

Applying the Cooperative Principle to the Translation of Chinese-Characteristic Expressions

-- A case study of the White Papers on “A Community with a Shared Future for Mankind”

Yue Zhao^{1, †}, Anqi Luo^{2, †}

¹Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai 200000, China

²Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications, Beijing 100000, China

[†]These authors contributed equally to this work

Abstract: This study examines the English translation of Chinese characteristic expressions in the White Papers on “A Community with a Shared Future for Mankind” within the framework of the Cooperative Principle, supported by corpus-based methods. Two White Papers released in September and October 2023 are compiled into a Chinese–English corpus. The characteristic expressions are categorized into five types—proper nouns, abbreviations, idioms, allusions, and metaphors. Analyses of representative cases show that the Cooperative Principle facilitates accurate and audience-oriented translation of governmental texts. Different strategies are recommended for different categories, while translators’ linguistic competence and intercultural awareness are highlighted as prerequisites for effective international communication.

Keywords: Cooperative Principle, A Community with a Shared Future for Mankind, Chinese Characteristic Expressions, Governmental Translation, Corpus-based Study.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

In the Report to the 19th CPC National Congress, Xi Jinping (2017) solemnly declared to the world that, “after a long period of hard work, socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era.”^[1] This new era is one of building a moderately prosperous society in all respects and achieving common prosperity; it is also the era of realizing the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation as China “moves closer to center stage.” How China adheres to peaceful development, advances the building of a community with a shared future for mankind, and participates in global governance has drawn mounting international attention, which in turn requires Chinese translators to deliver high-quality translations of political discourse.

Political discourse largely reflects a country’s political system and operational mechanisms; it serves as a barometer and compass for policy orientation, state governance, and foreign-relations concepts, and constitutes a key element in constructing China’s international discourse system. Translators must therefore use modes of expression readily accepted and easily understood by overseas readers to interpret and convey China’s new ideas and initiatives regarding diplomacy and global governance, thereby shaping China’s international image and enhancing its international discourse power.

Historically, China’s international discourse power has been closely linked to the translation of political discourse. Difficulties in understanding and communicating this discourse stem, on the one hand, from the asymmetric international public-opinion landscape in which “the West is strong while China is weak,”^[2] leading many translators to borrow Western discourse conventions and to interpret, trim, or select content accordingly. This often produces divergent interpretations or even mistranslations, undermining the

effectiveness of “China’s voice.”^[3] On the other hand, Chinese-characteristic expressions frequently face a dilemma: they are either “too Sinicized” to be easily understood, or they lose Chinese characteristics when rendered in English, thereby failing to win broad recognition.

As China rises in international affairs, government documents play an increasingly significant role in facilitating international communication and understanding. Among them, white papers centered on the vision of a community with a shared future for mankind (CSFM) have become important documents guiding China’s external policy. These white papers elaborate the concept’s connotations, practices, and prospects, and are consequential for China’s participation in global affairs and its advocacy of international cooperation. Studying the translation of these documents helps elucidate the logic of China’s external policies and provides concrete contexts for cross-cultural communication.^[4]

Translation of political texts is a specialized branch of political discourse translation. Its complexity lies not only in language but also in politics, culture, and history. While prior studies have often examined linguistic features and translation difficulties, research informed by the Cooperative Principle increasingly highlights the handling of Chinese-characteristic expressions—the fundamental elements of political texts. Proper treatment of such expressions is crucial for making political texts meet international readers’ expectations. This study therefore probes the application of the Cooperative Principle to the translation of Chinese-characteristic expressions in white papers.

1.2. Research Design and Significance

The corpus consists of two documents: The Belt and Road Initiative: A Key Pathway to Building a Global Community of Shared Future (October 2023) and The Community with a Shared Future for Mankind: China’s Proposals and Actions (September 2023). A bilingual (Chinese–English) corpus was compiled from authoritative originals and translations.

