

A Contrastive Study of Multimodal Advertising in China-foreign Automobile Enterprises and the Translation Strategies

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Abstract

China's automobile production and sales have ranked first worldwide for 12 consecutive years, but the automobile industry is still in an embarrassing situation of "big but not strong." Its brand value is much lower than that of the internationally renowned automobile manufacturers. By comparing and contrasting the design features, marketing techniques, and creative strategies of graphic advertisements from the perspective of multimodality and design science, the present study is intended to help Chinese auto companies better understand the advertising design of international auto brands (including language-level rhetorical techniques and visual modal graphic design) and marketing strategies (brand highlighting, functional characteristics highlighting, and corporate social responsibility highlighting), and promote Chinese enterprises to build their brands and "go global."

Keywords: auto enterprises; multimodal advertising; brand image; translation strategy; "go global"

1. Introduction

According to the data released by the Association of Automobile Manufacturers, China's auto sales in 2021 totaled 23.489 million cars, an increase of 1.6% over the same period in 2019. Among them, the cumulative sales of new energy vehicles in China were 2.99 million units, a yearly increase of 121.1%. The growth continues, and the market potential is enormous. It can be seen that despite the continuous impact of the epidemic, the automotive industry (especially new energy vehicles) has a bright future, providing a dream opportunity for the rise of second-tier companies. At the same time, the automobile industry is full of competition. For example, Tesla Motors, a rising star in the same line of business, has developed a strong interest in the new energy vehicle by virtue of its development "Master Plan" ^① and amidst the waves of electrification and intelligence of automobiles, under the impact of which both traditional auto companies and new energy vehicles are pouring human and financial resources in auto marketing. Like other industries, automobile marketing strategy determines its marketing value and the survival of the fittest.

Compared with the automobile industry, its academic research lags behind, with some scattered investigations. Take the perspective of translation as an example. By searching "automobile" and "translation" in the Journal Database of China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), we can only find 109 pieces of literature, nearly half of which focused on the translation of automobile brand names (i.e., 45.87%), the others studied automotive English (16.51%), automotive advertisement translation (12.84%), automotive text translation (11.01%), automotive manual translation (8.26%), automotive webpage publication (2.75%) and automotive regulations translation (0.92%). By further analysis, we can find that existing studies focus on the wording and sentences of auto publicity on the mono-language level, with other modes untouched. As Wang (2019, 2022) pointed out, Chinese enterprises' overseas publicity research is fragmented, making the translation projects and practices in the shortage of principles and strategies. Given this, the present study is intended to compare and contrast the features of automobile advertisements from the multimodality perspective and on this basis, explore the translation strategies for Chinese auto companies to "go global." Therefore, the findings would be significant for the marketing and publicizing of auto companies in today's "digital media" ecology and "visual age."

2. Features of Auto Ads

It is found in literature that automobile advertising slogans are concise, vivid and novel in wording, short and symmetrical in sentences, and rich and catchy in rhetoric, but reveal different psychologies and values of Chinese and foreign cultures (Ji, 2017: 73). These language features are the universal features of auto advertising slogans. They are the reflection of the auto marketing in a single mode, but cannot reflect all the features of auto advertising. Wang and Liang (2018: 11) point out the gaps in the translation research of multimodal advertisements, and further analyze the characteristics of multimodal advertisements (including static graphic advertisements and commercial videos). Namely, foreign advertisements employ the unique combination of pictograms and fonts to highlight the attractiveness of the products, and the mix of pictures and texts to pursue an associative and easy-to-remember validity; they also make full use of time and space resources to design engaging scenarios, and create metaphorical tension between pictures and texts to achieve vivid image effects (Wang & Liang, 2018: 12-18).

