

Translation Strategies of Orientational Metaphors from the Perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory —A Case Study of the 2026 Government Work Report

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Abstract: *The proposal of conceptual metaphor has driven metaphor research into the paradigm of cognitive linguistics. As a typical type of conceptual metaphor, orientational metaphors are no longer merely regarded as rhetorical devices, but cognitive modes for humans to understand abstract concepts based on spatial perception. Orientational metaphors consist of a source domain, a target domain, and mapping relations. Taking functional equivalence theory as the guiding framework for translation practice, this paper selects the official Chinese-Japanese bilingual version of the 2026 Government Work Report as the corpus, conducts a comparative analysis of Chinese and Japanese translations focusing on vertical orientational metaphors constructed by the words “high” and “low”, and summarizes three types of translation strategies. First, literal translation retaining the original vehicle preserves spatial imagery to achieve dual equivalence of form and function. Second, metaphor replacement adopts native Japanese vehicles to realize pragmatic functional equivalence. Third, metaphor omission strips rhetorical shells and delivers connotations through plain expressions to achieve deep communicative functional equivalence.*

Keywords: Functional equivalence theory, Orientational metaphors, Translation strategy, Japanese translation.

1. Introduction

The Government Work Report acts not only as a weathervane for domestic policies but also as a vital window for the world to grasp China's development philosophies. The 2026 Government Work Report extensively adopts vivid orientational metaphorical expressions such as “低空经济”, “人才高地”, “显示度高”. These expressions strengthen the appeal of the text and reflect the unique cognitive thinking mode of the Chinese language.

Although China and Japan both belong to the Chinese character cultural circle, discrepancies remain in geographical environments, cultural customs, and linguistic habits. The same spatial term may trigger cognitive gaps in the two languages. How to accurately convey the cognitive imagery and connotations behind these metaphors during cross-linguistic conversion has become a critical translation research topic.

In metaphor translation practice, translators often face a trade-off between formal and functional equivalence: whether to retain the source-language spatial imagery or conform to target-language expressive conventions. Scholars, including Newmark and Liu Fagong, have constructed corresponding systems of metaphor translation strategies, yet in translations of specific texts, in-depth discussions combined with a concrete corpus are still required.

This paper integrates conceptual metaphor theory from cognitive linguistics with Nida's functional equivalence translation theory to analyze translations of orientational metaphors in the 2026 Government Work Report. Through case studies, it explores how functional equivalence theory guides translators to balance formal and dynamic equivalence under scenarios of overlapping, divergent, or absent cognitive

imagery, and provides theoretical explanations for decision-making in metaphor translation.

Three translation strategies are generalized to summarize effective approaches for addressing differences in Sino-Japanese orientational metaphors, ensuring Japanese readers obtain cognitive experiences similar to those of Chinese readers. The cases selected from the 2026 Government Work Report feature distinct contemporary characteristics, and the analysis of emerging metaphorical expressions such as “低空经济” can offer references for Japanese translations of similar texts in the future.

2. Research on Metaphor and Its Translation

Shu Dingfang (2000) systematically sorted out the century-long evolution of metaphor research and divided it into three core stages: rhetorical research before the 1930s, semantic research from the 1930s to the 1970s, and interdisciplinary research from the 1970s to the present, demonstrating the academic shift of metaphor research from superficial linguistic analysis to in-depth cognitive exploration [1].

Traditional rhetoric treats metaphor as a linguistic ornament. The 7th edition of the Modern Chinese Dictionary defines metaphor as a type of figure of speech that likens one thing to another with similar attributes [2]. Nevertheless, with the rise of cognitive linguistics in the 20th century, the cognitive function and thinking-promoting effect of metaphor have gained universal recognition. Lakoff and Johnson put forward conceptual metaphor theory in *Metaphors We Live By*, breaking the limitations of traditional rhetoric.

Metaphor translation has become a core research topic in translation studies since the 1970s. Newmark (1988) established a classic framework for metaphor translation

research, proposing that metaphor translation should balance semantic accuracy and imagery integrity, and summarizing seven metaphor translation methods: literal translation, borrowing, metaphor converted to simile, literal translation plus free translation, free translation, deletion, and literal translation plus explanation [3]. Domestic scholars further refined the theoretical system of metaphor translation on this basis. Liu Fagong (2008) proposed three translation principles: retaining metaphorical features, connecting relevant cultural connotations, and filling gaps in cultural vehicles [4]. Wang Bin (2010) categorized metaphor translation into metaphorical translation, literal translation, and descriptive translation [5].

