

From “Puck” to “Ice Hockey”: The Translation and Dissemination of Ice Hockey in China

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Abstract: The introduction of ice hockey to China was accompanied by cross-language translation of numerous texts such as rules, regulations, technical manuals, and event reports. From the transliteration of “puck” as “帕克” to its free translation as “冰球”, and from “ice hockey” as “冰上曲棍球” to “冰球”, the diachronic evolution of term renderings reflects the cultural negotiation mechanism at work in the localization of Western sports. Drawing on medio-translatology and the framework of translation norms, this thesis examines the translation evolution of ice hockey terminology in China over the past century from three dimensions: motivation, process, and product. The findings show that the translation of ice hockey terminology has shifted from descriptive renderings to normative designation, shaped in different historical periods by multiple motivations such as the introduction of knowledge, political identity, and international exchange. At present, ice hockey terminology translation faces the dual difficulty of insufficient uniformity and a shortage of professional talent, which calls for a hierarchical terminology system and a mechanism for cultivating interdisciplinary talent. The case of ice hockey suggests that research on sports terminology translation should move beyond the technical question of “how to translate” and look into the cultural question of “why it is translated this way,” offering a theoretical reference for understanding the localization of Western sports knowledge.

Keywords: Medio-translatology; Translation norms; Ice hockey terminology; Sports translation

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1. Theoretical starting point and problem domain of ice hockey translation

Modern ice hockey took shape in Montreal, Canada, in the mid-19th century. Its name “hockey” comes from the French word “hocquet,” which originally referred to a curved-handled stick used by shepherds. In 1905, the Tianjin Ice Hockey Club was established in the Tianjin Concessions and held its first official competition. Since then, ice hockey has gradually spread in China^[1]. As a competitive sport with a complex rule system and dense technical terminology, ice hockey came to China alongside the cross-language conversion of numerous texts such as rules, regulations, technical manuals, and event reports. Translation has run through the whole process of the localization of ice hockey. From the transliteration of “puck” as “帕克” to its free

translation as “冰球”, and from “ice hockey” through “冰上曲棍球” to “冰球”, the rendering of terms has evolved diachronically from “a hundred schools of thought contending” to a gradually finalized form.

However, existing studies either focus on the technical side of contemporary ice hockey translation practice^[2] or on the history of ice hockey and social participation^[1]; they have not yet systematically adopted a translation-history perspective to examine the evolution of ice hockey term renderings. This thesis attempts to answer the following questions: What historical evolution has ice hockey terminology translation undergone in China? How did translation motivations in different periods shape the choice of translation strategies? What difficulties does current ice hockey terminology translation face, and what paths can solve them? The theory of medio-translatology and the framework of translation norms can provide a perspective for examining the above questions, setting this study apart from technical research on translation practice. By examining the century-long evolution of ice hockey terminology in China from the perspective of translation norms of national institutions, this thesis offers practical value for exploring feasible paths for introducing and disseminating the ice hockey system.

2. A Framework for analyzing translation norms from the perspective of medio-translatology

Medio-translatology, systematically established by Xie Tianzhen, is the product of the cross-fertilization of comparative literature and translation studies. It doesn't focus on the technical question of “how to translate”; rather, it treats translation as a medium of cultural communication and looks at how translated texts are received and exert influence in different cultural contexts, including their “creative treason”^[3]. In this sense, medio-translatology explains “why translation is cross-cultural communication,” while the theory of translation norms reveals “how this communication is organized and how it takes effect.” The translation norms of national institutions are divided into three categories^[4]: motivation norms concern the fundamental purpose and starting point of translation; process norms include both the people involved in the translation activity and the material process of production; and product norms cover what texts are chosen for translation and how they are translated. Combined, the two frameworks provide theoretical tools for analyzing the evolution of ice hockey terminology translation in different historical periods.

