Original Paper

An Analysis of English Translation Strategies for Internet Buzzwords Based on Skopos Theory

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Abstract

With the rise and widespread use of social media, Internet buzzwords have evolved into a linguistic phenomenon that strongly reflects the characteristics of the current era. Amid the deep integration of China's mainstream social platforms into the global digital ecosystem, effectively translating Internet buzzwords has become increasingly important. This paper first identifies the problems and challenges associated with translating Internet buzzwords into English. Then, using Skopos Theory as the core theoretical framework, this study conducts an in-depth exploration of the applicability and effectiveness of various translation strategies—including literal translation, free translation, literal translation with annotations, and transliteration with annotations—based on an analysis of the characteristics of Internet buzzwords and specific case studies.

Keywords

Skopos Theory, Internet buzzwords, English Translation Strategies, Cross-Cultural Communication, Social Language

1. Introduction

With the rapid advancement of Internet technology and the widespread adoption of social media, cyberspace has become a vital platform for the public to express ideas and share viewpoints, naturally giving rise to Internet buzzwords. Internet buzzwords refer to linguistic expressions created by netizens, used within online environments, widely adopted by users, and rapidly disseminated within a specific timeframe. As a unique linguistic phenomenon, Internet buzzwords sharply reflect social trends, embodies contemporary culture, and conveys public sentiments. In the context of deepening global digital cultural exchanges, interactions between China and the rest of the world have become more frequent, and the number of international users on China's major social platforms continues to grow. As a key vehicle for cross-cultural communication, the English translation of Internet buzzwords holds

substantial practical value. However, current translations face several persistent challenges. First, the absence of unified standards results in multiple translations for the same buzzword term, causing confusion. Second, some translations fail to convey the original meaning accurately and lose linguistic nuances, resulting in semantic deviations. Third, cultural adaptability is insufficient—many expressions imbued with Chinese sociocultural characteristics lose their cultural connotations in translation, making cross-cultural resonance difficult to achieve. These issues not only hinder effective cultural communication but also indicate a dual neglect of translation purpose and audience reception in current practices. Therefore, adopting Skopos Theory as a theoretical framework is essential for systematically analyzing the challenges in translating Internet buzzwords into English and exploring more appropriate translation strategies, thereby improving translation quality and enhancing cross-cultural communication effectiveness.

2. Overview of Internet Buzzwords

To investigate English translation strategies for Internet buzzwords, in addition to establishing the theoretical framework and identifying potential translation challenges, it is essential to fundamentally understand the definition and characteristics of Internet buzzwords itself. Therefore, this chapter aims to clarify the conceptual connotations of Internet buzzwords and analyze its distinctive features that differentiate it from conventional language, thereby laying a solid foundation for exploring translation strategies.

2.1 Definition of Internet Buzzwords

Internet buzzwords are a highly concise and symbolic labeled linguistic form. They refer to a linguistic type created by netizens within a specific time period, which are widely disseminated and used in online environments. It can not only reflect the emotional changes of netizens but also mirror the transformations in the online society and even the real world. The openness and freedom inherent in the online environment have broken spatial barriers, enabling real-time communication among people from different regions, countries, and even across the globe. Precisely this open and free online context provides a broad space for creativity and expression to the netizen group, predominantly composed of young people, thereby laying the necessary conditions and possibilities for the emergence of Internet buzzwords. This also constitutes an important social foundation for the popularity of Internet buzzwords.

2.2 Characteristics of Internet Buzzwords

Compared to conventional language, Internet buzzwords exhibit four distinctive characteristics. First and foremost is conciseness. Internet buzzwords typically convey rich semantic content in a concise form, offering advantages such as efficient expression and easy dissemination. Its highly condensed informational structure lowers the threshold for comprehension and imitation, facilitating rapid spread and amplifying its influence in online contexts. For example, "666" consists simply of the digit "6" repeated three times, yet it carries multiple connotations—including praise, admiration, and

