

An SFL Approach to the Untranslatability of English and Chinese CLWs: Functional Types and Stratificational Compensation Strategies

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Abstract

This study investigates the untranslatability of Cultural-Loaded Words (CLWs) between English and Chinese through the lens of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). By analyzing functional mismatches across phonological, lexicogrammatical, semantic, and contextual strata, the paper proposes a stratified compensation framework to bridge cultural-linguistic gaps in translation. Case studies demonstrate the efficacy of multi-stratum strategies. The findings offer both theoretical and practical contributions to cross-cultural translation, particularly in the context of Chinese cultural globalization.

Keywords

Untranslatability, Cultural-Loaded Words (CLWs), Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Stratification, Translation Strategies, English-Chinese Translation

1. Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, cross-cultural communication has become essential, highlighting the importance of language in conveying cultural identity and values. CLWs are significant linguistic elements that encapsulate the history, customs, and cognitive patterns of specific linguistic communities. These words often pose unique challenges in translation due to their deep-rooted cultural associations, particularly when translating between languages like English and Chinese, which have distinct cultural traditions and cognitive frameworks.

Previous research has predominantly focused on linguistic aspects of CLWs without adequately addressing the broader cultural implications. This study aims

to fill this gap by employing SFL, a theoretical framework that analyzes language function across various strata such as context, semantics, lexicogrammar, and phonology.

The study addresses existing shortcomings by providing new insights into the challenges of translating CLWs and offering practical strategies to enhance translation quality. By exploring the functional types and stratified compensation strategies for CLWs in English-Chinese translation, this research seeks to bridge cultural gaps in translation. Through case studies and a detailed examination of linguistic strata, it demonstrates how stratified approaches can effectively address translation difficulties beyond traditional methods that focus solely on linguistic equivalence.

This comprehensive approach not only improves accuracy, but also facilitates deeper cultural understanding, ultimately enhancing cross-cultural communication in an interconnected world.

2. Literature Review

This section reviews prior research on SFL's Stratification Theory, untranslatability, and the challenges posed by CLWs in cross-cultural communication.

2.1. SFL's Metafunctions, Stratification and Their Applications

SFL is a culturally oriented linguistic theory that views language as a social semiotic system. It emphasizes three metafunctions of language: the ideational function, which expresses experiences and logical relationships; the interpersonal function, which facilitates social interaction and negotiates attitudes; and the textual function, which organizes discourse into coherent and contextually appropriate structures.

The three metafunctions have been widely applied in fields such as education, legal discourse analysis, and media studies. In education, SFL has been instrumental in literacy development and genre-based pedagogy. For example, [Derewianka \(2011\)](#) demonstrates how the metafunctions scaffold students' writing skills by emphasizing functional grammar in classroom instruction. In legal discourse, researchers like [Tiersma \(1999\)](#) employ SFL to analyze power dynamics and textual organization in legal texts, revealing how metafunctions shape meaning. Media studies also utilize SFL; [Thomson and White \(2008\)](#) examine news discourse, highlighting how ideational and interpersonal meanings construct media narratives.

A key component of SFL is Stratification, which models language as a multi-stratum semiotic system where each stratum is realized by the stratum below it. The primary strata include: 1) Phonology/Graphology: The sound/writing systems that physically manifest language; 2) Lexicogrammar: The structural level comprising vocabulary and syntax; 3) Semantics: The meaning-making system of language; 4) Context: Divided into the context of situation (the immediate communicative environment) and the context of culture (broader sociocultural norms) ([Halliday & Matthiesen, 2014](#)). This stratificational system provides a comprehen-

sive framework for analyzing linguistic phenomena across different levels of abstraction, from the physical manifestation of language to its cultural and situational meanings.

The Stratification Theory has proven particularly valuable in translation studies. House (2015) and Nord (2014) demonstrated its utility in guiding translation quality assessment, strategy selection, and the analysis of untranslatability. Its application has extended to audiovisual translation, where functional compensation across linguistic and cultural strata is crucial. In language education, SFL provides a robust framework for analyzing intercultural communication and culture-specific lexis (Ellis et al., 2019). This theoretical foundation enhances pedagogical approaches to cross-cultural textual interpretation, aiding students in understanding the nuances of language use within specific cultural contexts. Interdisciplinary applications of stratification have further enriched its scope. Research by Huang and Zhang (2020) and Hood (2020) has demonstrated its relevance in addressing linguistic and cultural complexities across various domains, including cognitive studies.

