

Strategies for Chinese Translation of Commercial Advertisements from the Perspective of Translation Schema Theory

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of deepening globalization, the localized Chinese translation of English commercial advertisements has become a key step for brands entering the Chinese market. This paper introduces the translation schema theory from the interdisciplinary field of cognitive psychology and translation studies, and systematically explains the mechanisms of activation, adjustment, and reconstruction of linguistic schemas, cultural schemas, and formal schemas in the process of Chinese advertisement translation. By analyzing cases of English-to-Chinese advertisement translation, this paper proposes that translators should consciously identify the schematic elements in English advertisements and perform schema conversion or reconstruction based on Chinese readers' cognitive habits and cultural background, so as to achieve the dual goals of effective information transmission and emotional resonance in the Chinese translation of English commercial advertisements.

Keywords

Translation Schema Theory, English Commercial Advertisements, Schema Conversion, Chinese Translation Strategies

1. Introduction

It is widely recognized that the primary function of advertising discourse is persuasive (Dong, 2009). Accordingly, the translation of advertisements must not only convey product information accurately but also evoke positive emotions and purchase intentions among target consumers. When English advertisements are introduced into the Chinese linguistic context, they inevitably encounter multiple differences in terms of linguistic structures, cultural images, and aesthetic prefer-

ences. As Han Xu and Li Yanlin (2017) point out, the phenomenon of cultural loss in commercial advertisement translation remains a pressing issue. Therefore, exploring Chinese translation strategies for advertisements that align with the cognitive patterns of Chinese readers is of considerable practical significance. Moreover, as Yan Xiu (2026) notes, with the rapid development of cross-border e-commerce, short-video marketing, and other emerging forms of communication, the linguistic environment in which English advertising texts operate has become increasingly diverse. Consequently, society's expectations for the quality of English advertisement translation have risen substantially. Traditional translation approaches, which often rely on rigid word-for-word conversion or overly generalized strategies, can no longer adequately meet the demands of modern brand internationalization and cross-cultural communication.

Previous studies on advertisement translation have predominantly adopted macro-level theoretical frameworks such as functional equivalence, skopos theory, and cross-cultural communication. For instance, Xing Lin and Duan Ran (2025) examined Chinese translation strategies for commercial advertisements from the perspective of functional equivalence theory, focusing on four dimensions: vocabulary, syntax, rhetoric, and culture. Similarly, Wu Yichen (2025) investigated the translation strategies of advertising slogans under the guidance of skopos theory. While these studies have contributed valuable insights into advertisement translation by applying broad theoretical principles, they have paid relatively little attention to the internal cognitive processes of translators—namely, how translators comprehend the source text, identify discrepancies between source and target contexts, and construct an appropriate target text.

In recent years, with the advancement of cognitive translology, schema theory—originally developed within cognitive psychology—has been introduced into translation studies. This theoretical framework offers a new perspective for exploring the translation of advertising texts, as it emphasizes the role of pre-existing knowledge structures in comprehension and production, and provides a systematic account of how translators activate, adjust, and restructure knowledge during the translation process.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Concept of Schema

The concept of “schema” can be traced back to the German philosopher Kant, who believed that perceptual experience relies on innate cognitive structures to form knowledge. In the 1930s, British psychologist Frederick Bartlett explicitly proposed the concept of “schema” in his book *Remembering*, defining it as the “active organization of past reactions or experiences” in the human mind. Later, cognitive psychologist David Rumelhart and others further developed schema theory, arguing that schemas are the basic units of knowledge representation—structural knowledge frameworks stored in long-term memory that help individuals process, infer, and predict new information. After Peng Kaiming first intro-

duced cultural schema into translation studies, an increasing number of scholars began to focus on the application of schema theory in cross-cultural translation. In the early 21st century, scholars represented by Liu Mingdong further developed translation studies within the schema theory framework, proposing that in the translation process, the translator must correctly decode the source language schemas to achieve “faithfulness”, and at the same time appropriately transplant the decoded source schemas into the target language to achieve “expressiveness” and “elegance”. In other words, the translation process is essentially a process of schema conversion. That is, translation is a cognitive process of “schema processing”, mainly involving three stages: schema activation, schema comparison and conflict identification, and schema adjustment and reconstruction.

2.2. Classification of Schemas

According to existing research, Liu Mingdong and Liu Kuanping (2004) classify schemas into four categories: linguistic schema, contextual schema, cultural schema, and stylistic schema. These four types of schemas interact with each other in the translation process and jointly influence the quality and reception of the target text.

Linguistic schema refers to the knowledge a translator possesses at the level of linguistic forms, including vocabulary, syntax, and rhetoric. Specifically, it includes the ability to recognize and reproduce correspondences in word meaning, differences in grammatical structures, phonetic rhythm, common collocations, and rhetorical devices such as puns, rhymes, parallelism, etc. in both the source and target languages. A certain level of linguistic competence is a prerequisite for translation. Insufficient mastery of vocabulary, unclear understanding of syntactic structures, and limited knowledge of idiomatic usage can all lead to difficulties in reading comprehension, thereby directly resulting in unsuccessful translation.

