



## On the Equivalence of Translation – A Contextual Approach

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### Abstract

In the process of translation, it is crucial for the translator to achieve the goal of equivalence between the source-language text (ST) and the target-language text (TT). This paper analyzes this process from the perspective of context with the illustration of specific examples and tries to seek an effective method for further academic research in this field.

**Key words:** Equivalence; Translation; Text; Context; Culture

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### INTRODUCTION

#### A. Literature Review

Translation is a useful test case for examining the whole issue of the role of language in social life. In creating a new act of communication out of previously existing one, translators are inevitably acting under the pressure of their own social conditioning while at the same time trying to assist in the negotiation of meaning between the producer of the source-language text (ST) and the reader of the target-language text (TT). (Hatim & Mason 200, p.1) From the above assertion, it can be concluded that the process of translation is closely associated with the

rational and scientific shift between the source-language text (ST) and the target-language text (TT), which is also a key procedure for achieving the equivalence between ST and TT.

Nida (2001, p.86) states that translating means communicating, and this process depends on what is received by persons hearing or reading a translation. In Dubois's (Bell, 2001, p.5) opinion, translation is the expression in another language (or target language) of what has been expressed in another, source language, preserving semantic and stylistic equivalences. While to Meetham and Hudson (1972, p.713), translation is the replacement of a representation of a text in one language by a representation of an equivalent text in a second language. Hatim & Mason takes translating as a communicative process which takes place within a social context. Here they emphasize the importance of context in the translating process. The basic evaluating criterion of translation can be derived from these definitions of translation and translating. It depends on the receptor's understanding of the translated version. It is essential that functional equivalence be stated primarily in terms of a comparison of the way in which the original receptors understood and appreciated the text and the way in which receptors of the translated text understand and appreciate the translated text. (Nida, 2001, p.86) Thus, Nida (2001, p.87) gives two definitions of the term "functional equivalence" of translation. A minimal, realistic definition of functional equivalence can be stated as "the readers of a translated text should be able to comprehend it to the point that they can conceive how the original readers of the text must have understood and appreciated it." A maximal, ideal definition can be stated as "the readers of a translated text should be able to understand and appreciate it in essentially the same manner as the original readers did." Thus it can be concluded that the translated version can only be functionally equivalent to the ST. It is of great importance for the translator to analyze the ST in its own cultural circumstance and contextual situation and seek an

appropriate translating strategy.

## **B. The Current Study**

The current study will concentrate on the function of recognizing and analyzing the text and context in translating process and the specific steps in this process. The research will be carried out by a functional approach as well as discourse analysis. Specific samples of English-Chinese translation, Chinese-English translation and French-English translation will be presented to demonstrate the basic ideas of this paper, which aims to establish a translating model and seek an effective method for further academic research in this field.

