

A Study on the Chinese Translation of European Automobile Brand Names from the Perspective of Skopos Theory

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Abstract: Brand names are of great significance in reflecting the history and culture of their brands. Similarly, the translation of the name of an automobile brand profoundly affects its brand image, positioning and consumer acceptance, as well as the purchase price and consumers' willingness to buy. With the globalization of the automobile industry, the quality of a brand's translation has a direct impact on whether a European automobile manufacturer can successfully occupy a place in the Chinese market, therefore, effective translation of European automobile brands in the Chinese market is imperative. Successful Chinese translation is crucial for high sales of European car brands in China. The Chinese translation of the brand names has to be in accordance with the cultural psychology, customs and aesthetic interests of Chinese people. This study focuses on the application of skopos theory, aiming to explore how to translate European automobile brand names into Chinese using skopos theory through literature review and case study. It is found that European automobile brands mainly adopt the translation methods of literal translation, free translation and transliteration, which follow the principles of skopos, coherence and fidelity of the skopos theory.

Keywords: European Automobile Brand Names; Skopos Theory; Chinese Translation

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1.Introduction

In current society, automobile has become a part of everyone's life. A large number of foreign automobile brands are pouring into China. To successfully break into the Chinese market, a foreign automobile brand needs not only maintain the quality of its products, but also let the Chinese translation of its brand name to be recognised by Chinese consumers.

The brand name of automobile usually has a specific meaning and carries the history and culture of a country or nation. The global automobile industry's development has led to a trend of globalisation. Therefore, a automobile brand seeking to export overseas requires an effective translation strategy. Therefore a good translation of the brand name is extremely important. Brand image, positioning and consumer acceptance are significantly influenced by the brand name. The translation of a brand name and the product itself can significantly impact both the price and the consumer's willingness to purchase the brand. It is not an exaggeration to say that the Chinese translation of the brand name is absolutely indispensable for the high sales of these European brand automobiles in China. Moreover, whether a foreign brand can be successfully marketed or not, the name of its product plays a crucial role as it is the first impression of a brand to the consumers. In the face of Chinese consumer groups, the translation of automobile brand names with Chinese cultural characteristics needs to be in

line with Chinese social customs, Chinese consumers' cultural psychology, consumer psychology and aesthetic taste. The translation of automobile brand names bridges the communication between different nationalities and cultures, and realizes the transformation between languages in different cultural backgrounds.

Translations of brand names into Chinese, such as Bayerische Motoren Werke (BMW) and Mercedes-Benz, are not only easy to read but also easier to remember among European automobile brands. To ensure accurate translations of European automobile brand names into Chinese, it is essential to have a deep understanding of the cultural connotations and differences between the two languages. Therefore, it is necessary to study the methods and strategies used for the Chinese translation of European automobile brands for reference. As defined by William & Andrew (1999), European automobile brands are automobile manufacturers that are based in Europe and legally registered in European countries. These brands produce a wide range of vehicles, from passenger cars to commercial vehicles, and often represent the continent's rich heritage of automobile engineering and design.

A legally European automobile brand is an entity that is legally established in a European country. They operate under the regulatory framework and commercial laws of their respective countries. Moreover, they comply with EU regulations on vehicle safety, emission standards and other industry-specific regulations. Geographically European automobile brands are headquartered in various European countries including but not limited to Germany, France, Italy, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Spain and others.

Skopos theory is a classic translation theory, which emerged in Germany in the 1970s. The theory puts the focus of translation on the function of translation and emphasizes the purpose of translation. The purpose of the brand name of an automobile is to convey the characteristics and connotation of the brand to the consumers, which coincides with the emphasis on the purpose of the skopos theory, so that the skopos theory is the most suitable translation theory for the translation of the brand name of an automobile.

