

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Public Perceptions of Diplomatic Interpreters in China: A Corpus-driven Approach

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### Abstract:

This study explores the public perceptions of diplomatic interpreters and aims to unravel the criteria held by the public and the interpreting profession in evaluating the interpreters. The dissemination of diplomatic interpreting events through new media has led to increased visibility of interpreters and extended the public's attention from the interpreting product to the interpreters. To gain an insight into public perceptions of interpreters at diplomatic events, this study analyzes the comments from Weibo (a Chinese microblogging platform) on the interpreters in the China-US High-Level Strategic Dialogue (HLSD) in March 2021, the first high-level meeting between the two countries since the start of the Biden administration. ROST CM6 and NVivo 11 are used to visualize the themes of public perceptions on the interpreters. By analyzing 4,278 Weibo entries, it is found that new media platforms not only expand the audience of interpreting events but also facilitate the formation of a new way of interaction. As the indirect user of interpreting services, the public does not apply the traditional functional views (e.g., accuracy and completeness) in evaluating the quality of interpreting but examines it from the perspective of their native language, relying on the formal criteria of interpreting (e.g., fluency and pronunciation). The public is more concerned about the image of the interpreters than the quality of interpreting. The image of the interpreters is viewed by the public as a representation of professionalism.

**Keywords:** diplomatic interpreters, interpreter's image, public perceptions, interpreting quality

## 1. Introduction

This study explores the public perceptions of diplomatic interpreters and aims to unravel the criteria held by the public and the interpreting profession in evaluating the interpreters. Before the advent of new media, Chinese diplomatic interpreters often appear on television in the news about the meetings between Chinese and foreign heads of state. They are arguably among the interpreters who receive the most public attention in the Chinese media. However, limited by the traditional television media, interpreting activities are mostly presented in short clips. Comments about interpreters outside the professional circle mainly come from media coverage, while public opinion is not visible. The advent



of new media has attracted a wider range of audiences to interpreting activities, providing a new platform for the audiences' opinions and a new avenue for research. Online viewers participate in interpreting activities through tweeting and microblogging, among other digital footprints, and comment on interpreters and interpreting performance. To explore the public perceptions of diplomatic interpreters and their performance, this study mines Weibo data for comments on the interpreting of the China-US High-Level Strategic Dialogue (HLSD) in March 2021 and compares them against the interpreting service evaluation criteria.

## 2. Literature Review

Former Chinese senior diplomatic interpreters and professors define diplomatic interpreting as a highly formal type of interpreting service for diplomacy, conversing premeditated discursal content for sophisticated audience, and that qualified diplomatic interpreter must be well-versed in national policy, international relations, history, cultural and political affairs (Ren, 2000; Shi, 2007). Researches on Chinese diplomatic interpreting generally focus on the press conferences during the "Two Sessions" (the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference), with attention mostly paid to interpreting product, strategy and role. Related researches also include the relationship between lexical choices and stance-taking (Wang & Feng, 2018) and how speeches delivered by Chinese government officials are rendered by interpreters (Gao & Wang, 2021). Chinese diplomatic interpreting is a challenging task because the diplomatic discourse can be intricate and complex. In diplomatic interpreting practices, though faithfulness to the original has been upheld as a traditional principle, recent years have witnessed a growing trend of more target-oriented and the acceptability to the outside world (Pan & Wang, 2021). Wang (2012) suggests that in addition to the adequacy, acceptability of the target text is a major motivation for interpreters to shift their interpreting, and he argues that quality assessment should not be based solely on static quality criteria such as equivalence between the source and target languages. Acceptability becomes a key indicator in interpreting and interpreter evaluation, reflecting the interpreter's image in the eyes of the profession and the public.

However, the evaluation of diplomatic interpreting and interpreters is under-researched, especially from the perspectives of the general public. While several studies discussed evaluation either from the interpreter's or the user's perspective both in and outside China (Pöchhacker, 2009; Zwischenberger, 2009, 2010; Zhang, 2010, 2011; Shang & Li, 2022), few had a particular focus on diplomatic interpreting. Through an analysis of the image of diplomatic interpreters represented by the media in China, Du & Wang (2021) finds that diplomatic interpreters are portrayed as "stars" of the profession. While enjoying affiliation to power, diplomatic interpreters also suffer from a clear gender bias in which female interpreters were more presented in media with a focus on appearance. Their research points out the fact that the professional reality is not fully understood by people outside the professional circle, and there have been few studies about how interpreters are perceived outside the profession.

