

Original Paper

Research on Translation Strategies for Games Localization: A Case Study of *League of Legends*

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Abstract

With the rapid development of the digital technology, more and more e-sports games are accepted and recognized by the public. There are many games imported from abroad in Chinese gaming market. In addition to their super-excellent quality, what is more important is that they have achieved successful game localization after entering China. The most crucial aspect of game localization is translation of game texts, and translators often need to choose different translation strategies for different types of game texts to meet the needs of the target market and audiences. By analyzing the translation texts of the popular game League of Legends, it can be found that comprehensively applying various translation methods to different game texts of the game, its translation quality can be improved, making it much easier for the target audience to accept it.

Keywords

translation strategy, translation methods, game localization, League of Legends

1. Introduction

Since the 21st century, the electronic gaming industry has achieved fruitful results worldwide. With the advancement of globalization, electronic game manufacturers such as Electronic Arts and Riot Games are constantly pushing for game exportation to gain greater market benefits. As the largest emerging market, China, with its large population base and government policy support in the electronic game industry, is undoubtedly a paradise in the eyes of foreign game manufacturers.

League of Legends is considered as one of the most successful cases of localization among foreign games. As a MOBA game, it has been praised and recognized by the younger generation in China since its launch on the Chinese server in 2011. Over the past decade, Tencent, as its Chinese agency, has attached great importance to its localization. In January 2024, Tencent updated the S14 with a new

version, and the translation of game texts is also constantly being updated and refined. This indicates that the popularity of *League of Legends* in China is closely related to the localization of the game text. During the game localization process, translating game texts is a vital yet time-consuming step that significantly impacts players' gaming experience. As research on game translation in China is still developing, it is feasible to explore game text translation strategy and corresponding methods. Thus, based on the translation strategy—foreignization and domestication, the translation methods of character names, character skills, and character lines in *League of Legends* will be collected and analyzed. The findings will provide insights for game manufacturers to open their foreign markets, which makes their game localization much more successful.

2. Studies on Game Localization

2.1 Game Localization Abroad

In European and American nations, the exploration of localization commenced at an earlier stage due to their economic and digital advantages. Scholars there have conducted exhaustive research on a wider and more comprehensive scale. The Localization Industry Standards Association (LISA), based in Switzerland, introduced the concept of localization in 1998. This concept involves linguistically and culturally adapting a product to suit the specific region or country where it is marketed and utilized. According to Esselink (2000), localization is progressively becoming an essential component of the overall technical communication process. In some cases, technical communicators find themselves using special strategies to design documents that are easy to localize. The key to success is understanding the nature of localization so the right kinds of information can be presented in a way that best suits the needs of others' workplace.

Munday (2004) highlights that the significance of Manttari's theory on translation behavior that categorized message transmitters as a means to describe different cross-cultural changes, viewing translation as a multifaceted process with a distinct objective. This theory places translation, particularly non-literary translation, within a sociocultural framework that considers the dynamics between translators and translation initiation organizations.

Chandler (2004) states that games, being a type of software, undergo a similar translation process as software does, which is an integral component of localization. Meanwhile, he aims to conceptualize game localization to make it steadily stand under the discipline of Translation Studies.

Franca (2007) thinks that games are social, indicating that a game has the function of promoting communication between people. The prerequisite for achieving this function is to provide players with a suitable version of the game so that they can resonate with each other. In many localized games, by localizing the game and endowing it with unique local elements, it is easier for players to accept them. At the same time, communication between players is also more frequent, thus achieving the goal of promoting social interaction in the game.

According to Bernal-Merino (2008), language service providers in the gaming industry strive to distinguish themselves by employing slogans like “not just translation but transcription” “precision and creativity” and “preserving the essence of your game in localized versions”. These slogans highlight their ability to creatively adapt content, which may deviate from the conventional notion of faithful translation. Additionally, the linguistic quality of a game holds significant weight in the eyes of game streamers and fans, ultimately influencing the success or failure of a game in any given market.

Roturier (2015) explores the application of translation in localization and presents a comprehensive framework consisting of five key steps: extraction, translation, merger, construction, and testing, which gives a possible direction for localizing a game.

