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A Study on the Translation of Automotive Terminology From the Perspective of Functionalist Translation Theory

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In the context of globalization, the automobile industry is now in a transition period of rapid development. It has followed the fuel vehicle industry system for hundreds of years, and is slowly dismantling in the wave of electric and hybrid development. The new industrial structure is being built. In the R & D, production, marketing, and after-sales links of the industrial chain, new words are constantly emerging, and the meaning of the original words has also been changing. The same word is translated in different scenarios. The statement is not the same, which will affect the cross-border technology exchange, hinder the dissemination of overseas brands, and make ordinary users unable to understand the operation instructions of the vehicle. This study puts aside the traditional translation ideas of word by word and sentence by sentence, and uses functional translation theory as the analysis framework. According to the communication purpose of the text, the text related to automobile terminology is classified: engineering and technical documents belong to information text, unified terminology is the first requirement when translating, and priority should be given to following industry standards; brand marketing materials belong to expressive texts. The feelings and acceptance of local audiences are more important than the accuracy of literal meaning. Operative texts, such as owner's manuals require clear and unambiguous instructions, which is convenient for readers to follow directly. The evaluation of the translation is no longer only based on the standard of literal meaning matching, but also on the use of the text and the professional background of the audience to flexibly adjust the strictness of translation. The study points out that it is impossible to standardize the translation of automobile terms only by translators themselves to supplement their professional knowledge and scene thinking. Automobile enterprises should coordinate the technical, market and after-sales departments to build a shared terminology lexicon of sub-scenes. Rely on industrial cooperation to reduce the actual risk of terminology translation errors.

Keywords: functionalist, terminology, translation theory, automotive

Introduction

Research Background

The automobile industry has not stopped tormenting since its birth. The global industrial structure has been moving. The forces of electrification, intelligent networking, and sharing are now re-washing the technical route, product form, and competitive logic from the bottom. Cross-border technical cooperation, parts import and export, and overseas market layout are getting denser, and the amount of information to be exchanged between industrial entities in different countries has also increased. Automobile terminology is the thread that connects technology

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research and development, business collaboration, and user communication. Whether it is translated well or not, it is small to say that it determines whether cross-regional technical information can be passed on without deviation. It is large to say that it affects whether the brand can be caught in the overseas market, and even involves whether everyone can reach a consensus quickly when the global automobile technology standards are docked. The automobile has long been in the ordinary family and has become the daily consumer goods of the masses. Accurate expression in the local context can also help ordinary users to understand product positioning and functional operations more smoothly, from purchase decision-making to long-term use (Zhao, 2025).

Research Objectives and Significance

This study takes functionalist translation theory as the analytical framework, and focuses on three types of texts with different attributes in the automobile industry to see what kind of term translation path they fit to achieve the communication goal. From the industrial level, this set of classification and adaptation ideas can give the industry a clearer translation reference logic, less language friction in cross-regional technical cooperation, more smooth technical information between different markets around the world, more unified industrial cooperation system, and at least a set of reference practices for the internationalization of the automobile industry; for brands with overseas layout, dealing with terms according to the goal of text communication can avoid the problem of cultural adaptation caused by rigid literal translation. Brand concepts and product advantages are more likely to reach overseas consumers, the cost of trial and error in cross-cultural communication is reduced, and the competitive advantage of the global market can be stronger. On the side of ordinary end users, the expression of terms should be both professional and rigorous and popular and readable. The threshold for users to understand the function of vehicles will be much lower, and the performance characteristics and operation logic will be easier to grasp. The whole cycle of car experience is optimized, and the cognition of products is clearer.

