

Original Paper

A Discussion on the Translation of Promotional Articles on Nuclear Fusion from the Perspective of the Skopos Theory

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Abstract

The skopos theory focuses on the purpose of a translation action, which determines the translation strategies and methods. This theory breaks with the traditional concept of equivalence and gives translators more flexibility. Promotional articles feature distinctive, syntactic and rhetorical characteristics and translators need to take full consideration of the intended purpose of the original text and young nuclear fusion researchers as its target audience. This article makes a brief analysis of the translation of promotional articles on nuclear fusion from the perspective of the skopos theory, by taking examples from nuclear fusion research units from home and abroad.

Keywords

Skopos Theory, Nuclear Fusion, Promotional Articles

1. A Brief Introduction to the Skopos Theory

Skopos theory was first introduced by Hans J. Vermeer in his 1978 article “A Framework for a General Theory of Translation”. Skopos theory was later expanded by Katharina Reiss in their co-authored article “Foundation of a General Theory of Translation”, published in 1984 and translated into English in 2013 as “*Towards a General Theory of Translational Action: Skopos Theory Explained*”.

Reiss and Vermeer argued that traditional translation approaches that are source-text-centered with emphasis on formal correspondence were insufficient because translation is fundamentally a form of human action, and any action is “a purposeful behavior that takes place in a given situation” (Nord, 2013, p. 203). They believe that equivalence was not always achievable or desirable and emphasizing the primacy of purpose and the priority of functionality. According to Reiss and Vermeer, “a translational action is governed by its purpose” (Reiss & Vermeer, 2013, p. 85). The skopos of a translation—the purpose it serves in the target culture—becomes the decisive factor determining all translation decisions. The theory is built upon the following three fundamental principles:

The Skopos Rule stands as the highest principle. The purpose of the translational action determines the strategies and methods employed by the translator).

The Coherence Rule, also termed intratextual coherence, requires that the translated text be meaningful and acceptable within the target culture's communicative context. This principle requires that translations shall not only be linguistically accurate but also culturally acceptable [2]⁹⁸.

The Fidelity Rule or intertextual coherence, establishes a relationship between the source text and the target text. However, in contrast to traditional equivalence theories, fidelity is subordinate to the skopos rule (Yang, 2007, p. 204).

In practical translation scenarios, the above-mentioned rules empower translators to make contextually appropriate decisions. In advertising and marketing translation, the skopos theory justifies creative adaptations. Translators may modify cultural references, adjust humor, or restructure messages entirely to achieve the commercial purpose of the source text.

2. Promotional Articles on Nuclear Fusion and Their Target Audience

Promotional articles' primary function is to persuade target audiences and elicit intended responses. According to Vermeer's classification of text types, they can be classified as expressive texts, in which "the author wants the information offer to convey artistically organized content, consciously verbalizing the content according to aesthetic criteria". This purpose-driven nature distinguishes promotional texts from purely informational genres. According to Yang, promotional texts demonstrate distinctive linguistic characteristics at multiple levels:

Lexical Features: extensive use of personal pronouns, informal stylistic elements, and positive evaluative language.

Syntactic Features: promotional language favors brevity and impact. Effective wording is used a key strategy to ensure memorability, highlighting and accelerated diffusion of messages.

Rhetorical Devices: the use of wordplay, idiomatic expressions, and persuasive rhetoric to achieve effective communication (Yang, 2007).

Ira Torresi emphasizes that the translation of promotional materials requires techniques aimed specifically at preserving their persuasive purpose (Torresi, 2021, p. 21). The translators should have at least 5 non-linguistic skills: agility, persuasiveness, creativity, knowledge of laws and regulations and flexibility (Torresi, 2021).

Based on publicly available information, the average age of several leading controlled nuclear fusion research teams is concentrated between 30 and 35 years old, which demonstrates a significant trend of youthfulness. For example, the "New-Generation Artificial Sun" team at Southwestern Institute of Physics (SWIP) has an average age of 33 years old. Li Bo, a post-90s doctor serves as the "driver of the artificial sun", indicating that young researchers have become the cornerstone of fusion research.

Nuclear fusion is a cutting-edge field of research featuring very high proportion of high-education and overseas experiences. In SWIP, for example, the proportion of researchers with doctoral or master's

degrees exceeds 89%. Among them, many have educational and working experiences in developed countries at the forefront of fusion research such as the United States, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Japan. In the field of fusion theoretical research, the proportion even exceeds 30%.

