

A Study on the Translation of Cross-Cultural Narrative Reconstruction from the Perspective of Cultural Script Theory: The Case of Spring Festival and Mid-Autumn Festival Rituals

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Abstract: This study employs the Cultural Script Theory as its framework, focusing on the translation of ritual language associated with two major traditional festivals: the Spring Festival and the Mid-Autumn Festival. By analyzing the connotative features of cultural scripts and their operational mechanisms within festival rituals, this research reveals the limitations inherent in traditional translation models regarding the transmission of cultural symbols. Integrating specific case studies, the study proposes an optimized translation approach based on the reconstruction of cultural scripts. This approach encompasses several dimensions, including the deconstruction of semantic metalanguage, compensation for cultural context, and adjustments in narrative strategies, aiming to achieve effective cross-cultural communication of festival culture. The findings indicate that Cultural Script Theory provides a novel theoretical perspective for the translation of festival rituals. By dynamically balancing cultural authenticity with audience receptiveness, it can significantly enhance translation quality and the efficacy of cultural dissemination.

Keywords: Cultural Script Theory; festival rituals; translation optimization; cross-cultural narrative; Spring Festival; Mid-Autumn Festival

Introduction

In the context of globalization, cultural communication has emerged as a core domain in the competition for national soft power. As vital carriers of Chinese culture, the effectiveness of the international dissemination of traditional Chinese festivals directly impacts the construction of cultural identity. However, current translations of festival-related texts commonly suffer from issues such as the distortion of cultural symbols, the stripping away of context, and narrative discontinuity, leading to a significant "cultural discount" phenomenon. For instance, the Spring Festival custom of "贴春联" is often literally translated as "paste couplets," failing to convey its cultural essence of "warding off evil and inviting good fortune." Similarly, the Mid-Autumn Festival's "赏月" is translated as "admire the moon," neglecting the emotional metaphor of "family reunion." These translational dilemmas expose the limitations of traditional translation models in handling culture-specific items.

Cultural Script Theory offers a new pathway to address this issue. Proposed by Polish semanticist Anna Wierzbicka, this theory advocates for the deconstruction of cultural conventions through Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM), using concise and neutral language to describe behavioral patterns and value systems across different cultures. This study takes the Spring Festival and the Mid-Autumn Festival as examples, employing Cultural Script Theory to reconstruct the translation framework for festival rituals and explore effective strategies for cross-cultural narrative.

1. The Core Connotation and Applicability of Cultural Script Theory

1.1 Theoretical Construction of Cultural Script Theory

Wierzbicka defines cultural scripts as "discursive conventions that are widely recognized within a specific culture and reflected in its language," their essence being "the external manifestation of an internal system of cultural rules." This theory is based on three fundamental assumptions:

Cultural Differentiation: Different cultures manifest hierarchical value differences through unique patterns of speech acts;

Semantic Universality: There exists a set of cross-linguistic "semantic primes" (such as "I," "want," "do," "because," etc.) that can construct a universal framework for cultural analysis;

De-ethnocentrism: The use of neutral metalanguage avoids cultural bias and ensures descriptive objectivity.

For example, the Western "individualism" cultural script can be decomposed as: "X wants to do something by oneself; X thinks others should not prevent X; X does this because X wants to do it" (Wierzbicka, 1997). This deconstructive approach provides an operational analytical tool for cross-cultural comparison.

1.2 Script Adaptability in Festival Ritual Translation

Festival rituals represent a concentrated embodiment of cultural scripts, with their language exhibiting three key characteristics:

Symbolism: Ritual discourse conveys profound cultural meanings through metaphor and symbolism (e.g., the color "red" in the Spring Festival symbolizes good fortune);

Formulism: Ritual procedures follow fixed patterns (e.g., the established steps of "moon worship" during the Mid-Autumn Festival);

Context-Dependency: The meaning of rituals is highly reliant on cultural context (e.g., the Qingming Festival's "tomb-sweeping" lacks a corresponding ritual in Western cultures).

Traditional translation models often overlook these characteristics, resulting in the "rootless" dissemination of cultural symbols. Cultural Script Theory, by deconstructing the semantic structure and cultural logic of ritual language, can provide an "actionable semantic framework" for translation, enabling the accurate transmission of cultural connotations.