In order to explore more about public perceptions, this study aims to conduct a case study about the comments on interpreting HLSD. Unlike the press conference on TV with only one well-prepared diplomatic interpreter, HLSD was interpreted by two interpreters from the Chinese and American sides



and was broadcasted both on TV and social media. The video clip was widely circulated on the internet and generated a lively discussion on their performance. The audience's comments on social media are reflective of their understanding and expectation of interpreting, offering a new avenue to map out the public perceptions of diplomatic interpreters and unravel the gap between the public opinion and the interpreting service criteria in interpreter evaluation.

### 3. Research Design

Based on a corpus-driven approach, this study combs through the data and focuses on the comments pertaining only to interpreting and interpreters. Corpus linguistics focuses on the subjectivity of language users, and it reveals language patterns through understanding the co-selection of linguistic features and probabilities (Xu, 2020). Corpus-driven research, as an inductive paradigm, allows linguistic constructs to emerge from the analysis of a corpus (Biber, 2009). This research treats the most common occurring sequences of word forms as linguistically significant units. ROST CM6, a word-processing software, is used to analyze the word frequency of the Weibo comments and construct semantic networks, which allows the visualization of the degree of association between words. The data is analyzed using NVivo with reference to established studies on interpreting quality, service evaluation, and official documents such as the *Interpreting Competence Scales of China's Standards of English Language Ability* (CSE) initiated by the Ministry of Education in China.

#### 3.1 Data coding

Bazhuayu (Octopus), a crawler software was employed to search for postings on Weibo with the keyword of "China-US High-Level Strategic Dialogue" three days after the event. The three most commented postings of private bloggers and the three most commented postings of official media account were selected. Duplicated comments, emoticons, and comments not related to interpreting were taken out of the data set. Replies to previous comments were not included. A total of 4,278 comments registering 114,560 characters were counted for the setup of the corpus.

To ensure the reliability of the coding system, this study referenced established prescriptive criteria of interpreting quality. Interpreting scholars have sought to capture the "ideal standard" for the interpreter's translational product with notions like accuracy, completeness, and fidelity (Pöchhacker, 2016). Many evaluation criteria for interpreting can be traced back to Bühler's (1986) survey study, listing ideas such as fluency, grammar, and sense consistency with the original. Regardless of specific nomenclatures, three major criteria are agreed upon: content, delivery, and language quality (Lee, 2008; M.-H. Liu, 2013; Setton & Dawrant, 2016). A major point of confusion, however, lies in the interpretation of how "content" is to be assessed. Pöchhacker (2016) points out that fidelity and accuracy, with the implication of completeness, appear in the literature on interpreting as widely accepted standards of performance. But he seems to have stressed more on the similarities of the two concepts rather than their differentiation. Han (2022) points out that fidelity, carrying more weight than delivery and language quality, is the informational correspondence/equivalence between what a speaker delivers and what an interpreter renders. Even though there exist various sets of criteria with overlapping and crossovers, they can be generalized into functional criteria (e.g., accuracy and



completeness) and formal criteria (e.g., fluency and pronunciation), with a strong focus on the former in interpreting evaluation (Bühler, 1986; Moser, 1996). This study adopts the categorization of functional criteria and formal criteria for the benefit of analysis.

This study does not attempt to reinvent the wheel of evaluation criteria but only references them to facilitate the coding process. While some original comments can be coded under existing criteria, others have to be coded under new concepts. To navigate many concepts that complicate the understanding of “content” evaluation, this study chooses “faithfulness” and “accuracy” as conceptual codes, to avoid the possible overlapping of connotation that “fidelity” brings. In this study, “accuracy” is the extent to which the interpreter created a “meaning shift”, indicating whether or not one expressed the speaker’s intention precisely. And “faithfulness” means if a “meaning error” occurred, and if the interpreter misinterpreted the intention of the speaker. Three coders conducted independent open coding over original comments to ensure validity. A cross-reference and comparative analysis were carried out to establish a correlation between the original comments and open codes. In this way, concepts sharing common attributes were tagged under the same code.