As research advances, academia has begun to focus on the application of metaphors in specific genres. As an effective cognitive tool, metaphors build bridges between two cultures, simplifying complex issues and concretizing abstract concepts. Yu Gaofeng (2011) pointed out that metaphor translation of political texts is a process of cross-cultural communication and cultural transplantation, which must balance semantic accuracy, political rigor, and stylistic appropriateness [6].

3. Concept of Orientational Metaphors and Their Frequency in the Target Text

Lakoff argued that metaphor is essentially a fundamental human cognitive model, which systematically maps characteristics of familiar concrete “source domains” onto abstract “target domains”; linguistic figurative expressions are merely superficial external manifestations.

He classified conceptual metaphors into three categories: structural metaphors, orientational metaphors, and ontological metaphors. Specifically, structural metaphors construct one concept by another highly structured and clearly defined concept. Ontological metaphors treat events, activities, emotions, thoughts, and other intangibles as entities to facilitate reference and quantification for rational processing of experience. Orientational metaphors are built on natural and cultural experiences, relying on spatial orientations such as high-low and front-back to construct semantics. Most such metaphors relate to physical orientations, including up-down, in-out, front-back, on-off, deep-shallow, etc. These spatial orientations derive from human bodies and their interactions with physical environments [7].

Text collation reveals abundant orientational metaphors in the 2026 Government Work Report. Statistics show 46 metaphorical instances containing the character “high” and 21 instances containing the character “low”. These two types of orientational metaphors vividly construct various relationships through vertical shifts between high and low. Therefore, the following analysis focuses on the metaphorical systems formed by the core spatial terms “high” and “low”, examining their features and translation strategies.

4. Compatibility Between Nida’s Functional Equivalence Theory and Translation of Orientational Metaphors

Eugene A. Nida, a renowned American linguist and translation theorist, introduced modern linguistics into translation practice and formed a distinctive theoretical system whose development evolved from embryonic to mature stages.

In its embryonic stage, Nida relied on structural linguistics to focus on lexical and syntactic analysis. However, long-term practices of Bible localization revealed that mechanical literal translation impedes cross-cultural communication, laying practical groundwork for the subsequent formation of his theory.

In 1964, Nida first proposed the concept of dynamic equivalence and distinguished it from formal equivalence. Formal equivalence prioritizes literal translation and easily creates cultural barriers, while dynamic equivalence centers on reader response, pursuing natural and fluent target texts and requiring target readers to generate reactions similar to those of source-text readers when comprehending information. This work broke formalism and incorporated reader acceptability into translation evaluation criteria.

In 1969, Nida refined dynamic equivalence in *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, putting forward a four-step translation workflow: analysis, transfer, restructuring, and testing [8].

In 1986, to avoid misunderstandings caused by lexical connotations, Nida officially replaced “dynamic equivalence” with “functional equivalence” in *From One Language to Another* [9].

After the proposal of functional equivalence theory, international scholars enriched its connotations through criticism and expansion, while domestic scholars promoted its further development via introduction, popularization, and comparative research. With the continuous improvement of its theoretical system, functional equivalence theory has been widely applied to translation practices of various text types.

Conceptual metaphor reveals the cognitive mechanism through which humans construct abstract thinking via mapping from source domains to target domains, and orientational metaphors represent a typical embodiment of this mechanism in the spatial dimension. Nevertheless, cross-linguistic conversion may lead to divergent meanings conveyed by identical orientational metaphors due to differences in geography, history, and social customs between China and Japan.

Under such circumstances, a scientific translation evaluation system is required to judge whether translations successfully transmit source-language cognitive imagery and resolve conflicts between retaining formal features and conveying textual meaning. Eugene A. Nida’s functional equivalence theory provides robust theoretical support for this purpose. It emphasizes that translation should not be confined to superficial formal correspondence between linguistic forms, but should strive for high consistency in psychological reactions and cognitive experiences between target-text readers and source-text readers.

