REFLECTIONS

When Minds Meet Machines: A Pilot Programme of using Chat-GPT to Teach Political Speech Translation in a Chinese-to-English Translation Classroom

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Abstract:

This piece of reflection draws on a pilot programme of using Chat-GPT in the teaching of political speech translation in a Chinese-to-English translation classroom. The conduction of this pilot was driven by, among others, a growing concern by the third-year undergraduates doing Chinese-English translation as their major; they have aired worries that human translators might be replaced by large language models capable of doing the translation. The students observed and compared the human translation (by institutional interpreters) and the Chat-GPT translation of four political speeches delivered by Chinese government officials at the General Debate of the United Nations General Assembly. While acknowledging some strengths of Chat-GPT, they found that the GPT translation stayed too 'close' to the source text Chinese, potentially leading to issues at the lexical, sentence, and contextual levels. The author (also the course convenor) then reflected on the strengths and limitations of Chat-GPT in conjunction with pedagogical considerations regarding the ethical and practical implications of GPT-enabled machine translation. The paper concludes that GPT is not, and will not be, an adequate substitute for the language expertise, cultural awareness, ideological sensitivity, and creative abilities to 're-write' on the part of professional human translators.

Keywords: political speeches, Chinese-English translation classroom, Chat-GPT, limitations

1. Introduction

Chat-GPT, a natural language processing tool, has taken the world by storm since the end of 2022. Chat-GPT is not only an intelligent chatting machine developed by OpenAI upon the InstructGPT (Ouyang et al. 2022) but also a generative pre-trained transformer, affording translation in real time between two languages. GPT affords a sophisticated method of machine translation that combines artificial intelligence (AI) with natural language processing (NLP), allegedly surpassing machine translation models that use large neural networks (ibid). Additionally, it has a sentence level auto-correct tool reducing translation errors. With the presumed high translation quality, Chat-GPT models have been increasingly used in translation practices, showing a strong performance in the high-resource language pairs, which are predominantly English and some European languages used as the training data for the Chat-GPT model (Hendy et al. 2023).

Nonetheless, how well Chat-GPT can translate between English (a high-resource language) and Chinese (a low-resource language) remains largely unknown. Against this backdrop, a pilot programme

was conducted by the author with her students in the module *Chinese-to-English Translation* to explore Chat-GPT 3.5's performance in translating Chinese political speeches into English. The selection of GPT-3.5 for the pilot programme is based on its accessibility to both the teacher and the students, in contrast to the more advanced GPT-4.0, which necessitates subscription payments. This decision was made in consideration of resource availability and pragmatic concerns, ensuring the feasibility and inclusivity of the chosen platform within the educational context. The conduction of this pilot was also driven by a growing concern by the third-year undergraduates doing Chinese-English translation as their degree; they have aired enormous worries that they, as human translators, would be replaced by large language models capable of doing the translation. Another motivation to conduct this pilot was that the author, also the course convenor, wanted to explore the potential of AI-assisted methods in translation training as well as the limitations of Chat-GPT in translating political speeches from Chinese into English.

2. The Pilot Programme

The pilot programme was integrated into the module *Chinese-to-English Translation* for third-year undergraduate students majoring in translation. One important objective of the module was to help students develop abilities to translate the political discourse produced by the Chinese government and Chinese political leaders at international conferences. While all 24 students have passed the English proficiency test TEM 4 (a highly recognised standardised test in China), the political discourse was not easy for them to translate from Chinese into English which is their acquired language. In addition to the difficult directionality, the language-pair specificities of English and Chinese (Wang & Gu 2016) alongside the underlying ideologies specific to the Chinese political discourse (cf. Gao 2021, 2022) present extra challenges. Considering these transnational, linguistic, and discursive challenges, students were not required to do the Chinese-English translation but were guided to compare two versions of English target texts (TTs) produced by (a) the Chinese institutional interpreters (as the official version of human translation) and (b) Chat-GPT 3.5 against the Chinese source texts (STs).