This thesis aims to explore the methods of translating European automobile brand names into Chinese by studying skopos theory and the naming conventions of these brands. The research will include a literature review and a case study. The analysis will start with an examination of skopos theory and its relevance to brand translation, providing a theoretical foundation for subsequent analysis. The case study will focus on the translation methods and principles used for selected European automobile brands.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Studies Abroad

Katharine Reiss, a renowned German translation theorist, based her analysis and criticism of translation on the relationship between the function of the source language and the function of the target language. The foundation of her theory aimed to achieve equivalence between the source and target languages. However, when the communication function of the source language and the target language differ, the focus should be on the original function of the target text rather than pursuing equivalence. Reiss & Vermeer (1986) suggests that language functions should be integrated with translation practice, and the research focuses on the exploration of the importance of the function of the text, laying a solid foundation for the development of the skopos theory.^[1]

Hans Vermeer, a student of Katharine Reiss, innovated and enriched the skopos theory. Taking the function of the target text as a primary consideration, Hans Vermeer (1989) argues that translation cannot be effectively analyzed and studied by language translation theory alone^[2]. It is more effective to follow three major principles than to rely on language translation theory for translation work. The three principles are skopos rule, coherence rule and fidelity rule, which means that the process of translation should be based on the fact that the translated text fulfills its intended function in the translated culture. According to Hans Vermeer (2004), the translation must achieve intra-textual coherence and there should be some correspondence between the translated text and the original text in terms of what is to be presented^[3].

Christiane Nord (1991) proposes the principle of fidelity, which complements the original three principles of translation proposed by Hans Vermeer's skopos theory^[4]. It is important for a translator to remain faithful to both the source and target languages. However, this should not be conflated with the concept of fidelity, which pertains solely to the relationship

between the original and translated texts. Christiane Nord's theory in 1997, which focuses on pre-translation text analysis, is a functionally-based theory of translation that can be applied to all text types and language pairs^[5]. The theory proposes a translation-oriented model of source text analysis that aims to identify translation problems and strategies based on the factors of the source text and their relationship to the function and recipients of the target text.

Scholars in the field of translation studies often use these theories to translate texts with a clear purpose, such as brand names. When translating brand names, the goal is to effectively communicate the brand's image to the intended audience, which are the customers. For example, Al & Jack (2002) analyses the ways in which some of the world's top brands stand out as brands in today's market by examining their stories and brand marketing methods^[6].

2.2 Studies at Home

Most of the domestic studies have taken the skopos theory as a perspective, prioritising the perspective of translation on whether it can convey the connotation of the trade name. Whether the quality and efficacy of the product and the company's philosophy can be successfully publicized has become the focus of the current domestic translation work^[7].

Domestic scholars conduct research on brand name translation by analyzing and comparing different translation methods. Researchers such as Guo Huirong (2013) and Xu Xiaoshu (2013) have emphasized the importance and necessity of brand name translation from a business perspective^[8]. By comparing various translation methods, they have found that skopos theory is a suitable approach for the current market globalization. It is essential to note that brand name translation has a significant impact on the brand's image and sales^[9].

According to Liu Ning (2009)'s study on automobile trademarks translation, the main objective of automobile companies in creating their logos is to promote sales and stimulate consumers' desire to buy their products. Therefore, when translating automobile logos, translators should focus on the purpose and consider the cultural differences of the target readers^[10]. Skopos theory is well-suited to meet this requirement.

Wang Xin (2022) applied skopos theory to examine the translation strategy of automobile trademarks. She emphasized that in the era of economic globalization, the translation of automobile trademarks is crucial to the success of an automobile company^[11]. A well-executed translation of automobile trademarks can result in significant economic benefits for the company. The translation process should prioritize the needs of consumers, and therefore, skopos theory, which focuses on the purpose of translation, should be employed^[12].

