



# A Study of E-C Translation of International Brand Names from the Perspective of Linguistic Relativity

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**Abstract**— Nowadays, more and more brands are eager to open overseas markets with the development of economic globalization and the increase of international trade. As the important marketing means and cultural carrier, an appropriate translation of brand name plays an important role in the transmission of brand concept and the expansion of sales. Brand name translation should not only try to convey the accurate information and cultural connotation of the brand itself but also fully consider the cultural context and consumer psychology of the target country, to achieve the effect of unity of form and spirit. From the perspective of “linguistic relativity” by Benjamin Lee Whorf, this paper selects several famous brand names as examples and analyzes the factors of information, language, aesthetics and cultural taboos that influence brand name translation. Some translation methods for brand name are also provided, including transliteration, literal translation, free translation, the combination of sound and meaning, creative translation, and zero translation.

**Keywords**— E-C translation, international brand names, Linguistic Relativity, translation methods.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the 1950s, American anthropologist and linguist Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf devoted themselves to a study of the close relationship between language and thinking. After their deaths, some linguists summarized their related theories as a proposition—the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. As the most important point in the hypothesis, “linguistic relativity” has been deeply studied by scholars in linguistics, cross-cultural studies, translation studies, and other fields. It was found by Whorf that “the background linguistic system of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the

individual’s mental activity” (Whorf, 1956: 212).

The brand name is used to distinguish an operator’s commodities or services from other operators’ commodities or services, reflecting corporate culture, development history, product information and other contents. In addition, aesthetic function and marketing function also need to be considered. Nowadays, with the increase of international trade and fierce market competition, brand name shoulders the multiple tasks of expanding the consumer market, establishing the brand image, conveying the brand concept, and stimulating the desire to buy. Brand name translation in import and export trade becomes an important factor affecting whether a brand can seize the market opportunity.

Translators are not only required to master two languages but also need to understand the deep-thinking structure and cultural connotation so that the translated names can influence the psychology and thinking of consumers to enhance brand awareness and expand sales.

This paper selects some international brand names as examples to analyze the factors that need to be considered in brand name translation and summarize the translation methods from the perspective of “linguistic relativity” by Benjamin Lee Whorf.

## II. “LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY” BY BENJAMIN LEE WHORF

### 2.1 Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis and “Linguistic Relativity”

“Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis” has been discussed, questioned, and even misinterpreted by many scholars for decades since it was proposed by Harry Hoijer at a conference in 1954 (Koerner, 2000: 2). Gao Yihong (2000), Ji Yuhua & Xu Qichao (2003), Pan Wenguo & Tan Huimin (2005) and other scholars held that the hypothesis included two basic viewpoints. One is linguistic determinism (strong hypothesis)— language determines thinking. The other is linguistic relativity (weak hypothesis)— language affects thinking. They criticized the strong hypothesis for overemphasizing the decisive role of language in thinking mode and culture. However, Whorf himself never claimed that language played the decisive role in thinking. According to Whorf (1956: 239), language is only the surface decoration of deeper processes of consciousness, which are necessary before any communication, signaling, or symbolism can occur. Communication can be achieved without the aid of language or symbols, which showed that he also opposed linguistic determinism.

However, the “linguistic relativity” proposed by Wolff is both scientific and innovative. Whorf lived in America at the time of great progress in modern physics and was gifted in linguistics and physics (Zhu & Wang, 2021). In 1940, inspired by Einstein’s relativity, Whorf proposed “a new principle of relativity”— linguistic relativity, which holds that “all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated” (1956: 214). Later, Whorf (1956: 221) further elaborated on this principle, arguing that people who speak different

languages were not equal as observers, and hence different world views were bound to arise.

The real value of “linguistic relativity” lies in revealing the bidirectional connection between language and thinking, thus breaking the stereotype that language belongs to thinking. This dynamic connection with thinking reveals the essence of human language, and also constitutes the prerequisite for language to influence national spirit and cause cultural differences.

