

# Translation Study on “Common Agenda Summary” Based on Skopos Theory

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**Abstract**—As a form of language communication, translation is a complex process involving multiple choices. In this process, the determination of choice and purpose is influenced and restricted by many factors. Skopos theory deems that the purpose of translation is the primary factor that determines the process of translation. “Our Common Agenda” is a report presented by Antonio Guterres, the ninth Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN), in September 2021, outlining the vision and priorities of the UN in the coming years. It is important to inform member states of the plans, initiatives and priorities the UN, and to push countries to work together to achieve common goals. “Our Common Agenda” has been translated into many languages, including Arabic, Chinese, French, Russian and Spanish. Based on the three basic rules of Skopos theory, the paper analyzes the Chinese translation of the summary of “Our Common Agenda” and finds that the translation is not only matched with the original text but also highly readable to the target audience. Therefore, when translating United Nations reports, the purpose of the translation should be clear. Under the guidance of the Skopos theory, appropriate strategies and methods should be used to realize the communicative function of translation, so that China can better understand the world and make greater contribution to the peaceful development of the world.

**Keywords**—Skopos theory, United Nations report, “Our Common Agenda”

## I. INTRODUCTION

As linguistic communication, translation is a complex process involving multiple choices. In this process, the determination of choice and purpose is influenced and restricted by many factors, which may come from the language differences within the text, but also from the outside of the text, including power will, ideology, interest drive, and use of the text [1].

In 1984, Vermeer and Reiss wrote the General Foundations of Translation Theory, and Skopos theory of translation took shape. They propose that translation is not only a linguistic process, but also the activity of transferring verbal and non-verbal communication symbols from one language to another. Therefore, translation is a human act, and any act has a purpose. Vermeer believes that the primary factor determining the process of translation is the purpose of the translation. The purpose determines that the translator must clearly understand and choose a translation strategy [2].

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The United Nations (UN) is an international organization established in 1945 to promote global cooperation, peace, and security. The UN has 193 member states, representing a diverse range of cultures, languages, and political systems. As the official language of the UN, English is the primary means of communication among the member states. However, the majority of the member states are non-English speaking countries, which poses significant challenges to effective communication and cooperation among them [3]. To overcome these linguistic and cultural barriers, the websites of the UN were translated into multiple languages, including Arabic, Chinese, French, Russian, and Spanish.

“Our Common Agenda” is a report presented by the UN Secretary-General that outlines the vision and priorities of the UN for the upcoming years. The report was published in September 2021 and provides a roadmap for the member states to address the current global challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and the digital divide. “Our Common Agenda” was translated into multiple languages, including Arabic, Chinese, French, Russian, and Spanish.

The report outlines the plans, initiatives, and priorities of the UN for the upcoming years and is an essential document for the member states to understand the activities and objectives of the UN. The report of the UN Secretary-General has important guiding significance on the issues concerning education reform, lifelong learning, sustainable development, digital cooperation, etc. Therefore, the translation study of the report of the UN Secretary-General is conducive to improving its translation strategy, making the report of the UN Secretary-General more acceptable to Chinese readers, and thus promoting the implementation of UN initiatives. It provides great value for lifelong education and other aspects in China, such as museum construction and open-source digital education tools, etc. However, the translation of the report is a complex process that involves various linguistic, cultural, and political factors that impact the communicative effectiveness of the translated text.

This paper aims to examine the Chinese translation of the report of the UN Secretary-General from the perspective of Skopos theory, which focuses on the translation of the

summary of “Our Common Agenda” that was published on the official website.

## II. SKOPOS THEORY

Functionalism is a translation theory that emphasizes the communicative function of language and the context in which it is used. According to functionalism, translation should be guided by the communicative purpose of the source text and the needs of the target audience. The role of the translator is to ensure that the translated text conveys the same meaning and effect as the source text while taking into account the linguistic and cultural differences between the source and target languages.

The German functionalist Skopos theory, which emerged and developed in the 1970s, is mainly based on the theory of text types and translation criticism of Katharina Rice Reiss, the Skopos theory of translation of H. Vermeer and the model of text analysis represented by Nord, among which Skopos theory of translation of Vermeer is the most influential core theory.

The Skopos theory was initially proposed by Hans J. Vermeer and developed in the late 1970s. “Skopos” means aim or purpose in Greek. Vermeer put forward the Skopos theory in translation, aiming to introduce cross-cultural communication theory into translation studies, expand the horizon of translation studies, emphasize the role of Skopos theory, and believe that the purpose determines the translation strategy. Skopos Theory points out that the highest principle of translation is “Skopos rule” [4].

