

Original Paper

A Study on the International Publicity Translation from the Perspective of Translation Shifts Theory—Taking China’s Energy Transition as an Example

Fanfan Ye & Chunxiu Long

School of Foreign Languages, Hubei University of Technology, Hubei Province, China

Received: March 20, 2026

Accepted: April 25, 2026

Online Published: April 28, 2026

doi:10.22158/jecs.v10n2p30

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/jecs.v10n2p30>

Abstract

International publicity translation is an important medium for international communication. Its core goal is to overcome language and cultural barriers and effectively convey China’s development concepts, policies and achievements to the global audience. Based on Catford’s translation shifts theory, this paper takes the English translation of China’s Energy Transition as the research object to explore the shift phenomena and strategies in international publicity translation. Through the analysis from the two dimensions of level shifts and category shifts, it reveals the applicability and guiding significance of translation shift theory in international publicity translation. It is found that appropriate shifts not only faithfully conveyed the core information and policy stance of the original text, but also significantly improved the readability and acceptability of the translation, so as to better serve the strategic communication goal of international publicity translation.

Keywords

International Publicity Translation, Catford’s Translation Shifts Theory, Level Shifts, Category Shifts

1. Introduction

With the increasing international influence of China, the importance of international publicity translation as a key component in constructing the national external discourse system is also becoming more and more prominent. As an important bridge for China to participate in international dialogue and show the national image, international publicity translation has the mission of accurately and effectively conveying China’s voice, telling Chinese stories and spreading Chinese ideas. Unlike general literary or technical translation, international publicity translation has unique characteristics, that is, it involves the interpretation of key concepts, policies and the dissemination of values. It requires higher sensitivity,

formal expression, rigorous accuracy, positive orientation and unique style characteristics (Zhu, 2021). Therefore, how to effectively overcome linguistic and cultural barriers in translation practice, achieve precise equivalence of information, and ensure the acceptability and dissemination effect of the target text, has become a core and challenging issue in the field of international communication.

As an official channel for China's external communication, white papers systematically expounds China's development experience and achievements in the process of modernization to the international community (Liang et al., 2024). Therefore, the quality of its translation directly affects the international community's understanding and recognition of China's development path. Li (2020) noted that the translation of white papers should give priority to ensuring the fidelity and semantic accuracy of the original text, while taking into account the conventions of English expression and the readability of the translation, so as to allow the necessary flexibility and adjustment. However, existing research on the translation of Chinese political discourse, especially in international journals, remains relatively scarce. (Valdeón & Li, 2024).

China's Energy Transition is an important policy document issued by the State Council of the People's Republic of China, which systematically expounds China's strategic planning and policy direction in the field of energy. Its language is concise, the terminology is standardized, so its English translation serves as a typical case of the international publicity translation research. The translation text must not only accurately convey the original information but also consider the acceptance of the target readers, thus it has significant research value in translation shifts. This study aims to explore how translation shifts are manifested in the English translation of *China's Energy Transition* and what strategies are used to strengthen cross-cultural communication.

2. Literature Review

In recent years, many domestic scholars have studied the international publicity translation. Zhu and Zhang (2021) stressed the importance of clarifying the name and nature of international publicity translation, arguing that it should be regarded as an independent interdisciplinary field that focuses on both the accurate delivery of content and the realization of effective communication effects among target audiences. Li (2024) proposed that cultural connotation and translation strategies should be equally prioritized in the external publicity translation of intangible cultural heritage. The preservation of cultural authenticity should not be compromised for the sake of superficial linguistic adaptation. Yang and Hu (2024) demonstrated the feasibility of the ten eco-translation strategies in the English translation of introductions to scenic spots and pointed out that these translations methods can naturally convey the cultural elements in the publicity-oriented material. Zhao and Wang (2025), taking the English translation of Chinese white papers on China-US economic and trade frictions as their research object, adopted an approach integrating critical discourse analysis and dual narrative progression theory to construct a three-dimensional analytical framework encompassing national consciousness, intersubjectivity, and social context, systematically examining the features of political discourse translation as social practice across

the processes of discursive production, distribution, and consumption.

