

Language Modes and Intertextual Translation of Corporate Leaders' E-Messages in Hong Kong and China

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Abstract. This paper investigates the strategies used by the leaders of listed corporations in Hong Kong and Shanghai to communicate with their stakeholders. The content of the electronic messages (e-messages) posted by the leaders sampled on their corporations' websites was analyzed to identify language modes and intertextual translation practices. Due to the international aspirations of these listed corporations, it was presumed that the leaders would attach more significance to, and exhibit greater reliance on, communication in English than in Chinese. However, the study's key findings are that monolingual Chinese messages are predominant on these websites. In addition, the Chinese messages posted on bilingual websites were found to provide more elaborate information in a more cordial tone than their English counterparts. Some of the English messages posted on the bilingual websites were found not to be literal translations of the Chinese content, but to reflect the underlying assumptions and cultural values that shape leaders' strategies for communicating with their English-speaking stakeholders. This paper discusses plausible explanations for these findings, and their implications for both Chinese and foreign corporations with business aspirations in Hong Kong and Greater China.

Keywords: Language Mode, Intertextual, Translation, Leader Communication, E-Message, Hong Kong, China

1. Introduction

With the expansion of major listed corporations in the Greater China regions of Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland (Weidenbaum, 1993), it has become increasingly important for the leaders of corporations to communicate with their stakeholders in a multilingual and multicultural setting via corporate websites (Segars & Kohut, 2001). The backbone of a corporation is constituted by its leaders, such as CEOs, Presidents, and Chairmen, who are responsible for formulating and executing corporate communication strategies (Kitchen & Schultz, 2001). To strengthen their communication with stakeholders, leaders are increasingly expected to communicate regularly and to disseminate information in e-messages on their corporations' websites.

Despite the growth of Web-based leader communication, there is a paucity of research on the language modes of leaders' e-messages, and how the translation of bilingual messages reflects leaders' beliefs and core values in relation to Greater China, all of which may affect the effectiveness of corporate communication.

2. Literature Review

Responding to the increasingly prolific use of the Internet worldwide, multinational corporations often include messages or addresses from their leaders to their stakeholders on their websites (Segars & Kohut, 2001). We define leader e-messages as instances of electronic communication posted by the leaders of corporations on their corporations' websites, facilitating interaction between leaders and stakeholders with the aim of fostering business success. Messages that focus on financial performance and earnings do not constitute leader messages.

A full review of the literature on leader communication is beyond the scope of this paper, which instead summarizes the work most relevant to its objectives. Numerous studies have been conducted on the

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documentation produced by leaders, including letters from CEOs, Chairmen, and Presidents. Researchers have addressed three key aspects of these documents: 1) the relation between leaders' letters and corporate reputation (Prasad & Mir, 2002; Palmer, King, & Kelleher, 2004; Fanelli & Grasselli, 2005; Amernic, Craig, & Tourish, 2010); 2) the linguistic characteristics of leaders' letters (Hyland, 1998; Prasad & Mir, 2002; Garzone, 2004; Amernic & Craig, 2004; Bournois & Point, 2006; Amernic & Craig, 2007; Conaway & Wardrope, 2010); and 3) the effects of leaders' letters on organizational performance (Pegels & Yang, 2000; McClelland, Liang, & Barker III, 2009).

However, few researchers have analyzed the content of leaders' e-messages, which are critical to business success in the Internet-driven setting of the twenty-first century. More importantly, little content analysis has been undertaken of the e-messages posted by leaders in the Greater China region.

3. Research Questions

Access to information on the leading listed corporations operating in the Greater China region, and specifically in Hong Kong and Shanghai, was readily available. The researchers identified and analyzed the e-messages written by the leaders of these corporations, which included both multinational corporations aiming to enter the China market and domestic corporations in China seeking to enter international markets.

The research questions were as follows:

- RQ1: What language modes are adopted in the e-messages posted by the leaders of corporations in Hong Kong and China in this globalized era?
- RQ2: When communicated bilingually, what are the distinct linguistic characteristics of leaders' e-messages?
- RQ3: What intertextual practices (where translation is regarded as an intertextual practice) are undertaken in e-messages by the leaders of corporations in Hong Kong and China?

4. Research Methodology and Sampling

To access the largest possible number of leader e-messages, the websites of listed corporations in Hong Kong and Shanghai that exhibited communication between corporations and stakeholders, and promoted corporate values, were identified and sampled (Simmons, 2007). In 2010, 184 corporations listed in the stock-market indexes in Hong Kong and China were selected, including all 96 red-chip (HKRC) corporations (HKRC) and all 38 blue-chip (HKBC) corporations in the Hong Kong Hang Seng Index, and all 50 corporations in the Shanghai Composite Index (SHCI).

