

Translation of Cosmetics Instructions from the Perspective of Skopos Theory

Liping Fu, Juan Dong

College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai 200093, China

Abstract: Cosmetics constitute a significant segment of global trade and many international brands enter the Chinese market. However, the translation of cosmetics instructions has been overlooked, and there is a general lack of theoretical guidance among translators, resulting in substandard Chinese translations of such materials. The paper aims to analyze features of cosmetics instructions and discuss the necessity of introducing Skopos Theory, particularly its three core principles: the skopos rule, the coherence rule and the fidelity rule, to the translation of cosmetics instructions. The applicability of Skopos Theory is examined from both theoretical and practical perspectives, demonstrating its suitability as a comprehensive framework for guiding cosmetics instruction translation. And it is hoped that this study will encourage more translators to adopt Skopos Theory in this specialized field, enhancing their understanding of translation theories and contributing to the production of higher-quality cosmetics instruction translations.

Keywords: Cosmetic Instruction, Skopos Theory, Translation Strategies.

1. Introduction

As China's reform and opening-up deepens, the Chinese market has witnessed a growing influx of international cosmetic companies seeking to expand their market presence. Cosmetics instructions play a crucial role in communicating product value and attracting consumers by providing essential information on ingredients, features, efficacy, and usage. However, the translation of such instructions in China still remains underdeveloped with noticeable shortcomings because of the lack of systematic theoretical guidance. Many translators still rely primarily on literal or free translation techniques without applying a coherent framework, resulting in translations that fail to persuade potential customers. Furthermore, due to varying cultural backgrounds, consumers from different countries may hold distinct preferences regarding product functions, but translators often overlook the cultural and functional expectations of the target audience.

By analyzing the original instructions of an American cosmetic product with its Chinese translation, this study evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of the translation in light of Skopos Theory and its three core rules. It is hoped that this case-based discussion will encourage more translators to engage with the translation of cosmetics instructions and contribute to elevating the overall quality of such practical translations.

2. Skopos Theory

Skopos Theory, which originated in 1970s Germany, is rooted in the functionalist approach to translation and has since become one of the most influential frameworks in the field. Prior to its emergence, translation norms emphasized fidelity to the source text, leading translators to strive to preserve its original flavor and style, often relying solely on methods such as literal or free translation. However, many translators came to recognize the limitations of such approaches and began to explore alternative paradigms. It was against this background that the translation theorist Vermeer (1989) made a groundbreaking shift by redirecting

attention towards the target text, emphasizing its intended purpose and function. This perspective laid the foundation for Skopos Theory. In *Translating as a Purposeful Activity*, Nord [6] (2001) explains the term "skopos" derives from the Greek word for "purpose." Thus, according to Skopos Theory, the supreme principle guiding any translation process should be its intended purpose.

Nowadays, it is widely acknowledged that translation constitutes a purposeful activity and that the choice of translation strategies should be governed primarily by the target context rather than the source text alone. Vermeer argues that the purpose of any translational action is closely correlated with the cultural and customary background of the target audience. Therefore, translation should be tailored to a specific readership or national group and appropriate strategies must be selected to accomplish this demanding task effectively.

According to Skopos Theory, the translation process should adhere to three principles: the skopos rule, the fidelity rule and the coherence rule.

Skopos rule is the most important rule among the three principles because it governs the whole translation process. This rule emphasizes that the intended purpose of the target text should guide all translation decisions. And this purpose can be categorized into three types: the translator's basic aim, the communicative purpose of the translation, and the function achieved through specific translation strategies. In essence, the purpose of translation refers to the communicative purpose of the translated text, that is, "the communicative function of the translated text on the reader of the translated language in the socio-cultural context of the translator" [8].

The fidelity rule emphasizes the intertextual consistency between the source text and the target text. As the term suggests, fidelity implies that the target text should maintain equivalence with the source text in terms of both content and form. This principle, which influences consumers' perceptions of cosmetic products, plays a crucial role. In practice, many translators tend to add or omit some important contents when translating product instructions. While such

techniques may be effective when applied by experienced translators, they often lead to violations of the fidelity rule. A more serious issue occurs when translators employ exaggerated claims about a product's function to boost sales. In fact, all these situations infringe fidelity rule and misleads consumers and damages brand credibility. Therefore, when translating cosmetic instructions, translators should not only adhere to the skopos rule but also strictly obey the fidelity rule to ensure consistency between the source and target texts, maintaining informational accuracy and ethical responsibility.