During the axial coding, conceptual codes from the open coding were categorized according to the descriptors in *the Interpreting Competence Scales of China’s Standards of English Language Ability*, such as idiomatic target language speech, communication ability, and language styles. When the axial coding reached theoretical saturation, which means all the conceptual codes were categorized, the selective coding process was able to be completed.

### 3.2 Data presentation

A semantic web created by the ROST CM6 is shown in Figure 1. The most frequent word is “翻译”(translation, a broad term in Chinese that could both signify the activity of translation and interpreting, translator and interpreter, as well as translated and interpreted product). The word “translation” is located at the center of the chart. Its weight of correlation with other frequent concerns of the public can be observed in the figure. The result reveals that the public’s primary interest is “中文水平”(Chinese ability, weight of correlation: 82), “中文翻译”(Chinese translation, weight of correlation: 49), “头发”(hair, weight of correlation: 37), “场合”(setting, weight of correlation: 19), followed by concepts with weight of correlation around 7 to 10, such as “accent”, “fluency”, “tone” and “faithfulness”, criteria directly related to interpreting evaluation.





Table 1. Coding Frame of Public's Evaluation of Interpreting and Interpreters

Selective codes	Count	Axial codes	Count	Conceptual codes	Count		
Quality evaluation	333	Communicative quality	151	fillers	41		
				flow	59		
				timber	18		
				accent	17		
				tone	13		
						sequence	3
				Interpreting quality	105	consistency	50
						faithfulness	35
						accuracy	20
				Language quality	77	target language	55
				proficiency	11		
				pronunciation	11		
				word-choice	11		
Professional image	344	Appearance	196	hair	125		
				looks	46		
				clothing	24		
				hands	1		
				Physical features	121	age	48
						gender	44
						body functions	28
						height	1
				Psychological features	27	nervousness	11
						confidence	6
				steadiness	3		
				agility	3		
				disposition	4		
Overall perceptions	459	Attitudinal appraisal	213	criticism	161		
				affirmation	52		
		Knowledge of interpreting industry	132	understanding of the industry	98		
				interpreting school	23		
				machine translation	8		
				artificial intelligence	2		



		interpreter status	1
	Public's	personal qualities	80
	impression	image projection	34
Total			1136

#### 4. Analysis and Discussion

The triangular model of interpreting by Seleskovich (1962) describes interpreting as a triangular interaction between the speaker, interpreter and listener. As an essential variable in the interpreting equation, the listener is also regarded as the audience or the user of interpreting services. Measurements of service quality that do not include user expectations miss the point (Kurz, 2002). Defining quality as user satisfaction, Kurz (ibid) argues that the quality of interpreting services is evaluated by users in terms of what they receive in relation to what they expect. The new media expand the scope of interpreting users from the ones on-site in conventional settings to a wider audience online. The public consequently becomes the indirect users of interpreting services through the internet.

New media platforms not only expand the audience of interpreting events but also facilitate the formation of a new form of interaction. The interaction model of interpreting, whether reflecting a “one-to-one” or a “one-to-many” constellation, can be extended and specified by adding further participant positions (Pöchlhammer, 2016). In this case, the new form of interaction reflects a “one-to-many and many-to-more” constellation. As indirect users, the audience also extends their attention from the interpreting product to the interpreter. They willingly participate in the interpreting event by way of commenting, thus constituting a para-social interaction with interpreters visible on screen.

Recognizing multiple stakeholders could be at play in evaluating interpreting quality, Sylvia (2005) proposes that in order for interpreters to fulfil the expectations of speakers and listeners alike, and to achieve an optimum result, it should be clear to all in advance which preferences a client or audience has and what participants expect from interpreters. To satisfy our users implies meeting their service quality expectations, and empirical studies designed to provide us with knowledge of user expectation profiles are a line of research worth pursuing (Kurz, 2002). The sheer number of comments on HLSD is a good indication of the enthusiasm, interest and expectations of the audience on diplomatic interpreting and interpreters. Among the three selective codes, “Overall perceptions” represents the single most significant category, accounting for 40 percent of the total. But the comments under this category are often short, summative remarks without an explanation of how they arrived at such judgement. The remaining 60 percent of codes are comments showing clear and explicit criteria for evaluation, constituted by two categories, “Quality evaluation” and “Professional image”. It is noted that the public’s comments are a reflection of their expectations of the interpreters and how interpreting quality should be evaluated.