Pym (2017) further states that localization is the translation and adaptation of software, operating manuals and websites. On one hand, he reaffirms that translation plays a crucial role in the process of localization. On the other hand, he strongly believes that translation in the process of localization should be combined with the local economy, culture, and language, i.e., the local language level, cultural diversity, and social morality can all affect the content of translation. Park and Seo (2019) analyze the character design in *League of Legends*, especially those originating from mythical motifs. They conclude that combining regional mythological elements with game content design not only makes the content more in line with the player’s taste but also facilitates later game localization.

2.2 Game Localization in China

Zhang (2002) believes that the key to achieving good sales in the Chinese market for foreign games is the issue of Chinese culture, which is the problem of game translation. In other words, the problem of game translation is also a problem of localization. For game manufacturers that introduce games, the degree of game localization affects the acceptance of the game by the target audience.

Zhang (2013) points out that in-game localization translation, translators have the ability to employ imaginative translation techniques for game titles, names of individuals or places, and in-game dialogues. However, he also points out that this method has limitations. Translators must possess a thorough understanding of the cultural context of the target language in order to ensure that the translated material carries the cultural nuances of the target language and is more readily embraced by the intended audience.

Wang (2015) believes that game translation is different from traditional translation. On the one hand, game translation involves text translation; On the other hand, the purpose of the game gives game translators more freedom. In the international market, the most important thing for introducing games is to achieve game localization. This means that game translators need to consider local culture, customs, and other factors to ensure that the game content does not deviate from the theme and can be better accepted by the target audience, so that target language players have the same gaming experience as local players.

Cui (2015) has extensive experience in software localization translation research, summarizing that the localization characteristics of economic drivers, regional kernels, whole-process management and technical support. He also states that in the current domestic translation industry, localized translation has long been stuck at the technical level, lagging behind industry practice. To make progress in localized translation, it is necessary to align with localized production, and conduct more extensive research based on academic theories.

Fang (2016) summarizes the principles that game software text translation strategies as follow. The first is to follow the principle of teleology; the second is the four elements of non-breaking games; the third is the principle of not compromising gameplay. Simultaneously, she considers that employing efficient text translation for various genres of games can enhance both work productivity and the caliber of localized game software translation. Dong and He (2016) believe that the translation of game names and internal soft texts is an extremely important part of localization. They have analyzed the translation strategies, methods, and techniques adopted by domestic game names, mainly including foreignization translation strategy and domestication translation strategy. A game that translates through appropriate translation strategies will receive good market feedback and word-of-mouth from the player community.

Li (2018) asserts that game localization translation involves the process of translating and enhancing games imported from foreign countries to align with the operational and language preferences of the Chinese people. At the same time, localizing game translation requires translators to abandon language and cultural concepts in their minds and think about their games according to the thinking logic of game manufacturers.

3. Translation Strategy-Foreignization and Domestication

3.1 Foreignization

The core principle of foreignization lies in the focus on the original author, where the translator endeavors to stay true to the original text in order to maintain its linguistic, literary, and cultural nuances, as well as its unique charm. The methods employed in game translation following the foreignization strategy can be categorized into three main types: zero translation, transliteration, and literal translation (Dong & He, 2016).

Zero translation refers to the absence of any translation operations, where certain elements of the source language are directly incorporated into the target language. According to Article 7 of *The 2019 Management Measures for Game and Amusement Equipment* issued by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, game and entertainment equipment produced and sold domestically should have their appearance, game content, and game method instructions in the common language of China. Consequently, the zero translation method is rarely employed by localization translation teams in China. However, there are still some games that use zero translation, such as the Chinese translation of the

foreign PS4 game *F1 2015*, which is called *F1 2015*.

Transliteration is a type of translation method used to represent the written symbols of one language with similar pronunciation in another language. In cases where literal translation is not feasible due to differences in vocabulary, grammar, or semantics, transliteration can be adopted by starting with phonetic conversion. This method is frequently utilized in game localization, especially when dealing with invented terms or intricate compound words. Moreover, transliteration is commonly employed for translating personal names or proper nouns. For example, the PS4 game *Ratchet & Clank* uses the method of transliteration. The Chinese translation of this game is 瑞奇与叮当 (*ru ìq íyǔ dīng dāng*). “Ratchet” is the name of the character, and naturally, the translator’s use of transliteration is the most appropriate way to handle it.

The primary features of literal translation can be summarized in two ways: first, there is strict adherence to lexical meaning and rhetoric without resorting to paraphrasing, and second, adjustments or modifications may be made to the language form to ensure that the translation aligns with the vocabulary and syntactic norms of the target language. For example, *Zoom Tycoon* uses the method of literal translation. The translator translated it as 动物园大亨.

