

A Systems-Theoretic Perspective to the Translation of Company Profiles from Chinese into English

Jinpei ZHANG

School of Foreign Languages, Shenzhen Institute of Information and Technology, Shenzhen,
P.R. China

zhangjp@szit.edu.cn

How to cite:

ZHANG, J.(2023). A Systems-Theoretic Perspective to the Translation of Company Profiles from Chinese into English. *International Journal of Linguistics and Translation Studies* 4(2).1-10.

<https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlts.v4i2.328>

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 09/03/2023

Accepted: 10/04/2023

KEYWORDS

Systems theory; business discourse; company profiles; quality of translation

Abstract

A translation system is made up of a source text subsystem and a target text subsystem. The elements in the system are interrelated and exert influence on each other. Translation studies from a systems-theoretic perspective focus primarily on literary texts, while business discourses are seldom explored. In order to assess the translation quality of company profiles, a three-level model from the systems theory perspective has been proposed. The three levels are the preliminary data level, the discourse level, and the contextual level. The results show that the translator should attach great importance to improving and restructuring the source text and reconstructing experiential meaning, interpersonal meaning, and textual meaning. The translation should be reader-oriented and adapt to the cultural context of the target language.

1. INTRODUCTION

A company profile (aka corporate profile or “about us”) is an introduction to a company usually in written form. It often appears in want ads, exhibition booths, company brochures, company websites, e-commerce platforms, social media (e.g., YouTube channels), annual reports (see de Groot, 2008), and corporate social responsibility reports (see Yu, 2022), etc. It plays a very important role in communicating corporate reputation and brand image. Against the backdrop of increasing economic globalization and the “Belt and Road” initiative, many Chinese companies are becoming more and more engaged in cross-border business activities. English has been the lingua franca to conduct business around the world (Nickerson & Planken, 2015). However, we found in our data that there are many problems in the translation of some company profiles from Chinese into English. These problems can cause misunderstandings at best and might damage the corporate image in the worst-case scenario. Taking examples from the English translation of company profiles of two Chinese companies, this paper attempts to put forward a model to assess the translation quality of business discourse from the perspective of systems theory, aiming to pinpoint the root causes underlying the problems in the translation of the two company profiles from Chinese into English.

2. COMPANY PROFILE

Company profile is a business genre that fulfils descriptive and promotional functions (de Groot, 2008; Yu, 2022). On the one hand, it introduces the company from various aspects, such as its history, products, technological strength, and culture. On the other hand, the company aims to attract potential customers and investors and persuade them into action by showcasing the company comprehensively, in the hope of enhancing the company's credibility and reputation and seeking wider cooperation opportunities for better future prospects.

A company profile generally consists of several moves, each with its communicative purpose. All these moves work in tandem to realize the overall communicative purpose of the genre. A move can be further divided into multiple steps. Sun, Zhao, and Zhao (2016) found that a company profile is usually composed of five moves: company overview, company strength, product introduction, corporate culture, and future prospects, and each move can be broken down into several steps.

(1) The company overview move introduces the company's basic information to readers from ownership, industry, development history, business scope, etc. It mainly fulfils an informational communication purpose;

(2) The corporate strength move details company size, sales volume, research and development capabilities, awards and honours, financial capabilities, human resources, etc., to create a positive company image and attract potential customers and investors. It usually has a persuasive communication purpose;

(3) The product introduction move describes the products or services from multiple perspectives, including product range, product quality, and safety guarantees. It serves an informational purpose;

(4) The corporate culture move explains the corporate mission, philosophy, values, social responsibilities, etc. It aims to enhance readers' positive attitudes towards the company, and as a result, has a persuasive communicative purpose;

(5) The future prospects move states the vision of the company so that readers can foresee the bright future of the company. It has a persuasive communicative purpose.

In addition to the above five moves, some company profiles might also include such moves as titles (e.g., name of the company), contact information, brand stories, etc. Among these moves, company overview and corporate strength are compulsory moves, appearing in most company profiles, while other moves are optional.

