

Coping Strategies in Government Interpreting: A Case Study of Zhaoqing City

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the coping strategies employed in government interpreting within the context of Zhaoqing City's international engagements. Through qualitative analysis of real and simulated interpreting scenarios, the study identifies four categories of coping strategies: linguistic adaptation, cultural mediation, technical management, and psychological regulation. The research reveals that effective government interpreters serve not merely as linguistic experts but as active cultural mediators and communication facilitators. Findings suggest that successful interpreting in Zhaoqing's government contexts requires specialized training in local cultural knowledge, strategic thinking, and stress management.

KEYWORDS

Government interpreting; Coping strategies; Zhaoqing city; Cross-cultural communication

1 Introduction

The rapid globalization of local governance has positioned cities as crucial actors in international relations. Zhaoqing City, located in Guangdong Province and serving as a connector between the Greater Bay Area and southwestern China, has witnessed growing international exchanges in trade, culture, and governance. This expansion has created an urgent need for professional government interpreting services that can navigate the complex interplay of linguistic, cultural, and political factors unique to municipal contexts.

Government interpreting at the sub-national level presents distinctive challenges that differentiate it from other forms of interpreting. The high-stakes nature of governmental communications, combined with the frequent use of locally-specific terminology and concepts, demands specialized coping strategies beyond conventional interpreting techniques. While substantial research exists on conference and diplomatic interpreting, the particular demands of municipal government interpreting remain understudied.

The allure of interpreting as a profession is intrinsically linked to its inherent unpredictability. It is, by nature, an art of managed imperfection, constrained by the limits of human cognition and perpetually tested by variables beyond the interpreter's control. When confronted with unforeseen challenges, the paramount objective is to maintain cognitive composure—a principle that is simple to articulate yet difficult to enact. This raises a central question for both pedagogy and practice: what constitutes the core repertoire of coping strategies that enables practitioners to navigate this landscape of uncertainty with professional resilience? Based on the author's extensive professional practice, the analysis of coping strategies presented in this study is grounded in empirical observations from authentic interpreting contexts.

2 Literature review

It is well established in the literature that coping strategies are a vital component of professional interpreting. Their importance is magnified by the considerable psychological and cognitive pressures of the task, making them indispensable for successful practice in authentic, high-stakes settings.

2.1 Theoretical foundations of coping strategies

Coping strategies in interpreting have been conceptualized through various theoretical frameworks. Gile's (2009) Effort Models provide a foundational understanding of the cognitive resources required in interpreting and the strategies interpreters employ when these resources are strained. The model identifies listening, analysis, memory, and production as key efforts that must be strategically managed to prevent interpretation failures.

Building on cognitive approaches, Setton (1999) emphasizes the role of the interpreter as an active participant in meaning construction rather than a passive conduit. This perspective aligns with the demands of government interpreting, where interpreters must often navigate ambiguous or culturally-loaded content.

2.2 Government interpreting as a distinct domain

Government interpreting occupies a unique position within the interpreting profession. Unlike conference

interpreting, it often occurs in smaller, more interactive settings where the interpreter's role may extend beyond strict linguistic mediation. According to Li (2019), government interpreters frequently function as “institutional agents” who must balance linguistic accuracy with diplomatic considerations.

The political sensitivity of government interpreting distinguishes it from other forms of public service interpreting. As Wang and Feng (2008) note, interpreters in government settings must be particularly attuned to issues of face, protocol, and political nuance, requiring a specialized set of coping strategies.

2.3 Cross-cultural considerations in translation and interpreting

Culture and cross-cultural communication are foundational pillars of effective interpreting. A deep understanding of these elements is paramount, as they underpin the accurate conveyance of meaning beyond mere words. Distinguished scholar Sun Yifeng (Sun, 2016), in his groundbreaking research on cross-cultural translation, profoundly identifies the core dilemma of cultural translation as bridging deep conceptual chasms rather than performing mere linguistic transfer. He articulates a triple paradox confronting translators: the need to preserve the cultural heterogeneity of the source text while ensuring its acceptability to target-language readers; the obligation to convey surface-level information while interpreting implicit cultural cognitive models; and the challenge of avoiding meaning distortion through cultural appropriation while overcoming cultural flattening caused by excessive domestication.

