

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Research of Translation Strategies of Culture-Loaded Terms in *Three Kingdoms* from the Perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory

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Abstract

The unique cultures of different nations have emerged due to variations in lifestyles, social systems, and thought processes, including vocabulary laden with social and cultural significance, known as culture-loaded terms. In translation studies, the past half-century has witnessed a gradual elevation of the importance of cultural factors, accompanied by the emergence of new translation theories. Notably, Nida's theory of dynamic equivalence integrates reader response into the evaluation of translation quality, emphasizing both formal and functional equivalence to ensure the translation elicits the same effects in target language readers as in source language readers. Nida argues that even if the translation reader is unfamiliar with the cultural background of the source text, a comprehensive understanding of the translation's meaning is still achievable, constituting an excellent translation. *Three Kingdoms*, as a classical Chinese novel, encompasses numerous culture-loaded terms. The translation of these terms directly influences reader comprehension, crucial for overall translation quality. This paper focuses on Moss Roberts' English version, guided by Nida's theory, summarizing translation strategies and providing valuable insights for guiding the translation of classical Chinese literary works.

Keywords: Three Kingdoms, Cultural-Loaded Words, Dynamic Equivalence Theory, Translation Strategies.

1. Introduction

This thesis explores the intricate relationship between language, culture, and translation, with a specific focus on the handling of culture-loaded terms in Moss Roberts' translation of the renowned Chinese classical work, *Three Kingdoms*. Culture-loaded terms, representing a subset within vocabulary, embody rich cultural nuances. Against the backdrop of increasing global attention to Chinese culture, especially in classical works, Moss Roberts' translation has been recognized as exemplary. However, comprehensive research, particularly from the perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory, is lacking. The study aims to fill this gap by systematically examining Roberts' translation, emphasizing the treatment of culture-

loaded terms within the framework of Functional Equivalence Theory. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the translation process and cultural implications in rendering Chinese classical literature into English.

Three Kingdoms is an outstanding work in Chinese literature, integrating traditional genres, like rituals, music, poetry, and prose to showcase a rich cultural heritage. The novel extensively employs culture-loaded terms, describing official titles, idioms, war-related vocabulary, and food, making their translation crucial. Scholars and translators focus on English versions, exploring translation purposes, limitations, and merits. This paper discusses and summarizes translation methods for culture-loaded terms, centered

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on Nida's Functional Equivalence, validating its feasibility in practice. It concludes Roberts' strategies in translating and classifying these terms in *Three Kingdoms*.

Three Kingdoms, a pinnacle in classical Chinese literature, holds profound themes and exceptional artistic achievements. Its global influence is evident through translations into numerous languages, earning it the title "the Chinese epic". Moss Roberts, a distinguished translator and cultural ambassador, significantly contributed to its translation. His rendition, one of two complete English versions worldwide, emphasizes cultural transmission and maintains academic rigor. Despite its cultural and academic value, there's insufficient research on Roberts' translation, especially lacking studies from the Functional Equivalence Theory perspective. To address this gap, the author tentatively explores Roberts' translation of culture-loaded terms grounded in Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory. This effort aims to contribute insights to *Three Kingdoms* translation and Functional Equivalence Theory.

2. Literature Review about *Three Kingdoms*

Being one of the esteemed classical Chinese novels, *Three Kingdoms* has garnered increasing scholarly attention in recent years. This thesis aims to scrutinize Moss Roberts' translation of culture-loaded terms in *Three Kingdoms* through the lens of Functional Equivalence theory. The objective is to elucidate and consolidate the translation strategies employed by Moss Roberts.

Three Kingdoms, a significant work among the Four Chinese Classical Masterpieces, written by Luo Guanzhong in the late Yuan and early Ming Dynasty(14th century), is a classic historical romance. The novel, with distinct chapter divisions, employs accessible classical language, featuring culture-loaded terms and portraying around a thousand characters in over 800,000 words. Inspired by Chen Shou's *The History of Three Kingdoms*(San Guo Zhi), it narrates a century of warfare from the fall of the Han Dynasty(168 A.D.) to the Jin Dynasty's reunification(280 A.D.). The literary masterpiece, rich in cultural connotations, vividly depicts intense struggles among political factions and introduces heroic figures. As noted by He Manzi(2006), it holds groundbreaking status, not just as a literary but also a socio-cultural phenomenon, reflecting historical,

ethical, and value concepts, imparting profound social impacts surpassing its artistic achievements.

