

# A Study on the Translation of the 2024 Government Work Report from the Perspective of Iconicity Theory

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## Abstract

Iconicity, with its unique form of language cognition, refers to the existence of similarity or direct connection between the form of linguistic symbol and its meaning. This thesis aims to analyze the translation strategies of 2024 Government Work Report from the four dimensions of sequence iconicity, mark iconicity, distance iconicity, and quantity iconicity. The study finds that sequence iconicity reflects the commonalities in the narrative structures of Chinese and English by retaining the temporal and logical sequences of the source domain. Mark iconicity highlights the core information and key content of the source domain by adding explanations. Distance iconicity reflects the close relationship between concepts by adjusting the positions of modifiers and core words. Quantity iconicity achieves the equivalent transfer of semantics through lexical addition and sentence pattern adjustment. This thesis reveals the applicability of the iconicity in the translation of political texts and provides a theoretical basis for the translation practice of the Government Work Report

## Keywords

2024 Government Work Report; Iconicity; Translation

## 1. Introduction

Cognitive linguistics holds that language forms reflect people's experience, perception and cognitive way of the world. Therefore, the structure of language bears a considerable resemblance to people's cognition of the objective world. Iconicity, with its unique form of language cognition, is of great significance to deeply reveal the essential attributes and functions of language. Iconicity refers to the existence of similarity or direct connection between the form of linguistic symbol and its meaning. Regarding to its origin, it can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy. Believing that there exists a similarity between forms and meaning of words, the natural connection between language symbols and meanings was discussed by philosophers. It also

broke the traditional view that linguistic symbols are arbitrary. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, its systematic development has occurred by Charles Sanders Peirce. His classification provided a systematic theoretical framework for iconicity, making an important concept in semiotics, linguistics and influencing these field up to the present.

Iconicity pays close attention to the correspondence between form and meaning, providing a brand-new perspective in analyzing the transformation of form and meaning in the course of translation, which is conducive to the accuracy and readability of policy documents translation. Moreover, as China's international status rises, the translation of policy documents such as *Government Work Report* and *Xi Jinping: The Governance of China* play an important role in spreading China's voice around the world, shaping China's national image, and striving to international understanding and cooperation. On the one hand, as a guiding document for China's development in the coming year, the 2024 Government Work Report has drawn extensive attention from foreign social media. In this instance, the adequacy of translation cannot be underestimated. On the other hand, due to its rich content and concise language, a study of its translation from the perspective of iconicity holds crucial practical and theoretical value. Nevertheless, scholars mainly apply iconicity to analyze social sciences and literary works nowadays. Few scholars have turned their attention to the relevant research on domestic political texts. Therefore, this thesis intends to take iconicity as the theoretical foundation and 2024 Government Work Report as research object, and analyze the characteristics and translation strategies of political discourse from the perspective of iconicity.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Theoretical Research

Regarding its domestic theoretical research, it has been carried out for thirty years. Shen Jiaxuan (1993) pioneered a comprehensive introduction to the latest advancements in foreign iconicity research, summarizing three fundamental principles of syntactic iconicity: distance iconicity, sequence iconicity, and quantity iconicity. Building on the foundational principles of iconicity, Wang Yin (1998) proposed three additional principles: mark iconicity, topic iconicity, and sentence pattern iconicity. In subsequent works, Wang Yin (2000) further explored the rationality of iconicity from linguistic and philosophical perspectives. To further expand and deepen the application research of cognitive linguistics and the theoretical study of cognitive translation, Wen Xv and Si Weiguo(2020) aimed to explore the cognitive basis behind the category transformation in translation. In order to demonstrate the interaction between universal grammar and iconicity and establishing an operational theoretical model, Li Yafei (2022) introduced a new interface theory. According to its basic framework , there are at least two functional vacancies in universal grammar. The role of iconicity is to assist universal grammar in completing the sentence construc-

tion task by filling these vacancies in a 100% predictable way. A general trend in iconicity research is the gradual expansion of the scope of research objects. In terms of theoretical research, it has gradually extended from the earliest concept introduction and philosophical foundation elaboration to its interaction with theories such as translation and universal grammar. Moreover, it also shows a trend of interdisciplinary research, which scholars have linked iconicity with sociolinguistics and pragmatics research, enhancing its relevance to other areas of language research. These achievements not only enrich its connotation, but also provide a solid theoretical foundation for its application in fields such as translation and cognitive science.