Taking ice hockey terminology translation as an example, when rendering but-ending, elbowing, and kicking, the translator needs both a command of ice hockey rules and familiarity with Chinese ways of expression. This reflects how the translator's competence, as a factor within process norms, constrains the quality of translation. Terms such as interference, period, and hat-trick have had different renderings in different periods and different texts, and this is precisely the result of translation norms at work in medio-translatological practice. The choice of translation strategy determines the final form of a rendering, which in turn shapes the formation and dissemination of an ice hockey terminology system. From the perspective of medio-translatology, studying the translation norms of national institutions is equivalent to studying the various norms that constrain the production of texts, which offers an operable analytical aspect for the historical examination of ice hockey terminology translation.

3. Historical evolution of ice hockey terminology translation

The historical evolution of ice hockey terminology translation can be examined along three normative

aspects: motivation, process and product. From the perspective of motivation norms, the translation of ice hockey terminology has served different communication goals at different historical stages ^[5]. During the Republic of China period, the aim of translation was to help Chinese elites understand and take part in the sport, which belongs to a stage of “knowledge introduction.” In the 1950s, during the period of Sino-Soviet sports exchange, Soviet ice hockey terms were brought in systematically through Soviet experts stationed in China; renderings such as “shou fa xi” (penalty box) and “zheng qiu quan” (face-off circle) echoed the discourse system of socialist sports at the time, which stressed discipline, and the motivation of translation shifted toward “political identity.” In the contemporary period, the translation of ice hockey terms mainly serves the language needs of international exchange and the Winter Olympics, with the motivation featuring both “international communication” and “discourse construction” at the same time. The 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics promoted “two-way translation” of ice hockey terms, marking a shift for Chinese ice hockey from being a rule receiver to being a discourse constructor.

From the perspective of product norms, the translation of ice hockey terminology as a whole has moved from foreignization to domestication. Taking the name of the sport as an example, “ice hockey” was mostly translated as “冰上曲棍球” (hockey on the ice) between 1910 and 1920, a descriptive rendering that borrowed the familiar term “hockey” and added “on the ice” to lower the barrier of understanding. In the 1930s and 1940s, both “冰球” and “冰上曲棍球” were in use; after 1950, “冰球” became the standard rendering, completing the shift from a phrase to a two-character word. At the level of equipment terms, “puck” was mostly transliterated as “帕克” in the 1920s and 1930s, keeping the sound of the source word; from 1940 to 1960 it changed to the free translation “冰球,” the same form as the sport’s name, reflecting the strategic move from foreignization to domestication. At the level of rule terms, “offside” was first translated literally as “越界” (crossing the line), and later borrowed the existing football term “越位”, completing a shift from word-for-word rendering to functional equivalence. Each adjustment of a rendering is a cultural negotiation the translator makes between “staying faithful to the source language” and “serving the local audience.”

From the perspective of process norms, ice hockey translation is constrained by the participants in the translation activity and by their material production processes. Early ice hockey translation was mostly done by foreign residents and by teachers and students of church schools; the translators came from varied backgrounds but lacked organization. After the 1950s, state institutions began to organize the translation of ice hockey rules systematically. In 2018, the Chinese Ice Hockey Association set up a translation working group and invited referees working in the field and translation experts to form an expert panel responsible for translating and proofreading the Official Playing Rules of the International Ice Hockey Federation, which was published with the authorization of the International Ice Hockey Federation ^[2]. This practice shows that the involvement of professional translators and an organized workflow are the key to the quality of ice hockey terminology translation. Translation by state institutions for foreign audiences is highly organized, and the cooperation between local translators and expert translators from outside plays a key role in translation quality. However, existing research has not yet examined the backgrounds, differing views, and working mechanisms of the translation subjects in a systematic way. So research at the process-norm level remains weak.

4. Current practical dilemmas in ice hockey terminology translation

Although ice hockey terminology translation has achieved remarkable progress in its historical development, it still faces multiple dilemmas.