The examples in this article come from the company profiles of Shenzhen Taikong Gifts Co., Ltd. (hereinafter referred to as Taikong Gifts) and Ganten (Shenzhen) Food and Beverage Group Co., Ltd. (<http://www.ganten.com.cn/p/about.html/>, hereafter referred to as Ganten Beverage), with the former being a typical example of human translation, and the latter a case of machine translation. The company profile of Taikong Gifts used to be included as a paradigmatic example of sound translation in many textbooks, such as *Practical Chinese-English Translation Course* edited by Zeng (2002), and *Business English Translation (Teacher's Book)* edited by Tang (2012), etc. Below are the Chinese version of the company profile of Taikong Gifts and its English translation that appeared in the company brochure:

深圳大光礼品有限公司

该公司是一家中外合资的综合性经济实体,为国内首家专业生产、经营各类中高档礼品精品、旅游纪念品、宾馆客房系列用品的企业。

公司规模庞大,技术力量雄厚,机械设备、生产原料进口,产品自行设计生产。大光礼品,物美价廉。

公司将竭诚为您提供高质量的产品,高质量的服务。大光标志,质量的保证,信誉的保证。

Shenzhen Taikong Gift Co. Ltd.

This is a jointly-ventured comprehensive economic entity, and the first domestic enterprise which specializes in producing and dealing with different kinds of high grade and intermediate choice gifts and souvenirs, tourist souvenirs and serial appliances for guestrooms in hotels.

The company is broad in scale, and is equipped with solid technical forces. Machines and raw materials are imported, while products are designed and produced by local forces. The company provides satisfying gifts and souvenirs in appropriate prices.

The company will whole-heartedly provide high quality products and services. Our symbols will guarantee the quality and our prestige.

The company profile of Taikong Gifts is composed of a title (i.e., name of the company), company overview, company strength, corporate culture, and contact information (omitted in this paper). The first paragraph is an overview of the company, including two steps: the type of company and its main products. The second paragraph is a statement about the strength of the company, in terms of scale, technical strength, and competitive price. The last paragraph is a statement about corporate culture.

3. TRANSLATION FROM A SYSTEMS-THEORETIC PERSPECTIVE

General systems theory was proposed by Austrian-American biologist and philosopher Ludwig von Bertalanffy, and has witnessed a wide range of applications in biology, psychology, social science, and other fields. According to systems theory, many objects, animate or inanimate, can be regarded as a system, and each system is composed of multiple elements and subsystems, which interact and influence each other. Lambert and van Gorp (2014) were among the early scholars who applied systems theory to the field of translation. They believed that the three elements: the author, source text, and readers constitute the source text subsystem, and the translator, target text, and target text readers constitute the target text subsystem. The source text subsystem and the target text subsystem constitute a larger system. Lambert and van Gorp (2014) argued that translation studies should examine the interrelationship between the various elements within and across the systems, for example, the relationship between the source text and the target text, the relationship between the author and

the translator, etc. The source and target language text subsystem are open systems that maintain interaction with other systems, such as social, cultural, and inter-textual contexts. Lambert and van Gorp (2014) proposed a systems-theoretic model consisting of four levels: preliminary data, macro level, micro level, and systems context, for the study of literary translation. Munday, Pinto and Blakesley (2022) pointed out that translation research from the systems theory perspective is mainly limited to literary texts, while other text types are seldom explored. This paper aims to fill this gap by investigating business discourse from a systems-theoretic perspective. To this end, we can simplify the model to three levels: preliminary data level, discourse level, and contextual level adapted for the research of business discourse translation.

Preliminary data concerns the source, the translator, and the target language text and the relationships among them. At this level, such information as the genre structure of the source language text, the extent of adaptation of the source text, the translation strategies used, the degree of correspondence between the target text and the source text, the background of the translator, and the voice of the translator, etc., is extracted and analyzed.

