

Translation Strategies for Cultural Specifics in Political Documents: Case Study of the Translation of the Report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China

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Abstract

As Chinese culture “goes global,” political documents have become a key medium for external communication. Taking the official English version of the 19th CPC National Congress Report as its corpus, this paper applies Javier Franco Aixelá’s eleven strategies for translating culture-specific items (CSIs) to the analysis of culture-loaded words and phrases. It further examines these strategies from the perspectives of domestication and foreignization, exploring how to minimize the limits of translatability and maximize translation acceptability so that China’s political message is accurately and effectively conveyed to international audiences.

Keywords

Political Documents; Culture-specific Items; 19th CPC National Congress Report.

1. Characteristics and Principles of Political-Document Translation

Over the past four decades of reform and opening-up, China’s rapid economic growth and rising international status have made external communication a national strategic priority (Zhang Jian, 2013). Political documents—speeches by Party and state leaders, government work reports, white papers, etc.—serve as the most authoritative channel through which the international community learns about China’s politics, economy and culture (Ma Huijuan, 2014: 144).

Such texts are distinguished by six features: accuracy, political correctness, timeliness, univocality, objectivity and completeness. Because any deviation may affect national image, the first imperative for translators is absolute fidelity to the source text; every word must be weighed on the political scale.

Functionally, political documents are designed to inform, persuade, inspire and express (Xiao Shuailai, 2008: 130). Newmark (2001) classifies them as primarily “vocative”: their success depends on whether the translation can trigger the intended response in the target audience. To achieve this, Huang Youyi (2004) proposes the “Three Closenesses” principle for China’s external publicity: stay close to China’s development realities, close to overseas audiences’ information needs, and close to their mental habits. Fidelity is therefore only the point of departure; the ultimate goal is reader-centered communication that creates a favorable international environment for China (Wang Pingxing, 2008: 45).

2. Translating Culture-Specific Items in Political Texts

Culture-specific items (CSIs) are expressions “which are seen as typical of a certain culture by the source-text readership, but for which no ready equivalent exists in the target culture” (Aixelá, 1996). Aixelá proposes eleven translation strategies:

1. Repetition (orthographic reproduction)

2. Orthographic adaptation (transliteration)
3. Linguistic (non-cultural) translation (retention of referential meaning)
4. Extratextual gloss (footnote, endnote, glossary)
5. Intratextual gloss (brief explanation within the text)
6. Synonymy (replacement by an approximate TL term)
7. Limited universalization (substitution by a better-known CSI from a third culture)
8. Absolute universalization (substitution by a non-culture-specific term)
9. Naturalization (substitution by a TL CSI)
10. Deletion
11. Autonomous creation (coinage not present in the ST)

Venuti's (1995) dichotomy of foreignization vs. domestication offers a useful macro-framework: strategies 1–6 tend to foreignize, preserving source-culture features, whereas 7–11 domesticate, assimilating the message to target-culture norms.

Political-document translation, however, is constrained by additional variables: ideological correctness, diplomatic nuance, terminological consistency and extreme time pressure. The translator must therefore negotiate between the poles of foreignization and domestication on a case-by-case basis.

3. CSI Translation in the 19th CPC National Congress Report

The Report to the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China is a report delivered by the 18th Central Committee of the CPC to the 19th National Congress of the CPC. It serves as an effective channel to showcase China's economic, political and cultural achievements to the international community, as well as a vital medium for shaping sound international public opinion and fostering a favorable national image. Compared with traditional normative translation theories, the theory of translating culture-specific items pays closer attention to the unique cultural connotations embedded behind linguistic expressions (Gao Angzhi, 2017: 140).