2. Cultural Script Deconstruction of Spring Festival and Mid-Autumn Festival Ritual Language

2.1 Spring Festival Rituals: The Composite Script of Warding off Evil, Praying for Blessings, and Family Reunion

The language of Spring Festival rituals revolves around three core scripts: "warding off evil, praying for blessings, and family reunion."

2.1.1 The Evil-Warding Script

This script employs a symbolic system featuring "the color red," "firecrackers," and "door gods." It constructs a narrative of "evil retreating" through actions such as "pasting red couplets on doors" and "setting off firecrackers." For example, the complete cultural script of "spring couplets" can be deconstructed as follows:

Semantic Primes: write, words, red, door, protect, bad things

Script Reconstruction: "People write words in red and paste them on doors because they believe the color red can protect them from bad things."

2.1.2 The Blessing-Invoking Script

This script utilizes vehicles such as the "New Year's Eve dinner," "red envelopes (lucky money)," and "ancestor worship" to convey the expectation of "continued fortune and prosperity" through actions like "eating fish" (symbolizing "surplus year after year") and "giving red envelopes." For example, the script of "red envelopes (lucky money)" can be deconstructed as follows:

Semantic Primes: money, red, envelope, give, child, safe, bad spirits

Script Reconstruction: "People put money into red envelopes and give them to children because they believe the color red protects children from bad spirits, and the money can ensure the children's safety."

2.1.3 The Reunion Script

Centered around "staying up late on New Year's Eve" and "paying New Year visits," this script reinforces family identity through actions such as "family reunion" and "exchanging greetings." For example, the script of "staying up late on New Year's Eve" can be deconstructed as follows:

Semantic Primes: night, stay together, family, not want, sleep, because, hope, good things

Script Reconstruction: "On New Year's Eve, family members stay together and refrain from sleeping because they hope good things will happen in the coming new year."

2.2 Mid-Autumn Festival Rituals: The Dual Scripts of Moon Worship and Family Reunion

The language of Mid-Autumn Festival rituals revolves around two core scripts: "moon worship" and "family reunion."

2.2.1 The Moon Worship Script

Using rituals such as "moon worship" and "moon appreciation" as vehicles, this script constructs a narrative of "the moon deity bestowing blessings" through actions like "offering mooncakes" and "reciting poems." For example, the script of "moon worship" can be deconstructed as follows:

Semantic Primes: moon, worship, hope, good things, happen, because, people believe, moon can influence

Script Reconstruction: "People worship the moon because they hope good things will happen, as they believe the moon can influence people's lives."

2.2.2 The Family Reunion Script

Centered on "sharing mooncakes" and "sharing stories," this script strengthens familial bonds through activities such as "cutting mooncakes" and "sitting together to converse." For example, the script of "mooncakes" can be deconstructed as follows:

Semantic Primes: round, shape, food, family, eat, together, because, round symbolizes, reunion

Script Reconstruction: "Mooncakes are round-shaped food that family members eat together because the round shape symbolizes reunion."

3. Analysis of the Limitations of Traditional Translation Models

3.1 Semantic Distortion: The "Hollowing Out" of Cultural Symbols

Traditional translation often employs literal or free translation methods, resulting in cultural symbols being stripped of their original context. For example:

The Spring Festival's "福字" is translated as "Fu character," failing to convey the homophonic metaphor of "inverted Fu character" (福倒了, implying "good fortune has arrived");

The Mid-Autumn Festival's "玉兔" is translated as "Jade Rabbit," neglecting its symbolic significance as a divine messenger in the Moon Palace.

3.2 Context Stripping: The "Fragmentation" of Ritual Procedures

Festival rituals are highly context-dependent, yet traditional translation often overlooks the integrity of their procedures. For instance:

The Spring Festival's "祭祖" is merely translated as "ancestor worship," failing to explain specific actions such as "burning incense" and "offering sacrifices";

The Mid-Autumn Festival's "拜月" is simplified as "moon worship," omitting cultural details like "arranging an offering table" and the "kneeling and bowing" ceremony.