### 2.2 “Linguistic Relativity” and Translation

Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis is also instructive to the development of translation studies. For example, the hypothesis is one of the theoretical sources of the hermeneutics proposed by George Steiner, a famous scholar in the field of western comparative literature and translation studies. It was by exploring the connotation of hermeneutic translation theory from the perspective of Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis that George Steiner gradually enriched and consolidated his theoretical construction (Duan, 2020). Language influences thinking and carries culture. Translation is not only the transformation of different languages but also the integration and dissemination of different thinking and culture. Therefore, it is very important to scientifically understand and deal with the relationship between language, thinking and culture in translation activities. The famous translation theorist Eugene Nida has pointed out that familiarity with two cultures is even more important than mastering two languages for truly successful translation because words only have meaning in the cultural context (1993: 10).

Brand name translation is undoubtedly one of the decisive factors affecting product awareness and sales when products enter overseas markets for consumers with language and cultural differences. Countries differ in language, geographical location, economic level, social form and other aspects, resulting in people’s different ways of thinking, psychology, values, consumption concept, aesthetic taste, etc. These differences also affect language. Therefore, translators should correctly understand the relationship between language, thinking and culture to lay the foundation for brand name translation.

### III. ELEMENTS OF BRAND NAME TRANSLATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF “LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY”

From the perspective of “linguistic relativity”, the cultural differences of countries and nations can be reflected through language. In the brand name translation, translators need to be familiar with two languages and cultures and increase their knowledge. Therefore, several elements need to be fully considered and analyzed by translators.

#### 3.1 Information

The basic function of the brand name is to show the information of category, specification, use, effect, etc. Therefore, the translator can combine the words with the products to offer a clear impression to consumers. After entering the Chinese market, “Comfort”, a well-known clothing care brand, was translated as “金纺”, which not only has a similar pronunciation but also indicates the product category and performance through the word “纺 (textile)”. The famous hair care brand “Clear”, is known in Chinese as “清扬”, which reminds people of the clean, hair-flying effect after using the shampoo. “Polaroid” is an international camera brand with fast imaging as its main selling point. It has many translated names such as “宝丽来”, “拍立得”. Among them, “拍立得” has gained popularity because it fully embodies the performance and effect of the product— people can get the photo immediately after pressing the shutter. This translated name has been widely accepted and even extended to the category name of the product.

#### 3.2 Language

The translated brand name should be as concise and vivid as possible to attract consumers’ attention quickly. Linguistic relativity holds that groups who speak different languages form different thoughts and ideas. Foreign brands prefer to directly choose the name or surname of the brand founder, which symbolizes the respect for family and commitment to consumers in their view. However, complicated transliterations affect Chinese consumers’ first impression of the products. For example, “Hewlett-Packard (HP)”, a world-renowned brand for its printers, computers, and other products, was named after two founders— William Redington Hewlett and David Packard. It was transliterated as “休利特·帕卡德” when it first came to

China. Chinese people usually prefer simple names with two to three characters. Foreign names with difficult pronounce are not easy to recognize for Chinese consumers. The revised translated name “惠普” corresponding to “HP” in *Pinyin* is not only easy to remember but also conveys the positive meaning that the product can benefit the general public. “Volkswagen”, an internationally renowned German automobile brand, was transliterated as “伏克斯瓦根” for the first time. It was later changed to “大众” through free translation because “Volk” means “people” and “Wagen” means “car” in German, which embodies the founder’s desire to make affordable and convenient cars for everyone.

#### 3.3 Aesthetics

Whorf believed that the relationships between words produced semantic effects, which depended on language in the process of thought (1956: 67). For example, when Chinese consumers see the Chinese character “福”, they will associate with words such as “幸福(happiness)” and “福气(lucky)”, and the positive meaning of words will stimulate consumption. When translating the brand names, translators should know the aesthetic tastes and preferences of target language consumers in advance. Chinese people prefer the names with auspicious characters like “福”, “乐”, “利”, “康”, such as “Carrefour” (“家乐福”), “Unilever” (“联合利华”) and so on. In addition, different sort of commodities can use different types of words to cater to consumer psychology. In the pharmaceutical and health care industry, Chinese characters like “健”, “康”, “安”, “壮” are used to imply good health and robust physique, such as “Amway” (“安利”) and “Diflucan” (“大扶康”). In the cosmetics industry, “诗”, “黛”, “美”, “蔻”, “芳”, “姿” and other characters are commonly used in translated brand names to show the expectation and pursuit of elegance and beauty, such as “Clarins” (“娇韵诗”), “Maybelline” (“美宝莲”), “Estée Lauder” (“雅诗兰黛”), “Lancôme” (“兰蔻”) and “Avon” (“雅芳”). The chocolate brand “Dove” is translated as “德芙”, whose pronunciation is similar to “得福” in Chinese, implying that consumers will feel happy when eating the chocolate. However, the washing and care brand “Dove” is translated as “多芬” to make consumers have a good association with the sweet smell and effect of the product. All these examples show that the influence of language on thinking will unconsciously make us have positive association to the translated names and play a

promoting effect.