## 2.2. Applied Research

Domestic scholars' applied research mainly focus on two fields: social science and the realm of literary works. Chu Zexiang (2000) first applied iconicity manifestations to punctuation marks and raised the issue of its usage norms. Xiao Jian'an and Xiao Zhiqin (2003) explored the iconicity laws of gendered speech, which revealed social roots of gender-marked speech. Holding that linguistic iconicity reflected in word order of both sexes between English and Chinese is actually a real portrayal of the patriarchal system. Tang Dan (2018) analyzed and explored the characteristics of advertising language in terms of sound, form, structure, and content. This research not only enriched theoretical level but also provided a new perspective for advertising creation and appreciation. Zhu Chuanhong (2018) argued that the effective application of phonetic iconicity, semantic iconicity, sequence iconicity, and grammatical metaphor iconicity is conducive to improving teaching efficiency. Cao Yu and Li Heng (2021) studied the influence between iconicity and sign language learning experience on the cross-modal semantic priming effect of sign language and Chinese. Chen Jirong (2023) believed that the iconicity will bring new inspiration to the translation of Chinese literary classics through the analysis of Zhuang Zi English version. The scope of applied research has expanded from syntax to non-literary fields which enhances the explanation of iconicity. Currently, scholars have also explored its application value in other fields. By applying to advertising, teaching, and sign language, scholars have deepened and broadened the research on iconicity.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

Iconicity was first proposed by the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce in the late 19th century to the early 20th century. He argued that different relationships between signs and their referents can be classified into icons, indices, and symbols. An icon refers to a sign that shares pictorial characteristics with its object, such as a map or a photograph. An index refers to a sign when there is a causal relationship between it and its object, such as an arrow and the wind direction, or symptoms and diseases. A symbol refers to a sign when there is a conventional relationship between it and its object, such as red light and no passing, or a cross and Christ. These three types of signs exist in the human cognitive process and represent people's under-

standing of external things through the commonalities of things, their relationships, and social conventions.

Conducting a systematic research and classification on Peirce's view, the classification of iconicity subsequently became more complete and systematic. Haiman (1980) carried out groundbreaking research on isomorphism and motivation that explored syntactic motivation from the perspective of iconicity. He believed that icons in natural human languages are mainly images and diagrams, especially the latter. Haiman argued four relationships in motivation and summarized them into four types of iconicity: sequence iconicity, mark iconicity, quantity iconicity, and distance iconicity. Due to the wide scope of his research and the specific influence of his iconicity classification system on many linguists, this thesis adopts Haiman's iconicity classification. The central concepts of iconicity will be presented as follows.

### **3.1. Sequence Iconicity**

Cognitive linguistics holds that language does not directly mirror the objective world. There exists an intermediary of cognition between language and the objective world. The Chinese linguist Wang Yin (2006) proposed that the cognitive basis of sequence iconicity is that narrating in the order of the occurrence of events is more in line with the cognitive laws of people's experiential perception. Language users project their ways and processes of perceiving the world onto syntactic forms, which is manifested as linear order. Sequence iconicity posits that when the word order structure aligns with the information storage format, it is easier to activate and retrieve information.

### **3.2. Mark Iconicity**

Wang Yin (2006) pointed out that mark iconicity is similar to implicature. Processing mark iconicity requires more time and greater effort. Conversely, unmarkedness is iconic of conventional meaning which takes less time to process and requires minimal inference without much effort. The textual features of mark iconicity are often manifested as rhetorical questions, personification, litotes, capital letters, boldface, etc.

### **3.3. Quantity Iconicity**

Information that is tedious, considered important by speaker, and difficult to predict for listeners. In this case, Shen Jiaxuan(2009) claimed that the syntactic components expressing such information are larger and more complex in form. It emphasizes a proportional relationship between the quantity of language form and the quantity of the meaning expressed, that is, the more complex the form, the more complex the meaning conveyed. The same event may be construed in different ways. Therefore, Quantity iconicity is prominently characterized by repetition, reduplication, and parallelism in stylistic features.