irony—embodying the unique advantage of combining simplicity with rich meaning. Secondly, humor is a prominent feature. Internet buzzwords often convey attitudes through wit, teasing, self-deprecation, or satire, combining entertainment functions with information transmission to enhance linguistic expressiveness and approachability. This characteristic reflects netizens' psychological needs to regulate emotions and relieve stress in high-pressure social environments, as well as their playful responses to real-world issues. For instance, through exaggeration and self-deprecation, people compare the intense and unrewarded work situation to "牛马" (a metaphor for overworked and underappreciated individuals), which is both vivid and satirical. This expression not only alleviates the emotional burden faced by users under real-life pressures but also resonates with others in a relaxed and witty manner, demonstrating the unique capacity of Internet language to address social issues through humor. Thirdly, innovation is a core attribute. Internet buzzwords break conventional linguistic norms by boldly creating new words and expressions and flexibly combining existing vocabulary to form novel and distinctive modes of communication, thereby satisfying diverse and personalized communicative needs. For example, the term "电子榨菜" describes food-related videos that people habitually watch while eating. By combining two seemingly unrelated words—"电子" and "榨菜"—to depict a specific phenomenon, this expression is both vivid and playful. Fourthly, timeliness is an inherent trait of Internet buzzwords. It is closely linked to social phenomena, cultural trends, and prevailing ideological concepts within a specific timeframe. Serving as a mirror of the times, Internet buzzwords accurately captures and reflects current social hot topics, public sentiments, and emerging cultural trends. It is not only a linguistic phenomenon but also a significant symbol reflecting the zeitgeist and social dynamics, embodying the vitality and evolution of language across different periods. For example, the term "involution" describes the phenomenon of excessive competition in modern society, while "lying flat" expresses the helpless response of certain groups to the intense pressures of life.

A systematic understanding of Internet buzzwords serves as a crucial foundation for its effective and accurate translation. On the one hand, in the context of accelerating global digitization, the international community's demand for understanding China's social dynamics and culture is steadily increasing. On the other hand, many words and expressions in Internet buzzwords are highly dependent on local context and cultural background, making it difficult for overseas audiences to comprehend them through literal translation alone. Without accurate and effective translation, these originally vivid and dynamic linguistic expressions risk losing their intended communicative impact and may even result in misunderstandings. Therefore, employing suitable translation strategies for Internet buzzwords has become a necessary and urgent task. Skopos Theory, which emphasizes that "the end justifies the means," provides a scientific framework for guiding the translation of such linguistically distinctive expressions. Accordingly, the following sections will discuss specific English translation strategies for Internet buzzwords in conjunction with Skopos Theory.

3. Overview of Teleology in Translation

German functionalist translation theory emerged in the 1970s, emphasizing the functionality and purpose-driven nature of translation. This development marked a significant shift in translation studies from a purely linguistic paradigm to an approach incorporating behavioral theory and cultural perspectives. The origins of this theory can be traced to Katharina Reiss. In 1971, Reiss introduced the prototype of functionalist theory in her work, systematically linking text types with corresponding translation strategies for the first time. She followed the source-text-oriented equivalence theory, asserting that an ideal target text should be equivalent to the source text in terms of conceptual content, linguistic form, and communicative function. Drawing upon Karl Bühler's linguistic function model, Reiss classified texts into three categories: informative, expressive, and operative. She advocated that appropriate translation methods should be adopted according to the specific text type. For example, scientific and technological documents are classified as informative texts, where accuracy of content takes precedence in translation. Literary works fall under expressive texts, requiring a balance between linguistic aesthetics and the author's style. Operative texts, such as advertisements and brochures, aim to influence readers' behavior, making linguistic persuasiveness and acceptability especially important. However, Reiss's theory remained centered on the source text, emphasizing the "functional equivalence" of the target text to its source, which to some extent limited the translator's subjective initiative. In response, her student Hans Vermeer proposed more innovative perspectives. He argued that traditional equivalence theory placed excessive emphasis on the surface structure and formal equivalence of language, while neglecting the actual purpose of translation activity and its social context. From Vermeer's perspective, translation is not merely a transfer of language; every translation action serves a specific purpose. When confronted with multiple translation strategies, translators should choose the one that best achieves the intended communicative goal. On this basis, Vermeer formally introduced the core idea of functionalist translation theory in 1978—Skopos Theory (Skopostheorie in German). Compared to Reiss's viewpoints, Skopos Theory places greater emphasis on the target text being guided by its intended functions, following an analysis of the source text and selection of the most suitable translation strategies. The target text should not only be comprehensible to target readers, but also culturally meaningful and function as expected within the recipients' context. In other words, translators base their decisions during the translation process on one or more communicative functions that the target text is intended to fulfill in the target language context.

