

Analysis of the Characteristics of Museum English Interpretation from the Perspective of Skopos Theory, with the National Museum of China as an Example

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Abstract: With the rapid development of science and technology, social change is rapid, and the level of human civilization has achieved a qualitative leap. Museum is an important carrier of cultural dissemination and plays an important role in society. More and more people pay attention to the importance of inheriting ancient culture. In order to promote traditional culture to a broader level, it is inevitable to publicize the local excellent traditional culture to overseas countries, and museums are a very good carrier. Among the many exhibitions and exhibits about Chinese culture in museums, the wonderful use of English translation of explanatory notes aims to maximize the cultural output. Taking the National Museum of China as an example, this paper analyzes how translation promotes folk culture from the perspective of Skopos Theory by analyzing the examples and combining the cultural and contemporary backgrounds with the three principles of Skopos Theory. This paper selects the English commentary in the special exhibition "Ancient Chinese Food Culture" of the National Museum of China as the research object. Specifically, it analyzes the application of the three principles of Skopos Theory in the English translation of the commentary. It is found that the translator usually adopts methods such as increasing or decreasing the translation method and adjusting the syntax and tense to show the main content of the translation to achieve the ultimate translation goal. Moreover, the overall translation activity is carried out with the core of being close to the thinking and reading habits of the English readers to realize the interaction of cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: National Museum of China, Skopos Theory, English commentary, three principles of Skopos Theory

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the rise of Sino-foreign trade and the continuous development of globalization, the demand for cross-cultural exchanges between countries has been growing. As China's national strength and economic level have never been stronger, the process of China's opening up to the outside world has also been promoted. Along with the opening of China's doors, more and more foreign tourists are choosing to travel to China to enjoy the country's local customs. Such a phenomenon strongly confirms the importance of translation in promoting China's outstanding traditional culture

to the outside world. Visiting museums is one of the most intuitive and effective ways to introduce and publicize China's history and culture to overseas audiences. Museums are a concentrated manifestation of local traditional culture and development history, carrying the process of time change in a certain region with rich historical and cultural heritage. The translation of museum interpretation is a powerful means to publicize the history and culture of China to foreign audiences. Up to now, Chinese-English translation in the study and application of tourism materials tends to focus on the introduction of tourist attractions and the Chinese-English translation of public notices of the attractions, while there is little research on the English translation of museums' explanatory words, and thus there is a lack of corresponding theoretical guidance [1].

The National Museum of China is located in the center of Beijing, east of Tiananmen Square, and was once rated by the State Administration of Cultural Heritage as the "national-level museum", which is the highest historical, cultural and artistic hall for explaining Chinese culture and showing the achievements of national collections. According to the statistics on the official website of the National Museum of China, as of December 2021, the collection of the National Museum of China totaled more than 1.43 million items. In 2022, the National Museum of China effectively curated three international exchange exhibitions, two inbound and one outbound. Notably, one of these exhibitions, titled "Taste of China — Ancient Chinese Food Culture Exhibition," was dispatched to the National Museum of Liechtenstein from June 9, 2022, to August 21, 2022. It marked a significant milestone as certain exhibits from this display made their European debut. This information is drawn from the 2022 annual National Museum of China data report. During the year, the National Museum of China also completed the Chinese-to-English translation of the commentaries of 31 exhibitions, including "Ancient Chinese Costume Culture Exhibition" and "Standing in the East: Exhibition of Classical Artworks in the Collection". This work has attracted many foreign tourists. Taking the National Museum of China as an example, this paper analyzes the characteristics of the National Museum of China's commentary from the perspective of Skopos Theory, guided by the three principles of Skopos Theory, and combined with specific examples, to provide part of the research materials for the research gaps of the museum's commentary in the field of Chinese-English translation of tourism materials.

2. Overview of the Skopos Theory

The Skopos Theory originated in the 1970s and is one of Germany's most influential and representative translation theories today. In this theory, the purpose of the overall translation act has a decisive effect on the translation process, and fullness (adequacy) is used as the criterion for evaluating the target text rather than equivalence (equivalence) [2]. The Skopos Theory was first proposed by German translator Hans Vermeer in 1978. The word "Skopos" comes from Greek, which means "purpose" and "intention". According to the system of the Skopos Theory, translation is not only a conversion between the source language and the target language but also should have a clear purpose and intention, so the translation process is a purposeful behavior [3].

