

A Report on the English-Chinese Translation of Abstract Nouns in Energy English

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Abstract: One of the characteristics of English is abstractness, which indicates the common use of abstract expressions in English texts. The utilization of abstract nouns is primarily used in formal or sci-tech texts; hence energy English, as a sort of sci-tech texts, has a body of abstract nouns. The first introduction is about the forms of abstract-noun expressions, including inherent abstract nouns, verbal nexus-word, i.e. action noun, and predicative nexus-word, i.e. predicative noun. The second part discussed the function of abstract nouns, including succinctness and coherence. Lastly, the translation techniques of abstract nouns is discussed via analyzing several cases under energy English context.

Keywords: Energy English; Translation techniques; Abstract noun

1. The Introduction of Abstract Nouns

Relative to concrete nouns, such as table, mosquito, or Hermès bag, abstract nouns usually refer to something that exists but cannot be seen, heard, touched, smelled, or tasted. In other words, abstract nouns do not denote physical objects, but indicate some abstract concepts which are intangible, for example, emotion, action, and the like. Jespersen (1924) points out that the nouns derived from verbs and adjectives shall be deemed as verbal nexus-words and predicative nexus-words respectively. Close (1975: 107-122) states that from the perspective of noun endings, abstract nouns fall into two categories, namely, abstract nouns derived from verbs and abstract nouns derived from adjectives.

In conclusion, the abstract nouns can be divided into three major categories, involving: 1) inherent abstract nouns; 2) verbal nexus-word; 3) predicative nexus-word.

1.1 Inherent abstract nouns

Inherent abstract nouns directly arise during the development of English. They are neither derived nor transformed, but directly borrowed from Latin or French, or produced to meet the needs of language development, such as art, law, language, reason, etc.

1.2 Verbal nexus-word

“There is a marked tendency in English to clothe the chief idea of the predicate in the form of a noun instead of a finite verb.” (Curme, 1931: 22) Verbal nexus-words, i.e. action nouns, are derived or transformed from verbs, meeting the tendency Curme mentioned.

The first kind of verbal nexus-word is derived from verbs, via employing nominal suffixes such as -al, -tion, -ment, -ance. Installation and development are typical words in the list of this category. The second kind is transformed from verbs. Those words per se can be used as both noun and verb, for instance, kiss, export, desire, etc. The third kind is formed by employing -ing after the end of a verb, namely gerund, which is a verb semantically and an abstract noun grammatically. Particular examples can be given as arranging, developing, and feeling.

1.3 Predicative nexus-word

Predicative nexus-words, i.e. predicative nouns, are primarily derived from adjectives. According to Zhang Jin (1996: 3), adjectives are used for modifying nouns and indicating the attributes of nouns; although such abstract nouns derived from the adjectives can express a variety of meanings such as nature, situation, and state, it mainly represents the meaning of “quality” corresponding to the adjective. Thus they can be called abstract nouns of quality as well.

The first kind of predicative nexus-word is derived from adjectives, via adding nominal suffixes such as -cy, -y, -ness, etc. Words such as sufficiency, vagueness, realism are typical examples under this concept. The second kind is directly transformed from adjectives which can be used as both adjectives and nouns, for example, cold, good, evil, etc. The third kind does not account for a large proportion; they are derived from some nouns that denote identity by employing suffixes like -ship, -age, or -dom. We can give examples as friendship, parentage, monkdom, etc.

2. The functions of abstract nouns

All abstract nouns are often adopted to present facts or ideas in a neutral tone and to miniaturize complex structures as same as the nature of nouns. In terms of inherent abstract nouns, they primarily indicate concepts with close link to daily life. However, the other two types of abstract nouns function more complex.

Crystal (1997: 260) defines nominalization as: 1) the process of forming a noun from some other word-class; 2) the derivation of a noun phrase from an underlying clause. Quirk et al. (1985: 1288) define nominalization as a noun phrase which has a systematic correspondence with a clause structure. In this context, verbal nexus-words and predicative nexus-words are a part of nominalization.