Besides, some foreign scholars also conducted researches in the international publicity translation. Yahiaoui et al. (2025) used a qualitative case study methodology integrating critical discourse analysis with the appraisal framework to analyze the translation of two English political texts into Arabic in Egypt and Algeria. The study demonstrated that translation operates as an ideological tool shaped by Global South power dynamics and highlighted the ethical responsibility of translators in politically sensitive contexts. Huotari and McLaughlin (2025) used a mixed-methods analysis of a parallel corpus of news agency dispatches to examine the translation of quotations. They found that quotations can be deleted when translating news, and which content in this process will be deleted or retained depends on the specific situation. In addition, they stressed the need for a hybrid approach and called for more comparative studies of news translation. Lupano (2024) used the qualitative text analysis method and focused on the translation strategies of Italian translation of articles about the 2022 Beijing Olympic and Paralympic Games. She pointed out that understatement and omission help to dilute China's geopolitical ambitions, while indirect translation will hinder the transmission of expected political information and is not conducive to foreign exchanges.

In short, the domestic research on international publicity translation mainly focuses on the effective transmission of cultural connotation. Scholars focus on how to maintain the authenticity of culture while ensuring the understanding of foreign audiences. They often discuss translation strategies that can be faithful to the source culture and adapt to the target language environment. By contrast, the international academic community focused more on the study of political and ideological factors. Foreign scholars focus on how political information is selectively retained, omitted or diluted in the process of translation, and whether these decisions promote or hinder the expected external communication. Therefore, combining these two research focuses closely can form a comprehensive research framework.

3. Theoretic Basis

In 1965, J.C. Catford put forward the translation shifts theory in *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*, which provides a systematic analytical framework for translation studies. He defined translation as replacing text materials in the source language with equivalent textual material in another language (Catford, 1965). Besides, Catford explained the phenomenon of translation shifts by referring to Halliday's systemic grammar and the division of language levels. Due to inherent differences between languages, achieving formal correspondence is often difficult. He also pointed out that in the process from the source language to the target language, translation shifts are the manifestation of deviation from formal correspondence (Catford, 1965). Catford divided translation shifts into two main types: level shifts and category shifts.

A level shift occurs when the words of the source language at a certain language level are replaced by the words of the target language at different levels, due to the different level systems of the two languages. Category shifts, occurs at the same language level, and translation will deviate from the formal

correspondence with the source text to follow the norms of the target language and accurately convey the meaning. Catford further divided category shifts into four types: structure shifts, class shifts, unit shifts, and intra-system shifts (Catford, 1965).

4. Case Study

The main goal of international publicity translation is to make the global community have a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of China through effective translation practice (Hu, 2023). *China's Energy Transition* summarizes China's historic achievements in the field of energy and shares its practices in energy transition. As a white paper aimed at conveying information and China's stance to the world, it is an informative text whose main purpose is to convey information objectively and accurately. Based on the level shifts and category shifts in the translation shifts theory, and combined with the characteristics of the original text, this paper explores the corresponding translation methods and techniques adopted in the English version.

4.1 Level Shifts

Level shift refers to a translation technique in which a word or phrase from the source language is represented by the corresponding units at different linguistic levels in the target language (Catford, 1965). This type of shift usually occurs between the grammatical level and the lexical level.

4.1.1 Shifts in Number

In form, Chinese and English express plural in different ways. English usually uses conventional morphological changes to represent plurals. The most common way is to add “-s” or “-es” after countable nouns. However, there is no such numeral change in Chinese. In Chinese, plural is mainly represented by quantifiers, such as “很多”, “一些” or specific plural markers.

Example 1

ST: 发达国家应当为发展中国家提供部署可再生能源的资金、技术、能力建设支持, 帮助广大发展中国家应对能源供应安全和绿色低碳转型双重挑战, 共同迈向更加绿色、包容、可持续的未来。

TT: Developed countries should provide funding, technology, and capacity-building support for renewable energy deployment in developing countries, and help address the dual challenges of energy supply security and the green and low-carbon energy transition, as all nations move together towards a greener, more inclusive, and sustainable future.