Applying functional equivalence theory to the Japanese

translation of orientational metaphors means translators must not only focus on literal conversion of spatial lexicon such as “high” and “low”, but also examine whether translations enable Japanese readers to form spatial-abstract associations consistent with Chinese readers. When source and target languages share overlapping cognitive perceptions, literal translation achieves dual equivalence of form and function; when cognitive discrepancies exist, metaphor replacement or omission strategies are adopted to prioritize communicative functional equivalence.

5. Japanese Translation Strategies for Orientational Metaphors in the 2026 Government Work Report

In *From One Language to Another*, Nida further defined “information”, stating that information covers both ideological content and linguistic form. He argued that functionally equivalent translation demands equivalence not only of informational content, but also of form as far as possible.

5.1 Literal Translation Retaining the Original Vehicle

Example 1

Original Chinese: 打造集成电路、航空航天、生物医药、低空经济等新兴支柱产业。

Japanese Translation: 集積回路、航空宇宙、バイオ医薬、低空経済などの新興基幹産業を育成する。

Analysis:

From a cognitive linguistics perspective, the character “低” in the phrase “低空经济” literally refers to vertical physical height. When collocated with the economy, it forms an orientational metaphor that maps concrete vertical airspace attributes onto industrial development, interpreting emerging industrial forms through vertical orientations.

Per Nida’s functional equivalence theory, the core translation objective is to enable target audiences to acquire cognitive experiences similar to source-text readers. “低空经济” is a new term in industrial discourse with no pre-existing counterpart in Japanese texts, yet China and Japan share the basic spatial cognition that the sky can be vertically divided into high and low altitudes, eliminating barriers to cross-cultural comprehension. Translators thus adopt literal translation rendered as 「低空経済」, realizing both formal and functional equivalence.

Example 2

Original Chinese: 促进低收入群体增收

Japanese Translation: 低所得層所得向上の促進

Analysis:

The phrase “低收入” constitutes a classic up-down orientational metaphor following the cognitive logic “less is down”, mapping abstract wealth levels and social strata onto

vertical spatial orientations. Japanese economic texts conventionally employ fixed expressions “高所得層” and “低所得層”, corresponding to Chinese “high-income groups” and “low-income groups”. China and Japan share an identical less is down cognitive framework without cross-cultural comprehension barriers. Translators directly retain the original spatial vehicle, rendering “low-income groups” as “低所得層” and preserving the vertical spatial imagery of income tiers positioned at lower levels. This conforms to Japanese expressive conventions and enables Japanese audiences to form reading cognition consistent with Chinese readers, achieving functional equivalence.

Example 3

Original Chinese: 促进社会综合融资成本低位运行。

Japanese Translation: 民間資金調達のコストが低水準で推移するよう促進する。

Analysis:

The term “低位” follows the orientational metaphor cognition “low level is down”, mapping abstract operational states of economic indicators such as financing costs onto the lower end of a spatial scale. Nida’s functional equivalence theory stresses that translation should not rigidly adhere to literal wording but prioritize enabling target audiences to gain cognitive perceptions similar to source readers. Although Japanese contains the Sino-Japanese word “低位”, its application scope is narrow and limited to describing stock market quotations. Official Japanese economic reports standardly use “高水準” and “低水準”, which share homologous orientational metaphors with Chinese high level and low level without cross-cultural comprehension barriers. The translation “低水準” retains the source-domain imagery of numerical values at lower positions, falling under the literal translation strategy of preserving original vehicles.

5.2 Replacement of Metaphorical Vehicles

Example 4

Original Chinese: 高标准推进人才高地建设

Japanese Translation: 人材拠点のハイスタンダードな整備を推進

Analysis:

The phrase “高地” in the original text employs a typical orientational metaphor, mapping abstract talent aggregation zones onto physical geographical highlands to highlight their advantageous and core status. Per Nida’s functional equivalence theory, translation must first ensure that target readers generate cognitive reactions similar to source readers. The Japanese noun “高地” primarily refers to geographical elevation in purely topographical contexts; literal translation would mislead Japanese readers and fail to convey its connotation as a talent platform.

To achieve functional equivalence, translators adopt the metaphor replacement strategy, converting highland to “拠

点”. While this abandons the vertical spatial imagery of height in the original text, “拐点” also functions as an orientational metaphor signifying resource hubs capable of implying core talent gathering areas. This approach avoids cross-cultural communication misunderstandings, aligns closely with Japanese textual conventions, and realizes the equivalence of communicative function.

