

Exploring Translation in International Chinese Teaching Materials from the Perspective of Functional Translation Theory: A Case Study of HSK Standard Course 4 (Volume 1)

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Abstract:

With the acceleration of globalization, China's global status and discourse power continue to rise, leading to a growing number of Chinese language learners worldwide. As a widely used and influential learning resource, the *HSK Standard Course* serves as a crucial tool for Chinese language learners, and the quality of its translations directly impacts their learning outcomes. This study adopts the perspective of functional translation theory, taking *HSK Standard Course 4 (Volume 1)* as a case study, to explore translation strategies in international Chinese education materials. Through qualitative analysis of the textbook's content—including dialogues, vocabulary, and grammar explanations—this research examines whether its translations fulfill intended communicative purposes and meet learners' needs, thereby achieving the pedagogical function of the text. Additionally, the study identifies shortcomings in the current translations and proposes improvements to enhance Chinese learners' comprehension and translation abilities.

Keywords: Functional translation theory, International Chinese teaching materials, Translation strategies, Cultural communication, *HSK Standard Course* translation

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

The acceleration of globalization has spurred the development of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Lan-

guage (TCFL). The translation and comprehension of international Chinese teaching materials significantly impact learners' acquisition outcomes. The *HSK Standard Course*, authorized by the Center for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC) and jointly developed by Beijing Language and Culture

University Press and Chinese Testing International (CTI), is widely recognized for its universality, authority, and official status, making it a primary resource for Chinese learners worldwide.

1.2 Research Questions and Significance

Research Questions:

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the *HSK Standard Course* translations from the perspective of functional translation theory?
- How can its translations be improved?

Research Significance:

- Theoretical Significance: This study expands the application of functional translation theory, moving beyond its traditional use in subtitling to analyze educational materials.
- Practical Significance: The findings provide actionable recommendations for refining the *HSK Standard Course*, thereby enhancing learners' comprehension and efficiency in Chinese language acquisition.

1.3 Research Object and Methodology

Research Object:

The study focuses on the translated texts in *HSK Standard Course 4 (Volume 1)*, including dialogues, vocabulary, grammar explanations, and cultural annotations.

Methodology:

A qualitative analysis is conducted to examine whether the translations achieve their intended communicative purposes and accurately convey linguistic and cultural information.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Research on Functional Translation Theory

Functional Translation Theory, with Skopos theory at its core, posits translation as a purposeful social activity. This theoretical framework advocates for functional equivalence in textual transformation, emphasizing that translation should achieve equivalent effects across different cultural contexts. A key tenet of this approach is its focus on audience needs and textual functions in the translation process.

In studies since the 21st century, scholars have focused on discussing the realization of translation purposes. Liu Songhao (2004), in "The Functions and Principles of Translation in TCFL Materials - Taking 'Teacher' and 'Facial Makeup' as Examples", argued that translation should serve teaching purposes and fulfill the goal of cultural transmission. Zeng Xiaohong (2006), in "Reflections on English-Chinese Translation Textbooks for TCFL",

proposed that textbook translation should emphasize purposefulness and systematicness, a view that aligns with Skopos theory.

In post-2010 research, scholars have placed relatively greater emphasis on the transmission of textual functions. Tang Zhiwei (2014), in "On English Glosses for New Words in TCFL Materials from the Perspective of Equivalence Theory", emphasized that vocabulary translation should achieve semantic and cultural equivalence, paying attention not only to grammatical aspects but also to emotional and stylistic connotations. Zhou Yan (2013), in "A Study of English Translation and Interpretation in TCFL Materials", stressed that translation should consider both linguistic forms and cultural connotations, which corresponds with the multidimensionality of textual functions in Functional Translation Theory.

2.2 Research on Translation in TCFL Teaching Materials

Since the 21st century, research on TCFL teaching materials has primarily focused on the translation of vocabulary, grammar, and cultural terms within the textbooks themselves, with relatively few studies examining the functions and principles of translation. Notably, there has been a lack of relevant research in the past five years.

Yu Juanyan (2008), in "A Study of English Translation of Vocabulary in TCFL Teaching Materials", mainly analyzed Chinese-English translation issues of vocabulary in "Chinese Course". Tang Xintong (2011), in "An Analysis of Chinese-English Translation Problems in Vocabulary Lists of Elementary TCFL Textbooks", focused specifically on vocabulary lists, proposing that translations should be more concise and clear. Lu Jie (2009), in "A Study of English Translation of New Words in TCFL Textbooks from the Perspective of Equivalence", emphasized the importance of semantic and pragmatic equivalence in vocabulary translation.