The materials used for the pilot programme were the speeches delivered by Chinese political leaders at the General Debate of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). Both the ST speeches and the TT English versions are publicly available from the UN's official website. The 24 students were divided into four groups and each group was given one UNGA speech to examine. Table 1 lists the details.

Table 1. Breakdown of the Data Used in the Pilot Programme

No.	Name of Chinese Speakers	The Title Of The Address	Session	Year
1	Wen, Jiabao	A China Committed to Reform and Opening-up And Peaceful Development	the 63rd Session of UNGA	2008
2	Hu, Jintao	Unite as One and Work for a Bright Future	the 64th Session of UNGA	2009
3	Wen, Jiabao	Getting to Know the Real China	the 65th Session of UNGA	2010
4	Yang, Jiechi	Work Together to Meet Challenges and Pursue Common Development	the 66th Session of UNGA	2011

To ensure relative consistency of the translation generation from Chat-GPT, the course convenor (the author) applied, for each of the four speeches, consistent prompts with (1) relevant information about the speech (speaker, year, address title, and the UNGA event), (2) directions for translation ("based on the relevant information about the political speech given above, please translate the following speech from Chinese into English"), and (3) pasting the ST speech to the chat-box. After the GPT generation of the translated version, the author pasted it as plain text.

The pilot programme was designed to achieve three objectives:

1) Help the students gain some basic understanding of the differences between human translation (by institutional interpreters) and Machine translation (Chat-GPT 3.5);

2) Enable them to explore the strengths and limitations of using large language models (Chat-GPT) in the Chinese-English translation of political discourse;

3) Allow them to assess the potential of using a large language model (Chat-GPT) in their future translation practices.

The pilot programme was conducted in five steps:

1) The 24 students engaged in the pilot were informed of the purpose and procedures of this programme and signed consent forms voluntarily.

2) The course convenor sent the ST and TT speeches (in Microsoft Word documents) to the students.

3) The course convenor explained the exploratory nature of the pilot programme, with instructions for the ST-TT comparison at the lexical and sentence levels as well as with consideration of the context.

4) Each group leader organised group members in the analyses, discussions, and preparations for the presentation in class.

5) One or two members of each group delivered their presentations with PowerPoint slides in class, and the other students and the teacher exchanged views and gave them feedback.

The pilot programme comprised six class hours, supplemented by an additional five to six hours dedicated to post-class teamwork, spanning three weeks. Notably, all three outlined objectives were successfully attained within this timeframe. The following sections will report the students' tentative observations and reflections in their PowerPoint slide presentations.

3. Professional Interpreters or Chat-GPT, Who Prevails?: Observations and Reflections from Students

With a comparative lens, students' opinions converge on the superior quality of human translation over GPT translation; albeit, this is their initial observation and largely 'gut feelings' at this stage. Interestingly, even though students were not asked to compare GPT translation with other machine translation tools, they did the comparison and unanimously reported that the translation quality of the GPT version excels that of traditional machine tools based on neural networks or rule-based translation.

Yet, students reported that the human translation still surpasses the GPT translation regarding the political texts they had observed.

From a comparative perspective, students also reported their observations of the translated texts regarding the differences between human translation and GPT translation at the lexical, sentence, and context levels. First, students admitted that the GPT models have large vocabularies, enabling them to handle a wide range of words, including rare and specialised terms. In addition, they found that the GPT models were able to handle polysemous words by discerning word meanings in context, reducing translation ambiguity by selecting the appropriate meaning for a given word based on the surrounding words and context. However, they also reported that the GPT translation unnecessarily stayed too 'close' to the ST Chinese version, rendering almost all the Chinese words into their English correspondences. In what follows, examples are discussed in terms of the students' observations.

