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Exploring the Chinese Translation Strategies of Long and Complex Sentences in Nursing English Texts from the Perspective of Category Shift Theory

Yiling Zeng

College of Foreign Languages, Chongqing Medical University, Chongqing, China

Abstract: With the rapid global development of the nursing discipline, the international exchange of professional literature has become increasingly frequent. The prevalence of long and complex sentences in nursing English texts-characterized by intricate syntax and high information density-poses a significant challenge to translation in terms of both accuracy and fluency. Framed within J.C. Catford's Category Shift Theory, this paper analyzes the Chinese translation of long and complex sentences from the classic nursing text Clinical Judgement and Decision-Making in Nursing. It explores the specific application and efficacy of three core strategies-structure shifts, unit shifts, and class shifts-in addressing these challenges. The study demonstrates that by proactively adjusting sentence structures, flexibly manipulating the rank of language units, and converting parts of speech, the complex information of the source text can be effectively deconstructed. This process yields translations that are both accurate and idiomatic in Chinese. The theory provides systematic methodological support for enhancing the quality of nursing literature translation and facilitating the cross-cultural dissemination of professional knowledge.

Keywords: Category Shift, Nursing English, Long and Complex Sentences, Structure Shift, Unit Shifts, Class Shift.

1. Introduction

The vigorous advancement of nursing as a discipline worldwide has led to a surge in professional literature and textbooks, laying the groundwork for the transnational sharing and collaborative innovation of nursing knowledge. In this process, high-quality professional translation plays a crucial role. However, the long and complex sentences prevalent in nursing English texts-characterized by intricate syntactic structures, high information density, and a heavy load of specialized terminology-pose a significant challenge in translation practice. The rigid application of literal translation often results in awkward, obscure translations, potentially leading to information loss or ambiguity, thereby hindering the precise dissemination of knowledge and its effective comprehension by readers. To address this challenge, various translation strategies have emerged. Among them, Category Shift Theory offers robust methodological support by systematically examining and addressing the structural differences between languages, providing an effective means to deconstruct and reorganize such complex information units, achieving translation that is both accurate and idiomatic in the target language.

2. Overview of Category Shift Theory

Category Shift Theory was proposed by linguist J.C. Catford in 1965[1]. Category shift refers to the situation where the equivalent components of the source language and the target language reside at the same linguistic level but exhibit formal deviation. It is subdivided into structure shifts, unit shifts, class shifts, and intra-system shifts. In the translation process, translators often need to perform category shifts to make the output conform more closely to the expressive norms of the target language. Many scholars abroad have paid significant attention to Category Shift Theory[2]. Susanto et al., through descriptive quantitative research, found that unit shifts can significantly enhance meaning transfer in translation. Ruba Saad Alomari et al., through comparative studies of different translations, revealed factors that might influence a translator's adoption of these shifting strategies. Vivi Adryani Nasution et al., also via descriptive quantitative research, explored the impact of cultural differences on form and meaning shifts in translation from Chinese to Indonesian. Emma Natasha Octoveria et al. investigated translation models in qualitative and quantitative research, where qualitative data relied heavily on Catford's Category Shift Theory[3]. In recent years, many domestic translation researchers have also begun to utilize category and categorization theory to study translation between Chinese and other languages, focusing on issues such as the nature of translation and the application of prototype categorization theory to guide translation practice. However, research specifically targeting Medical English remains relatively limited, often consisting of scattered examples lacking systematic focus. Integrating Category Shift Theory with medical translation practice thus remains a subject requiring in-depth exploration[4]. Therefore, this paper will take the Chinese translation of long and complex sentences from Clinical Judgement and Decision-Making in Nursing by Mooi Standing et al. as examples. Based on the categorization theory from cognitive linguistics, it explores the application of Catford's Category Shift Theory in the Chinese translation of nursing English, aiming to improve translation quality and thereby promote the effective dissemination of nursing knowledge.

