

A Study on Japanese Translation of Social Science Texts from the Perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory—A Case Study of Promoting the Building of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind Through Exchanges and Mutual Learning Among Civilizations

Tingting Wu

Nanjing University of Information Science and Technology, Nanjing 210044, Jiangsu, China

Abstract: *Against the backdrop of deepening globalization, the external communication of Chinese characteristic social science texts has become a pivotal pathway to enhance international discourse power. Taking Promoting the Building of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind Through Exchanges and Mutual Learning Among Civilizations as the research object, this paper investigates the practical application of Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory in the Japanese translation of social science texts. Through an analysis of Japanese translation practices of the source text, this paper discusses core translation challenges including rendering culture-loaded words, transforming Chinese four-character idioms, and restructuring complex long sentences. It further summarizes translation strategies compatible with Japanese linguistic conventions that accurately reproduce the core semantics of the original text. This research aims to facilitate the precise international dissemination of fine Chinese ideological and cultural achievements as well as Chinese governance concepts, provide practical support for deepening Sino-Japanese inter-civilizational communication, and advance the cross-border dissemination of the vision of a community with a shared future for mankind.*

Keywords: Functional Equivalence Theory, Social Science Texts, Japanese Translation Strategies, Exchanges and Mutual Learning Among Civilizations.

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of globalization and inter-civilizational exchange and mutual learning, Japanese translation and international communication of China's vision of "building a community with a shared future for mankind" exert vital significance for cross-cultural communication. Obvious disparities between Chinese and Japanese language and culture bring numerous difficulties to Japanese translation of social science texts, such as structural divergence and mismatched cultural connotations. Eugene Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory emphasizes that target text readers ought to comprehend and respond to translated information in a manner analogous to source text readers. Translators can adjust sentence structures and add explanatory elaborations to convey rigorous academic concepts and logical relations embedded in social science texts. Guided by Functional Equivalence Theory, this paper conducts a case analysis of the source text *Promoting the Building of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind Through Exchanges and Mutual Learning Among Civilizations*, centered on three core dimensions: translation of culture-loaded words, transformation of four-character idioms, and handling of complex long sentences.

2. Theoretical Framework: Functional Equivalence Theory

In *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, Nida put forward the definition of "dynamic equivalence": "Dynamic

equivalence is therefore to be defined in terms of the degree to which the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it in substantially the same manner as the receptors in the source language" [1]. In 1986, Nida replaced the term "dynamic equivalence" with "functional equivalence" in the monograph *From One Language to Another*. He further defined translation as "reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style". Centered on target readers, Functional Equivalence Theory judges translation quality by examining target readers' responses to translated information [2]. Chinese translation scholar Tan Zai xi summarized the core tenets of Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory as follows: translated texts should read smoothly and naturally, faithfully convey the original meaning and artistic conception, and trigger similar reader responses [3]. Specifically, translated versions are expected to deliver reading experiences comparable to those of source text readers, achieving maximum convergence in emotional resonance, information comprehension and cultural cognition.

3. Applicability of Functional Equivalence Theory to Social Science Text Translation

The source text *Promoting the Building of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind Through Exchanges and Mutual Learning Among Civilizations* falls into the category of social science texts, distinguished by professional terminology and rigorous logical structures. From a translational perspective,

its major translation obstacles lie in abundant culture-loaded words, four-character idioms, and logically intricate long sentences.

First, Functional Equivalence Theory prioritizes generating parallel reading effects in target cultures, which is particularly critical for social science texts carrying Chinese political discourses. Translators must go beyond literal word-for-word correspondence to ensure target readers fully grasp core concepts and cultural implications beneath literal expressions. Second, the theory advocates prioritizing functional equivalence over formal equivalence when formal matching leads to incomprehensible rendering, offering flexible solutions to Chinese-specific four-character structures and classical allusions and striking an optimal balance between cultural fidelity and readability. Third, the theory permits dynamic linguistic adjustments rather than mechanical literal translation, providing a theoretical basis for logical explication and sentence reconstruction of lengthy source sentences. Translators can restructure paratactic Chinese sentences into hypotactic Japanese sentences by adding auxiliary particles and rearranging word order to conform to Japanese expressive norms.

