

Terminology Translation in Cross-cultural Communication: Strategic Choices and Functional Realization

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Abstract

Term translation plays a crucial role in professional and cross-cultural communication. In the context of globalization, cooperation between different countries and regions has become increasingly frequent, highlighting the importance of term translation. Terms are core components in professional fields, and accurate translation of terms is fundamental to ensuring precise communication of information. Any tiny distinctions may lead to misunderstanding or confusion, thereby affecting the quality and effectiveness of professional and cross-cultural communication. Accurate translation of terms helps to eliminate cultural barriers and facilitate understanding and cooperation among all parties involved. Term translation involves the transmission of professional knowledge and the adaptation of cultural backgrounds, making it a complex and delicate task. To ensure accurate and natural conversion of terms between two languages, flexible and diverse translation strategies and methods are required. This article analyzes relevant examples of term translation from the perspectives of two translation strategies and five translation methods. These examples demonstrate the practical effects of different translation strategies and methods in term translation and provide some useful references and insights for the practice of term translation.

Keywords

Terms; Translation strategy; Translation method; Cross-cultural communication

1. Introduction

Term refers to the specialized terms of various disciplines, which are used to correctly mark things, phenomena, characteristics, relations and processes in various specialized fields such as production technology, science, art and social life. Accurate translation of terms is crucial in the field of specialized knowledge exchange and cross-cultural communication. Therefore, flexible selection of translation strategies and translation methods is of great importance. In the practice of translation, particularly in specialized fields such as technical translation, the accurate rendering of

terminology largely determines the success or failure of the entire translated work. [1]

2. Translation strategies

2.1. Domestication

The advantage of the domestication is that it can reduce the barriers caused by cultural differences and make the term more natural and acceptable in the target language. However, to a certain extent, domestication may lead to the loss of cultural characteristics of the source language.

Example:

中医(zhōng yī): Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)

Analysis: As a medical system rooted in Chinese traditional culture, TCM has distinguished from Western biomedical science in core theories and the positivist thinking. If “中医” is directly translated as “Chinese Medicine”, the target language readers may mistakenly equate it with the modern Chinese medical system, resulting in the loss of cultural connotation. Therefore, the addition of the word “Traditional” not only clarifies its attribute and distinguishes the scope of traditional medicine from modern medicine, but also conforms to the naming convention in English, and breaks the cognitive barrier for target language readers. At the same time, the additional abbreviation “TCM” not only standardizes the term to facilitate international academic exchanges and promotion, but also strengthens the professionalism and global recognition of TCM through the adoption of authoritative institutions like the World Health Organization (WHO). Domestication is not a compromise of the source language culture, but a linguistic adaptation to achieve the dual goals of lowering the threshold of understanding externally and maintaining the cultural roots internally.

2.2. Foreignization

Foreignization focuses on preserving the linguistic forms, cultural features, and exotic flavor of the source text, striving to present the source culture in its authentic form to target-language readers. At the lexical level, foreignization involves directly borrowing culture-specific terms from the source language. [2] Through sustained cross-cultural exchange, this approach enables target language readers to progressively comprehend and embrace these culturally-specific concepts over time. Foreignization helps to preserve and disseminate the cultural characteristics of the source language and enhances the cultural diversity and richness of the term. However, to some extent, foreignization may increase the comprehension difficulty and require additional cultural background knowledge.

Example:

功夫(gōng fu): Kung Fu

Analysis: “功夫” is translated as “Kung Fu”, which retains the pronunciation and

ideograms of the original Chinese word, and has become a classic case of Chinese cultural export. As the core concept of Chinese martial arts culture, the word “功夫” has dual connotations of “martial arts skills” and “long-term training” in Chinese, and it is closely related to the Chinese traditional thought of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. If we adopt domestication and translate it into “Chinese martial arts” or “Chinese fighting techniques”, which can lower the threshold of comprehension for the target language readers, but will strip the word “功夫” of its cultural uniqueness. Therefore, directly translate “功夫” as “Kung Fu”, which highlights its cultural heterogeneity through the strangeness of the linguistic form. One of the problems faced by this translation is that “Kung Fu” adopts the Wade-Giles Romanization instead of the modern Chinese Pinyin “gōng fu”. To some extent, the difference in spelling may cause confusion to readers. Although this translation sacrifices the convenience of immediate comprehension, it promotes the target language readers to actively explore its cultural origin.