By analysing the current automobile market, Li Beibei (2014) concluded that foreign cars are still the mainstream of the Chinese automobile market. The naming of foreign automobiles and the Chinese translation of their names become very important. In order to maximise the publicity of the product and the promotion of the product, she believes that the translation of the trademark plays a vital and realistic role^[13]. Therefore, a successful brand name translation is an important condition for a company's products to enter the international market. She concludes that the skopos theory can be used to select the best translation method by analysing the names of automobile trademarks, so that the translation reflects the characteristics and functions of the products.

Based on the translation theory of skopos theory, Fu Xiaohong (2012) uses specific domestic and international case studies and qualitative analysis methods. The study concludes that the characteristics of the skopos theory are well suited to the needs of a brand that wants to express the connotations of its products in the market^[14]. What's more, as Feng Xiuwen (2009) suggests, the translation of a brand name should appeal to the target language consumers and stimulate their imagination and shopping desire^[15].

All these studies show the conclusion that in the translation of brand names, it is most important to accurately convey the message that the brand wants to express to consumers^{[16][17]}.

3. Case Analysis on Chinese Translation of European Automobiles Brands from the Perspective of Skopos Theory

3.1 European Automobiles' Naming Methods

Most European automobile companies have gained great recognition from consumers in China, such as Mercedes-Benz, BMW, Audi and Porsche. Therefore, by studying the Chinese translation names of European automobile brands, people

can understand the marketing strategies of these brands better in order to learn excellent translation strategies and advanced marketing strategies. This has become particularly important in the context of China's automobile exports jumping to the top of the world and the successful implementation of The Belt and Road Initiative.

The naming convention for European automobile brands usually involves a variety of factors, including the following:

1. Geographical and historical context

Many European automobile brands derive their names from the geographical characteristics or historical traditions of the region in which they are based. For example, the Bavarian Motor Works (BMW) brand in Germany is a direct reflection of the culture, history and geographic location of the country to which it belongs.

2. Names of founders or founding teams

Some European automobile brands take their names from the names of their founders or founding teams. For example, the Porsche brand is named after its founder Ferdinand Porsche, while Alfa Romeo is named after its founder Nicola Romeo, and Aston Martin after its founder Lionel Martin and its founding place Aston Clinton in England.

Moreover, this type of naming is also very conducive to a brand's globalisation strategy, which is to be remembered by consumers with its unique name, as Li Shuang's (2009) theory suggests, a brand in the context of economic globalisation should give due consideration to the ways of dealing with it.

3. Product features or philosophy

Some European automobile brands may have names that reflect their product features or corporate philosophy. For example, the name Volkswagen means "people's car" in German, reflecting the brand's early positioning as a high-quality, practical automobile product for the general public.

4. Symbolic words or symbols

Some European automobile brand names may be based on symbolic words or symbols. For example, the Renault brand name is derived from the surname of its founder, Louis Renault. And it also suggests innovation and renewal. Moreover, Jaguar, named after Jaguar, refers to the powerful, agile big cat, conveying speed, grace and strength. Lotus, named after Lotus, refers to a genus of flowering plants often associated with purity and beauty.

Overall, the naming approaches of European automobile brands are diverse, reflecting the history of the brand, its regional characteristics, the spirit of its founder, the characteristics of its products, and its market positioning, among other factors. Not only do these names have unique meanings and historical contexts, they are also an important part of the brand image and market positioning. Whereas the names of these car brands contain unique connotations, skopos theory is the best way to translate them, centred on the purpose of translation and showing the brand characteristics.

3.2 The Application of Skopos Theory in the Chinese Translation of European Automobiles Brands

The skopos theory provides a strong framework for translating European automobile brand names into Chinese, emphasizing purpose-driven translations and cultural adaptation. This section provides specific examples that illustrate how the principles of skopos theory are applied in the translation of well-known European automobile brand names into Chinese.