### **3.4. Distance Iconicity**

The cognitive linguist John Haiman (1983) claimed that distance iconicity refers to the correspondence between the distance between concepts and the distance between linguistic components. This concept is manifested in aspects such as the distance between modifiers and heads, the distance between subordinate clauses and main clauses, and the distance between coordinate components. It reflects the corresponding relationship between linguistic form and conceptual structure. Therefore, cognitive linguistics holds that different structures necessarily lead to different meanings. In many cases, distance iconicity is an important reason why two similar structures have different semantics.

#### 4. Analysis

The translations of external publicity political texts have emerged in large numbers. However, how to apply iconicity to the translation of political texts remains a key focus of academic research. Firstly, language is embodied. Different cognitive subjects create their own languages and cultures in the interactive experiences with the world. Different languages and cultures are inevitably imprinted with their own experiences. Therefore, translators need to take into account the role of embodied cognition when conducting category conversion. Secondly, iconicity is not only the fundamental principle of language organization but also an important guiding principle for translation category conversion. In translation practice, translators need to analyze the source language categories and target language categories, and strive to uncover the iconic features of language hidden behind the words as much as possible, so as to be faithful to the iconicity of the source language categories.

##### 4.1. Sequence Iconicity

[Case 1]

These steps will reduce the costs of giving birth and raising and educating children. In this case, both the source domain and the target domain exhibit a parallel relationship of sequence iconicity. The action sequence in the source domain reflects a linear progressive relationship from childbirth to upbringing and then to education, demonstrating the gradual increase in family burden. Meanwhile, The action sequence in the target domain is completely consistent with source domain, also retaining the progressive relationship from childbirth to upbringing and then to education. This preservation of sequence reflects the expressive characteristics of sequence iconicity, that is, the order of language symbols directly reflects the chronological order of events in the real world. When translating parallel structures, it is essential to follow sequence iconicity. The target domain adopts a literal translation strategy. The translation reflect the sequence of events in the source domain to be conformed both in form and function. In addition, three nouns were originally used to denote this logical process in the source domain, but it is translated into a gerund in the target domain. This belongs to a change in part of speech, which makes the expression in the target domain more vivid and specific. The three present partici-

ples “giving, raising and educating” not only accurately convey the action meanings in the original text but also enhance the dynamic sense of the translation.

[Case 2]

We should adhere to the principles of pursuing progress while ensuring stability, promoting stability through progress, and establishing the new before abolishing the old.

In this case, both the source and target domain reflect the sequential relationship of sequence iconicity. The sequential relationship refers to several clauses that state successive actions or related events in sequence. Its characteristics are to proceed come out in succession. Therefore, the sequential relationship is also known as the in-line style. Sequential conjunctions, such as “then, and then, after that, hence”, are commonly used in English. The logical sequence in the source domain is that seek progress in stability, promote stability through progress, and establish the new before break down the old. In order to express the original meaning in source domain, the target domain uses three gerund phrases to represent the sequence of three actions and the cyclic recurrence of the process. The translator also uses three prepositions “while, through, and before” to indicate the logical sequence of the actions. Thus, the word choice in the target domain strictly adheres to the logical sequence of the source domain, ensuring that the progressive relationship from stability to progress and then to the alternation of the old and the new is retained.

## 4.2. Mark Iconicity

[Case 3]

Over 66 million taxpayers benefited from an increase in the special additional educations for individual income tax, which cover children nursing expanses, children’s education, and elderly care expanses.

In the source domain, the first sentence is the main clause and the second is the result clause. The main clause contains the modifying marker “the elderly and the children” literally. Translator firstly integrates the core meaning expressed in the source domain into the main clause in the target domain. And an attributive clause is used to explain the marked content. The purpose of transformation is that readers in the target domain could understand well the meaning expressed by the marked component which needs to add additional information to explain. Therefore, it is necessary to provide a special explanation by using an attributive clause. It is worth emphasizing that “the elderly and the children” in source domain refers to a series of safeguard measures and services for “the elderly and children” policy launched by the government to alleviate the burden of young people in providing for their elders and to increase the fertility rate. These policies aim to address the care issues of the elderly and children in families, relieve the burden on young people, and thus increase the fertility rate and the level of social welfare. In both the source and target domain, mark iconicity is fully demonstrated through modifiers and clauses. It emphasizes the importance and scope of coverage of the policies, enhancing the clarity

and logic of the translation through the accurate use of modifiers. This kind of translation strategy not only preserves the logical order of the original text but also reflects the corresponding relationship between language symbols and conceptual structures.