Table 1. Overview of the Corpus

Item	Description
Corpus label	White Paper Translation Corpus
Dates	Oct 10, 2023; Sep 26, 2023
Size	75,853 Chinese characters (approx.)
Composition	2 Chinese originals + 2 English translations
Source	State Council Information Office website
Retrieval keywords	“Shared Future White Paper”

Following Wang Dongping (2020)^[5], Chinese-characteristic expressions are divided into five categories: proper nouns, abbreviations, idioms, allusions, and metaphors. Frequency and proportion in the corpus are summarized below.

Table 2. Frequencies and Proportions of Chinese-Characteristic Expressions

Category	Frequency	Proportion
Proper nouns	21	13%
Abbreviations	12	8%
Idioms	44	28%
Allusions	43	27%
Metaphors	37	24%
Total	157	100%

Anchored in the Cooperative Principle and corpus linguistics, this study closely examines the translation of the above categories in the white papers. It explores how the Cooperative Principle^[6] informs translation strategies and cross-cultural effectiveness, thereby offering empirical support for improving the quality of governmental translations and enhancing international understanding of China’s policies. It also contributes new perspectives and experiences to political text translation and to the development of Cooperative Principle-based translation theory.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Studies on Translating Government White Papers

Government documents-including government work reports, white papers, and fiscal reports-are official information produced or obtained by government organs in performing their functions (Zhao, 2022)^[7]. The particularity of such documents entails distinct translation principles and methods. In China’s external communication, Huang Youyi (2004)^[8] proposed the “three proximities”: being close to China’s realities, to overseas audiences’ information needs, and to their cognitive habits. Prior research on white papers has focused on linguistic features, translation difficulties, and translation assessment (Li, 2001)^[9], while relatively few studies have approached them through the lens of the Cooperative Principle. This article examines whether and how translations of white papers follow the Cooperative Principle in specific contexts.

2.2. Translation of Chinese-Characteristic Expressions

Chinese-characteristic expressions are terms created to express new concepts and phenomena in China’s development (Guo & Nan, 2020)^[10]. Wang (2020)^[11] divides

them into proper nouns, abbreviations, idioms, allusions, and metaphors. Existing studies have discussed strategies such as literal translation, free translation, transliteration, explication, addition, reduction, and image-retention-plus-explanation, emphasizing contextual dependence and audience cognition. Within a “political equivalence” framework, Lin (2021)^[12] proposed literal, free, and reductive strategies to convey political connotations; Zhang (2021)^[13] observed a tendency to prioritize formal retention for political terms.

The Cooperative Principle underscores interaction and resonance between translator and reader. In governmental translation, its implementation affects both translation quality and international understanding. Wu (2013)^[14] argued that translators should apply the four maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner with sensitivity to cultural and cognitive differences. Liang (2023)^[15] further suggested integrating the Cooperative Principle with concrete translation methods to address deficiencies in two-way interaction.

3. The Cooperative Principle and Translation

3.1. Grice’s Cooperative Principle

In “Logic and Conversation” (1975)^[16], Paul Grice proposed that interlocutors appear to follow certain principles-consciously or subconsciously-to achieve effective cooperation and complete communicative tasks. The Cooperative Principle is realized through four maxims: Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. Grice stated: “Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange.”^[17] The maxims specify how interlocutors cooperate for successful communication and have been widely applied in pragmatics.

3.2. Specific Maxims

- **Quantity:** Provide as much information as needed; do not over- or under-inform.
- **Quality:** Do not say what you believe to be false; do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
- **Relation:** Be relevant.
- **Manner:** Be perspicuous-avoid obscurity and ambiguity; be brief and orderly.