2.2. Untranslatability: Challenges and Strategies

Untranslatability remains a significant challenge in interlingual communication, primarily due to linguistic, cultural, and cognitive barriers. Early efforts by Nida (1964) and Newmark (1988) laid the groundwork for understanding these challenges, focusing on strategies such as transliteration, semantic translation, and annotated translation.

The debate between linguistic and cultural untranslatability has evolved since Dante's 14th-century treatise, as noted by Catford (1965). Contemporary research integrates Sino-Western cultural differences into translation strategies, particularly for culture-specific lexis. Munday (2022) advanced this field by applying Functional Equivalence Theory to develop concrete strategies, including semantic translation, cultural adaptation, creative translation, and annotated translation.

Buddhist scripture translation practices in ancient China, as documented by Yang (2023), illustrate early use of transliteration and semantic adaptation. These historical practices remain relevant today, with modern approaches emphasizing flexible strategy application, avoiding rigid hierarchical valuation (Liu, 2022).

2.3. CLWs in English and Chinese

CLWs represent dynamic intersections of language and culture, transcending mere denotation to encode cultural and historical contexts (Xiang, 2024). Their research combines linguistic analysis with cultural insights, offering a unique perspective on intercultural communication.

Nida's classification system for CLWs into ecological, material, social, and religious categories remains influential (Newmark, 1988). Recent studies, such as those by Cao (2024), emphasize preserving the cultural essence of Chinese historical and

social lexis in translation, enabling global readers to appreciate the profound wisdom embedded in Chinese culture.

2.4. Limitations of Previous Research

Despite significant advances in research on Stratification Theory and untranslatability, existing studies exhibit certain limitations. First, the integration of the Stratification Theory with studies on CLWs remains relatively limited. While Stratification Theory has been widely applied in linguistic research, its application to the study of English and Chinese CLW untranslatability remains underdeveloped. Second, current research often lacks systematic analysis of deeper motivations such as culture and cognition. There is a scarcity of studies examining functional types and stratificational compensation mechanisms based on Stratification Theory. Furthermore, proposed translation strategies frequently remain theoretical without concrete pathways for practical implementation.

To address these limitations, this study employs the theories of the metafunction and the Stratification within SFL to construct a multi-stratum analytical framework for investigating the intrinsic motivations behind CLW untranslatability. By conducting systematic case-based analysis of untranslatability across different strata, this research aims to develop targeted and operational translation methods with specific functional compensation strategies.

3. Theoretical Framework

Based on SFL's three metafunctions and Stratification Theory, this study constructs a functional type of framework to analyze English-Chinese CLWs. By comparing CLWs in terms of transitivity systems—such as material processes/participants, mood/modality systems, appraisal systems, and cultural metaphors—the research identifies the functional roots of untranslatability.

The study further develops a comprehensive compensation framework aimed at addressing functional mismatches at different linguistic strata:

- 1) Contextual Strategies: Focus on cultural and situational adaptation.
- 2) Semantic Approaches: Emphasize metafunctional alignment and semantic field adjustment.
- 3) Lexicogrammatical Solutions: Involve structural transformations and grammatical metaphor applications.
- 4) Phonological Strategies: Address sound-based cultural elements.

This multi-stratum framework underscores the necessity of coordinated interventions to effectively bridge cultural-linguistic gaps. Empirical validation through comparative analysis demonstrates the effectiveness of the stratified approach, with quantitative metrics showing significant improvements in translation outcomes.

4. Functional Types of CLWs in English and Chinese

This section establishes a tripartite framework for analyzing CLWs through Halliday's three metafunctions.

4.1. Ideational Function: Culture-Specific Experience Encoding

Within SFL's ideational metafunction, cultural schemas shape how experiences are linguistically realized.

4.1.1. Process Type: Action Conceptualization

Material processes encode divergent cultural logics:

- (1) 凑热闹 to join collective excitement: Encodes Chinese communal participation in shared events, reflecting collective orientation.
- (2) 走关系 to navigate social networks (Bian, 2019): Embodies guanxi (关系) dynamics, where social networking is institutionalized.
- (3) to stan 死忠粉: Rooted in Western fandom subculture, blending obsession and communal identity.
- (4) to wing it 临时发挥: Presupposes individualistic improvisation, contrasting Chinese collective problem-solving.

These comparative cases demonstrate how material processes encode deep cultural schemas. Chinese verbs frequently require collective subject participation, such as (1) and (2); while English counterparts emphasize individual agency and maintain clearer literal/metaphorical distinctions. The translation challenges are asymmetrical: Chinese-to-English requires unpacking collective subjects and adding cultural explanations, whereas English-to-Chinese often loses etymological nuances and flattens metaphorical dimensions.

