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Catford's Translation Shifts in International Publicity: The German Translation of the 2026 New Year Address

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Catford's Translation Shifts Theory provides a practical analytical framework for political international communication translation. The theory classifies shifts into two broad categories: level shifts and category shifts. Level shifts are mainly manifested at the lexical and grammatical levels, while category shifts are further divided into four types: structure shifts, class shifts, unit shifts, and intra-system shifts. Within the theoretical framework of Catford's Translation Shifts Theory, this paper adopts the Chinese-German parallel texts of President Xi Jinping's 2026 New Year Address to analyze the shift mechanisms in the translation of current-affair international communication texts. It aims to offer references for subsequent political international communication translation practice.

Keywords: Catford, translation shifts, international publicity translation, New Year Address

Introduction

As an important communicative tool, translation has played a crucial role throughout human history, particularly in facilitating economic and trade exchanges, cultural interactions, and shared development across regions and ethnic groups around the world.

In recent years, with the continuous improvement of China's international status, its development achievements, development model, and political philosophy have received extensive attention from the international community. However, due to significant differences in cultural mindsets, values, and discourse systems between China and the West, some Western countries, constrained by inherent perceptions and prejudices, struggle to understand China's political propositions and positions, and even distort or discredit them. Against this backdrop, international publicity translation has become a key pathway to bridge cultural gaps and mitigate cognitive biases.

This paper takes the German translation of General Secretary Xi Jinping's 2026 New Year Address as its primary research object. The German translation is the official version released by the Institute of Party History and Literature of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, while the corresponding Chinese original is taken from the full text of the address officially published by Xinhua News Agency. Both sources are authoritative, ensuring the political accuracy and linguistic comparability of the research texts.

As an important channel for building a friendly international image of China and conveying China's political philosophy, the translation of the New Year Address constitutes a significant yet challenging task in international publicity translation (Li, 2017). In concrete translation practice, the translator's choice of cultural identity is of

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vital importance, which requires them to apply different translation strategies in different contexts to avoid cultural conflicts.

Catford's Translation Shifts Theory is one of the classic theories in translation studies, providing valuable guidance for linguistic shifts in the translation process. From the perspective of Catford's Translation Shifts Theory, this paper explores shift strategies at the lexical, syntactic, and textual levels in the official German translation of the 2026 New Year Address. It seeks to summarize shift patterns in the official German translation of political texts, induce optimization approaches for international publicity translation, and offer references and implications for telling China's stories well and improving the effect of international communication against the background of cross-cultural dissemination.

Basic Concepts of Catford's Translation Shifts Theory

J. C. Catford was a renowned British linguist and translation theorist. His seminal work *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*, published in 1965, offers a brand-new interpretation of translation from the perspective of modern linguistics and has exerted far-reaching influence. Catford (1965) argues that translation is the replacement of textual material in one language by equivalent textual material in another language. In other words, it converts the phonological, graphological, lexical, and grammatical systems of one language into the corresponding systems of another. Due to the incompatibility of different linguistic systems, deviations from the source text are inevitable in the process of achieving textual equivalence. Catford terms such deviations "translation shifts" (Chen & Xiong, 2012). As he puts it, "As long as we acknowledge that different languages have different modes of expression, we must recognize the rationality of translation shifts" (Mu, 1993).

"Shift," a term coined by Catford, refers to "departure from formal correspondence in the process of translating a source text into a target text" (Liu, 2019, p. 4). Shifts fall into two forms: level shifts and category shifts.

A level shift means that a source language unit at one linguistic level has a target language equivalent at a different linguistic level. Level shifts are mainly manifested at the grammatical and lexical levels. As Murray notes, "Through level shifts, rigid wording can be made more coherent" (Catford, 1965).

As for category shifts, Catford defines them as departures from formal correspondence in translation. Category shifts occur within the same linguistic level, and include four types: structure shifts, class shifts, unit shifts, and intra-system shifts.