### 3.4 Cultural Taboos

“Language relativity” holds that there are differences among language systems, and language has “the shaping influence” on culture to some extent (Whorf, 1956:147). Different languages are the reflection of the “personalities” of different nationalities. Consumers in different countries have different associations with words such as numbers, animals, and colors, which are common in brand names. Therefore, translators need to pay attention to the choice of words to avoid the violation of cultural taboos. For example, as an auspicious animal in Chinese culture, dragon is often used in Chinese brand names, while in the West, dragon is mostly associated with evil and fierce descriptions. Therefore, special attention should be paid to the translation of export products including “龙”. Another example is the number. Chinese people do not like the number “4” because the Chinese character “四” has a similar pronunciation with “死 (death)”. However, under the influence of Christian culture, the number “13” become taboo in the West because they hate Judas, the 13th disciple who betrayed Jesus.

The change of the Chinese translation name of “Coco-Cola” also reflects the influence of language on thinking. When Coco-Cola first entered the Chinese market, it was translated as “蝌蚪啃蜡 (tadpole eating wax)”, which was farfetched and complicated. The image of “tadpole” is irrelevant to food, and the word “啃蜡” reminds people of a Chinese idiom “味同嚼蜡 (tasteless like chewing a wax candle)”, which refers to the food with terrible food. Later, the translation name “可口可乐” was collected. Based on keeping consistent with the English pronunciation, this name is simple and easy to remember with containing the implication of tasty and happiness, which is a classic successful case of the Chinese translation of brand names.

## IV. E-C TRANSLATION OF INTERNATIONAL BRAND NAMES

There are three main naming forms for international brands. The first is to directly use the surname or first name of the brand founder. The second is to choose words or phrases related to commodities, and the third is to invent new words or phrases that do not exist in the dictionary. For the first two naming forms, transliteration and the combination of sound and meaning are usually adopted. For

the third naming form, the translation method is more flexible, literal translation, free translation, the combination of sound and meaning, zero translation, and creative translation can be used.

### 4.1 Transliteration

Transliteration is one of the most common methods in brand name translation, which refers to the direct transition of brand name into the target language according to its pronunciation in the source language. This method is mainly used in brand names composed of people’s names or invented words. It can not only retain the original pronunciation and create an exotic atmosphere but also “realize the unity of the same brand in the domestic and international markets” (Zang, 2018: 92), which is conducive to enhancing the international popularity. In the process of transliteration of foreign brand names, translators should transfer the pronunciation and pay attention to the selection of appropriate Chinese characters with positive meanings. For example, the well-known automobile brand “Ford” (“福特”) was named after the surname of its founder, Henry Ford. “福” was chosen in translation, which is one of the Chinese people’s favorite characters. The famous hair care brand “Pantene” (“潘婷”) is an inventing word without practical meaning. The common Chinese surname “潘” and the common female name “婷” with beautiful and elegant were combined so that the brand translation is like a name of a beautiful Chinese girl, which immediately gives consumers the sense of kindness with local characteristics. The Chinese translation of “Revlon” (“露华浓”), an American cosmetics brand, not only matches the pronunciation of the original word but also is borrowed from the poem of the famous Tang Dynasty poet Li Bai—“云想衣裳花想容, 春风拂槛露华浓”, which describes the beauty and grace of Yang Yuhuan. While the translation is poetic, it also creates expectations about the beauty effect of cosmetics.

### 4.2 Literal Translation

Literal translation refers to finding the corresponding words in the target language directly according to the meaning of the brand name in the source language, which can maintain the original meaning to the greatest extent. Translators can use literal translation when translating the brand names with similar meanings in the target language. For example, the automobile brand “Crown” is translated

directly into “皇冠”, which reflects the luxury and comfort of the car. The popular social networking site “Facebook” was literally translated as “脸书”, showing its main function of sharing photos and texts.