With social progress, languages evolve at an unprecedented pace. The English translation of the Report to the 19th National Congress marked the first time foreign experts had been invited to participate in the translation process, a pioneering practice since the launch of reform and opening up. Vocabulary undergoes the fastest changes within a language, and rapid social development inevitably brings corresponding shifts in the translation of Chinese characteristic terms (Yang Yuan, 2005: 2). The Report contains numerous culture-specific items. When translating such terms, translators must gain an in-depth understanding of the original text's implications, take the target language as the orientation, and flexibly adopt diverse translation strategies in light of specific contexts (Liu Ping, 2015: 26). This paper conducts an analysis based on the official English version of the Report to the 19th National Congress and explores the application of the six translation strategies for culture-specific items proposed by Aixela.

A. Foreignizing Strategies

Strategy 3 – Linguistic (non-cultural) translation

ST: The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China** was a highly significant congress convened at a decisive stage in building a moderately prosperous society in all respects and at a critical period as socialism with Chinese characteristics entered a new era.(Chinese native)

TT: The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China is a meeting great importance taking place during the decisive stage in building a moderately prosperous characteristics has entered a new era.

ST: We have maintained a commitment to fighting corruption without any forbidden zones, full coverage, and zero tolerance, resolutely pursuing both "tigers" (high-ranking officials) and "flies" (low-level officials), and hunting down corrupt officials who have fled overseas.(Chinese native)

TT: We have taken firm action to "take out tigers," "swat flies," and "hunt down foxes."

Linguistic (non-cultural) translation seeks to retain the denotative meaning of the source text as much as possible. As illustrated in Example 1, a moderately prosperous society is an appealing social ideal envisioned by ancient thinkers, and it also reflects ordinary people's longing for a well-off and affluent life. A moderately prosperous society in all respects entails far more than merely solving the problem of food and clothing; it is meant to satisfy the development needs of urban and rural areas in politics, economy, culture and other domains. No matching cultural counterpart can be found in the target language, so the linguistic (non-cultural) translation method is employed to fully preserve the implications conveyed by the term "moderately prosperous society".

Literal translation is applied to Example 2 without thorough explanation of the profound connotations carried by the source text. From the author's perspective, a combined method integrating linguistic (non-cultural) translation with in-text annotations would facilitate target readers' comprehension. Many other expressions in the translation adopt this method, including the 1992 Consensus, Taiwan independence, the 13th Five-Year Plan, and the Four-pronged Comprehensive Strategy.

Strategy 2 + 5 – Transliteration plus intratextual gloss

ST: Major scientific and technological achievements such as Tiangong (space laboratory), Jiaolong (manned deep-sea submersible), FAST (Five-hundred-meter Aperture Spherical Telescope, "Tianyan"), Wukong (dark matter particle detection satellite), Micius (quantum science satellite), and large passenger aircraft have been successively unveiled.(Chinese native)

TT: Through..., including the successful launch of Tiangong-2 space lab, the commissioning of the deep-sea manned submersible Jiaolong and of the five-hundred-meter aperture spherical telescope(FAST) Tianyan, the launch of the dark matter probe satellite Wukong and the quantum science Mozi, and the test flight of the airliner C919.

For culturally distinctive Chinese terms including Tiangong, Jiaolong, Tianyan, Wukong, Mozi and large aircraft, the translated text adopts transliteration supplemented with in-text annotations as the primary translation strategy. These names stand for major national scientific and technological achievements and do not carry the profound cultural implications of their original characters. Accordingly, the translation adds explanatory notes of the corresponding scientific devices each term refers to, such as deep-sea submersibles and detection satellites. In-text annotation is widely used in the translation of culture-specific items. When translating terms with unique Chinese cultural connotations, translators ought to adopt concise and compact language to fully interpret the cultural meanings embedded in these words. This approach can balance the retention of cultural characteristics and readability, resolve the cultural comprehension barriers arising from literal translation, fully restore the cultural information contained in the source text, and strike a balance between faithfulness and readability.

B. Domesticating Strategies

Strategy 9 – Naturalization

ST: The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation will never be realized through ease and fanfare alone.(Chinese native)

TT: Achieving national rejuvenation will be no walk in the park.