3. Translation methods

3.1. Free translation

Free translation refers to the direct conversion of terms in the source language into the target language in accordance with their literal meanings or linguistic forms without any deformation or modification. Compared with literal translation, free translation is more flexible in expression and can be adjusted according to the needs to better adapt to the expression habits of the target language. It focuses on conveying the meaning or concept of the original term rather than its literal form or pronunciation. Free translation can assist translators in more effectively conveying the original text's intent and emotion, while also making the translation better align with the linguistic habits and expressive conventions of the target language, thereby facilitating smooth cross-linguistic communication. [3]

Example:

EU (European Union): 欧盟(ōu méng)

Analysis: “European Union” is translated as “欧盟”, instead of “欧洲联盟”. As a regional political and economic integration organization, the core of European Union lies in the transfer of sovereignty and in-depth cooperation among member states. In the English context, “Union” in its name can mean either “union” or “federation”, which has embodied the ambiguity of political system. If it is directly translated as “欧洲联盟”, although it retains the original structure of the word, it is difficult to fit in with the tradition of condensation of Chinese political terms (e.g., NATO and ASEAN are both abbreviated with two words, “北约(běi yuē)” and “东盟(dōng méng)” respectively). Therefore, we adopt free translation, extracting the words “欧” (geographical identity) and “盟” (cooperation core) to form the compound word “欧盟”, which follows the simplicity of Chinese two-syllable vocabulary.

3.2. Transliteration

3.2.1. Equal Transliteration

When the phonemes of the original terms happen to form relatively complete syllables, they can be converted into similar terms according to the International Phonetic Alphabet spelling rules.

Example:

Coffee: 咖啡(kā fēi)

Analysis: Equal transliteration can preserve the pronunciation of the original word as much as possible, which helps target language readers to make a rough guess of its origin or initial cognition through pronunciation without knowing the specific meaning of the original word. Taking “Coffee” as an example, the key to the success of this translation is that the phonetic correspondence between the English /'kɒfi/ disyllabic structure: the first syllable /kɒ/ matches the acoustic-rhythmic combination of “kā (咖)”, the second syllable /fi/ corresponds to the affricate stop of “fēi (啡)”. This almost seamless phonetic transition relies on the accidental correspondence between the Chinese and English consonant-vowel structures. Equal transliteration preserves the international universality of the term to the maximum extent while accomplishing cultural adaptation with the help of the multidimensionality of the Chinese characters, and ultimately striking a delicate balance between phonological fidelity and semantic penetration.

3.2.2. Approximate Transliteration

When the phonemes of a term in the original language do not form a relatively complete syllable, the incomplete syllable needs to be made complete, i.e., by adding the corresponding phonemes to form a complete syllable or by deleting some of the letters, so that the remaining elements can form a complete syllable. In the process of translating terms, certain phonemes are added or subtracted in order to make the constituent syllables of the term complete or to make the term easier and more audible to pronounce.

Example:

Los Angeles: 洛杉矶(luò shān jī)

Analysis: As a special strategy for translation, approximate transliteration fundamentally serves as a compromise when reconciling conflicting phonological structures between source and target languages. Its central challenge lies in adapting non-syllabic phonemes to Mandarin's tonal and syllabic framework. Taking the translation of “Los Angeles” into “洛杉矶” as an example, the original four-syllable /lɔːs ˈændʒələs/ is condensed into three syllables by omitting the final /ləs/, thereby achieving syllabic coherence in Chinese. Translators must adhere to the “core phoneme prioritization” principle, retaining the most recognizable elements like /lɔː/, /æn/ and /dʒə/. Such dual mechanisms of phonetic transcription and semantic re-configuration ultimately represent linguistic symbols' adaptive reconstruction

within heterogeneous cultural systems, striking a dynamic equilibrium between phonetic fidelity and cultural acceptability.

3.3. Transliteration + Annotation

This translation method can not only preserve the phonetic characteristics of the original word, but also enhance comprehension for target language readers by appending explicit explanatory words, thereby preventing any compromise to the readability of the translated text. [4] It helps audiences intuitively grasp the meaning or functional purpose of foreign term while maintaining its authentic pronunciation.

Example:

Jeep: 吉普车(jí pǔ chē)

Analysis: The pivotal challenge of this translation method resides in addressing the semantic void that may arise from pure transliteration, particularly when the referent of the source-language term lacks a direct linguistic correlate in the target cultural milieu (There was no corresponding terms of “Jeep” in Chinese during the 1940s). While transliterated parts adeptly capture the phonetic contour, they often fall short in conveying the entity's intrinsic attributes, which may foster cognitive discontinuities. Consider the example of “Jeep: 吉普车,” where the translation not only faithfully preserves the phonetic essence of the original term through transliteration (“吉普”), but also augments comprehension for target language audiences by appending a descriptive categorical term (“车”) that elucidates the essence of the foreign entity. To bridge this gap, translators deploy a descriptive classifier, fashioning a composite construct of “transliteration + annotation.” This method creatively harnesses the modifier-head structure inherent in Chinese, wherein the transliterated component assumes the role of a distinctive marker (imitating /dʒi:p/ as “吉普”), while the categorical term (“车”) delineates the semantic field. This fusion not only preserves the source term's phonetic fidelity but also establishes a cognitive framework. Ultimately, this translation method constructs a seamless cross-linguistic cognitive bridge, managing the interplay between phonetic transfer and meaning reconstruction to forge an intermediary zone of cultural accommodation.