3.2 Domestication

Domestication in translation involves focusing on the target audience, aiming to adapt the content as closely as possible. This includes replacing language, literature, and cultural elements from the source language with those that resonate with the target language audiences, while still respecting the norms of the target language. Game translation under the domestication strategy typically employs three main methods: free translation, imitation translation, and creative translation (Dong & He, 2016).

The primary characteristic of free translation involves utilizing paraphrasing techniques to convey lexical meaning and rhetorical devices (like metaphors) in a manner that enhances the authenticity and fluidity of the original text’s meaning. The foreign game *Dance Central: Spotlight* uses the method of free translation. The spotlight itself has two meanings: as a noun, it means “public attention”. As a verb, it means “to make prominent and eye-catching”. The translator did not adopt these two meanings but explained Spotlight in Chinese through the method of interpretation. Finally, the translator translated the Chinese name of this game as 舞动全身：夺目焦点.

Imitation translation involves the translator not being restricted to the exact meaning, vocabulary, and structure of the original text, but rather using it as a reference point. This method is often confused with free translation. The key difference lies in the fact that free translation aims to explain the original text, while imitation translation focuses on referencing it. Free translation stays within the boundaries of the original meaning, whereas imitation translation allows for more creative freedom while staying true to the main idea. An example of imitation translation is seen in the game *Journey*, which was translated as 风之旅人.

Creative translation involves the translator creatively reworking the original text to serve a specific translation purpose, such as catering to the target audience's needs while deviating from the original text's meaning and form. When translating game names, local translating authors often face highly abstract names created by the game production team, making it challenging to rely on past experiences. In such cases, creative translation becomes the preferred method. Given the unique nature of games and artworks as globally circulated commodities, there is a significant need for localization. The originality of these works leads to translators encountering numerous "tricky translations", further emphasizing the widespread adoption of creative translation methods. A typical example is the game Minecraft. Its Chinese translation is *我的世界*. The reason for the translation is twofold: firstly, the word "Mine" is easily mistaken for "mine", and secondly, "craft" itself means "skill", and the core of this game is to rely on players to create their own world. The translation of the game undoubtedly fits the artistic conception of the game itself.

4. Analysis of Translation Strategies in the Localization of *League of Legends*

This section mainly introduces the application of translation strategies in game texts from the perspective of localization in *League of Legends*. The game texts and their translated version of the game are collected and classified into three categories: character names, character skills, and character lines.

4.1 Translation Strategies for Character Names

Example 1:

English version: Jhin

Chinese version: 烬 (jìn)

Jhin, in the game, is an assassin in a power struggle. He used the gun in his hand as a paintbrush, creating cruel artwork that made the victims feel extremely scared. Jhin believes that murder is an art form and showcases his "masterpiece" on his own stage, making "terror" his synonym. There are three reasons why the Chinese translation uses the word "烬". Firstly, in the Chinese version, the pronunciation of "烬" is exactly the same as Jhin in English, which is a common transliteration method. Secondly, the Chinese character "烬" means "leftover", which is in line with the background setting of the character "Jhin" and perfectly matches the artistic atmosphere left on site after a grand performance. Finally, in the promotional video of the hero "Jhin", there is a scene where a woman burns into an "artwork", and the word "烬" naturally comes to mind for the audience.

Example 2:

English version: Aphelios

Chinese version: 厄斐琉斯 (è fěi liú sī)

Nickname: 月男

In the background story of *League of Legends*, Aphelios comes from the giant god peak of the Rune Continent, which maps to ancient Greece in reality, so Aphelios naturally has Greek characteristics. Aphelios is a compound word from Greek, meaning “far from the sun”. That’s also why Aphelios is nicknamed “月男”. The Chinese translation team cleverly incorporated ancient Greek elements into the transliteration, namely the legendary figure of ancient Greek mythology, Achilles. Incorporating familiar ancient Greek heroes into translation undoubtedly makes it easier for Chinese players to accept and identify with them. Firstly, the English name of this character itself cites the Greek word Aphelios, which means “far from the sun”. So its Chinese name was transliterated as “厄斐琉斯”. Secondly, “far from the sun” also means like the moon, so his nickname is called “Moon Man”, which is a very localized translation version.