Theoretical Foundations

Functionalist Translation Theory

Functionalist translation theory is regarded as one of the most practical and instructive translation theories in contemporary translation studies, which has had a lasting impact on the global translation studies since the 1970s (Reiss, 2000). The real step forward is to no longer take the faithfulness of the source text as the only yardstick, but to take the function and communication purpose of the translation in the cultural context of the target language as the anchor point, so the translation practice has a more flexible analysis dimension. Katherine Reiss is an important founder of this theory. She first systematically divides the text types: “Informative text should convey objective facts and restore the core concepts and contents of the source text completely by logical and rigorous expression; the expressive text focuses on aesthetic characteristics and emotional tension, the language is more appealing, and the style recognition is higher; the goal of operative text is to enable the audience to complete specific actions and use appealing and guiding dialogues to convey information” (Sager & Orero, 2001). Later, Vermeer (1989) put forward the “Skopos Theory” and made the ultimate goal of translation activities the first priority of all translation decisions. On this basis, Nord (2002) supplemented the principle of “function + loyalty,” emphasizing that in the purpose-oriented translation process, the translator has to find a balance between the original meaning of the source text, his own professional responsibility and the actual needs of the target readers (pp. 393-395).

Regardless of the nature of the text, this theory adheres to two underlying logics: the purpose determines the path, and the form and content of the source text are flexibly adjusted around the ultimate goal of the translation activity (Vermeer, 1989). The translation should satisfy both intra-lingual coherence and inter-lingual fidelity. Under the premise of anchoring the core purpose, the fluency and readability of the translation itself and the restoration of the core information of the source text should be taken into account, so that the target audience can receive information accurately without threshold. This also shows that functionalism never completely denies "faithfulness," but re-introduces this standard into the overall framework of translation purpose and redefines and evaluates it.

Analysis of Theoretical Applicability

The automobile industry chain has extended from early research and development, vehicle production to terminal market sales, and the whole chain has precipitated a large number of professional terms with great differences in attributes. The iteration speed of electrification and intelligent technology is accelerating, and the total number of terms that require cross-language conversion is still rising. Text typology proposed by Katherine Reiss, as a core branch of functionalist translation theory, is highly compatible with the translation of automobile terms.

The core of typical information-based texts, such as engineering technical documents and official maintenance manuals for industry technicians is to accurately transmit technical details, which is directly related to subsequent operation and maintenance and operational safety. The translation of terms in such texts highly emphasizes traceability (Pan & Lü, 2023), giving priority to the use of industry-recognized fixed translation methods, mainly literal translation, supplemented by free translation when necessary, and relying on a unified terminology database to ensure the complete unification of the full-text terminology expression.

The core role of expressive texts, such as brand promotion materials and outdoor advertisements is to strengthen brand awareness, arouse consumers' emotional identity, and cover content, such as model naming and brand slogan. Most of the audiences have no professional background in automobiles. Translation does not need to be literal, and it needs to take into account the communication effect and brand core, so as to make it easy to remember and facilitate mass communication. It can flexibly use creative rewriting, transliteration, and localized interpretation to amplify emotional appeal (Li & Chen, 2025).

To sum up, the translation of the three types of texts always revolves around a question: Who is reading it and what effect it hopes to achieve. All wording choices are subject to the ultimate purpose of use. The translation itself should be smooth and not deviate from the original meaning, and at the same time, it should be in line with the acceptance habits of all kinds of readers, so that there will be no random translation of technical documents and marketing documents. The translation is stiff, and the operation prompts the misplacement that cannot be understood.

Analysis of the Classification and Translation of Automotive Terminology From a Functionalist Perspective

Translation of Automotive Terminology in Informative Texts

The core role of information texts is to accurately convey objective facts, such as technical standards, industry norms, and academic literature in the automotive field. In such scenarios, term translation aims to eliminate the ambiguity of cross-subject concepts and build a solid information foundation for technical

cooperation. It is necessary to put precision and industry standardization in the first place. Excess modification or fuzzy expression can easily lead to technical misunderstanding and even potential safety hazards (Pan & Lü, 2023).

Most of the professional terms in automobile information texts are clearly defined and mature. Translators need to cross-check with national standards, industry practices or international technical documents to ensure the unity of the whole translation of the same concept. These terms can be divided into two categories: technical terms of vehicle structure and function and management terms of policy supervision. The two concepts have clear boundaries. The translation takes the core concept of the source text as the first priority, and gives priority to literal translation to restore the original meaning (Xue, 2024).

