake longitudinal analyses across an extended chronological spectrum of COP sessions to determine whether these linguistic strategies evolve synchronously with shifting global climate power dynamics.

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