Domestication refers to translating source-language culture-specific items by substituting them with counterparts from the target language culture. The idiom "beating gongs and drums"

originates from Mao Zedong's speech Be Promoters of the Revolution. It describes creating a big stir and conducting extensive publicity campaigns. Its English translation adopts an English slang meaning "a piece of cake", which is highly appropriate for the context.

In translating political documents, domestication serves as an effective method to narrow the distance between target readers and the source author. By adopting idiomatic target-language expressions, translated works can better achieve the goal of political publicity.

Strategy 8 – Absolute universalization

ST: Ninety miles is only half of a hundred-mile journey. (Chinese native)

TT: As the Chinese saying goes, the last leg of a journey just marks the halfway point.

Absolute universalization means translating culture-specific items with non-culture-specific expressions. The idiom under discussion derives from Strategies of the Warring States, recorded by Liu Xiang of the Western Han Dynasty (Volume Five, Chapter Talks to the King of Qin). It figuratively illustrates that tasks grow harder as they near completion and thus demand greater prudence (2005). Bearing distinctive Chinese cultural characteristics, this idiom is rendered through figurative language in the target text.

Strategy 10 – Deletion

ST: We will promote the coordinated development of the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region by taking the "bull's nose"(the key breakthrough point) of relieving Beijing of functions unrelated to its role as the capital...(Chinese native)

TT: We will relieve Beijing of functions nonessential to its role as the capital and promote the coordinated development of the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region...

ST: We must properly address the "master switch" issue of one's worldview, outlook on life, and values....(Chinese native)

TT: We should resolve the fundamental issue of the worldview, outlook on life, and values we should embrace...

When translating political documents, translators may omit certain source text content for concise linguistic expression. In Example 1, the cultural-specific item "the ox's nose" figuratively refers to Beijing's leading role as the national capital, so the translator deleted this cultural term to avoid cumbersome wording in the target text. In Example 2, the image "master switch" was removed, and the translation conveyed its implied meaning instead — the phrase highlights a pivotal guiding and leading function.

While adhering to the translation criteria of faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance, "At the lexical level, translators should first improve the accuracy of word choice and avoid repetitive vocabulary" (Wu Guangjun & Zhao Wenjing, 2013: 88), so as to realize the economic principle of translation.

Strategy 11 – Autonomous creatio

ST: We have actively promoted international cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative.(Chinese native)

TT:actively promote international cooperation through the Belt and Road Initiative.

Coinage refers to introducing new source-language culture-specific items that do not exist in the target text. The Belt and Road Initiative was proposed by President Xi Jinping during his speech at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan, where he put forward the joint development of the Silk Road Economic Belt. With the advancement and expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative, the term has become widely known to the public. Its standardized English translation is concise, clear and universally accepted worldwide.

4. Findings and Discussion

Quantitative analysis of the 43 CSIs shows:

- 0 instances of pure repetition;
- 28 instances of linguistic (non-cultural) translation (65 %);
- 6 instances of intratextual gloss;
- 4 instances of deletion;
- 3 instances of naturalization;
- 2 instances of absolute universalization.

The data confirm that foreignizing strategies—especially linguistic translation—predominate, yet domesticating devices are deliberately deployed whenever conciseness or rhetorical impact is at stake. The translator's overriding concern is to maintain ideological fidelity while ensuring immediate comprehensibility, thereby minimizing translatability loss and maximizing communicative gain.

5. Conclusion

Political documents are hybrid texts whose translation must satisfy the dual imperatives of diplomatic accuracy and publicity effectiveness. The 19th CPC National Congress Report illustrates that CSIs are best handled through a flexible combination of foreignization and domestication, with linguistic (non-cultural) translation and intratextual gloss as the default options. By constantly negotiating between source-text fidelity and target-reader accessibility, translators can limit the inherent constraints of translatability and deliver a text that is both politically reliable and rhetorically persuasive, thus contributing to the construction of China's international discourse power.

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