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## **1. TEXT AND CONTEXT IN THE TRANSLATING PROCESS**

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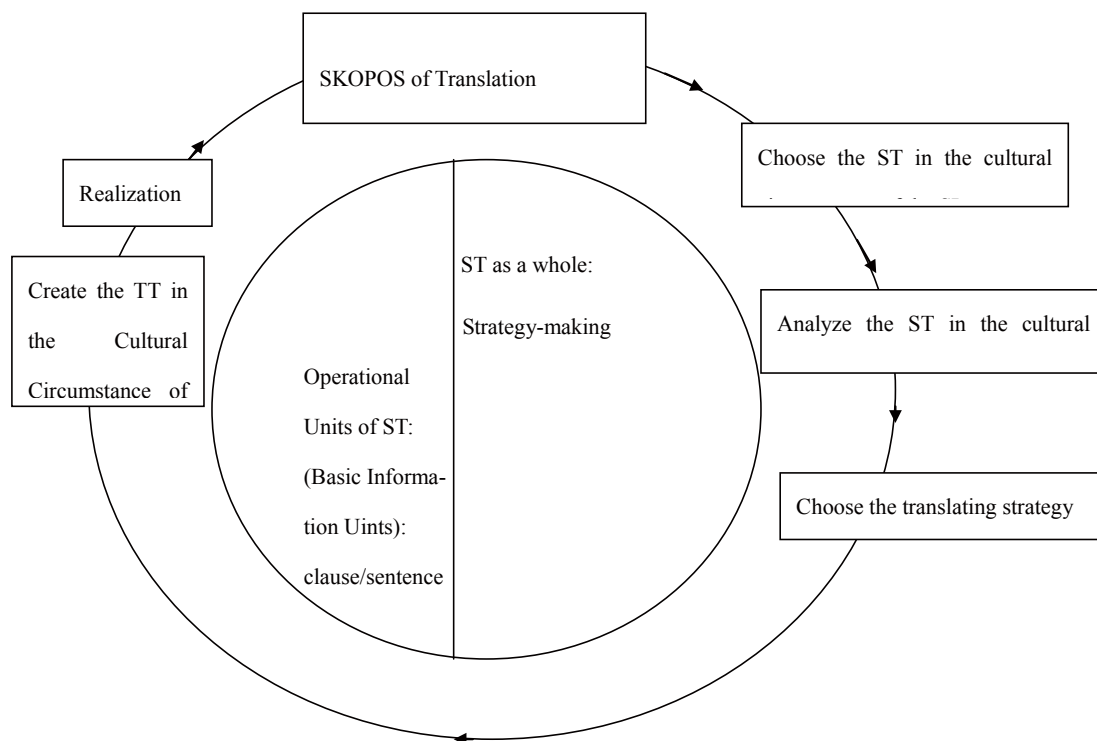
In recent years much emphasis is put on the role of text and context in the process of translating. The next two sections will respectively discuss the function of text and context in translating process.

### **1.1 Text in Translating Process**

In the process of translation, the translator will first encounter the source-language text (ST). Many linguists give various definitions of the term 'text'. Brown and Yule (2000, p.6) use the word 'text' as a technical term, to refer to the verbal record of a communicative act. In Barthes's (Bassnett & Lefevere, 2001, p.27) opinion, the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture... (the author's) only power is to mix writings, to encounter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them... These two definitions of 'text' are derived from the perspective of pragmatics. A more scientific and strict definition of this term is still needed. Text is used in linguistics to refer to any passage, spoken or written, of whatever length, that does form a unified whole. (Halliday & Hason, 1989, p.10) According to Bell (2001, p.149), text is a structured sequence of linguistic expressions forming a unitary whole. These two definitions are made from the functional perspective. A text is a unit of language in use. It is not a grammatical unit, like a clause or a sentence; and it is not defined by its size. A text is best regarded as a semantic unit: a unit not of form but of meaning. Thus it is related to a clause or sentence not by size but by realization, the coding of one symbolic system in another. A text does not consist of sentences; it is realized by, or encoded in, sentences. (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, pp.1-2) Language is used for the purpose of communication. This process can only be taken place in a given cultural and social circumstance. Due to the differences of various cultures, texts vary from one culture to another one. Therefore, the functional perspective is more appropriate for the translation research. In analyzing the specific text, the translator has to take other closely relevant factors into consideration. Among the relevant factors, context is the most important one.

