

Original Paper

A Study of Translation of Brand Names from the Perspective of Skopos Theory

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Abstract

As an important window faced with clients and customers, brand names can display companies' images as well as spirits and businesses. Translation of brand names is vital for companies to go international. A brilliant brand name translation can impress clients and customers and attract more customers, so as to increase the income of companies. Taking exhibitors from the Canton Fair as example, this research makes a classification of translation method for brand names, identifying 9 major translation methods. They are respectively Hanyu Pinyin, transliteration, literal translation, phonetic translation, semantic translation, combination of phonetic and semantic translation, renaming, abbreviation of Hanyu Pinyin, and combination of abbreviation and meaning. From the perspective of Skopos theory, this research discusses conditions where certain translation methods can be applied.

Keywords

translation of brand names, Skopos Theory, translation method

1. Introduction

Brands are important name cards that directly face customers and consumers, and powerful weapons used by enterprises in market competition. Nowadays, with more and more Chinese enterprises going global, the need for translating their brand names is self-evident. The Canton Fair (China Import and Export Fair), known as the "No. 1 Exhibition of Chinese Brands", attracts exhibitors from all over the world every year. The exhibiting brands include both well-known domestic ones and emerging stars. The quality of brand name translation directly affects the transaction volume or operating efficiency of the exhibiting enterprises. This article selects the new exhibitors of the 135th Canton Fair listed on the official website of the Canton Fair as the research object. Combining the Skopos theory and using the

quantitative and qualitative analysis methods, it analyzes the main translation methods currently adopted for English translation of brand names and the restrictive effect of the Skopos theory on the choice of translation methods, so as to provide reference significance for brand name translation.

2. Literature Review

Brand name translation is a crucial part for an enterprise to go international. There have been abundant research achievements in brand name translation, and scholars have expounded on it from different perspectives. Lü (2009) analyzed the translation methods of well-known foreign brands and proposed that the naming, translation of brand names, or in other words, the internationalization and localization of brand names lies in accurately expressing the marketing goals that brand owners aim to achieve in the target market and the value pursuits of consumers with words that conform to the cultural traditions, consumer characteristics, legal norms and fashion trends of the target market. Liu (2009) put forward an analytical framework for dealing with the cultural significance of English brand name translation into Chinese. Through empirical research, two translation models of English brand names into Chinese were summarized. This research provides a very good reference for the English translation of Chinese brand names. Hu and Liu (2013) also adopted a new perspective, namely the integrated marketing communication perspective, to study the translation of time-honored Chinese brands, and thus proposed three translation strategies for time-honored brands. Liu and Zeng (2015) conducted a systematic theoretical study on the changes in the morphological features of brand name meanings and translation strategies from the perspective of brand naming, which deepened the research on brand name translation. Liu and He (2015, pp. 103-106) focused on the phenomenon of renaming in brand translation and explained the mutual restrictive relationships among enterprises, translators and target consumers during the translation process. They proposed four renaming methods: “renaming based on sound”, “renaming based on meaning”, “renaming based on both sound and meaning”, and “renaming independent of sound and meaning”. In brand name translation, in addition to considering the ternary relationship among enterprises, translators and target consumers, Yu (2016) proposed that translators should also comprehensively consider social factors, company product factors and consumer factors when translating. In addition, Zheng and Lin (2017) analyzed the problems existing in the English translation of Chinese brands from a more macroscopic perspective of cultural capital theory and innovatively proposed the combined translation method and the variation method. Regarding the choice of brand name translation methods, different scholars have different views. Hu (2015) took the English translation of Tianjin time-honored brands as an example, advocated that Chinese time-honored brands should give priority to Chinese pinyin in translation, and proposed the spelling form of Chinese pinyin translations. Xu and Wang (2016) analyzed the deficiencies of pure transliteration and pure free translation, drew lessons from excellent works in brand English translation, and advocated that the English translation of Chinese time-honored brands should adopt the coinage method. Wang and Jian (2013) took 576 well-known trademarks as the research object, carried out a relatively large-scale

quantitative analysis, and combined with qualitative analysis, summarized eight methods for the English translation of Chinese brands.