4.1.2. Nominal Taxonomy: Culture-Specific Categorization of Participants

Participants/Things refer to the nominal elements in language that encode culturally-specific conceptualizations of entities, objects, and abstract notions within a speech community's worldview. These nominal elements are not just simple labels but are deeply embedded with cultural meanings and values, which can lead to significant differences in translation and cross-cultural understanding.

- (5) 表哥: Maternal male cousin.

In Chinese culture, the term “表哥” not only indicates a male cousin on the mother's side but also carries with it a sense of kinship and familial hierarchy. It reflects the importance of extended family relationships in Chinese society, where family ties are highly valued and often play a significant role in social interactions.

- (6) 妯娌: Wives of brothers.

The term “妯娌” in Chinese specifically refers to the relationship between the wives of brothers. It highlights the complex interconnectedness of family relationships in Chinese culture, where the dynamics between in-laws are carefully navigated and hold great social significance.

- (7) 连襟: Husbands of sisters.

Similarly, “连襟” denotes the relationship between the husbands of sisters. This term underscores the intricate web of family connections in Chinese society, where even the relationships between spouses of siblings are recognized and given a specific name.

- (8) ex-wife: 前妻

While the English term “ex-wife” simply refers to a former wife, the Chinese term “前妻” may carry additional connotations depending on the context. In some cases, it might imply a sense of past emotional attachment or unresolved issues, reflecting the cultural attitudes towards divorce and the continuing influence of past relationships in Chinese society.

(9) foster parents: 养父母

The term “foster parents” in English and “养父母” in Chinese both refer to individuals who take on the role of parents for a child who is not biologically their own. However, the cultural connotations may differ. In Chinese culture, the concept of “养父母” often emphasizes the moral and ethical responsibility of caring for a child in need, reflecting the Confucian values of filial piety and compassion.

(10) potluck: 百家饭

The term “potluck” in English typically refers to a meal where each guest contributes a dish, often in a casual and informal setting. In contrast, “百家饭” in Chinese has a more profound cultural connotation. It originally referred to food collected from many households, often given to a child in need as a form of blessing and protection. Over time, it has come to symbolize community support, sharing, and the collective care for the well-being of others. Thus, simply translating “potluck” as “百家饭” overlooks these deeper cultural meanings and the sense of communal solidarity that the Chinese term conveys.

These comparisons highlight how nominal elements serve as linguistic repositories of cultural logic. Chinese participants tend to encode relational hierarchies and extended family networks, reflecting the importance of family and community in Chinese society. In contrast, English equivalents often reflect individual status or functional relationships, emphasizing the independence and autonomy of individuals. The challenges of translation do not just focus on lexical differences but also on the different social and cultural roots that these terms are embedded in.

This extensive nominal analysis and functional types of CLWs (Culture-Loaded Words) require careful consideration in interpersonal communication. From this perspective, we can understand that Chinese emphasizes relational ontology, where relationships and social connections are central to understanding the world, while English emphasizes functional classification, focusing more on the roles and functions of individuals within society. By acknowledging and respecting these cultural differences, we can enhance cross-cultural understanding and avoid oversimplification in our analysis and communication.

4.2. Interpersonal Function: Social Role and Attitude

The interpersonal function plays a key role in language, encompassing mood, modality, and the appraisal system. It emphasizes interactions with others and is crucial in communication.

4.2.1. Mood and Modality: Cross-Cultural Negotiation of Speech Roles

Mood, as the core of language exchange, including subject and finite, has four types:

declarative, interrogative, imperative and exclamatory. Modality can be manifested in various forms, such as will, should, could, can, must, probably, usually, possibly, always and certainly.

(11) 劳驾 trouble your honor (request formula): Embodies Confucian hierarchy (honorific trouble), contrasting English's neutral "excuse me".

(12) 不敢当 dare not accept (response to praise): Reflects Chinese humility rituals, versus English "you're welcome" as transactional closure.

(13) 久仰 I've long admired you. (first meeting): Anchors first meetings in historical admiration, while English lacks equivalent ritualized defamiliarization.

(14) no worries 没关系: (response to thanks) 别担心 (reassurance) Australian/NZ casual reassurance, broader than Chinese 没关系's formal apology context.

