

A Study on Japanese-Chinese Translation Strategies of Cross-Cultural Terms From the Perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory

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The core difficulty in translating cross-cultural communication texts lies in how to handle terms that carry specific cultural cognitive patterns. This paper takes Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory as an analytical framework, and using the Japanese-Chinese translation practice of cross-cultural specialized terms in the intercultural training textbook 『異文化トレーニング』 as an example, compares the differences between the initial translation and the final translation to examine the translation strategies for cross-cultural terms and the applicability and limitations of Functional Equivalence Theory in Japanese-Chinese translation. The study finds that the core mechanism of translating cross-cultural terms is "conceptual reconstruction," i.e., the translator needs to recreate the source language concept based on the target language's cognitive framework and expressive habits. Specifically, the translation of loanwords needs to go beyond literal correspondence to achieve the indigenized reconstruction of concepts; the translation of specialized terms needs to strike a balance between disciplinary consensus and contextual adaptability; and the translation of Sino-Japanese homographs requires vigilance against "formal fidelity" masking "semantic deviation." This paper further points out that the value of Functional Equivalence Theory lies in providing a "reader-centered" translation orientation, but its effective realization in terminology translation depends on the translator's deep understanding of conceptual connotations and the creative use of target language expressive resources. This study can provide strategic references for the Japanese-Chinese translation practice of cross-cultural communication texts.

Keywords: Functional Equivalence Theory, cross-cultural terms, Japanese-Chinese translation, conceptual reconstruction, translation strategies

Introduction

As exchanges between China and Japan in political, economic, cultural, and technological fields grow increasingly deeper, cross-cultural terms, as the core carrier of information transmission, have their translation accuracy and effectiveness directly determining the quality of cross-cultural communication. Although Japanese and Chinese share some Chinese characters, due to differences in historical accumulation, cultural contexts, and language systems, a large number of semantically mismatched or culturally loaded terms have emerged. Especially in the intelligent era, new concepts emerge one after another. For example, although 「AI (人工知

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能)」 in Japanese and “artificial intelligence” in Chinese are similar in literal form, there are subtle differences at the levels of technical context, public cognition, and cultural metaphor. Similarly, 「クラウド(cloud)」 in Japanese often corresponds to “cloud services,” but in the Chinese internet context, the word “cloud” has developed multiple cultural metaphors, and simple literal translation can easily lead to comprehension deviations. These term translation issues unique to the intelligent era are becoming new obstacles in cross-cultural communication. In current Japanese-Chinese terminology translation practice, many problems still exist. For example, some translators over-pursue formal correspondence while neglecting functional equivalence, leading to semantic distortion of terms; some translations lack systematic strategies, making it difficult to adapt to the professionalism and cultural load of terms from different fields; although the popularization of machine translation improves efficiency, it is prone to stiff expressions, such as “Japanese-style Chinese,” exacerbating the loss of cultural context. Existing research mostly focuses on terminology translation in single fields, lacking the systematic construction of strategies based on Functional Equivalence Theory, and thus cannot meet the actual needs of diverse cross-cultural communication. Against this background, Eugene Nida’s Functional Equivalence Theory shifts the core of translation from formal correspondence to effect equivalence, emphasizing that the target text should enable target language readers to have the same understanding and response as source language readers, thus providing important theoretical support for cross-cultural terminology translation. This theory breaks the binary opposition between “literal translation” and “free translation,” focuses on excavating the deep semantics and cultural connotations of terms in context, and aligns with the core requirement of “balancing accuracy and cultural adaptability” in cross-cultural terminology translation. Systematically exploring Japanese-Chinese translation strategies for cross-cultural terms based on Functional Equivalence Theory, solving the problems of cultural dislocation and semantic deviation in terminology translation, standardizing translation practice, and improving translation quality have important theoretical value and practical significance for promoting cross-cultural mutual understanding between China and Japan and facilitating deep cooperation in various fields between the two countries.

