

CHALLENGES IN TRANSLATING DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENCE

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Annotation

This article analyzes the key challenges in translating diplomatic correspondence, including cultural differences, idiomatic expressions, psychological pressure, and the limitations of translation technologies. Diplomatic translation requires not only linguistic knowledge but also political awareness and cultural sensitivity. Using real-world examples and contemporary research, the article highlights the essential role of diplomatic translators in international communication.

Аннотация

В данной статье анализируются основные сложности перевода дипломатической корреспонденции, включая культурные различия, идиоматические выражения, психологическое давление и ограничения современных технологий перевода. Дипломатический перевод требует не только языковых знаний, но также политического контекста и культурной чуткости. На основе реальных примеров и современных исследований в статье подчеркивается важная роль дипломатических переводчиков в международной коммуникации.

Annotatsiya

Ushbu maqola diplomatik yozishmalarni tarjima qilishdagi asosiy qiyinchiliklarni, jumladan madaniy farqlar, idiomatik iboralar, psixologik bosim va tarjima texnologiyalarining cheklovlarini tahlil qiladi. Diplomatik tarjima nafaqat til bilish, balki siyosiy kontekst va madaniy sezgirlikni talab qiladi. Maqolada real misollar va zamonaviy tadqiqotlar asosida diplomatik tarjimonlarning roli yoritiladi.

Keywords:

Diplomatic translation, diplomatic correspondence, cultural differences, idioms, interpretation, psychological pressure, machine translation, international communication

Ключевые слова:

Дипломатический перевод, дипломатическая корреспонденция, культурные различия, идиомы, интерпретация, психологическое давление, машинный перевод, международная коммуникация

Kalit so'zlar:

Diplomatik tarjima, diplomatik yozishmalar, madaniy farqlar, idiomalar, interpretatsiya, psixologik bosim, mashina tarjimasasi, xalqaro kommunikatsiya

Diplomatic translation is one of the most delicate and responsible forms of translation. Unlike literary or technical translation, a single mistake in diplomatic communication can alter the meaning of an official statement, damage bilateral relations, or even create international crises. As House (2015) argues, translation quality assessment in diplomatic contexts goes beyond grammar and syntax — it requires evaluating how meaning functions within political and cultural frameworks.

Diplomatic correspondence includes notes verbales, official letters, memoranda, and verbal statements made during negotiations. Translating these texts is difficult not only because of complex terminology but also because of hidden cultural meanings, historical relationships, and unwritten rules of diplomatic etiquette. This article examines four major challenges: cultural differences, idioms and untranslatable expressions, psychological pressure on interpreters, and the limits of machine translation.

Cultural Differences in Diplomatic Communication

One of the most persistent challenges in diplomatic translation is the difference between high-context and low-context communication styles. Hall (1976) introduced this distinction, explaining that in low-context cultures (e.g., Germany, the United States), messages are explicit and direct. In high-context cultures (e.g., Japan, China, Arab countries), meaning is often embedded in context, relationships, and non-verbal cues. A classic example is the Japanese phrase *Kento shimasu* (検討します), which literally means "We will consider it." However, in diplomatic practice, this phrase frequently functions as a polite refusal. A translator unfamiliar with Japanese communication norms might report that a proposal is still under active consideration, while the intended message was a *委婉* rejection. Such an error could lead a foreign ministry to wait for a response that will never come. Similarly, in Chinese diplomatic culture, the concept of *mianzi* (面子) — "face" — governs how criticism or disagreement is expressed. Direct refusals are avoided to prevent embarrassment. Therefore, phrases that sound vague or evasive in English may carry precise diplomatic meaning in Chinese. Translators must choose formulations that preserve politeness without distorting the essential message. Munday (2016) emphasizes that translation is never a neutral act; it always involves choices that reflect cultural positioning.