Generally, the functions of abstract nouns (especially those in nominalization structure) including two aspects: succinctness and evaluation.

2.1 Succinctness

Abstract nouns can be used to express complex ideas and concepts; and provides more options for writers or speakers, for instance, shortening a sentence to an abstract noun can avoid repetition which is often seen as a sign of poor language competence by the English-speaking world. Liu (2019: 239) explains: “The purpose of nominalization is to simplify the language structure and highlight the factualness of the expression.”

Abstract nouns, when substituted for verbs and adjectives, are not only another alternative expression, but also a concise expression. Expressing ideas in the form of abstract nouns can encapsulate a large amount of content in a small unit, so it is more abstract and concise.

Succinctness will then provide generalization for corresponding sentences, which means that via summarizing the foregoing or the issues to be described accordingly, essay or article writers can avoid the reuse of certain words or specific phenomena. The word “condition” is a typical example. There are also such phenomena in Chinese, for example, “上述问题”, “下述情况”, etc.

2.2 Evaluation

Halliday (1994: 353) points out that in academic terms, abstract nouns are one of the main means by which authors construct arguments, which often include, in Hyland’s opinion (2005: 125), the author’s evaluation of propositional content such as research questions, hypotheses, arguments, conclusions, and results. Based on previous research (Hyland, 2005; Li, 2001), the evaluation function of abstract nouns in academic discourse is mainly reflected in the following three aspects:

- 1) Provide different evaluation postures.
- 2) Build an interaction between author and reader.
- 3) Show the author’s objective attitude.

Although both of the above functions discussed above are positive, many scholars doubt and even criticize that abstract nouns are puzzling words, for they sometimes cloak precise and real thoughts. E. Gowers (1987: 78) points out that “to express one’s thoughts accurately is hard work, and to be precise is sometimes dangerous”; he (1987: 181) also criticizes that “some social scientists strive for convoluted sentences filled with technical terms [particularly some puzzling abstractions] even when they are writing for ordinary people”.

3. The Translation Techniques of Abstract Nouns

The British translation theorist Newmark (1988:55) once said: “The largest quantity of translation in a text is done at the level of the word, the lexical unit.” Belonging to the word-translation level, the translation of abstract nouns is crucial in the translation of energy texts, not to mention the large number of abstract nouns in energy English. Here, the author will analyze the specific translation strategies for different categories of abstract nouns.

3.1 Translation technique of inherent abstract nouns - literal translation

The first category, inherent abstract nouns, refers to nouns the meanings of which are inherently abstract such as words like community and capacity. Translating inherent abstract nouns often contains a “puzzle-solving” process, but what translators need to do is to choose one suitable meaning based on the context, and translate it directly, i.e. literal translation.

【Example 1】

【Source Text】 The competitiveness of nuclear in relation to other power generation technologies is determined by the value of its output as well as its cost of production.

【Target Text】 与其他能源发电技术相比，核能是否具有竞争优势取决于核发电量与核发电成本。

【Analysis】 The word “value” is also an inherent abstract noun. In late 14th century, according to Online Etymonline Dictionary (<https://www.etymonline.com> (accessed on 6th December, 2022)), English borrowed the word “value” from Old French value which means “worth, price, moral worth; standing, reputation” and also adopted the meaning of valere, a Latin word, which is “be strong, be well; be of value, be worth”. The word “value” is formed for meeting the needs of language in the development of English; hence to translate “value” only needs to follow the one-to-one corresponding translation method. In this sentence, “value” is used to indicate the particular number of nuclear output, which is called “(数)量” or“(数)值” in Chinese. Through parallel texts on International Energy Association website, finally the translation “量” was decided.