The coherence rule requires that a translation be sufficiently coherent and smooth, taking into full consideration the cultural background of the target audience to ensure the text is clearly understandable to target language readers. This requires translators to have a good command of both the source language and the target language [3]. Vermeer [7] (2001) stated, the coherence rule can be further divided into two types: intra-textual coherence and intertextual coherence. Intra-textual coherence means that translation should be logically clear and linguistically natural for readers in line with the conventions of the target language. Intertextual coherence, on the other hand, refers to the consistency that should be maintained between the source text and the target text. Therefore, to achieve both forms of coherence, translators must have a good command of cultural knowledge about both the source text and target text, thereby ensuring that the translated cosmetics instructions are both accurate and comprehensible.

In summary, while the skopos rule is the primary and most influential principle among the three, both the fidelity rule and the coherence rule are subordinate to it and serve its overall purpose.

3. Linguistic Features of Cosmetics Instructions

Instructions are ubiquitous in daily life, often appearing directly on product packaging to provide immediate and accessible guidance to consumers. Collins Dictionary [1] (2023) defines “cosmetics” as “substances such as lipstick or powder, which people put on their face to make themselves look more attractive”. And the term “instruction” refers to “clear and detailed information on how to use something” [2]. Combining the two definitions, it can be concluded that cosmetic instruction not only gives enough information to consumers about the product in order to inform them of its correct use, but also serves practical and commercial functions of beautifying, cleansing, and enhancing one's charm. A cosmetics instruction is a pragmatic text and has its own unique characteristics. Given their primary purpose of promoting sales and generating profit, it is essential for translators to be thoroughly acquainted with these features in order to produce effective translations and fulfill the demanding task of cross-cultural product communication.

In terms of lexical features, cosmetics instructions prioritize the use of functional and professional terminology that directly conveys expertise and core values. This includes precise ingredient names as well as efficacy-related vocabulary, which helps consumers quickly comprehend the product's key advantages. Simultaneously, to stimulate purchase motivation, the language incorporates abundant evaluative and appealing expressions. In addition, recognizing that consumers typically skim through instructions to obtain essential information, the wording of

cosmetics instructions also emphasizes conciseness and brevity, avoiding redundant expressions while using condensed expressions to efficiently transmit core content.

Regarding syntactic features, declarative sentences occupy a dominant position in cosmetics instructions. They serve to objectively present the product's ingredients, sources, and efficacy, which enhances the credibility of the instructions and helps to build consumer trust in the product. Meanwhile, imperative sentences are frequently used to provide direct and clear directions for use, ensuring that consumers can easily understand and correctly operate the product. In terms of structure, cosmetics instructions mostly adopt short sentences or simple compound sentences, avoiding complex syntactic structures. This concise sentence design conforms to the reading scenario where consumers seek to obtain information quickly, helping them grasp usage methods and core efficacy without unnecessary cognitive effort.

4. Application of Skopos Theory to Cosmetics Instruction Translation

4.1. Translation Guided by Skopos Rule

The “skopos rule” is the prominent principle to be followed, and the entire process of translation is determined by the intended purpose. Cosmetics serves as a commodity and it needs to be sold and gains large profits for companies. Furthermore, cosmetics instruction is targeted to encourage people to be interested in products and increase the possibilities to buy cosmetics. Therefore, when translating it, translators should try to motivate consumers to make a purchase. Translators can use some vivid words to describe differences before and after its using. The translations should awaken consumers' potential needs, guide them to take purchasing actions, and thus realize the economic value of the advertisements themselves [5].

Consequently, it is necessary for translators to accurately convey the product's ingredients and functional properties. The following examples are given to illustrate this point (hereafter ST is short for source text and TT for target text):

Example 1:

ST: Bentonite clay: Bentonite clay is a natural, absorbed clay used to help unclog pores and make skin soft and supple. Within our formula, Bentonite clay works to help absorb excess oil and draw out surface dirt and debris that may contribute to the appearance of enlarged pores for a more refined skin texture.