Taking the industry's general abbreviation PHEV as an example, its international standard is defined as a hybrid vehicle that can be externally charged. The Chinese standard is translated as "plug-in hybrid vehicle," which directly points out the core technical characteristics and forms a clear distinction with non-plug-in hybrid HEV, completely avoiding conceptual confusion (Rui, 2023). The core assessment index CAFC under the domestic dual-carbon system is translated as "average fuel consumption of enterprises," which completely retains the statistical subject and measurement dimension. If it is simplified to "average fuel consumption," it is easy to produce ambiguity in the policy implementation process.

The translation of informative text terms must adhere to the bottom line of standardization, unification of the whole translation method and traceability of the translation method. The so-called "faithful translation," the core of which is the complete accuracy of professional concepts, and all translation methods conform to the general norms of the industry.

Translation of Automotive Terminology in Expressive Texts

Expressive texts are centered on mobilizing the positive emotions of the audience and establishing a sense of brand product identity. Brand advertisements, promotional materials, and brand concept slogans are all typical carriers. The terminologies in such scenarios no longer only bear the function of information transmission, but also have the attribute of brand marketing. The translation ultimately aims to enhance the attraction of the local market of the product and directly affect the consumer's purchase decision. The priority of local audience acceptance is much higher than that of word-face equivalence, and the emotional appeal of content replaces the rigid standardization requirements and becomes the core evaluation standard (Ji, 2023). Translation strategies can be flexibly selected for transliteration, free translation, and creative rewriting. There is no need to stick to the word-for-word correspondence rules. The translation can be dynamically adjusted according to the aesthetic preferences, emotional associations, and communication effects of the target market audience (Li & Chen, 2025).

There is a lot of room for translation of such texts, and they do not need to be framed by literal rules. Transliteration, free translation, and creative rewriting can be done according to. It needs to be matched. In the final analysis, the term translation of expressive texts does not need to be word-for-word and sentence-for-sentence with the original text. The key is the local aesthetic of the target audience, the emotional association in the cultural context, and the communication effect that the brand finally wants to achieve.

In terms of specific marketing content, the translation should try to make users feel the comfort and intelligence of the vehicle more strongly, and the expression of the output can arouse positive association. For example, "Ambient Lighting" in the technical document is literally translated into "ambient lighting" without temperature, which can be put into the product brochure for consumers and translated into "atmosphere light" to

"mood atmosphere light." The popular translation of "Panoramic Sunroof" takes into account both technical accuracy and aesthetic dissemination, without further modification. Some of the next main romantic models translate it into "star sky skylight" and "light perception skylight." Although it is slightly different from the original technical definition, it highlights the difference positioning of the model and also incorporates the preferences of the target users.

Brand concept translation can best reflect the value of localized creativity. If the two driving modes of BMW "BOOST" and "EASE" are directly translated into "enhanced" and "relaxed," the original brand recognition will be completely eliminated. The common translation of the industry's "driving pleasure" and "enjoyment," sharing the word "pleasure" echoes the core positioning of BMW's "pure driving pleasure," relying on the aesthetic meaning of Chinese, using the words "driving" and "enjoyment" to accurately distinguish two completely different use scenarios of dynamic driving and cockpit rest. This kind of translation is no longer an ordinary language conversion, but a localized re-creation around the core characteristics of the brand (Ji, 2023). The yardstick for the translation of expressive text terms is never the literal fit between the translation and the original text, but whether it can grasp the core characteristics of the brand, effectively reach the target audience and arouse emotional resonance.

Translation of Automotive Terminology in Operative Texts

The goal of operation text is very straightforward: directly guide the user to complete the corresponding operation. The owner's manual, vehicle maintenance guide, troubleshooting instructions, and vehicle-machine interface text all belong to this type of content. The accuracy of term translation and the popularity of expression directly determine whether users can operate correctly and identify potential safety hazards at the first time. The core of this kind of text translation is to completely eliminate the ambiguity in understanding, make the operation guidelines fully implementable, and minimize the security risks caused by the deviation of understanding by means of clear text expression.