It can be easily seen from the existing literature that remarkable achievements have been made in the research on brand name translation. From different perspectives such as macro influencing factors, the choice of translation strategies and methods, to specific translation difficulties, there are quite a number of researches. However, there are still some limitations. For example, there are short of proper classification of translation methods, with each scholar adhering to their own viewpoints. They cannot provide reliable references or choices for the implementation of brand name translation. Moreover, some methods are “different in name but similar in essence”, which is rather puzzling. Some scholars even classify “non-translation” as a translation method, which is rather inappropriate. After all, how can something that doesn’t involve translation be regarded as a translation method? In addition, translation is not a simple and mechanical literal translation. There is no absolute superiority or inferiority among translation methods. The key lies in whether they are used appropriately. It is rather arbitrary and unfair to claim that a certain method is the best across the board. The choice of translation methods involves certain translation purposes, either out of consideration for the corporate brand image, based on cultural factors, or to meet the usage habits of the target language. It may also be a comprehensive consideration of multiple factors. For example, a translation method that can both reflect the brand characteristics and conform to the cultural habits of the target audience is preferable.

The Skopos theory, proposed by the distinguished German scholar Hans J. Vermeer, serves as a guiding light in this research field. It forms the central tenet of the functionalist translation theory that emerged in Germany in the 1970s. This revolutionary theory breaks free from the shackles of the traditional source-text-oriented approach, opening up a novel avenue for exploration. Based on the action theory, Vermeer astutely observed that every action is driven by a specific purpose. Translation, being an action in its own right, is no exception. And the purpose is precisely imparted to each translation instance through the mechanism of commission. Nord (2005) mentioned translators can better convey the meaning of original text, if they analyze the position, need and expectations of target audience. At present, there are very few literature discussions on brand name translation with the guidance of Skopos Theory. Therefore, this article intends to analyze the English translation of Chinese export brand names in combination with the Skopos Theory. By means of reasonable classification, the mainly adopted translation methods will be summarized, and the choice of brand translation methods will be explored.

3. Analysis of Brand Name Translation of Chinese Export Brands

This research selects 130 brand exhibitors who newly participated in the recent five sessions listed on the official website of the Canton Fair as the research objects, and conducts frequency statistics and descriptive analysis on their translation of brand names. The exhibitors covered in this research span a wide range of fields, from mechanical and electrical products to light industrial products, and then to

textile and food products. The reason for selecting these exhibitors lies in that they deal mainly with foreign clients. With the increasingly fierce commercial competition and the growing brand awareness, the English translations of brand names may present new characteristics. Therefore, this article selects the exhibitors who newly participated in the recent five sessions.

3.1 Choice of Translation Methods

Referring to the classification and summary of brand name translation methods in existing literature, the author conducted a frequency analysis on the selected 130 companies and found that the translation methods adopted for their English translations of brand names could be roughly divided into nine categories, namely: Hanyu Pinyin, transliteration, literal translation, phonetic translation, semantic translation, combination of phonetic and semantic translation, renaming, abbreviation of Hanyu Pinyin, and combination of abbreviation and meaning. The frequency of use of each type of translation method is shown in Figure 1. As shown in Figure 1, in brand name translation, 37 brands used the Hanyu Pinyin, with the highest frequency of use. Next is the transliteration, which was used by 27 brands. Fourteen brands adopted combination of phonetic and semantic translation. Thirteen brands used the Literal Translation. Twelve brands adopted phonetic translation. Ten brands used abbreviation of Hanyu Pinyin, and six brands used semantic translation. The methods with the lowest frequency of use were Renaming and combination of abbreviation and meaning, each with three brands. The remaining five brands did not use any translation methods.