First, terminology translations lack uniformity. Ice hockey translation requires proficiency in a large number of professional terms. Yet, these terms haven't yet formed a unified and standardized translation system in the Chinese context ^[2]. Taking "penalty killing" as an example, current translations include "defensive penalty killing", "playing shorthanded", and "playing shorthanded with fewer players", without a unified standard. Translation selection should follow two criteria ^[4]: first, the work should be suitable for external publicity; second, the work should be excellent and of high quality. Contemporary ice hockey terminology translation likewise needs to establish similar screening criteria to ensure the standardization and authority of translated terms. In 2023, the State Administration for Market Regulation approved and issued 11 national standards for ice and snow sports, including the "Evaluation Specification for the Level of Mass Ice Hockey Sports". These standards make unified provisions on venue equipment, personnel, competition rules, technical movements, and competition results to provide policy support for terminology standardization. However, the review and approval of specific translated terms is still underway.

Second, there is a structural shortage of translation talent. Besides understanding the history of the sport, ice hockey translators must also use foreign languages to browse overseas websites and pay attention to the current situation and management models of leading ice hockey nations. Translators of professional sports texts need an in-depth understanding of the rules of the sport ^[6]. However, talents who combine both professional ice hockey knowledge and foreign language translation ability are extremely scarce. This shortage is related to the problem of non-uniform terminology, because without a unified standard, even skilled translators cannot ensure consistency. A telling counterexample warns of the serious consequences of non-uniform terminology: before the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics, the North and South Korean women's ice hockey teams encountered serious communication barriers during their first joint training session. South Korean players relied on English loanwords, while North Korean players used their own self-created Korean terms. Even though a terminology comparison table was distributed beforehand, terms were still mixed and coordination was hindered. This case demonstrates that terminology standardization is by no means optional, but rather a fundamental project that determines the development of the sport.

Third, the collaborative mechanism among translation entities isn't well established. Ice hockey terminology translation involves multiple types of texts and translation subjects. When the Chinese Ice Hockey Association compiled the "Official Ice Hockey Rules of the International Ice Hockey Federation" in 2018, it set up a team of industry referees and translation experts. The referees were responsible for accurately grasping the original meaning of the rules, while the translation experts were responsible for rendering them into standard Chinese expressions. The two worked in a division of labor. After the three stages of discussion, translation and review, the final version was authorized and published by the International Ice Hockey Federation. However, this collaborative model has not been institutionalized or regularized, and it lacks a stable mechanism for multi-party cooperation.

5. Approaches to translating ice hockey terminology

To address the above dilemmas, three approaches may help solve the problem of terminology translation.

First, we should shift from "language conversion" to "cultural negotiation" and adopt a translation

concept oriented toward communication effectiveness. Ice hockey terminology translation should give priority to communication effect rather than mechanically pursuing “literal equivalence” with the original. For example, translating “face-off” literally as “面向开球” (face opening the play) doesn’t fit Chinese sports expression habits; the translator adopted the free translation “开球” (kickoff) or “争球” (face-off), giving up the literal image of “face” but accurately conveying the functional meaning of restarting the play, which is precisely a choice oriented toward communication effect. Every adjustment of a translated name isn’t a casual language choice but a cultural negotiation made by the translator to improve acceptance among Chinese audiences in different historical contexts. The ultimate goal of ice hockey terminology translation is not merely code-for-code correspondence but to make terms understandable and acceptable in the Chinese context to serve the communication goals of a particular period.

Second, we should build a hierarchical terminology system and adopt differentiated translation strategies for different types of terms. Core rule terms should retain their Chinese translations to ensure the continuity and stability of the terminology system. Take “offside” as an example: the term was literally translated as “越界” in 1930 and gradually settled into “越位”, and it has been widely accepted by the Chinese ice hockey community, so it should not be changed lightly. Rule terms such as “boarding”, “high-sticking,” and “cross-checking” also need unified and standardized translations. Technical action terms can follow a dual strategy of “English + Chinese explanation”: retain English in professional training contexts to stay consistent with international ice hockey terminology, while using Chinese translations in media reports and mass communication. For example, “power play” is often used directly in English in professional training but translated as “多打少” in media reports, which ensures both the precision of professional communication and the understanding of mass communication. Terms with Chinese characteristics should be actively translated outward. The 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics promoted the outward translation of Chinese-specific concepts such as “雪童”, marking a shift in Chinese ice hockey from a rule acceptor to a discourse constructor^[2]. Concepts reflecting Chinese ice hockey practice, such as the “体教融合” (integration of sports and education) training model and “冰雪进校园” (ice and snow into schools), should also gradually establish standardized English translated names and take part in building the international ice hockey discourse.