Literature Review

Nida’s Functional Equivalence Theory originated from the practice of Bible translation. Its core propositions can be summarized as three points: First, meaning takes precedence over form; the primary task of translation is to convey the meaning of the original text rather than to replicate its form. Second, reader response equivalence: the target language readers’ response to the translation should be equivalent to the original readers’ response to the original text. Third, the legitimacy of cultural conversion: when formal correspondence leads to obstacles in understanding meaning, the translator has the right to make adjustments at the cultural level (Nida, 1964; Nida & Taber, 1969). After this theory was introduced to China in the 1980s, scholars conducted in-depth analyses of its practical effects on Chinese literary translation, scientific and technical translation, and legal translation (Wen, 2004), and identified issues, such as Functional Equivalence Theory’s insufficient attention to cultural essentialism and its rather weak explanation of translator subjectivity (Guo, 2000). Numerous translation practices have promoted the development of Functional Equivalence Theory in Chinese-Japanese translation. The fundamental challenge faced in the field of Japanese-Chinese translation stems from the structural differences between the two languages. That is, Japanese is characterized by a “nested” modification structure, where a large amount of information is presented through multiple layers of premodifying attributes; Chinese,

on the other hand, is typified by “run-on sentences,” where information unfolds sequentially according to temporal or logical order (Gao, 2015). With the rapid development of international communication, current attention to the research field of cross-cultural terminology translation is insufficient. The core issue in terminology translation is how to accurately convey the conceptual connotation of source language terms in the target language. The academic community generally agrees that terminology translation should follow principles, such as monosemy, transparency, and systematicity (Zheng, 2012). At the level of terminology translation, existing research on Japanese-Chinese terminology translation has mostly focused on single dimensions, such as the handling of homographs (Song, 2020) or the translation and introduction of loanwords (Xie, 2018), lacking comprehensive investigations based on systematic translation practice. Japanese-Chinese translation faces the trap of “false correspondence” of Sino-Japanese homographs—words with the same written form but vastly different meanings (such as 「手紙」 and “toilet paper”) which can easily lead to mistranslation. Wei Xiangqing and Zhao Lianzhen (2012) pointed out that there are three modes for the translation and introduction of foreign terms: transliteration, literal translation, and free translation, among which free translation is often accompanied by “indigenized reconstruction of concepts.” In recent years, with the rise of artificial intelligence translation, scholars have begun to pay attention to AI’s performance in terminology translation. Research has found that AI is prone to problems, such as “indiscriminate translation, rigid translation, omission translation, and biased translation” when dealing with culturally loaded words (Tao, 2023). The particularity of cross-cultural terminology translation lies in the fact that terms carry not only concepts, but also the cognitive patterns and value orientations of specific cultures.

In summary, Functional Equivalence Theory provides a “reader-centered” basic orientation for terminology translation; Japanese-Chinese translation research reveals the influence of language type differences on translation strategies; and terminology translation research emphasizes the importance of accurate concept transmission. However, existing research rarely combines these three aspects to test the applicability of Functional Equivalence Theory in cross-cultural Japanese-Chinese terminology translation based on authentic translation practice. This study, grounded in translation practice, systematically examines translation strategies for cross-cultural terms from the perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory, providing some reference for research on the development and limitations of Functional Equivalence Theory in Japanese-Chinese cross-cultural terminology translation.

Case Analysis: Translation Strategies for Cross-Cultural Terms

The acceleration of globalization has made cross-cultural communication competence one of the core qualities of international talent, and the demand for the translation and introduction of intercultural training textbooks is consequently increasing. Such texts carry specific academic concepts and cultural cognitive patterns, and the accuracy of their terminology translation directly affects the effective dissemination of disciplinary knowledge. As a classic textbook in the field of cross-cultural communication, 『異文化トレーニング』 systematically introduces core concepts, such as cultural dimension theory and intercultural communication models, making the translation of its terminology system of significant research value. This study aims to answer the following three questions:

1. How does Functional Equivalence Theory guide the Japanese-Chinese translation of cross-cultural terms?
2. What difficulties do different types of terms (loanwords, specialized terms, and Sino-Japanese homographs) face in translation, and what translation strategies should be adopted?

3. From the perspective of functional equivalence, what is the mechanism for achieving “equivalence” in the translation of cross-cultural terms?