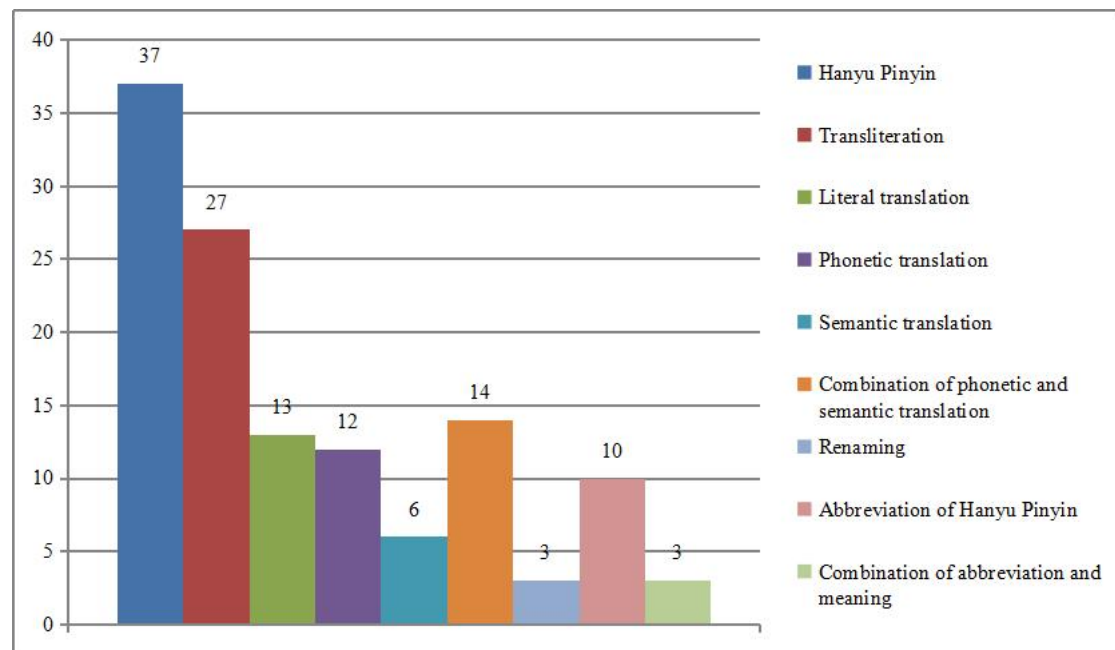


Figure 1. Frequency of Adoption of Translation Methods for Brand Name Translation of Chinese Exhibitors

3.2 Analysis of the Effects of Translation Methods

As mentioned before, there is no absolute superiority or inferiority among translation methods. Any method that achieves the translation purpose is a good one. The Skopos Theory consists of three rules: the Skopos rule, the coherence rule and the fidelity rule. The Skopos rule requires that through different translation methods, the translated brand names can fulfill certain communicative functions, such as arousing the purchase desire of the audience. The coherence rule demands that the translation be coherent and generate meaning in the communicative context of the target text. The fidelity rule implies the degree of fidelity of the translation to the source text. This degree of fidelity depends on the translator's understanding of the source text and the purpose of the translation. In the translation process, the Skopos rule is the primary one. Each translation method can assist in achieving different purposes, and some may fulfill multiple purposes. Wang (2006) summarized four characteristics of brand naming, namely being concise and unique, having a sonorous pronunciation, looking aesthetically pleasing in form, and being profound in implication. These characteristics all contribute to the purposes of brand naming, such as promotion and identification. The English translation of brands should also conform to these characteristics and achieve corresponding purposes. Translators should combine the translation purpose, select appropriate translation methods, and decide which parts of the source text need to be adjusted accordingly during the translation process. Next, the author will analyze and illustrate the effects of each translation method with examples.

3.2.1 Hanyu Pinyin

Hanyu Pinyin means directly using Chinese pinyin to replace the English translation of the brand. It is the translation method with the highest frequency of use when Chinese brands in this research object are translated into English, accounting for 28% of the total sample number. This is consistent with previous research results. Using of Hanyu Pinyin Method has both advantages and disadvantages. It is most helpful in highlighting the characteristics of Chinese brands, enhancing communication between enterprises and foreign customers, and allowing foreign customers to understand the Chinese cultural connotations of the brand. However, there are also certain risks. The fact that the method is simple and easy to operate does not mean it can be used casually. Sounds like “c, zh, sh, ch, q, x, Ü” in pinyin are difficult for English speakers to pronounce or pronounce accurately. For example, “杭州叉车” is translated as HANGCHA. This word is very difficult for many foreigners to pronounce. If the brand name is difficult to pronounce, it is not conducive to the promotion of the brand. On the contrary, if the Chinese pinyin of the brand is close to the English pronunciation and is short, it is appropriate to use this method. For example, the translation of “海尔” is “Haier”. Such a brand pronunciation is easy for foreigners to master, and the meaning is positive—Haier sounds like “higher”, making it easier to promote. Therefore, translators need to combine specific situations and use this method flexibly to achieve the purpose of making the brand name easy to pronounce, short, positive in meaning, and conducive to promotion.