A form-oriented method entailing the "routine counting of words or concrete references" was used to analyze the content of the leaders' e-messages (Smith & Taffler, 2000, p. 627). The messages' macrostructural characteristics, such as word number, sentence number, and language mode, were identified and explored in depth.

5. Findings

5.1. Language Modes and Uses of E-Messages

First, 95% (175) of the 184 corporations investigated were found to have corporate websites, of which 93% (162) were used to communicate with stakeholders in both English and Chinese. All of the listed HKBC corporations operated bilingual websites, and 84 HKRC and 41 SHCI corporations operated either bilingual or trilingual websites. The prevalence of bilingual websites indicates the importance attached by corporations to delivering messages in both Chinese and English.

Table 1: Language Mode in the Leaders' Messages

		HKBC (n)	HKRC (n)	SHCI (n)	Total
No. of leaders' messages identified	35	8% (3)	43% (15)	49% (17)	100%
No. of monolingual messages (Chinese/English)	16	0% (0)	38% (5C, 1E)	62% (8C, 2E)	100%
No. of bilingual messages (Chinese & English)	18	17% (3)	50% (9)	33% (6)	100%
No. of trilingual messages (Chinese, English & Other Languages)	1	0% (0)	0% (0)	100% (1)	100%

Another noteworthy finding, as shown in Table 1, was the under-use of leader e-messages by listed corporations in Hong Kong and Shanghai. Only 35 (20%) of the 175 leaders from these regions attempted to

communicate with stakeholders on their corporations' websites. In addition, only 18 (approximately 10%) of these 175 leaders were found to communicate bilingually with their stakeholders.

5.2. Linguistic Characteristics of Bilingual E-Messages

Next, all of the 18 bilingual e-messages posted by the leaders of these corporations – three HKBC corporations, nine HKRC corporations, and six SHCI corporations – were thoroughly examined to determine their linguistic characteristics and interlingual variations. A form-oriented method of content analysis was used to derive the sentence length and number of sentences in each of the leaders' messages. The results are listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Average Word and Word per Sentence Counts in Leaders' Bilingual Messages

	HKBC		HKRC		SHCI	
	English	Chinese	English	Chinese	English	Chinese
Word Count						
Maximum	208	426	464	1313	725	1205
Minimum	191	243	79	157	130	176
Average	171	241	280	564	305	508
Words per Sentence						
Maximum	41	204	52	203	105	208
Minimum	8	21	5	12	7	12
Average	23	51	21	56	29	61

Remarks: The average is expressed by the mean and rounded up to the nearest integer

The linguistic characteristic that emerged most clearly from the analysis of these data was the predominance of Chinese words, which greatly outnumbered English words in all of the corporations' e-messages, as shown in Table 2. The Chinese messages were also found to exhibit a substantially greater number of words per sentence than the corresponding English messages.

5.3. Communicative Functions Underlying Intertextual Practices

The predominance of Chinese rather than English words in the e-messages posted on the bilingual websites of the corporations sampled suggests that a unique strategy is used to translate leaders' e-messages. Literal translation, or "simply re-expressing the meaning of the lexical items of the source language (SL) with lexical items carrying a similar meaning in the target language (TL)," is rarely undertaken (Ngan, 2009, p. 41). The leaders of HKRC corporations tended to communicate with their domestic stakeholders primarily in Chinese, not only providing elaborate information but frequently also adopting a candid and cordial tone. For instance, the leaders often expressed heartfelt gratitude and used copious slogans and couplets in their e-messages. The findings of this study, consistent with those of Ngan's (2009) research, suggest that translators may adopt "bilingual representation in order to be communicative" when they translate business discourse from Chinese into English and vice versa (p. 41). For example, Ngan (2009) demonstrated that promotional material in Chinese tends to be detailed, comprehensive and "more lively," often providing full explanations and expanding on ideas, whereas the equivalent material in English is more business-like and "rather plain" (p. 55). The use of this particular communication strategy in Chinese – informative, expansive, and fostering a sense of cultural solidarity – may relate to the fact that the target audiences of HKRC and SHCI corporations are composed primarily of Chinese readers with cultural backgrounds similar to those of the corporations' leaders. However, the more reserved strategy in English of conveying less information in a more business-like tone could be attributed to leaders' disinclination to impose their cultural values and beliefs – which are inextricable from their choices of linguistic style – onto their English-speaking stakeholders.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

6.1. Infrequent Use of E-Messages and Prevalence of Chinese E-Messages in the Globalized Era

Our data indicate that only 20% of the corporations sampled in the Greater China region posted e-messages from their leaders on their websites. As the Web can help the leaders of corporations to connect with stakeholders worldwide, leaders should aim to harness its power by posting more e-messages on their corporations' websites.

