

Translation Strategies of Buzzwords From the Perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory

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As linguistic tools reflecting the characteristics of the times, buzzwords play an important role in interpersonal communication. The external translation of buzzwords largely shapes overseas perceptions of Chinese society. This paper takes the Top 10 buzzwords released by *The Chinese Publication Excessive Wording* from 2021 to 2023 as the research objects and conducts a classification analysis. Taking some buzzwords as examples and guided by the theory of functional equivalence, this paper compares the Japanese translation strategies of buzzwords by three websites: *People's China*, *People's Daily Online (Japanese Version)*, and *China Radio International*. Combining the characteristics of buzzwords, this paper explores translation methods for buzzwords. The study finds that the Japanese translation of buzzwords requires comprehensive consideration of the equivalence of form and content and the selection of appropriate translation strategies in order to obtain the same reader response.

Keywords: functional equivalence, buzzwords, translation strategies

Introduction

Language serves as the tool for human communication, carrying not only history but also closely intertwining with the era. Among these, the temporal characteristics of buzzwords are particularly significant. They focus on social hot topics, faithfully reflecting the development status of society during specific periods, reflecting people's rational thinking about contemporary society, as well as the mental state and attitude towards survival when facing social realities. These buzzwords are rooted in China's unique historical culture and era background, with diverse word-formation methods. However, when translating them into other languages, the challenge lies in how to convey the meaning while also reflecting the characteristics of the buzzwords, and maximizing the same reader response.

Functional Equivalence Theory

Functional Equivalence Theory, proposed by Eugene Nida, has had a continuous and profound influence worldwide. Nida (1964, p. 159) defined "dynamic equivalence" as "the receptor of the message in the receptor

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language should respond to it in substantially the same manner as the original receptors”. Tan (1983) summarized Functional Equivalence Theory into four standards for translation: (a) conveying the meaning; (b) being vivid; (c) flowing naturally; and (d) eliciting a similar response from the audience. This implies that translation must convey the meaning of the original text, making the translation semantically similar to the original while also conveying the emotions and expression of the original text, presenting a natural and fluent style to evoke a similar response from the audience. Regarding the essence of translation, Nida (1964, p. 12) further stated: “Translation must reflect the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, first in meaning, and second in style, in the receptor language”. Clearly, there is an inherent contradiction among these standards. Therefore, when it is believed that conveying both content and form is not possible, it is generally accepted to sacrifice form. However, Nida (1964) also emphasized that form is subordinate to content, but this does not mean ignoring formal equivalence entirely. Buzzwords have distinct linguistic characteristics, and merely translating their meanings may not effectively convey their intended effect or capture their subtle connotations. Therefore, adopting Functional Equivalence Theory strives to reproduce the content and form of the original text to the greatest extent possible.

Classification and Characteristics of Buzzwords

Classification of Buzzwords

Buzzwords originate from various sources. Among the Top 10 annual buzzwords released by *The Chinese Publication Excessive Wording* from 2021 to 2023, there are features of reusing old words, creating new words, and using dialectal words. The two main categories are new use of an old words and creation of new words.

New use of an old words. The reuse of old words refers to existing vocabulary acquiring new meanings in current social contexts. Yang and Zeng (2020) pointed out that metaphorical expressions commonly involve the reuse of old words, giving them new meanings to map new categories. For example, “新赛道” (new arenas) originally referred to a new racing track but now signifies any new starting point, new journey, new efforts, or new situations. Similarly, “躺平” (lie down) originally meant lying flat but now refers to having low desires, lacking motivation and hope in life, and being content with the current state. “情绪价值” (emotional value), originally a term in marketing referring to the difference between customers’ perceptions of positive and negative emotions, has now been extended to interpersonal relationships, indicating one’s ability to influence others’ emotions.

Creation of new words. New words are words created that do not previously exist in the language system. These words often relate to economics, politics, or are compound words formed through metaphors. For instance, “新质生产力” (new quality productive forces) and “中国式现代化” (Chinese path to modernization) are popular political and economic buzzwords. For example, “内耗” (internal friction) in “精神内耗” (mental internal friction) originally referred to the energy consumed by a machine or device without doing external work but now, paired with “spiritual” maps the term to the psychological domain, indicating “useless consumption of mental energy, leading to physical and mental exhaustion”. Terms like “雪糕刺客” (ice cream assassin) and “沉浸式” (immersive) are also compound words formed through metaphors. There are also new buzzwords that use sentence forms, such as “多巴胺xx” (dopamine xx) and “质疑xx理解xx成为xx” (question xx, understand xx, and become xx).