## **1.2 Context in Translating Process**

According to Malinowski (Hu, 2001, p.402), the meaning of an utterance does not come from the ideas of the words comprising it but from its relation to the situational context in which the utterance occurs. Therefore, in order to fully comprehend a text, it's absolutely necessary for the audience or reader to get familiar with the corresponding context. Neufeldt & Guralnik (1994, p.301) define the term 'context' as 'the parts of a sentence, paragraph, discourse, etc, immediately next to or surrounding a specified word or passage and determining its exact meaning.' Context is defined as 'that which occurs before and /or after a word, a phrase or even a longer utterance or a text. The context often helps in understanding the particular meaning of the word, phrase, etc.' (Richards, 1992, p.102) By comparing the two definitions of context, it can be seen that the latter is more extensive and scientific. Actually there are many kinds of context. Among them, context of situation and context of culture are the most important factors for a translator. Malinowski (Hu, 2001, p.402) believes that the meaning of spoken utterances could always be determined by the context of situation. The term 'context of situation' is seen as 'the environment of any particular selection that is made from the total set of options accounted for in the context of culture.' (Halliday, 1973, p.71) Thus a general description of these concepts can be formed. In a given cultural circumstance, people speak or write in order to communicate with each other. In this way different kinds of texts are created, e.g. narratives, drama, novel, poetry, dialogues, jokes, laws and so on. Each text is applied in its own circumstance, namely, context of situation. Accordingly the translator's work is to analyze the ST in its own cultural circumstance. The context of situation is a significant reference for him to make a proper translating strategy for the very text, which is the first stage in translating process. The main concern of the translator is the ST in a certain situational context instead of the specific words or sentences because of the fact that the ST in a certain situational context is the strategy-generating part. After obtaining the translating strategy, the translator ought to do the second stage's work, i.e., create the target-language text (TT) in its own cultural circumstance. Meanwhile, the context of situation of the TT should also be taken into consideration. The second stage requires the translator to deal with the basic information units, including words, groups, clauses and sentences. Text acts as the analyzing unit of translation while the clause is the basic transformational unit. (Luo, 1992) Actually the so-called transformational unit is operational unit. The two stages are indispensable in translating process. The latter is conditioned by the former while simultaneously the ultimate aim of translation is realized by the latter. The whole process is explicitly illustrated by Figure 1.



**Figure 1**  
**Translating Process**

Due to the differences from context to context, the translated versions may vary from one to another. As a result it's hard for the translator to get the corresponding version in the target language of the text being translated if he or she does not know the relevant context, which can be further explained by the following two samples.

**1.2.1 Sample I**

If the translator is asked to translate the simple sentence “Fire!” into Chinese, there will be several different translated versions according to the different contexts.

**1.2.1.1 Context I**

An employee is always late. So the manager of the company asks the president how to deal with the employee. The president says, “Fire!” According to this context, it can be translated into “（把他）解雇!”

**1.2.1.2 Context II**

A man in the street sees a building that is catching fire and he shouts, “Fire!” Then the sentence can be translated into “着火了!”

**1.2.1.3 Context III**

On a battlefield, a commander orders his soldiers by saying, “Fire!” Accordingly the sentence should be translated into “开火!”

**1.2.2 Sample II**

Similarly, in Chinese-English translation, the factor of context should also be taken into consideration. The sentence such as “鸡不吃了” may be translated into two different versions according to different contexts.

**1.2.2.1 Context I**

A chicken has eaten enough food and does not need any more. The owner of the chicken says, “鸡不吃了”. Then the sentence may be translated into “The chicken does not eat any more.”

**1.2.2.2 Context II**

A man is having dinner with his family members and he has eaten too much food. He points at the dish made of chicken and says, “鸡不吃了”. According to this situational context, the sentence can be translated into “I don’t want to eat the chicken,” or simply “I don’t want the chicken.”

**1.2.3 Sample III**

In Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale* (*Course in General Linguistics*), there’s a sentence which describes the subject matter of linguistics. The sentence is – La matière de la linguistique est constituée d’abord par toutes les manifestations du langage humain, qu’il s’agisse des peuples sauvages ou des nations civilisées. (Saussure, 1916, p.20) Here are two translated versions.

The subject matter of linguistics comprises all manifestations of human speech, whether that of savages or civilized nations. (Baskin, 1959, p.6)

Linguistics takes for its data in the first instance all manifestations of human language. Primitive peoples and civilized nations. (Harris, 1983, p.6)

Here Baskin translates ‘la matière de la linguistique’, into ‘the subject matter of linguistics’, while Harris translates it into ‘linguistics’. The former uses the

equivalent words of the original words. The latter replace the original group with the word 'linguistics', which is less accurate. But Baskin translates 'langage humain' into 'human speech'. Harris translates it into 'human language'. Thus it can be clearly seen that Baskin's version of the group 'langage humain' is wrong because in this specific context 'langage' refers to 'language' instead of 'speech'. Thirdly, Baskin translates the group 'des peuples sauvages' into 'savages' while Harris translates it into 'primitive peoples'. The word 'savages' expresses the exact meaning of the group 'des peuples sauvages', but it shows a certain bias of racial discrimination. Harris uses the group 'primitive peoples' to avoid the bias of racial discrimination, but it lacks accuracy. It is recommended that when the translator meets such kind of dilemma, he or she has to sacrifice the style to the semantic meaning, which is the primary criterion of equivalence. Sample III shows that both Baskin and Harris make slight mistakes in translating Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* (*Course in General Linguistics*).