##### 4.1 A native language-oriented evaluation on interpreting

According to the *Weibo User’s Characteristics Report* released by Weibo’s owner, Sina, most comments on trending events come from the millennial generation, which makes up 70 percent of



Weibo's users (Weibo Data Center, 2021). The millennials are more competent in English than the Generation Y in China. The primary purpose for people to use Weibo is to acquire information that interests them (Wang, Zhu & Wen, 2013). Therefore, it can be speculated that the subjects of research share a certain degree of interest in interpreting and possess some knowledge of the profession, for example, an interpreter has to be faithful and fluent. However, the public's interest in interpreting does not enable them to distinguish the nature of interpreting from language speaking. The public believes one is entitled to evaluate the interpreting quality as long as the evaluator is a native speaker of the target language. This suggests the public sees interpreting as a monolingual endeavor rather than the conversion between two languages. Typical examples found in the NVivo coding frame are selected to illustrate the point. Weibo user 1 says:

“我觉得中文翻译的好不好，完全不需要权威人士界定，就像我和美国人说英语，他们母语的人是可以判断我说的好不好，因为几乎所有人都懂我要表达的大体意思。”

*I don't think there is a need for experts to decide whether the Chinese translation is good or not. This is just like I speak English to Americans. Native speakers can tell whether my English is good or not, because almost everyone understands the general meaning of what I am trying to say.*

The interpreting service criteria would generally evaluate interpreting products through the lens of faithfulness, delivery, and communicative act. At this event, instead of using criteria for interpreting, the audience measures the American interpreter's Chinese rendition from the perspective of their native language. The public would like to consider themselves as qualified in evaluating the interpreting product, at least in the direction of English to Chinese. This self-granted qualification, however, roots in their belief that speaking one of the interpreted languages credits a person the power to make judgments on the said language. It also reveals that the Weibo bloggers would easily look past the key features and functions of interpreting and evaluate the interpreting product without associating them with the source language.

Among all the 333 nodes under the selective code of “Quality evaluation”, only 105 nodes are about “Interpreting quality” (31.5%). The remaining 228 nodes are about the formal aspects of the interpreter's performance, with 45.3% on “Communicative quality” and 23.1% on “Language quality”. The number of nodes dispersed across the three axial categories is not evenly distributed, showing a stark contrast between the public opinion and the interpreting service criteria in the evaluation of interpreters. The public is chiefly concerned with communicative quality, as opposed to the interpreting criteria, which focus more on the functional aspects of interpreting. For example, two concepts that are closely associated with fluency, “fillers” and “flow”, account for 100 among the totals. Weibo user 2 says:

“翻译官翻译成中文就应该做到语句通顺，表达清晰，而不是磕磕巴巴，太飘忽，颤音多，语气词一堆，老是嗯这个啊那个，这就很糟糕了。”

*The translation officer should translate into Chinese smoothly and clearly, rather than stumbling, trailing, trembling and producing too many fillers such as ums and ahs, this is very bad.*



This tilted attention to the “Communicative quality” is a result of the audience’s inability or lack of confidence to evaluate the content of interpreting. For the audience online, “fluency” is an easier way to comment without the risk of being called amateurish or substandard. Such findings echo what Rennert (2010) argued that user perceptions of an interpreter’s performance might be influenced by prosodic factors rather than accuracy. Tone, prosody and voice modifiers in oral communication are not strictly part of the language and can be classified as paralinguistic features (Wharton, 2017). If the occurrence of paralinguistic features in the interpreting process is similar to that in everyday communication, the audience will be able to understand them in context. The audience, with high expectations of linguistic formality in diplomatic settings, may be relatively critical of the fluency and manners in interpreting. If the audience is aware that interpreting is a difficult cognitive task, they will not be surprised to see more paralinguistic features in interpreting than in natural conversation. However, the extent to which the audience tolerates paralinguistic features in interpreting needs to be studied in the future.

