

On the Translation of Chinese Four-Character Phrase from the Perspective of Skopos Theory: A Case Study of 2022 Government Work Report

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Abstract: As a unique linguistic phenomenon in Chinese, four-character phrase has its distinguishing features: being concise and comprehensive in content, being neat and orderly in form, being rhythmical in pronunciation, and being infectious in expression. All of these make it popular in political speeches and documents. Choosing Chinese version and English version of 2022 Government Work Report as corpus, this paper counts the adopted four-character phrases, analyzes the translation strategies of different types of four-character phrases, aiming to explore the employed rules of the Skopos theory. According to the statistics and analysis, this study acquires the following findings: 1) The total of four-character phrases adds up to 1458. 2) Of all free four-character phrases, subordinating phrases have the highest frequency, followed by coordinating phrases, verb-object phrases and subject-predicate phrases. 3) Four translation strategies are employed, including literal translation for the Fidelity rule, liberal translation for the Skopos rule, omission for the Coherence rule and the Skopos rule, and amplification for the Skopos rule.

Keywords: Skopos Theory, Four-Character Phrase, Translation Strategy.

1. Introduction

Chinese four-character phrase, an important component and a unique linguistic phenomenon in Chinese, has its unique features: be brief and to the point in meaning, be simple and orderly in structure, be of strong rhythm, and be expressive. It is all of these features that make it widely used in all kinds of practical documents, especially political speeches and documents, such as Government Work Report. We know, as an important and official means to propagate China and the policies of the authority, Government Work Report plays a crucial role. And as a channel to introduce China to the whole world, the translation of Government Work Report is of great importance. And thus the study on how to translate Chinese four-character phrase, adopted in Chinese four-character phrase, is of great necessity.

This paper chooses the Chinese version and English version of 2022 Government Work Report as corpus, and aims to count the four-character phrases used in it, to learn the translation techniques suitable for different types of four-character phrases and to explore how to realize the employed rules of the Skopos theory.

2. Skopos Theory

This study adopts Skopos theory coined by German linguist Hans J. Vermeer, who argues that the behavior of translation is steered by the possible aim of translation.

2.1. Vermeer's Skopos Theory

“Skopos”, a Greek word, means “purpose”. Skopos theory, in German spelled as Skopostherorie, a theory in the field of translation, emerged in 1970s and was initiated by Hans Vermeer in 1978.

According to Skopos theory, translation is an activity with an aim or purpose. To translate means to produce a target text in a target setting for a target purpose and target addressees in the target circumstances (Vermeer & Reiss, 1984). Vermeer holds that translation is a communicative activity with certain

purposes and the translational action is decided by the process of translation. That is to say, “the end justifies the means” (Vermeer & Reiss, 1984).

2.2. Three Rules of Skopos Theory

According to Vermeer, while translating, we should follow three general rules, i.e. Skopos rule, Coherence rule and Fidelity rule.

Skopos rule

Since translation is a kind of action with purpose, Skopos rule becomes the primary rule that translators should obey. While translation, the translator should fully understand the purpose of the translating behavior and the source text. That is, translator should have a clear idea of the target readers, the target culture and the target context to make the translation acceptable and readable for the target readers. And then the translator will choose suitable translation strategies and techniques based on the aim(s) of translation since the purpose of translation determines the translation methods.

Coherence rule

Coherence rule requires that translation should ensure intra-textual coherence. In other words, translation should be readable and acceptable to foreign readers. In order to realize the rule, we should not only adopt appropriate translation techniques to maintain the text features of the source text, but also take reasonable accounts into the features of the target language and the target culture. If there exist some difference or contradictions between the original language and the target language, some necessary changes on information transfer are needed in order to help the target reader to fully understand the translation version.

Fidelity rule

Fidelity rule requires the translation should be same with the original meaning of the source text. That is to say, translator should thoroughly master the meaning and the form of the source text and try to translate it into the target language based on the comprehension. Although the Fidelity rule should be followed, the translation and the original text may

not be the same word by word. There must be inter-textual coherence between the original text and the translation. In other words, the degree of the fidelity to the source text depends on the purpose of the translation and the translator's comprehension and interpretation of the original text.