According to the reports from the Internet (Anhui & Chen, 2006; ScienceNet, 2024), young fusion research experts have grown up in an era when China's comprehensive national strength has been rapidly rising and the Internet has been highly developed, and they possess distinct generational characteristics:

(1) Confidence and internationalization

Many of them have overseas study or exchange experiences. They do not look up to or down upon the outside world, but rather “look it in the eye”. They can confidently give reports in fluent English at international academic conferences and have equal dialogues with top institutions. Therefore, in promotional articles, the “Official Document Tone” shall be eliminated and “Technological Aesthetics” shall be emphasized. Language that is more technologically evocative and visually descriptive is recommended. The writing style could be more inspiring, but it must be supported by solid scientific details.

(2) Be straightforward and oppose “big talk”

Their communication style tends to be direct and pragmatic. They are rather averse to formalism and empty slogans. Accordingly, promotional articles shall show the “down-to-earth” side, highlighting their hobbies such as playing in a band or running marathons. This kind of “cute contrast” can effectively bridge the gap between the public and researchers, and make 90s-born researchers feel that the organization “understands me”.

3. A Discussion on the Translation of Promotional Articles on Nuclear Fusion

With flourishing fusion research activities around the world, various kinds of promotional articles have come to light in both private and public entities to promote their latest progress and attract talents and investments. These articles include recruitment advertisements, brochures and promotional videos, etc. Excellent promotional articles on nuclear fusion are represented by the ones on ITER (International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor) website, featuring vivid and common language. The author will discuss in detail by taking two examples.

Example 1:

A giant, slow-motion game of musical chairs

One component leaves sector sub-assembly tooling, another arrives ... the intricately coordinated transfers of large components in the ITER Assembly Hall resemble a slow-moving game of musical chairs. (<https://www.iter.org/node/20687/giant-slow-motion-game-musical-chairs>)

The ITER Assembly Hall is full of giant components which have to follow stringent procedure and protocols to enter, assemble and exit. This article is a promotion of the order and grant sight of the Assembly Hall. In the title, the author of the original text compares this procedure to the game of

musical chairs, which is what we called the game of “抢凳子” in China. The slow and prudent movement of these gigantic objects may have associated the author with the game when all the players circle around the chairs carefully to wait for the stop of the music. But for Chinese readers, several questions remain. First, if translated literally, “the game of musical chairs” (音乐椅子游戏) will cause trouble in the readers’ understanding, as there is no counterpart in Chinese. Even if the translator succeeds in finding the correct functional translation of “抢凳子”, for most target readers who are under 30 years old, they might have little idea of what does the game actually look like, because the game is very traditional and seldom seen in the kindergartens today. What’s more, the game of musical chairs reminds the target readers of the chaos when the music stops and all the players rush for the available seats, which is in contradiction of the reality in the ITER Assembly Hall.

To summarize, it is not a reasonable choice to translate “game of musical chairs” into “抢凳子”, even though it is loyal to the original text and is acceptable in the target language. In light of the skopos theory, the priority of purpose governs the whole translation process. The purpose of the title is to grasp the young readers’ attention and prompt them to image the scene at the ITER site, which should be the primary concern of the translator. It is necessary to make a shift in the translation to better adapt the text into the target culture.

The sense of order in the ITER Assembly Hall reminds the author of the game “Sokoban”, in which the player must push the box to the designated position under a series of movement restrictions. The game is very popular even among those under 30 years old, especially for those young fusion research scientists who are engaged in mental work. Therefore, the author translates “game of musical chairs” into “推箱子游戏”, which is closer to the true intention of the original author and more understandable for the target readers.

Example 2:

Without equivalent on this planet

See the latest image of work underway in the ITER machine assembly pit.
(<https://www.iter.org/node/20687/without-equivalent-planet>)

In this promotional article, the author of the original text shows several pictures of the splendid colossal components in ITER tokamak pit. The translation of its title is worth consideration. Most ITER components are “first of its kind” and no similar objects can be found on earth. One of the author’s colleague translated “Without equivalent on this planet” into “地球上独一无二的存在”. This translation is loyal to the original text and is equivalent semantically. But when taking the characteristics of the promotional articles into consideration, it is not concise enough to be eye-catching in the title. To meet the target readers’ taste, which is prone to be confident and straightforward, it is recommended to translate the title into “举世无双”. This translation is easier to be recognized with the power of brevity, thus contributing to the promotional article’s highlights and effectiveness.

The wording and style of the above-mentioned examples shed light on the practice of Chinese-English translation of promotional articles. The author will discuss three examples from Chinese domestic

fusion research institutions and companies.