In his theoretical framework, Vermeer stated that the most important determinant of translation purpose is the audience. They are the intended recipients of the target text and have specific knowledge, psychological expectations and communicative needs which are influenced by culture [5]. Skopos theory takes the criterion of purpose as the supreme criterion. In this way, the translator chooses the translation strategy or translation method to achieve the translation purpose, which itself becomes one of the translation purposes in Skopos theory [6]. Therefore, Skopos theory in translation is a deconstruction model that takes translation as the entry point and focuses on the functionality and practicability of translation.

Skopos theory holds that translation is a process that has a purpose or aim and is directed at the reader of a text, which is also the creation of a target text fulfilling the target purpose in a target set. In Skopos theory, the source is a provision of information, which the translator transforms into a provision of information for the target readers [7]. Thus, the choice of translation strategy depends on the aims of the translated text to produce a better functional text. In the frame sense of this theory, one of the most important factors defining the purpose of a translation is the expected receiver or reader of the target text. The theory focuses above all on the purpose of the translation, which determines the translation methods and strategies that are to be employed in order to produce a functionally adequate result.

According to Vermeer and following experts in translation theory, Skopos theory has three main rules: 1) Skopos rule means that the translation is measured by its purposes, 2) coherence rule holds that the target text must be coherent with the settings and circumstances of the target readers, and

3) fidelity rule means that the translated version and the source text must be coherent [8]

### A. Skopos Rule

The Skopos is the purpose or aim of the translation. According to the Skopos theory, the Skopos is the most significant element that determines the translation strategy and the linguistic and cultural choices made by the translator. The Skopos can be defined by the commissioning agent (the person or organization that requests the translation) or by the translator.

From the perspective of Vermeer, translation is a human action. While every human action is purpose-driven, translation is purpose-driven. Therefore, in translating, translation purpose prevails over everything. Unlike conventional translation theories which put an emphasis either on fidelity or equivalence or the response of the readers or the functions of source text intended by its author, Skopos theory postulates that the Skopos of the target text decides how the translation should be made. The target text is an answer to why the source text is translated and what results are expected from the translation among the receivers. In this sense, whatever translation methods or strategies a translator may adopt, Skopos is their supreme goal. Vermeer claimed that every text is produced for a given purpose and should serve that purpose. The Skopos rule are as follows: translate in such a way that enables the text to function in the occasion in which it is used and with the people who want to use it and exactly in the way they want it to function.

### B. Coherence Rule

Skopos theory focuses above all on the purpose of the translation, which determines the translation methods and strategies that are to be employed in order to produce an adequately functional result. This result is the target text, which Vermeer calls the *translatum* [9]. Skopos is not the only one rule a *translatum* should follow. There are two other rules: the coherence rule and the fidelity rule.

The coherence rule, also called intertextual coherence, means the target text should make sense within its own language environment and must be interpreted as coherent with the target text receiver’s situation. A successful communicative interaction could only be possible when targeted receivers find the target text acceptable, meaningful and understandable. The information presented by the target text should be compatible with the language context of targeted readers.

According to the Skopos theory, the translator should ensure that the translation is coherent with the Skopos and that it is appropriate for the target audience. The translator should also consider the linguistic and cultural differences between the source and target languages and ensure that the translation is comprehensible and culturally appropriate.

### C. Fidelity Rule

While the coherence rule highlights the relationship between the target text and the targeted context, the fidelity rule focuses on the relationship between target text and source text. The fidelity rule stipulates that source text should be taken into consideration when target text is produced. A target text, if not required by Skopos and coherence rules, should show fidelity to the source text. To some extent, the

fidelity rule bears some resemblance to the claim that translation should be faithful in some traditional translation theories except that the degree or the form of fidelity in Skopos theory changes with Skopos [10].

According to the Skopos theory, the translator should be loyal to the Skopos and ensure that the translation meets the needs and expectations of the commissioning agent and the target audience. However, the translator should also be loyal to the source text and ensure that the translation is faithful to the original.

### III. UNITED NATIONS REPORT

Although the UN report is not legally binding, it has politically and even legally significant meaning. What makes the UN report politically significant is the participation of indigenous peoples in its negotiation as well as the universality of its acceptance. Representatives of indigenous peoples actively participated in the draft process of the UN report and many of their voices were incorporated into it.

#### A. "Our Common Agenda"

In the declaration on the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations, Member States requested that the Secretary-General provide recommendations to advance "Our Common Agenda" and to respond to current and future challenges. The Secretary-General issued a report entitled "Our Common Agenda" on September 2021, which, among others, reinforces the role of the United Nations as a place of choice for the development of international law, also putting in context the role and specific prerogatives of the Secretary-General in the promotion of international law. The declaration and "Our Common Agenda" have also presented an opportunity to counter sentiments regarding a supposed general decline in respect for international law.