These specific samples show the importance of the context in translating process. Malinowski (Hatim & Mason, 2001, p.37) believe that the cultural context to be crucial in the interpretation of the message, taking in a variety of factors ranging from the ritualistic (which assumes great importance in traditional societies), to the most practical aspects of day-to-day existence.

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## 2. CONTEXT OF CULTURE IN THE TRANSLATING PROCESS

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It has become axiomatic to state that there exists a close relationship between language and culture. (Hu, 2001, p.223) Actually culture is closely related to context and plays an influential role in the process of translating. In Bhabha's (Bassnett & André, 2001, p.137) opinion, translation is the performative nature of cultural communication. Differences of cultural value are also important factors in understanding a series of related terms. The meaning of a text may depend in large measure on some completely different text. (Nida, 2001, pp.166-167) In Venuti's (Bassnett & André, 2001, p.137) view, every step in the translating process – from the selection of foreign texts to the implementation of translation strategies to the editing, reviewing and reading of translations – is mediated by the diverse cultural values that circulate in the target language, always in some hierarchical order. These statements all emphasize the importance of cultural context in translating process. In order to achieve the goal of functional equivalence between the ST and TT, the translator should be familiar with the different cultures of the ST and TT and make a well match. But sometimes it is impossible for a translator to meet this requirement due to the variation from culture to culture. This point can be illustrated by the following samples.

### 2.1 Sample I

This is a selected sentence from an essay entitled *Nerds and Geeks in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century College English* (*Book One*) published by Fudan University Press and Higher Education Press in 1999. Here is the sentence, "Children who prefer to read books rather than play football, prefer to build model airplanes rather than idle away their time at parties with their classmates, become social outcasts." In *the Teacher's Book of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century College English* (*Book One*), the translator named Xi Zhaoyan translated this sentence into the corresponding Chinese sentence – "那些宁愿看书而不去踢足球, 宁愿制作飞机模型而不愿在晚上上与同学们一起虚度光阴的孩子, 成了社会的弃儿。" For this sentence the Xi Zhaoyan translates the group "play football" into "踢足球". In fact, the author of the ST is an American people and the ST talks something about the current condition of education in the United States of America. Consequently the ST is created in the American cultural context. In American English, "to play football" means "to play American rugby." So the translated version by Xi Zhaoyan is wrong because it is not in concord with the cultural context of the SL. The more acceptable and equivalent TT may be like this – "那些宁愿看书而不去打橄榄球, 宁愿制作飞机模型而不愿在晚上上与同学们一起虚度光阴的孩子, 成了社会的弃儿。"

### 2.2 Sample II

Here is a sentence which is selected from Sima Qian's *Shi Ji* (*Historical Records*). The original sentence is "乃弃其步军, 与其轻锐倍日兼行逐之." In *A Retrospective of Chinese Literature* (*the Section of Ancient Chinese Essays*) published by the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press and the Chinese Literature Press in 1998, the translator translates this sentence into "Leaving his infantry and taking light cavalry only, he pressed on at twice the pace in hot pursuit." Firstly, the nominal group "轻锐" ought to be carefully analyzed from the specific cultural and historical perspective. This sentence is selected from *The Section of Sunzi & Wuqi of Shi Ji* (*Historical Records*). This historical event took place in ancient China in 342-341 B.C. Thus it can be found that it happened in the Warring States Period (403-221 B.C.) In fact, the formal cavalry troops did not appear until the Han Dynasty. It is impossible that the word "轻锐" refers to cavalry in this context. From the perspective of history, there were only two major armed forces in the Warring States Period of China, i.e., infantry and the chariot troops. The word cavalry is defined as "combat troops mounted originally on horses but now often riding in motorized armored vehicles." (Neufeldt & Guralnik, 1994, p.224) So it is not equivalent to the meaning of "轻锐". As a result, the nominal group should be translated into "the chariot troops."