Stylistic schema refers to the stylistic style of a text—that is, the translator’s knowledge of structural organization, expression style, and genre norms for different text types. As a special type of applied text, the stylistic schema of commercial advertisements is typically manifested in short and pithy slogan structures, the use of vocative sentence patterns, and conventional arrangements of text-image coordination. In the Chinese context, the stylistic schema of advertising also reflects a preference for traditional linguistic forms such as four-character phrases, couplets, and rhymed short sentences. When translating English advertisements, the translator needs to actively invoke the stylistic schema of Chinese advertising and make appropriate adjustments to the syntactic rhythm, tone intensity, and writing style of the source text, so that the target text conforms more closely to the reading expectations of native Chinese readers in terms of form.

Cultural schema refers to the knowledge structure blocks about “culture”—an existing organizational model of “culture” in the human mind formed through prior experience. It denotes knowledge structures related to specific cultural backgrounds, encompassing values, social customs, historical allusions, lifestyles, aesthetic preferences, and other such elements. Different language communities may

hold different cultural schemas for the same object. For example, the “dragon” is often associated with evil in Western culture, whereas in Chinese culture it symbolizes auspiciousness and authority. In the process of Chinese translation of advertisements, the translator needs to identify the cultural schemas on which the source advertisement relies, determine whether these schemas have the same cognitive basis among Chinese readers, and, if not, carry out a conversion or reconstruction of the cultural schemas to avoid misunderstanding or enhance resonance.

Contextual schema refers to the “environment of language use”. In specific situations, various logical connections among linguistic components that affect discourse meaning, along with various subjective and objective environmental factors, can be referred to as contextual schema.

3. Chinese Translation Strategies for Commercial Advertisements under Translation Schema Theory

Based on the four types of schemas discussed above, this paper proposes three Chinese translation strategies for advertisements, corresponding to different schema categories: schema overlap (literal translation), schema conflict (free translation and corresponding translation), and schema default (transcreation). Moreover, these strategies are not mutually exclusive; translators often need to use them in combination.

3.1. Schema Overlap—Literal Translation

When the linguistic form and surface content of the source language advertisement have roughly corresponding schematic structures in Chinese, and when they will not cause cultural misunderstanding, the translator can directly activate the corresponding schemas in Chinese readers and adopt literal translation. This strategy preserves the original style to the greatest extent and facilitates rapid understanding of the English advertisement content by Chinese readers.

Example 1

ST: Every time we race, you win. (Yamaha electronic keyboard advertisement)

TT: 每场比赛，你都胜券在握。

Analysis: In this advertisement, the words “race” and “win” construct a straightforward and readily understandable competitive scenario. Chinese readers are equally familiar with the causal relationship expressed through “competition-victory”. The translator adopts a literal translation strategy, rendering “you win” as “你胜券在握”, which appropriately incorporates a four-character idiomatic expression in Chinese. This choice not only enhances the sense of certainty and encouragement conveyed by the slogan but also successfully activates both the linguistic schema and the cultural schema in the minds of the target audience.

Example 2

ST: We bring high technology home. (Japanese electronics company adver-

tisement)

TT: 让我们把高科技带回家。

Analysis: The source structure “bring... home” is a common verb-object plus place complement construction in English. The corresponding Chinese pattern “把……带回家” is also a high-frequency sentence structure. The two exhibit a high degree of correspondence at the level of linguistic schema. The translator adopts literal translation while adding the appealing expression “让我们” (let us), thereby creating a tone of invitation and shared action. This translation effectively achieves a schema match for Chinese readers in relation to the notion of “owning high-tech products”, resulting in a concise and impactful rendering.

3.2. Schema Conflict—Free Translation and Corresponding Translation

When the source language advertisement relies on a specific cultural background or set of values, and these schemas conflict with or differ from those of Chinese readers, the translator needs to adjust the content schema, using free translation or corresponding translation to replace or downplay certain elements, making the translation more aligned with local cognitive habits.

3.2.1. Free Translation

Example 3

ST: We lead. Others copy. (Ricoh copier advertisement)

TT: 一直被模仿，从未被超越。

Analysis: The original consists of two short sentences, and its content schema involves a contrast between “leader” and “imitator”. A literal translation such as “我们领先，其他人抄袭” would be correct in meaning but lacking in impact and cultural adaptability. The Chinese translation “一直被模仿，从未被超越” adopts the passive voice, successfully activating Chinese readers’ cultural schema of “originality” and “high self-confidence”, while implying a leading position in the industry. This version is more effective in expression and better conforms to the linguistic aesthetics of Chinese advertisements.

Example 4

ST: If you drink, don’t drive. If you drive, don’t drink. (Public service advertisement)

TT: 喝酒不开车，开车不喝酒。

Analysis: The original advertisement conveys a safety message through a pair of parallel conditional sentences. While its linguistic schema is clear, the use of conditional clauses (if... don’t...) is typical of English public service announcements. In contrast, Chinese public service advertisements tend to favor imperative or declarative couplets that are concise and rhythmic. The translator therefore converts the original into a symmetrical six-character pattern: “喝酒不开车，开车不喝酒”. This translation is highly colloquial, easy to memorize, and flows

smoothly when spoken. By simultaneously reconstructing the linguistic schema and the stylistic schema in line with Chinese advertising norms, the translation significantly enhances the persuasive and warning effect of the public service message.