The three rules of Skopos Theory are not parallel, but hierarchical. The Fidelity rule is subordinate to the Coherence rule, which in turn is subordinate to the skopos rule, which is dominant.

3. Chinese Four-Character Phrase

As a special linguistic phenomenon of Chinese, Chinese four-character phrases have a long history and are extensively used in our spoken and written language. Definitions and features of four-character phrase will be stated in the following part.

3.1. Definitions and Features of Chinese four-Character Phrase

According to the Chinese Grammar and Rhetorical Dictionary, a Chinese four-character phrase can be defined as a set pattern and generally it consists of four Chinese characters. In the narrow sense, four-character phrases refer to classical and fixed Chinese idioms, which are frozen in structure and connotation, such as *chi zhi yi heng* (持之以恒), *yuan yuan liu chang* (源远流长) and so on. In the broad sense, four-character phrases refer to phrases that are made up of four free Chinese characters, which can be assembled freely by the speaker according to his/her intention. That is to say, the free four-character phrases can be created by the speaker on his/her will. There are lots of new-created four-character phrases, such as *yi qing fang kong* (疫情防控), *kai tuo chuang xin* (开拓创新), and the like. In this paper, the author analyzes Chinese four-character phrase on the broad sense.

3.2. Classification of Chinese four-character phrase

With its uniqueness, Chinese four-character phrase can be classified according to different standards.

Based on the structure or the formation, four-character phrases can be grouped into two types: four-character idioms and free four-character phrases. Four-character idioms are of fixed and frozen structure, which is allowed little or no changes. The elements of four-character idioms are usually set and cannot be changed or omitted, otherwise the meaning or connotation will be destroyed by the changing. For example, *tong zhou gong ji* (同舟共济) is a fixed four-character phrase. Contrary to four-character idioms, free four-character phrases are freely-combined phrases. The four characters can be assembled together freely and the order of the four characters may be changed according to the intention and requirement of the speaker. Owing to the flexibility and changeability of free four-character phrases, the number of free four-character phrases is much more than four-character idioms. For example, *you liang zuo feng* (优良作风), *you liang chuan tong* (优良传统) are free four-character phrases.

Chinese four-character phrases can also be categorized from the perspective of grammar or syntax. According to the relationship between the two parts before and after, Chinese four-character phrases can be grouped into four categories: SV-phrases (subject-predicate phrases), VO-phrases (verb-object phrases), subordinated phrases (modifier-modified

phrases) and coordinated phrases (parallel or joint phrases). For example, *gang ren zhi gang* (港人治港) is a SV-phrase, which is composed of two elements – *gang ren* and *zhi gang* –, and the former element is the actor who acts and the latter is the action that is behaved by the actor. *Kai chuang wei lai* (开创未来) is a VO-phrase because the first element is the action and the second element is the goal or the subject of the action. *Xiang hu zun zhong* (相互尊重) is a subordinated phrase since the first element is the modifier to modify the second element and the second element is the core of the phrase. *Gai ge kai fang* (改革开放) is a coordinated phrase since the two elements “*gai ge*” and “*kai fang*” are parallel.

3.3. Previous Studies on Translation of Chinese Four-Character Structure

It is the features of Chinese four-character phrases that make the translation of them difficult, including compactness, classical simplicity and elegance, varied figures of speech, reflecting Chinese traditional mentality

Compactness means to be simple and neat in form but rich in meaning. The feature makes the translation of Chinese four-character phrases difficult because it is not easy for translator to find the suitable words to express the same meaning of a Chinese four-character phrase in English.

A four-character phrase often carries rich Chinese culture, Chinese traditional mentality, Chinese modes of thinking, etc, and uses different rhetoric devices, such as simile, metaphor, etc. The feature also makes translation of four-character phrases hard to do.

So the study on how to translate four-character phrases was, is, remains and will be the hot in field of the translation. This paper will focus on the application of four-character phrases in political documents, so just the politics-related researches will be stated as follow.