Different from those genres that require the translation to be consistent with the source text in terms of both content and form, the company profile generally allows the translator to adapt the source text, such as rearranging the structure of moves and steps, adding and deleting some content, etc., to make it more aligned with the target text reader's language and cultural norms, to fulfill its promotional function better. Based on the quality requirements of the target texts and the purpose for using such texts, Cui and Lei (2016) divided target texts into three types: reference-level texts, standard-level texts, and publication-level texts, and proposed translation strategies for each type. It was argued that the majority of reference-level texts can be machine-translated, while publication-level texts should be translated by humans, and standard level texts can use a combination of manual translation and computer-assisted translation. The company profile is a standard-level text, which calls for a mixed translation strategy of machine translation and human translation. Prior to machine translation, however, the source text can be adapted if it is found necessary, for example, the move and step structure can be rearranged, additional information supplemented, and irrelevant information deleted. Then the improved source text is ready to be subjected to machine translation, and the output should be manually proofread and revised.

According to Systemic Functional Linguistics, language has three metafunctions: ideational metafunction (which can be further divided into experiential and logical metafunctions), interpersonal metafunction, and textual metafunction (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Experiential metafunction means that people use language to talk about their experiences, and to describe objects, events, or states of being around them. Interpersonal metafunction means people use language to communicate with others, establish and maintain interpersonal or social relationships, and influence others through language. Textual metafunction means how people organize information into coherent and cohesive discourse when they use language. Matthiessen (2014) defines translation as the process of reconstructing the meaning of the source text in the target language through choice. According to him, translation is “the recreation of meaning in context through choice—choice in the interpretation of the original text and choice in the creation of the translated text” (Matthiessen, 2014: 272). Therefore, translation studies should mainly examine how the translator interprets the

experiential meaning, interpersonal meaning, and textual meaning of the source text and reconstruct them in the target text. Experiential meaning is realized primarily through the transitivity systems of clauses, which are composed of processes, participants, and circumstantial elements. The expression of interpersonal meaning is realized by Mood (Subject and Finite), modality, evaluation (appraisal), and negotiation (Thompson, 2022). Among the resources for the expression of interpersonal meaning, the appraisal will be the primary concern in this paper, which Martin and White (2005) broke down into three subsystems: attitude, engagement, and graduation. The attitude subsystem mainly involves interpersonal meanings such as emotional expression, moral/character judgment, and object appreciation; the engagement subsystem deals with whether the writer or the speaker engages other voices and perspectives and acknowledges other positions; the graduation subsystem is concerned with the way the speaker or the writer intensifies or weakens their evaluation. The theme system and cohesion system mainly realize the textual meaning.

Context includes situational, co-textual, inter-textual, and cultural contexts. Situational context refers to the participants, physical environment, and time setting. Co-textual context refers to the connection of words, phrases, and clauses with other components before or after them. Inter-textual context refers to the relationship with other texts. Cultural context includes politics, law, religion, values, etc.

3.1. Preliminary Data Level

As mentioned above, preliminary data mainly examines the source language text, the translator and the target language text, and the relationships among the three, including the genre analysis of the source language text, the adaptation of the source language text by the translator, the translation strategy used, and the degree of correspondence between the target language text and the source language text, etc. The company profile of Taikong Gifts mainly introduces the company from three aspects: company overview, corporate strength, and company culture. The profile is a little bit too short, among other things, in that the full text is less than 150 Chinese characters. For example, the strength of the company is mentioned only in broad terms, without providing any statistical data or further explanation. As a result, the persuasive force might not be that strong. Suppose the translator can make some necessary improvements on the source language text and supplement it with awards and honors, sales volume, research and development capabilities, etc., instead of being too faithful to the source language text. In that case, the corporate image can be better communicated from multiple dimensions. Broadly speaking, the translator of this company profile used the strategy of a literal translation. Unfortunately, there are quite some weaknesses or mistakes in the reconstruction of empirical and interpersonal meaning in the target text.

On the contrary, as many as 900 Chinese characters are in the Chinese version of the Ganten Beverage company profile. It spared no efforts when it comes to describing the strength of the company, for example, it furnished a complete list of mineral water production bases, purified water plant sites, and more than ten honors won by the company over the years, which amounts to 200 Chinese characters and takes up a lot of space. It was found in the genre analysis that the steps fulfilling the same purposes were not neatly configured and as a result, trespassed into other moves to which they don't belong. The company simply resorted to word-for-word machine translation, without making any adaptation to the source text. For example, we did not identify any improvement in content (e.g., addition or deletion) or any rearrangement of the

structure of moves and steps. Similarly, no subtitles were added to signal and explain each move. After scrutinizing the target text, we found that the translation of the company profile was not cohesive and coherent in many places, and there were many bad translations.