3.2.1 The Application of the Skopos Rule

A delicate balance between preserving the essence of the original name and ensuring resonance in the target Chinese market is required when translating European automobile brand names into Chinese. Various translation methods have been used to manage this complex process. Each has its own implications for brand identity, cultural relevance and market appeal. Taking the entry of European car brands into the Chinese market as a background, when these different translation methods are examined and evaluated, it can be found that the skopos rule plays a significant role.

Skopos theory prioritises the purpose and function of the translation. When applied to an automobile brand name, it ensures that the translated name conveys the basic message about the brand to the target audience. The skopos theory states that the primary principle of all translation activities is the "skopos" principle. This principle suggests that a translation should be able to function in the way expected by the recipient of the translation in the context and culture of the target language. The purpose of the act of translation determines the entire process of translation. In other words, the result determines the method. BMW is an automobile company that produces high-performance engines and emphasises its sporty characteristics, so it is

particularly important to convey the brand's sporty attributes accurately. The skopos rule is perfect for this. BMW stands for Bayerische Motoren Werke AG, which translates to "Bavarian Motor Works" in English. It is a well-known brand that is known for its luxury vehicles and German engineering. In the 1990s, when BMW first entered the Chinese market, its brand name BMW was directly transliterated as "bayier". This name did not attract much attention at that time. Obviously, the Chinese translation of BMW's name initially used the transliteration method. But it was clear that the name "bayier" didn't fit, either because of its poor pronunciation or because it didn't convey the idea of a car company. The name did not make BMW a success in the Chinese market, and sales were dismal. Many people even thought the name was like Chanel, a little bit feminine. The Chinese translation does not fulfil the skopos of communicating the brand to consumers. Because it neither conveyed the luxury quality of BMW cars nor was it easy to remember. Meanwhile, the Hong Kong market translated BMW as "baoma", and the name was immediately popular. Not only was it easy to remember, but the word "BMW" in Chinese signified speed and dignity, which was very much in line with the brand image of BMW. Therefore, from 1992, the name "baoma" was gradually adopted in mainland China, while "bayier" was gradually forgotten.

The new translation uses the method of free translation. The word "baoma" in Chinese means a precious horse, which is a fitting representation of the BMW brand's luxury, power and agility. Additionally, the Chinese translation mirrors BMW's original industry, the manufacturing of engines. The correspondence between this Chinese translation and the original text is important. It follows the skopos rule and aims to communicate the brand's identity and message effectively to the Chinese consumers. The translation maintains relevance to the target audience by using a name "baoma" that is culturally appropriate and resonates with Chinese consumers. The term "a treasure like horse" is visually and phonetically appealing, contributing to its acceptance and popularity in the Chinese market. In order to ensure that the intended message of the BMW brand is accurately conveyed in the Chinese language and culture, the Chinese translation of the brand name has been carefully selected. This approach is in line with the skopos rule, which stresses the importance of translating brand names in a way that communicates relevant brand messages to the target audience, thereby meeting their communication needs.

Mercedes-Benz's previous Chinese translation is an example of a poor literal translation that fails to convey the brand's luxurious and elegant image. The brand's name was first directly translated as "moxietaisibenchi," which is a long and difficult name to remember. This translation only conveys the name of the brand's founder to Chinese consumers and does not effectively communicate the brand's connotation of comfort and luxury. As a result, the Chinese translation does not fulfil the skopos of effectively communicating the brand image to Chinese consumers.

Mercedes-Benz changed its name to "meisaidesi-baoma", also known as "benchi," which represented the brand's vision and positioning. The new Chinese translation followed the skopos theory, which focuses on the skopos of translation and aims to achieve the expected function of the Chinese culture in the translation process. It emphasizes the function of the translation in the cultural environment of the target language, which is to convey the meaning of the brand. The modified Chinese translation "benchi" is more coherent in the Chinese context and easier for consumers to remember compared to the original "benchi." It is more acceptable, understandable and culturally appropriate for Chinese consumers. The new Chinese translation of the name reflects the skopos rule in the skopos theory.