This study adopts a case analysis method, selecting representative terminology translation cases from 『異文化トレーニング』. By comparing the differences between the initial translation and the final translation, it analyzes the motivations for revision, extracts translation strategies, and engages in dialogue with the core propositions of Functional Equivalence Theory. The case selection follows the following criteria: type coverage (covering loanwords, specialized terms, and homographs), problem typicality (significant differences between initial and final translations), and theoretical relevance (capable of engaging in dialogue with Functional Equivalence Theory).

Translation of Loanwords: Indigenized Reconstruction of Concepts

Loanwords are an important component of Japanese vocabulary. The difficulty in translation lies in how to choose between “phonetic and formal transplantation” and “conceptual transplantation.” Functional Equivalence Theory requires translators to go beyond literal correspondence and carry out conceptual reconstruction based on the cognitive framework of the target language readers.

Contextual explicitation of academic concepts.

Case 1: Translation of 「シナリオ」

Original text: トロンペナールスとハムデン・ターナーの調査方法の一つはジレンマを含むシナリオを提示し…

Initial translation: script

Final translation: scenario case

「シナリオ」 derives from the English “scenario.” In daily contexts, it is often translated as “script” or “plan,” emphasizing fictionality and planning. This term does not refer to “a script in the literary or cinematic sense, but rather specifically refers to a descriptive situational text deliberately designed by researchers to induce subjects’ responses to specific cultural values, containing value conflicts and dilemmas.” The initial translation “script” overemphasizes the attributes of literary fiction and narration, weakening its empirical and scientific nature as a social science research tool, and may easily lead readers to semantic deviation. The final translation “scenario case” bases itself on the academic research context, retaining the scene characteristics of “situation” while highlighting the research sample attribute of “case,” accurately restoring its connotation as a research tool. It achieves context-driven explication of academic connotations, i.e., relying on the overarching research context, stripping away the everyday semantics of the loanword, and highlighting its professional conceptual orientation.

Precise matching of cultural connotations.

Case 2: Translation of 「コネ」

Original text: 就職活動を体験した人なら学校の就職担当官から「コネがあるなら活用しなさい」と言われたことがあるのではないだろうか。

Initial translation: relationship/connection

Final translation: personal network

「コネ」, borrowed from the English “connection,” has departed from the original meaning of simple “link” or “association” and has solidified into a unique cultural concept within the Japanese collectivist cultural context, specifically referring to an informal social network based on in-group identity ties that can be used to obtain actual benefits in social matters such as job hunting. The initial translation “relationship” is semantically broad

in Chinese, which can refer to “interpersonal interactions or connections between things, failing to highlight its exclusive connotation as a social resource.” Backdoor, although it can correspond to some of the semantics colloquially, carries obvious negative connotations of rule-breaking, backroom manipulation, and moral depreciation, contradicting the neutral cultural norm in the original text where school career advisors openly suggest that students reasonably utilize existing social resources, thereby distorting the pragmatic stance of the original text. The final translation “personal network” encompasses the dual imagery of “interpersonal connection” and “resource network,” accurately corresponding to the cultural core of 「コネ」, while aligning with the positive, neutral suggestive tone of the original text, embodying a translation strategy of dual matching of cultural connotation and pragmatic stance.

Cross-linguistic activation of metaphorical systems.

Case 3: Translation of 「サングラス」

Original text: その「癖」をサングラスにたとえると、人はみな、独自のサングラスを通して周りの人を見ていると言える。

Initial translation: sunglasses

Final translation: colored glasses

The dictionary definition of 「サングラス」 is “sunglasses,” referring only to a physical light-shielding device. In the original text, the author likens the inherent habits, biases, and thinking patterns in human cognition to a cognitive filter, with the core metaphor being “subjective bias leads to cognitive distortion.” The initial translation “sunglasses” merely restores the literal meaning of the object, failing to carry the metaphorical connotations of “bias, one-sided cognition, and distorted perspective,” making it difficult for readers to grasp the author’s metaphorical intention. The final translation “colored glasses” activates the inherent cultural metaphor system in Chinese. In Chinese expression, “wearing colored glasses to view problems” is itself a classic metaphor for subjective bias and non-objective cognition, achieving complete functional equivalence with the original metaphor. This revision follows the principle of activating the target language’s metaphorical system, abandoning literal translation and selecting a functionally equivalent cultural metaphorical expression, achieving cross-linguistic cognitive resonance.