3.3. Applying the Cooperative Principle to Translation

Although formulated for conversation, the principle’s logic is instructive for translation, a quintessential act of intercultural communication. Recent work applies it to literary translation, interpreting, and audiovisual humor. For example, Jia used the principle to study the Fool’s language in King Lear and propose optimization for Chinese translations^[18]; Liu Xintong examined renderings of implicature in Spring^[19]; Liu Shasha explored pragmatic functions of the principle in international business interpreting^[20]; Duan Wenhui analyzed its guidance for tour-escort interpreting^[21]; Li Mengli & Qi Shifang discussed humor translation in Friends^[22]; Fan Rui analyzed The Big Bang Theory through a Gricean lens^[23]. Extending the Cooperative Principle to Chinese-characteristic expressions helps reduce cultural and semantic asymmetries^[24] and clarifies China’s positions for more effective external communication.^[25]

4. Translating Chinese-Characteristic Expressions in the CSFM White Papers under the Cooperative Principle

4.1. Proper Nouns

(1) 2013年3月, 习近平主席提出构建人类命运共同体理念。

(2) In March 2013, President Xi Jinping proposed the vision of a global community of shared future.

Under the Maxim of Relation, the translation should remain closely aligned with the source. The Chinese *gongtongti* (共同体) denotes a collective bound by common conditions and interests; community in English is a near-equivalent image in both usage and conceptual field. Modifying it with global highlights the human scope. Under the Maxim of Manner, shared future is preferred to destiny, which can evoke fatalism; shared future stresses openness and co-construction. Notably, A Shared Future has appeared in policy discourse in English-speaking contexts (e.g., the 2005 strategy in Northern Ireland), further supporting idiomaticity.

4.2. Abbreviations

(1) 共建“一带一路”以“六廊六路多国多港”为基本架构……

(2) Based on a framework comprising “six corridors, six routes, and multiple countries and ports”, a multitiered and multidimensional infrastructure network is taking shape.

By the Maxim of Quantity, the translation conveys neither less nor more than needed. Six corridors refers to the New Eurasian Land Bridge; China–Mongolia–Russia; China–Central Asia–West Asia; China–Indochina Peninsula; China–Pakistan; and Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar. Six routes refers to railways, highways, shipping, air, pipelines, and space-based information networks. Literal rendering coupled with parallel structure preserves the original framework; explanatory notes can be added on first mention when required.

4.3. Idioms

(1) 任何一国即使再强大也无法包打天下, 必须开展全球合作。

(2) No country, however strong it may be, can do everything on its own. We must engage in global cooperation.

The idiom 包打天下 figuratively means monopolizing all tasks or attempting to handle everything alone. The rendering adopts explication rather than literal image transfer, meeting Quantity (adequate information) and Manner (clarity and brevity) while ensuring comprehensibility across cultures.

4.4. Allusions

(1) ……张骞从长安出发, 完成了“凿空之旅”。

(2) At around 140 BC during China’s Han Dynasty, Zhang Qian, a royal emissary, made a journey to the West from Chang’an (present-day Xi’an in Shaanxi Province), opening an overland route linking the East and the West.

Zao kong (凿空) originates from Shiji • Dayuan Liezhuan, meaning “to open up” (a route). As no direct cultural equivalent exists in English, explication under Quantity and Manner is appropriate; the parenthetical note on Chang’an aids non-specialists.

4.5. Metaphors

(1) ……一些国家构筑“小院高墙”。

(2) Some countries are turning to a “small yard, high fence” approach to wall themselves off.

The metaphor is retained and functionally explicated with approach to wall themselves off, balancing image preservation with policy meaning to minimize misinterpretation, in line with Manner and Relation.

5. Conclusion

A comprehensive analysis of translations in the CSFM white papers indicates that the Cooperative Principle provides constructive guidance for governmental translation. Different categories—proper nouns, abbreviations, idioms, allusions, and metaphors—require differentiated strategies to ensure accuracy while attending to cultural factors. Governmental translation is complex and consequential; success hinges on translators’ linguistic proficiency and intercultural literacy. Applying the maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner enriches the translator’s decision space and raises quality standards, thereby improving overall renderings of policy texts (including government work reports). The study broadens both the text type to which the Cooperative Principle is applied and the research lens on CSFM white papers, offering practical value for enhancing external communication.

Limitations remain: the present study primarily draws on texts from September–October 2023 as an initial attempt; the sample size can be expanded. Future work could enlarge the corpus and combine reader-response experiments (e.g., surveys, eye-tracking) to evaluate communicative effects of alternative strategies.