Example 3:

English version: Kindred

Chinese version: 千珏 (qiān jué)

In the game, “千珏” is a mysterious existence in the Rune Land, believed to be the incarnation of the god of death. He is not a single entity but is composed of two independent entities: the sheep spirit and the wolf spirit. There are two main reasons why “Kindred” is translated as “千珏”. Firstly, the pronunciation of the word “Kindred” is similar to that of “千珏”, which makes the name more pleasant and melodious. Secondly, the ancient characters of “千” and “羊” have similarities in shape, which is consistent with the sheep spirit image set in the game’s character design. Meanwhile, the character “珏” describes the scene of two jade pieces merging together, which matches the character’s background in the game—the combination of wolf spirit and sheep spirit. The translation of the name “千珏” first utilized the method of transliteration. But more importantly, it applied the method of free translation, and the translator gained a deep understanding of the background story of this hero, combined with Chinese culture, and finally finalized the translation of the name “千珏”.

Through the explanation of the above three examples, readers can clearly see that in the translation of character names, translators often use transliteration as a translation method. That is, they first identify Chinese characters with similar pronunciations, then apply free translation based on the background story of the characters themselves, and finally finalize the translated name of the character.

Table 1. Translation of Some Character Names and Translation Methods

English name	Chinese name	Translation methods
Zed	劫 (jié)	Transliteration and Free translation
Shen	慎 (shèn)	Transliteration and Free translation
Rakan	洛 (luò)	Free translation
Xayah	霞 (xiá)	Transliteration and Free translation
Jinx	金克斯 (jīn kè sī)	Transliteration
Ekko	艾克 (ǎi kè)	Transliteration
Zoe	佐伊 (zuǒ yī)	Transliteration
Amumu	阿木木 (ā mù mù)	Transliteration

4.2 Translation Strategies for Character Skills

Example 4:

English version: The Show Stopper

Chinese version: 叹为观止 (tàn wéi guān zhǐ)

The translator applied the method of free translation in the translation of this role skill. “The Show Stopper” comes from Sett’s R skill. In the English explanation, “showstopper” means “a piece in a stage performance that the audience enjoy so much that their clapping and shouts of approval interrupt the performance”. In the game, Sett’s skill is to pick up enemy heroes and smash them to the ground, which is a range control skill. In the hands of players, this skill can often lead to exciting team battles. So using “叹为观止” to translate is undoubtedly very vivid and concrete. As a Chinese idiom, “叹为观止” can immediately make players understand the strength of this skill.

Example 5:

English version: Apprehend

Chinese version: 无情铁手 (wú qíng tiě shǒu)

“Apprehend” comes from Darius’s E skill. In the English explanation, “Apprehend” means “to catch and arrest someone who has not obeyed the law”. In the Chinese translation version, this skill is translated as “无情铁手”. This translation is in line with the ruthless general character of Darius, while Iron Hand easily reminds people of the hook of the large axe in his hand. This free translation method undoubtedly makes a simple English word more vivid and vivid, and also more in line with the acceptance level of Chinese players.

Example 6:

English version: Whirling Death

Chinese version: 冷血追命 (lěng xuè zhuī mìng)

Undoubtedly, the translator used the method of free translation here. In the game background, Draven is a very cold-blooded executioner. He will intentionally release the enemy and enjoy the pleasure of

pursuit. So the translation of the skill “冷血追命” is undoubtedly more in line with the hero’s character. Meanwhile, in the game, Darius and Draven are a pair of biological brothers. The two skill names “无情铁手” and “冷血追命” are also four characters in the Chinese martial arts novel *Four Famous Captors*. “无情” and “铁手” are older brothers, while “冷血” and “追命” are younger brothers. This type of translation that combines local Chinese elements is undoubtedly more accepted by Chinese players.

Example 7:

English version: Slicing Maelstrom

Chinese version: 万雷天牢引 (wàn léi tiān láo yǐn)

As one of the four ninjas in *League of Legends*, Kennen is a short ninja who throws darts. But his ultimate skill, “Slicing Maelstrom” is indeed a very powerful team control skill in *League of Legends*. In this context, the Chinese server translation uses the method of imitation translation to translate it as “万雷天牢引”. It not only highlights his team control attributes but also indirectly emphasizes the powerful energy contained in Kennen’s skill. At the same time, this cool translation is more in line with the preferences of Chinese players.

By elaborating on the translation of character skills mentioned above, readers can clearly understand that translators generally use the method of free translation and imitation translation to translate character skills. Because character skills are often a single word or phrase, if translated directly into Chinese, it cannot achieve the intended meaning. Therefore, the translator combines skill effects with the Chinese context for translation, making it more easily accepted by Chinese audiences.