(15) you good 你很好, 你要乖: African American Vernacular English (AAVE) solidarity marker, diverging from Mandarin's prescriptive 你要乖.

(16) If you wouldn't mind 如果你不介意的话: British understatement as polite hedging, contrasting Chinese directness.

The interpersonal function of English is largely influenced by mood and modality, which encodes cultural norms of politeness, social stratification and communicative style. This classification indicates that English is greatly influenced by interpersonal relationships, discourse situations and special context, while Chinese has a great degree of dependence.

4.2.2. Appraisal Paradigms: Value Positioning in Cultural Lexis

Appraisal can simply be defined as the speaker's view on whether something is good or bad. The Appraisal system is a new framework developed by SFL in the study of interpersonal meaning. It mainly focuses on social relationships and attitude expression. It is divided into three subsystems, including attitude, engagement and graduation.

(17) 白眼狼 ungrateful wretch: Animal metaphor (wolf with "white eyes") conflates visual imagery and moral condemnation.

(18) 绿茶 scheming innocent: Modern Chinese cyber-metaphor linking tea (green) to scheming innocence, untranslatable without cultural annotation.

(19) 圣母 holier-than-thou: Religious metaphor (Mary) weaponized as critique of self-righteousness.

(20) 摆烂 quiet quitting: Cyber-slang encoding passive resistance through performative decay.

(21) stand-up guy: Moral evaluation rooted in Western individualism, versus Mandarin's situation-dependent 值得信赖的人.

(22) pick-me: Digital-era self-promotion strategy, mistranslated as 标题党 (click-bait) due to divergent pragmatic goals.

(23) high-maintenance: high-maintenance: Individualistic trait evaluation, contrasting Chinese 难伺候 relational burden framing.

SFL emphasizes the social function and contextual dependence of language. Through its Appraisal System, it can systematically analyze how CLWs express

emotions (affect), judgments (judgment), or appreciation (appreciation). And how to reflect cultural values. Through classification based on appraisal system, it can be clarified how different cultures construct social norms, identity recognition, and common memory through language. The system reveals English speakers' propensity for nuanced, often sarcastic evaluation, where single terms index complex intersections of identity, power, and cultural critique while adapting to digital discourse norms.

4.3. Textual Function: Cultural Cohesion and Metaphor

The textual function in CLW pertains to how language constructs coherent and culturally meaningful discourse. This function ensures that linguistic elements are organized in ways that reflect cultural patterns of thought, cohesion and metaphorical expression.

4.3.1. Reference and Ellipsis: Typological Contrasts in Cohesive Devices

Both reference and Ellipsis are grammatical devices used to express cohesive relation. English typically relies on explicit reference (pronouns, demonstratives) to maintain clarity, while Chinese frequently uses zero anaphora (omission of referents) due to its topic-prominent structure. For example:

(24) 京剧很迷人。这种艺术形式结合了音乐和杂技。 Beijing Opera is fascinating. This art form combines music and acrobatics.

(25) The Forbidden City is magnificent. It was the imperial palace for 500 years. 故宫很壮观。它曾是 500 年的皇宫。

(26) —春节回家吗? [Are you] going home for Spring Festival?

—回。 [I am] going [home].

(27) —Have you been to Shanghai? 你去过上海吗?

—[Yes, I] have. 去过.

In (24) and (25), Ellipsis refers to the omission of recoverable elements in linguistic expressions without compromising comprehension. It can be dependent on discourse context. In (26) and (27), these examples demonstrate the fundamental differences between English and Chinese in terms of reference and Ellipsis: English maintains clear reference through formal means, while Chinese relies on context and cultural consensus to achieve economic expression. This difference reflects the linguistic types of English “hypotaxis” and Chinese “parataxis”, as well as the deep difference between Western low-context culture and Eastern high-context culture.

4.3.2. Conjunction Strategies: Logic Marking across Cultural Contexts

The conjunction and continuity strategies in English and Chinese reveal fundamental differences in how the two languages build logical relations and maintain discourse flow. While English tends to rely on explicit linguistic markers, Chinese often favors implicit connections, reflecting broader typological and cultural distinctions.

(28) 下雨了, [Ø]比赛取消。 It rained, so the match was canceled.

(29) She was tired, so she went to bed early. 她累了, [Ø]早早就睡了。

Classifying CLWs through conjunction and continuity in English and Chinese reveals fundamental differences in discourse organization. English uses explicit conjunctions (e.g., “so”, “but”, “however”) and grammatical devices like tense consistency to maintain logical flow, reflecting its Conformability. In contrast, Chinese favors paratactic constructions through zero anaphora and topic chains, where semantic relationships are often implied rather than overtly marked, demonstrating its topic-prominent structure and high-context communication style.