Regarding the translation of cultural terms, Dang Li (2021), in "A Study of Cultural Term Interpretation in Intermediate TCFL Textbooks", pointed out that translations should balance accuracy with cultural background, and that greater attention should be paid to conveying cultural connotations. Ding Ruiyun (2015), in "A Study of English Translation and Annotation of Idioms in TCFL Textbooks", highlighted how cultural and linguistic habit differences should be reflected in translations.

Research on grammar translation has been relatively scarce. Yang Chengling (2021), in "A Study of Grammar Translation in Elementary Chinese Textbooks Based on Equivalence Theory", primarily investigated grammatical translation issues in TCFL materials, proposing that differences in grammatical structures should be given due

consideration in translation.

2.3 Limitations of Existing Research

Current research on Functional Translation Theory has predominantly focused on film subtitle translation and specific literary works, with fewer than ten studies addressing TCFL teaching materials in the past decade. This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing translation strategies in TCFL materials through the lens of Functional Translation Theory, examining their strengths and weaknesses, and proposing practical recommendations for improvement.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Core Concepts of Functional Translation Theory

Emerging in the 1970s, Functional Translation Theory has progressively developed into a significant theoretical framework in translation studies. Katharina Reiss's text typology theory categorizes texts into informative, expressive, and operative types, emphasizing that translation strategies should vary according to textual functions. Hans Vermeer's Skopos Theory further posits that the primary principle of translation is to achieve the intended purpose (skopos) rather than pursue equivalence with the source text. Justa Holz-Mänttari's theory of translational action approaches translation from an intercultural communication perspective, conceptualizing it as a purposeful social activity.

These theories have introduced new perspectives to translation research. Particularly in educational text translation, Functional Translation Theory has been widely applied to analyze the intentionality, functionality, and audience adaptability of textbook translations. In the context of TCFL materials, existing literature primarily focuses on translation strategies, the treatment of culture-loaded terms, and the localization of teaching materials.

3.2 Three Dimensions of Functional Translation Theory

3.2.1 Realization of Translation Purpose

Based on Hans Vermeer's Skopos Theory, this dimension considers the intended function of the target text as the primary factor in translation. The choice of translation strategies always serves the "skopos" (purpose) of the translation act. This manifests in three aspects: purpose determinism, purpose hierarchy, and purpose negotiation. Purpose determinism means the fundamental principle of translation is "the end justifies the means" - translation

strategies fully serve the intended function of the target text (skopos). This principle overturns the traditional absolute standard of "faithful equivalence," emphasizing the dynamic and practical nature of translation.

Purpose hierarchy indicates that translation purposes exist at multiple levels, requiring distinction between overall textual purpose (macro) and local linguistic purposes (micro), with coordination between different levels.

Purpose negotiation means the translation purpose results from negotiation among multiple stakeholders (clients, translators, readers), requiring balance between "ideal function" and "practical constraints."

3.2.2 Transmission of Textual Functions

This dimension mainly draws on Katharina Reiss's text typology theory, emphasizing that different text types require different translation strategies. For example, the core function of informative texts is conveying facts, so translation strategies should focus on semantic equivalence with attention to standardized terminology. From the principle of functional equivalence, different text types serve different functions and thus require different translation approaches.

3.2.3 Fulfillment of Audience Needs

From the perspective of reception theory, to meet audience needs, translation should emphasize the acceptability of the translated text in the target culture. The translation activity should focus on readers' responses rather than simply pursuing textual "faithfulness." Readers' reception of texts is influenced by their cultural background, aesthetic habits, knowledge level and other factors. Translators should predict these factors and meet readers' horizons of expectation.

4. Text Analysis

4.1 Analysis of HSK Standard Course 4 (Volume 1) from the Perspective of Translation Purpose Realization

As an international Chinese teaching material, the primary purpose of HSK Standard Course is to help learners of Chinese as a foreign language better study and understand Chinese. Therefore, its translation purpose is to convert the textbook content into multilingual versions, lowering the learning threshold for non-Chinese learners, helping Chinese learners understand exam requirements, and mastering test-taking skills. Thus, HSK Standard Course should adopt standardized terminology strategies and cultural adaptation strategies.

(1) Clear semantic differentiation. The Chinese word “自然” is appropriately translated into two distinct mean-

ings - “Naturally” and “Certainly” (Lesson 1). The same Chinese term may serve different functions in different contexts: “自然地” when describing a state, versus “当然” when emphasizing inevitability. Functional theory prioritizes target language readers’ comprehension and usage conventions. In English, “Naturally” and “Certainly” belong to different semantic categories. A unified translation of the Chinese polysemous word could mislead readers. Therefore, translators need to differentiate meanings according to English expression conventions. The textbook’s approach in this case effectively serves its intended purpose.