Lv Wenpeng and Xi Huichao(2009) did a comprehensive research on the translation of four-character phrases, summarizing the research contents, research methods, the theoretical basis of the translation of four-character phrases, and also summarizing the advantages and disadvantages and development of existed researches. Wang Xin and Liu Jia(2007), based on the text typology, explored how to translate four-character phrases employed in political documents, advertisements and business contracts. Wu Yufang(2022) took the 2018 and 2019 Government Work Reports as examples to explore the translation of four-character phrases in political documents from the perspective of Skopos theory.

This paper takes the Chinese version and English version of 2022 Government Work Reports as corpus to count the adopted four-character phrases, analyze the translation strategies of different types of four-character phrases, aiming to explore the employed rules of the Skopos theory.

4. Analysis on Translation Strategies of Chinese Four-Character Phrases in 2022 Government Work Report

2022 Government Work Report (Chinese version) lasts for about 56 minutes and has 16054 Chinese characters altogether. Based on the broad sense of Chinese four-character phrase, the author counts and categorizes the Chinese four-character phrases in 2022 Government Work Report. Then the author studies the English version of 2022 Government Work Report

and analyzes the translation strategies adopted by different categories of Chinese four-character phrases, under the guidance of Skopos theory. The statistic figures are listed in the following table.

Table 1. Statistic figures of Chinese four-character phrases, translation strategies and Skopos rules

Translation strategy	Chinese four-character phrases	Percentage	Skopos rules
Literal translation	900	62%	the Fidelity rule
Liberal translation	288	20%	the Skopos rule
Omission	210	16%	the Coherence rule & the Skopos rule
amplification	60	4%	the Skopos rule
total	1458		

Table 2. That literal translation is the most popular translation strategy used by translator to meet the Skopos rule.

free four-character phrases	Chinese version	English version
subordinating phrases	ling huo jiu ye	flexible employment
	zhi hui cheng shi	smart cities
	shu zi xiang cun	digital villages
coordinating phrases	he xie wen ding	harmony and stability
	lv se di tan	green and low-carbon
	gai ge kai fang	reform and opening up
verb-object phrases	shen hua gai ge	deepened reform
	gai shan min sheng	improve the people's wellbeing
	kuo da nei xu	Expanding domestic demand
subject-predicate phrases	gang ren zhi gang	the people of Hong Kong administer Hong Kong
	ao ren zhi ao	the people of Macao administer Macao
	duo cuo bing ju	adopt a package of steps

By analysis, the author finds that the translator employs literal translation mostly for free four-character phrases. By further studying, the author gets the result: of all adopted free four-character phrases, subordinating phrases have the highest frequency, followed by coordinating phrases, verb-object phrases and subject-predicate phrases.

According to Vermeer, while translation the target text should be faithful to the original text, which means the Fidelity rule. According to the Fidelity rule, the translation of Chinese four-character phrases should conform to the exact meaning of Chinese and try to choose the appropriate phrases, which are the same as or similar with Chinese in meaning or structure, to substitute the original phrases.

In the following section, the author will take some cases to illustrate why and how the translator adopts literal translation to translate different types of free four-character phrases to adhere to the Fidelity rule.

The phrase “shu zi xiang cun” is a subordinating phrase, of which “shu zi” is the modifier of “xiang cun”. So in translating, the author translates it into “digital villages”, which is of the same structure and meaning as the Chinese phrase. The phrase “lv se di tan” is a coordinating phrase, of

As can be seen from the table, 1458 Chinese four-character phrases are employed in 2022 Government Work Report (Chinese version). Studying the English version, we can see the translator employs four translation strategies, including literal translation, liberal translation, omission and amplification to conform to the Skopos rules respectively.

In the following part, the paper will take examples to illustrate why the translator chooses the corresponding translation strategy for different types of Chinese four-character phrases and how the translation can meet the Skopos theory.

4.1. Literal Translation for the Fidelity Rule

According to the statistics, we can see that literal translation is the most popular translation strategy used by translator to meet the Skopos rule. The examples are listed below:

Example 1:

which the two parts “lv se” and “di tan” are parallel. So the translator changes it into “green and low-carbon” directly. The phrase “shen hua gai ge” is a verb-object phrase, of which “shen hua” is the verb and “gai ge” is the object. So the translator chooses the corresponding words for them and forms them together into “deepened reform”. In the phrase “gang ren zhi gang”, “gang ren” is the subject and “zhi gang” is the predicate. In order to fulfill the Fidelity rule, the translator translates it into the “the people of Hong Kong administer Hong Kong” to show the same meaning and structure of the Chinese text.