Three Kingdoms, translated into over 10 languages, enjoys global popularity alongside other Chinese masterpieces. Moss Roberts' English rendition in 1994 stands out for its comprehensiveness and esteem. As a New York University professor, Roberts, with expertise in Chinese culture and literature, began translating the novel in 1983. His work, known for its flexibility and accuracy, reflects his deep understanding of both English and Chinese cultures. A meticulous study of his translation offers valuable insights for future renditions of classical Chinese literature. Selecting Roberts' version for analysis underscores its significance in the field.

3. Culture-Loaded Terms

Cultures, shaped by diverse factors, yield distinct linguistic expressions termed culture-loaded words. Renowned Spanish theorist J. F. Aixelá(1996) termed them "culture-specific items", absent or different in the target culture. Mona Baker(2000) viewed such words as expressing unknown concepts in the target culture, spanning religion, customs, or food. Peter Newmark(2001) noted translation challenges arising from cultural mismatches, and Louis R. Salomon labeled them "vocabulary blanks" and "semantic vacancy". Chinese scholars like Wang Huan(1987) and Hu Wenzhong(1999) associated culture-bound terms with unique cultural concepts. Bao Huinan and Bao Ang(2004) described culture-loaded words as reflecting historical, social, ecological, religious, and ethnic aspects. Sun Zhili(2003) defined them as richly connotated expressions in both English and Chinese, encompassing idioms and dialects. In summary, terms like "culture color words", "culture-specific items", and "culture-bound terms" collectively denote words rich in cultural nuances.

Scholars differ in categorizing culture-loaded terms, with Nida, a pioneer in the field, outlining significant divisions in "Toward a Science of Translating". He identified five cultural categories posing translation challenges: Ecology (seasons, plants), Material Culture (tools, objects), Social Culture (organizations, practices), Religious Culture (titles, beliefs), and Linguistic Culture (language-specific characteristics). Nida suggested translators consider sub-cultures: ecological, material, social, religious, and linguistic (Hu Zhuanglin & Jiang Wangqi, 2002: 364). Bao Huinan further classified culture-loaded terms,

including proper names, idioms, and color words. This thesis adopts Nida's classifications, recognized for their applicability and authority. In analyzing culture-loaded terms in *The Analects of Confucius*, the terms are divided into five categories: ecological, material, social, religious, and linguistic culture-loaded terms.

Over 50 years ago, the Western translation field acknowledged the pivotal role of cultural factors in translation. Nida emphasized the superiority of biculturalism over bilingualism, stating that words derive meaning from the cultures they exist in. Bilingual competence, he argued, is crucial for translators. Similarly, Katan underscored the growing association between culture and translation, and Mounin identified cultural background differences as a primary challenge, suggesting the use of loanwords and explanatory definitions. Western translators, including Venuti, introduced strategies like foreignization and resistancy. Chinese scholars, such as He Ziran and Qiu Maoru, proposed various methods for translating culture-loaded terms. Recent studies, examining texts like "Fortress Besieged", "True Story of Ah Q", and "Farewell My Concubine", explore translation strategies using theories like functional grammar, Skopos theory, cognitive schema theory, and relevance translation theory. Research spans diverse subjects like "A Dream of Red Mansion", "Six Chapters of a Floating Life", Yuefu Poetry, Huangdi Neijing, news, and film titles (Tan Bin, Shao Wenfang, Xu Ke, Yuan Siyuan, Lu Huihui, Zhao Wenfang, Jia Xiaoying, Zhang Xuan, Lu Pingping, Huang Lin).

4. Theoretical Basis and Research Methodology

Eugene A. Nida, a renowned American linguist, translator, and pioneer in contemporary translation theory, significantly shaped the landscape of translation through decades of dedicated work, particularly in translating the Bible. His notable contributions culminated in the formulation of the Functional Equivalence Theory in 1964, a groundbreaking paradigm that revolutionized the field of translation. This theory continues to command global attention and influence in the present day.