3. Analysis of Chinese Translation of Long and Complex Sentences in Nursing Texts from the Perspective of Category Shift Theory

When dealing with structurally complex and information-dense long sentences in nursing English, Catford's Category Shift Theory provides an effective analytical framework for

tackling translation difficulties[5]. The core of this theory lies in consciously altering the category of linguistic components to bridge the deep-seated differences in syntactic structure and expressive habits between English and Chinese. Its application can be operationalized into three core strategies:

Firstly, structure shifts focus on syntactic restructuring. This typically involves converting English passive voice into the more common active voice in Chinese, adjusting narrative focus and word order, or even splitting and reorganizing lengthy clauses or participial structures to align with the "paratactic" and flow-like characteristic of Chinese sentence flow. Secondly, unit shifts handle changes in the rank of language units. In translation, an English word might be converted into a Chinese phrase, or a complex English clause might be condensed into a concise Chinese phrase, and vice versa. This flexible adjustment ensures that information chunks are presented in the most natural and compact way in the target language. Finally, class shifts represent the most dynamic micro-level strategy. It primarily involves breaking correspondence in parts of speech, engaging in cross-category translation. For example, it involves converting high-frequency nominalizations in English (e.g., "the implementation of care") into Chinese verb phrases ("实施护理"), or converting adjectives into verbs, thereby making the translation more dynamic and fluid, avoiding stiffness and awkwardness. In the practice of translating nursing literature, these shifting strategies are not used in isolation. Translators need to make comprehensive judgments, deconstructing and reshaping long and complex sentences to produce idiomatic, highly readable Chinese text while accurately conveying professional information, ultimately facilitating the clear dissemination and effective application of nursing knowledge.

3.1. Structure Shifts

Structure shift is a key technique in translation, referring to the proactive adjustment of a sentence's grammatical structure without changing its original meaning, to enhance the naturalness and acceptability of the translation in the target language. This shift stems from fundamental differences between English and Chinese: English sentences are structurally rigorous, frequently employing passive voice and conjunctions; Chinese sentences are flexible, emphasizing parataxis and active expression. Therefore, in translating nursing English into Chinese, common shifts include converting English passive voice to Chinese active expressions (e.g., translating "It is suggested that..." as "建议..."), adjusting affirmative and negative sentence structures according to tonal needs, and transforming English postpositive modifiers into Chinese prepositive "的" structures or independent short clauses. Through such structural adjustments, translators can effectively resolve the rigidity often found in literal translations of long sentences, ensuring that the transmission of professional information is both accurate and fluent.

3.1.1. Passive to Active

Example 1: Reggie is a first-year student on an adult nursing programme. While on placement in a medical ward he is shown how to dispose of used needles and syringes properly.

Translation: 雷吉是一位攻读成人护理专业的大学一年级学生。在医院病房的实习过程中, 他掌握了如何妥善处理使用过的针头和注射器的技能。

Analysis: In the translation of the sentence "While on placement... he is shown how to...", the passive structure "he is shown" is transformed into the active expression "他掌握了……的技能". This treatment is a comprehensive embodiment of both "structure shift" and "unit shift". Firstly, the translator converts the static passive "is shown" into the active and completed "掌握", accurately capturing the implied process from instruction to learning, which aligns better with Chinese expression habits. Secondly, the skill content carried by the infinitive phrase "how to dispose of..." in the original text is elevated and explicitly rendered as the nominal unit "技能" in the translation. It is then reorganized through the active verb-object structure "掌握了……的技能", simultaneously involving both "unit shift" and "class shift". Finally, the overall shift, by adopting the active voice, backgrounds the implied instructor in the original text and instead establishes the learner "他" as the focal subject of the entire sentence. This aligns with the Chinese narrative preference for using human agents as subjects, highlighting action and result. Therefore, this conversion is not merely a mechanical switch in voice but a reconceptualization** process. Through category shift, the translation becomes more fluent and natural, effectively enhancing the efficiency and readability of professional information transfer.

3.1.2. Adjustment of Attributive Position

Example 2:Understand and apply the principles of courage, transparency and the professional duty of candour, recognising and reporting any situations, behaviours or errors that could result in poor care outcomes.