Pursuit of transparency in disciplinary concepts.

Case 4: Translation of 「クロネミックス」

Original text: 時間について扱う分野をクロネミックスと呼ぶ。

Initial translation: phonetic transcription

Final translation: chronemics

「クロネミックス」 is a Japanese phonetic transcription of the English “chronemics.” The root “chron-” originally means “time.” This term belongs to the branches of communication studies and sociolinguistics, specializing in the study of human use and perception of time and their sociocultural meanings. The initial translation adopted pure phonetic transcription, retaining only the phonetic form without any semantic direction, making it completely unfamiliar to Chinese readers, creating serious reading and comprehension barriers, and failing to meet the basic requirements of academic terminology (“easy to understand and disseminate”). The final translation adopts a free translation naming method, using “time” to specify the object of study, “behavior” to focus on the actual use and response patterns of time by humans, and “studies” to establish its disciplinary field attribute. The overall translation is intuitive and clear, transparent in meaning, aligning with the disciplinary

connotation while facilitating understanding and academic dissemination for Chinese readers, embodying the principle of transparency in academic terminology translation.

Translation of Specialized Terms: Bridging Academic Discourse Systems

The core contradiction in the translation of specialized terms lies in how to balance terminological stability and contextual adaptability. According to Functional Equivalence Theory, translators must both respect the established normative translation traditions of the target discipline, ensuring the continuity and consensus of academic concepts, and make appropriate fine-tuning based on the specific context of the text, avoiding conceptual dislocation caused by mechanical application, ultimately achieving a smooth connection between Chinese and Japanese academic discourse systems.

Confirmation and adherence to established translations.

Case 5: Translation of 「自己効力感」

Original text: ある文化の中で、場面に応じた適切な行動が取れる自信をベックは自己効力感と呼んでいる。

Initial translation: self-drive

Final translation: self-efficacy

「自己効力感」 is the established Japanese translation of “self-efficacy.” Its core connotation is an individual’s subjective judgment and belief in whether they can effectively execute goal-directed behaviors in specific situations, and it is a core term in the field of psychology. After this concept was introduced into Chinese academia, a stable, common, and standardized translation “self-efficacy” has been formed, widely adopted in textbooks, monographs, and academic papers, becoming a consensus expression within the psychological discourse community. The initial translation “self-drive” refers to the intrinsic power or motivation that drives one to take initiative and make continuous efforts, deviating from the core of the concept and confusing the boundary between “efficacy belief” and “action motivation,” easily causing readers to be unable to connect the translation with existing knowledge systems and disrupting the coherence of academic concepts. The final translation strictly follows the established disciplinary translation, adhering to the principle of prioritizing academic community consensus, ensuring terminological stability and the effectiveness of academic dialogue.

Accurate conveyance of conceptual attributes.

Case 6: Translation of 「関与特定の」「関与拡散的」

Original text: 関与特定のな場合は限られた個人の生活や役割では関わるが、それ以上の発展は望まない。関与拡散的な関わりを志向する場合は一度知り合ったら、生活活動のさまざまな場面と役割で関わるのが必然とされる。

Initial translation: 参与特定型 **Participation-Specific Type**

Final translation: 特定性渉入 **Specific Involvement**

The initial translation directly and rigidly transliterated 「関与」 as “participation.” This expression is not a standard Chinese collocation; its semantics are vague, making it difficult for readers to understand its core meaning. “Involvement,” as a common academic term, accurately corresponds to the core meaning of “participation, involvement, and association” emphasized by 「関与」 and conforms to the expression habits of sociological terminology. Furthermore, the choice between the suffixes “type” and “attribute” reflects a discernment of conceptual attributes: The original text does not describe a dichotomous typology of interpersonal relationships but rather describes continuous attribute differences in the degree and scope of interpersonal

involvement. Therefore, using “Specific Involvement” better reflects the attribute characteristics and degree differences of the concepts than “Participation-Specific Type,” avoiding semantic deviation caused by mechanical categorization. This revision implements a strategy of refined discernment of conceptual attributes, ensuring that the terms are equivalent to the original text at both the connotational and logical levels.