4.3.3. Cultural Metaphors: Cognitive Models in Linguistic Encoding

Cultural metaphors reflect different societies and different ideas through language. Both English and Chinese cultural metaphors are rooted in their respective social background, leading to distinct patterns of expression.

- (30) 心有余悸: Fear after the event
- (31) 心碎: Extremely sorrowful
- (32) 骨干: Core member
- (33) 如沐春风: To express in a good mood
- (34) 侠肝义胆: For courage and justice
- (35) She exploded with rage: 她气得肝疼
- (36) He overflowed with joy: 心花怒放
- (37) I'm drowning in sorrow: 心如刀割

The differences in cultural metaphors between English and Chinese reflect the cognitive patterns and values of both languages. Chinese metaphors, originating from agricultural civilization and Confucian traditions, emphasize unity between heaven and humanity, reflecting nature's integration with human consciousness. In contrast, English metaphors, influenced by Christian tradition and maritime civilization, highlight the opposition between individuals and nature more prominently.

These contrasts show how cultural cognition shapes linguistic expression: English focuses on external/spatial mappings, while Chinese emphasizes embodied/kinship models (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Metaphors reveal deep cultural logics through cognitive tools.

5. Stratificational Compensation Strategies for Untranslatability

Untranslatability occurs when it is difficult to find equivalent expressions in the target language. To address this, stratificational compensation strategies operate across four linguistic strata, including contextual, semantic, lexicogrammatical, and phonological. Below is a detailed breakdown of these strategies with illustrative examples.

5.1. Contextual Strategies

Contextual stratum strategies address untranslatability by reconstructing or adapt-

ing cultural and situational contexts to achieve functional equivalence in the target language. These strategies are essential when linguistic gaps stem from culture-specific concepts, pragmatics, or discourse norms.

5.1.1. Cultural Context Reconstruction

Cultural context reconstruction is a translation strategy that addresses the challenge of untranslatability by embedding cultural explanations or finding analogous concepts when culture-bound terms lack direct equivalents. This approach is essential for bridging cultural gaps and ensuring that the target audience can understand and appreciate the source text's cultural nuances.

(38) 大脚姑说,“你没听过支歌,我唱给你听——裹小脚,嫁秀才,白面馒头就肉菜;裹大脚,嫁瞎子,糟糠饽饽就辣子。”: Miss Bigfoot continued, “Have you ever heard this song? Let me sing it to you. Bind your feet small, A scholar you shall marry. Then you'll eat white bread, meat, and veggies. Bind your feet big, A blind man you shall marry. Then you will eat cornbread and hot peppers daily.” (Feng, 1994)

(39) 闺女!不是娘害你!娘就是给这双脚丫子毁成这样,不愿再叫你也毁了!不是娘走了非拉着你不可,是娘陪你一块走呀!记着,闺女!你到了阎王殿也别冤枉你娘呀!: My daughter, mama doesn't want to hurt you. But my feet have ruined me, and I don't want yours to ruin you. It's not that mama is leaving. This is your journey, and she's going with you. Remember, my daughter. When you reach the palace of Hades, don't blame your mother, she's doing this for you. (Wang, 2004)

In (38), translators translate “白面馒头” into “white bread” and “糟糠饽饽” into “cornbread”. Through this alternative strategy, they make up for the differences in food culture and enable English readers to understand the meaning of the original text more directly. In (39), the translator translated “阎王殿” into “the palace of Hades” and adopted the domestication strategy, corresponding “阎王” in Chinese culture with “Hades” in Western culture, so that English readers can understand its religious and cultural connotation.

Cultural context reconstruction, particularly in dealing with CLWs, is essential for overcoming cultural barriers in translation by providing functional equivalents or explanatory contexts, thereby enabling the target audience to understand the source text's cultural connotations and ensuring the preservation of its original meaning and intent.

5.1.2. Situational Context Adaptation

Situational context adaptation is a translation strategy that adjusts language and expressions to align with the target audience's norms and expectations. This approach addresses cultural discrepancies in speech acts, routines, rituals, or discourse styles. By adapting to situational contexts, translators ensure linguistic accuracy, functional equivalence, and cultural appropriateness.

(40) 如果你能尽快回复我,我将不胜感激。I would appreciate it very much if you could reply to me as soon as possible.