4. Japanese Translation Strategies for Social Science Texts Under Functional Equivalence Theory

4.1 Translation of Culture-Loaded Words

Liao Qiyi (2000) defined culture-loaded words as “words, phrases and idioms that mark unique items of a given culture, embodying distinctive modes of activity accumulated by a specific nation over its long historical evolution” [4]. To avoid semantic distortion and cross-cultural misunderstanding, translators must thoroughly analyze source texts and accurately capture subtle semantic nuances and cultural contexts instead of relying on literal translation. Guided by Functional Equivalence Theory, translators should adopt a target-reader-oriented approach to realize equivalent linguistic effects between source and target texts [5]. This section analyzes representative culture-loaded words extracted from the source text and discusses how to realize equivalent meaning transmission via amplification, literal translation with annotations, and free translation.

Example 1

Source Text: From an essential perspective, the awareness of a community with a shared future for mankind rejects narrow egoism that adheres to “clique mentalities” and clings to “zero-sum thinking”. Only guided by such communal awareness can humanity fully respect each other’s development paths and let the flowers of civilizational diversity bloom.

Japanese Translation: 本質的に言えば、人類運命共同体の意識は「閉鎖的・排他的な小さなグループ」に固執したり「ゼロサム思考」に囚われたりする狭隘な自己優先意識ではない。前述した共同体意識の指導のもとではじめて、人類は発展の道を互いに尊重し合い、文明の多様性を開花させることができる。

Analysis: The metaphor “clique mentalities” refers to closed, exclusive interest groups with distinct derogatory political connotations. A literal rendering as 「小さなサークル」 only describes a small collective without conveying its negative political undertones. The translation amplifies implicit cultural and political connotations with modifiers 「閉鎖的・排他的」, complying with rigorous academic diction for social science texts and enabling target readers to accurately interpret the term’s political context, thereby achieving functional equivalence.

Example 2

Source Text: As early as 2,500 years ago, Chinese people already understood the connotations of “harmony without uniformity” and “continuous vitality”.

Japanese Translation: 早くも 2500 年前の中国人が既に「和而不同（和して同ぜず）」と「生生不息（生々と息絶えない）」の趣旨を理解していたのである。

Analysis: “Harmony without uniformity” and “continuous vitality” are culture-loaded words embodying classical Chinese philosophy, derived from *The Analects* and *The Book of Changes* respectively, with no direct counterparts in Japanese linguistic context. Social science texts shoulder the mission of interpreting Chinese concepts and disseminating Chinese discourses to international audiences, so translation of such terms must balance cultural identity recognition and target readers’ comprehensibility. Nida argues that formal equivalence should yield to effective meaning transmission when literal matching produces unintelligible renderings. Accordingly, the translation adopts the strategy of “literal translation of Chinese character forms plus semantic annotations”, retaining original cultural connotations while lowering comprehension barriers for Japanese readers, and realizing dual functional equivalence of information delivery and cultural communication.

Example 3

Source Text: Drawing on its profound cultural heritage and indomitable resilience, Chinese civilization has learned from and borrowed modern Western civilizations amid cross-civilizational exchanges, accomplished the creative transformation of civilization, and witnessed its rebirth through fire.

Japanese Translation: 中華文明は自らの奥深い文化的背景と不屈の精神をもって文明交流の中で西洋の近現代文明を取り入れ、参考して、文明への創造的転換を実現し、文明の鳳凰涅槃を迎えた。

Analysis: The phrase “rebirth through fire” constitutes a culture-loaded expression carrying mythological and religious imagery, describing renewal and sublimation after catastrophic destruction with intense emotional overtones. No fixed equivalent idiom exists in Japanese. A literal translation such as 「火を浴びて再生する」 merely reproduces surface semantics and loses symbolic literary implications. To deliver parallel reading experiences and equivalent cultural cognition

to Japanese readers, the translator abandons literal rendering and adopts 「鳳凰涅槃」, an imagery widely familiar in Japanese culture, to convey the core implication of “surviving hardships and gaining new life”. This approach eliminates comprehension obstacles for target readers, facilitates cross-linguistic transmission of Chinese ideological connotations, and achieves functional equivalence in terms of audience response.