3.2. Discourse level

The discourse level mainly investigates the relationships within and across clauses and sentences. It analyzes the various meanings expressed in the discourse and the reconstruction of these meanings in the target text. In the following sections, we examine the translation quality and discuss the translation problems in the reconstruction and delivery of experiential, interpersonal, and textual meaning in the two company profiles.

3.2.1. Experiential meaning

Experiential meaning is primarily expressed through the transitivity systems, which are comprised of processes, participants, and circumstantial elements. There are material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral, and existential processes, which are signaled by verb phrases. Different processes involve different participants. For example, a material process is usually composed of participants such as actors and goals, while a mental process, senser (i.e., the participant who senses, feels, or perceives) and phenomenon. Circumstantial elements refer to place, time, manner, and reason, and are usually expressed by adverbial phrases and prepositional phrases.

There are quite a few mistakes in the translation of the company profile of Taikong Gifts in terms of experiential meaning delivery. For example, one participant, “中外合资(企业)” (Sino-foreign joint venture) in the relational process “公司是一家中外合资的综合性经济实体” (This *is* a Sino-foreign joint venture) was translated as “a jointly-ventured comprehensive economic entity”, in which “jointly-ventured” was wrongfully coined from the term “joint venture”, and the word “中外” (Sino-foreign) was simply ignored and not translated.

The sentence “(公司)专业生产、经营各类中高档礼品精品、旅游纪念品、宾馆客房系列用品” (The company specializes in producing and dealing in various kinds of high end gifts, souvenirs and supplies for hotel rooms) is a material process and was translated as “The company specializes in producing and dealing with different kinds of high grade and intermediate choice gifts and souvenirs, tourist souvenirs and serial appliances for guestrooms in hotels”. The signal of the material process, that is, the verb compound “专业生产和经营” (specialize in producing and dealing in), had been mistranslated as “specialize in producing and dealing with”. As we know, the phrase “deal with” means to “to handle” or “to do business with someone” in English, but does not have the meaning “to buy and sell products”, the correct phrase should be “deal in”. The participant “礼品精品、旅游纪念品” (gifts and souvenirs) was translated as “choice gifts and souvenirs, tourist souvenirs”, in which “souvenirs” are redundant and thus should be changed to “gifts and souvenirs”. Another participant “系列用品” (a series of supplies) was translated as “serial appliances”. However, in English, the word appliance usually refers to electrical appliances, the correct translation should be “supplies”.

The translator used a material process to put the sentence “大光礼品,物美价廉” into English: “The company provides satisfying gifts and souvenirs in appropriate prices”, in which the prepositional phrase “in appropriate prices” is functioning as a circumstantial element. However, the preposition to go with a certain price should be “at”, rather than “in”. In addition, “appropriate” means “suitable”, which is generally used to modify behavior or manner, rather than price. Therefore, the correct circumstantial element should be “at low/favorable/reasonable prices”.

Another sentence “大光标志, 质量的保证, 信誉的保证”(Taikong brand/logo is a guarantee of quality and credibility) was translated as “Our symbols will guarantee the quality and our prestige”. The participant, “大光标志” (Taikong brand/logo) in the relational process was translated as “Our symbols”, which is not an accurate equivalent to the source text. The word “标志” here should be understood as brand or logo.