In the context of the report of the UN Secretary-General, functionalism is particularly relevant because the report has a specific communicative purpose and is intended for a diverse range of audiences. The report aims to inform the member states about the plans, initiatives, and priorities of the UN and to encourage them to work together to achieve common goals. Therefore, the translation of the report should be guided by the communicative purpose of the report and the needs of the target audience.

#### B. Text Type

Reiss proposes the theory that divides all texts into three informative types based on their main informative functions: informative, expressive, and operative. Reiss gave examples of which texts fell into her three categories, and Chesterman later graphed her categories (see Fig. 1). Informative text mainly shows facts, information, views, etc., while its language has strong logic. Expressive text is used to express the feelings and attitudes of the sender towards people and things, while its language has aesthetic characteristics. Operative text aims to infect and persuade the reader [11].

It can be reflected from the figure that reference works are the most typical informational text, poetry is the most expressive, and advertising is the most operative type. Between reference work, poetry, and advertising, there are several types of text that have multiple functions. For

example, biographies may be informative and expressive, and sermons may be informative and expressive. Although many texts have multiple functions, they always have primary and secondary functions. Reiss argues that translation methods should vary according to the type of text [12]. Mundy points out that the importance of Reiss's theory is that it goes beyond the level of pure language, beyond the words on paper and their meaning, and broadens the horizon to the communicative purpose of translation.



Fig. 1. The types of texts proposed by Reiss.

It is clear that reports belong to informational text, which mainly exhibits facts, information, and views. Thus, the text type of "Our Common Agenda" is informational text.

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### A. Skopos Rule in the Summary of "Our Common Agenda"

1) Based on acceptability in the language of the target audience

##### a) Voice

There is a difference in the voice of the source language and the target language. Chinese prefers the active voice while English prefers the passive voice, which is a big difference between Chinese and English. Such as:

Source Text 1: These challenges can only be addressed by an equally interconnected response, through reinvigorated multilateralism and the United Nations at the centre of our efforts [13].

Target Text 1: 唯有通过重振多边主义并以联合国为中心开展我们的各项工作，采取同样相互关联的对策，方能应对这些挑战。

In this example, the original English text uses the passive voice, while the target text uses the active voice. The subject of the source text is "these challenges", while the subject of the target is changed from object to person. This processing method can better conform to the language habits of the target language, and enhance the readability of the translation.

##### b) Idiom

Source Text 2: One message rang through loud and clear: the choices we make, or fail to make, today could result in further breakdown, or a breakthrough to a greener, better, safer

future.

Target Text 2: 一个讯息振聋发聩：我们今天是作出选择，还是不作出选择，结果可能截然不同：进一步走向崩溃，或者取得突破，走向更绿色、更美好、更安全的未来。

Source Text 3: The choice is ours to make; but we will not have this chance again.

Target Text 3: 是否作出选择，取决于我们自己；但机不可失，时不再来。

In these two examples, the target text adopts four Chinese four-character idioms, including “振聋发聩”, “截然不同”, “机不可失” and “时不再来”, which are more acceptable to the habits of the target audience.

### c) Cohesion

In *Cohesion in English*, Halliday and Hasan divided English cohesive devices into two broad categories: method of grammar and method of vocabulary. The cohesion of grammar mainly includes reference, substitution, ellipsis, etc. [14, 15].

Source Text 4: Increasingly, people are turning their backs on the values of trust and solidarity in one another – the very values we need to rebuild our world and secure a better, more sustainable future for our people and our planet.

Target Text 4: 人们正在日益背弃相互信任和团结互助的价值观，而这些价值观正是我们重建世界、为民众和地球确保一个更美好、更可持续的未来所需要的。

In the theory of discourse analysis, reference includes personal reference, demonstrative reference and comparative reference. Personal reference is the cohesive device that plays the role of using a pronoun to refer to the noun that appears in the context, which is more frequent used in English than in Chinese. In source Text 4, “their” refers to “people” in the preceding text, and “our” refers to “we” in the preceding text. However, in the target text, these words were not translated directly. Instead, the reference relations are indicated in the context, which is more corrected to the habits of Chinese readers.

### d) Sentence length

Source Text 5: This common agenda is our road map to recapture this positive spirit and begin rebuilding our world and mending the trust in one another we need so desperately at this moment in history.

Target Text 5: 本共同议程是我们的路线图，指引我们重拾这一积极精神，着手重建我们的世界，修复彼此间的信任，我们在当下的历史时刻尤其迫切需要这种信任。

It is obvious that Source Text 5 is a coherent long sentence, while Target Sentence 5 is divided into several short sentences guided by verbs, making the target text more readable to the audience.

### 2) Based on the cultural acceptability of the target audience

There are cultural differences between the East and West. People with different language and cultural backgrounds may have completely different understandings of the same thing. Therefore, it is significant to accurately convey the meaning of the report to the target audience of China.