3.2.2. Some Common Mistakes

Example 5

ST: A diamond is forever. (De Beers diamond advertisement)

TT: 钻石恒久远，一颗永流传。

Analysis: The original is a simple declarative sentence, but “forever” in English carries romantic and eternal connotations. There is no Chinese lexical equivalent that can achieve the same effect. The translator uses corresponding translation, borrowing the form of a five-character rhymed couplet familiar in Chinese, reconstructing the parallel structure “恒久远 – 永流传”, while adding the concrete image of “一颗”. This translation successfully activates Chinese readers’ cultural schemas of “eternal love” and “family heirloom”, as well as the stylistic schema of the five-character poetic line, achieving an excellent communicative effect.

Example 6

ST: Better late than the late! (Traffic safety advertisement)

TT: 晚了总比完了好。

Analysis: The original slogan is a clever variation of the well-known English proverb “Better late than never”. It exploits the two distinct meanings of the word “late”—one referring to being delayed or tardy, the other serving as a euphemism for being deceased. This creates a pun that is both humorous and thought-provoking. A literal translation such as “迟到比去世好” would convey the literal meaning but would lose the wit, wordplay, and alerting effect of the original. In response, the translator adopts a corresponding translation strategy, relying on the phonetic similarity and semantic association between the Chinese words “晚了” (being late) and “完了” (being finished or dead). The translation retains the contrastive structure of the original: “晚了总比完了好”. For Chinese readers, “晚了” readily evokes the idea of tardiness, while “完了” strongly suggests death or an irreversible end. Thus, the translation successfully reconstructs and reproduces the punning effect of the source text, achieving functional equivalence at both the linguistic and cognitive levels.

3.3. Schema Default—Transcreation

In more complex advertising cases, the source language may simultaneously integrate linguistic rhetoric, cultural connotations, and specific brand concepts, making it impossible to find corresponding cultural schemas in the target language through literal or free translation. In such cases, the translator needs to adopt creative transcreation—extracting the core functional elements of the source text and constructing an entirely new combination of schemas in Chinese to maximize the

communicative effect.

Example 7 (Traffic safety advertisement)

ST: The best men can be.

TT: 男子汉，就该如此。

Analysis: This advertisement has a double meaning: on the surface, it suggests that Gillette shaving products help men achieve their best external appearance; at a deeper level, it encourages men to become better people in terms of behavior and morality. A literal translation like “最好的男人可以成为” would fail to convey the intended meaning to Chinese readers. In the Chinese translation, the translator uses creative conversion: “男子汉，就该如此”, invoking the Chinese cultural schema of “男子汉” (true man) while retaining the dual meaning (neat appearance and good character). This translation demonstrates the translator’s fusion and reconstruction of the source cultural schema (dual meaning) and the Chinese stylistic schema (short, powerful slogan).

Example 8

ST: Connecting People. (Nokia advertisement)

TT: 科技以人为本。

Analysis: The original English advertisement is extremely concise, consisting of only two words. Its linguistic schema is a “verb + noun” structure, its cultural schema points to “connection and communication among people”, and its stylistic schema is an extremely terse slogan-like statement. A literal translation such as “连接人们” would be grammatically correct but would lack force and depth in Chinese. The translator adopts a creative translation strategy, completely breaking away from the original linguistic schema and reconstructing it as the six-character assertive sentence “科技以人为本”.

This translation introduces the core images of “technology” and “people”, which are not present in the original, and implies the logical relationship that “technology serves people”. Moreover, the four-character phrase “以人为本” (people-oriented) is a highly condensed value concept in Chinese culture, invoking a cultural schema familiar to Chinese readers—the idea of humanism. The translation skillfully highlights Nokia’s brand proposition: its products are not merely connecting tools but embody the value of serving people. This represents a thorough reconstruction of the stylistic schema and a creative fusion of cultural schemas, elevating the translation from the level of “translation” to that of “brand localization manifesto”.

4. Conclusion

Guided by translation schema theory, this paper has systematically explored the cognitive mechanisms and strategic choices involved in the process of rendering English commercial advertisements into Chinese. The analysis reveals that the success of advertisement translation depends to a large extent on whether the translator can accurately identify the linguistic schemas, cultural schemas, and

stylistic schemas embedded in the source advertisement, and then flexibly activate, adjust, reconstruct, or integrate these schemas in light of the cognitive habits of the target readers. By applying the framework of translation schema theory, this paper has examined how translation strategies for English advertisements can achieve the dual objectives of effective information transmission and emotional resonance. It is expected that, in the contemporary commercial environment where globalization and localization coexist, this study may provide useful reflections for the Chinese translation of advertisements, facilitate the effective communication of international brands in the Chinese market, and at the same time contribute to the further multifaceted development of cultural exchanges between China and other countries.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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