When dealing with such terms, the most powerful translator is the verb. The same English verb falls in different operating contexts, corresponding to a completely different Chinese action statement, can not save a word all over. A typical example is "Engage." Its literal meaning is meshing, locking, and establishing connections, but in the car operation manual, the translation should follow the scene: "Engage the parking brake" is to pull up the handbrake to lock the car, translated as "joint parking brake," highlighting the clamping action between the mechanical parts; "Engage the cruise control" is driving in the engine.

Cruise, translated as "enable cruise control," points to the activation of electronic functions, independent of mechanical locking. Another high-frequency word "release" is the same. "Release the parking brake" is to release the locked parking brake, translated as "release the parking brake," the landing point is to remove the physical constraints; "Release the switch" is to release and cut off the circuit by pressing the button, translated as "disconnect the switch," which falls on the interruption of the circuit connection.

The same English verb, with different objects, appearing in different scenes, should correspond to different Chinese expressions. The change is only for one purpose, that is, to let the reader understand the requirements at a glance and make the right action immediately. It can be seen that the key to the translation of operational terms is to set up a set of rules corresponding to the scene between the original verb and the Chinese practical action, and then flexibly choose according to the context, the operation result and the degree of safety. Finally, there is

no ambiguity in the expression, and the action can be done directly, even for novice car owners without a car base (Jiang, 2022).

Conclusion

Summary of the Study

The speed of electric and intelligent technology iteration is far faster than the industry's early expectations. New functions and new concepts in the automotive field are emerging in an endless stream, and the volume of the entire terminology system is still expanding rapidly. The research on the adaptation of sub-scenes for automotive terminology has long been not a niche issue in the translation circle, but a rigid need that cannot be bypassed by the globalization of the entire industry.

Dismantling three types of automobile texts with different attributes in the real scene of the industry one by one, we can find that functionalist translation theory is not an academic concept floating in the middle of the air. It sets up a set of practical guidance framework for the translation of automobile terms. The core principle of this theory, "translation purpose determines translation strategy," can just explain a long-standing phenomenon in the industry: the same technical term has different translation methods in different scenarios. It is not that the translator's translation level is uneven, but a reasonable choice that fully meets the needs of different scenarios.

In the technical documents for engineers and maintenance technicians, the unity and fixity of terminology translation is the first criterion that must not be compromised. It avoids conceptual confusion between different subjects and causes technical accidents. However, in the promotional materials and machine operation interface for ordinary consumers, the same term does not need to stick to the rigid translation method in the technical document, and flexibly adjust it according to the language habits of the target audience, which is more suitable for the correct choice of communication objectives.

In order to really put forward the overall quality of automobile terminology translation, the core is never to let the translator recite the glossary, but to let the translator get the first time of the content, first judge what type this text belongs to, what effect it will eventually achieve, and what professional background the person reading this content is. Taking functionalist translation theory as the core idea, the translation strategies corresponding to the attribute matching of different texts are the most feasible path to find the optimal balance between "technical accuracy" and "user acceptance," "industry standardization" and "market communication power," "professional rigor" and "operational practicality." In the end, it can also make the value of automobile terminology translation truly come true: It clears the language barriers for cross-border technical exchanges in the entire automobile industry, helps the overseas brand to play a better communication effect in the global market, and also allows every ordinary car owner to get a smoother experience in the process of daily use of the car.

Recommendations

For those who specialize in automotive translation, they can't just position themselves as simple language conversions. To complete the transformation of identity and become a "functional coordinator" for the smooth transmission of information between different subjects. This requires the translator to have three core competencies: The technical level can accurately understand the actual concepts behind the terms, the text analysis level can quickly determine the type of content and the purpose of dissemination, and the strategic level can flexibly select the most appropriate translation method in combination with the final translation goal. From the perspective of the entire automotive industry, the entire industry should focus on the core goal of "reducing

cross-subject communication costs" and build a unified terminology collaborative validation mechanism. By promoting the popularization and use of general standardized terms, we can connect the standards of different markets at home and abroad, and provide a unified reference for the terminology translation of the whole industry.

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