(41) 感谢你一直以来的帮助。Thank you for your help all the time.

The two examples both express gratitude but use different translation methods based on context. In a business setting like (40), more formal language is appropriate. In (41), a less formal tone calls for “thank you”.

Situation adaptation strategies are crucial in translation, ensuring accuracy and alignment with target language norms. Tailored language that matches audience communication habits achieves functional equivalence.

5.2. Semantic Strategies

Semantic stratum strategies address untranslatability caused by conceptual gaps, lexical mismatches, and functional meaning loss between languages. These strategies manipulate meaning structures to achieve functional equivalence while preserving communicative intent.

5.2.1. Metafunctional Compensation

Different languages encode ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings in distinct ways, which can lead to partial loss or distortion in translation. This is particularly evident when the source language prioritizes one type of meaning over another, while the target language has different functional expectations.

(42) 滴水穿石，非一日之功。

Persistence pays off, as even a small drop of water can wear away a stone over time. (Optimizing the Ideational Function).

Constant dripping wears away a stone, which illustrates that perseverance is the key to success (Enhancing the Interpersonal Function).

As the saying goes, constant dripping wears away a stone. This means that success is achieved through persistent effort over time (Adjusting the Textual Function).

Different functions can achieve different effects. Optimize the Ideational Function: Choose vocabulary and expressions that are more natural in the target language while still conveying the original meaning. Enhance the Interpersonal Function: Adjust the tone, add explanatory phrases, or use expressions more familiar to the target language’s cultural context to compensate for deficiencies in the Ideational function. Adjust the Textual Function: Reorganize sentence structures, add connectives, or adjust paragraph layouts to improve coherence.

Metafunctional Compensation is a flexible translation strategy that involves adjusting the balance between the three metafunctions of language to address untranslatability. It requires translators to deeply analyze the metafunctional characteristics of the source text and make appropriate adjustments based on the expressive capacity of the target language. This approach enables more accurate and natural translations by effectively balancing the Ideational, Interpersonal, and Textual functions.

5.2.2. Semantic Field Manipulation

Semantic field manipulation refers to the construction of a concept association

system similar to the CLWs in the target language to compensate for the semantic loss caused by cultural gaps by reorganizing the lexical semantic network of the target language. This strategy applies to CLWs.

(43) 江南

Jiangnan (the culturally iconic region south of the Yangtze River).

(44) 黄土高原

The Loess Plateau (China's cradle of dryland farming civilization).

(45) 人情债

Renqing debt (reciprocal obligation in Chinese relation networks).

The translation strategies employ distinct semantic-field operations paired with cultural-functional annotations. In (43), semantic field extension combines with geo-tagging to emphasize its cultural iconicity; In (44), the Loess Plateau undergoes semantic field reconstruction alongside an ecological function description to highlight its agricultural significance; In (45), while renqing debt utilizes semantic field grafting integrated with sociological concept association to clarify its role within Chinese relational networks.

Semantic Field Manipulation is a cognitive-semantic strategy that systematically restructures the target language's lexical network to compensate for cultural gaps in translating CLWs. By expanding, shifting or compressing semantic fields, preserves systemic cultural conceptualization while avoiding over-domestication. Grounded in SFL and cognitive linguistics, it requires context-aware adaptations—often combined with annotations or visual aids—to balance semantic precision and reader accessibility. This approach enables deeper cultural transfer than literal substitution.

5.3. Lexicogrammatical Strategies

5.3.1. Transitive Reconstruction

Transitive reconstruction involves modifying process types (material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, existential) and participant roles to align with the syntactic norms of the target language. Its key features include:

1) Process Types: Include material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential processes. Each type is adjusted based on the target language's grammatical preferences.

2) Participant Roles: Involve actors, goals, sensors, sayers, etc., which are redefined to fit the target language's structural requirements. Examples of Transitive Reconstruction:

Examples of Transitive Reconstruction:

(1) Material Process Example:

Chinese: “炆锅”

Literal Translation: “fry wok”

Reconstructed: “quickly stir-fry aromatics to release fragrance”

(2) Mental Process Example:

Chinese: “缘分”

Literal Translation: “predestined relationship”

Reconstructed: “feel destined connection”

(3) Relational Process Example:

Chinese: “风水”

Literal Translation: “wind-water”

Reconstructed: “the system that balances environmental energies”

(4) Behavioral Process Example:

Chinese: “作揖”

Literal Translation: “make bow”

Reconstructed: “press palms together while bowing as greeting”

(5) Verbal Process Example:

Chinese: “客气”

Literal Translation: “polite”

Reconstructed: “say ‘no’ thrice before accepting”

(6) Existential Process Example:

Chinese: “江湖”

Literal Translation: “rivers-lakes”

Reconstructed: “there exists a chivalric underworld”

Transitive reconstruction is vital for achieving functional equivalence in translation, ensuring that reconstructed sentences are natural and fluent in the target language while preserving the original meaning and cultural resonance.