Table 2. Translation of Some Character Skills and Translation Methods

English name	Chinese name	Translation methods
World ender	大灭 (dà miè)	Free translation
Heartbreaker	痛贯天灵 (tòng guàn tiān líng)	Imitation translation
Last breath	狂风绝息斩 (kuáng fēng jué xī zhǎn)	Imitation translation
Hijack	其人之道 (qí rén zhī dào)	Free translation
Mirror image	镜花水月 (jìng huā shuǐ yuè)	Free translation
Facebreaker	强手裂颅 (qiáng shǒu liè lú)	Free translation
Grand starfall	大荒星陨 (dà huāng xīng yǔn)	Free translation
Five point strike	寒影 (hán yǐng)	Creative translation

4.3 Translation Strategies for Character Lines

Example 8:

English version: Half broken-heated

To sever for years

Pale grew thy cheek and cold

Colder thy kiss

Chinese version: 面如霜下雪, 吻如雪上霜

In this line, the Chinese translation did not mention the word “cold”, but cleverly used the idiom “adding frost to snow” to correspond to the ten characters. The word “face” corresponds to the word “kiss”, the word “frost” corresponds to the word “snow”, the word “up” corresponds to the word “down”, and finally the word “snow” corresponds to the word “frost” again. This highly Chinese-style translation allows players to better understand the meaning of dialogue and also conforms to the local aesthetic of China.

Example 9:

English version: They know not I knew thee

Who knew thee too well

Long, long shall I rue thee

Too deeply to tell

Chinese version: 谁知我知你, 我知你知深

此恨经年深, 此情度日久

These are undoubtedly two very contrasting translations. The first half of the sentence vividly reproduces the original meaning of the dialogue. In the following two sentences, the Chinese server translator translated Rue as hate and also added the word “emotion” to correspond with it, which is more in line with the character settings of Yasuo and Riven in the game. The translation method of free translation enables obscure and difficult-to-understand English lines to be clearly translated into text that is more widely accepted by Chinese players.

Example 10:

English version: If I should meet thee

After long years

How should I greet thee?

With silence and tears

Chinese version: 何以与君识? 无言泪千行

In this line, the translation of the Chinese server quoted Su Shi’s poem “相顾无言, 惟有泪千行”. This translation not only retains some of the original lines but also cites classics to turn English lines into Chinese that we are truly familiar with and enjoy, which is both artistic and pleasant to listen to.

It is obvious that the translation of character lines mostly uses creative translation methods. Translating English lines into Chinese sentences is the most challenging task in translation. Firstly, the translator needs to understand the meaning of the English lines themselves, and secondly, they need to convert them into Chinese sentences in a concise and elegant manner, preferably with a connotation of Chinese culture. Therefore, a long English line may end up being translated into just one short sentence.

From the analysis of the three examples above, it is not difficult for readers to notice that the difference between the English and Chinese contexts often leads translators to consider the needs of the target audience when translating. Therefore, translators often use creative translation methods to creatively reprocess the original text and meet the needs of the audience.

Table 3. Translation of Other Lines Using Creative Translation Methods

English	What is broken can be reformed !
Chinese	断剑重铸之日，骑士归来之时！
English	Here is a tip, and a spear behind it.
Chinese	一点寒芒先到，随后抢出如龙。
English	Deftly, I travel.
Chinese	我随影而来，随影而去。

5. Conclusion

The above analyses and tables suggest that the most commonly used strategy in the translation of *League of Legends* character names is the foreignization translation strategy, especially the transliteration translation method. Because English character names often correspond to similar-sounding Chinese characters, translators can complete the translation of character names through transliteration translation methods. The most commonly used strategy in translating *League of Legends* character skill and character lines is the domestication translation strategy. The most commonly used method in the translation of skill names is free translation, while the most commonly used method in the translation of character lines is creative translation. The reason is that character skill names are often words or sentences, and translators only need to complete the translation within the original meaning range. And character lines are the process of converting English sentences into Chinese sentences. As is well known, there are significant contextual differences between Chinese and English, so translators need to use creative translation methods to change the meaning and form of the original text in order to complete the translation of character lines. Although there exist limitations in the research, the findings still can help localization translating authors with quick choosing translation strategies and methods for game texts, greatly facilitating the success of the localization of games.

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