Analysis: The term “国家” as a countable noun implies a plural sense when not modified by a quantifier. In the context of this sentence, “发达国家” and “发展中国家” obviously refer to different groups and have plural meanings. Therefore, the translator translates “国家” into “countries”. In addition, the quantifier “广大” also has a plural meaning, but it is omitted in the translation because the plural form “国家” already conveys this meaning, thus avoiding repetition. The source text uses the quantifier “双重” to modify the phrase “挑战”, which clearly expresses two challenges. By using the plural form “challenges” to correspond to this meaning the translation achieves a level shift.

Example 2

ST: 中国持续扩大开放合作, 与 100 多个国家和地区开展绿色能源项目合作, 核电、水电、新能源等一大批标志性项目接连建成投产, 2023 年出口风电光伏产品助力其他国家减排二氧化碳约 8.1 亿吨。

TT: Through expanding opening up and cooperation, China has worked with more than 100 countries and regions on green energy projects. A large number of signature projects involving nuclear power, hydropower, and new energy have been completed. In 2023, China's exports of wind power and PV products helped other countries reduce carbon dioxide emissions by about 810 million tonnes.

Analysis: In Example 2, the original text uses “等” to convey the meaning of plurality, indicating that in addition to nuclear power, hydropower, and new energy, China has also carried out some other cooperation projects in green energy. In the translation, the translator didn't directly translate the word “等”, but added “s” after the countable noun “project” to reflect its plural meaning, so as to show the coverage of these projects.

4.1.2 Shifts in Tense

The construction of tense in English is mainly realized by the morphological changes of verbs. This process expresses different time through regular or irregular changes in the form of verbs, thus forming a closed and rigorous grammatical system. In contrast, the time system of Chinese is established without the change of verb tense, which relies on vocabulary and syntactic strategies to represent the time position of the action. In Chinese, time adverbs such as “曾”, “已”, and “将”, and auxiliary words such as “了”, “着”, and “过”, are used to indicate the time position of an action.

Example 3

ST: 经过长期发展, 中国建立了煤、油、气、核、水、风、光等全面发展的能源供给体系, 为经济社会持续快速发展提供澎湃动力。

TT: Over the years, China has established a comprehensive energy supply system encompassing coal, oil, gas, nuclear, hydro, wind, and photovoltaic (PV) energy, providing robust impetus for the fast and sustained development of the economy and society.

Analysis: The auxiliary word “了” in the original text indicates the completion of the action and implicitly conveys its impact on the current state—that is, the energy system has been built and still in operation. The translator's choice to use the present perfect tense “has established” accurately captures the dual meaning of the original text: the completion of the action and its continuous relevance. This reflects the adaptive strategy from lexical expression to grammatical expression, which is consistent with Catford's translation shifts theory. In addition, this conversion conforms to the English tense conventions, and makes the translation more natural and smooth.

Example 4

ST: 本世纪中叶, 中国将全面建成社会主义现代化强国, 清洁低碳、安全高效的新型能源体系全面建成, 能源利用效率达到世界先进水平, 非化石能源成为主体能源, 支撑 2060 年前实现碳中和目标。

TT: By the middle of the century, China will have become a great modern socialist country with a clean, low-carbon, safe, and efficient energy system. Its energy efficiency will be among the world's highest, with non-fossil fuels as its main energy sources, as the country looks to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060.

Analysis: In Chinese, the word “将” is used to refer to the future tense, meaning that an action or state will occur later. In the corresponding English translation, the future perfect tense “will have become” is used. This choice of tense is more in line with the commonly used expression in English and accurately conveys the meaning that the action will be completed in a specific future time. Through this shift, the future perspective implied by “将” in Chinese is transformed into a grammatical structure in English, which can accurately express the meaning of future completion. This ensures that the translation can properly and accurately convey the time information in the original text.

4.2 Category Shifts

Category shifts refer to departures from formal correspondence in the process of translation (Catford, 1965). They can be divided into four types: structure shifts, class shifts, unit shifts, and intra-system shifts.

4.2.1 Structure Shifts

Structure shifts are observed as some of the most frequent categorical shifts at every level of the linguistic hierarchy in translation (Catford, 1965). These shifts are mainly manifested in the reorganization of syntactic units, the transformation of active voice and passive voice, and the transformation of positive and negative expressions.

Example 5

ST: 产业结构偏重、能源结构偏煤，资源环境约束长期存在。

TT: With an industrial structure dominated by heavy industry and an energy mix primarily based on coal, China will continue to face resource and environmental constraints in the long run.