In 1997, Christiane Nord systematically developed functionalist theory in her book *Translating as a Purposeful Activity: Functionalist Approaches Explained.* She summarized Skopos Theory into three core principles: the Skopos Rule, the Coherence Rule, and the Fidelity Rule. Among these, the Skopos Rule is the primary principle that guides the overall direction of the translation process. It posits that the purpose to be achieved by the translation activity dictates the translation process, encapsulated by the phrase, "the end justifies the means." The Coherence Rule requires that the target text achieve "intra-textual coherence," meaning the translation should be logically consistent, linguistically natural,

and easily comprehensible within the target language culture, as well as meaningful within the specific communicative context of the target culture. The Fidelity Rule, meanwhile, mandates that the target text be faithful to the source text to a certain extent; however, the degree and form of such fidelity depend on the specific purpose of the translation and the translator's interpretation of the text's functions. For example, if the translation purpose is to adapt classic novels for children, simplifying content and adopting colloquial language are reasonable; in this case, "fidelity" to the source text lies in conveying its spiritual core rather than in reproducing words and sentences. Therefore, when confronted with different text types and translation purposes, translators need to flexibly apply appropriate translation strategies to achieve optimal communicative effect.

4. English Translation Strategies for Internet Buzzwords Guided by Skopos Theory

Based on the core tenets of Skopos Theory, the selection of translation strategies should be subordinated to the communicative purpose that the target text aims to achieve. Systematic translation theories often derive corresponding translation strategies, which are continuously enriched through theoretical development and practical experience, thus embodying openness and flexibility. Internet buzzwords are deeply embedded in profound cultural contexts; thus, translation involves not only linguistic conversion but also the conveyance of underlying cultural connotations. Therefore, in practical translation, translators should not be confined to a single fixed method. Instead, they should flexibly adopt appropriate strategies based on specific contexts, target audience, and translation purposes, striving to enable target text readers to attain an understanding and experience comparable to those of the original audience. Subsequently, this paper will explore the specific applications of several strategies—including literal translation, free translation, literal translation with annotations, and transliteration with annotations—in the English translation of Internet buzzwords, supported by practical examples.

4.1 Literal Translation

Literal translation is a commonly employed strategy in translating Internet buzzwords. Literal translation refers to a method that is not only faithful to the original content but also aims to preserve the original form. It is particularly applicable to expressions that are vivid and intuitive, semantically clear, and unlikely to cause misunderstanding in the target language. When the literal meaning of a buzzword can be directly understood by target readers, priority should be given to adopting the literal translation method.

Example 1

Original text: 智能向善

Target text: AI for Good

"智能向善" (AI for Good) has emerged as a prevalent expression in recent years amid the rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI).　It is widely used in policy documents, technology forums, media reports, and corporate statements, and can be effectively translated using the literal translation

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strategy. In this context, "智能" (intelligence) specifically refers to "artificial intelligence," corresponding to the internationally recognized abbreviation "AI"; "向善" (toward goodness) connotes "developing in a positive and beneficial direction," rendered as "for Good" in English. Therefore, the translation "AI for Good" features a concise structure and clear semantics, aligning with English linguistic conventions. This rendition not only accurately conveys the core concept that artificial intelligence should serve society and promote human well-being but also retains the persuasive power of the original expression as an era-specific slogan. By balancing semantic fidelity, cultural relevance, and target-language naturalness, it fully complies with the requirements of Skopos Theory.

Example 2

Original text: 硬控

Target text: Hard Crowd Control

"硬控" (Hard Control) originally emerged as a technical term in Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) and First-Person Shooter (FPS) games, referring to skills that temporarily prevent players from controlling their characters. Later, it was extended to social contexts to describe something so appealing that people cannot divert their attention—carrying exaggerated and playful connotations. This expression can be translated using the literal translation strategy as "Hard Crowd Control." "Crowd Control" is a widely accepted technical term in gaming, denoting the effect of restricting the actions of multiple targets. The adjective "Hard" corresponds to "硬" (hard), emphasizing the compulsory and irresistible nature of the control. This translation preserves the gaming etymological characteristics of the original term: English readers familiar with gaming culture can quickly grasp its primary meaning and naturally infer its extended connotation, achieving both accuracy and expressiveness. In contrast, adopting free translation—such as "can't look away" or "irresistible allure"—although capable of conveying the core idea of "strong appeal," would lose the original gaming background and technical flavor of "硬控." This not only weakens the playful tone unique to internet buzzwords but also results in an overly generalized expression that fails to reflect the term's identity as a community-specific internet buzzword. Furthermore, it hinders the transmission of its unique pragmatic connotations in cross-cultural communication. Therefore, the literal translation "Hard Crowd Control" better aligns with the original term's usage context and the communicative purpose of preserving its cultural specificity, fully complying with the core tenets of Skopos Theory.