Dialectal words. Buzzwords also include dialectal words. The widespread use of the internet has brought people from all over the country closer, spreading dialectal elements in buzzwords. For example, “搭子” (dazi),

originally from northern dialects, means a companion or partner in doing something together. Over time, its usage context has entered into Mandarin, with its meaning expanded to any temporary or long-term partner. Similarly, “显眼包” (play a fool) is from multiple dialects, originally referring to someone who loves to show off and make a spectacle, often for entertainment. Now, it signifies humorous eccentricity, attracting attention with one’s appearance and personality traits, bringing joy to others, with a more positive connotation. These dialectal words, after entering Mandarin, have undergone semantic or lexical changes.

Characteristics of Buzzwords

Guided by the theory of functional equivalence, the translation of buzzwords must also consider their linguistic features. Compared to ordinary vocabulary, Chinese buzzwords have the following prominent characteristics:

Conciseness. The Top 10 buzzwords from 2021 to 2023 have a maximum length of eight characters, mostly ranging from two to four characters. Despite being just a few words, they carry rich cultural connotations. For example, “新质生产力” (new quality productive forces) represents a newly proposed type of productivity in China, reflecting the country’s current strategic choices. “踔厉奋发、勇毅前行” (forging ahead with enterprise and fortitude) often appears in documents and news reports, demonstrating the spirit of endeavor in the great practice of comprehensively building a socialist modernized country.

Metaphorical and metonymic usage. Over the past three years, half of the top buzzwords have utilized metaphors and metonymy. For instance, “破防” (overwhelm) originally referred to breaking through defenses in games but has metaphorically extended to psychological domains, implying the breach of psychological defenses. “多巴胺” (dopamine), originally a hormone produced when one feels pleasure, is metaphorically used to describe the pleasure felt upon seeing colorful clothing, leading to dopamine secretion. The semantic shift of the word “多巴胺” (dopamine) through metonymy indicates excitement or happiness.

Informality and humor. Buzzwords often incorporate regional dialects, which are a form of spoken language expression. Both “显眼包” (play a fool) and “搭子” (dazi) mentioned earlier originated from local dialects. The tendency towards informality favors the spread of buzzwords. In addition, Yang (2023) argued that during communication, overly blunt expressions would cause the listener’s resentment and prevent effective communication. Therefore, the widespread use of buzzwords also benefits from their relatively indirect and humorous expression. “显眼包” (play a fool) is linked to the semantic concept of humiliating which contains a spirit of ridicule and entertainment. But to put it bluntly is somewhat rude and offensive, so using the term “显眼包” can convey both the semantics and the humor.

Under the guidance of the Functional Equivalence Theory, the translation of popular phrases should first integrate their background and causes to convey their basic semantics. Then, considering the characteristics of the aforementioned popular phrases, efforts should be made to maximize their reproduction in the translated text.

Analysis of Translation Strategies for Buzzwords From the Perspective of Functional Equivalence

Literal Translation

“Literal translation” refers to closely following the original text during the translation process, translating word for word and sentence by sentence. According to Lao (1989), Nida later emphasized the importance of formal equivalence because although languages around the world have different characteristics, they also share

certain commonalities. Therefore, under certain conditions, we need to strive for equivalence in both form and content. As Liang (2010) pointed out, since China and Japan both belong to the Chinese character cultural circle and use Chinese characters, when translating new words and buzzwords that express simple concepts, we can use the simplest and most straightforward method, which is literal translation, for example, translating “新质生产力” (new quality productive forces) directly as “新たな質の生産力”. This buzzword is a fixed economic and political term in China, with a clear definition, so literal translation can retain the accuracy of the original vocabulary and semantics. Similarly, “中国式现代化” (Chinese path to modernization) translated as “中国式現代化”, “百年未有之大局” (profound changes unseen in a century) translated as “百年間なかった大変動” etc. “雪糕刺客” (ice cream assassin) refers to expensive ice cream with ordinary packaging that does not display its price, catching consumers off guard during checkout, thus “assassinating” their wallets. In Japanese, there is also the term “刺客” which has the same meaning as in Chinese, referring to “a person who assassinates with a weapon”. Both countries can speculate on the meaning of this buzzword based on the characteristics of “刺客”. Therefore, it can be translated literally as “アイスの刺客”. In this example, using literal translation preserves the original metaphor, conveying the meaning vividly while maintaining its vivid imagery. This approach satisfies both content and formal equivalence, reproducing the rhetorical devices of the original text in the translation.