3.2.2 Transliteration

The Transliteration Method generates translations that are close to or conform to English pronunciation habits. Usually, they don't have specific meanings, unable to convey corporate philosophies or reflect business fields, but they are easy to pronounce. In the samples of this research, 21% of the brand names are the results of the Pure Transliteration Method. Some translated names obtained through this method have existing words in English. For example, “利欧集团” is translated as LEO. However, most of them are coined words with the characteristics of loanwords, which can be clearly distinguished from native brands in English-speaking countries. The translated names produced by this method are similar to the pronunciation of the original brand names and convenient for foreign audiences to spell, which is beneficial to promoting the unity of brand names at home and abroad and enhancing brand recognition. For example, “富达电子” is translated as *flurida* and “帅康厨房电器” as *sacon*. This translation method can take into account the language usage habits of the target language audience, making the pronunciations of Chinese and English brand names relatively consistent, but it fails to convey brand concepts.

3.2.3 Literal Translation

The literal translation method well embodies the fidelity principle. If there are words in the Chinese brand name that can prompt brand associations or have certain implications, and there are corresponding words with similar meanings in English, then this translation method can be used to achieve the purpose of conveying the brand connotations. This method is also applicable to brands where it is difficult to balance the conveyance of brand meaning and the consistency of Chinese and English pronunciations. For example, “万善美” is translated as “thousand perfection”. The products of this company are various tableware and utensils. Its Chinese name can make people associate it with the company's pursuit of perfection in production, with excellent workmanship and exquisite shapes. Though the corresponding words for “万” should be “ten thousand” in English, “thousand” is often used to express “extremely” or “very” “thousand”. The Chinese character “美” can be literally translated as “perfection”. This English translation can also trigger the same brand associations in the target language. Therefore, in the process of translating this brand, the goal of unifying the Chinese and English brand names is abandoned, while the purpose of conveying the brand implication is emphasized.

3.2.4 Phonetic Translation

The difference between phonetic translation and the transliteration lies in that the former is more particular about word selection. It not only makes the translation similar to the pronunciation of the Chinese name and conforms to the spelling habits of the target language audience, but also ensures that the English words themselves have positive meanings and can, to a certain extent, reflect the corporate culture or business scope of the brand. Using this method can enhance the brand's recognition to some extent. Separately presenting these two methods helps translators pay attention to this phenomenon during the translation process and better guide translation practice. For example, “鑫源农机” is

translated as “SHINERAY”, which gives people a sense of shining and outstanding. Another example is “天宝皮具” translated as “ttagbag”, where its business field is clear at a glance.

3.2.5 Semantic Translation

Liu and He (2015, p. 104) pointed out that semantic translation is to choose a new name that highlights the core meaning of the original brand when it is impossible to retain the pronunciation and literal meaning of the original name. It should be particularly noted that semantic translation is different from the literal translation Method. It doesn't translate the literal meaning but evokes the core associative meaning of the brand. For example, “倍加洁” is translated as PERFECT. This company specializes in producing oral care products. Its Chinese name can bring good brand associations, making people feel that their mouths will become cleaner after using the products of this brand. Although “PERFECT” doesn't match the Chinese name in pronunciation and literal meaning, it can convey the company's vision of enabling consumers to solve their oral problems completely and have perfect and healthy mouths. When the audience see the brand name, they will associate it with the perfect oral condition that the product can bring to them, which is equivalent to the core associative meaning of the Chinese name, thus achieving the purpose of attracting consumers to make purchases.

