

LITERAL AND FREE TRANSLATION IN CHINESE-ENGLISH INTERPRETATION

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Abstract. Today, as global trade grows, effective communication between countries has become more important. As international ties in business, education, and politics expand, translation and interpretation are crucial for connecting nations. This article looks at two techniques in Chinese-English interpretation: literal and free translation. It defines their advantages, disadvantages, and main features. It also addresses the challenge of translating idioms and culturally specific expressions, which need precise interpretation to avoid misunderstandings. In conclusion, the findings indicate that neither literal nor free translation is better. Successful translation from Chinese to English or vice versa depends on using both methods appropriately based on the situation.

Keywords: Chinese-English translation, literal translation, free translation, interpretation difficulties, translation strategies.

ANNOTATION

Currently, the rise of global trade and international cooperation has made effective communication between countries increasingly important. As international relations grow in business, education, and politics, translation and interpretation play vital roles in breaking down language and cultural barriers. This article examines two main translation methods—literal translation and free translation—within the context of Chinese-English interpretation, analyzing their key features, strengths, and weaknesses. Special attention focuses on translating idioms and culturally specific expressions, as accurate interpretation is essential to prevent misunderstandings and ensure successful cross-cultural communication. Research findings show that neither literal nor free translation is categorically superior. Instead, effective Chinese-English translation depends on a balanced and contextually appropriate use of both techniques.

Key terms: Chinese-English translation, literal translation, free translation, challenges in interpretation, translation strategies, cross-cultural communication.

INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized world, communication between countries is crucial for development in many areas. China is viewed as one of the fastest-growing countries in business, economics, politics, and trade, increasing the demand for quality Chinese-English translation. However, the significant differences in language and culture between these two languages pose challenges for interpreters trying to convey meaning accurately.

One of the most discussed topics in Chinese-English translation is the choice of method. Some researchers believe that literal translation guarantees accuracy, while others argue that free translation better conveys meaning. This article explores the characteristics of both literal and free translation to identify their strengths and weaknesses.

LITERAL TRANSLATION IN CHINESE-ENGLISH INTERPRETATION

Literal translation is a method where the translator works to transfer the text into the target language while keeping its grammar, structure, and vocabulary intact. This approach prioritizes linguistic accuracy and aims to preserve the original message without unnecessary additions. It is often used in technical, legal, and instructional texts.

Literal translation, or word-for-word translation, offers several benefits. First, it keeps the original structure and meaning, making the translated text clear and precise. For instance, it is particularly suited for scientific, legal, and academic texts where accuracy and consistency matter. According to Ali (2025), literal translation ensures that the original message is conveyed accurately.

Additionally, literal translation helps maintain linguistic and cultural elements, making the translation clear and useful for readers and researchers who want to compare the translated text with the original. It also aids language learners in understanding the structure and vocabulary of a foreign language by providing a direct comparison between the source and target texts.

However, despite its advantages, literal translation can lead to misunderstandings. Chinese differs greatly from English in grammar, syntax, and cultural context, so literal translation does not always yield natural or meaningful outcomes. For example, the Chinese phrase 加油, meaning "good luck" or "keep going," would literally translate to "add oil," which sounds unnatural in English.

As noted by Ali Hussein Awadh Azzan and Dr. Sana Sakale (2025), literal translation can create ambiguity because it does not always account for how concepts are expressed differently in various languages. Translating idiomatic expressions and culturally specific phrases, which often lack direct equivalents, can also be problematic. A literal rendering can result in awkward or illogical interpretations.

Moreover, concentrating too much on individual words can cause the translator to overlook context, which is essential for meaning. This can lessen accuracy and hinder effective communication of the intended message.

FREE TRANSLATION IN CHINESE-ENGLISH INTERPRETATION

Free translation is a method that prioritizes conveying the overall meaning of the text instead of sticking closely to its form. Unlike literal translation, it allows flexibility in grammar, vocabulary, and structure to create a more natural and understandable result.

In Chinese-English interpretation, free translation is especially valuable for idioms, cultural references, and expressions without direct equivalents in English. This method helps the reader grasp the intended meaning even when the original words are not retained.

According to Ziqi Lu (2024), free translation focuses on communicating the main idea of the text without being limited by a word-for-word approach. This makes it particularly effective for translating culturally specific expressions. For example, the Chinese expression 入乡随俗 translates literally as "enter a village and follow its customs." However, a more natural free translation would be "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." This version conveys the same meaning in a culturally relevant way for English readers.

Free translation acknowledges that languages and cultures operate independently, allowing the translator to tailor the message to the target audience. This enhances communication in cross-cultural contexts.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, both literal and free translation methods are important in Chinese-English interpretation. Translators should combine these two approaches for balance. Literal translation preserves the structure, grammar, and vocabulary of the original text, making it useful for technical and academic materials. However, it can sometimes result in misunderstandings or unnatural expressions.

Free translation, in contrast, emphasizes conveying the author's intended meaning and is particularly effective for idiomatic and culturally specific expressions. Therefore, neither method is universally better. Effective translation needs to flexibly employ both strategies based on the context to achieve accuracy, clarity, and naturalness.

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