It can be concluded from above-mentioned examples and analysis that the strategy of liberal translation is employed to realize the Fidelity rule if the original text and target text are of the same or similar meaning or structure.

4.2. Liberal Translation for the Skopos Rule

Liberal translation is another frequently-used translation strategy by translators while translation. Some examples are listed below:

Example 2:

Table 3. Liberal translation is another frequently-used translation strategy by translators while translation.

four-character phrases	Chinese version	English version
	an ju le ye	our people enjoy peace and contentment in work and life
four-character idioms	ke jin zhi shou	perform our duties
	qin zheng wei min	work diligently for the people
	yi ji zhi chang	marketable skills
	liang li er xing	do everything within our capacity
free four-character phrases	li de shu ren	education performs its fundamental mission of fostering virtue
	chan jiao rong he	integrating vocational education with industry
	jun ren jun shu	service members and their families
	tuo pin ren kou	people who are no longer in poverty
	zhu qi shu kun	easing the difficulties of businesses
	tuo pin gong jian	Poverty elimination
	sao hei chu e	combat organized crime and root out local mafia

We know Chinese four-character phrases can be categorized into four-character idioms and free four-character phrases. The former, four-character idioms are mostly fixed structure passed down to now and carry their specific historical, emotional and cultural connotations, which makes it hard to find the suitable words in target language to match them. And the latter, free four-character phrases are created by the users according to their practical needs and real background. That is to say, as for most of the free four-character phrases, the denotation of the characters does have been changed and the characters have been given their particular and specific connotation. So the understanding of the cultural-related phrases is based on their specific cultural background and connotation, which is very difficult for foreigners who are not familiar with the original language and its culture.

According to Vermeer, the translation of Chinese four-character phrases should be purpose-based and target reader-targeted, that is to say, the translation should aim to help the target readers to better understand the original text. So to realize the purpose, the translator should take the target readers into consideration and make necessary explanation and changes of the original text while translation. Liberal translation can function in this way.

As for the phrase “ke jin zhi shou”, it means that a person

should be responsible for what he should do in Chinese and is difficult to find certain phrases with the similar or same structure and meaning to match with it. In order to help the target readers to understand it, the translator translates it into “perform our duties”, which carries the same connotation as the original phrase.

The phrase “zhu qi shu kun”, is a newly-created phrase under the present background of economic development in China. It means that the government will take some measures to help the businesses that are facing difficulties. It is not easy to find suitable phrases to substitute it. So taking the target readers’ understanding into account, the translator uses liberal translation.

From above-mentioned examples and analysis, it can be concluded that liberal translation is employed to avoid ambiguousness and to help target reader to better understand the original text. Thus the strategy of liberal translation aims to realize the Skopos rule.

4.3. Omission for the Coherence Rule and the Skopos Rule

Here lists some Chinese four-character phrases translated via the translation strategy omission:

Table 4. Here lists some Chinese four-character phrases translated via the translation strategy omission:

four-character phrases	Chinese version	English version
Phrases with modifier	ji xu you hua	were refined
	chi xu tui jin	was enhanced
	bu duan shen hua	were deepened
	chi xu gong gu	were consolidated
	dui wai kai fang	opening up
Phrases with repeated expression	sheng tai huan jing	the Environment
	gong gu zhuang da	strengthening
	ren min qun zhong	people
	luo shi luo xi	fully implement
	tou shui pian shui	tax evasion and fraud

By studying the examples, we can see that the phrases are translated by deleting certain words, that is, omission is adopted while translating.

Analyzing the above examples, we find that they can be grouped into two types: phrases with modifier and phrases with tautology. In translating, the translator treats them by cutting the modifier and the repeated words, which refers to

omission or simplification.