5.3 Omission of Metaphors

When linguistic disparities exist between Chinese and Japanese, literal translation of orientational metaphors may trigger misunderstandings. Under such circumstances, translators may remove metaphors, strip away spatial vehicles, and directly state core policy semantics to eliminate cross-cultural cognitive barriers, achieving equivalence of readers’ cognitive responses as required by functional equivalence theory at the cost of abandoning metaphorical rhetorical forms.

Example 5

Original Chinese: 城乡居民基础养老金月最低标准再提高20元。

Japanese Translation: 都市・農村住民基礎年金の給付基礎月額をさらに20元引き上げる。

Analysis:

The phrase “最低标准” in the original text adopts a typical orientational metaphor, mapping abstract policy welfare thresholds onto the bottom of a vertical physical scale. Chinese minimum standard constitutes an objective, neutral technical term; however, the Japanese adjective “最低” carries negative connotations of inferior quality in daily contexts. Direct application would easily mislead readers into perceiving substandard welfare benefits. Additionally, Japanese conventionally uses “基礎” to denote institutional foundations when describing benchmarks, rarely defining policy thresholds via orientational metaphors of height and depth.

Consistent with Nida’s functional equivalence theory, translation must prioritize accurate and natural transmission of core policy information to target readers. Translators thus strip away the spatial metaphor carried by the character low and adopt the metaphor omission strategy, rendering the phrase as “給付基礎月額”, a fixed professional terminology in Japanese social security. This translation discards concrete spatial vehicles, avoids semantic misunderstandings from literal rendering, transmits core policy connotations while eliminating cross-cultural cognitive barriers, and realizes equivalent cognitive responses among readers as emphasized by Nida.

Example 6

Original Chinese: 打造一批带动面广、显示度高的消费新场景。

Japanese Translation: 影響力と特徴のある新たな消費シーンをもく生み出し。

Analysis:

The phrase “显示度高” represents a classic up-down orientational metaphor governed by the cognitive mapping, high visibility is up. It describes emerging consumption models with prominent exposure, strong communication potential, and robust spillover effects. Chinese analogizes abstract scene exposure to vertical spatial tiers, leveraging up-down imagery to emphasize distinctive scene recognition.

Per Nida’s functional equivalence theory, the core translation objective is to enable Japanese audiences to acquire consistent information cognition with Chinese readers. The target text does not retain the vertical spatial source domain carried by the original character “high”, instead converting it into the plain descriptive phrase “特徴のある”, embodying the metaphor omission strategy. The Japanese rarely employ orientational metaphors of height and depth to describe scene exposure; rigid literal translation would violate Japanese expressive conventions. Translators thus abandon the rhetorical shell of the original metaphor and directly extract the core semantic meaning of distinctive, highly recognizable characteristics, achieving equivalent information transmission despite discarding metaphorical form.

6. Conclusion and Reflection

Collation and analysis of the Chinese-Japanese bilingual parallel text of the 2026 Government Work Report demonstrate that translators select three translation strategies for handling Chinese orientational metaphors based on overlapping cognitive imagery of orientational metaphors and divergent written stylistic conventions between Chinese and Japanese: literal translation retaining original vehicles, metaphor replacement, and metaphor omission.

First, when China and Japan share consistent cognitive frameworks for orientational metaphors with highly cross-culturally compatible spatial vehicles, translators predominantly adopt the approach of retaining original vehicles.

Second, when Chinese and Japanese employ divergent spatial vehicles for identical abstract concepts, translators apply the source-domain replacement strategy, substituting vehicles conventionally used in Japanese texts.

Third, when Chinese orientational metaphors constitute language-specific expressions absent from equivalent spatial imagery in Japanese, translators omit metaphors, strip rhetorical figurative devices, and transmit core semantic connotations through plain, straightforward phrasing.

Nevertheless, this paper only analyzes orientational metaphor cases centered on “high” and “low”, without further research on other spatial metaphor lexicons such as “rise”, “fall”, and “sink”, leading to limited research coverage. Follow-up studies may expand corpus scope, quantitatively count application characteristics and translation strategies of orientational metaphors, summarize more universal rules for metaphor translation, deepen research depth, and provide more effective guidance for translation practice.

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