

Chinese Diplomatic Political Language: Conceptual Dimensions, Historical Evolution, and Diplomatic Art

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Abstract. This paper delves into the multifaceted nature of Chinese diplomatic political language, examining its conceptual delineation, historical evolution, and the distinctive artistry with which Chinese diplomats employ it. We explore the varying interpretations of diplomatic political language, from its role as a necessary tool for communication between nations to its embodiment of the art of diplomacy, and its function as a mode of communication that can be both form and substance. Through case studies and historical analysis, we demonstrate how Chinese diplomats' adept use of language contributes to the protection of national interests and the advancement of diplomatic objectives, showcasing the unique wisdom and charm of Chinese diplomacy.

Keywords: Diplomatic Political Language, Artistry of Diplomacy, Chinese Diplomacy.

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1 Conceptual Delineation and Historical Evolution of Diplomatic Political Language

Defining diplomatic political language is no easy task. As the term suggests, it refers to "modes of communication suitable for diplomatic contexts." However, varying interpretations in everyday communication reveal its multi-dimensional nature. For instance, diplomatic political language is regarded as "necessary empty talk" in diplomatic settings; an embodiment of "the art of diplomacy"; a "personally variable mode of communication"; an expression of "selective truth"; and "the language of warriors rather than gentlemen." Each of these perspectives reflects different functions and implied meanings of diplomatic political language. The first viewpoint emphasizes its direct function as an essential tool for communication between nations, maintaining official relationships. Diplomacy is essentially communication between states, conveying information through language. If diplomatic representatives meet without communication, it could imply a serious issue in bilateral relations. The communication itself of diplomats is meaningful, indicating normal relations between states. This also suggests that diplomatic political language focuses more on form than content, potentially being more form than substance. The Chinese term "diplomatic rhetoric" carries a pejorative connotation, implying an ambiguous mode of communication. The second perspective is more positive and widely accepted by academia and diplomats, emphasizing the complexity of diplomacy and the required communication skills. Kissinger highlighted the "artistic" nature of diplomacy and expressed concerns about the Bush administration's military preference, with an article titled "Does America Need Diplomacy?" This viewpoint has a long-standing tradition, traceable to various times and places. The third perspective reveals an understanding of the darker side of international relations, addressing betrayal and bullying in diplomatic contexts, with many treating diplomatic objects based on different standards of "enemy" and "friend." The advantage of this view lies in clear strategies, while the disadvantage is the potential neglect of gray areas. The term "devil's talk" is less suitable for formal occasions. The fourth perspective emphasizes the truthfulness of diplomatic political language, contributing to the ethical standards and public image of the diplomatic profession. Excluding false statements is the key difference between this definition and others. It addresses the sensitivity of diplomacy while retaining flexibility in the scope of "truth." "Selective truth" is a sophisticated skill, but defining truth and gauging proportion remain challenging. The fifth perspective views diplomacy as a battlefield, with diplomatic political language focusing on games and outcomes. When nations face significant crises or challenges such as war and peace, diplomats feel tension and pressure. The advantage of this view is that it aids governments in mobilizing social resources when focusing on major adversaries; the disadvantage is its limited adaptability to long-term peaceful development environments, potentially leading to a narrow diplomatic vision and monotonous rhetoric.

Historically, different interpretations of diplomatic political language are closely related to the evolution of diplomatic systems. The modern form of diplomacy originated in the late Middle Ages in Italy and some city-states along the Mediterranean coast. At that time, diplomacy was vastly different from the modern concept, primarily involving activities between the papacy and kings or great lords, such as royal marriages, religious conversions, and the belonging of scepters. The earliest diplomats, as envoys, were usually relatives or confidants of the emperor, shuttling between countries to deliver messages and confidential letters from the papacy and royalty. These envoys and the diplomatic political language they used had no professional requirements and were at most seen as "messengers" or "spokespersons." With the rise of capitalism, especially the great voyages and colonial conquests brought about by the Industrial Revolution, modern European and American countries developed a system of national governance and international interaction. This system quickly expanded globally after its inception, forming a global hegemony. Diplomacy is an important international institution that combines both domestic and foreign norms. Western modern diplomacy was the first to establish rules of interaction on a global scale, including: (1) interacting with other nations in the name of sovereign states; (2) conveying the will of the nation to the outside world; (3) concluding international agreements through negotiations. These rules gave rise to three major functions of the diplomatic system: acting on behalf of the nation, communication and negotiation, and shaping international relations. Diplomats became a specialized profession, and diplomatic political language gained universality. Users needed to have a foundation in foreign languages, be familiar with the conditions of other countries, and undergo specialized courses and assessments. Over the past two to three hundred years, in European and American countries first, and then in all industrialized regions, professions and courses related to diplomacy, foreign languages, and foreign trade have been developed, teaching international organizations, international negotiations, international law, and international documentation, supplemented by knowledge of the politics, national cultures, geographical resources, and historical traditions of various countries.