#### 4.3 Free Translation

Translators can use free translation when translating some brand names related to the products themselves but not suitable for literal translation. Through appropriate adjustment and innovation, the translated brand name not only retains the meaning of part of the words themselves but also contains cultural connotations corresponding to the brand concept, function, and effect. The Chinese translation of the American cosmetics brand “Origins” is “悦木之源”, reflecting the meaning of “源(origin)” and adding some characters to including “悦” that implies pleasure, “木” that conveys the brand concept of pure natural, and “之” that commonly used in ancient Chinese, to form a four-character word Chinese people prefer. “变形金刚” is the Chinese translation of “Transformers”, a global brand of games and toys. With the meaning of “变形 (changing the shape)”, the vivid and childlike name of “变形金刚” can greatly stimulate the interest of children and occupy the market rapidly.

#### 4.4 The Combination of Sound and Meaning

The Combination of Sound and Meaning refers to the use of free translation based on transliteration, so that the translated name is not only close to the original pronunciation, but also reflects the specific effects and characteristics of the product. Translators using this method are usually required to have a high level of translation and innovative spirit. For example, Mercedes-Benz, an international famous automobile brand, was simply transliterated as “本茨” at the beginning, and then changed to “奔驰”. The new name fits the brand positioning better with the meaning of high speed and free. Another famous automobile brand BMW used to be translated as “巴依尔” in German transliteration but later changed to “宝马” in response to the Pinyin of “B” and “M”. “宝马” means the good mount in Chinese and reminds consumers of “香车宝马” in ancient Chinese poetry. The Chinese translation of “Pampers”, a famous baby care brand, is “帮宝适”. The word “pamper” means “meticulous care and indulgence” in the dictionary. The combination of transliteration and free translation conveys the concept of meticulous care for the

baby to make them feel comfortable and secure. Microsoft’s search engine, Bing, translates as “必应”, which is both phonetically consistent and shows that the search engine is responsive to demand. The Chinese name of “Safeguard” is “舒肤佳”, which is similar to the English pronunciation and shows that the product can make the skin more comfortable. Other examples include “Johnson’s” (“强生”), “Subway” (“赛百味”), “Ikea” (宜家), “Simmons” (席梦思), to name but a few.

#### 4.5 Creative Translation

The brand name is a kind of creative product. Creative translation is often used in brand name translation to make beautiful images as much as possible. The translated name is usually different in pronunciation and meaning from the original brand name, but it is intended to express the brand concept and characteristics. “Smart” is the car brand of a creative collaboration between Mercedes and Swatch. The letter “S” stands for “Swatch”, “M” for “Mercedes”. Its Chinese name is “精灵” because of its small size and agility. Another well-known car company, JEEP, once promoted a car called “Cherokee”. “Cherokee” is the name of a tribe of North American Indians known for their bravery and strength. The car was named with this word, which means that the car has good performance. After entering the Chinese market, it was translated as “自由光” through creative translation, which means the speed change of the car is fast enough to chase freedom.

The cosmetics brand Shiseido is translated as “资生堂” in Chinese, inspired by “至哉坤元, 万物资生” in *The Book of Changes*. The meaning of “资生” is to generate new life and create new value. The brand also adds a Chinese character “堂” at the end of the name, imitating some old Chinese brands as “同仁堂”, “九芝堂” to win the trust of consumers.

#### 4.6 Zero Translation

According to linguistic relativity, there are no two languages that are so similar that people can use them to identify the same social reality. The heterogeneity and the unique mode of expression are inherent features of language, the translation goal should be “reserving differences” rather than “seeking similarities”. Therefore, the zero-translation method has become a trend in brand name translation these years. For example, European fashion brands such as H&M, C&A and ZARA all take fashion and simplicity as their



sales concepts. After entering the Chinese market, the brands directly retain their English names instead of translating them into Chinese characters, which is impressed the consumers.

## V. CONCLUSION

As a dynamic process, translation is closely related to social development and people's value orientation. "Linguistic relativity" holds that language influences and even shapes thought. The translation of brand name affects consumers' association with the product and further affects the sales. Therefore, translators are not only required to understand the linguistic and cultural similarities and differences, but also try to cater to the preferences of consumers and avoid taboos, so as to reduce the negative impact caused by cultural mistranslations. Multiple translation methods can be used in the process of brand name translation to conform to the aesthetic taste of Chinese people and lay a foundation for the expansion of product sales and the transmission of concept.

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