The name change of Mercedes-Benz was a deliberate move to convey the brand's characteristics to its target consumers through its name. The word "benchi" is simple yet powerful, suggesting high-speed driving and excellent performance, which is consistent with the luxury brand positioning of Mercedes-Benz. The new Chinese translation follows the skopos rule of the skopos theory. It gives the brand a humanistic meaning and conveys an image of luxury, sophistication, and elegance. This purpose-driven translation aligns with the mission of the skopos theory, which acknowledges the need to adapt translations to the cultural context of the target consumers. The Chinese name of Mercedes-Benz subtly captures the cultural values associated with luxury and advancement, aligning with Chinese perceptions of prestige and progress.

Another most widely known example that follows the skopos rule is Volkswagen.

Volkswagen is an automobile manufacturing company based in Wolfsburg, Germany, and the VW in the logo stands for the acronym Volkswagen. The logo is made up of three V's made with the middle and index fingers, indicating that Volkswagen and its products are sure to win.

Volks means “people” in German, Wagen means “car” in German, the full name means “people’s car”. Therefore, Volkswagen means “people’s car” in German. It reflects the spirit of Volkswagen’s approachability and affordability, as well as the historical background of Volkswagen’s origins in post-war Germany. Its’ name conveys not only the hope that the company can make cars that are recognised by the people, but also the hope that every person in the country will be able to drive a car.

Accurately conveying the “the mass” element in Volkswagen is the key point of its Chinese translation. The Chinese translation of “Volkswagen” is “dazhongqiche”, where “dazhong” means “people” or “the masses,” and “qiche” means “car.” This translation effectively conveys the concept of accessibility and mass appeal inherent in the original German name, and it also complies with the skopos rule by maintaining the message and intent of the original text, but is also more easily understood and recognisable in the Chinese market, in line with the aim of communicating the message effectively.

3.2.2 The Application of the Coherence Rule

Skopos theory emphasizes adapting translations to target audience’s cultural context. Applied to automobile brand names, it ensures resonance with cultural nuances and preferences. When a European automobile brands are translated into Chinese, the coherence rule of the skopos theory is usually applied, which usually involves the selection of characters that phonetically represent the original name or convey the meaning associated with the brand. Like Ferrari, which Chinese translation uses characters that represent the phonetics of “Ferrari”. These characters don’t directly convey meaning but closely mimic the sound. “Ferrari” is the surname of Enzo Ferrari, the founder of the luxury sports car manufacturer. It represents a brand known for its high-performance vehicles, luxury and racing heritage.

The Chinese translation uses the method of transliteration. It follows the coherence rule in skopos theory, which means that the translation must meet the criterion of intra-textual coherence. It also means that the translation is readable and acceptable, and can be understood by the receiver and make sense in the culture of the language into which it is translated as well as in the communicative context in which the translation is used. The Chinese translation of Ferrari adopts a phonetic translation method, directly translating as “fālālì” (Fālālì). There are three tones in the translation, which are alling tone, level tone and entering tone, which make up a very clear and coherent sounding Chinese phrase. This gives the target readers a sense of the power of the name. This is in line with the rule of coherence, the standard of translation intra-textual coherence. In addition, Ferrari is named after its founder, Enzo Ferrari, who was also very confident that he wanted customers to remember his name and his car.

Audi is another European automobile brand that uses the coherence rule as a translation method. Translating “Audi” as “aodi” in Chinese follows the coherence rule of the skopos theory, as the pronunciation and meaning of the two words are semantically and phonetically consistent. In Chinese, “ao” means deep and precious, while “di” means straight and leading to the far side. Combined together, the name “aodi” gives people a high-end and honorable feeling, which aligns with Audi’s consistent high-quality and luxury positioning. Additionally, the pronunciation of “Audi” is similar to that of Audi in English, as both words are composed of a falling tone and a rising tone, making the Chinese translation of the name “aodi” very easy to pronounce. This ensures that the Chinese translation of Audi maintains the consistency of the brand name in different languages. Therefore, the Chinese translation of “aodi” conforms to the coherence rule.