Example 1 is a case in which students found the GPT rendering was, in their words, "unnecessarily too close" to the ST Chinese. They reported that the Chinese word "*发展*" (*development*) was often omitted in the English rendition, as the human interpreter rendered as "*in the long history of mankind*"; the GPT translation keeps the lexical equivalent *development* which students contended as redundant. In this case, students argued that the human translation was better than the GPT translation. In their examination of Example 1, students identified discrepancies between human and machine translations, highlighting instances where the latter fell short in capturing the intended meaning and preserving metaphorical imagery.

Example 1

ST: 在人类漫长的发展史上，世界各国的命运从未像今天这样紧密相连。(Wen, 2008)

(Gloss: In the human long history of development, the fate of world countries has never been as closely connected as it is today.)

Chat-GPT: In the long history of human development, the fate of countries around the world has never been as closely connected as it is today.

Human translation: In the long history of mankind, the destinies of countries have never been so closely linked as they are today.

Also at the lexical level, the students found the different ways of rendering metaphor by human translation and GPT translation. In Example 2, the ST metaphor "*同舟共济*" literarily means "in the same boat with mutual aids" with the metaphorical connotation of mutual assistance for mutual benefits between the parties involved. The students argued that the GPT rendition "*Let us join hands*" signalled a similar connotation but lost the ST metaphorical image. They continued to point out that the human translation "*win-win progress like passengers in the same boat*" was better since it kept the ST metaphorical image and delivered the connotation concomitantly.

Another interesting observation the students made was GPT's insertion of "*lasting peace*" which was nonexistent in the ST Chinese. They reported that the case was one of, in their own words "creating the message out of nothing", which was not alone in the data they had observed. They argued this

phenomenon could potentially give rise to serious issues in the translation or interpretation of political speeches.

In Example 2, the students noted the machine translation's tendency to introduce extraneous elements not present in the source text, thereby altering the intended message and potentially leading to misinterpretation. They emphasised the significance of maintaining fidelity to the source text's metaphorical expressions, as deviations could result in a loss of meaning and nuance, particularly in sensitive contexts such as political discourse.

Example 2

ST: 同舟共济、互利共赢是时代对我们的客观要求，也是实现各国共同发展繁荣的必由之路。(Hu, 2009)

(Gloss: In the same boat with mutual aids, with mutual benefits and win-win results, is the must-travel road to realise common prosperity among countries.)

Chat-GPT: Let us join hands, share development opportunities, address various challenges, and make unremitting efforts to build a world of lasting peace and common prosperity.

Human translation: We are called upon by our times to unite as one and work together for mutual benefit and win-win progress like passengers in the same boat. This is the only way leading to common prosperity.

Regarding the differences between human and machine translation at the sentence level, the students admitted that the GPT models could do a reasonably good job in maintaining correct grammar and sentence structure in translations, producing coherent and linguistically sound output. Nonetheless, they posited that the translation of political speech required creative techniques that 're-write' the political speech to achieve rhetorical effects and corresponding interpersonal or operative functions (cf. Reiss 1981/2004). They used Example 3 for illustration. According to the students, the GPT translation matched the ST Chinese with close lexical correspondences, without changing the sentence structure; while the human translation restructured the sentence with an inverted sentence order, delivering an emphatic effect. Therefore, sentence restructuring in the latter was considered a better choice by the students in this example.

At the sentence level, as demonstrated in Example 3, the students recognised the machine translation's proficiency in maintaining grammatical correctness and structural coherence. However, they also highlighted the importance of stylistic considerations in conveying rhetorical effects and emotive nuances, areas where human translators may excel through creative adaptation and restructuring.

Example 3

ST: 但靠战争最终解决问题已经过时了。(Wen, 2010)

(Gloss: But relying on war to ultimately solve problems is outdated.)

Chat-GPT: But relying on war to ultimately solve problems is outdated.

Human translation: But gone are the days when problems were ultimately settled by war.