Idioms and Untranslatable Expressions

Idiomatic expressions pose a second major challenge. Idioms are culturally bound and rarely have exact equivalents in other languages. Translating them literally often results in confusion or absurdity. For example, the English idiom *kicking the can down the road* means delaying a difficult decision. A literal translation would mean nothing to a Russian or Uzbek diplomat unfamiliar with the expression. The translator must find an equivalent local idiom or rephrase the meaning clearly. Some words are even more difficult because they express unique cultural concepts. The German word *Schadenfreude* — joy at another's misfortune — has no single-word equivalent in English, Uzbek, or many other languages. Similarly, the Arabic concept *taarradhin* refers to a form of reconciliation where neither side feels defeated — a critical term in Middle Eastern diplomatic negotiations. Baker (2018) notes that untranslatability does not mean impossibility; it means the translator must use creative strategies such as paraphrasing, borrowing, or adding explanatory notes. However, in diplomatic correspondence, explanatory notes are rarely acceptable. The translator must find a concise, natural-sounding solution that preserves the original intent. A famous historical example comes from the Cold War. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev reportedly said, "My vas pokhoronim" (Мы вас похороним). This was translated into English as "We will bury you," which sounded like a direct military threat and intensified tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States. Many linguists later argued that the Russian phrase was idiomatic and closer in meaning to "We will outlast you" or "We will be present at your funeral" — still blunt, but less aggressive. Regardless, the damage was done. This case, discussed in Pöchhacker

(2016), remains a textbook lesson in why diplomatic translation requires cultural and idiomatic competence, not just dictionary knowledge.

Psychological Pressure on Diplomatic Interpreters

Unlike written translation, interpreting happens in real time and under extreme psychological pressure. At the United Nations, interpreters work in soundproof booths, listening to speakers through headphones and rendering the message into another language almost simultaneously. There is no time to consult dictionaries or ask for repetition. Pöchhacker (2016) describes this as cognitive load — the mental effort required to listen, analyze, memorize, and reproduce speech simultaneously. Speakers may talk quickly, use complex political terminology, switch topics unexpectedly, or have strong accents. Interpreters must remain calm and accurate despite these challenges. Moreover, diplomatic interpreters are acutely aware that their words carry political weight. A single wrong word could be interpreted as an official position shift. This awareness creates additional psychological stress. Many interpreters report physical symptoms such as fatigue, anxiety, and even insomnia after high-stakes meetings.

Another form of psychological pressure comes from ethical dilemmas. If an interpreter hears a diplomat say something offensive or aggressive, should they render it exactly as spoken, or soften it to reduce tension? Most professional codes of ethics require fidelity to the original message, but diplomatic practice sometimes values conflict avoidance. Interpreters must navigate this tension without explicit guidance (Baker, 2018).

The Limits of Machine Translation

With advances in artificial intelligence, tools such as Google Translate, DeepL, and large language models have become more powerful. They can handle simple, formulaic diplomatic texts such as invitations or acknowledgments. They also help human translators work faster by providing draft translations that can be edited.

However, machine translation has fundamental limitations. Current AI systems do not understand cultural context, historical relationships, or political nuance. They cannot recognize when *Kento shimasu* probably means "no" rather than "we will consider." They cannot sense the weight of face in a Chinese diplomatic note. They also struggle with idioms, humor, irony, and tone.

Munday (2016) argues that machine translation lacks pragmatic competence — the ability to understand what a speaker intends to communicate beyond the literal meaning of words. Until AI develops genuine understanding, human translators and interpreters will remain indispensable in high-stakes diplomatic communication.

That said, professional translators increasingly use machine translation as a tool rather than fearing it as a replacement. The future of diplomatic translation is likely to be hybrid: machines handle routine, low-risk texts, while humans focus on complex, sensitive, or creative tasks.

Diplomatic translation is far more than converting words from one language to another. It is an act of cultural mediation, political interpretation, and psychological endurance. Translators and interpreters must navigate differences in communication styles, translate untranslatable idioms, manage intense cognitive pressure, and understand the limitations of technology.

As this article has shown, even a small translation error — a mistranslated idiom, a misunderstood cultural signal, or a misjudged tone — can have serious diplomatic repercussions. The Cold War example of Khrushchev's "We will bury you" remains a warning to all who work in this field.

At the same time, skilled diplomatic translation enables countries to communicate clearly, resolve disagreements, and build international cooperation. When translation is done well, it becomes almost invisible. But its absence, or its failure, is immediately noticed. Diplomatic translators and interpreters therefore play a crucial, often unseen role in supporting global dialogue, stability, and peace.

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