The audience intuitively perceives language quality as interpreting quality. “Language quality” in the public mind is mostly related to the formal features of the target language, which is independently evaluated without referencing the source language. The focus of the audience on language quality is primarily concentrated on pronunciation and word choice. Whether the interpreter’s expression conforms to the habitual use of their native language is also part of their concern. Among the 77 nodes under this category, 55 are about the interpreter’s target language proficiency. Weibo user 4 and 5 says:

“开头是美国翻译，太难受了中文水平，不好好学汉语，一句完整的话都没有，翻译就是要把一种语言翻成另一种别人听得懂的语言啊。所（shuo）以（yi），这拼音普通话都说不好嘛？还有样本儿，儿化音都出来了，在用词上也有些和我们熟悉的语境脱节。”

*The American started translating first. (I find) it too hard to understand her Chinese. (She) doesn't learn Chinese well. (She) could not even produce a complete sentence. Translation is to turn one language into another language that others can understand. The word “so” (suǒ yǐ) is even mispronounced as /shuǒ yǐ/, couldn't she speak the mandarin pinyin well? And even, (she added) /ər/ to the word “sample” (yàng běn)! (Her) word choice is also somewhat disconnected from our familiar context.*

“我觉得张京的语音要再修炼一下，还几处说到 the United States 语调都怪怪的。”

*I think Zhang Jing has to refine her intonation a bit more, for a few times she pronounced ‘United States’ with a strange intonation.*

As most of the comments are related to interpreting into Chinese, and according to Sina’s survey of Weibo bloggers, it can be assumed that most of the audience are native Chinese who are more proficient in Chinese than English. Weibo bloggers apply formal criteria in their evaluation confusing language quality with interpreting quality. As the audience is presumably native Chinese speakers, they expect a higher language quality in interpreting into Chinese. The audience tends to focus on the formal aspects of interpreting rather than the functional aspects of interpreting. This is not to say that the public is oblivious to the functional criteria. For example, comments such as “夹带私货” (smuggle) were



identified by ROST CM6 in the frequent word list. They are tagged as “faithfulness” under the category of “Interpreting quality”, but there are no specific examples to support such a claim in the comments. All the examples exhibit the same pattern. In contrast, criticisms made under “Language quality” and “Communicative quality” are supported with specific evidence.

Although some audiences may have a better understanding of interpreting and refer explicitly to the functional evaluation criteria in their comments, they often misunderstand the functional criteria or even confuse them with the formal criteria. Their main focus is on “consistency”, with 50 out of 105 nodes coded under the category of “Interpreting quality”, followed by “faithfulness” (35 nodes) and “accuracy” (20 nodes). Weibo user 7 says:

“美国的翻译每一个字我都懂，连起来怎么就那么令人费解，失去了信还有啥意义？都无需上升到是否准确，光听念出来的中文句子，你觉得通顺嘛？”

*I can understand every word by the American translator, but how can they be put together in such an incomprehensible way? Does it make any sense without faithfulness? It doesn't even need to rise to the level of accuracy. Just listen to the Chinese renditions. Do you find them to be coherent?*

In terms of the number of nodes on each criterion, this study does not echo what Rennert (2010) argued that the users of interpreting think accuracy is the most important thing in interpreting. This could be the difference between indirect users and direct users of interpreting. But this study does confirm Rennert's findings that the public tends to evaluate the accuracy of interpreting based on one's subjective impression. The audience would evaluate interpreting based on the correlations between the formal criteria and the functional criteria. For example, they would replace accuracy with fluency in evaluation.

In contrast, the interpreting service criteria place more emphasis on the functional criteria and focus only on “fluency” in terms of the formal criteria. *China's Standards of English Language Ability* (CSE) is an overarching standard published by the Ministry of Education. It contains a dedicated scale for interpreting, defines the proficiency of Chinese English learners and delineates the features of the proficiency at each level. This diplomatic interpreting is at the highest level described in the Interpreting Scale of CSE, which is level 9. According to the descriptors, level 9 is the comprehensive application of level 8, so levels 8 and 9 are taken together as the reference for this event. The Interpreting Scale of the CSE describes that interpreters on levels 8 and 9 should be able to achieve accuracy, completeness and fluency. Additionally, they should exhibit flexibility in expression, adapt to the target language's speech patterns, and stay as close as possible to the register and style of the source language (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China & State Language Commission, 2018). The sub-scale of the Interpreting Scale describes interpreting competencies and strategies. According to level 9, interpreters should provide head-of-government meetings with accurate, complete, and fluent interpreting of the source language, with the target language's register and style being consistent with the source (ibid). The descriptors in the scale demonstrate the importance attached to the functional criteria, such as accuracy, completeness and register, with “fluency” being the only formal criterion mentioned.