Analysis: In Chinese, the active voice is more common, while English tends to use passive voice to achieve objectivity or shift focus. In Example 5, the phrase “产业结构偏重、能源结构偏煤” adopts the active structure, and concisely states the objective facts about China's industrial and energy structure. However, in the translation version, passive structures are adopted, such as “an industrial structure dominated by heavy industry” and “an energy mix primarily based on coal.” The use of passive voice here makes the description more objective, places the affected entity in the subject position, and omits the agent (Lin & Wang, 2020). By choosing the passive structure in English instead of replicating the active voice of the original text, the translator achieves a more formal and objective tone. This, in turn, enables English readers to grasp the nature of these structures more clearly, so as to ensure the accuracy and effectiveness of cross-language communication.

4.2.2 Class Shifts

Class shifts refer to the change of parts of speech of a certain word in the process of translation, which will cross different parts of speech categories, such as verbs, nouns and adjectives.

Example 6

ST: 随着新能源大规模发展和电力负荷特性变化, 能源电力系统运行面临更多不确定性, 亟须增强系统灵活调节能力, 不断提升能源系统安全运行和抵御风险能力。

TT: With the large-scale development of new energy and changes in power load characteristics, China's energy and power system is facing more operational uncertainties. Therefore, it is important that the country should increase the regulation ability of the system, keep improving its capacity for safe operation and strengthening its resistance to risk.

Analysis: In the translation of political documents, nominalization can be used to replace verbs or adjectives in the original text (Tang & Qu, 2022). In Example 6, “抵御风险” is a verb phrase, in which the core word “抵御” is used as a verb, that and its semantic meaning is “resisting”. However, in translation, “resistance to risk,” constitutes a noun phrase centered on the noun “resistance”. By transforming the action into an abstract concept, this method not only enhances the formality of the text but also avoids the redundancy that might be caused by more literal translation such as “the ability to resist risks.”

4.2.3 Unit Shifts

When a source language unit at a certain level is translated by a corresponding target language unit at different levels, there will be unit shifts.

Example 7

ST: 坚持先立后破、通盘谋划, 传统能源逐步退出必须建立在新能源安全可靠替代的基础上, 加强能源产供储销体系建设, 补足能源储备调节短板, 发挥化石能源兜底保障作用, 有效应对能源安全风险挑战。

TT: The country has applied the practice of establishing the new before discarding the old and implemented strong overall planning to ensure that safe and reliable new energy is secure before phasing out conventional energy. China has improved its energy production, supply, storage and sale systems while shoring up the weak points in its energy reserve regulation and using fossil fuels as safeguards of energy security, thus forming an effective response strategy to energy security risks and challenges.

Analysis: The phrases “先立后破” and “通盘谋划” in the example are idiomatic Chinese expressions. “先立后破” emphasizes the principle of establishing new mechanisms, systems, or concepts before dismantling old ones or old models. “通盘谋划” on the other hand, emphasizes comprehensive and systematic planning and arrangement. In the translation, these concise Chinese phrases are transformed into sentences, “the country has applied the practice of establishing the new before discarding the old and implemented strong overall planning.” Chinese often conveys rich meanings through concise phrases, relying on context and readers’ understanding of cultural connotations. In contrast, English usually needs a clearer syntactic structure to clearly express complex ideas. Therefore, in order to achieve semantic equivalence and make the translation easier to understand in the target language, the translator chose to convert these phrases into complete sentences.

4.2.4 Intra-system Shifts

The White Paper is an important tool for China's external communication, which is characterized by professional rigor and distinctive Chinese characteristics. The expressions of certain terminology often have no direct equivalents in English. Therefore, translators need to translate these terms into meanings the target language readers can understand, which is an intra-system shift.

Example 8

ST: 实行能源领域重大科技项目“揭榜挂帅”“赛马”等制度，有效激发研发主体创新活力。

TT: The country adopts an open competition mechanism for selecting the best candidates to undertake key energy technology projects and a multi-team research mechanism for finding the best pathways and achieving optimal results, with the purpose of motivating key R&D players in innovation.

