

A Corpus-Based Contrastive Analysis of Directive Speech Act Verbs in English and Chinese Legal Texts

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Abstract : In the process of human interaction and communication, speech act verbs are considered to be the most active component and the main means for information transmission, and are also taken as an indication of the structure of linguistic behavior. The theoretical value and practical significance of such everyday built-in metalanguage have long been recognized. This paper, which is part of a bigger study, is aimed to provide useful insights for a more precise and systematic application to speech act verbs translation between English and Chinese, especially with regard to the degree to which generic integrity is maintained in the practice of translation of legal documents. In this study, the corpus, i.e. Chinese legal texts and their English translations, English legal texts, ordinary Chinese texts, and ordinary English texts, serve as a testing ground for examining contrastively the usage of English and Chinese directive speech act verbs in legal genre. The scope of this paper is relatively wide and essentially covers all directive speech act verbs which are used in ordinary English and Chinese, such as order, command, request, prohibit, threat, advice, warn and permit. The researcher, by combining the corpus methodology with a contrastive perspective, explored a range of characteristics of English and Chinese directive speech act verbs including their semantic, syntactic and pragmatic features, and then contrasted them in a structured way. It has been found that there are similarities between English and Chinese directive speech act verbs in legal genre, such as similar semantic components between English speech act verbs and their translation equivalents in Chinese, formal and accurate usage of English and Chinese directive speech act verbs in legal contexts. But notable differences have been identified in areas of difference between their usage in the original Chinese and English legal texts such as valency patterns and frequency of occurrences. For example, the subjects of some directive speech act verbs are very frequently omitted in Chinese legal texts, but this is not the case in English legal texts. One of the practicable methods to achieve adequacy and conciseness in speech act verb translation from Chinese into English in legal genre is to repeat the subjects or the message with discrepancy, and vice versa. In addition, translation effects such as overuse and underuse of certain directive speech act verbs are also found in the translated English texts compared to the original English texts. Legal texts constitute a particularly valuable material for speech act verb study. Building up such a contrastive picture of the Chinese and English speech act verbs in legal language would yield results of value and interest to legal translators and students of language for legal purposes and have practical application to legal translation between English and Chinese.

Keywords : contrastive analysis, corpus-based, directive speech act verbs, legal texts, translation between English and Chinese

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