The unbalanced emphasis can be traced back to a range of prescriptive and normative criteria in the Chinese interpreting industry. The *Specification for Translation Service-Part 2: Interpretation* (GB/T 19363.2-2006) is a national standard for translation and interpreting services published in 2006. It requires consecutive interpreters to express the content of information in the source language clearly, accurately and completely in the target language (General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine of the People's Republic of China & Standardization Administration of the People's Republic of China, 2006). The “clarity” mentioned in the national standard is a synonym for the interpreted rendition being logically sound, thus still a functional criterion. The focus on functional criteria remains unchanged for another ten years. The *Competencies for Translator and Interpreter* (T/TAC 2 – 2017), an industrial norm published by the Translation Association of China, sustained the descriptors for interpreter's competence verbatim from the national standard in 2006. Researchers pointed out that formal characteristics such as prosody, tone and accent can all exert an impact on the user's impression in addition to fluency (Cheung, 2013; 2015). The interpreting profession has been slow in taking into consideration the public's concerns. This study finds that the public not only resorts heavily to the formal criteria in evaluation but also evaluates interpreting from their native language perspective. The quality of the target language is commented by the public in terms of pronunciation, word choice and other components of language proficiency.

The broadcast of interpreting events by new media irreversibly expands its circle of users. The public becomes the indirect user of the interpreting service by viewing the event online. It is found that the public perception of interpreting in China is considerably different on the evaluation of interpreters from the industry criteria as represented by the Translators Association of China. When there are multiple stakeholders in the interpreting interaction, all perspectives deserve to be considered. The public has shown a disproportionate focus on the target language rather than the source language when evaluating the quality of interpreting. Dimensions such as communicative and target language quality, which are valued by the public, have so far been overlooked and excluded by the practice community. They should be given due consideration. The formal criteria for interpreting need to be emphasized in the interpreter training in addition to the development of the students' language proficiency.

## 4.2 An image-oriented evaluation of interpreters

The broadcast of interpreting events by new media takes away the ephemerality of interpreting and expands the audience of the event. It also makes interpreters increasingly visible and extends the public's attention from the interpreting product to the interpreter. The process of interpreting is captured and recorded, and thus the interpreters are subjected to the full scrutiny of the audience. This diverts people's attention from the interpreting product to the interpreter's image, including appearance, physical and psychological features. From a traditional perspective, the interpreter's image is not part of the established criteria in evaluating interpreting quality and the interpreter's competence. This study finds that it is included in the public's evaluation matrix on interpreters.

A total of 344 nodes under the selective code of “Professional image” are identified in the open coding and are grouped into three axial categories, “Appearance” (57%), “Physical features” (35.2%) and “Psychological features” (7.8%). In comparing the number of nodes between “Professional image”



and “Quality evaluation”, this study finds that the public takes more interest in how the interpreters present themselves rather than how they interpret. A similar conclusion can be corroborated by the Social and Semantic Correlation Analysis Chart produced by ROST CM6. Keywords such as “紫色头发” (purple hair) and “正式场合” (formal setting) have a stronger weight of correlation with the word “翻译” (translation) than words that pertain to interpreting quality. The interpreter’s image is a dimension that attracts more attention from the public, followed by interpreting quality.

The public is very much expectant of a refined appearance. A total of 196 nodes under the category of “Appearance” are coded, out of which 125 are about the interpreter’s hair color. Hair color is not what people would notice under normal circumstances. In HLSD, however, the American interpreter’s purple hair sparked a discussion on the interpreter’s professional presentation. A small group of people believes that hair color is an individual’s decision. An interpreter’s professional competence should not be judged based on the color of their hair. A significant number of people think that a distinctive hair color is inappropriate in formal settings and it is a sign of insensitivity to the situation. The purple hair, to a certain extent, makes the public question the interpreter’s competence and associate the interpreter’s decorum with their country’s image. Weibo user 8 says:

“这种正式的外交场合是应该庄重保守的。美方翻译染个紫头发给人感觉就是轻佻不专业，比水平拉胯更丢分。张京姐姐实力跟颜值都是最棒的，庄重低调，从里美到外的中国女人！这其实也是翻译的专业性表现之一。”

*(The atmosphere) in such a formal diplomatic setting should be dignified and conservative. The American translator’s purple hair gives the impression of being frivolous and unprofessional and loses more points than poor interpreting. Elder sister (姐姐, jiě jie, meaning: elder sister, an online buzzword used to show affection and love for females) Zhang Jing is the best both in terms of her competence and looks, dignified and understated, a Chinese woman that is beautiful from the inside out. This is actually one of the demonstrations of her professionalism.*

The personal appearance that is appropriate to the time and place is supposed to be a common sense and basic requirement for any profession. This requirement is generally taken for granted, and both industrial norms and national standards do no more than advise interpreters to dress as required. Interpreters would dress formally on most occasions, knowing that formal dressing remains a more sensible option than being underdressed. In the absence of specific requirements provided by the event organizers, interpreters not only have no guidelines as to what to wear but also lack a general understanding of “what not to wear”. For far too long, interpreters have relied on their experience from past events to make decisions on how to dress and present themselves. Interpreters enjoy varying levels of dress codes in traditional interpreting settings. Simultaneous interpreters benefit from the convenience of a secluded booth, which insulates them from the observation of users. For interpreters working consecutively, dressing to the occasion is a must, and formal attire is not a panacea for all types of consecutive interpreting. While the direct users of interpreting services would mostly be attentive to the interpreting product rather than the interpreter, indirect users pay attention to everything. New media allows everything on the screen to be observed for all the details, with videos being replayed, paused, zoomed in and enhanced in their resolution. Due to the increased exposure of



interpreters, the public tends to focus more on the interpreter's image than interpreting quality, sometimes to the point of being demanding and nitpicking. The interpreter's image is perceived by the public as a representation of professionalism. However, there are few courses on dress code and professional etiquette in the syllabi of interpreting education programs published on the websites of Chinese universities. The interpreting service criteria also need to attend to the image and presentation of interpreters, something overlooked and taken for granted in professional development.

The public also examines the physical features of interpreters. Appearances are something that interpreters can manage and modify. Physical features, being intrinsic and unmodifiable, are also included in the public's evaluation. In the category of "Physical features", the most cited original concepts such as "姐姐" (jiě jie, meaning: elderly sister), "年龄大" (nián líng dà, meaning: older in age), can be found under the codes of "age" and "body functions". Weibo user 9 says:

“张京全程高能输出，信息量饱满，好奇她是怎么做笔记怎么记下那么多信息的太厉害了。美国这位翻译应该是年纪有些大了，记忆和临场应变迟钝导致的错误频出？同声传译是不是年轻人更能胜任？”

*Zhang Jing works at full capacity with high performance. (Her rendition was) full of information. I'm curious how she took notes to jot down so much information, and it was awesome. Is it possible that this American translator is a bit older, has a poor memory, and slow to adapt, resulting in frequent errors? Wouldn't a younger person be more competent at simultaneous interpreting?*

There are not sufficient researches to establish a correlation between aging and the interpreter's performance, but some research demonstrate that aging could lead to a certain amount of cognitive decline (Signorelli et al, 2012; Liu et al.,2020). However, the declined performance resulting from this reduced cognitive ability can be compensated by the interpreter's experience and familiarity with the interpreting task. The general public's perception is that young people are more capable of interpreting. The concurrence of the two nodes, "age" and "body functions", may be a result of the public's perception that aging is associated with a slowed response in interpreters. While it would be premature at this point to include age in the assessment criteria of interpreters, the concern of the public does warrant further studies on this topic. The comments made by Weibo users on the physical features of interpreters are not entirely based on intuition and speculation. Rather, they demonstrate a plausible understanding of the process of interpreting. Weibo user 10 says:

“同传翻译是极费脑子的工作，不光考验词汇量，对听力、反应速度、记忆力、文化典故的要求都极高。”

*Simultaneous interpreting is an extremely demanding job, not only in terms of vocabulary but also in terms of listening, reaction speed, memory and cultural allusions.*

Many similar comments share this Weibo user's understanding of interpreting. Despite Weibo users' confusion about consecutive interpreting with simultaneous interpreting, they still have some basic knowledge of interpreting. Even though the audience on Weibo may not have a well-established system for evaluating interpreting products and interpreters, many of their perceptions are similar to those of



the interpreting industry, only that they tend to favor the exterior side of interpreters and their interpreting.