(2) Combination of literal translation and transliteration for cultural terms. As a textbook for intermediate Chinese learners, *HSK Standard Course 4 (Volume 1)* aims to help learners understand Chinese cultural elements and linguistic expressions through translation. Therefore, both literal and free translation approaches are essential. In the textbook’s translation of the Qixi Festival (Lesson 1), the festival name “七夕节” is presented with both pinyin (Qixi Festival) and explanatory translation (Chinese Valentine’s Day), effectively balancing language learning and cultural understanding. This dual approach helps international students establish Chinese-English correspondences while implementing both standardized terminology strategies and cultural adaptation strategies. Specific custom-related terms like “乞巧” are translated as “pray for skills” with supplementary activity details (“穿针引线”→“Doing Needlework”), which intuitively presents the festival’s cultural connotations and facilitates cultural vocabulary acquisition for elementary-level learners.

(3) Clear vocabulary correspondence. In the textbook’s translation of shopping-related content (Lesson 6), it provides sentence-by-sentence Chinese-English comparisons (e.g., “砍价”→“Bargained”, “网上购物”→“Online Shopping”), helping international students directly associate Chinese and English vocabulary and phrases. This approach is particularly suitable for elementary learners to accumulate daily expressions and better comprehend Chinese. The translation of “集购物, 休闲, 娱乐, 餐饮于一体” as “Multifunctional Places for Shopping, Leisure, Entertainment and Dining” effectively assists students in learning the corresponding relationships between compound nouns and functional expressions.

4.2 Analysis of HSK Standard Course 4 (Volume 1) from the Perspective of Textual Function Transmission

(1) Accurate Handling of Polysemy

The textbook adequately considers that the same word may require different translations in texts serving different functions. For instance, the Chinese word “调查” is

translated as both “Survey” and “Investigate” (Lesson 3). These two English terms differ significantly in meaning and usage context:

- “Survey” implies breadth-first, data-driven approaches with statistically descriptive outcomes
- “Investigate” suggests depth-first, problem-driven approaches yielding causal analysis or solutions

This distinction helps international students understand that while both concepts are expressed as “调查” in Chinese, their English equivalents vary according to textual function, thereby reducing learners’ confusion about functional translation variations.

(2) Explication of Logical Relationships

In the translation of “green food” content (Lesson 7), which belongs to the expository text category, the translation strengthens logical structure to achieve its explanatory purpose. The implicit cause-effect relationship in Chinese (higher price but beneficial for health/environment) is made explicit through “Though...” structures. This approach:

- Demonstrates English equivalents for Chinese adversative relationships
- Maintains the expository text’s instructional function
- Provides learners with clear syntactic models for academic writing

The textbook’s systematic functional differentiation is particularly evident in:

- Lesson 3’s comparison of “Survey” (问卷调查) vs. “Investigate” (案件调查)
- Lesson 7’s explicit rendering of 虽然...但是 as “Though...”, preserving the original’s persuasive function
- Consistent handling of procedural verbs (e.g., “Follow Steps” for 按步骤) in instructional texts

This functional approach ensures learners acquire not just lexical equivalents, but also genre-appropriate discourse patterns essential for academic and professional Chinese.

4.3 Analysis of HSK Standard Course 4 (Volume 1) from the Perspective of Meeting Audience Needs

(1) Lack of Cultural Comparison in Overall Translation, Insufficient Analysis of Chinese-Western Cultural Conflicts

For example, when discussing Chinese cultural concepts of “红事” (happy events) and “白事” (funeral affairs) in Lesson 8, the translation of “红事” as “red events” is overly literal. In Chinese culture, red symbolizes joy and auspiciousness (e.g., weddings, Spring Festival), while in Western culture, red represents danger or passion (e.g., warning signs, love). This translation may lead Western students to misinterpret it as “red-themed parties.” In Chinese culture, “红事” specifically refers to weddings and

should be translated as “weddings” or supplemented with annotations (e.g., “auspicious ‘red affairs’”). Similarly, “白事” translated as “white event” could be clarified with “funeral” or annotations (e.g., “mourning rituals called ‘white affairs’”).