[Case 4]

We will strive to build a strong agricultural sector. With this goal in mind, we will draw on and apply the experience from the Green Rural Program in Zhejiang Province.

In this case, the source domain consists of two coordinate clauses. The marked object is the project of “Demonstration in a Thousand Villages and Renovation in Ten Thousand Villages” literally. However, the translator use “the construction of a strong agricultural country” that is mentioned in the first sentence as the core premise separately in target domain. Taking the adverbial of accompaniment led by “with” as a premise, the marked content is marked in capital letters. This translation method conforms to the expression habit of mark iconicity. It is worth emphasizing that the marked content refers to the successful practice of the concept that “lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets” in rural grass-roots areas in Zhejiang. Starting from rural environmental renovation and expanding from point to area, 20 years of continuous efforts have created thousands of beautiful rural villages which benefits thousands of farmers, and have created successful experiences and practical examples for promoting the all-round revitalization of rural areas as well. The translator skillfully applies the principle of mark iconicity in the translation process. Through strategies such as word choice, sentence pattern adjustment and information recombination, the translator has successfully achieved a high degree of fit in form, meaning and culture between source and target domain. Mark iconicity plays an important role in the translation. It not only highlights the important information of the original text, but also enhances the expressiveness and persuasiveness of the translation.

[Case 5]

Improve the open competition mechanism for selecting the best candidates to lead research projects.

In this case, the marked object is obvious and contains certain metaphors in the source domain. The “ open competition mechanism for selecting the best candidates to lead research projects” is a scientific research funding input mechanism that rewards based on scientific research achievements. It is a non-periodic scientific research funding arrangement organized by the government to openly solicit scientific and technological innovation achievements from the whole society. It is a new scientific research organization model that deepens the reform of the science and technology system, strengthens the organization of innovation research, and addresses the disconnection between scientific research and the application of achievements that occurs during the organization of industrial technology research.

The key core technology projects needed are publicly announced, and regardless of background, anyone with the ability can take on the challenge.

Translator combines literal translation and free translation that retains the basic meaning of the source domain and makes appropriate adjustments according to idiomatic expression in English. It makes the expression in the target domain more fluent and natural. In terms of vocabulary, the translator chooses words with clear meanings and markers such as “Improve, open competition, and the best candidates” to accurately convey the meaning in the source domain. The target domain highlights the openness and competitiveness of the mechanism. In addition, the translator successfully conveys the cultural connotations and selection concepts contained in the source domain “open competition mechanism for selecting the best candidates to lead research projects” through appropriate adjustments and supplementary information.

### 4.3. Quantity Iconicity

[Case 6]

The Chinese people have the courage, vision, and strength to meet any challenge and overcome any obstacle.

Quantity iconicity emphasizes the proportional relationship between the quantity of language forms and the meanings expressed. The three repetitions of “have” in the source domain emphasize the determination of the Chinese people to overcome difficulties. These three words are arranged in a certain logical order. First, it emphasizes “courage” in the face of challenges, followed by “wisdom” required to address the challenges, and finally “ability” relied on to overcome difficulties. This order reflects a progressive relationship from the spiritual level to practical actions. The repetition phenomenon is a good illustration of quantity iconicity. In addition, repetition is a rhetorical device that repeats a certain word, phrase, or sentence to meet certain stylistic requirements. The rhetorical device of repetition is commonly seen in literary genres such as speeches, poems, and novels. At the same time, repetition also conforms to the appealing characteristics of public reporting occasions such as government reports. In the target domain, the translator directly translates the three adjective phrases in the source domain into three parallel nouns, retaining the quantity iconicity. Translating “wisdom” as “vision” is more in line with idiomatic expression while maintaining the quantitative correspondence. Therefore, through the quantitative correspondence, the overall translation enhances the expressive effect, making the sentence more persuasive and appealing.