3.2.3 The Application of the Fidelity Rule

According to Christiane Nord (1997), there are two main different translation strategies, documentary and instrumental, which depend on the translation skopos and the recipient’s expectations. Documentary translation aims to preserve the original qualities of the source text and present the target text as a version or report of the source text, with the objective of informing the target readers about the form and content of the source text. Instrumental translation, on the other hand, is meant to meet the needs of the target readership, where the target text is considered as a substitute or a tool for the source text, with the aim of enabling the target readers to receive the same information and emotions that the author of the source text intends to communicate. For Chinese translations of European automobile brand names, the direct translation method that emphasizes fidelity is the most suitable. One of the key tasks in Chinese translation is to accurately convey the intended brand meaning expressed by the automobile brands.

Aston Martin, built in March 1913, was founded by Lionel Martin and Robert Banford. In 1923 Lionel Martin won a mountain car race at Aston Clinton Hill in a car he had built himself, and in 1923 he renamed the company Aston Martin in honour of the victory. The company was named for its founder and the race victory. For this reason, it is necessary to faithfully reflect the two elements of “Aston” and “Martin” in the Chinese translation of its name. The Chinese translation of the name “*asidunmading*” has faithfully conveyed these two elements to the consumers. The word “*asidun*” faithfully conveys the message of the *asidun·kelindunshandibisai* (Aston Clinton Mountain Race). The translation of Martin as “*mading*” not only follows the Chinese standard for translating foreign names, but also faithfully conveys the message that its founder was Lionel Martin. This Chinese translation complies with the fidelity rule, resulting in inter-textual coherence between the original text and the translated text; in other words, it is faithful to the original text.

The Chinese translation of the name Alfa Romeo is also using the fidelity rule. Alfa Romeo is a famous Italian automobile manufacturer, founded in 1910, headquartered in Milan. Originally known as ALFA (Anonima Lombarda Fabbrica Automobili), the company’s predecessor can be traced back to an automobile company founded by Alexandre Darracq in Naples in 1906 and then moved to Milan. In 1916, Nicola Romeo, a Neapolitan by birth, took ownership of the factory and incorporated his family name Romeo into the name of the factory, which became today’s Alfa Romeo. On its logo is written Alfa Romeo, the word Alfa is a reminder of its history, and Romeo is in honour of the Romeo family, and is always vigilant that it does not dishonour Milan’s glorious tradition.

4. Conclusion

Upon analysing these examples, it is evident that skopos theory’s principles are embodied in the translation of European automobile brand names into Chinese. Skopos theory serves as an invaluable framework, emphasizing the primacy of purpose in translation. It underscores the significance of achieving equivalence, functionality, linguistic accuracy, market effectiveness and cultural resonance in brand name translations to facilitate effective cross-cultural communication and market penetration. Its adaptability allows for the strategic selection of translation methods that effectively convey brand identity, cultural connotations and functional equivalence. This ensures that the translated brand names resonate harmoniously within the complex socio-cultural landscape of the Chinese market. The skopos theory recognizes the evolving nature of cultures and the need for translations to consider these changes. It emphasizes the importance of functional equivalence, where the translation should serve the purpose and needs of the target audience. This aligns perfectly with the idea that brand names should reflect contemporary socio-cultural environments and be adapted to suit them. Moreover, skopos theory’s adaptability enables the integration of brand attributes and innovative elements into the translated names, ensuring that they resonate effectively in the target culture. Skopos theory emphasizes cultural sensitivity and appropriateness, enabling the incorporation of cultural heritage while ensuring that the brand name remains relevant and appealing in the contemporary context.

Further analysis will examine the implications and effectiveness of these translations in terms of brand recognition, consumer perception and market success.

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