References

- [1] Winning the final victory in building a moderately prosperous society in all respects and securing great success for socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era. (2017, October 19). Renmin Ribao, p. 002.
- [2] Shallow discussion on the applicability of the Cooperative Principle to translation. *Yingyu Guangchang*, (2), 13–14.
- [3] Jia, Z. (2021). A study of the Fool’s language in King Lear under the guidance of the Cooperative Principle. *Wenxue Jiaoyu (Xia)*, (2), 52–53.
- [4] [Liu, X. (2021). A translation study of dialogues in Spring under conversation alimplicature theory (Master’s thesis, Kashgar University).
- [5] Liu, S. (2021). The Cooperative Principle in interpreting for international business negotiation. *Shangye Wenhua*, (23), 124–125.
- [6] Duan, W. (2019). A tour–escort interpreting practice report under the Cooperative Principle (Master’s thesis, Shandong University).
- [7] Li, M., & Qi, S. (2016). Interpreting humor in Friends from the perspective of the Cooperative Principle. *Zhifu Shidai*, (11), 226.
- [8] Fan, R. (2016). Humor translation of The BigBang Theory from the perspective of conversation alimplicature. *Wenhua Xuekan*, (6), 196–198.
- [9] Wang, D. (2020). Cultural correspondence and English translation strategies for Chinese–characteristic expressions in the Government Work Report. *Xueshu Yanjiu*, (12), 34–40.

- [10] Huang, Y. (2004). Adhering to the “three proximities” and addressing difficulties in external communication translation. *Zhongguo Fanyi*, (6), 29–30.
- [11] Li, C. (2001). On the English translation of the white paper The One–China Principle and the Taiwan Issue. *Zhongguo Fanyi*, (5), 63–65.
- [12] Guo, W., & Nan, H. (2020). Ideal C–E translation of value–laden culturally specific terms. *Haiwai Yingyu*, (5), 168–169.
- [13] Lin, P. (2021). Translation strategies for Chinese–characteristic terms on the MFA website under “political equivalence”. *Juece Tansuo (Xia)*, (2), 59–60.
- [14] Zhang, J. (2021). On translating political Chinese–characteristic terms in the Government Work Report. *Haiwai Yingyu*, (12), 77–78.
- [15] Wu, D. (2013). Application of the Cooperative Principle in English translation of Chinese political publications—A case study of Xinhua’s translation of the 18th CPC National Congress report. *Chuban Guangjiao*, (12), 82–83.
- [16] Liang, J. (2023). English translation of Chinese–characteristic terms under the Cooperative Principle—Based on the Government Work Reports(2018–2022). *Wenhua Chuangxin Bijiao Yanjiu*, 7(4), 27–33.
- [17] Zhao, J. (2022). A discourse–practice study of governmental document translation (Doctoral dissertation, Jilin University).
- [18] Wu, H. (2012). Discourse studies on current political news in Party newspapers (Doctoral dissertation, Fudan University).
- [19] Jin, L. (2005). Cooperation and conversation: A study on the Cooperative Principle and its applications (Doctoral dissertation, Zhejiang University).
- [20] Lan, C., & Hu, Y. (2014). A pragmatic analysis of evasive answers by MFA spokes people. *Zhongguo Waiyu*, 11(6), 21–28.
- [21] Ma, L. (2003). Pragmatic principles and diplomatic rhetoric. *Beijing Second Foreign Languages Institute Journal*, (4), 21–24.
- [22] Xi, J. (2017, January 20). Jointly building a community with a shared future for mankind. *Renmin Ribao*, p. 002.
- [23] Cheng, Z. (2003). Political sensitivity in translating political articles. *Zhongguo Fanyi*, (3), 20–24.
- [24] Wang, N. (2004). Thoughts on the C–E translation of the 16th CPC National Congress report. *Zhongguo Fanyi*, (1), 58–61.
- [25] Deng, H. (2020). Translation strategies for China’s political discourse: The case of the English rendering and communication of “a community with a shared future for mankind”. *Lilun Yuekan*, (8), 21–30.