Other translation scholars like Liu Miqing (Liu, 2012) asserts in his theoretical framework of cultural translation that its essence lies in profound cross-cultural reconstruction and creative transformation. He contends that successful cultural translation must transcend the constraints of superficial linguistic structures through a tripartite mechanism—“decoding cultural semantics, reconstructing cultural imagery, and compensating for cultural functions”—to achieve an organic integration between the source and target cultural systems. He advocates for an “explanatory translation” strategy to avoid the cultural erosion caused by rigid literal translation while preventing the dissolution of cultural identity through excessive domestication. Instead, it employs methods such as contextual expansion, imagistic analogy, and annotative supplementation to construct new cultural cognitive schemata in the target language. This theoretical framework provides significant guidance for resolving the challenges in translating Chinese culturally-loaded terms, highlighting the constructive power of translation as a medium for civilizational dialogue.

3 Coping strategies in Zhaoqing's government interpreting context

Government interpreting constitutes a highly complex and demanding professional domain, characterized by inherent unpredictability and multidimensional challenges. Practitioners must navigate a spectrum of unforeseen scenarios that extend beyond pure linguistic transfer to encompass cultural, technical, and psychological dimensions. The dynamic nature of such settings necessitates the development of a diverse and adaptable repertoire of coping strategies, enabling interpreters to respond with agility and professionalism to situation-specific demands, whether they involve managing dense bureaucratic jargon, mitigating cross-cultural pragmatic failures, resolving technical disruptions, or maintaining composure under significant psychological pressure.

3.1 Linguistic coping strategy

Interpreters in Zhaoqing government settings frequently encounter challenges related to local terminology and specialized jargon. One interpreter described the difficulty of rendering terms like “Duan Inkstone culture” for international audiences unfamiliar with Chinese scholarly traditions. The preferred strategy involved “cultural unpacking”, providing brief explanatory context rather than direct translation.

Interpreters must accurately discern the actual administrative authority behind official titles rather than adhering to literal translations. For instance, while both may be termed as “财政局长”, the position held in Sihui (a county-level city) operates at a different administrative rank from its counterpart in Zhaoqing (a prefectural-level city). This hierarchical distinction must be lexically or contextually clarified in the target language to convey the appropriate administrative relationship.

When encountering an unfamiliar term during interpretation, a standard coping strategy is to employ its hypernym, thereby preserving the core meaning despite the loss of specificity. The author, for instance, once faced the term “罗非鱼” during a live session about the fishery export statistics and could not immediately retrieve its precise English equivalent. As a contingency, the author rendered it as “a type of freshwater fish known as luofei.” It was only after the assignment that the exact translation “tilapia” was confirmed.

A noteworthy difficult point for all interpreters is the strong accent of certain individuals. In the contemporary paradigm of global interconnection, interpreters routinely engage with clients from diverse linguistic backgrounds. While

individuals from nations such as India, the Philippines, and the United Arab Emirates may demonstrate high fluency in English, their speech is often characterized by distinct phonological and prosodic features. This reality necessitates deliberate and systematic preparation in the interpreter's ongoing professional development. Strategic acclimatization to varied accent patterns—including characteristic phonological variations and frequently occurring non-standard grammatical structures—forms a critical component of this preparatory process. Such targeted familiarization not only builds perceptual adaptability but also significantly enhances operational confidence. With sustained exposure, interpreters can develop the ability to rapidly attune to a specific accent, often within the initial moments of a discourse. Moreover, these phonological patterns serve as a cultural prism; learning to decode them offers valuable insights into the speaker's linguistic identity and communicative norms, thereby transforming a potential obstacle into an opportunity for deeper cross-cultural understanding.