Example 3:

解决疑问的求索

勇闯未知的决心

广阔天地的向往

相汇闵行的携手

携手共聚变 启航向未来

The text above is an abstract of caption from a promotional video by a fusion research company in China. Parallelism is often used in Chinese promotional texts to show the order and force. But it is very hard to reproduce this beauty in translation, especially when there are several sentences in parallel structure. One of the author's colleague's translations is as follows:

The quest for resolving doubts

The determination to venture into the unknown

The yearning for a vast world

The hand-in-hand convergence in Minhang

Join hands to achieve fusion and set sail towards the future

This translation reproduces the meaning of the original text, but the target audience watching the fleeting video images has no time to read such long lines and words. Lexically and syntactically, the translation is too long; rhetorically, the last line serves as the closing statement of the video but the translation fails to restore the original parallelism and lacks a meaningful finishing touch. After review, the author of translated the lines as follows:"

The quest to resolve the unknown

The courage to venture untrod

The call for vast horizon

The union in Minhang shown

Partner for the fusion. Pilot for the future

There are three eye-catching points in the translation above. There is a rhyme at the end of each sentence; the sentence structure is neat and the number of words is consistent. Additionally, the last sentence contains three rhetorical devices: antithesis, alliteration and rhyme, which is a striking finishing touch. This translation fits well in the context of the target language, and is in line with young researchers' concise, straightforward and confident personalities.

Example 4:

国家主席发来贺信

指出：“科学无国界 创新无止境”

This golden sentence is often quoted by Chinese units involved in the ITER Project in their promotional materials, which features parallelism in its rhetoric. One of the translations is as follows:

Chinese President sent a congratulatory message, which highlighting the sentence “Science is not

bound by national borders and innovation is an endless endeavor.”

The above translation conveys the original meaning rather mechanically, and it loses the rhetorical beauty of the original text and is not concise enough. As mentioned above, in promotional articles, the “Official Document Tone” shall be eliminated and “Technological Aesthetics” shall be emphasized. If the translation is not appropriate in its style in the target culture, some Chinese official language will not only fail to achieve their original purpose but may even have the opposite effect. Therefore, the author made his first attempt to translate this sentence as:

Science is without borders. Innovation is without boundaries.

At first glance, this translation seems to have a parallel structure, but compared with the original text, the sentence is still too long, and the word “boundaries” is overly complex. After refinement, the author’s final translation is:

Science knows no borders. Innovation knows no limits.

These two sentences are both from the cultural concepts of well-known foreign scientific research enterprises, with a strong link in the target culture. Compared with the previous two translations, they are more concise in expression, more balanced visually, and have a stronger impact on the target readers.

Example 5:

核聚变能 点亮未来

This is a slogan from a Chinese fusion research institute featuring parallel structure. The sentence was originally translated as “Nuclear fusion can light up the future”. This is a typical literal translation that loses the symmetrical beauty of the original text. According to the skopos theory, the translator can adapt and polish the translation based on the purpose of the target text and should not translate word for word. This slogan is to be displayed in large characters at the most prominent position of the unit’s booth at the exhibition. The words must be concise and powerful and partial omission can be used in the translation to achieve a better effect. The translator’s version is as follows:

Fusion Lights Vision

There are only three words and five vowels in this translation with rhetorical device of rhyme. It has a balanced aesthetic appeal both visually and aurally, and is more concise and easier to be read than the original text. This example shows that under the guidance of the skopos theory, translators should not be bound by the form and content of the original text. To ensure the promotional effect of the article in the target context, the translation should generate the strongest response among the target readers.

4. Conclusion

The skopos theory lays great focus on target text function and the primacy of the purpose it serves in the target culture. The three rules—Skopos, Coherence and Fidelity presented by Reiss and Vermeer provide practical guidelines to translators in an increasingly diverse globe. The translator, when analyzing the original text, is required to have a clear understanding of the text functions in the target

language, and make necessary shifts to the structure of the original text, so as to transfer the purpose of the original author by reproducing the meaning, tone and spirit in the target culture.

Translators are advised to pay special attention to the characteristics of promotional articles with cutting-edge fusion technologies and highly-personalized ‘post-90s’ young researchers as the target readers. The promotional articles on the ITER website offer good models for the Chinese-English translation of such articles. It should be noted that there is still much room for improvement in the English translations of promotional articles by domestic fusion research units, as shown in the lack of conciseness in sentences, the lack of refinement in word choice, and the lack of diversity in rhetorical devices. It is hoped that through this article, some useful inspirations can be provided for the translation of such texts, and more research could be done by taking more examples of fusion-related translation.

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