Eugene Nida's translation theory, introduced in "Toward a Science of Translating", centers on dynamic equivalence, emphasizing a dynamic relationship between receptors and the message. In "The Theory and Practice of Translation", he defines

dynamic equivalence as the extent to which target language receptors respond similarly to the original receptors. Nida contrasts this with formal equivalence, which mechanically reproduces source text features in the receptor language. The shift from verbal correspondence to dynamic relationships underscores a reader-oriented approach, considering cultural differences. Nida acknowledges the contradiction between functional and formal equivalence but Doesn't assert superiority. Both dynamic and formal equivalence are deemed fundamental in translation (Nida & Taber, 2004).

Following its development, dynamic equivalence theory gained traction among translators, especially in Bible translations. However, due to a distorted understanding and criticism of the term "dynamic", Eugene Nida introduced "functional equivalence" as a substitute in "From One Language to Another". This change aimed to address misconceptions, particularly the focus solely on content at the expense of form. Nida's shift to sociolinguistics in the 1970s and 1980s influenced this substitution, emphasizing language functions. Introduced in 1964, functionalism categorizes language functions into eight types. Functional equivalence, emphasizing understanding the source text's meaning and how receptors grasp it in the target language, essentially aligns with dynamic equivalence, clarifying Nida's intent (De Waard and Nida, 1986: vii).

Eugene Nida, a pioneer in translation studies, introduced the Functional Equivalence Theory, highlighting the crucial role of receptors. In this theory, the emphasis shifts from mere fidelity to the original text to serving both the readers of the original and translated texts. Nida asserts that translation should be evaluated based on how readers respond, emphasizing comprehension and appreciation over lexical and grammatical equivalence. The theory acknowledges readers' significance, contrasting with traditional approaches that often neglect their role. Nida's paradigm considers translation as a form of communication, asserting success when receptors understand and appreciate the translated content (Nida, 2004).

5. Culture-Loaded Terms in *Three Kingdoms* and their Translation Strategies

To bridge the cultural gaps inherent in the text, diverse translation strategies have been employed, yielding a plethora of creative renditions across

different translated versions of *Three Kingdoms*. This section delves into an examination of Moss Roberts' rendition, scrutinizing specific translation strategies applied to five distinct categories of culture-loaded terms. The analysis is conducted through the lens of Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory, providing a theoretical framework to understand the translational choices made in addressing cultural nuances within the text.

6. Categories of Culture-Loaded Terms in *Three Kingdoms*

6.1 Ecological Culture-loaded Terms

Diverse nations, shaped by distinct geographical environments, present unique cultures reflected in ecological culture-loaded terms. Eugene Nida recognized the challenge in translating these terms due to diverse perceptions of ecological features. In the *Three Kingdoms*, country names hold cultural significance, demanding nuanced translation strategies. Moss Roberts, in his translation, employs a dual approach—transliteration and detailed explanations. For instance:

Example 1.

汉朝自高祖斩白蛇而起义，一统天下后来光武中兴，传至献帝，遂分为三国。（第一回）

The Han court's rise to power began when the Supreme Ancestor slew a white serpent, inspiring an uprising that ended with Han's ruling a unified empire. (Chapter one)

In ancient China, countries often had various subordinate nations, a concept unfamiliar to Western readers. Referred to as countries, “汉” represented a dependent state. The translator transliterates its name without detailed explanations, leaving Western readers feeling unfamiliar. Thus, beyond transliteration, providing further clarification is essential. For example, “汉” could be translated as “Han, a vassal state”. This approach introduces Chinese cultural nuances and aids Western readers interested in ancient cultures, including terms like “principality” and “feud”.

6.2 Material Culture-loaded Terms

Due to cultural variations, objects may carry different meanings across cultures. Material culture-loaded terms encompass daily items and artifacts, revealing diverse perspectives on people's lives. Translators face the challenge of conveying cultural nuances to

foreign readers. For instance:

Example 2.