Under the framework of the Skopos Theory, there are three application principles: the Skopos rule, the Coherence rule and the Fidelity rule. The Skopos Theory has gone through four stages: (1) Katharina Reiss first proposed the functional approach to translation and introduced the concept of "functional type" into translation theory, arguing that translation should have specific translation requirements; (2) Hans J. Vermeer, Reiss's student, further broke the limitations of the theory of equivalence and advocated that the purpose of the text should be the first criterion for translation activities. He first put forward the Skopos Theory; (3) Justa Holz-Manttari drew on the communicative and behavioral theories and proposed the translation behavior theory; (4) Christiane Nord systematically summarized the various academic ideas of the functional school and, in response

to the shortcomings of the functional translation theory, proposed the "principle of function plus loyalty", which is a supplement to the Skopos Theory and further improves the theory.

Translation activities should align with the text's intended purpose. This necessitates elucidating the rationales behind these translation endeavors and the target audience. As the renowned translator Peter Newmark emphasized, effective communication constitutes a fundamental element of semantic translation [4]. The English translation of museum narration is to realize cross-cultural communication and interaction through the proper translation of the narration, ultimately conveying Chinese history and culture to foreign tourists. Museum narration belongs to one of the tourist types of text; the main purpose of this kind of text is to convey important information, so the museum narration is enough to translate the general idea of the text. When translating, it is necessary to pay attention to the principle of coherence and the principle of fidelity, and do not need to be too harsh on reciprocity to achieve the purpose of communication [5]. The theory of translation purpose emphasizes the cultural communication function of translation, and the act of translation is determined by the purpose, aiming to achieve a certain desired purpose through the act of translation [6]. Therefore, this paper selects the Skopos Theory as the theoretical basis to study the characteristics of the English translation of the National Museum of China's commentary, develops the argument through the analysis of specific examples, takes the purpose of the original text as the entry point, and specifically studies the corresponding translation strategies.

3. The Application of the Three Principles of Skopos Theory in the English Translation of National Museum Interpretations

Under the framework of the Skopos Theory, translators must follow the three principles of Skopos: Coherence and Fidelity. When translating, translators can adopt different translation strategies according to different needs. These three principles complement and work together, so one is indispensable.

3.1. Skopos Rule

The Skopos rule plays a decisive role in the overall translation behavior, and the translator's translation work should strive towards meeting the readers' needs of the translated language. Before translating, the translator should determine the text's purpose and context and then select the corresponding method according to the purpose [2].

Example (1):

Original text: 琳琅美器

Translation: Utensils for Cooking and Dining

Example (1) uses both omitted and augmented translations in the Skopos rule context. The Chinese language is used to choose some gorgeous words to emphasize the degree of sophistication, such as "琳琅" and "美" in the example, both used to describe the exquisite appearance of ancient Chinese utensils. In the translation, the translator omits the modifier and uses the noun "Utensils", meaning "utensils, vessels", followed by the preposition "for", which means that Utensils are mainly used for "cooking" and "dining". Such a translation method is closer to the direct and concise language characteristics of English to achieve the purpose of conforming to the characteristics of the English language. The translator accordingly adopts the translation methods such as the omission and augmentation methods, omitting the useless information and highlighting the important information.

Example (2):

Original text: 铜冰鉴

Translation: Bronze Bingjian(ritual wine cooler)

This example adopts the method of adding notes to the translation. "Bingjian" is a kind of wine vessel used to chill wine pulp in ancient China, and "Bingjian" can produce cold and sweet wine. According to historical records, the ancient people drank cold wine for a long period. In the translation process here, if the translator directly translates it as "Bronze Bingjian", it is easy to make native English speakers feel confused and difficult to understand because of the lack of context. Therefore, the translator adds notes to the translation after directly translating the vessel's name through the phonetic method and then adding "wine" and "cooler" in parentheses to explain that the vessel is a container used to cool the wine pulp. Through the annotated translation process, the translator can add key information to the translated text, making the native English speakers' understanding of the vessel clearer and more explicit.

