

The Application of Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory in the English Translation of Chinese Brands

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ABSTRACT

Translation is not only an art and a skill but also a science. Nida's "functional equivalence" theory emphasizes communication through the transmission of information. It prioritizes "content over form," asserting that no translation achieves absolute equivalence. Translators, whether actively or passively, must consciously address the impact of cultural differences on translation, integrating emotions to convey the distinct cultures embedded in different languages. Functional equivalence provides direction for translation standards, constraining translators' free interpretation and reducing deviations between the target and source languages. This ensures that the target language conveys the original message clearly and acceptably across different linguistic forms.

Keywords: Nida, functional equivalence, English translation of Chinese brands

BACKGROUND OF BRAND ENGLISH TRANSLATION

With the advancement of globalization, the world has entered an era of economic integration. In this context, international exchanges and economic development have become increasingly critical, necessitating the establishment of robust trade relationships and the expansion of Chinese brands into global markets. For Western businesses, a brand's name determines whether a product can penetrate international markets and secure a foothold in global commerce. Thus, the successful translation of brand names is pivotal for domestic brands entering international markets. This paper analyzes the application of Eugene Nida's functional equivalence theory in the English translation of Chinese brands from a sociosemiotic perspective, exploring how to achieve equivalence through case studies.

FUNCTIONAL EQUIVALENCE THEORY

Language serves as a carrier of information and a tool for cultural exchange, while translation acts as a bridge for cross-cultural understanding. Translators play an irreplaceable role in facilitating cultural communication. Only by deeply understanding regional customs, values, and cultural contexts can translators produce satisfactory works. Nida's theory posits that translation should prioritize reader response and pursue natural equivalence. He states, "In discourse communication, loss and distortion are inevitable, as no two interlocutors share identical denotative or associative meanings for the same linguistic features" (Huang Yuanpeng, 2010: 102). Thus, no translation is entirely equivalent.

Functional equivalence emphasizes "content over form" (Wang Shouhong, 2012: 24), reflecting Nida's principle that translation should reproduce "the closest natural equivalent of the source

language message, first in terms of meaning and second in terms of style" (Nida & Taber, 1969: 12). Nida's early work focused on syntactic and morphological analysis, treating linguistic differences as variations of the same essence. He viewed translation as a science, art, and skill, integrating communication and information theory into translation studies.

The "functional equivalence" approach follows a three-step strategy—analysis, transfer, and restructuring (Ding Meiling, 1995: 58). First, the source text is analyzed to grasp both meaning and structure. Next, the decoded information is transferred into the target language. Finally, the translated text is restructured to achieve equivalence. These steps ensure that translations prioritize semantic fidelity over rigid formal correspondence, enabling clarity and acceptability.

STANDARDS FOR BRAND TRANSLATION

Brand translation is influenced by multiple factors. Translators must consider cultural, economic, and contextual elements to create impactful names. British theorist Alexander Tytler asserted, "A good translation is one that fully conveys the merits of the original, allowing target readers to perceive and feel as vividly as source readers do" (Tytler, 1790: 33). Similarly, Nida's functional equivalence theory outlines four criteria: accuracy, expressiveness, natural diction, and equivalent reader response (Bao Baoquan, 2009: 3). This requires translations to be linguistically fluent while preserving cultural and emotional nuances.

Chinese brand names often carry profound cultural connotations. For example, the cosmetics brand Xiefuchun (谢馥春) evokes imagery of rejuvenation and historical prestige in Chinese. However, a direct phonetic translation like "Xiefuchun" fails to convey these meanings to foreign audiences. Successful cases, such as Keyroad (启路), demonstrate how functional equivalence bridges cultural gaps: "Keyroad" combines "key" (crucial) and "road" (path), aligning with the brand's ethos of "opening doors to success."

APPLICATION OF FUNCTIONAL EQUIVALENCE IN BRAND TRANSLATION

Functional equivalence prioritizes semantic fidelity over formal resemblance. For instance, the home furnishing brand Mercury (水星家纺) risks negative associations due to "mercury" (a toxic substance) in English, despite phonetic similarity. Conversely, Miracle (米奇化妆品) leverages the word's connotation of "wonderful effects" to attract consumers, prioritizing meaning over literal form.

While transliteration is common for Chinese brands (e.g., Xiefuchun), it often fails to resonate internationally. Functional equivalence advocates for adaptive strategies. The mobile brand K-Touch (天语) exemplifies this: "K-Touch" conveys accessibility and technological prowess, aligning with the Chinese name's implication of "heavenly communication."

CONCLUSION

Absolute equivalence in translation is unattainable, but Nida's functional equivalence theory provides a robust framework for cross-cultural brand translation. Rooted in linguistics, semiotics, and communication studies, the theory emphasizes cultural sensitivity and reader response. Brand names are not mere labels but embodiments of corporate identity and cultural values. Translators must navigate linguistic and cultural barriers to convey these meanings

effectively. In an era of global exchange, translators serve as cultural mediators, harmonizing differences and fostering mutual understanding.

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