Correction of conceptual orientation.

Case 7: Translation of 「価値志向」

Original text: フローレンス・クラックホーンとフレッド・ストロッドベックは... 文化間・文化内での価値観のバリエーション、「価値志向」を見ていくことで文化特有のパターンの違いを説明しようとした。

Initial translation: value aspiration

Final translation: value orientation

「価値志向」 is a Sino-Japanese homographic term. The initial translation directly copied the characters, easily falling into the cognitive trap of “same form means same meaning.” In the Chinese context, “aspiration” emphasizes an individual’s inner ambition, ideals, and future pursuits, with strong subjectivity, internality, and personalization. Using it to describe collective value tendencies at the cultural level clearly shifts the focus inappropriately. The corresponding theoretical concept in the original text, “value orientation,” has as its core the direction of value choices and criteria for behavioral judgment provided by a cultural system for its members, emphasizing the guiding and regulating role of culture on individual behavior. The final translation “value orientation” uses “orientation” to highlight directionality, guidance, and regulation, precisely matching the deep connotation of the concept and clearly conveying the core logic that culture shapes behavioral patterns through value systems. This revision embodies a strategy for precise correction of conceptual orientation, achieving a high degree of alignment between terminological connotation and theoretical core by reselecting the core meanings of the Chinese characters.

Translation of Sino-Japanese Homographs: The Trap of False Correspondence

Sino-Japanese homographs refer to Chinese-character vocabulary items that have the same or highly similar written forms but differ in semantic range, stylistic register, cultural connotation, or pragmatic function between the Chinese and Japanese language systems. The difficulty in translation lies in the false sense of security brought about by formal consistency: translators tend to directly borrow the words due to their similar written forms, neglecting deep-seated semantic mismatches, ultimately leading to comprehension deviations and expression errors.

Mismatch and correction of register.

Case 8: Translation of 「宣誓」

Original text: これは教授の指示にも反していたし、彼らが宣誓書にサインをした学業倫理規程にも反することであった。

Initial translation: oath document

Final translation: guarantee document

The Japanese word 「宣誓」 and the Chinese word “oath/swear” are homographs with basically corresponding dictionary definitions, but there is a clear mismatch in their stylistic register and applicable domains. Chinese “oath/swear” carries a strong sense of ritual, solemnity, and legal seriousness, mostly used in formal occasions, such as inauguration, party induction, court testimony, and major commitments, with an

extremely high register. The original context involves students signing a document pledging to abide by academic ethics regulations. This belongs to the category of academic integrity commitment in a campus setting. Although serious, it is far from the ritual level and solemnity corresponding to “oath/swear.” The initial translation directly used “oath document,” which carries an overly heavy register and does not match the everyday campus scenario. The final translation “guarantee document” has a moderate register, retaining the seriousness of the commitment while fitting the scenario attribute of students making a written integrity pledge to the school, achieving precise matching of stylistic category and usage context and correcting the register mismatch caused by the homograph.

Differences and matching of cognitive depth.

Case 9: Translation of 「認識」

Original text: 違いをどうとらえるか: 異文化の認識

Initial translation: recognition, knowing

Final translation: understanding

The Sino-Japanese homograph 「認識」 and Chinese “knowing” appear semantically consistent, but there are significant differences in cognitive level and depth of connotation. Chinese “knowing” often remains at the surface cognitive stage of “knowing, recognizing, and preliminary understanding,” emphasizing the perception and identification of external features of things. In contrast, Japanese 「認識」, deeply influenced by philosophical and cognitive science terminology, has greater depth of connotation, including not only “knowing,” but also emphasizing systematic grasp and rational understanding of the essence, internal logic, deep relationships, and cultural mechanisms of things. If translated as “recognition of different cultures,” it could easily be understood as merely “knowing that cultural differences exist,” failing to reflect the academic pursuit of deep thinking, analysis, and grasp of cultural differences. The final translation “understanding,” better aligns with the deep cognitive connotation of Japanese 「認識」, covering the complete cognitive process from perception to internalization, from surface to depth, achieving precise matching of cognitive levels and avoiding semantic shallowing caused by differences in cognitive depth of homographs. Then, why not translate it as “understanding”?