Third, we should establish a mechanism for cultivating interdisciplinary translation talents and for multi-stakeholder collaboration. On the one hand, an “ice hockey + translation” talent training mechanism should be set up to provide translation training for retired athletes and coaches with ice hockey experience, while foreign language students are encouraged to take internships in ice hockey clubs and associations. Ice hockey translation talents must have the awareness and ability to keep learning and to follow changes in international ice hockey rules and terminology updates. On the other hand, a multi-stakeholder collaborative translation team should be formed as three expert groups. A “project expert group”, comprising professional players, coaches and referees, takes charge of the professional review of terminology. A “language expert group”, made up of translation teachers and scholars, is responsible for the normative check of translations. A “communication expert group”, consisting of overseas sinologists and experts from the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF), assesses the international acceptance of the terms. The three groups work together to ensure the professionalism, standardization and communication power of ice hockey terminology translation. It is suggested that the Chinese Ice Hockey Association, together with the General Administration of Sport of China and universities, set up an expert committee for approving ice hockey terms, which would

review translated names in a unified way and regularly publish a Standardized Translated Names of Ice Hockey Terms, while building a feedback mechanism on the use of translated names for timely revision and improvement.

6. Conclusion: Theoretical implications and research prospects of ice hockey translation and dissemination

The century-long evolution of ice hockey terminology reflects a profound proposition: when a Western sport enters China, translation takes on not only the function of naming terms, but also the negotiation and reconstruction of cultural identity. From “帕克” to “冰球”, from “越界” to “越位”, behind every adjustment of a translation name lies the weighing and choice between “being faithful to the source language” and “serving the local context” in Chinese sports discourse. The coexistence of early translation names such as “冰上曲棍球” and “帕克” during the Republic of China period reflects the respect and imitation of Western rules in early translation practice. The introduction of the name “受罚席” in 1950 echoed the socialist sporting system’s emphasis on disciplinary discourse. The finalization of contemporary names such as “越位” and “多打少” marks the shift of Chinese ice hockey discourse from passive acceptance to active construction. This evolution shows that the translation of ice hockey terminology is not an isolated act of language conversion, but a cultural practice embedded in a specific historical context.

From the perspective of translation norms theory, the evolution of ice hockey terminology translation can be understood as a three-dimensional interactive mechanism comprising motivation, process and product: motivation norms drive the selection of translation strategies, process norms constrain the ways in which translation subjects collaborate, and product norms are embodied in the final form of the translated names. The introduction of this analytical framework reveals the evolutionary logic of ice hockey translation from “passive introduction” to “active negotiation”, and simultaneously verifies the applicability of translation norms theory in the field of sports.

Research on the translation of sports terminology shouldn’t stop at the technical discussion of “how to translate”, but should go deeper into the cultural reflection on “why it is translated in this way”. The case of ice hockey shows that translation norms theory provides an operable analytical framework for understanding the translation mechanism in the process of localizing Western sports culture. On this theoretical basis, this thesis further proposes the core idea of “from language conversion to cultural negotiation”, and builds a solution path around three principles: communication effect, layered strategy and multiple subjects. Thus, this solution path offers a theoretical reference for the practical difficulties in translating ice hockey terminology. In the current context of intensifying tension between globalization and localization, the construction of Chinese sports discourse calls for both respecting the local translated names formed through historical accumulation and participating in the dialogue of the international terminology system with an open attitude. From the cross-disciplinary perspective of knowledge translation and area studies, the translation and dissemination of ice hockey terminology is not only a cross-lingual flow of sports knowledge, but also a microcosm of regional cultural interaction, discourse power negotiation, and the construction of a national knowledge system. Future research may extend to a comparative study of terminology translation and dissemination in other winter sports, or to a corpus-based quantitative analysis of the diachronic change of ice hockey terminology translated names, so as to deepen the understanding of the evolution of norms in sports translation.

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