3.4. Transliteration + Semantic Translation

Transliteration + semantic translation, as a composite translation method, combines the two strategies of transliteration translation and semantic translation, translating one part of the original text phonetically according to its pronunciation, and translating the other part semantically according to its actual meaning. It not only retains some phonetic features of the original text, but also conveys the core meaning of the original text, making the translation result easy to understand and rich in cultural connotation.

Example:

Internet: 因特网(yīn tè wǎng)

Analysis: Taking “Internet: 因特网” as an example, the original word consists of two morphemes “inter-” (跨(kuà)) and “net” (网), but the Chinese language lacks the corresponding compound structure, so the translator adopts the reorganization of “pre-phonetic and post-semantic”: “inter” is transliterated as “因特” (/ɪn.tə/→/yin te/), retaining the correspondence between the core phonemes /ɪn/ and /t/, while discarding the English suffix “-er”; then ‘net’ is directly translated as “网”. The success of this strategy depends on the precise judgment of the boundaries of the source morphemes and the acceptability of the target language - if completely transliterated, it will lose the semantic transparency and completely translated semantically, it will be difficult to reflect the characteristics of the onomastic name (e.g., “international net”). On the structural level, the translation method cleverly utilizes the modifier-head structure that “因特” serves as a modifier and “网” serves as the center word, forming the framework of “term + category”. This translation method is essentially to deconstruct the etymology of the source language and then reproduce the meaning in the target language system, which not only maintains the technical specificity of the term, but also builds a localized cognitive.

3.5. Pictographic Translation

Pictographic translation conveys the original meaning directly through visual representation, where the physical form is either explicitly depicted by the characters of the target language or implicitly suggested by the core semes of target-language terms. [5] By mimicking the morphological structure of source words, pictographic translation creates visual associations between Chinese and English, enabling immediate cognitive recognition of described objects and enhancing translation readability and acceptability.

Example:

I-steel: 工字钢(gōng zì gāng)

Analysis: As a special translation method, pictographic translation essentially achieves cross-linguistic visual metonymy through Chinese character configuration. The translation of “I-steel” as “工字钢” demonstrates the core challenge of bridging structural gaps between alphabetic and ideographic writing systems. Transforming the purely geometric form of English letter “I” into Chinese characters combines pictographic form and semantic function. The character “工” is selected because its structure mirrors the I-shaped cross-section. This dual association of graphic resemblance and professional connotation operates within the framework of Chinese compound word formation rules. The term “工字钢” follows the standard technical nomenclature pattern of “descriptive modifier + material classifier”, maintaining “steel” as the categorical headword while accomplishing graphic transcription through “I-shaped.” This translation strategy showcases the unique advantages of

Chinese ideographic writing while revealing how visual thinking compensates for logical reasoning in cross-cultural technological communication.

3.6. Coinage

Coinage is an innovative translation method used to deal with terms that have unique meanings in the original language but have no equivalent in the target language. The process of coinage requires an in-depth understanding of the semantic content, functional characteristics and cultural background of the original terms, and the creation of new words by combining the lexical composition and expression of the target language. In contexts where specific circumstances are unclear, language users can consciously or unconsciously employ knowledge to make inferences, and this process of knowledge derivation primarily relies on the cognitive environment. [6]

Example:

Entropy: 熵(shāng)

Analysis: As an important means of cross-linguistic conceptual reconstruction, the core challenge of coinage lies in how to visualize the scientific abstraction of the original term through the Chinese character system. The German etymology “Entropie” coined by Clausius has the compound semantics of “energy transformation” (en-) and “turn” (-tropie), which lacks the corresponding concept in Chinese. The Chinese translation of “熵” was proposed by Prof. Hu Gangfu, a physicist, based on the concept of the quotient of heat and temperature, and considering that it is related to fire, it is formed by adding “火(huǒ)” to the character “商(shāng)”, which combines the Chinese character's form and meaning. The deeper cultural adaptation is reflected in the anchoring of Western scientific concepts in the cognitive framework of Chinese characters: the activation of the thermal field of the “火” character group (e.g., “焔(hán)” and “焙(bèi)”) by means of radicals not only perpetuates China's cognitive tradition, but also builds the root basis for the systematic derivation of term. This wisdom not only satisfies the academic community's demand for conceptual precision, but also maintains cultural subjectivity through Chinese character forms, realizing the creative combination of Western and Chinese character aesthetics.

4. Conclusion

Term translation plays an irreplaceable role in professional and cross-cultural communication, and its accuracy is directly related to the precision of information conveyance and the effectiveness of cooperation. Under the wave of globalization, term translation is facing increasingly complex challenges, requiring translators to possess profound professional knowledge, keen cultural awareness and flexible translation strategies. This paper explores the characteristics and practices of term translation through two translation strategies and five specific methods. These dis-

cussions not only deepen our understanding of term translation, but also provide valuable reference for translation practice. In the future, with the further deepening of international exchanges, the importance of term translation will become more and more prominent, and we need to keep exploring and innovating translation strategies and methods in order to adapt to the ever-changing needs, to promote the in-depth development of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic communication and understanding, and to facilitate the sharing and dissemination of global knowledge.

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