The public's perceptions of interpreting and interpreters are developed as the result of a range of interconnected factors. The public evaluates the quality of interpreting from the perspective of the mother tongue with reference to the formal criteria. When commenting on the interpreters, the public focuses on the interpreter's appearance, physical and psychological features. This study finds a correlation between the public's evaluation of interpreting quality and interpreters. For example, the public would relate the psychological features to interpreting performance and make inferences about the interpreter's proficiency based on the extent of steadiness and poise demonstrated. The public's perceptions of the interpreter's psychological features are predominantly based on the "Communicative quality" of the interpreting product, such as flow, timber and non-language signals. The public is more likely to detect the interpreter's "nervousness" than "confidence". Weibo user 11 says:

“这美方的翻译听着怎么有点底气不足啊，就听得出来两个字：紧张。心理素质好像比中国的小姐姐要差多了。”

*The American translator sounds a little bit unsure of herself. All I can hear from her are two words: "being nervous". Her psychological quality is so much worse than that of our little Chinese elder sister.*

It is widely recognized in academia that physical and psychological traits are constitutive of an interpreter's competence. Nevertheless, the existing studies have not reached a consensus on its specific composition, nor have they produced a comprehensive and thorough description (Lu, Li & Li 2019). Wang (2012) holds that physical/psychological qualities, such as concentration, good memory and quick responsiveness, are the qualities suitable for the interpreting profession. A commensurate physical stature is also required for interpreters to rise to the challenge of a mentally-demanding activity of high intensity over a sustained period of time. The public generally believes that memory and responsiveness are the physical qualities. Tone and flow are what they would employ to scrutinize into the interpreter's psychological status. Although there are discrepancies in the categorization of qualities between the public and academia, their specific content is the same. The physical and psychological features are not only part of the interpreter's competence, but are also the basis of which the public generates the interpreter's image.

The interpreter's performance, image and professionalism are intricately interconnected in the eyes of the public. While we usually assume poor performance leads to a compromised image of the interpreter, this paper finds that an unreceptive image of the interpreter also affects the public's impression of interpreting quality and their professionalism. The existing frameworks of interpreting evaluation, such as the *CSE* by the Ministry of Education in China and the *Competencies for Translator and Interpreter* by the Translators Association of China, mostly focus on interpreting quality and pay little or no attention to the interpreter's image. In the age of new media, the public's perception of interpreters' appearance precedes their interpreting. Therefore, the interpreting service criteria need to take some aspects of the public's evaluation into account and help interpreters construct images compatible with the setting.



## 5. Conclusion

This study examines the perceptions of the public from Weibo on diplomatic interpreters at the HLSD in March 2021. Following a corpus-driven approach, this study unravels the public perceptions and shows how they differ from the interpreting service criteria. The broadcast of interpreting events on new media made interpreters more visible. The public becomes the indirect user of interpreting products, expanding the pattern of interaction in conference interpreting. Through commenting on social media, the public constitutes a complex para-social interaction with interpreters that provides a potential avenue for evaluation. The study finds that the public adopts a native language-oriented perspective, assigning more value to formal criteria, such as fluency, accent and the quality of target language. The public's expectations of interpreters and their performance are more refined than the relevant industry standards. The image of the interpreters is considered as part of their performance and also a sign of professionalism in the eyes of the public.

In the age of new media, the interpreters and their trainers need to take note of the pertinent concerns of the public on interpreter evaluation. When developing criteria for the evaluation of interpreters, the interpreting industry needs to consider incorporating more elements related to formal criteria. This study proposes that interpreter training include, in addition to language conversion exercises, modules to develop communicative competence and professional ethics, in an effort to make students aware of the interpreter's image.

To conclude, the findings of this research reveal how diplomatic interpreters are evaluated and perceived by the public on Weibo. Recommendations were made for refining the standards for interpreter training, practice and services. Given the diversity of the public and possible bias in the comments, subsequent research into online interpreting events may lead to new findings.

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