To summarize, under the guidance of the principle of purpose, the translator's translation should conform to the expectation and purpose of the original text. In addition, the translator should consider the reading habits of the target language receivers when translating and then further adopt appropriate translation strategies to achieve the corresponding purpose and expectation and complete the translation work [7]. This principle holds that the translator's translation should simultaneously satisfy the intended purpose of the original text and the target language readers' understanding and reading habits.

3.2. Coherence Rule

This principle holds that the translation must follow intra-textual coherence so that the receiver can understand the general meaning of the translation according to his/her background knowledge reserve and cultural environment [8]. The Coherence rule is complementary to the Skopos rule [7].

Example (3):

Original text: 用来渲染气氛，增进食欲，引导程序，彰显威仪。

Translation: to create a better eating atmosphere and demonstrate authority.

Example (3) is a typical Chinese parallelism sentence with a neat and symmetrical style. Native English speakers, on the other hand, are more accustomed to intuitive and linear expressions, so they use simple sentence structures and vocabulary. Therefore, the translator has changed the sentence structure of the sentence "渲染气氛，增进食欲" ("to create a better eating atmosphere") by combining two small proverbs into one sentence. In this way, it is more in line with the reading habits of native English speakers so that the English readers can understand the meaning of the translated text with their own familiar language and logical structure.

Example (4):

Original text: 不有佳作，何申雅怀？

Translation: Without fine poems, how can I express my elegant feelings?

Example (4) comes from a parallel essay written by Li Bai, a famous poet of the Tang Dynasty in China, which describes a gathering of Li Bai and his brothers on a spring night, drinking wine and writing poems. The example is a typical symmetrical sentence, appearing in pairs but not requiring exactly equal or symmetrical number of words. It is a typical rhetorical device in the field of Chinese literature. The translator has kept in mind the reading habits of native English speakers by translating "不有…，何?" in the original text as "Without...how can?" and then combining the two clauses into one sentence. The translator realizes the intra-linguistic coherence of the translation, which is more in line with the reading habits of native English speakers.

It can be seen that the Coherence rule holds that the translator should fully understand the reading habits, thinking patterns, cultural background and linguistic structure of the target language readers before the translation work begins. Moreover, the translator should not directly translate the original text as it is but should make sure that the translation conforms to the reading habits of the English

readers and follows the linguistic structure of the English language [3]. Therefore, the principle of Coherence rule holds that translation activities are usually carried out to ensure that the translated text conforms to the rules of intra-language coherence of the translated language. It is necessary to ensure that the target language's readers can understand the translated text's general meaning through their own language habits.

3.3. Fidelity Rule

This principle recognizes that the translator can appropriately reconcile the translation's purpose with the author's intention and that the translator's translation should be faithful to the original text and respect the original author [2]. It is worth noting that the purpose of the translation and the translator's understanding of the original text work together to determine the degree and form of "Fidelity" [9].

Example (5):

Original text: 不同民族的饮食文化在传播过程中不断与中原饮食文化互相吸收，融会贯通。

Translation: In the dissemination process, the food culture in the Central Plains has continuously absorbed and integrated the food cultures of other nationalities.

The term "Central Plains" in this example relates to ancient Chinese history, which has been diluted in the modern world. This concept requires attention to the change of tense in English. Therefore, the translator adopts the past tense in the translation to indicate the tense of the whole sentence with the deformation of the words "absorbed" and "integrated". This approach is based on the translator's understanding of Chinese history, and the tense of the translated text is handled accordingly in the translation process, which is more faithful to the original text and history while being closer to the reading comprehension habits of native English speakers.

Example (6):

Original text: 龙腾四海

Translation: Shrimp in Garlic and Chili Sauce

Example (6) "龙腾四海" is a typical Chinese dish belonging to Southern Fujian cuisine, which uses shrimp as the main ingredient with a special sauce. Instead of stir-frying over high heat, the dish focuses more on the quality of the original ingredients, ensuring that it is as light, fresh and crispy as possible. Native English speakers will not be able to instantly recognize the general characteristics of the dish through the words "龙腾四海". They will be confused because no imagery of "dragon" or "sea" exists in the original text. Therefore, the translator focused on the ingredients used in the dish, aiming to directly translate the dish's main ingredient as shrimp, supplemented by a sauce made of garlic and chili. In this way, the target language readers will be able to appreciate the characteristics of the dish at first sight. When the translator handles the translation here, the translator takes the understanding of the original meaning as the starting point and combines it with the reading habits of the target language readers to translate the imagery of the Chinese rhetorical devices directly to its essence, which is faithful to the linguistic characteristics of the translated language and conveys the essence of what the original work wants to express clearly and intuitively.