3.3 Narrative Discontinuity: The "Diminishing Effect" on Emotional Resonance

The core of festival language lies in emotional conveyance, yet traditional translation often weakens

emotional tension due to cultural differences. For example:

The Spring Festival greeting "恭喜发财" is literally translated as "Congratulations on becoming rich," which appears overly utilitarian and loses the sincerity of the blessing;

The Mid-Autumn Festival verse "但愿人长久" is rendered as "I hope people live long," failing to convey the poetic sentiment of "longing that transcends time and space."

4. Translation Optimization Strategies Based on Cultural Script Reconstruction

4.1 Semantic Metalanguage Deconstruction: The Translation Path from "Literal" to "Cultural"

This approach employs the NSM framework to deconstruct the cultural connotations of festival terminology, using "semantic primes" to reconstruct the translation. For example:

"Spring couplets" are translated as "red protective words on doors," conveying the evil-warding function through the term "protective";

"Mooncakes" are translated as "round family-reunion food," reinforcing the imagery of reunion through the phrase "family-reunion."

4.2 Cultural Context Compensation: Narrative Integration from "Isolated" to "Situated"

This approach supplements cultural background through amplification or annotations to construct a complete ritual narrative. For example:

"Ancestor worship" can be translated as "the ancestor worship ceremony: burning incense and offering sacrifices to honor ancestors," which elaborates on the specific actions;

"Moon worship" can be rendered as "the moon worship ritual: kneeling before an offering table to pray for blessings," clarifying the purpose of the ritual.

4.3 Narrative Strategy Adjustment: Emotional Adaptation from 'Literal Translation' to 'Adaptive Translation'

This approach adjusts narrative methods according to the audience's cultural background to enhance emotional resonance. For example, "恭喜发财" can be translated as "Wishing you prosperity and good fortune," which softens the utilitarian connotation and strengthens the sentiment of blessing. Similarly, "但愿人长久" can be rendered as "May our love endure across time and space," where replacing "people" with "love" aligns more closely with Western conventions of emotional expression.

4.4 Dynamic Balancing Strategy: Coordinating Cultural Authenticity and Audience Receptiveness

While preserving the core cultural value, a dynamic balancing model of "cultural retention + functional adaptation" is employed. For example:

The term "red envelope" retains the visual symbol of "red envelope," while supplementing it with a functional explanation: "a gift of money in a red envelope for good luck";

The figure "Chang'e" is translated as "Chang'e, the Moon Goddess," preserving the mythological archetype while clarifying the cultural identity.

5. Case Validation: Translation Practice for the Spring Festival and Mid-Autumn Festival

5.1 Spring Festival Case: Translation Optimization of "New Year's Eve Dinner"

The traditional translation, "New Year's Eve dinner," merely conveys temporal information and lacks cultural connotation.

The script-reconstructed translation, "a family reunion feast with symbolic dishes for good fortune," supplements cultural symbols such as "fish (symbolizing surplus year after year)" and "dumplings (symbolizing the transition between years)" through the phrase "symbolic dishes."

5.2 Mid-Autumn Festival Case: Translation Optimization of "Moon Appreciation"

The traditional translation, "admire the moon," is overly literary and lacks a sense of ritual.

The script-reconstructed translation, "the moon-gazing ritual to celebrate family unity," incorporates "ritual" and "family unity" to reinforce its cultural function.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Cultural Script Theory provides a systematic analytical framework for the translation of festival rituals. Through strategies such as semantic deconstruction, contextual compensation, and narrative adaptation, the efficacy of cultural transmission in translation can be significantly enhanced. Future research may expand in the following directions:

Multimodal translation: developing an integrated translation system by incorporating visual symbols (e.g., festival decorations) and auditory symbols (e.g., ritual music);

Technology-enabled approaches: utilizing AI technology to achieve automatic identification and dynamic adaptation of cultural scripts;

Audience research: employing quantitative methods such as eye-tracking and EEG experiments to assess translation effectiveness and optimize narrative strategies.

Cultural Script Theory not only offers a new paradigm for translation studies but also provides an "actionable semantic tool" for the international dissemination of Chinese culture. Through the precise reconstruction of cross-cultural narratives, Chinese festivals can evolve from "cultural symbols" to "cultural experiences," contributing Chinese wisdom to global cultural diversity.

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