[Case 7]

We will stay committed to an independent foreign policy of peace and to peaceful development.

Quantity iconicity is reflected in the repeated use of the words “persistence” and “peace” in this case. There were two words of “stay committed to” in the source area, which respectively emphasized China’s firm position on foreign policy and devel-

opment path, forming a quantitative corresponding relationship. “Independent foreign policy of peace” and “peaceful development” are the two core concepts in the source domain, which correspond to China’s foreign policy and development strategy respectively. Translators adopt a translation strategy that combines literal translation and free translation in target domain. In the process of translation, the translator not only retains the literal translation elements of the source domain, such as “independent foreign policy of peace” and “peaceful development”, but also carries out free translation which use “stay committed to” to express “insist”. The translator also combines the two parallel clauses in the source domain into one sentence by adjusting the sentence pattern, while maintaining the corresponding relationship of quantity iconicity.

[Case 8]

We will give our people a growing sense of fulfillment, happiness, and security.

Quantity iconicity reflect the correspondence between the source domain and the target domain through techniques such as lexical addition or reduction and syntactic adjustment in translation. The three parallel phrases are similar in length and symmetric in structure, reflecting the balance and significance of the content. This parallel structure emphasizes the equal importance of the three aspects. It also corresponds respectively to three different levels of psychological experiences pursued by the people, forming a quantitative correspondence. In the target domain, the translator combines literal translation with free translation. It is directly translated by three nouns in the source domain through the phrase “a growing sense of”, which freely translates the meaning of “constantly strengthening”. In terms of sentence structure, the translator supply the subject “We” and the auxiliary verb “will” to make the sentence structure complete. It clarifies the doer of the action, making the translated text conform to idiomatic expression in English. Meanwhile, it reflects the close relationship between the action and the doer through quantity iconicity. In terms of modifiers, the translator converts Chinese adverbials into English adjectives to make the translation more in line with grammar structure in English. Therefore, the continuity of the action is reflected through quantity iconicity.

#### 4.4. Distance Iconicity

[Case 9]

The armed forces will strengthen all-around military training and combat readiness, make well-coordinated efforts to improve military preparedness, and devote great energy to training under combat conditions.

Distance iconicity refers to the correspondence between the distance between concepts and the distance between linguistic components. In the source domain, both coordinate sentences have the grammatical structure of “adverbial + predicate + object”. The two adverbials, “all-around” and “well-coordinated”, highlight the system and planning nature of the predicate verbs “strengthen” and “make”. Firstly, this structure emphasizes the characteristics of the action through the preposition of the

adverbial. Secondly, it makes the logical hierarchy of the sentence clearer. That is to say, the adverbial provides the background and conditions for the action, the predicate represents the specific action, and the object is the target of the action. This structure makes the sentence semantically coherent and easy to understand. Thirdly, Chinese emphasizes parataxis which express semantics through the order and logical relationship of words. It is concise and clear, conforming to the Chinese grammar structure. In the target domain, the grammatical structure of the source domain is transformed into the sentence pattern of “subject + predicate + object”, which conforms to the English grammatical principle. Sentence structure in English usually takes the subject-predicate-object as the core. Modifiers are usually placed before or after nouns or verbs. Making the translation more fluently, the translator transforms adverbials in the source domain into modifiers in the target domain because the position of modifiers is more flexible in the target domain. Therefore, in order to maintain semantic consistency, the sentence structure in the target domain is more compact and the distance is closer. Translating the modifying component as the core component demonstrates its importance in the whole sentence.

[Case 10]

Keep in mind the expectations of enterprises and the people when deciding on work and policy priorities.

Distance iconicity can be employed to reflect the corresponding relationship between the source domain and the target domain through the adjustment of syntactic structures in translation. In the source domain, the sentence structure of “predicate verb + adverbial + predicate verb + object” closely connects the action, source, and object, thereby demonstrating the close relationship among concepts. For example, the phrase “pay attention to” is directly linked with “expectations of enterprises and the public”, indicating the close connection between the source of the action and the core action.