Synthesis of the above case analyses. The Japanese-Chinese translation strategies for cross-cultural terms can be summarized as follows:

First, for loanwords, through the tension between phonetic-formal transplantation and conceptual transplantation, strategies, such as context-driven explication, pragmatic stance matching, metaphorical system activation, and transparent naming achieve indigenized conceptual reconstruction.

Second, for specialized terms, balancing disciplinary consensus and contextual adaptability, strategies, such as adherence to disciplinary consensus, discernment of conceptual attributes, and correction of conceptual orientation accomplish the bridging of academic discourse systems.

Third, for homographs, facing the trap of formal correspondence masking meaning deviation, strategies, such as matching of stylistic category and matching of cognitive level require precise alignment of pragmatic categories.

The core mechanism of the three types of strategies can be unified as “conceptual reconstruction,” i.e., the translator, based on the cognitive framework and expressive habits of the target language, recreates the source language concept, enabling it to both convey the core connotation of the original concept and conform to the cognitive habits of the target language readers.

Discussion and Conclusion

First, this study finds that in the translation of cross-cultural terms, the mechanism for achieving functional equivalence is not “finding equivalent expressions” but “conducting conceptual reconstruction.” This includes three levels:

1. Explicitation reconstruction. When the connotation of a source language term needs to be presented more clearly in the target language, the translator must make its implicit dimensions explicit. For example, 「シナリオ」 → “情景案例” (scenario case), making the implicit characteristic of “descriptive situation in research methods” explicit;

2. Transformative reconstruction. When the expression of the source language does not conform to the cognitive habits of the target language, the translator transforms it into idiomatic expressions of the target language. For example, 「価値志向」 → “价值导向” (value orientation), transforming “aspiration” into “orientation,” which better matches the conceptual attribute;

3. Creative reconstruction. When there is no existing concept in the target language to correspond, the translator creates new expressions. For example, 「クロネミックス」 → “时间行为学” (chronemics), creating a transparent term in Chinese.

Second, regarding the applicability and boundary limitations of Functional Equivalence Theory: The applicability of Functional Equivalence Theory in this study is reflected in its provision of a “reader-centered” basic orientation, guiding translators to go beyond literal correspondence and focus on the cognitive habits of target language readers. Specifically, in the translation of metaphorical terms (e.g., 「サングラス」 → “有色眼镜”/colored glasses), functional equivalence requires the translator to activate functionally similar metaphorical systems in the target language; in conveying pragmatic stance (e.g., 「コネ」 → “人脉”/personal network), functional equivalence requires the translator to identify the pragmatic intention of the source text and match it. However, this study also reveals the boundary of applicability of Functional Equivalence Theory. When a term involves disciplinary consensus (e.g., 「自己効力感」 → “自我效能感”/self-efficacy), “reader response” is not the primary consideration. The translator’s task is to follow the conventions of the academic discourse community rather than creating new translations to please readers. Thus, the scope of Functional Equivalence Theory has a boundary condition of “disciplinary consensus.”

Third, in Functional Equivalence Theory, the translator is seen as a matcher seeking “equivalent expressions.” However, the translator as presented in this study is a “cultural mediator” and “concept generator” who negotiates between two cognitive frameworks. The translator’s core competence is not “equivalence matching” but recreating the source language concept according to the target language’s cognitive framework.

This study examines the applicability of Functional Equivalence Theory in Japanese-Chinese translation of cross-cultural terms, reveals its effective boundaries in terminology translation, and proposes “conceptual reconstruction” as a supplementary explanatory mechanism for functional equivalence, enriching the theoretical interpretation of cross-cultural terminology translation. However, this study also has the limitation of a single source of cases. Since it is based only on the translation practice of one textbook, the generalizability of the conclusions needs further testing. In terms of content, the analysis focuses only on the lexical level. Future research requires comparative studies of multiple text types; meanwhile, testing of reader response, i.e., empirical testing of translation effects, is needed. Finally, in the current era of rapid artificial intelligence development, conducting comparative studies of human and AI translation to systematically examine their differences in

terminology translation is an important topic for future translation research.

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