Analysis: In this example, “揭榜挂帅” refers to a mechanism that uses market competition to stimulate innovation, and “赛马” describes the way in which multiple research teams carry out the same project at the same time, and determine the best method or solution by competing with each other and comparing the results. However, these terms have no direct corresponding vocabulary in English. Therefore, it is necessary for effective cross-language communication to carry out intra-system shift when translating “揭榜挂帅” and “赛马”. The translator elaborated on the conceptual meanings of these expressions so that readers of the target language can understand the specific mechanisms and concepts described in the original text.

5. Conclusion

As a specific type of translation with a clear purpose of communication, international publicity translation focuses on accurately conveying policy information and improving the acceptability and dissemination of the translation. Based on Catford's translation shifts theory, this study systematically discusses the specific forms and strategies of level shifts and category shifts in international publicity translation by analyzing *China's energy transition* and its English translation. It is found that level shifts can effectively make up for the differences between Chinese and English in basic grammar, and ensure that the time and quantitative meanings contained in the original text are accurately and idiomatically expressed in the target language. Category shifts, including structure shifts, class shifts, unit shifts, and intra-system shifts, make the translation conform to the stylistic norms of English, while retaining the original policy stance and information integrity. These shifts enhance objectivity, formality, and readability, thus improving the acceptability and communication effect of the translation in international audiences. The study further verifies the applicability of the translation shifts theory in international publicity discourse, particularly in the context of building China's external discourse system, and provides theoretical reference and strategic support for the translation practice of relevant policy documents.

References

- Catford, J. C. (1965). *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Hu, K. (2023). National Capacity for Publicity Translation: Composition, Status Quo, and Future Prospects. *Shanghai Journal of Translators*, (4), 1-7+95. (in Chinese)
- Huotari, L., & McLaughlin, M. (2025). A Mixed-methods Analysis of the Translation of Quotations in International News Dispatches. *Target*, 38(1), 51-83.
- Li, J. (2024). A Study on the International Publicity Translation of Central Plains Intangible Cultural Heritage: A Case Study of Huaiyang Ninidog. *Shanghai Journal of Translators*, (3), 36-41. (in Chinese)
- Li, Y. (2020). The Translation and Publication of White Papers. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 41(1), 49-53. (in Chinese)
- Liang, H., Zhang, W., Xue, H., et al. (2024). The Great Practical Innovation of Chinese-Style Modernization from the Government White Paper. *Think Tank: Theory & Practice*, 9(6), 10-19. (in Chinese)
- Lin, Z., & Wang, M. (2020). A Functional-cognitive Study of English Voice. *Foreign Language Learning Theory and Practice*, (2), 7-14. (in Chinese)
- Lupano, E. (2024). "Telling China's Story Well"? Tifa, Translation, and Discursive Power in the Quotidiano Del Popolo. *The Translator*, 30(4), 455-470.
- Tang, G., & Qu, Y. (2022). Translation-related Shift of Nominalizations in C-E Translation of Official Documents. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 43(1), 158-165+189. (in Chinese)
- The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. *China's Energy Transition* (full text). (2024-08-29) [2025-05-30]. <http://www.scio.gov.cn/gxzt/dtzt/2024zt/zgnyzxbps/>
- Valdeón, R. A., & Li, S. (2024). Political discourse translation in contemporary Chinese and western contents. *The Translator*, 30(4), 427-440.
- Yahiaoui, R., Alhirthani, M., Al-Adwan, A. et al. (2025). Translation between Ethics and Politics: Political Discourse in Translation. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 12(1), 1845.
- Yang, C., & Hu, G. (2024). A Study on the English Translation of English Translation of Introductions to Scenic Spots and the Enhancement of Local International Image from the Perspective of Eco-Translatology. *Journal of Xi'an International Studies University*, 2(4), 109-113. (in Chinese)
- Zhao, J., & Wang, J. (2025). Discursive practices in translating political discourse: insights from white papers on China-US economic and trade frictions. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 12(1), 415. (in Chinese)
- Zhu, Y. (2021). *Exploration of the Construction for International Publicity Translation Research System*. Shanghai: Shanghai Jiao Tong University Press. (in Chinese)
- Zhu, Y., & Zhang J. (2021). A Study on the Name and Nature of International Publicity Translation from a Disciplinary Perspective. *Shanghai Journal of Translators*, (5), 34-38. (in Chinese)