4.2 Free Translation

Free translation is a translation strategy opposite to literal translation. It enhances semantic clarity and is primarily realized through explanatory translation. When significant linguistic or cultural gaps exist between the source and target languages, and literal translation may result in semantic ambiguity or even misunderstanding, free translation is more appropriate.

Example 3

Original text: 显眼包

Target text: Drama queen/king

"显眼包" (literally "conspicuous package") was originally a dialectal expression, initially carrying a derogatory connotation used to describe people who crave the limelight. In recent years, its derogatory overtones have gradually faded, and it is now mostly used in casual, teasing contexts—referring to individuals who behave exaggeratedly, exude a comedic vibe, and easily draw attention. Particularly prevalent in variety shows and entertainment settings, the term is often used by fans to describe humorous celebrities, with an emotional tone that leans toward affection and amusement. For this term, free translation is the optimal choice, rendered as "Drama queen/king." In English, "Drama queen/king" specifically refers to someone who attracts attention through exaggerated words and actions, and its core meaning closely aligns with "显眼包." Both expressions share a teasing yet affectionate nuance, making it a naturally intuitive translation for native English speakers. By adopting a phrase familiar to the target audience, the translation effectively conveys the original term's humorous essence, facilitating smooth and natural cross-cultural communication. In contrast, a literal translation such as "obvious package"—while preserving the surface structure of the source term—deviates significantly from English linguistic conventions. Not only does it fail to capture the playful tone inherent in "显眼包," but it also risks causing confusion or misunderstanding among target readers. Such a translation deviates from the original's pragmatic function, as it cannot replicate the lighthearted atmosphere intended by the term. Therefore, free translation ("Drama queen/king") more accurately conveys the pragmatic intent and emotional tone of "显眼包," fulfilling the communicative purpose of enabling target readers to appreciate the term's humor and affection. This approach fully conforms to the core principles of Skopos Theory by prioritizing cross-cultural understanding over formal equivalence.

Example 4

Original text: 班味

Target text: Job Burnout

"班味" (literally "the taste of work") is a popular internet buzzword that has emerged in workplace contexts in recent years. It does not refer to a tangible smell but to an abstract state—describing office workers overwhelmed by heavy work pressure and intense rhythms, characterized by tired eyes, low spirits, casual attire, and an inability to shake off the oppressive feeling of work even on rest days. The term carries self-deprecating and playful nuances among young people when describing workplace life. Free translation is adopted here, with "burnout" defined as "physical and mental exhaustion or emotional collapse caused by overwork or stress," and "Job Burnout" specifically denoting chronic physical and mental fatigue and reduced motivation resulting from prolonged work pressure—this aligns perfectly with the realistic state reflected by "班味." Target readers can immediately grasp the emotional undertones and contextual meaning, facilitating effective cross-cultural communication. In contrast, a literal translation such as "the smell of work," while retaining the original term's surface structure, is likely to mislead readers into interpreting it as a literal odor. Such a rendition fails to convey the term's social implications (young people's resonance with workplace stress) and playful

tone, thereby losing the expressive power inherent in internet buzzwords. Therefore, free translation better meets the needs of practical communication, fully embodying the core tenets of Skopos Theory by prioritizing semantic accuracy and emotional resonance.

4.3 Literal Translation with Annotations

Literal Translation with Annotations refers to a translation strategy that directly renders the source term into the target language, supplemented by annotations providing additional explanations. This approach is particularly applicable when no equivalent culture-loaded terms exist between Chinese and English. By adopting Literal Translation with Annotations, translators can preserve the structural characteristics and cultural uniqueness of the source term while enabling target readers to fully grasp the semantic connotations, cultural backgrounds, and pragmatic functions of the relevant internet buzzwords.