Translation:必须理解并践行勇气、透明度和坦诚原则, 能够识别并报告任何可能导致护理效果不佳的情况、行为或错误。

Analysis: In this example, the position of the attributive clause “that could result in poor care outcomes” has been completely adjusted. It is converted into the “的”-phrase “可能导致不良护理结果的” and placed before the central nouns “情况、行为或错误”. This adjustment fundamentally restructures the modifying relationship within the sentence, transforming the English postpositive, supplementary clause into a prepositive, tightly integrated modifier in Chinese. It not only strictly adheres to the core syntactic rule in Chinese where modifiers precede the words they modify but also, by fronting the core logic (“resulting in poor outcomes”), clarifies the nature of the qualified elements (which situations, behaviours, or errors) for the reader immediately. This significantly enhances the directness and clarity of the sentence. This prepositive treatment avoids the brief cognitive gap possible in the original English structure (where the noun is encountered first, followed by its qualifying characteristics), enabling Chinese readers to comprehend the information more efficiently and fluently. It achieves accurate transmission of all original information while optimizing the reading experience for the target language audience.

3.2. Unit Shifts

Unit shift refers to breaking the inherent hierarchical level of language units in the source text and reconstructing them as expression units of a different rank in the target language. Its core lies in flexibly translating across different language ranks such as word, phrase, clause, and sentence, rather than pursuing formal rank-to-rank correspondence. In practice, this shift often manifests as "rank raising" or "rank lowering": for example, expanding an English word carrying key

information into a specific Chinese phrase according to Chinese expressive habits; or compressing and refining a structurally complex English clause into a concise Chinese phrase. Through this conscious adjustment of rank, translators can more effectively resolve obstructions caused by linguistic structural differences, ensuring the translation conveys professional information accurately while becoming more fluent and conforming to the sense of the target language.

3.2.1. Clause Split into Sentences

Example 2: Registered nurses are 'licensed to care' on condition that we are held to account for what we do as nurses, at all times, including always meeting the professional standards set out in the nursing and midwifery Code.

Translation: 注册护士获得"护士执业许可"的前提是, 必须始终对自己的护理行为负责, 这包括始终遵守《护士职业守则》中规定的专业标准。

Analysis: This translation exemplifies the strategy of "clause split into sentences" within "unit shift" theory. The original sentence is a typical complex English sentence. Its main clause is followed by an information-dense adverbial clause of condition introduced by "on condition that", which itself contains an object clause ("what we do") and a present participial phrase ("including…") for supplementary explanation. Unconstrained by the original syntactic form, the translator astutely identifies three core information units: the precondition for obtaining the license, the specific connotation of accountability, and a key standard encompassed by that accountability. In the translation process, the translator decisively deconstructs and elevates the originally subordinate "conditional clause", transforming its core information into an independent Chinese main clause ("注册护士获得'护士执业许可'的前提是……"). Subsequently, using a comma for separation, two parallel short clauses ("必须始终……" and "这包括……") clearly and fluently present the content of accountability and the specific standard. This approach creatively converts an English "clause" unit into a Chinese sentential group consisting of multiple "sentences/clauses", thereby breaking the constraints of English hypotactic structure and fully conforming to the paratactic, flow-sentence-oriented expressive habits of Chinese. This ensures the accurate transmission of professional information and results in a highly readable translation.

3.3. Class Shifts

Class shift refers to replacing the part of speech of a source language item with a different part of speech in the target language during translation. Class shifts mainly involve conversion among nouns, verbs, and adjectives.

3.3.1. Adjective to Noun

Example: According to Griffith and Tengnah (2020), accountability has four functions – protective, deterrent, regulatory and educative.

Translation: 根据格里菲斯等人的见解（Griffith and Tengnah, 2020）, 问责制具备四个核心功能:保护功能、威慑功能、监管功能和教育功能。

Analysis: In this example, the original text uses four adjectives—"protective, deterrent, regulatory and educative"—to directly modify "functions". A literal translation like "保护性的、威慑性的、监管性的和教育性的功能" would make the translation appear lengthy and cumbersome due to the repetitive "的" structures, distracting attention from the core functions themselves. The translator converts all four adjectives into four parallel noun phrases: "保护功能、威慑功能、监管功能、教育功能". This shift elevates the adjectives describing the attributes of the functions in the original text to nouns that denote the functional entities themselves. By omitting the modifying elements, the four core terms are presented in a concise, parallel four-character structure. This not only eliminates the prolixity that a literal translation might produce but also renders the conceptual expression more condensed and formal. It significantly enhances the academic density and reading efficiency of the Chinese text, fully meeting the requirements of theoretical writing for conceptual clarity and terminological standardization.