Textual Features and Translation Difficulties of the New Year Address from the Perspective of International Publicity

Textual Features of the New Year Address

The New Year Address is one of the important forms for showcasing China's image to the world and telling China's stories well, embodying features of the times, political significance, and humanistic concern. It includes both a review of annual work and a vision for future development, with a clear and well-organized narrative structure. In terms of linguistic expression, it extensively employs four-character idioms, parallel structures, and classical rhetorical devices, and is imbued with rich Chinese cultural images and characteristic political discourse. With a large number of culture-loaded words and a distinctive linguistic style, it presents considerable difficulties in linguistic shift for translation, and thus holds high research value for international publicity translation.

Peter Newmark (1988) divides all texts into three types: "expressive texts," "informative texts," and "vocative texts." Political texts, by contrast, are primarily vocative in function, aiming to enable readers to better listen to "China's stories." As an important representative of political documents, the translation of the New Year Address should not only accurately convey the meaning of the original text, but also preserve its style and tone as much as possible. Meanwhile, it should take into account the cultural background and linguistic habits of the target audience, so that the translation, while remaining as close as possible to the source language expression, can be more easily understood and accepted by target language readers. Furthermore, political texts often involve the country's major principles and fundamental policies, requiring translators to fully understand the relevant cultural background to better grasp the intention and focus of the original text.

Core Translation Difficulties of the New Year Address

Eugene A. Nida (2001, p. 82) points out that for a truly successful translator, familiarity with two cultures is even more important than mastery of two languages. As a rigorous language, German differs dramatically from Chinese in terms of expressive conventions and cultural background. Particularly in the translation of typical international publicity texts, such as the New Year Address, exclusive political terms and contemporary expressions often lack corresponding German equivalents; poetic allusions and cultural images tend to lose their original artistic conception in cross-linguistic transfer. Meanwhile, there are remarkable differences in syntactic logic between Chinese and German, making it difficult to simply reproduce the rhetorical charm and emotional momentum of the New Year Address in German. Therefore, in translation, translators need to conduct an in-depth analysis of the original text, accurately comprehend its context and meaning, and then select appropriate translation strategies for linguistic shift.

A Study of the German Translation of Xi Jinping's New Year Address From the Perspective of Catford's Translation Shifts Theory

Level Shifts

Level shifts generally refer to "transitions from grammatical structure to lexical structure, or from lexical structure to grammatical structure."

Tense shift.

Example 1

> Chinese original: 五年来，我们踔厉奋发、勇毅前行，克服重重困难挑战，圆满完成目标任务，在中国式现代化新征程上迈出了稳健步伐。
>
> English rendering: Over the past five years, we have forged ahead with great determination and courage, overcome numerous difficulties and challenges, successfully accomplished our goals and tasks, and taken solid steps on the new journey of Chinese modernization.
>
> German translation: In den vergangenen fünf Jahren haben wir uns voller Elan und Mut vorangearbeitet, zahlreiche Herausforderungen gemeistert und sind unerschrocken vorangeschritten.

Analysis: Given the high authority and clear temporal reference of texts, such as the New Year Address, the expressions "over the past five years," "successfully accomplished," and "have taken solid steps" in the original text all represent political achievements completed within a specific period and with lasting positive impacts to the present. Accordingly, the translation must accurately convey the perfective meaning of "past actions producing positive present effects." As translators with a conscious cultural identity of the source language, they proactively adopt the German grammatical form that best preserves this layer of meaning—the present perfect

tense (haben + past participle)—rather than the simple past tense that would come most naturally to native German speakers in pure narration. On the whole, this approach remains more faithful to the original text. The Chinese text implies sentence tense through lexical items or function words, while the German translation realizes the same meaning through the present perfect form of verbs. This conforms to a level shift between different linguistic levels from lexis to grammar.

Plural shift.

Example 2

Chinese original: 我国经济总量连续跨越新关口，今年预计达到140万亿元，经济实力、科技实力、国防实力、综合国力跃上新台阶，……。

English rendering: China's total economic output has continuously broken new thresholds. It is expected to reach 140 trillion yuan this year, and China's economic strength, scientific, and technological strength, national defense strength, and overall national strength have risen to a new level, ...

