

The Impact of Eastern and Western Cognitive Differences on International Publicity Translation and Corresponding Strategies

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International publicity translation constitutes a specialized form of translation where communicative effectiveness serves as the primary evaluation criterion, adhering to the principle of reader-oriented adaptation. Consequently, understanding of East-West cognitive differences is essential in this field. This paper examines three core distinctions in Eastern-Western cognition—collectivistic vs. individualistic thinking, correlative vs. logical reasoning, and spiral vs. linear thought patterns—through analysis of publicity texts. It further proposes targeted translation strategies and orientation adjustments.

Keywords: cognitive patterns, differences, culture, international publicity translation

Introduction

Cognitive difference represents a crucial dimension in Eastern-Western cross-cultural communication.

On one hand, cognitive patterns are intrinsically linked to culture, embodying the concentrated manifestation of cultural psychology while simultaneously constraining its elements. These patterns permeate all cultural domains—material, institutional, behavioral, spiritual, and communicative—particularly evident in philosophy, language, science, arts, medicine, religion, politics, economics, and daily practices. Such cognitive divergence constitutes a fundamental source of cultural distinctions. (Baidu Baike)

Language, as the carrier of culture, maintains an inseparable relationship with cognition: Cognitive patterns form the deep structure underlying linguistic development, while language conversely shapes cognitive formation, which establishes language as the primary instrument of thought. This paper is an attempt to analyze how East-West cognitive differences manifest in publicity texts and discusses critical considerations for translation practice.

Characteristics of International Publicity Translation

Professor Zhang Jian (2013) defined international publicity translation as “the general term for translation practices primarily involving materials intended for overseas dissemination” (p. 18). Broadly, it encompasses all Chinese-to-foreign language translation; narrowly, it refers to translating texts like leaders’ speeches, government reports, news releases, and tourism materials. While adhering to fundamental translation principles (accuracy and fluency), international publicity translation aims to project China’s image globally. Consequently, translators must prioritize communicative effectiveness—the paramount criterion determining translation success—necessitating target-reader-centered strategies.

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Impact of East-West Cognitive Differences on Publicity Translation

Given its distinctive nature, international publicity translation requires understanding of Western readers' cognitive patterns and adapting strategies through comparative analysis. There are three key differences influencing translation:

Holistic vs. Individualistic Patterns

Chinese culture emphasizes collectivistic, or holistic cognition rooted in the ancient concept of “天人合一” (harmony between humanity and nature), prioritizing collective harmony and macro-perspectives. Western culture, influenced by “天人相分” (separation of humanity and nature), values individualism—evident since the Renaissance—focusing on personal development before collective interests.

Concept sequencing reflects this divergence: Chinese follows macro-to-micro order, while English uses micro-to-macro one. Notable in spatiotemporal expressions: for example, the address of the University of Shanghai for Science and Technology is “中国上海杨浦区军工路516号”—following macro-to-micro order; however, in English, the order of address components is reversed: “20B, Baker Street, Marylebone District, City of Westminster, London, UK”—following micro-to-macro order. The same applies to the expression of time. For instance, “2025年7月7日上午8时20分” would be written in British English as “20 minutes past 8 o'clock a.m., 7th of July, 2025” or “20 minutes past 8 o'clock a.m., July 7th, 2025”. Therefore, in international communication translations, it is essential to adjust the sequence to convey information in accordance with Western conventions.

At the beginning of the Year of the Sheep, there was quite a debate over how to accurately translate the Chinese zodiac sign “羊” into English, leaving many Chinese both amused and exasperated. English media outlets were divided—some translated it as “goat”, others as “sheep”, while some opted for “ram”, “lamb”, or even “mutton”. A few were so indecisive that they settled on a more academic definition: “a horned ruminant”. CNN even sent reporters to the streets of Hong Kong to investigate, only to find depictions of cartoonish sheep, goats, and curly-horned rams. After much deliberation, the Birmingham Chinese Festival Committee finally decided on the phrasing: “Celebrations for the Chinese Lunar New Year of the Sheep & Goat are about to begin”.