### 3. CONTEXT ANALYSIS MODEL IN TRANSLATING PROCESS

The above samples show the importance of context in translating process. Therefore the translator should follow a certain context analysis model in translating process. This paper mainly presents two models.

#### 3.1 Model I

Hymes (Brown & Yule, 2000, p.38) sets about specifying the features of context which include the ‘addressor, addressee/audience, topic, setting, channel, code, message-form, event, key and purpose.’ Similarly, Lewis (Brown & Yule, 2000, pp.40-41) calls them ‘the co-ordinates of the index’ which include ‘possible-world co-ordinate, time co-ordinate, place co-ordinate, speaker co-ordinate, audience co-ordinate, indicated object co-ordinate, previous discourse co-ordinate, and assignment co-ordinate.’ Actually these two classifying methods have no major differences in essence. Thus Model I adopts the former as the criteria of context analysis.

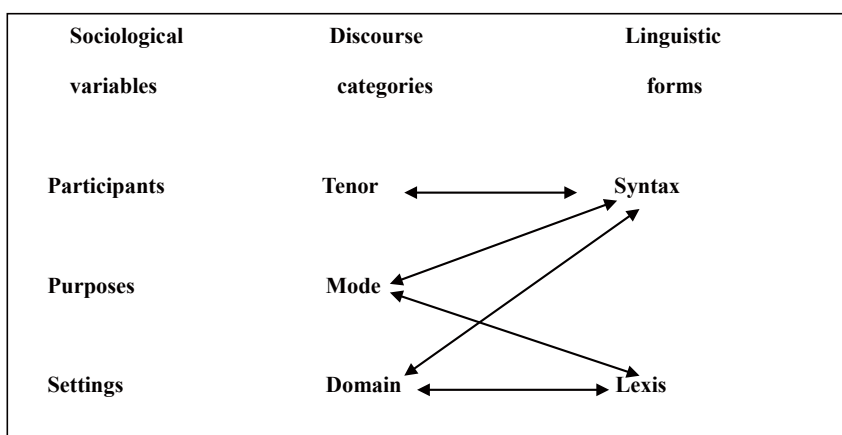
Here is a sample. If the translator is asked to translate the sentence “十六大将会全面贯彻‘三个代表’重要思想” into English, he ought to take the factor of context into consideration. Actually this sentence appears in an editorial of a newspaper, so the addressor is the writer of the editorial. The audience is the readers who read this message. The topic of this editorial is the theme of the 16<sup>th</sup> National Congress of CPC. This editorial is released before the opening of the 6<sup>th</sup> National Congress of CPC through the channel of newspaper. Thus the message-form of its context is news. Of course it is a precise editorial

written to inform and encourage the audience. Therefore the translator may obtain a general idea of the context of the ST. The next stage is the analysis of the TT’s context. The audience of the TT will be the English-speaking people with less or no knowledge of the ST. Then the translator should take this point into account and rewrite a version containing enough information that can be understood by the audience of the TT. This sentence may be translated as, “The 16<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) will comprehensively carry out the important thoughts of ‘Three Represents,’ which call on the CPC to always represent the development trend of China’s advanced productive forces, the orientation of China’s advanced culture and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people.” Thus the audience of the TT can comprehend the information conveyed by the translated version, which conforms to the requirement of functional equivalence.

#### 3.2 Model II

Halliday (1989, p.5) analyzes the context of situation into the following three components: field of discourse, tenor of discourse, and mode of discourse. Field, or the reference to ‘what is going on’ (i.e. the field of activity), is a kind of language use which reflects what Gregory and Carroll (1978) call ‘the purposive role’, or the social function of the text (e.g. personal interchange, exposition, etc). Mode refers to the medium of the language activity. And tenor relays the relationship between the addressor and the addressee. (Hatim & Mason, 2001, pp.48-50)

Bell (1991, p.9) describes the discourse parameters by the following figure.