3.2 Cultural coping strategy

Cultural mediation emerged as a crucial aspect of government interpreting in Zhaoqing. Interpreters frequently served as cultural explicators, particularly when local officials referenced historical figures or traditional customs. When mayors mention 包公文化 (Lord Bao's culture), the interpreter must explain this represents justice and clean governance, not just a historical figure.

The strategy of “cultural adaptation” (Berry et al. 2002) proved effective in these situations. Cultural adaptation theory provides a more refined theoretical perspective beyond the binary opposition of “literal translation” and “free translation” for dealing with culturally loaded words. Its core lies in exploring how to handle cultural differences in translation. This involves situating cultural references within broader narratives that made them accessible to international audiences while preserving their essential meaning.

Chinese communicators often employ indirectness as a strategic pragmatic feature in expressions of gratitude or acknowledgment, requiring interpreters to possess not only linguistic proficiency but also a nuanced understanding of cross-cultural pragmatics (Zhan, 2010). A representative instance occurs when Chinese officials respond to compliments or thanks from foreign counterparts with phrases such as, “没什么, 这是我应该做的”. A literal rendering “It's nothing, it's what I should do” would strip the utterance of its culturally intended meaning, potentially conveying unintended detachment or indifference. Instead, skilled interpreters pragmatically adapt the message using culturally congruent equivalents such as “You're most welcome—it was my pleasure,” “I'm honored to have been of assistance,” or “Thank you for your kind words”. Such reformulations preserve the speaker's modesty and politeness while ensuring the exchange remains natural and relationally affirming in the target language and cultural context.

As a famous historical and cultural city in China, Zhaoqing has a history of more than 2,200 years. It is not only one of the birthplaces of Cantonese culture and the origin of the Cantonese language, but also renowned as the “Capital of Inkstones” in China. Any interpreter working for the Zhaoqing government must shoulder this significant mission of telling the Zhaoqing culture stories to the world.

3.3 Technical coping strategy

Technical challenges in Zhaoqing's government interpreting included rapid speech, strong local accents, and occasionally poor audio conditions. Interpreters developed various techniques to manage these issues, including strategic note-taking systems tailored to government terminology and proactive clarification protocols.

The author of this paper has developed a “verification protocol” for dealing with unclear statements: “Just to confirm my understanding...” rather than simply asking for repetition, which maintains professionalism while ensuring accuracy.

A related challenge lies in the difficulty of retaining every participant's name, particularly in multi-party dialogues. On one occasion, when an interpreter missed a guest's name, they strategically employed the vague referent “this gentleman.” This formulation allowed the conversation to proceed seamlessly without sacrificing clarity. The precise name could be naturally recovered later through contextual cues or formal introductions, thereby maintaining respectful engagement while prioritizing communicative flow.

Interpreters may occasionally omit information due to cognitive overload or momentary lapses. A key distinction of expertise lies in the ability to perform strategic compensation—when a term or concept initially missed is later clarified by the speaker, the experienced practitioner actively retrieves and incorporates this information at an opportune moment. This practice of “debt repayment” is guided by a holistic view of the discourse, prioritizing the accurate transmission of the overall message over the sequential rigidity of the source speech. Furthermore, trainees should be advised that initial uncertainties are often resolved naturally through the speaker's subsequent elaboration, allowing for later rectification. Therefore, cultivating cognitive resilience—allowing oneself the temporal and mental space for recovery and compensation—is a marker of professional competence.

The deployment of coping strategies, while indispensable for managing real-time interpreting challenges, should not

be conflated with the long-term development of linguistic and knowledge competence. These tactical interventions serve as temporary mechanisms to sustain communication flow but do not inherently augment a practitioner's mastery of the source or target languages. Professional excellence remains fundamentally dependent on the systematic expansion of one's lexical repository and conceptual understanding, enabling precise retrieval of terminology and nuanced expression. It is critical to frame coping tactics as complementary rather than compensatory. They must not engender complacency in foundational learning; rather, they should coexist with a disciplined commitment to continuous knowledge acquisition, domain exploration, and intellectual curiosity. Lifelong learning constitutes the core pathway toward sustainable expertise, with coping techniques serving as strategic tools within this broader developmental framework.