3.2.6 Combination of Phonetic and Semantic Translation

Renaming Based on Both Sound and Meaning demands relatively higher translation abilities from translators. It not only sounds similar to the Chinese name of the company but also serves the purpose of promoting the corporate philosophy, which is conducive to enhancing brand recognition. The translated names generated by this method contain brand implications and are thought-provoking, capable of stimulating customers' purchase desires and fulfilling the evoking function of the brand. It is suitable for companies with relatively short names, for which it is easy to find corresponding English words. When the Chinese brand name fails to reflect brand associative meanings, this method can be utilized to make efforts in English word selection. For example, for Anbo Motor (Ningde) Co., Ltd., its English name is “ABLE”. This translation fully takes into account the feelings of English readers and adopts the renaming translation method that balances sound and meaning. Its pronunciation is close to the original text, completely conforming to the habits of English readers, and in terms of meaning, it aligns with Anbo's corporate culture of “being able to do better”, triggering associations among the audience about the enterprise's capabilities and product performance.

3.2.7 Renaming

As the name implies, “renaming” means that the translated name has nothing to do with the original name in terms of sound and meaning. According to the definition given by Liu and He (2015), “renaming” refers to the brand name selected by the enterprise to adapt to the target market, which contains the core associative meaning of the brand and has no linguistic connection with the original name. The author believes that the extension of this definition can be expanded. The translations generated by this method are detached from the Chinese name in both pronunciation and brand meaning, conforming to the usage habits of the audience in the main sales market, but not necessarily

possessing the core associative meaning of the brand. For example, “欣红陶瓷” is translated as “Dennis”. If an enterprise wants to localize its brand, it can adopt this method and rename it according to the language and cultural habits of the target market audience.

3.2.8 Abbreviation of Hanyu Pinyin

Translators usually take the form of the capitalized first letters of the Chinese Pinyin of the brand or the abbreviations of English words. Adopting this method can achieve the purpose of making the brand name short, concise and easy to remember. It also won't cause pronunciation difficulties for foreign consumers. For example, Zhuangcheng Company(庄诚), which produces electric light source products, is translated as J&C, and its full English name is “junction”. The abbreviation “J&C” is close to the pronunciation of its Chinese name in pinyin. Many well-known foreign brands have adopted the alphabet abbreviation method in naming, such as H&M, UR, LG, etc.

3.2.9 Combination of Abbreviation and Meaning

This translation method has not been separately classified in previous studies. This method takes the form of the full Chinese pinyin or the abbreviation of the first letters plus an English word. This English word usually represents the business field of the enterprise, which can be regarded as an integration of the abbreviation of Pinyin the literal translation. Therefore, it is better to list it separately rather than classify it into any of these categories. This method can make up for the defects of the Pinyin and the literal translation that may make people “puzzled”, and achieve the purpose of making the enterprise brand name short, easy to remember and highlighting the business field. For example, 中裕软管科技有限公司, which mainly produces fire hoses, has its brand name translated into “ZYfire”. The English name clearly presents the product field.

3.3 Other Findings

Through research, the author has found that some brands only have English names and no corresponding Chinese names. Zhang and Schmitt (2001) once proposed that when a foreign enterprise introduces its products into the local market, one of the most important strategies is to choose a correct and effective local brand name. Brand name localization is one of the reasons for this phenomenon. Although some products of export brands are sold domestically, most of them are sold abroad. Therefore, the target language is directly adopted in naming. In addition, with the continuous deepening of globalization, brand internationalization is the strategic goal of many enterprises. Directly using English names can save the trouble of translation and also achieve the unity of brand names.

4. Conclusion

Although using Pinyin to translate the brand name remains the most frequently used translation approach in the current English translation of Chinese brands, it doesn't imply that it is the most suitable one. All roads lead to Rome. During the English translation of Chinese brands, multiple translation methods can assist translators in achieving translation purposes. To fulfill the same purpose, there are also various options available. The translation purposes of brand names are multifaceted and

may conflict with each other, necessitating certain adjustments and trade-offs by translators. Different translation methods can help achieve different goals, and it cannot be generalized that a certain translation method is the most suitable for translating Chinese brand names. This research has explored, through examples, how various translation methods fulfill different translation purposes, hoping to provide inspirations to translators. It is expected to help them combine factors such as the translation requirements of enterprises, marketing strategies, and the language and culture of the target audience to select appropriate translation methods, achieve the goals of brand translation, and help to promote brands in global market.

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