**Figure 2**  
**Discourse Parameters**

Bell (1991, pp.186, 188, 190) also defines the three terms: tenor, mode, and domain. Any sender of message has a relationship with his or her receiver(s) and this relationship is reflected intentionally or unintentionally in the form the messages are given. It is precisely this ‘tone’ in written and spoken texts which is signaled mainly, in English, through syntactic choices by the tenor of

discourse. The tenor consists of a number of overlapping and interacting scales or levels: formality, politeness, impersonality and accessibility. The four parameters we have just discussed were all concerned with the reflection of relationships between the producer of the text and the text itself or the receiver of the text. As in the case of tenor, four scales need to be considered within the

general category of mode of discourse: channel limitation, spontaneity, participation and privateness. The domain of discourse is revealed by choices of features of the code which indicate the role of the text is playing in the activity of which it forms a part.

By comparing these three viewpoints, it can be concluded that there are no major differences among Halliday, Hatim & Mason, and Bell. Bell's parameters are more precise and applicable in translating process. Model

II focuses on the three components' function in translating process. The three dimensions are believed to be the fundamental elements of the communicating process. The translator ought to reconstruct a context by analyzing the three communicative dimensions of the ST. The following sample is selected from *President Jiang Zemin's Speech at Hong Kong's 5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebrations* carried on the *Beijing Review* magazine, which is published on July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2002.

**Table 1**  
**President Jiang Zemin's Speech at Hong Kong's 5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebrations**

| Source text   | Target text  |
|---|--|
| <p>从“一国两制”构想的提出，到这一构想在香港成功地付诸实践，经历了一个不平凡的过程。邓小平先生是“一国两制”事业的奠基人，他以伟大政治家的智慧和胆略，创造性地提出了“一国两制”的科学构想，为完成祖国和平统一大业打开了切实可行的道路。解决香港问题的中英谈判，具有开创意义的香港特别行政区基本法的起草，都是在他的直接关心和指导下完成的。香港进入后过渡期，国际局势发生了重大变化，但我们始终坚持“一国两制”方针不动摇，有条不紊地完成了恢复对香港行使主权的各项工作，实现了香港的平稳过渡。回顾这段历史，我们深感香港今天的局面来之不易。祖国的日益强大，是香港顺利回归和回归后成功贯彻“一国两制”方针的根本保障，也是保持香港社会和经济长期稳定繁荣的坚强后盾。</p> <p>现在，世界多级化和经济全球化趋势深入发展，科技进步日新月异，综合国力竞争日益激烈，国际局势正在发生深刻的变化。我们必须适应这种新的形势，更好地推进我国的发展。经过二十多年的改革开放和现代化建设，我们国家的综合国力大幅度增强，人民生活总体上达到小康水平。进入新世纪，祖国内地进入了全面建设小康社会，加快推进社会主义现代化的新的发展阶段，正在实施现代化建设的第三步战略目标。我们要紧紧抓住新世纪初的战略机遇期，与时俱进，开拓创新，继续把改革开放和现代化建设不断推向前进。今后五到十年，也是香港经济和社会发展的关键时期。香港特别行政区政府和各界人士同样要以与时俱进的精神，积极进取，努力创造香港更加美好的未来。这里，我想提出三点希望。</p> | <p>From its inception to its successful implementation in Hong Kong, the concept of 'one country, two systems' went through an extraordinary process. Mr. Deng Xiaoping was the founder of this great cause. In display of wisdom, creativeness and bold vision of towering statesman, he laid down this scientific concept and thus blazed a feasible way for the peaceful reunification of the motherland. It was under his personal attention and direct guidance that the China-U.K. negotiations on the settlement of the Hong Kong question and the drafting of the Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, which was of trail-blazing significance, were brought to fruition. In the face major changes in the international situation as Hong Kong entered the latter half of the transitional period, we persisted with the policy of 'one country, two systems,' systematically went about various preparations for the resumption of exercise of sovereignty over Hong Kong and achieved a smooth transition. In reviewing this process, we feel all the more strongly that what has become Hong Kong today has not come by easily. Indeed, it is the growing prosperity of the motherland that ensured the smooth return of Hong Kong and its successful implementation of 'one country, two systems' thereafter. It also provides a reliable backing for the long-term social stability and economic prosperity in Hong Kong.</p> <p>At present, the trends toward a multi-polar world and economic globalization are developing in greater depth. With rapid advancement of science and technology and increasingly fierce competition in our country's overall national strength, the international situation is undergoing certain profound changes. We must adapt ourselves to such new circumstances and do a better job in promoting our national development. Thanks to the two decades of reforms, opening-up and modernization drive, China's overall national strength has increased substantially and the Chinese people on the whole have enjoyed a comfortable living standard. In the new century, China's mainland has entered into a new stage of building a well-off society across the country and expediting the socialist modernization while fulfilling the third-phase strategic objectives of modernization program. We must firmly grasp the strategic opportunity in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, keep abreast with the times and press ahead with continued reform, opening-up and modernization. The next five to ten years are crucial for Hong Kong's economic and social development. The HKSAR Government and people of all circles are therefore required to also keep abreast with the times, work hard and bring about an even better future for Hong Kong. To this end, I would like to express a few hopes.</p> |