5.3.2. Lexical Conversion

Lexical conversion involves altering the grammatical category of a word from the source language to align with the target language’s syntactic norms, thereby ensuring naturalness and fluency. This strategy is particularly crucial for addressing morphological discrepancies between languages such as English (analytic with inflectional morphology) and Chinese (isolating with minimal inflection). A case in point is “the implementation of the policy”, which can be translated into Chinese as “落实政策”, in which the shift from a noun phrase to a verb in Chinese exemplifies how English relies on analytical structures with inflections. Lexical conversion helps bridge these structural gaps, facilitating effective communication across linguistic boundaries.

5.3.3. Grammatical Metaphorization

The stratificational essence of metaphor involves the recombination of resources across semantic and grammatical levels. At the semantic level, figures transform into elements, while at the grammatical level, clauses undergo rank transfer to become word groups or phrases. In translation studies, this dual-level restructuring is crucial for handling CLWs. For example, translating the Chinese idiom “春节包饺子” (making dumplings during the Spring Festival) involves restructuring it to emphasize both the action and its cultural significance: “During the Spring Festival, we prepare and share dumplings as part of our tradition”. Similarly, the imperative “请随便点(菜)” (feel free to order) can be rephrased to align with West-

ern politeness norms: “It would be our pleasure to serve you; please order freely what you desire”. By reconceptualizing source language forms through grammatical metaphorization, translators achieve equivalence in both form and cultural essence, facilitating effective cross-cultural communication.

5.4. Phonological Strategies

Translating CLWs involves addressing challenges related to sound symbolism, rhythm, and phonetic aesthetics. Three primary strategies can be employed: Onomatopoeia Retention, Prosodic Adaptation, and Homophonic Pun.

5.4.1. Onomatopoeia Retention

This strategy involves preserving sound-imitative words when the target language lacks equivalent expressions. For example, “汪汪” for dogs barking in Chinese translates to “woof woof” in English, maintaining the imitative quality of the sound.

5.4.2. Prosodic Adaptation

This strategy focuses on adjusting rhythm, stress, and intonation to fit the target language’s phonetic norms. For instance, adapting “滴滴” to “beep-beep” ensures it matches English stress patterns. Similarly, modifying “馄饨” to “won-ton” facilitates smoother pronunciation in English.

5.4.3. Homophonic Pun

This strategy leverages phonetic similarities to create double meanings. For example, “年年有鱼” translates to “wishing you abundance every year”, as “鱼” sounds like “余”. Visual representations, such as displaying “福” upside-down (sounds like “福到” meaning in English “fortune arrives”), preserve cultural symbolism.

Translators must balance retaining original sounds with adapting them for target language norms. The liberty in modifying sounds versus retention varies based on context. Homophonic puns require creative approaches to maintain both literal and implied meanings. Phonological strategies aim to bridge linguistic gaps while preserving cultural authenticity, ensuring translations are understandable and natural to the target audience.

6. Case Studies and Validation

This section applies the above compensation framework to analyze CLWs in English and Chinese, demonstrating how different strategies resolve untranslatability across linguistic strata.

6.1. Analysis of English CLWs Exemplified by “Serendipity”

Serendipity means the occurrence of fortunate discoveries by chance (coined from Horace Walpole’s fairy tale *The Three Princes of Serendipity*, see **Table 1**).

Table 1. Stratified compensation strategies.

Stratum	Untranslatability Challenge	Compensation Strategy	Example Application
Contextual	Lacks Chinese cultural counterpart	Cultural Reconstruction	机缘巧合 (highlighting chance + luck)
Semantic	No single-word equivalent	Metafunctional Compensation	意外发现的美好 (beautiful accidental discovery)
Lexicogrammatical	Nominalization preference in English	Word Class Conversion	幸运地偶遇 (luckily stumble upon)
Phonological	Etymology tied to English literature	Prosodic Adaptation	塞伦迪蒂(transliteration) + 注释(note its literary origin)

This case study of “serendipity” exemplifies a systematic stratified compensation approach. The term’s untranslatability stems from its unique cultural-literary origins and semantic complexity, requiring multi-stratum solutions: contextual reconstruction “机缘巧合” captures the core concept of chance discovery; semantic unpacking “意外发现的美好” conveys the experiential meaning; grammatical conversion adjusts for linguistic types; while transliteration with annotation preserves the etymological heritage. The coordinated application of these strategies demonstrates how functional translation can be achieved through complementary compensations across different linguistic levels, with each stratum addressing specific dimensions of meaning that would otherwise be lost in direct translation.