3.4 Psychological coping strategy

The high-pressure environment of government interpreting requires significant psychological resilience. Interpreters reported using various self-regulation techniques, including controlled breathing and cognitive reframing, to manage stress during important meetings.

Thorough preparation stands as the cornerstone of successful interpreting, a factor that becomes exponentially more critical when facing predictable challenges such as speakers with strong regional accents or logistically complex assignments. An interpreter's preparatory phase must therefore be both comprehensive and strategic. This involves not only terminological research but also actively acquiring and reviewing materials like speaker bios, presentation slides, and program agendas well in advance. Where possible, pre-event briefings with organizers or even the speakers themselves can provide invaluable context and clarify potential ambiguities.

Physical and mental readiness is an equally vital component of this preparation. On the day of the assignment, arriving early is non-negotiable; it allows the interpreter to acclimatize to the venue, verify technical equipment, and establish rapport with key participants. This proactive approach serves to "exhaust doubts" preemptively, creating a stable foundation from which to operate. Ultimately, it is this rigorous groundwork that empowers an interpreter to navigate the inevitable unforeseen emergencies with the calmness, resourcefulness, and professionalism that define expert-level performance.

The experience of anxiety is a well-documented phenomenon in interpreting, particularly in high-stakes settings such as large conferences. A moderate level of anxiety can, paradoxically, serve a facilitative function by sharpening an interpreter's focus and cognitive engagement. However, when anxiety exceeds an optimal threshold, it becomes debilitating, consuming precious cognitive resources and impairing performance. Consequently, the cultivation of psychological resilience is not merely beneficial but essential for practitioners. This entails building robust physical and mental endurance, alongside the adoption of a pragmatic, as opposed to perfectionist mindset. Perfectionism, often counterproductive, can precipitate a cycle of heightened stress and pessimistic outlooks. It is therefore recommended that student interpreters strive for a balanced approach characterized by realism, practicality, and optimism. Fostering such a positive psychological disposition is a critical factor in building a sustainable and progressive career, as it equips individuals to navigate challenges and pursue continuous improvement effectively.

4 Findings and discussion

The findings reveal that successful government interpreting in Zhaoqing requires a sophisticated repertoire of coping strategies that extend beyond conventional interpreting skills. These strategies reflect the unique demands of municipal government contexts, where interpreters must navigate local specificities while facilitating international communication.

The role of the government interpreter emerges as multidimensional, combining linguistic expertise with cultural mediation skills and diplomatic awareness. This expanded role necessitates corresponding adaptations in interpreter training and professional standards.

Current interpreter training programs often emphasize technical skills without sufficient attention to the strategic competencies required in government settings. The findings suggest the need for specialized modules on local government structure and terminology and training in cultural explanation techniques, stress management and professional communication skills, plus scenario-based exercises using authentic government materials.

For practicing interpreters, the study highlights the importance of continuous learning about local development priorities and cultural heritage. Interpreters serving Zhaoqing government agencies would benefit from regular briefings on key municipal initiatives, access to updated terminology databases, opportunities for peer learning and strategy sharing, and mentorship programs pairing experienced and novice interpreters.

5 Conclusion

This study has identified and analyzed the coping strategies employed by interpreters in Zhaoqing government settings, contributing to our understanding of the specialized nature of municipal government interpreting. The findings demonstrate that effective interpreting in these contexts requires not only linguistic proficiency but also cultural insight, technical adaptability, and psychological resilience.

The coping strategies identified linguistic adaptation, cultural mediation, technical management, and psychological regulation form an integrated system that enables interpreters to navigate the complex demands of government interpreting. These strategies allow interpreters to function as active facilitators of cross-cultural communication rather than mere linguistic conduits.

Future research could benefit from larger-scale studies across multiple municipalities and the development of assessment tools specifically designed for government interpreting competencies. As cities like Zhaoqing continue to expand their international engagements, the professionalization of government interpreting services will become increasingly vital to their global communication efforts.

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