3.2.2. Interpersonal meaning

Interpersonal meaning is usually conveyed by the Mood system, the modality system, the evaluation system, and the negotiation system. This paper mainly examines the use and translation of evaluation system resources in company profiles. The company profile of Taikong Gifts relied mainly on explicit “appreciation” evaluation resources, such as the use of adjectives to express its interpersonal meaning. However, there are many problems in the translation of these interpersonal meaning. The phrase “中高档” (high end) was translated as “high grade and intermediate”, which on the surface, seems completely equivalent to the source text. However, The expression “中高档” (high end) actually means “good quality and high price”, which mainly highlights the interpersonal meaning, rather than the literal meaning of “intermediate grade and high grade”. The translation “high grade and intermediate” seems to be faithful on the surface to the source text since it brings out the literal meaning of the phrase. However, “intermediate” is redundant information and thus should be omitted. Besides, the word “choice” in “中高档礼品精品” (“high grade and intermediate choice gifts and souvenirs”) also means high-quality, and is thus redundant since there is already “high grade” (or rather high end) to modify “the gifts”.

The company profile of Ganten Beverage made use of implicit “appreciation” evaluation resources, for example, it cited a complete list of the honors the company had won over the years to show its edge. Facing such a wide array of awards, even readers at home might have difficulty recognizing them all. If all these awards are translated word for word, it is not only time-consuming, but also it may take up a lot of space. What’s worse, it may not achieve the intended effect of impressing the reader. After all, if the target text readers know little or nothing about such awards they might as well choose to ignore them. Therefore only important and well-known awards should be identified and translated, while the less important ones can be tallied and only the total number, rather than the complete list of awards, should be reported. Similarly, even though great details including the place names of mineral water production bases, the sites of purified water plants, and market shares in many countries and regions were provided in the source language text, it would be enough to translate by reporting the total number of bases and sites.

3.2.3. Textual meaning

Textual meaning is expressed by the theme system and the cohesion system. The theme is the starting point of clause information, and usually conveys information already known, which is usually expressed by subject, predicate, complement, circumstantial adverbial, etc. Cohesion is achieved through grammatical cohesion (e.g., anaphora, ellipsis, and conjunction) and lexical cohesion. There is room for improvement in the reconstruction of textual meaning in the company profiles of Taikong Gifts and Ganten Beverage. In the company profile of Taikong Gifts, the noun phrase “(the) company” was used in each move as the subject of the clause. At the same time, it played the role of a theme. It was translated as “this” in the overview move, and translated as “the company” in the corporate strength move and corporate culture move, thus forming a constant thematic progression link: “this—the company—the company—the company—our (symbols).” The word “this” in the link is a demonstrative pronoun, which is an anaphora that refers back to the things that have been just mentioned; “the company” is a noun phrase, which is repeated three times in the link, falls into the category of lexical cohesion; “our” is a possessive pronoun, which is an example of anaphora. Among them, “this” and “the company” belong to the third-person perspective, which may be replaced by “we” from the first-person perspective, so that it will be more consistent with “our (symbols)”, making the connection more closely knit. Generally speaking, companies tend to use “we” to refer to their company, indicating that they are introducing the company from their own point of view.

3.3. Contextual level

The contextual level examines the relationship between text and context. The construction and interpretation of discourse are constrained by context, which includes situational context, co-textual context, cultural context and so on. In the translation process, the context of the source language text may have changed, and necessary adjustments should be made. For example, there is such a sentence in the company profile of Ganten Beverage: 让“水中贵族”四个字深入消费者心中 (make the four characters *shui zhong gui zu*, i.e., *best quality drinking water*, go deep into the hearts of consumers) and the result of the machine translation runs like this: “...so that the four words “water aristocracy” go deep into the hearts of consumers”. It is true that in the source text, there are four characters. But when it was translated into English as “water aristocracy”, there are only two English words in the target context. Obviously the machine translation failed to recount the number of words in the co-text “water aristocracy”.

The company profile of Ganten Beverage says: the production base combines the “Taoist holy mountain” Luofu Mountain allusions and legends. As we know, Taoism is a native religion in China, and from time to time, Taoist allusions are used from time to time in China to promote products. There is nothing wrong to use Taoism as long as it does not violate relevant laws and regulations. However, when we do international marketing, the cultural context that the readers use to interpret the text has changed, and thus consideration should be given to the extent of acceptance of Chinese local cultural elements among foreign customers, to avoid being accused of cultural hegemony. In this case, the source language text can be rewritten accordingly, rhetoric such as “Taoist holy mountain” should be avoided, and we can substitute the sustainable development practice of the company for it, e.g., by describing their water source ecosystem protection and other efforts.