3.3.2. Conversion of Nouns to Verbs

Example: We noted that compliance with the NMC Code facilitates our professional accountability and that we also have to adhere to the principles and values of the NHS Constitution.

Translation: 我们强调, 遵循 NMC 守则对于维护我们的专业问责至关重要, 同时我们也必须遵守 NHS 宪章的原则和价值观。

Analysis: The core elements of the original sentence, "compliance with the NMC Code" and "adherence to the principles and values," are noun phrases. The English sentence is structured around such abstract nominalizations, primarily presenting the static relationships between "compliance" and "accountability," and between "adherence" and "principles/values," with relatively limited verb use (e.g., facilitates, have to). This highly nominalized structure is very common in English academic and regulatory texts, but a literal translation into Chinese could easily result in lengthy, Europeanized expressions such as "对 NMC 守则的遵守……" ("the compliance with the NMC Code...") or "对原则和价值观的恪守……" ("the adherence to the principles and values..."). The translator converted the noun phrase "compliance with" into the verb "遵循" ("to follow/adhere to") and "adherence to" into "遵守" ("to abide by/comply with"), thereby transforming static "entities" (compliance, adherence) directly into dynamic "actions" (following, abiding by). Simultaneously, the process-describing verb "facilitates" was converted into the attributive-judgment phrase "对于……至关重要" ("is crucial for..."). This series of conversions shifts the core message of the translation from "what effect an entity has" to "how important performing an action is," significantly enhancing the sense of action and direction.By employing linked verb-object and adverbial-head structures such as "遵循……对于……至关重要" ("Following... is crucial for...") and "必须遵守……" ("must abide by..."), the translation directly and coherently expresses a series of requirements and judgments. The sentence is initiated with an implied collective subject "we," and the subsequent actions are logically connected, aligning with the Chinese convention in normative discourse of often omitting generic subjects and advancing the text through topics and verbs. This approach not only makes the sentence structure more concise and powerful, avoiding the potential for the bloated and alienating feel of nominalized structures, but also enhances the text's instructive quality and readability, better meeting Chinese readers' expectations for policy and principle-oriented texts.

4. Summary

This study, from the perspective of Catford's Category Shift Theory, systematically examines the issue of translating long and complex sentences in nursing English literature. Utilizing specific examples from Clinical Judgement and Decision-Making in Nursing, it elaborates in detail on the key roles played by core strategies such as structure, unit, and class shifts in resolving syntactic complexity and enhancing information transfer efficiency. The analysis indicates that this theory provides an effective framework, combining explanatory power and practicality, for addressing challenges specific to nursing texts, such as terminological density and logical intricacy.

Specifically, structure shifts, through proactive adjustment of voice, word order, and sentence focus, effectively bridge the fundamental differences in English-Chinese syntactic structures. This liberates the translation from rigid literal correspondence, making it more aligned with Chinese narrative logic and expressive habits. Unit shifts, by flexibly manipulating the rank of language units, achieve the deconstruction and reorganization of information packages from the source text. This transforms lengthy clauses into fluent short sentences, enhancing the clarity and compactness of the translation. Meanwhile, class shifts activate the dynamism of the translation at the micro-level. Through flexible conversion of parts of speech, they make professional expressions more congruent with Chinese lexical preferences, strengthening the text's readability and academic acceptability.

In summary, the application of Category Shift Theory has significantly optimized the translation quality of professional nursing texts, achieving a favorable balance between accuracy and readability in the translations. This not only facilitates the precise dissemination of nursing knowledge and international dialogue but also provides a useful paradigmatic reference for medical translation research and practice. In the future, the applicability and adaptive strategies of this theory in a wider variety of nursing text types warrant further exploration.

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