Free Translation

The translation method of “free translation” is based on the premise that a completely literal translation cannot effectively convey the original text. Free translation means maintaining the semantic meaning of the original text while considering the fluency and beauty of the translation. For example, the term “显眼包” (play a fool)” originates from local dialects. Translating it directly as “目立つの包” (conspicuous bag) cannot convey its meaning. Therefore, three websites translate it as “目立ちたがり屋” (conspicuous person), “目立つ存在” (conspicuous presence) and “外見や性格から人々の注目を集める人” (someone who attracts attention from others due to appearance or personality). “目立ちたがり屋” adopts the domestication translation strategy, a fixed expression in Japanese referring to someone who desires to be more noticeable than others, using words and actions to attract attention. This represents one aspect of the meaning of “显眼包” (play a fool), albeit with a narrower semantic range. Although the meaning of “显眼包” (play a fool) varies in different contexts, from the perspective of individual words, “目立つ存在” is closest in content and form to the entire connotation of “显眼包” (play a fool). “显眼包” (play a fool) can refer not only to people but also to conspicuous items. “目立つ存在” is in line with the concise and vivid characteristics of buzzwords, facilitating their dissemination while also being the closest to the full semantics of “显眼包” (play a fool). Similarly, “搭子” (dazi) due to cultural and contextual differences between China and Japan is translated as “~友” (~friend), “~仲間” (~companion), to make it more understandable and natural. However, “搭子”(dazi) is based on the fast pace of contemporary Chinese society, emphasizing a temporary and precise companionship relationship, a form of social interaction shallower than friendship. Therefore, “~仲間” is relatively closer to the connotation of “搭子” (dazi) than “~友”.

Transliteration + Annotation

When both literal and free translations fail to achieve the best translation effect, a combination of transliteration and annotation can be adopted. “大白” originally referred to the medical inflatable robot Baymax in Disney’s animated movie. Due to Baymax’s obese figure and pure white appearance, it was translated as “大

白” in China. During epidemic prevention and control, Chinese medical staff wearing protective clothing resembled Baymax’s appearance. The character Baymax is a medical robot who cares deeply for patients, is inherently kind-hearted, and can even sacrifice himself to save others in critical moments. This is very similar to the qualities of frontline medical workers and volunteers who serve others at the risk of their lives. Therefore, they are affectionately called “大白”. *People’s Daily Online (Japanese Version)* directly translating it as “大白” would be confusing for Japanese readers. Additionally, in Japanese, there is a word spelled the same way as “大白” meaning “big wine glass, large cup”, which could lead to mistranslation. Nida believed that literal translation could not be used when it would cause a mistake in meaning. *China Radio International* translates it as “新型コロナ対策の防護服を着る人”, which conveys the meaning but reduces its vividness, lacking the warm and friendly tone. *People’s Daily Online (Japanese Version)* translates it as “ダーバイ” (新型コロナ対策の防護服を着る人), which clearly conveys the meaning and further guides Japanese readers to understand the meaning of this buzzword in Chinese.

Additional Translation

Liu (1991) pointed out that when translators transfer information from one language and cultural structure to another, they must not only transform the obvious language expressions in the original text into the translation but also translate the implicit components in the original text, especially some components related to the cultural background of the original text, into obvious language forms. Take the term “躺平” (lie down) as an example. *People’s China* translates it as “寝そべる”, and *China Radio International* translates it as “横たわる” or “寝そべる”. In Japanese, these two words simply mean lying down, without metaphorical meanings. *People’s Daily Online (Japanese Version)* translates it as “寝そべり現象” (lying-flat phenomenon), adding the word “現象”(phenomenon). If translated literally, combined with context, perhaps a state of naturalness and lack of fervent pursuit of success can be inferred from the lazy lying-down state. However, at the vocabulary level, literal translation may not allow Japanese readers to understand the information well and may even lead to misinterpretation. Therefore, in this case, additional translation can allow Japanese readers to speculate on its cultural connotations and understand it as a current situation in Chinese society. This way, it is not only convenient for Japanese readers to understand but also increases awareness of the source culture.

Conclusion

This paper comprehensively analyzes the Japanese translation strategies of the Top 10 buzzwords released by *The Chinese Publication Excessive Wording* editorial department in mainstream media under the guidance of the theory of functional equivalence. When translating buzzwords into Japanese, literal translation is the main method to preserve the semantics and forms of the original text, suitable for creation of new words and words with the same metaphors in China and Japan, conveying both semantics and corresponding forms. Free translation is suitable for buzzwords with Chinese local characteristics, better reflecting the cultural connotations of the source language and meeting the reading habits of target language readers. Additionally, for buzzwords that do not have the same metaphors in the target language, transliteration with annotation or additional translation can be used to retain the cultural characteristics of the original text and help readers understand the era background and cultural connotations. In summary, the translation of buzzwords needs to consider both content and form, as well as cultural differences, to select appropriate strategies, thereby better conveying the charm and cultural value of buzzwords.

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