In terms of Vermeer’s Skopos theory, translation aims to make the target text understandable and intelligible for the target readers and in order to fulfill the purpose we can make some necessary changes and transfers if word-by-word translation will hinder understanding of the target readers or harm the coherence of target text.

The following case studies will illustrate how and why the translator treats the phrases by omission.

In the phrase “bu duan shen hua”, “bu duan” is an adverb, the modifier to modify the core “shen hua”. In order to be in line with the feature of target language, English, being simple, the modifier is deleted. The author treats the phrases, like “chi xu tui jin, dui wai kai fang” in the same way.

In the phrase “gong gu zhuang da”, “gong gu” and “zhuang da” are similar in the meaning, which is redundant in language. In some cases the repetition of some words can make the language more expressive while in some languages it is redundant and needless. To deal with the problem of redundancy, the translator omits the repeated words. So here the translator just treats “gong gu” and “zhuang da” as one word. In this way, the target text is more coherent.

In order to fulfill the Skopos rule and the Coherence rule, the translator can adopt the translation strategy omission. However, it doesn’t mean that the original text can be cut randomly. What the translator has to bear in mind is the words “necessary and needed”. So the translator’s decisions on whether to adopt omission and which word to be cancelled have been made on the precise and full understanding of the original text. The translator must be sure that the deleting won’t harm the main idea of the original text and that simplification can be more expressive, coherent and readable for the target readers.

4.4. Amplification for the Skopos Rule

Some Chinese four-character phrases translated via amplification are listed as follow:

Table 5. Some Chinese four-character phrases translated via amplification

Chinese version	English version
si ge yi shi	our consciousness of the need to maintain political integrity, think in big-picture terms, follow the leadership core, and keep in alignment with the central Party leadership
si ge zi xin	stay confident in the path, the theory, the system, and the culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics
jiu zheng si feng	oppose pointless formalities, bureaucratism, hedonism and extravagance
shuang jian zheng ce	We reduced the homework load and eased the off-campus tutoring burden on students in compulsory education
liang ge que li	the establishment of both Comrade Xi Jinping’s core position on the Party Central Committee and in the Party as a whole and the guiding role of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era
.....	...

Studying the examples, we can see that they are all Chinese phrase born in the unique Chinese background and with specific Chinese meaning. If they are translated into target language word-by-word, it is difficult for the target readers to understand them because of the lack of background information. According to Vermeer, the purpose of translation is to help target readers master the real meaning of the original text, so in order to make the Chinese phrases understood by the target reader, the author add some background information to make the meaning clear, expressive and acceptable.

The following examples can illustrate how the author adopts amplification to realize the Skopos rule.

In the phrase “jiu zheng si feng”, “si feng” is an abbreviation of four negative working behaviors. To make the translation understandable, the full form is needed, so the translator lists the four working styles to complete the information gap. Another example “si ge zi xin” is also a good example. Here “si ge” is the information gap. So the translator lists the specific contents of confidence.

According to the above analysis, we can conclude that while translation, if the equivalents are lack, that is to say, literal translation cannot realize the purpose of translation, we need add necessary explanation and information to complete the information gap to help the target readers to master the real meaning, that is, amplification is good choice in this situation to realize the Skopos rule.

5. Conclusion Strategy for Four-Character Phrases

Definitions, features and classifications of Chinese four-character phrases and various translation strategies have been discussed above, and taking 2022 Government Work Report as a case and based on Vermeer’s Skopos theory, the paper

analyses which strategy of translation should be taken for certain type of four-character phrases.

The paper finds that literal translation is the most popular translation strategy adopted by the translator and the using of the literal translation aims to fulfill the Fidelity rule.

Liberal translation is the second choice for translating four-character phrases carrying specific Chinese culture to realize the Skopos theory.

For some four-character phrases with repeated expression and modifier, in order to make the target text coherent and understandable for target readers, the strategy of omission is frequently employed.

As for some four-character phrases newly created under the special background of China, adding some explanations is the favorite way, that is to say, amplification is the best choice.

As for which translation strategy the translator should take, the translator should bear in mind that the purpose of translation decides the strategy of translation, and translation should follow the three rule of Skopos theory, including the Skopos rule, the Coherence rule and the Fidelity rule.

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