3.2 Translation techniques of verbal nexus-word and predicative nexus-words

When it comes to verbal nexus-word and predicative nexus-words, things are more complex; there are three techniques as follows:

3.2.1 Translating to jargon

Each industry has its own jargon and slang, which compose parts of terminologies in their own respective fields, and the energy sector is no exception. “The translation of scientific literature must be expressed in scientific ‘jargon’, and otherwise it will not reflect the ‘scientific style’” (Chen, 1984: 20). Fang Mengzhi (2004: 122) also points out that if a translated version has been recognized and used for a long time, and has certain social attributes, the translator generally does not change such translated results. In energy English text, a body of abstract nouns are jargon; when translating such abstract nouns, translators ought to search relevant information or ask for help from industry insiders, and then follow the language habits in the industry.

【Example 2】

【Source Text】 ... renew ambitions on renewables deployment while putting greater focus on consumption targets and renewables integration.

【Target Text】 ...再次强调自身发展可再生能源的信心，并表明会更加关注消费目标和可再生能源并网。

【Analysis】 In this case, “integration” is a verbal nexus-word, which derived from the verb “integrate”. “Integration” means the act or process of combining two or more things so that they work together, according to Oxford Advanced English-Chinese Dictionary (9th Edition), that is, “结合/整合/一体化” in Chinese. Since the article in which this sentence comes from is based on Chinese reports, the author went through the relevant documents and found the related jargon “并网”. Although “并网” is generally translated into “grid-connected” or “parallel”, but according to the context, the “integration” here has the same meaning as “grid-connected” or “parallel”. Therefore, the “integration” is translated into “并网”.

3.2.2 Converting the word class

According Lian Shuneng (2010: 13), “English tends to use more nouns, so its narrative is static; Chinese tends to use more verbs, so its narrative is dynamic”. The static narrative of English is mainly manifested in its frequent use of nominalization to express information that originally should be conveyed via verbs (phrases) or adjectives.

Lian Shuneng (2010: 176) also pointed out that if verbal nexus-words in English are directly translated into Chinese, this will confuse Chinese readers, because nominalization structure with a verbal nexus-word in English is often equivalent to subject-verb structure in Chinese. Grammatically, verbal nexus-words are used as the noun component, but with regard to the deep structure of sentences, what verbal nexus-words expressed is still a verb meaning, so it makes sense to convert it into Chinese verbs, when translating such action nouns.

【Example 3】

【Source Text】 Self-sufficiency is not always an option – particularly for critical minerals that are geographically concentrated – nor an economically optimal approach: a combination of open markets, strategic partnerships and diversity of supply sources can deliver security, resilience and sustainability.

【Target Text】 自给自足既不是长久之计（特别是某些关键矿物仅集中于几个地区），也不是经济层面的最优解，只有开放相关市场、建立战略伙伴关系、增加供应来源多样性三措并举，才可以建立安全、有弹性、可持续的供应链。

【Analysis】 Here we will only discuss four abstract nouns in this sentence—“combination”, “security”, “resilience” and “sustainability”, and will give the reason to the translation of “diversity” in 3.2.3.

The word “combination” is transformed from “combine”, belonging to verbal nexus-words. If they are not translated into verbs, but still nouns, the translated sentence will be like “开放相关市场、建立战略伙伴关系、增加供应来源多样性三种措施的组合”. Once the adjective is too long, the sentence load will increase, which does not conform to the language habits of Chinese. Lv Shuxiang (1980: 156) points out that the definite words of Chinese can only be placed in front; if they are very long, they are not appropriate. Hence, the word “combination” is translated into Chinese verbs “并举”.

Just like verbal nexus-words, predicative nexus-words, when undergoing word-class conversion, can be translated into adjectives. For one thing, abstract nouns derived from adjectives can miniaturize complex structure to simplify sentences and enrich expressions (Lian, 2010: 165). This sentence is coming from a report, which is about building a secure, resilient and sustainable supply chain, publicized by International Energy Association (IEA). In Example 3, IEA simplified “secure, resilient and sustainable supply chain” with “security, resilience and sustainability”. For the other thing, the conversion of quality abstract nouns from central nouns to modifiers is partly because of the difference between Chinese and English. Specifically, this conversion is used to meet the need for meaning expression. Therefore, “security”, “resilience” and “sustainability” were translated into “安全的”, “有弹性的” and “可持续的” in order to restore the complete information.