In terms of translating texts in context, the students pointed out that compared with the traditional machine translation tools, the GPT models could more or less maintain a more coherent thread of meaning throughout the text, ensuring that translation remains contextually consistent and flows logically from sentence to sentence. However, the students were critical of the ways in which political speeches are translated in relation to a given context. Regarding Example 4, in the context of highlighting the importance of education and technology, the students commented that the GPT rendition stayed too close to the ST that the implied meaning in the ST was lost and the communicative effect was not achieved. They presumed that the GPT model could not figure out the sentences that are inherently ambiguous, where the meaning is implied rather than explicitly articulated. On the contrary, they gave positive comments to the version of human translation in which "*I believe two things are of fundamental importance*" was inserted. According to the students, this human translation version took into consideration the context of the surrounding information alongside the interpersonal function of a political speech, which enhanced the communicative effect that the GPT translation could not deliver.

In their analysis of Example 4, the students delved into the challenges of translating texts within specific contextual frameworks, particularly in discerning implied meanings and adapting to ambiguous or nuanced expressions. While acknowledging the machine translation's capacity for coherence and consistency within the text, they underscored the limitations in capturing contextual subtleties and interpersonal functions, as evidenced by instances where human translators outperformed their machine counterparts in conveying the intended message effectively.

Example 4

ST: 一靠教育，二靠科技。(in the context of highlighting the importance of education and technology) (Wen, 2010)

(Gloss: First, rely on education, and second, rely on technology)

Chat-GPT: First, on education, and second, on science and technology.

Human translation: I believe two things are of fundamental importance: first, education and second, science and technology.

The students argued that in terms of the political speech , at the lexical, sentence, and discourse level, Chat-GPT translation demonstrates distinctive strength, compared with the traditional machine translation tools they had previously used, , but the human translation version outperforms the Chat-GPT translation. After the group presentations and discussions among students and the course convenor, some students posited that the GPT models could have difficulty comprehending complex or abstract contexts, where a deep understanding of the subject matter is required; that could explain the GPTs' overly literal translation of the political speeches whereas more nuanced interpretations are needed.

Overall, the students' exploration of these examples elucidates the multifaceted nature of translation and the complex interplay between linguistic accuracy, cultural understanding, and contextual interpretation. Their findings underscore the complementary roles of human and machine translation

tools, each possessing distinct strengths and limitations that warrant careful consideration in real-world translation scenarios.

4. Tentative Reflections from the Teacher

4.1 Strengths and limitations of Chat-GPT used in translation training and political discourse translation

Built on the students' observations and reflections during the pilot programme, it is evident that the students have recognised certain strengths of the Chat-GPT translation. However, they also expressed scepticism regarding its ability to effectively translate political speeches. This observation was made partly in comparison with the human-translated version. The human translators who did these translations at the UN have a particular set of standards associated with, among others, the unique characteristics of their professional identity, ethical concerns, and translation norms. These aspects might contribute to the translation output in conjunction with intrinsic human cultural awareness and creative minds. This observation is shared by the course convenor, who is also the author of this paper. Through the implementation of the pilot programme and active engagement in the students' activities, my observation is that the GPT models still encounter difficulties when faced with complex nuances that are linguistically, culturally, and ideologically specific. Furthermore, the GPT models may not fully comprehend certain contextual elements. Subsequently, a brief reflection is presented to discuss the strengths of Chat-GPT in translation training and its application in political discourse translation, which is followed by my tentative thoughts regarding its potential limitations.

Generally speaking, Chat-GPT can assist translation training by offering valuable resources, particularly for novice or student translators given its rapid drafting as well as the rich language resources and encyclopaedic knowledge. For one thing, the student translators can utilise Chat-GPT to generate initial drafts of translation quickly, saving their time and effort. They can then devote their creative-human input by focusing on refining the content and language and ensuring the TT accurately delivers the intended functions. For another, the students can leverage Chat-GPT as a rich language resource and knowledge reservoir, since the GPT models can provide useful information on vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, grammar rules, and syntax as well as accurate terminologies and jargon in specific knowledge domains.

Nonetheless, the Chat-GPT models are limited in myriads of ways when it comes to translating political speeches of the Chinese-English language-pair. These limitations could cut down its utility in translation training in this regard.