Source Text 6: Last year, on the occasion of the seventy-fifth

anniversary of the United Nations, Member States agreed that our challenges are interconnected, across borders and all other divides.

Target Text 6: 去年，在联合国成立七十五周年之际，会员国一致认为，我们的挑战是相互关联的，跨越国界和所有其他界线。

In Target Text 6, “the seventy-fifth anniversary” was translated into “成立七十五周年”. “周年” means a full year, which is a precise concept of time in Chinese. Thus, the target text conforms to the language habit of Chinese, which is more receptive to the target audience.

### B. Coherence Rule in the Summary of “Our Common Agenda”

English and Chinese belong to different language families, while Chinese belongs to Sino-Tibetan, and English belongs to Indo-European; These two languages are very different in language features and structure. In order to resolve these differences and make communication smoother, translators have the responsibility to follow the coherence rule in the process of translation.

Source Text 7: For 75 years, the United Nations has gathered the world around addressing global challenges: from conflicts and hunger, to ending disease, to outer space and the digital world, to human rights and disarmament.

Target Text 7: 七十五年来，联合国把全世界召集到一起，应对全球性挑战：从冲突和饥饿，到消灭疾病，到外层空间和数字世界，再到人权和裁军。

Chinese pays less attention to tenses, while English does the opposite. Therefore, the translator has the responsibility to adjust the tenses in accordance with the principle of coherence in translation. Source Text 7 adopts the present perfect tense because it contains the achievements of the UN over the past seventy-five years. However, in Target Text 8, the present perfect tense was transformed into the simple present tense. Otherwise, the target audience could hardly understand the text.

Besides, there are differences in the arrangement of information between Chinese and English. Chinese is a paratactic language, while English is a hypotactic language. Therefore, when translating long sentences of “Our Common Agenda”, it is necessary to rearrange the order of some information to make it conform to Chinese logic, and also make the sentences more compact and coherent.

Source Text 8: Second, now is the time to renew the social contract between Governments and their people and within societies, so as to rebuild trust and embrace a comprehensive vision of human rights.

Target Text 8: 第二，现在是时候重续政府与民众之间和社会内部的社会契约，以重建信任，拥抱全面的人权愿景。

Source Text 9: Fourth, now is the time to correct a glaring blind spot in how we measure economic prosperity and progress.

Target Text 9: 第四，现在是时候纠正正在经济繁荣和进步的计量办法中存在的一个显眼盲点。

It is clear that the position of the predicates in Source Text

8 and Source Text 9 was moved to the end of the sentence. After adjusting the order of information, the translation text is more fluent and easier to be accepted by the target language readers.

### C. Fidelity Rule in the Summary of “Our Common Agenda”

The rule of fidelity is to make the translation closely match the original text. “Our Common Agenda” plays an important role in transmitting the plans, initiatives, and priorities of the UN, so the original information needs to be conveyed accurately through translation. At the same time, the translation must closely fit the original.

Since the original language of the report is English, there will be many expressions with English habits, which is not easy for Chinese people to understand. In this case, it is necessary to adopt the appropriate adjustment during translation.

Source Text 10: We are at an inflection point in history.

Target Text 10: 我们正处于历史转折的紧要关头。

In Target Text 10, the translation adds the word “紧要关头” to emphasize the importance of this historical time.

Source Text 11: In our biggest shared test since the Second World War, humanity faces a stark and urgent choice: a breakdown or a breakthrough.

Target Text 11: 在我们自第二次世界大战以来遭遇的最大共同考验中，全人类面临一个严峻而紧迫的抉择：是走向崩溃，还是取得突破。

In Target Text 11, after adding the verbs, “breakdown” and “breakthrough” in the source text were translated to “走向崩溃” and “取得突破”，which makes the translation more consistent with the original meaning.

It is very consistent with the characteristics of Chinese, both clear and concise, and some explanatory content is added to the translation. The processing method of the translation makes the translation faithful to the original text in both the surface and deep meaning, and the degree of faithfulness is determined by the translation purpose and the translator’s understanding of the original text.

## V. CONCLUSION

“Our Common Agenda” is of great significance in informing the member states about the plans, initiatives, and priorities of the UN and encouraging them to work together to achieve common goals. After analyzing the content of the original text and the translation of the summary of “Our Common Agenda”, and combining the three basic rules of Skopos theory, this paper finds that the translation and the original text have been closely matched, and the readability of the translation has been greatly improved. Therefore, the purpose of translation should be clearly defined in the translation of the report of the UN. Guided by Skopos theory, appropriate strategies and methods should be used to realize the communicative function of the translated text, so that China can better understand and make further contributions

to the world.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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