The question of how to translate “羊年” is by no means new, and it is not the only zodiac animal that poses a dilemma. Many of the 12 zodiac signs leave foreign media scratching their heads and challenge translators working on international communication. Actually, this issue stems from differences between Chinese and Western ways of thinking. English tends to emphasize precise classification, whereas Chinese often uses a single character to broadly represent an entire subfamily of animals. This cognitive gap adds significant difficulty to translation, so if we want to specifically represent the connotation of the cultural symbol, we need to trace back to the source of it—it is well known that the Chinese zodiac is rooted in folk culture, and all 12 animals are familiar creatures in Chinese society. Archaeological findings suggest that in oracle bone script, bronze inscriptions, large seal script, and small seal script, the Chinese character for “羊” always features a pair of inverted “V”-shaped horns, closely resembling the slightly curved horns of a goat. Furthermore, among cultural artifacts, the vast majority of sheep-shaped figurines and carvings are modeled after goats, with very few depictions of fluffy sheep. As a result, the English version for “羊年” ought to be “the year of goat”.

The Difference Between Correlative Thinking and Logical Patterns

The Chinese prefer imagistic and correlative thinking while English-speaking people favor logical thinking, American linguist Edward Sapir says, “Chinese, with its unmodified words and absence of formal (grammatical) apparatus, throws the whole weight of relational expression on position and, to a lesser extent, on tone”; “English

is weakly synthetic, but decidedly analytic in tendency. It depends largely on word order and auxiliary words to make up for its loss of inflectional richness” (Sapir, 1921). The specific linguistic differences are manifested as follows:

Chinese frequently employs rhetorical devices, such as metaphor or simile, whereas English tends to use more straightforward language. As noted by Chinese linguists,

Chinese rhetoric makes extensive use of comparison. Comparison takes various forms, but the general principle is to avoid direct expression, instead using one thing to represent another, leaving the listener or reader to infer the meaning. Traditional rhetorical devices such as simile, metaphor, and metonymy all fall under comparison, and even techniques like hyperbole or transferred epithet often involve or contain elements of comparison. Many idioms are also applications of comparison. The prevalence and diversity of comparison reflect a facet of traditional Chinese culture (“在汉语修辞中大量使用‘比’，用的多，用的方面广。‘比’的方式有种种，总的就是不宜直说，而以此喻彼，让听者或读者自己去理解。一般修辞学上讲的‘明喻’、‘隐喻’、‘借喻’等都是比，就连‘夸张’、‘移就’等，往往也是‘比’或者包含有‘比’的因素；各种成语，许多都是‘比’的运用。大量的、多方面的‘比’，反映汉民族文化传统的一个侧面”). (Guan, 2012, p. 61)

For example,

Example 1: 暮春三月，江南草长，杂花生树，群莺乱飞。远处青山如黛，薄雾轻拢，似一幅未干的水墨画。近处溪水潺湲，清澈见底，几尾红鲤悠然游弋，偶有花瓣飘落，随波逐流。岸边杨柳依依，嫩绿的枝条垂入水中，随风轻摆，惊起一圈圈涟漪。

This type of rhetoric-heavy phrasing is ubiquitous in Chinese promotional texts and literary works, and Chinese readers see nothing unusual about it. However, if translated literally, Anglophone readers would find these “exhaustively descriptive” passages highly jarring. To them, such writing appears not only exaggerated to the point of absurdity and confusing, but even laughable.

Let’s examine how scenery is typically described in English:

Example 2: The valley unfolded in a patchwork of emerald meadows and ancient oaks, their gnarled branches etching shadows against the afternoon sun. A thin mist rose from the river below, softening the edges of the landscape. Somewhere in the distance, a hawk circled silently, its wings barely stirring the still air. The scent of damp earth and wild thyme hung between the hills, carried by a breeze light enough to tremble the grass but leave the heavier oaks unmoved.

Although Example 2 also employs rhetorical devices such as metaphor and personification, the language remains relatively plain overall and adheres to the subject-verb sentence structure preferred in English reading. In the process of translating such texts, rigid adherence to the source structure must be avoided. Just as excessively exaggerated Chinglish appears pretentious and ludicrous to Western readers, mechanically literal and unadorned translations equally fail to satisfy Chinese readers’ aesthetic sensibilities. These phenomena originate from fundamental cognitive divergences between Eastern and Western thought patterns. Consequently, appropriate cultural transposition is imperative during Chinese-English conversion—failure to do so results in compromised readability and ultimately undermines the intended communicative efficacy.