4.2 Translation of Chinese Four-Character Idioms

Four-character idioms represent a prevalent linguistic form in Chinese, characterized by conciseness and cultural embeddedness. While Japanese also contains four-character kanji idioms, their semantic meanings may diverge sharply from Chinese counterparts. Guided by Functional Equivalence Theory, translation prioritizes generating parallel comprehension effects for source and target readers rather than mechanical matching of superficial linguistic forms. When translating four-character idioms, translators should avoid direct borrowing based merely on graphic or superficial similarities, and flexibly employ literal translation, free translation and inversion to ensure equivalent cognition and perception in target cultures.

Example 4

Source Text: Creative “metabolism” is closely intertwined with exchanges and mutual learning between civilizations.

Japanese Translation: 創造的な「新陳代謝」は文明の交流・相互参考と深く関わっている。

Analysis: Originally a biological term referring to the process where organisms replace old substances with new ones, “metabolism” has evolved into a metaphor for the replacement of declining entities by emerging forces, symbolizing universal renewal and transformation. The Japanese four-character idiom 「新陳代謝」 retains the original Chinese semantic scope and enjoys widespread academic use. Literal translation preserves formal equivalence while allowing Japanese readers to immediately capture its metaphorical extension (the renewal and self-transformation of civilizations) within contextual constraints, thus realizing functional equivalence.

Example 5

Source Text: Boasting a long history and vast territory with abundant natural resources, Chinese civilization has fostered culturally inclusive traits of perpetual vitality through the multiplication of diverse ethnic groups and integration of multiple cultures, yielding splendid civilizations spanning over five thousand years.

Japanese Translation: 悠久の歴史を誇り、国土が広く物産も豊富な中華文明は多民族の繁栄と多文化の融合の中で、生生流転・相互包摂という文化的特徴を築き上げ、五千年以上も続く輝かしい文明を創造した。

Analysis: The juxtaposed four-character expressions “a long history” and “vast territory with abundant natural resources”

summarize the fundamental characteristics of Chinese civilization and implicitly convey a sense of cultural pride. No fully matching four-character Japanese idioms exist; rigid literal translation would produce awkward, unnatural Japanese prose. Per Functional Equivalence Theory, formal equivalence must be subordinated to effective information transmission and target audience reception when literal matching leads to unintelligible text. The translation abandons superficial formal correspondence and adopts free translation. The Japanese collocation 「～を誇る」 implicitly reproduces the original cultural confidence and positive evaluation, while the descriptive phrase 「国土が広く物産も豊富な」 restates the generalized meaning of “vast territory with abundant natural resources” through concrete elaboration. This rendering enables Japanese readers to attain identical perceptual effects as source text readers.

Example 6

Source Text: Second, exchange goods to mutual benefit, pursue joint development, and achieve common prosperity.

Japanese Translation: 第二、有無相通、共同发展、共同繁栄を実現すること。

Analysis: “Exchange goods to mutual benefit” is a classic Chinese four-character idiom encapsulating Eastern diplomatic philosophy of reciprocity and mutual gain. Guided by Functional Equivalence Theory, the translator prioritizes natural semantic transmission and compliance with Japanese academic conventions over mechanical literal rendering. The translation employs inversion and adopts the Sino-Japanese kanji compound 「有無相通」, a classical Han-derived expression widely accepted in Japanese academic discourse. Despite minor word-order inversion, the translation retains the compact four-character form of the original idiom and accurately conveys the core implication of exchanging surplus resources for reciprocal advantages, achieving dual equivalence of linguistic form and communicative function.

4.3 Translation of Complex Long Sentences

Chinese text rarely relies on cohesive conjunctions to clarify logical relations yet maintains coherent reasoning through semantic integration, classifying Chinese as a paratactic language [6]. In contrast, Japanese belongs to hypotactic language, relying heavily on auxiliary particles and modal verbs to mark logical connections. Accordingly, Japanese translation of lengthy Chinese sentences must accommodate distinct linguistic features of both languages through amplification, inversion and other restructuring strategies to conform to Japanese expressive conventions.

Example 7

Source Text: The expansion of transportation and population mobility facilitated trade and circulation of commodities including Chinese silk, porcelain and tea, spices, gold and cotton from Southeast Asia and India, European handicrafts, and silver from the Americas, as well as mutual learning and exchange of technologies such as papermaking, printing, navigation, surveying and military armaments, knowledge spanning philosophy, mathematics, literature, medicine and

geography, and even religious doctrines.