生得身长七尺五寸，两耳垂肩，双手过膝，目能自顾其耳，面如冠玉，唇若涂脂。（第一回）

He stood seven and a half spans tall, with arms that reached below his knees. His ear lobes were elongated, his eyes widely set and able to see his own ears. His face was flawless as jade, and his lips like dabs of rouge. (Chapter one)

The Chinese term “尺” in material culture, translated by Moss Roberts as “span”, specifically denotes the distance between the tips of an extended thumb and little finger, approximately 23 centimeters or 9 inches. To enhance foreign readers' comprehension, Roberts employs detailed annotations when it first appears, explaining that “a span (chi)” is slightly under 10 inches, with additional measurements like six chi making a pace and 300 bu constituting a li, roughly one-third of a mile. Roberts' reader-oriented translation emphasizes clarity, providing a vivid portrayal of the character Liu Bei without relying on transliteration, ensuring accessibility and understanding for readers unfamiliar with the source language.

6.3 Social Culture-loaded Terms

Cross-cultural challenges arise due to differences in customs, political structures, and kinship systems. Social culture-loaded terms, reflecting Chinese societal nuances in *Three Kingdoms*, pose obstacles for Western readers, demanding precise translation attention. For instance:

Example 3.

玄德告曰：“若斩大将，于亲不利，备难久居膝下矣。”（第五十四回）

“To kill a general,” he said, “bodes no good to bonds of kinship. I would not be able to serve you as a filial son for long.” (Chapter fifty-four)

In the excerpt from *Three Kingdoms*, the Chinese term “膝下” (Xīxià) is translated into English as “bonds of kinship”, exemplifying Functional Equivalence in Nida's translation theory. Originally denoting a child's affectionate address to parents, it metaphorically signifies loyalty to a lord. The translation, opting for a more general expression, aligns with Functional Equivalence by emphasizing similar communicative functions. “Bonds of kinship” preserves emotional and relational implications, ensuring a universal understanding while accommodating some cultural

adaptation in the process. Moss Roberts employs a strategy of free translation in this context, aiming to enhance the comprehension of the profound essence of the phrase for readers not familiar with the foreign language.

6.4 Religious Culture-loaded Terms

Religion, integral to culture, varies across nations. In ancient China, Buddhism and Taoism played pivotal roles, reflected in terms like “天”(heaven), “天子”(son of heaven), and “神”(deity). While familiar to Chinese readers, conveying their nuanced meanings poses a challenge for translators due to Westerners’ predominant Christian beliefs.

Example4.

国老曰：“玄德有龙凤之姿，天日之表；更兼仁德布于天下：国太得此佳婿，真可庆也！”（第五十四回）

he replied. “A man, moreover, to combine anew humanity and virtue and manifest them throughout the world. You are truly to be congratulated on acquiring so excellent a son-in-law.”

The Chinese idiom “龙凤之姿，天日之表” conveys an auspicious appearance, translated into English as “A man, moreover, to combine anew humanity and virtue and manifest them throughout the world. You are truly to be congratulated on acquiring so excellent a son-in-law”. This translation, following Nida’s Functional Equivalence theory, employs an explanatory strategy to convey superstitious elements more universally. Moss Roberts blends free and literal translation, prioritizing accessibility for Western readers while preserving cultural nuances. Adaptability in translation methods is emphasized to navigate challenges in conveying intricate religious meanings, striking a balance between fidelity to the source text and reader reception for effective cross-cultural communication.

6.5 Linguistic Culture-loaded Terms

Chinese and English, from different language families, differ in tones, phonetics, idiom structures, and grammatical attributes.

Example5.

孔明曰：“豫州虽新败，然关云长犹率精兵万人；刘琦领江夏战士，亦不下万人。曹操之众，远来疲惫；近追豫州，轻骑一日夜行三百里，此所谓‘强弩之末，势不能穿鲁缟’者也。”（第四十三回）

Kong ming began, “Lord Guan commands ten

thousand elite troops, and Liu Qi’s fighters from Jiangxia number no less. Cao Cao’s host is exhausted, having come so far. In their recent pursuit of Lord Liu, their light cavalry was covering three hundred li a day clearly a case of a spent arrow unable to pierce fine silk.”(Chapter forty-three)

Chinese readers, well-versed in their cultural background, easily grasp allusions, unlike foreign readers with limited knowledge. Considering this, a translator must gauge the reader’s cultural familiarity. Moss Roberts opts for literal translation in conveying the allusion “强弩之末，势不能穿鲁缟”. This approach retains the connotation for both Chinese and foreign readers, illustrating the futility of endeavors. Though the Western audience may be unfamiliar with the story, the literal translation effectively conveys the meaning, allowing direct exposure to Chinese culture without the need for additional notes or explanations.