German translation: Das Gesamtvolumen der chinesischen Wirtschaft hat mehrmals neue Marken überschritten und wird in diesem Jahr voraussichtlich 140 Billionen Yuan RMB erreichen. Die Wirtschaftskraft, die wissenschaftlich-technischen Fähigkeiten, die Verteidigungskraft sowie die Gesamtstärke des Landes sind auf ein neues Niveau gehoben worden.

Analysis: Due to differences in expressive conventions, Chinese commonly uses numeral units, such as "ten, hundred, thousand, ten thousand, hundred million, trillion," and so on, while German has no direct equivalents for the Chinese units "wan" (ten thousand) or "yi" (hundred million). Instead, it frequently uses units like Million, Milliarde, and Billion, which do not align with Chinese usage habits. Therefore, conversion is required in such cases. In addition, when translating into German, attention should be paid to the plural forms of nouns, which are usually formed by adding "-e" or "-en" to the noun ending, or by adding "-er" with a vowel change, among other patterns. Although the Chinese phrase "new thresholds" does not explicitly indicate plural meaning, based on the preceding word "continuously" and the actual situation of China's economic development, the translator, as a native Chinese speaker with knowledge of current affairs, gives full play to subjectivity by using the plural form Marken in German, faithfully preserving the original meaning of "China's total economic output growing continuously."

Category Shifts

Structure shifts. Structure shift is the most common type of shift in translation, mainly involving the transformation of linguistic structures at the same grammatical level—That is, the translator adjusts or transforms the sentence structure during the translation process (Pu, 2004). A typical example is the conversion between active and passive voices.

Example 3

Chinese original: ……，首艘电磁弹射型航母正式入列。

English rendering: ..., China's first electromagnetic catapult aircraft carrier was officially commissioned.

German translation: ..., die Inbetriebnahme des ersten Flugzeugträgers mit elektromagnetischen Katapulten, ...

Analysis: During translation, the translator needs to adjust the syntax of the original text in accordance with the characteristics of German grammatical structure. The original Chinese is an active action expression without a clear subject. To avoid ambiguity, the translator cannot arbitrarily add a subject in the foreign translation, and thus converts it into a passive structure in German. Furthermore, since the preceding and following sentences are

parallel structures with similar forms but different verbs, the traditional structure of "werden + past participle" would appear lengthy and complicated here. Converting the verb into a nominalized form with passive meaning is more appropriate to convey the sense that "the aircraft carrier is put into service."

Class shifts. The main approach of class shift is the conversion of parts of speech, which refers to "changing the word class of an item in the source text to another word class in the target text during translation" (Kou & Lu, 2022). In Chinese-German translation, the conversion between verbs and nouns is particularly common, as Chinese makes extensive use of verb-object structures, pivotal constructions, and serial verb constructions, resulting in a high frequency of verb usage.

Example 4

Chinese original: 铭记历史、缅怀先烈、珍爱和平、开创未来

English rendering: Remember history, commemorate martyrs, cherish peace, and create a better future.

German translation: sich der Geschichte zu erinnern, den Märtyrern zu gedenken, den Frieden zu schätzen und eine schöne Zukunft zu gestalten

Analysis: The words "remember," "commemorate," "cherish," and "create" in the original text are all verbs, forming four parallel gerund phrases. When translated into German, they are rendered as the structure of "zu + infinitive" with nominal function, which falls into the category of verb-noun class shift.

Example 5

Chinese original: 柴米油盐、三餐四季，每个"小家"热气腾腾，中国这个"大家"就蒸蒸日上。

English rendering: With daily necessities secured and life flowing through all seasons, every "small family" brims with warmth, and the "big family" of China thrives with prosperity.

German translation: Solange jede „kleine Familie "das ganze Jahr und jeden einzelnen Tag gut versorgt ist und ein glückliches Leben führt, kann unser großes gemeinsames Zuhause gut gedeihen.