Japanese Translation: 交通の開拓と人々の往来により、中国の絹、陶磁器、茶葉と東南アジア・インドの香辛料、黄金、綿布とヨーロッパの工芸品およびアメリカ大陸の銀など商品売買が発展し、製紙術や印刷術、航海術、測量術、軍事兵器などの技術、そして哲学や数学、文学、医学、地理学などの知識や宗教も相互参考と交流を行うようになった。

Analysis: The source sentence consists of dense parallel items separated by commas and enumeration marks, representing a prototypical lengthy paratactic Chinese structure adapted to native Chinese reading habits. To realize equivalent audience responses, the translation reconstructs the sentence to align with Japanese hypotactic norms. First, the translator adds the causal marker 「により」 to explicate implicit causal logic and supplements 「発展し」 to restore the latent semantic meaning of “flourishing trade” embedded in “trade and circulation”. The sentence concludes with 「ようになった」 to highlight resultant evolutionary changes. Coordinators 「と」 and 「および」 sort layered parallel items, reorganizing loose Chinese paratactic structures into logically cohesive Japanese clauses. Following the principle of content priority over formal matching, the translation achieves functional equivalence.

Example 8

Source Text: Diverse civilizations inevitably engage in communication; communication fosters mutual learning; mutual learning drives further progress.

Japanese Translation: 文明は多様であるがゆえに交流し、交流があるからこそ互いに学び合い、互いに学び合うことで発展していく。

Analysis: The source text constitutes a chained causal compound sentence with omitted subjects, embodying the paratactic characteristics of Chinese. Adhering to Nida's principle of “the closest natural equivalent”, the translation applies inversion to front the subject 「文明」, eliminating comprehension burdens caused by missing subjects for Japanese readers. Instead of rigidly reproducing the original syntactic frame “Due to..., bring..., and thus...”, the translator amplifies logical particles 「からこそ」 to emphasize causal necessity and 「ことで」 to denote instrumental means, externalizing implicit progressive causal relations layer by layer to meet Japanese hypotactic requirements for explicit logical markers. Consecutive verb conjugations (「交流し」「学び合い」「発展していく」) sustain textual coherence and preserve the complete logical chain of “diversity → communication → mutual learning → development”. Functional equivalence is realized in both logical expression and target readers' psychological reception.

5. Conclusion

Guided by Functional Equivalence Theory, this paper analyzes Japanese translation practices of the social science text *Promoting the Building of a Community with a Shared*

Future for Mankind Through Exchanges and Mutual Learning Among Civilizations and summarizes systematic Japanese translation strategies for social science texts. For culture-loaded words, translators may adopt amplification, free translation, or literal translation with annotations to balance cultural fidelity and target audience accessibility. For four-character idioms, translators should flexibly apply literal translation, free translation and inversion based on semantic similarities and disparities between Chinese and Japanese kanji vocabulary. For complex long sentences, translators need to restructure syntax through rational segmentation and logical explication in light of paratactic Chinese and hypotactic Japanese linguistic differences. The core of Functional Equivalence Theory lies in dynamic linguistic adjustments to realize equivalent communicative functions of translated information. Future research may expand corpus coverage and strengthen empirical analysis to integrate theoretical frameworks with practical translation, offering targeted strategies for the international dissemination of Chinese social science texts.

References

- [1] NIDA E A, TABER C R. The Theory and Practice of Translation [M]. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969.
- [2] NIDA E A, WAARD J. From One Language to Another: Functional Equivalence in Bible Translation [M]. New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986.
- [3] LIN S W. A Brief Introduction to Nida's Translation Theory [J]. Linguistics Abroad, 1982(2):7.
- [4] LIAO Q Y. A Survey of Contemporary Western Translation Theories [M]. Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2000.
- [5] WEI X R, YAN J. A Study on English Translation of Commercial News Under Functional Equivalence Theory: A Case Study of The Economist [J]. English Square, 2022(26):15–18.
- [6] DANG X Y. Preliminary Research on English Translation of Social Science Texts: A Case Study of Tiguog Jingye [J]. Literature, 2019(16):237–238.