6.2. Analysis of Chinese CLWs Exemplified by “风水”

“风水” originally means that a geomantic system harmonizes humans with environmental energy (pronounced “qi” in Chinese) (see **Table 2**).

Table 2. Stratified compensation strategies.

Stratum	Untranslatability Challenge	Compensation Strategy	Example Application
Contextual	Embedded Taoist/cosmic concepts	Situational Adaptation	Shortened to “space arrangement” in film credits
Semantic	“Qi” has no Western equivalent	Semantic Field Manipulation	Wind-water energy flow (expanded semantic field)
Lexicogrammatical	Chinese compound-word structure	Grammatical Metaphor	The geomancy of feng shui
Phonological	Tonal wordplay (风 wind + 水 water)	Homophonic Pun Retention	Retain the transliteration “Feng Shui” + visual symbol

The translation of “风水” demonstrates a stratified compensation approach addressing its cultural and linguistic complexities. Contextually, Western adaptation simplifies it to “space arrangement” for accessibility while losing philosophical depth. Semantically, “wind-water energy flow” expands the concept to approximate qi’s

essence. Grammatically, “the geomancy of Feng Shui” bridges Chinese nominal compounds with English syntax. Phonologically, retaining “Feng Shui” preserves the term’s iconic status while sacrificing the original wordplay. This case illustrates how cultural terms require trade-offs between accuracy and intelligibility, with each stratum offering partial solutions that collectively provide functional equivalence while inevitably compromising some original dimensions.

6.3. Comparative Evaluation of Translation Versions

This section conducts a cross-linguistic comparison of the compensation strategies applied to English “serendipity” and Chinese “风水”. The analysis evaluates the effectiveness of each strategy by stratification, highlighting trade-offs and optimal approaches (see **Table 3**).

Table 3. Comparative framework.

Stratum	“Serendipity” (EN → CN)	“风水” (CN → EN)	Key Insights
Contextual	“机缘巧合” (Daoist/Buddhist resonance)	“Chinese geomancy” (Western esoteric framing)	Both use cultural substitution, but “风水” requires stronger explication.
Semantic	“意外发现之美” (interpersonal focus)	“Wind-water harmony” (literal + footnote)	Metafunctional compensation works better for abstract terms (serendipity).
Lexicogrammatical	“幸运的偶然” (adjective-noun phrase)	“To practice feng shui” (verb conversion)	Chinese → English favors transitivity shifts.
Phonological	“塞伦迪皮蒂” (preserves phonetics but loses semantic and cultural meaning)	“Feng shui” (retained + gloss)	Retention works only if culturally familiar.

The stratified framework proves English CLWs demand more semantic adaptation, while Chinese CLWs prioritize phonetic-cultural hybridity. Future research could quantify these patterns via large-scale parallel corpora.

7. Conclusion

The study investigated the untranslatability of CLWs in English-Chinese translation through an SFL framework. It identified multi-stratum functional misalignments across linguistic strata, including phonological conflicts, lexicogrammatical discrepancies, semantic gaps, and contextual differences. These findings validate Halliday’s Stratification Theory and propose a stratified framework for assessing translation quality.

The research extends SFL theory into translation studies by linking linguistic strata to specific types of untranslatability, complementing existing models like House’s (2015). It offers practical insights by providing translators with systematic decision-making frameworks and concrete techniques for handling CLWs. When

encountering a CLW, translators may stratify analysis from phonology to context to spot conflicts, discrepancies, gaps and differences, then pick suitable techniques like transliteration or restructuring to handle it while balancing source-culture fidelity and target-language acceptability. The study underscores the balance between fidelity to source culture and target language acceptability, supporting translation teaching through structured approaches and measurable criteria.

Future research should expand beyond literary texts to explore specialized domains such as legal, scientific, and digital media. Integrating AI-assisted and multimodal approaches could revolutionize translation practices. Additionally, adopting diachronic perspectives will enhance understanding of how CLWs evolve in a rapidly changing digital era.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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