Example 5

Original text: 躺平

Target text: Lie flat (a lifestyle stance popular among Chinese youth, characterized by rejecting cutthroat competition and opting for a low-stress, minimalist life amid societal pressures)

"躺平" (literally "lying down") originally emerged in an online post, and refers to a life attitude adopted by young people facing fierce social competition—choosing to lower material desires and embrace a low-pressure, simplified lifestyle, which carries undertones of self-deprecation and helplessness in the face of reality. Beyond its literal meaning of "lying down," "躺平" represents a social phenomenon intrinsically linked to "involution" (a situation where people have to compete much more intensely), a term that describes the hyper-competitive and futile rat race in Chinese society. As "躺平" carries unique social and cultural connotations with no direct English equivalent, the strategy of "Literal Translation with Annotations" is adopted, following the guidance of Skopos Theory. The literal rendering "Lie flat" preserves the vivid imagery of the original term, while the annotation clarifies its social background, core essence, and contextual significance. This approach not only allows readers to perceive the term's etymological form, but also helps them recognize that it is not simply a physical action, but a culture-specific social phenomenon that reflects youth mentality. In contrast, simplifying it to "give up" or "be lazy" risks misinterpreting it as passive sabotage or indolence, which completely distorts the term's inherent social reflection and the complex mindset of young people coping with systemic pressures. Such translations fail to capture the nuanced critique of excessive competition and the pursuit of a balanced life, thereby significantly compromising communicative effectiveness. Therefore, Literal Translation with Annotations more accurately conveys the true meaning of "躺平" by balancing formal fidelity and cultural transparency, fully aligning with the communicative purpose of cross-cultural understanding advocated by Skopos Theory.

4.4 Transliteration with Annotations

Transliteration with Annotations refers to a translation strategy that first transliterates source-specific vocabulary and then supplements it with annotations to clarify its meaning, cultural background, or pragmatic function. Many challenges in vocabulary translation lie not in paraphrasing denotations but

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in balancing form and meaning. When encountering terms in the source language that possess distinct cultural characteristics or unique linguistic imagery—where direct free translation is likely to lose cultural connotations and literal translation is barely intelligible—Transliteration with Annotations is recommended.

Example 6

Original text: 退退退

Target text: Tui Tui Tui (an onomatopoeia derived from Chinese folk belief, mimicking the act of spitting to "expel" misfortune; in online contexts, it is used mockingly to "drive away" bad luck or annoying things, analogous to the colloquial English expressions "scram!" or "begone!")

"退退退" (literally "retreat, retreat, retreat") originated from an online video in which an elderly woman stamped her feet and repeatedly shouted "Tui! Tui! Tui!" during an argument. Her exaggerated gestures and highly rhythmic chant quickly went viral, propelling the term into mainstream internet usage. Later, it was repurposed to mockingly "drive away" bad luck or irritating matters, carrying connotations of playful teasing and emotional catharsis. Under the guidance of Skopos Theory, the strategy of "Transliteration with Annotations" is employed here. The transliteration "退退退" preserves the original term's phonetic rhythm and immediate on-site sense—replicating the intense, repetitive cadence of the original chant—while the annotation elaborates on its cultural origin (rooted in the Chinese folk belief of spitting to expel misfortune) and pragmatic function (online mocking usage). This dual approach allows English readers not only to pronounce the term accurately but also to grasp the underlying humor and contextual scenarios, fulfilling the communicative purpose of cross-cultural understanding. In contrast, a mere transliteration "退退退" without annotations would be incomprehensible to most target readers unfamiliar with Chinese folk culture; a direct free translation such as "Go away!" or "Scram!" would strip the term of its unique linguistic rhythm, folk cultural connotations, and playful nuances. Such translations fail to reflect the term's identity as a meme-born internet buzzword, reducing its expressive power. Therefore, Transliteration with Annotations is a more effective translation method: it retains the original flavor of the source term while bridging cultural gaps, ensuring that target readers not only comprehend its surface form but also grasp the social intent characterized by humor and irony. This approach fully aligns with the core tenets of Skopos Theory by prioritizing both cultural fidelity and communicative effectiveness.

5. Conclusion

With the popularization of the internet, Internet buzzwords have become an integral part of contemporary linguistic life, vividly reflecting social mentalities, cultural shifts, and public sentiments. Today, an increasing number of foreigners gain insights into China through online platforms, making internet buzzwords a window through which they observe Chinese society and youth culture—their communicative and cultural value has become increasingly prominent. Therefore, the translation of such terms is not merely a linguistic conversion, but also undertakes the cultural function of conveying

Chinese voices and presenting an authentic image of China. This practice necessitates theoretical guidance. Based on Skopos Theory, translators should flexibly select translation strategies according to the translation purpose and the needs of target readers. While accurately transmitting the original meaning, translators must also adapt to the conventions of the target language, thereby achieving effective cross-cultural communication.

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