7. General Translation Strategies of Culture-Loaded Terms

7.1 Transliteration

Transliteration, rendering based on pronunciation, is common for culture-loaded terms like place names (e.g., “汉”). Pinyin Romanization is often used to convey Chinese culture faithfully. It maintains foreignness, preserving the original sound and rhythm, intriguing foreign readers. However, it lacks meaning transmission, as exemplified by “汉” translated as “han”. To address this, transliteration with explanation integrates words with classifiers or labels into pinyin, providing a clearer picture of the original meaning. This method helps target language readers understand cultural nuances, balancing the advantages and disadvantages of pure transliteration.

7.2 Annotation

When fully translating proves challenging, the use of annotations becomes essential. This method involves placing parts of the original text in notes to provide readers with background information on cultural content. Nida asserts that annotations serve to correct linguistic and cultural discrepancies and offer valuable insights into the historical and cultural context. For instance, Roberts uses detailed annotations, explaining “尺” in material culture-loaded terms, as “a span (chi)”, slightly under 10 inches. thousand

Annotations effectively address challenges in balancing form and content, especially for expressions with

strong national flavor. These strategies, including annotation, should be integrated for a comprehensive translation, showcasing flexibility in the translator's approach.

7.3 Free Translation

Culture-loaded terms, products of a society, require more than literal translation due to the target language readers' lack of background knowledge. Free translation, synonymous with paraphrasing, becomes crucial. This method sacrifices cultural images for meaning, not retaining the original form. When translating Chinese culture-specific terms like “膝下”, where the surface meaning may not convey the inner meaning, and no English equivalents exist, free translation ensures reader comprehension. Roberts, for instance, translates “膝下” as “bonds of kinship” to convey the implied meanings effectively.

7.4 Literal Translation

Literal translation, retaining original forms, is also termed word-for-word or sentence-for-sentence translation. It is suitable for religious and linguistic culture-loaded terms, as seen in Robert's translation of “强弩之末,势不能穿鲁缟” as “a spent arrow unable to pierce fine silk”. However, this approach has drawbacks, emphasizing forms at the expense of deep meaning. Meaning exists not only in individual words but also in relationships, idiomatic uses, and cultural context. To address comprehension gaps, compensation is necessary, achieved through annotation. This method ensures readers understand the cultural meanings behind the images, addressing the limitations of literal translation.

8. Conclusion

Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory opens up a novel avenue for research in translation and modern linguistics. It presents a fresh perspective on translation, asserting that the primary goal is to reproduce the closest natural equivalent of the source language message in the target language, prioritizing meaning over style (Nida, 2004:12). This theory offers a clear resolution to the debate between literal and free translation by emphasizing the equivalence between readers and texts rather than linguistic correspondence. And that content should supersede form provide a revolutionary framework for studying the English translation of Chinese culture-loaded terms.

Culture-loaded terms, rich in cultural connotation,

pose challenges in cross-cultural understanding if translated inaccurately. The terms discussed in this thesis are extracted from *Three Kingdoms*, a classic Chinese novel offering insights into ancient Chinese customs and idioms. Nida categorizes culture-loaded terms in this work into five groups: ecological, material, social, religious, and linguistic. This thesis primarily focuses on investigating the translation strategies of these culture-loaded terms in *Three Kingdoms* based on Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory. The study extensively analyzes Moss Roberts' application of methods such as transliteration, free translation, literal translation, amplification, and annotation to enhance foreign readers' comprehension of the original text. Through detailed analysis and discussion of specific examples, the thesis provides insights into the translation strategies and approaches employed for each category of culture-loaded terms. It is crucial to note that these strategies are not mutually exclusive; for optimal results, they should be applied cooperatively rather than in isolation.

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