3.2.3 Adding category words

Category words are those words that indicate the category, to which concepts such as attributes and phenomena belong; and category words are commonly used in Chinese (Lian, 2010: 176). Adding category words after abstract nouns according to the context can make the meaning of abstract nouns more specific and more in line with Chinese language customs.

【Example 4】

【Source Text】 More complete metrics, such as the value-adjusted LCOE, quantify the system value of different technologies, through their contributions not only to low emissions electricity, but also to system adequacy and flexibility.

【Target Text】 更完善的指标（如价值调整后的LCOE）量化了不同发电技术的系统价值，不仅考虑到不同技术对低碳排放发电的贡献程度，而且也考虑到不同技术是否提升了系统充裕性和灵活性。

【Analysis】 In Example 4, there are three abstract nouns—contribution, adequacy and flexibility; the first one belongs to verbal nexus-words and the latter two belong to predicative nexus-words. First, we will discuss the two predicative nexus-words, adequacy and flexibility, which are more easy to explain. The words “adequacy” and “flexibility” are derived from “adequate” and “flexible”, respectively. In 3.2.2, we have introduced that predicative nexus-words can be translated into Chinese adjectives, but in this case such translation technique is not suitable due to the genuinely puzzling translation result—“充足和灵活的系统”. This is where category words come in.

English tends to use abstract nouns because of its inherent abstraction, but Chinese tends to be crystallized, that is, to express the concept of the abstract in a concrete form. In another words, when translating English abstract nouns into Chinese, the translator should crystallize them—one of the means is to add category words including “性”, “化”, “度”, “主义”, etc (Lian, 2010). In this case, the predicative nexus-words do not stand for the state of being enough to use and being able to be easily modified to respond to altered circumstances or conditions, respectively. Instead, they refer to the qualities of the “system”, namely, the way in which a power system can match the evolution in electricity demand (system adequacy) and the ability of a power system to reliably and cost-effectively manage the variability and uncertainty of demand and supply across all relevant timescales (system flexibility). Therefore, the author should render the words into “充裕性” and “灵活性” to make sure the message conveyed from source text to target text is accurate and complete.

Then we will discuss the translation of the verbal nexus-word “contribution”, which is derived from “contribute”; as the second translation technique in 3.2 (converting the word class), “contribution” can be translated into “贡献”, “促进” or “提升”, according to the meaning of “contribute” in Oxford Advanced English-Chinese Dictionary (9th Edition). However, when the “contribution” to the first object is translated into a verb, part of the sentence will be “.....考虑不同技术贡献/促进/提升低碳排放发电,”, which is wholly strange and will confuse readers. According to Liu Guangyao (1994(01): 70), “just like other abstract nouns, verbal nexus-words can also be crystallized; the embodied action-nouns will no longer represent the meaning corresponding to the cognate verbs, which indicates that they are no longer the ‘act’ itself but the concrete meaning associated with the ‘act’”. Therefore, the author translated the “contribution” into “贡献程度”, which directly explains the intrinsic meaning of it. In Example 3, the translation of “diversity” also uses this translation technique, that is, to add “性” after its original meaning “多样”.

4. Conclusion

Abstract nouns are a fairly common linguistic phenomenon in English. This report first introduces the categories of abstract

nouns (inherent abstract nouns, verbal nexus-word and predicative nexus-words), and then briefly discusses the functions of abstract nouns (succinctness and evaluation), and finally attempts to summarize some regular translation techniques through analyzing four examples of energy English text. However, like the translation of other kinds of words, sentences or passages, the translation of abstract nouns is a rather complex issue with special cases and exceptions. For example, predicative nexus-words can also be translated into verbs; sometimes abstract nouns are omitted in the translation progress; and there are cases where separate abstract nouns need to be translated into a sentence in detail. Due to the limited sample, such cases will not be explored in this report.

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