Analysis: The Chinese expressions "steaming hot" (reqi tengteng) and "thriving" (zhengzheng ri shang) are four-character idioms with Chinese characteristics, functioning as adjectives to describe the states of "small families" and the "big family" of China. However, there are no corresponding words in German. Hence, it is imperative for translators to exercise subjectivity and adopt free translation. Here, the adjectives are converted into adverbial elements that serve as predicative components in the sentence—gut versorgt ist und gut gedeihen.

Unit shifts. Unit shift refers to the conversion of a word into a phrase, a phrase into a sentence, or a word directly into a sentence during the translation process (Li, 2023).

Example 6

Chinese original: 岁序更替，华章日新。

English rendering: As the seasons turn, a splendid new chapter unfolds each day.

German translation: Mit jedem Jahreswechsel öffnet das Leben ein neues, glanzvolles Kapitel.

Analysis: The original text is a highly typical Chinese four-character parallel couplet, highly condensed and distinctively Chinese. It is impossible to find a corresponding expression at the phrase level in German. Therefore, within the framework of Catford's Translation Shifts Theory, the translator upgrades the phrase into a complete metaphorical sentence in German. Upholding the cultural identity of the source language, the translator preserves the elegance and uplifting tone in the political international publicity text, achieves functional equivalence, and embodies a unit shift from phrase to sentence.

Intra-system shifts. Intra-system shift refers to "the situation where certain expressions in the source language have no direct equivalents in the target language, and for the ease of understanding by target language readers, it is necessary to find expressions in the target language with meanings close to those in the source language." This is especially true for expressions with rich cultural connotations, such as idioms, proverbs, and two-part allegorical sayings (Xi, 2020). Here, we take metaphorical system shift as an example.

Example 7

Chinese original: 各族群众心手相连，像石榴籽一样紧紧抱在一起。

English rendering: People of all ethnic groups stand together as one, closely bound like pomegranate seeds.

German translation: Völker von verschiedenen ethnischen Gruppen sind mit einem Herz und einer Seele verbunden und wie Granatapfelkerne vereint.

Analysis: "Held closely together like pomegranate seeds" is a unique Chinese cultural image of ethnic unity, as well as a fixed political metaphor system that is rarely used in German. The translation first adopts the well-known idiomatic expression mit einem Herz und einer Seele to convey the core meaning, and at the same time, adds wie Granatapfelkerne vereint to retain the original image. This belongs to intra-system adaptive shift at the level of cultural imagery.

Conclusion

Political texts embody China's major political thoughts and political actions, represent China's political stance (Tian & Xu, 2024), and showcase China's image as a major country. In translating political texts, we should always take their fundamental cultural connotation as the core, and never neglect the cultural meaning for the sake of formal equivalence in translation—This is the soul of translation. As can be seen from the case analysis, based on Catford's Translation Shifts Theory, this paper analyzes specific cases in detail from six types of shifts, explores the underlying rationales of translation, and provides a practical analytical framework for political international publicity translation. At the lexical level, tense shifts effectively compensate for the tense-aspect differences between the Chinese and German linguistic systems; at the syntactic level, unit shifts and structure shifts achieve a dynamic balance between the concise expression of Chinese and the grammatical norms of German; and at the textual level, intra-system shifts facilitate the cultural adaptation and functional construction of Chinese-style political metaphors in the target language.

Based on the above shift patterns, this paper proposes the following optimization ideas and implications:

First, in international publicity translation, on the premise of being faithful to the original political connotation, sentence patterns or parts of speech should be flexibly adjusted to meet the mandatory grammatical requirements of the target language;

Second, translators should balance the cultural identity of the source language with the expectations of target language readers, and seek a balance between political equivalence and linguistic acceptability;

Third, for images and expressions with unique Chinese characteristics, we should start from the cultural differences between China and Germany, and adopt a translation strategy that combines "core image retention and target system integration" to avoid comprehension barriers caused by literal translation.

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