English undoubtedly provides a useful means for upwardly mobile corporations in Greater China to gain a foothold in the global arena. However, our hypothesis that listed corporations in Hong Kong and China would be equally eager to communicate with their stakeholders in Chinese and in English was not fully supported. At the time of the study, there was strong evidence that China-based (i.e. HKRC and SHCI) corporations particularly favored the use of Chinese e-messages, as shown in Tables 1 and 2. Furthermore, the e-messages posted by the leaders of the HKRC and SHCI corporations exhibited a substantially greater number of words per sentence when written in Chinese than in English, as seen in Table 2.

A plausible explanation for the predominance of corporate Chinese e-messages is that most of the China-based corporations investigated in this study have a strong regional background. As most of their stakeholders are Chinese, they tend to communicate with their stakeholders in Chinese alone. The common national identity of Chinese leaders and Chinese stakeholders gives them a sense of solidarity. With the rise of China's status as an economic power in the global arena, corporations' increased use of Chinese may reinforce their solidarity with their Chinese stakeholders, which may in turn serve the corporations' business interests. However, the predominance of Chinese in Web-based leader communication may also pose a language barrier to English-speaking stakeholders hoping to break into the Greater China market.

6.2. Adoption of the Naturalized-Translation Strategy

It is also worth noting that 4 of the 18 e-messages posted on bilingual websites were not literally translated into either Chinese or English, possibly to facilitate leaders' communication with stakeholders in a multilingual and multicultural setting. The majority of these intertextual messages posted by corporations in Shanghai, and had been naturalized (Aiexl à 1996) to cater to an English-speaking audience. The leaders' adoption of the naturalized-translation strategy was determined by their assumptions, beliefs, and cultural values, and has in turn shaped their communication with English-speaking and Chinese-speaking stakeholders. Additionally, the e-messages posted in Chinese by the leaders of the SHCI and HKRC corporations were written in a more cordial and engaging tone than the equivalent messages in English. For example, the message posted in Chinese by the leader of the China Resources Power Holdings Company Limited included classical four-character parallel couplets/slogans such as “业绩导向, 结果第一” (“performance-oriented, outcome-based”), “客户满意, 互利双赢” (“satisfy the customer, achieve a win-win situation”), “激情投入, 追求最好” (“indulge emotionally, go for the best”), “诚信立身, 言行一致” (“honesty, consistency of words and actions”), and “以人为本, 团队致胜” (“people-oriented, winning team”), and a number of Chinese proverbs. In addition, the message was written in a lively and cordial tone.

In contrast, a business-like, concise, and professional tone was adopted in the English version of the same message. To avoid foreignizing the English message, the leader did not include literally translated Chinese proverbs or four-character couplets. This may suggest that the beliefs of Chinese leaders determine their corporations' translation strategies. Leaders seem to be reluctant to articulate and promote their beliefs and values – which are intricately intertwined with their linguistic styles – to English-speaking stakeholders. They may thus choose to deliver information more concisely and in a more professional tone in their English messages.

The finding above suggests that the leaders of Chinese-based corporations are more eager to connect with their Chinese stakeholders than their English-speaking stakeholders on both a personal and a professional level, as they adopt a more cordial, appealing, and engaging tone when communicating in Chinese. As a result, however, English-speaking stakeholders are more likely to perceive these China-based corporations as providing inadequate transparency in their business planning and operations, and making insufficient effort to establish closer relations with the English-speaking world. For these corporations to transition successfully onto the world stage in this globalized age, their leaders should aim to be more communicative in their translated e-messages, and to actively engage stakeholders worldwide with the same warmth and enthusiasm that is extended to Chinese stakeholders.

7. Limitations and Further Studies

This study is acknowledged to have a few limitations. First, its findings are not generalizable to the e-messages posted by other corporations in the Greater China region, due to the small number of bilingual e-messages examined. Second, the e-messages were collected from corporate websites and analyzed in 2010. Yet although the findings may be out of date, they still offer researchers insight into the previously unexplored field of Web-based leader communication.

It is recommended that future researchers investigate the linguistic assumptions that underlie the bilingual-representation strategies implemented by Chinese corporations, and the inextricable link between these assumptions and the beliefs and cultural values of Chinese leaders.

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