First and foremost, a notable disparity exists between the abundance of training data in English and European languages and the scarcity of data in other languages; Chinese is arguably a low-resource language. The specific syntactic differences between Chinese and English (Wang & Gu 2016), among others, may pose challenges to GPT translation. As a consequence, the translation between Chinese and English may lack the desired level of language quality that is often expected of. For example, political speeches in Chinese can feature lengthy and convoluted sentences, which GPT may not split or structure properly, potentially leading to run-on sentences and awkward or confusing translation.

Second, Chat-GPT translation could be limited by the political speeches as a genre with specific characteristics. Political rhetoric frequently employs idiomatic expressions and figures of speech, and the GPT models may not recognise or translate these idioms accurately. This can impact the naturalness and effectiveness of the speech in the TT discourse. In addition, political speeches may intentionally use ambiguity, innuendo, or indirect language to convey messages or avoid controversy. GPT may produce overly literal translations, potentially missing the subtleties in the source text.

Third, political speeches often contain cultural references that GPT may not fully grasp. Both Chinese and English have their own set of idiomatic expressions, metaphors, historical allusions, and specific political terminologies that are deeply rooted in their respective cultures. Political leaders often use these linguistic devices which entail 're-writing' or 'creative' translation strategies on the part of translators. However, a literal or verbatim translation by GPT may not capture the cultural nuances and implied meaning, or it is not able to deliver the intended interpersonal and operative functions of the political speeches (cf. Reiss 1981/2004) in the target language.

Fourthly, the GPT models may have limited ability to handle ideological factors contextually embedded in translating political speeches. As evidenced in numerous studies, at the discursive events of international conferences that are often ideologically contested (Gu 2019; Gao 2022), human interpreters use their linguistic and discursive abilities to reconstruct the ST discourse to achieve ideological stance-taking with their affiliated institution or nation as the 'in-group' (e.g., Wang & Feng 2018; Gu & Tipton 2020; Gao 2024) through their linguistic 'engineering' (Gu 2019) and 'editing' the ST discourse (Gao & Munday 2023). Nonetheless, such strategic moves are inevitably beyond the ken of the GPT models. When faced with the challenge of navigating political or ideological sensitivities, human translators are able to translate or interpret texts that maintain appropriateness in relation to the social, and political context. While the GPT models can provide translations in a generic sense, they may not fully capture the nuances and contextual understanding required for handling ideological issues. Ideological concepts often rely on cultural, historical, social, and political contexts, which can be challenging for language models to grasp thoroughly. Furthermore, large language models like Chat-GPT learn from vast amounts of online texts, which can contain biased messages due to, inter alia, the predominance of data in English and some European languages as the training data. As a result, these biases are reflected in the translation, particularly when it comes to politically sensitive or ideological topics. The models may unintentionally favour certain perspectives or ideologies based on the training data they have been exposed to. Therefore, ideological factors may constitute a hurdle to utilising Chat-GPT to translate political speeches.

4.2 Pedagogical considerations

The engagement of students in this pilot programme provides some pedagogical considerations. Through reflecting on the nuances of GPT translation, the students have undoubtedly begun to formulate their own perspectives on how to navigate the evolving landscape of human-machine interaction in translation. The exploration of discrepancies between human and machine translation, as well as the identification of strengths and limitations inherent in both approaches, has likely prompted students to consider the ethical and practical implications of integrating machine translation into their workflow.

The observations and reflections raise important questions about the coexistence of human translators and machine translation technologies. How do we leverage the capabilities of machine translators while preserving the unique insights and creative adaptability of human translators? How can we ensure that machine translations remain faithful to the original text's intended meaning and cultural nuances? What ethical considerations arise when relying on machine translators, particularly in sensitive contexts such as political discourse or literary translation?