The field of the ST is a political speech about the peaceful transition and the successful practice of the policy of 'one country, two systems.' The tenor of the ST can be obviously seen. The addressor is the President of the People's Republic of China and the addressees are the residents in Hong Kong. The ST's mode is making a speech at Hong Kong's 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations and it is also relayed by various media such as TV, radio, newspaper and the Internet. The three dimensions of the ST, i.e. field of discourse, tenor of discourse and mode of discourse can also be applied to the analysis of the TT. The field of the TT is same with that of ST. The tenor has to be changed. The addressor is still President Jiang Zemin, but the addressees are English-speaking people. The mode has also to be changed. The function of the ST is mainly to show the Hong Kong residents the importance of the policy of 'one country, two systems,' to summarize

the 5 years achievements since Hong Kong's return, and to express hopes to Hong Kong residents. While the function of the TT is mainly to inform and to make the English-speaking people understand the importance of the policy of 'one country, two systems.' The addressees change from the Hong Kong residents to the English-speaking people. The former has enough contextual information while the latter has little or even does not have the corresponding contextual information except the experts who are specialized in this area of research.

Therefore the translator should carefully select serious words to construct the TT and make sure that the readers of the TT can understand the speech. The policy named '一国两制' in the ST is translated literally into the policy of 'one country, two systems.' It's hard for the English-speaking readers to understand this version. Some explanations should be made to further interpret

this policy. So it can be translated as the policy of ‘one country, two systems,’ which means that after the country is reunified, Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan can enjoy a high degree of autonomy as a special administrative region and maintain capitalism; meanwhile, the main body of the country (China mainland) will continue with its socialist system. The policy of ‘one country, two systems’ is also created to solve the question of Macao and Taiwan, so the explanation should include Macao and Taiwan. Similarly, the group ‘现代化建设的第三步战略目标’ is translated as ‘the third-phase strategic objectives of our modernization program,’ which is also obscure for the readers of the TT to comprehend. It also needs further explanation. But this kind of explanation is almost impossible for the simultaneous translators, so this model is less fit for the oral interpretation.

## CONCLUSION

In the process of translation, the translator should try to achieve the goal of functional equivalence of the ST and TT. It is very significant for the translator to analyze the ST in its own cultural circumstances and form an appropriate translating strategy. This stage’s work also requires the translator to take the cultural factors, the features of context, and the three components of context of situation (field, tenor, mode) into account. Then the specific translating process is realized at the level of basic information units (operational units: sentence, clause, group, word). It is crucial for the TT to be comprehensible in its cultural and situational context because that’s the basic requirement of the functional equivalence between the ST and TT.

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