4. CONCLUSION

This article first provided an overview of company profile: including its definition and its move structure. Then, from the systems-theoretic perspective, a model consisting of three levels, i.e., preliminary data, discourse level, and contextual level was proposed, to examine the translation quality of company profiles. Next, examples were taken from the English translation of company profiles of two Chinese companies to assess the translation quality. The results showed that there are many problems in the adaptation of the source text, in the reconstruction of experiential meaning, interpersonal meaning, and textual meaning, and in the adjustment to the new context in the English translation of these company profiles. Suggestions were proposed to solve these problems. Company profile is a very important business discourse, which plays a very important role in maintaining the corporate reputation and building brand image, and its translation quality should be given sufficient attention. In the process of translation, the quality of the source language text should be double checked first, improvement should be undertaken when necessary, and attention should be paid to the accurate reconstruction of the meanings of the source language text in the target language text. Besides, the translated text should conform to the language and cultural norms of the target language. In recent years, many Chinese brands have successfully entered the global market. In similar vein, some international companies fared pretty well in China and were able to rake in millions of dollars each year. Their success may be attributed to their “think globally, act locally” strategy. These companies have unique insights in market research, product design, brand marketing and local team building. The academic community should conduct more research and tease out the successful experience of these companies especially in their construction of the business discourse, which includes company profiles, advertising copy, product descriptions, brand stories, press releases, etc., to help other companies aspiring to “go global” to improve their discourse competence.

REFERENCES

- Cui, Q. L. & Lei, X. F. (2016). Human-machine interactive translation strategies based on text stratification, *Contemporary Foreign Languages Studies*, 423 (03):46-52.
- de Groot, E.B. (2008). *English annual reports in Europe: A study on the identification and reception of genre characteristics in multimodal annual reports originating in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom*. PhD Dissertation. Radboud University Nijmegen.
- Halliday, M.A.K. & Matthiessen, C. M. I. M. (2014). *Halliday's introduction to functional grammar* (4th Ed.). London: Routledge.
- Huang, G. W. & Chen, Y. (2022). *Editor's introduction to introducing functional grammar* (3rd Ed.). Beijing: Foreign Languages Teaching and Research Press.
- Lambert, J., & van Gorp, H. (2014). On describing translations. In T. Hermans (Ed.). *The Manipulation of Literature*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Martin, J. R., & White, P. R. (2005). *The language of evaluation: Appraisal in English*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Matthiessen, C. M. I. M. (2014). Choice in translation: Metafunctional consideration. In K. Kunz, E. Teich, S. Hansen-Schirra, S. Neumann, & P. Daut (Eds.), *Caught in the middle—language use and translation*. Saarbrücken: Universaar, Saarland University Press.
- Munday, J., Pinto, S. R. & Blakesley, J. (2022). *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and*

A Systems-Theoretic Perspective to the Translation of Company Profiles from Chinese into English

Applications. London: Routledge.

Nickerson, C. & Planken, B. C. (2015). *Introducing business English*. London: Routledge.

Sun Y., Zhao, J. & Zhao, Q. (2016). A contrastive genre analysis of Sino-US company profiles in the fast-moving consumer goods industry. *Journal of University of Science and Technology Beijing*, 32(06):12-17.

Tang, J. F. (2012). *Business English Translation (Teacher's Book)*. Beijing: University of International Business and Economics Press.

Thompson, G. (2022). *Introducing Functional Grammar (3rd Ed.)*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Teaching and Research Press.

Wang, H. S. (2016). Study on the curriculum construction of translation technologies from the perspective of systems theory. *Contemporary Foreign Languages Studies*, 423 (03):53-57.

Yu, D. (2022). Cross-cultural genre analysis: Investigating Chinese, Italian and English CSR reports. London: Routledge.

Zeng, C. (2002). *Practical Chinese-English translation course*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Teaching and Research Press.

About the Author

Jinpei Zhang is associate professor at Shenzhen Institute of Information Technology, Guangdong, China. He holds a PhD in Applied Linguistics. His research interests include translation, intercultural communication and second language acquisition.