Entering the contemporary era, after the shocks following "World War II," international relations have undergone tremendous changes. In terms of diplomatic systems, one of the most significant changes is the trend towards the democratization of diplomacy. This is mainly manifested in the expansion of the scope of diplomacy, the increase in the number of participating actors, and the diversification of levels of play; technological factors have strengthened the interaction between diplomacy and domestic politics, with increasing publicization of diplomatic decision-making and mass participation. Diplomacy not only focuses on "high-level issues" such as war and peace, and the rivalry of great powers, but also increasingly involves "low-level areas" such as ecological and environmental protection and the rights of vulnerable groups. Civil groups, non-governmental organizations, regional and international initiative networks,

transnational forces (such as multinational corporations or terrorist organizations), and more small and medium-sized countries have begun to participate in the complex game of international affairs, forming a multi-track diplomacy and a pyramid-style diplomatic structure. Major policies of political and diplomatic core institutions are subject to checks and balances from various aspects. New actors are more adaptable to new situations and learning new technologies (such as the internet, self-media, and big data platforms), while traditional diplomatic systems and elites appear conservative and resistant to change, with intergovernmental actors constituting international politics slowly transforming into world politics with multiple actors interacting. Diplomacy faces new pressures and opportunities. In terms of diplomatic political language, a large number of new vocabulary has been added, such as terms related to carbon emissions, climate change, and the greenhouse effect faced by climate issue envoys, or cases related to artificial intelligence, big data, and the internet handled by the arms control department, or terminological expressions in various fields such as port affairs, finance, education, legal affairs, and finance in negotiations between Chinese and British representatives around the return of Hong Kong. More and more functional foreign interactions are linked with diplomacy, such as "trade diplomacy", "sports diplomacy", "city diplomacy", "youth diplomacy", "climate diplomacy", and so-called "anti-epidemic diplomacy", leading to speech and interaction methods different from traditional ones. Diplomatic personnel can no longer be omnipotent like their predecessors; they remain silent when involved in high-level secrets but often face uncontrollable situations. The role of diplomatic representatives, their methods of performing duties, and future evolution are more uncertain than ever. Diplomatic political language also has to adapt to new situations.

2 The Artistry of Chinese Diplomats in the Use of Diplomatic Political Language

The employment of diplomatic political language places exceedingly high demands on diplomats, an area to which the Chinese government has accorded great importance. The image of diplomats on the international stage fluctuates between that of a mediator and a staunch defender. In traditional Chinese culture, there is a concept of "being accomplished in both literary and martial pursuits," which is fully manifested in the application of diplomatic political language. The "literary" aspect refers to the meticulous consideration of diplomats in their linguistic demeanor and word choice, while the "martial" pertains to their solemn attitude and resolute spirit in external contests.^[1] For other nations, this image of Chinese diplomats, though rational, often only scratches the surface. As one of the global powers, Chinese diplomats on the stage of international strife, whether at the negotiation table or in social settings, are dedicated to securing greater rights and advantageous positions for China. Their actions and words are

imbued with complex calculations and strategies. From the trajectory of war and peace, negotiations over trade terms and investment agreements, to the respect for national history and culture, and even the advocacy for Chinese citizens treated unfairly abroad, Chinese diplomats bear a special responsibility in these areas, with no room for error.

Diplomacy is the political continuation of national will, akin to military language, aimed at gaining advantage and victory in contests. It reflects the competition between different political systems, ideologies, and ways of life, emphasizing national strength, including hard power such as military, industry, and infrastructure, as well as soft power like self-confidence, courage, and the spirit of struggle. In Chinese culture, the term "soft" may be perceived by some as synonymous with "weak" or "easily bullied".^[3] Thus, diplomacy is viewed as a "smokeless war", encompassing various forms such as "cyber warfare," "public opinion warfare," "propaganda warfare," "psychological warfare," and "legal warfare"; dialogues, negotiations, statements, and declarations in diplomatic settings are overt "verbal fencing."