In the target domain, the sentence structure of “predicate verb phrase + object + adverbial clause” tightly connects the core action with the object. Placing the adverbial clause at the end of the sentence, it reflects the relatively loose relationship between the action and the condition. For instance, “keep in mind” is directly associated with “the expectations”, showing the close connection between the action and the object. “when deciding on...” serves as supplementary information, which maintains a certain distance from the core action. During the process of transformation, the translator adjusts the position of the adverbial to make the translation conform to English syntactic conventions firstly. Meanwhile, the relatively loose relationship between the action and the condition is reflected through distance iconicity. Second, the translator maintains the close connection between the object and the predicate verb, demonstrating the direct relationship between the action and the object, which is in line with distance iconicity. Third, the translator simplifies the predicate structure to make the translation more concise. At the same time, the logical rela-

tionship between the action and the condition is reflected by supplementing information through the adverbial clause. Fourth, the translator transforms Chinese adverbials into English adverbial clauses and noun phrases, making the translation more in line with idiomatic expression in English. Therefore, the logical relationships between the action and the condition, as well as the object, are reflected through distance iconicity.

[Case 11]

We will promote the development of SMEs that use specialized and sophisticated technologies to produce novel and unique products.

The source domain, through the structure of “predicate verb + attributive + object”, closely connects the action, the subject, and the object which reflects the close relationship among concepts. For example, “promote the development” is directly linked to “specialized and sophisticated technologies to produce novel and unique products”, indicating the close association between the action and the object. The target domain, the structure of “subject + predicate verb + object + attributive clause” closely connects the core action with the object, and further elaborates on the characteristics of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) through the attributive clause, reflecting the close relationship between the action and the characteristics of the subject. “that use...” serves as supplementary information to further illustrate the characteristics of SMEs. The translator makes appropriate adjustments to word order and parts of speech. First, the translator clarifies the performer of the action in subject-free sentences, making the translation conform to English syntactic habits and reflecting the close relationship between the action and the performer through distance iconicity. Secondly, the translator makes the translation more specific and detailed by expanding the object and adding attributive clauses, which reflects the close relationship among the action, the object, and the characteristics of the subject through distance iconicity. Thirdly, the translator supplements information through attributive clauses, making the translation richer and more specific, and reflects the close relationship between the action and the characteristics of the subject through distance iconicity. Finally, the translator transforms Chinese adjective phrases into English verb phrases and infinitive phrases, making the translation more in line with idiomatic expression in English and reflecting the logical relationship between the action and the characteristics of the subject through distance iconicity.

[Case 12]

We will make holistic and coordinated efforts strengthen China’s education, science and technology, and workforce.

The source domain, the structure of “predicate verb + object + adverbial” closely connects the action, object, and manner, reflecting the close relationship among concepts. “Make holistic and coordinated efforts” is directly linked to “China’s education, science and technology, and workforce”, indicating the close connection be-

tween the action and the object. “promote in an integrated and coordinated manner” follows immediately after the object, indicating the close connection between the action and the manner. The target domain, the structure of “subject + predicate verb + object + infinitive phrase” closely connects the core action and the object. It further explains the purpose of the action through the infinitive phrase, reflecting the close relationship between the action and the purpose. “make” is directly linked to “holistic and coordinated efforts”, indicating the close connection between the action and the object. “to strengthen...” as supplementary information further explains the purpose of the action. Firstly, the translator makes the translation more specific and detailed by transforming the object and adding an infinitive phrase, which reflects the close relationship between the action, object, and purpose through distance iconicity. Secondly, the translator transforms the Chinese adverbial into English adjective phrases and infinitive phrases.

## 5. Conclusion

This thesis takes the 2024 Government Work Report as the corpus. Based on the iconicity theory, it systematically explores the translation strategies of the English version of 2024 Government Work Report from the four dimensions of sequence iconicity, mark iconicity, distance iconicity, and quantity iconicity. The study findings indicate that the iconicity has important guiding significance in the translation of political texts. Sequence iconicity ensures the coherence and readability of the translation by preserving the logical and temporal order of source domain. Mark iconicity highlights the core information of source domain through syntactic structure adjustment and word order optimization. Distance iconicity reflects the close relationship between concepts through the adjustment of the positions of modifiers and core words. Quantity iconicity achieves the equivalent transfer of semantics through word addition or subtraction and sentence pattern adjustment.

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