These questions provide a fertile ground for the development of pedagogical approaches aimed at fostering critical thinking and ethical awareness among students. By incorporating discussions around the ethical and practical implications of machine translation into their curriculum, educators can empower students to navigate the complexities of translation in an increasingly technologically mediated world.

In classroom dynamics, GPT could serve as a useful tool for translation training. The translated output from GPT can serve as a useful reference point for students to compare and contrast with human translation, enabling them to identify nuances in language usage and cultural expressions. By engaging with machine-translated texts alongside human translation, students can develop a deeper understanding of the complexities of language and translation, honing their analytical and critical thinking skills in the process. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of GPT translation and the potential pitfalls associated with its use in the classroom. GPT translation may lack the subtlety, nuance, and cultural sensitivity inherent in human translation, leading to inaccuracies or misinterpretations in the translated text. Therefore, teachers are expected to guide students in critically evaluating GPT-translated texts, encouraging them to consider the context, audience, and intended meaning when utilising GPT in translation practices.

5. Conclusion

Based on the observations and reflections from the pilot programme, the short response to the students' GPT-replacing-human-translators concern is that GPT is not quite there yet, at least regarding the political speech translation with a low-resource language. It still has a long way to go. One important takeaway from this pilot is the recognition of what GPT is capable and incapable of in terms of translating the specific texts under scrutiny.

Indeed, Chat-GPT can translate texts quickly, which speeds up the processing of enormous amounts of text. This efficiency is especially helpful in situations when there is a need for rapid turnaround, such as real time communication or translating vast amounts of documents. Additionally, since the GPT models can provide helpful information on vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, grammatical rules, and syntax, as well as accurate terminologies and jargon in particular subject domains, students can use Chat-GPT as a rich language resource and knowledge reservoir.

Chat-GPT's limitations observed from this pilot can be tentatively summarised germane to language features, genre, culture, and ideology that pose challenges to Chat-GPT translation. The (near)-correspondence or literal translation, as reported by the students, may contribute to the limitations. First, Chinese (as the low-resource language for the GPT models) alongside the language-pair specificities

of Chinese and English may constrain Chat-GPT's ability to restructure the TT appropriately in translation. Second, the interpersonal and operative language functions that often characterise political speeches also pose a challenge to Chat-GPT to deliver commensurable functions in the TTs. Third, the GPT models may have difficulties in handling cultural references in idiomatic expressions, metaphors, historical allusions, and specific political terminologies, which are deeply rooted in their respective cultures. Fourth, political speech translation may have contextually embedded ideological elements that the GPT models are not trained to handle or are trained with ideologically biased data. Another point worth noting is that the GPT translation is likely to insert into the TTs the messages that are not existent in the STs, as observed in the pilot. Cautions need to be taken with Chat-GPT translation. In sum, these limitations are not to be easily overcome within the foreseeable future.

Pedagogical shifts are likely to take place with the increasing human-machine interaction in translation practices. Future pedagogical considerations need to address the ethical and practical implications of machine translation, which is essential for preparing students to navigate the evolving landscape of translation. By fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities and challenges inherent in human-machine interaction, educators can empower students to become critical and ethically responsible practitioners in the field of translation.

A final note of this reflection paper is that the pilot programme is only exploratory, the data set used is modest in size, and the reflections are tentative. While the writing here is not of the academic rigour required in a typical research article, it is worth communicating our observations and reflections regarding the new AI phenomenon that has taken our community by storm. When reflecting on the entire pilot programme, it is instrumental to note that Chat-GPT can assist translation training with proper human-teacher guidance; it is also crucial to point out that GPT is not, and will not be, an adequate substitute for language expertise, cultural awareness, ideological sensitivity, and creative abilities to 're-write' on the part of professional human translators. The GPT models can be used as a tool to enhance and expedite the translation process rather than replace it entirely. Human translators often excel in capturing the deeper pragmatic, cultural, and ideological aspects of language, which can be challenging for the GPT models to replicate. Therefore, a combination of GPT and human translation expertise may be a solution for certain translation tasks.

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