On the other hand, Chinese diplomats are particularly fastidious in their language use, adhering to international conventions and not merely being forceful. For instance, everyday expressions like "it's done", "it's passable," "not bad", "pretty good", and "excellent" might be translated by diplomats into more nuanced and implicit terms such as "take note of," "understandable", "do not object", "fully acknowledge", and "highly appreciate".^[4] When expressing concern or negation, diplomats employ phrases like "concerned," "seriously concerned", "deeply troubled", "very regrettable", "strongly dissatisfied", and "sternly condemn". When warning others, they might say, "We are closely monitoring the situation," "reserve the right to further react," or "may have to reconsider our position." When evaluating talks, if they say "it was beneficial", it could mean no concrete results were achieved; "frank exchanges occurred" might imply serious disagreements; "hoping the other side will move towards us" could express some dissatisfaction; referring to diplomats "engaging in activities unworthy of their diplomatic status" usually indicates espionage. Faced with thorny issues, spokespersons might resort to evasions like "no comment", "will not respond to unauthorized questions", or "currently do not have the information, will inform you once I do".^[5]

In international organizations and multilateral diplomatic settings like the United Nations, the term "enemy" is typically replaced with "adversary"; when expressing objections to proposals, diplomats often preface their disagreement with "sympathize with," "understand," "acknowledge," followed by "but" or "however."

It is worth noting that the complexity and ambiguity of the Chinese language are rare in the world's languages, especially in diplomatic settings and bilingual translations, which place high demands on users' literary literacy and word choice. For example, the

English term "open-door policy" can be translated into Chinese as "对外开放方针" or "门户开放政策", the former carrying a positive connotation in official Chinese terminology, often referring to a significant decision implemented by the Chinese government in the late 1970s, while the latter is associated with the forced openness imposed on the late Qing dynasty by Western powers.^[2] Similarly, "universal values" and "common values" may sound indistinguishable to non-native Chinese speakers, but they bear entirely different meanings in Chinese, the former referring to Western-promoted political ideas and ideologies, and the latter representing the political and cultural concepts shared by the international community, especially among developing countries and emerging economies. Furthermore, "国际社会" is a collective concept for most Chinese, representing the majority of UN member states, but in Western countries, particularly in Western Europe, it carries a strong sense of a "circle," referring to a group of nations sharing common beliefs, historical evolution, and normative recognition.^[6] Even the same term, such as "shared future," can have different meanings in Chinese, ranging from "a shared destiny" to "a shared future" and even "colluding," delivering entirely different effects to readers and listeners. Therefore, Chinese diplomats must be cautious with their words, read widely, and carefully consider their choice of language based on international conventions and needs.

Diplomats with excellent foreign language skills and agile thinking are not indifferent to these subtle differences. Chinese diplomatic language bears deep marks of the times, with significant differences among diplomats from different eras. Facing diverse ethnic audiences, vastly different cultural psychologies, and ideological concepts, the effectiveness of different people's diplomatic language varies, reflecting their respective cultivation and interests. Generally, Chinese diplomats rarely condescend or coerce. Especially some outstanding Chinese diplomats are adept at speaking implicitly and skillfully "saying half a sentence"; when encountering situations that are hard to answer or "digging pits," they respond cleverly without embarrassing others; regardless of their inner feelings, they respect others (including gaze, tone, and body language) without frivolous or grotesque words or expressions. Simplicity is the best reflection of rigor; it is implicit but not vague, cultured but not "playing" with culture. Whether in bilateral or multilateral talks or press conferences, speeches are not so obscure as to be difficult to translate; sentences are not so long as to reduce speaking efficiency.

A common fact in international relations is that people are more concerned about countries stronger than their own, feeling more vulnerable and prone to dissatisfaction or inferiority; conversely, many are less sensitive to countries weaker than theirs, prone to behavior that makes others feel disrespected. This mindset exists to varying degrees around the world and often affects the diplomatic practices of various countries. The backgrounds of countries with different sizes and strengths are differently reflected in the hearts and mouths of diplomats, and how to behave with neither servility nor

arrogance is a skill. Moreover, there is no fixed template for interpreting other countries' positions or narrating one's own history; this uncertainty is a test for speakers, reflecting their evaluation and selection of the essence or dross of different national traditions. The Chinese thinker Fei Xiaotong proposed the philosophy of "appreciating one's own beauty, appreciating the beauty of others, sharing beauty together, and achieving universal harmony" in his later years, suggesting a way of coexistence between self and others. American international relations scholar Wendt summarized different paradigms such as "Hobbesian culture," "Lockean culture," and "Kantian culture." These two sets of ideas have a similar subtlety, both indicating directions for advancement. In diplomatic settings, those who blindly promote their own culture and history often intentionally or unintentionally omit the flawed or dross aspects, leading to misunderstanding or aversion from other nations (especially weaker countries). The breadth and vision of diplomats determine the pattern and effect of their speech.