TT: 燕麦仁细粉: 平衡水油; 吸除多余油脂

In Example 1, the source text fully embodies the lexical features of cosmetic instructions. The product Bentonite clay is a functional professional term that clarifies the ingredient's identity, while “unclog pores,” “soft and supple” and “refined skin texture” are evaluative and appealing expressions that detail efficacy. From the perspective of the skopos rule, these vocabulary choices are designed to highlight the product's natural properties and comprehensive benefits, encouraging consumers to purchase. But the given Chinese translation is not so successful because it just introduces functions curtly and omits core ingredients. This translation's expression is also short of appeal and vividness.

To conform to the skopos rule, it can be translated into 燕麦仁细粉: 天然吸附矿物泥, 疏通毛孔、净吸多余油脂与表面污垢, 改善毛孔粗大, 肌肤柔润顺滑, 肤质更细腻。 By adopting the typical linguistic features of Chinese

cosmetic copywriting such as four-character phrases and integrating affective expressions to enhance the persuasive appeal of the translation, the revised version fully aligns with the core tenet of the skopos rule.

Example 2:

ST: Fairly traded Amazonian white clay: It is also known as Kaolin clay and is collected from the mouth of the Amazon River in Brazil by local communities. Through providing economic support and strengthen their business. Within our formula, this mineral-rich Kaolin clay helps remove bacteria, toxins, excess oil and dead cells that can clog skin and result in enlarged pores.

TT: 亚马逊神奇白泥: 毛孔污垢吸铁石; 减少肌肤油脂; 净澈老废角质

In the example, the target text successfully leverages the vocabulary features of conciseness and appeal. Translation is not just a simple way of code switching, but a complex communication between different languages and cultures [4]. The Chinese translation 毛孔污垢吸铁石 uses a vivid metaphor to convey the clay's adsorption capacity, while 净澈老废角质 is a concise, targeted efficacy phrase, aligning with Chinese consumers' cognitive habits and stimulating purchasing desire. However, the translation omits the professional term-related information of fairly traded and collected from the mouth of the Amazon River, which is key to highlighting the ingredient's unique source and ethical value. This omission weakens the product's differentiation and social responsibility image, missing an opportunity to enhance credibility through vocabulary features, thus partially falling short of the skopos rule.

Therefore, it can be translated into 国际公平贸易认证亚马逊白泥: 源自巴西亚马逊河口, 由当地社区采集, 助力社区经济发展; 蕴含丰富矿物质, 堪称毛孔污垢吸铁石, 能除菌排毒、吸收多余油脂、净澈老废角质, 深层疏通毛孔, 改善毛孔粗大问题, 令肌肤洁净清爽。

4.2. Translation Guided by Coherence Rule

The cosmetic instruction must be lucid and readable, which means translation must abide by coherence rule. It implies that expressions in the text should fit for targeted readers' language habits and it can be accepted by most of ordinary people.

Example 3:

ST: Our moisturizing lip balm nourishes and soothes dry lips. Smooth on this balm to hydrate lips from dryness in the winter and around the year.

TT: 科颜氏护唇膏舒缓干燥肌肤、滋润双唇, 一年四季滋润保养双唇, 令双唇柔软丰润。

In this example, the source text's two independent short sentences are integrated into a cohesive statement, conforming to Chinese preference for coherent expression. Additionally, the source text's expression "hydrate lips from dryness in the winter and around the year" is rephrased as 一年四季滋润保养双唇, which simplifies the cumbersome temporal description into a concise, idiomatic expression. This adaptation not only makes the sentence more concise but also aligns with such expressions and reading habits.

Example 4:

ST: Supercharged with Niacinamide and Collagen Peptide to treat all four eye zones, this anti-aging eye cream visibly lifts the brow bone area, smooths the eyelid, firms the outer corner to minimize crow's feet and fine lines, and depuffs the

under-eye.