(2) Insufficient Depth in Cultural Background

In the translation of the Qixi Festival (Lesson 1), the textbook does not explain the historical context of the “乞巧” (praying for skills) custom: ancient women demonstrated needlework skills to pray for marital happiness, reflecting the idealized division of labor in the Cowherd and Weaver Girl legend (“men farm, women weave”). The translation only superficially describes the activity without mentioning how Qixi evolved from a “skill-praying festival” to a modern “Chinese Valentine’s Day,” potentially confusing international students about traditional vs. contemporary differences.

Similarly, in Lesson 8’s discussion of “红事” and “白事,” the textbook does not address the core cultural conflict in color symbolism (e.g., white symbolizes purity in Western weddings but mourning in Chinese funerals). Without historical context, students may struggle to understand the specific meanings of these events and miss the cultural significance of red in China (e.g., red couplets during Spring Festival, wearing red to ward off evil during one’s zodiac year). Overall, this weakens the cultural logic behind the language.

(3) Ambiguity in Cultural Terminology

In the translation of Buddhist concepts, “境界” is rendered as “Realm,” which may cause confusion. In English, “realm” typically refers to physical or abstract domains (e.g., “the Realm of Science”), whereas the Chinese term “境界” carries Daoist connotations of self-cultivation and spiritual attainment. A better translation might be “spiritual state” with explanatory notes.

Additionally, the cultural background of “知足” (contentment) is omitted. The translation does not mention its origin in the *Dao De Jing* («知足不辱，知止不殆»—“Contentment prevents disgrace; knowing when to stop avoids danger”), leading students to mistake it for a colloquial phrase rather than a philosophical concept.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Research Conclusions

From the perspective of functional translation theory, the translation design of *HSK Standard Course 4A* demonstrates notable achievements in the realization of instrumental rationality. Lexical translations are generally well-executed, largely fulfilling the dual objectives of achieving translational purposes and conveying textual

functions. However, structural limitations persist in the construction of communicative functions and the negotiation of cultural subjectivity, resulting in deficiencies in addressing audience needs. Future optimizations should emphasize cultural annotations and contextualized translations, with a stronger focus on Sino-Western cultural comparisons. This approach would transform translation into a cognitive bridge connecting linguistic competence and communicative competence, rather than remaining a mere tool for symbolic conversion.

5.2 Improvement Proposals

(1) Supplement Cultural Annotations**: Implement footnotes in translations to elucidate cultural contexts. For instance, in the translation of shopping conventions (Lesson 6), explanatory notes could be added to clarify the cultural practice of “Price Bargaining” (砍价) or the socio-technological factors behind the prevalence of e-commerce in China (e.g., mobile payment culture), thereby aiding international learners in comprehending the embedded social semiotics.

(2) Deepen Cultural Exploration through Comparative Analysis**: Enhance translations with cross-cultural comparisons. When translating the Qixi Festival (Lesson 1), supplementary contrasts between the Chinese legend of the Cowherd and Weaver Girl (牛郎织女) and Western narratives like *Romeo and Juliet* could be incorporated, analyzing differential cultural paradigms of tragic love (e.g., familial constraints vs. feuding societal structures).

(3) Enrich Specialized Cultural Terminology**: Strengthen philosophical contextualization in translations of religious content. For Buddhist terminology, provide annotated excerpts from classical texts like the *Dao De Jing* and elucidate conceptual distinctions between Confucian “Contentment in Poverty” (安贫乐道) and Daoist “Self-sufficiency” (知足).

5.3 Research Limitations

(1) Scope Restriction to HSK Materials**: The exclusive focus on *HSK Standard Course* may limit generalizability to broader international Chinese pedagogical materials. This study primarily reveals the prescriptive translation characteristics inherent in standardized examination-oriented textbooks, emphasizing “linguistic structure transparency” and “predictability of assessment points.” By contrast, widely adopted pedagogical approaches—such as immersion-oriented textbooks (e.g., *Riding the Wind: Chinese*) or task-based curricula (e.g., *Task-based Chinese Course*)—prioritize “meaning negotiation” and “communicative efficacy,” frequently transcending formal equivalence constraints.

(2) Subjectivity Inherent in Functional Translation Theo-

ry**: The analytical outcomes may reflect researcher bias due to the theory's interpretive nature. While functional translation theory's subjective orientation enhances its explanatory power for complex translational phenomena, it simultaneously constrains theoretical scientization. Researchers must maintain "critical self-awareness," explicitly articulating three positional parameters when applying functionalist frameworks: cultural stance, academic lineage, and value presuppositions. Only through methodological transparency and systematic verification processes can the practical utility of functional theory be maximized while mitigating conclusion bias caused by subjectivity. This approach facilitates the gradual evolution of translation studies from an "interpretive art" toward a "verifiable science."

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