Sincerity is an essential quality for high-level diplomats, and a diplomat's words and actions are the external projection of their personality. Behind poor language, there is always a poor experience and temperament (even mood); a refined demeanor and words are certainly related to high-quality personality. Even when facing difficult opponents and provocative situations, in challenging times, top diplomats remain dignified, neither arrogant nor impatient, sincere, kind, reasonable, and measured. The ancient Chinese sages had the saying "the sage within and the king without." The best diplomats always "can correctly display the qualities of an excellent diplomat, such as honesty, patience, and good judgment"; they are confident but not arbitrary, self-respecting but not conceited, firm but flexible when necessary, clever but never seen as "cunning"; they apply the simple standards of elegant demeanor to complex issues; they are trustworthy, and their existence provides a model for "integrity"; they are respected, and even the most malicious people have to behave properly in their presence.

Prudence is also an essential quality of diplomacy. Diplomacy is considered a "prudent force," an "important and moderate force." It requires more patience and gentleness than any other means, especially in the face of colleagues of different skin colors, habits, and languages, always willing to negotiate and communicate. It also means combining foresight and wit organically, having a broad perspective and attention to detail. No matter how severe the situation, skilled diplomats can perceive how all events are interconnected and where they stand, with expressions, body postures, and words all appropriately measured. Therefore, excellent diplomats should be rational and emotional, tenacious and free from deceit. They know that diplomacy is always about continuously seeking conditions acceptable to both (or all) parties, without indulging in temper or harshness. Good diplomats also often use humor to defuse embarrassment, ease tense atmospheres with comforting manners, and subtly restrain irritable negotiators or audiences with their own cultivation. In fact, diplomatic language is not only

spoken words but also includes non-verbal language, which we often call "body language," encompassing gaze, gestures, posture, body language, expressions, appearance, and tone. Non-verbal language is widely applied in the diplomatic practices of various countries, either complementing or enhancing. Diplomats who understand this knowledge are more cultivated.

Regardless of the aspect considered, the great Chinese diplomat Zhou Enlai stands as a paragon. What is admirable is not only his composure in the face of formidable opponents and his respect and consideration for weaker nations and the less privileged, but also his all-round high quality, encompassing magnanimity, sincerity, humor, and prudence. Throughout the history of China's diplomacy, Zhou Enlai's sharp and subtle use of language has so far been unmatched. Former US President Nixon commented: "He is very modest, yet calm and firm. His elegant demeanor and straightforward yet calm attitude exude great charm and poise." In personal contacts and political relations, he faithfully follows the ancient Chinese creed of never hurting people's feelings. The proper use of diplomatic language allows people to appreciate the style of diplomacy, enjoy the true, good, and beautiful it contains, and understand why it is called an "art."

3 The "Strategic Ambiguity" in Chinese Diplomatic Political Language

In the intricate game of international politics, Chinese diplomats skillfully employ ambiguous language as a core tool of their diplomatic strategy to safeguard national interests and advance diplomatic objectives. Ambiguity, as one of the fundamental attributes of language communication, allows diplomats to maintain necessary flexibility and openness in their expressions, especially crucial when dealing with sensitive issues and easing tensions. In actual diplomatic practice, Chinese diplomats demonstrate their superb skills in avoiding sensitive questions, creating a favorable atmosphere, self-protection, tact and concealment, neutrality, and propriety through the use of ambiguous language.

For instance, during the handling of the China-Japan Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands collision incident, the spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not directly disclose whether there would be a meeting between Chinese and Japanese leaders, instead using the ambiguous response "no relevant information to provide." This approach not only protected information but also left room for maneuver in subsequent diplomatic activities. Such a strategy not only reflects the function of ambiguous language but also shows the firm stance of Chinese diplomats in safeguarding national interests and dignity. In the China-US mid-air collision incident, facing the United States' "regret" instead of "apology," Chinese diplomatic personnel responded with

ambiguous language, maintaining the atmosphere for consultation while conveying dissatisfaction, demonstrating the dual role of ambiguous language in upholding national dignity and advancing diplomatic processes.

In terms of self-protection, Chinese diplomats use ambiguous language to leave room for both sides when representing the national stance in statements, expressing their position without damaging the atmosphere of the occasion. This strategy is particularly important when faced with difficult or unanswerable questions, allowing diplomats to provide a reasonable response while protecting their own and their country's image. Moreover, the tactful and concealing functions of ambiguous language in Chinese diplomacy should not be overlooked. By applying ambiguous language, diplomats can leave more diplomatic space for both sides when expressing concerns or positions, which is especially important in handling international affairs.

In summary, Chinese diplomats, in their actual diplomatic actions, flexibly use ambiguous language and diplomatic jargon, effectively safeguarding national interests and promoting the realization of diplomatic goals. The use of this diplomatic style and strategy not only reflects the professional quality of Chinese diplomats but also showcases the unique charm and wisdom of Chinese diplomacy.

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