To sum up, the Fidelity rule dictates that the translator prioritizes the original text's intended purpose during translation. Subsequently, the translator should select an appropriate translation method aligned with the original text's characteristics, with a primary aim to faithfully replicate the original text. At the same time, it conforms to the readers' reading habits of the target language. Translators need to thoroughly understand the connotation of the original text when translating, which is the foundation for subsequent translation work.

4. Recommendations

The National Museum of China, as one of the leading historical and cultural halls in China, ensures that the translations are close to the original text's meaning. The National Museum of China stands in the position of the readers of the translated language and considers their needs. Simultaneously, the premise of ensuring that the translations will not be distorted, finally realized the translation's "Fidelity, Clarity, and Elegance", which is worthy of many museums to learn from. It can be seen that in the future, in the field of narration translation, it is not only necessary to realize high accuracy of the translation, but also need to pay attention to the readability of the translation to ensure that the information that the translation wants to convey is accurate and effective. Numerous museums draw inspiration from the National Museum of China's commitment to "Fidelity, Clarity, and Elegance" principles in translation. They also draw from the target language audience's language preferences and cognitive patterns, intensifying the translation revision process. Additionally, they integrate valuable insights and recommendations from scholars within relevant domains. These collective endeavors aim to reduce any potential obscurity in translations and prioritize the transmission of content and the core ideas they convey.

5. Conclusion

Skopos Theory advocates that translation can be liberated from constraints by increasing the range of possible translation strategies according to the different purposes the translator intends to achieve. This paper summarizes the characteristics of the English translation of museum narratives through a specific analysis of the National Museum of China, a research output that provides a partial reference to the gaps in the field of museum narration research today. Based on the three principles of Skopos Theory, this paper maps out the characteristics of the English translation of museum narratives and argues that under the guidance of Skopos Theory, the English translation of museum narratives is highly flexible. Furthermore, this feature allows the translator to transcend a specific translation strategy, facilitating cross-cultural interactions in partial language communication through adjustments in syntax, additions or omissions in translations, and various other techniques. The more successful the translation, the weaker the presence of the translator [10]. The English translation of the National Museum of China's commentary is characterized by the "invisibility of the translator", and in the translation of many Chinese cultural characteristics of proper nouns and rhetorical devices, the National Museum of China's translators have adopted different strategies, targeted solutions to each of the situation of Chinese and English language habits do not match each other. Moreover, to maximize traditional Chinese history and culture, promote foreign tourists. The National Museum of China has adopted different strategies in the translation work to solve each customary situation in Chinese and English and maximize the promotion of traditional Chinese history and culture to one batch of foreign tourists after another. In contemporary society, there is a heightened emphasis on preserving historical and cultural heritage. Consequently, a growing number of museums are undergoing renovations and enhancements. Their primary objective is to safeguard traditional culture from erasure while simultaneously amplifying the promotion of Chinese ancient heritage. This study focuses exclusively on the National Museum of China as its specific research subject, with the Skopos Theory serving as its sole theoretical foundation. This limited scope might restrict its applicability beyond this particular context. Nowadays, there are still many problems in the field of tourism text translation, which need to be further paid attention by more professionals. At the same time, in museum narration translation, not only is one theory of Skopos Theory prevalent, but in most cases, a variety of translation strategies and theories are complementary to each other and work together. As a result, more translators need to study a wide range of translation theories, popularize their professional knowledge, and select appropriate translation strategies for different scenarios of tourism

texts. It is hoped that the construction of museums around the world will become more and more complete and modernized, the functions of museums can be improved day by day, and the accuracy of the translation of museum narratives can be constantly improved. In this way, the excellent traditional cultures around the world can be preserved and promoted to more overseas audiences, continuing the new chapter of the splendid civilization of mankind.

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