TT: 精纯烟酰胺、双重胜肽解决各类眼部问题。多重修颜眼霜紧致眼周, 收紧泡泡眼, 淡化眼纹、无惧眼周纹, 淡化黑眼圈。

In this example, the ST is a complex long sentence with multiple functions. Such a long, compact sentence structure is acceptable in English but would be difficult to read in Chinese which favors short, fragmented sentences. The TT is two independent short sentences. The first Chinese translation 精纯烟酰胺、双重胜肽解决各类眼部问题 focuses on ingredients and their overall effect. And the second translation 紧致眼周, 收紧泡泡眼 details the product's specific functions. This translation greatly improves readability and coherence.

4.3. Translation Guided by Fidelity Rule

Cosmetic instruction is mainly used to convey to readers important information and provide consumers with a detailed knowledge about it, so that customers can choose suitable products to meet their relative needs by reading instruction. To achieve this purpose, the instruction translation must be consistent with the source text with no exaggeration or omission of necessary information.

Example 5:

ST: Usage: After cleansing, apply a small amount of our facial cleanser to clean fingertips. Gently massage into damp facial areas in upward, circular motions, avoiding the immediate eye area. Rinse thoroughly or remove excess with a damp wash cloth

TT: 用法: 取部分高保湿洁面啫喱于指间, 加水揉出泡沫。以指间于脸上轻轻按摩打圈, 避开眼周。最后清水冲洗赶紧即可。

In this example, the target text violates the fidelity rule because it omits some details, and thus affecting users' understanding about the product and canceling out products' efficacy. It ignores after cleansing, which may lead users to use ultra facial cleanser immediately and forget to keep face damp. Furthermore, in the source text, it uses fingertips to describe method. But in fact, using fingertips to apply over face is a common sense, so translator can omit "fingertips" when translating.

Example 6:

ST: After cleansing and toning, apply a dime-sized amount of our hydrating facial cream to skin. Use twice daily, both day and night as the ultimate compliment to your skincare routine.

TT: 取黄豆粒大小量高保湿霜, 在掌心温热乳化, 按摩肌肤促进吸收, 告别干燥不适。

In this example, this target text shows a total disregard for the source text and causes a huge gap between the English instruction and the Chinese translation. The Chinese instruction version violates fidelity rule and is translated in isolation from the original. Specifically, the target text omits after cleansing and toning. But if consumers forget to use facial toner, it may affect ultra facial cream's efficacy. Similarly, it deletes using cream both day and night. It fails to introduce the detailed usage and can affect its effect. Nonetheless, the target text also presents commendable aspects that are worthy of emulation in terms of communicative efficacy. In the English version, there is a lack of thorough using method which plays an important role in guiding customers to use it correctly. It adds the procedures 在掌心温热乳化, 按摩肌肤, and it teaches consumers the

proper approach and informs them that ultra facial cream can work greatly.

Generally, the cosmetic instruction must be lucid and readable, which means the corresponding Chinese translation must abide by the coherence rule. It implies that expressions in the text should fit for targeted readers' language habits and it can be accepted by most of ordinary people. And the translation must be clear and direct rather than obscure. From this perspective, translators need to have a basic knowledge about the targeted culture and linguistic features.

5. Conclusion

Translation of cosmetics instructions from the perspective of Skopos Theory is a practical and meaningful topic, as cosmetics instructions serve as a crucial bridge for information transmission and sales promotion in global cosmetics market. Cosmetics instructions exhibit distinctive linguistic features. At the lexical level, they employ functionally oriented professional terminology, evaluative and persuasive expressions, and concise phrasing; at the syntactic level, declarative sentences dominate to enhance credibility, imperative sentences are frequently used for clear usage guidance, and short or simple compound structures prevail for improved readability. This paper explores the applicability of the three core rules of Skopos Theory in English-Chinese translation of cosmetics instructions, demonstrating that Skopos Theory provides a comprehensive framework that aligns well with the linguistic and functional features of this text type. However, this paper is subject to certain limitations, including a relatively narrow scope of cases and reliance on qualitative analysis. Future research could expand the scope by incorporating cases from more

diverse countries and product categories, and introduce quantitative methods to further validate translation strategies and effects.

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