The Divergence Between Spiral Thinking and Linear Thinking

The divergence stems from profound cultural roots. Chinese culture, shaped by the tripartite philosophical traditions of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, has cultivated character traits emphasizing “tranquility”, “introspection”, “enlightenment”, and “forbearance”. Consequently, Chinese discourse prioritizes benevolence, interpersonal harmony, and employs indirect, nuanced spiral communication as the preferred mode of interaction.

In contrast, ancient Western civilizations emerged among Mediterranean island-states engaged in perpetual warfare and territorial disputes. This geopolitical reality forged a straightforward, non-circumlocutory character. Even in reconciliation, Westerners adopt a linear approach—direct and unequivocal—giving rise to their characteristically linear thought patterns.

In communication, Chinese people often use expressions like “可能” (maybe), “大概” (probably), “我猜” (I guess), or “据说……” (it is said that...). These vague terms can make it difficult for low-context communicators to grasp the intended meaning, leading to misunderstandings and creating obstacles in international outreach efforts.

Cross-cultural scholar Zhuang Enping once conducted a study on the phrase “我尽量去做 (I will do my best to do something)” and found that it carries four possible meanings in Chinese communication (Zhuang, 2004, p. 87):

1. “If there are no unexpected obstacles, I’ll try my best” (In other words, I might not actually do it).
2. “A polite refusal” (Indirect rejection to save face—both one’s own and the other party’s).
3. “It depends on the situation” (I may or may not do it).
4. “I will definitely do it” (No matter what happens, I won’t go back on my word).

Therefore, in language conversion—particularly in Chinese-to-English translation—how to uncover the implicit meaning between the lines and minimize cross-cultural communication barriers becomes a major challenge in translation.

Besides, the spiral thinking pattern characteristic of Chinese culture determines that the Chinese language is “inductive”—meaning that in a sentence, the speaker often places the central idea at the end, preceded by polite remarks, introductions, or explanations. In contrast, the linear thinking pattern of Anglo-American culture shapes English as a “deductive” language—where the central idea is stated first, followed by supporting details, explanations, or secondary information.

For example, recently there is a piece of news on BBC as follows:

“The UK government will introduce a new carbon tax policy next month, ministers announced yesterday. The move aims to reduce emissions by 30% by 2030 through financial incentives for green energy and penalties for high-pollution industries, according to a White Paper published alongside the statement”.

While the same news reported by Xinhua News Agency appears in this way,

Example 3. “昨日发布的政策白皮书显示，为鼓励新能源发展并对高污染行业形成约束，英国政府拟通过财政激励与处罚相结合的方式推动2030年前减排30%。唐宁街发言人最终宣布：新碳税政策将于下月正式实施”。

In inductive (spiral, i.e., Chinese) language structures, the key information “英国政府拟通过财政激励与处罚相结合的方式推动2030年前减排30%……新碳税政策将于下月正式实施” is placed at the end, whereas in deductive (linear, i.e., Chinese) language structures, the corresponding part “The UK government will introduce a new carbon tax policy next month, ministers announced yesterday. The move aims to reduce emissions by 30% by 2030...” appears at the beginning.

Mr. Lin Yutang once vividly summarized the “Four Stages of Requesting Favors” among Chinese people:

The first stage is “Meteorology”—exchanging pleasantries and commenting on the weather upon meeting; the second stage is “History”—reminiscing about the past and revisiting old ties; the third stage is “Political Science”—discussing current affairs and venting sentiments; and only in the fourth stage does the conversation circle back to the main point—“Economics”—humbly entrusting a small favor, pleading for assistance, and promising lifelong gratitude. (Huang & Qin,

2009, p. 25)

This passage can be considered the best illustration of the spiral thinking characteristic of Chinese people.

Conclusions

In summary, the primary differences between Chinese and Western cognitive patterns lie in the contrast between holistic and individualistic thinking, logical and correlative reasoning, as well as spiral and linear thinking patterns. These distinctions manifest linguistically in variations, such as the ordering of “broad concepts” vs. “specific concepts”, differences in the scope of lexical definitions, and broader stylistic tendencies: Chinese emphasizes parataxis and inductive reasoning, often employing ornate language, while English prioritizes hypotaxis and deductive reasoning, favoring plain and straightforward expression.

In international communication translation, we must not only conduct meticulous comparative studies of Chinese and English thinking patterns and recognize how different cognitive difference influence language, but also actively cultivate logical reasoning skills and deepen our mastery of English. Only by effectively overcoming the interference caused by these cognitive differences during translation can we produce versions that are more natural, accurate, and culturally resonant.

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