2.1 A Contrastive Study of Verbal Ads

By building a small-scale corpus of Chinese auto slogans (a total of 3200 characters), we can find that the high-frequency words in the slogans include “bargain (吃亏),” “driving (驾驭),” “technology (科技),” “Chinese road (中国路),” “lines of the car (外型),” “world (世界),” “dynamic (动感),” “movements (动静),” “Life (人生),” “Model (典范),” “Excellent (卓越),” “Luxury (卓越),” among others. We use Tuyue Software to visualize the high-frequency keywords extracted from the database, as shown in Figure 1. It can be seen that driving experience, technology driving, and car appearance are the fundamental aspects highlighted in words. In addition, the Chinese car slogans are typically put in four-character formats or Chinese proverbs, and the Chinese cultural context. For instance, “坐红旗车, 走中国路” (Take Hongqi auto and the Chinese road) and “杰作天成, 一见如故” (An old acquaintance is born to be a masterpiece, VW Golf’s slogan).



Figure 1. A Nephogram of Hi-frequency Characters in Chinese Auto Slogans

Similarly, we build a small-scale corpus of foreign auto slogans (a total of 2400 words). We can find that such high-frequency words as “car,” “new,” “life,” “future,” “road,” “enjoy,” “dynamic,” “beauty,” “technology,” “better,” “never,” “excellent/excellence,” “beyond,” “power,” “performance,” “moment,” “leading,” “control,” and the like. Besides, three classifications of slogan formats can be abstracted here:

(1) To stress the appeal of the brands, “the essence of/the pursuit of/at the heart/director of”

Buick: *In search of excellence.*

Benz CLS: *The essence of the temptation.*

Mazda 6: *Charm of science and technology.*

LEXUS: *The relentless pursuit of perfection.*

Mazda: *Qualities are at the heart of every Mazda.*

Buick: *Full of enthusiasm, determined to forge ahead.*

Hyundai: *The pursuit of excellence to create happiness.*

BMW: *I am the one no one believed, a vision, a dream, a crazy idea.*

Audi A3: *Director of wonderful life. Confident and energetic and dynamic and clear, always the essence of freedom to break the usual driving standards, this is the Audi A3.*

(2) To highlight qualities or features of the product, “with/blend of/together/gathered/and...”

Skoda: *Simple, Smart.*

Toyota: *Farther and more freedom.*

Cadillac: *The strength, speed and luxury blend.*

Buick: *Line with the heart, static and dynamic one.*

Mazda: *Harmony of style and performance set this new Mazda 6.*

Fiat: *Create a new era of Fiat, reborn, menacing, super Leimax 1000.*

Benz CLS: *Free and smooth lines gathered in one place: with your heart.*

Volvo: *Performance and Safety: At Volvo we believe they go very well together.*

Mercedes-Benz: *Agile and flexible, dynamic and excellent demeanor, fully shown between the new C-Class.*

Audi A1: *Audi A1, with small see big. From the small and flexible appearance, to the simple personality of the color equipment; from the dynamic interior of the intelligent load, to the precise and comfortable power control.*

(3) To trigger cognitive or mental vibration, “spirit/determined”

Hyundai: *Managing modern achievement.*

Buick: *Full of enthusiasm, determined to forge ahead.*

Mercedes-Benz: *Engineered to move the human spirit.*

like these ancient buildings, are made with hands, and the brand name on the building (pillar) gives potential buyers the feeling that the brand is as old as the city and it is part of Italian history.



Figure 3. Brand-prominent Feature

2.2.2 Function-foregrounded Features

The brand power is closely related to the characteristic functions of automobiles, and vice versa. To build their brand and company image, many automobile companies highlight specific designs and functions of their products to enhance their distinct advantages. For example, Toyota is famous for its hybrid technology and many models (as a selling point); Honda is well-known for its turbo engine and chassis power technology; Mercedes-Benz and BMW of the German series are a perfect mix of luxury high-end and precision machinery; last but not least, American brands have the advantage of ample space and complete equipment. Take Audi and Mercedes-Benz in the 70 creative car advertisements selected by Design Your Way website as an example; the following analysis is made.



Figure 4. Design-prominent Feature

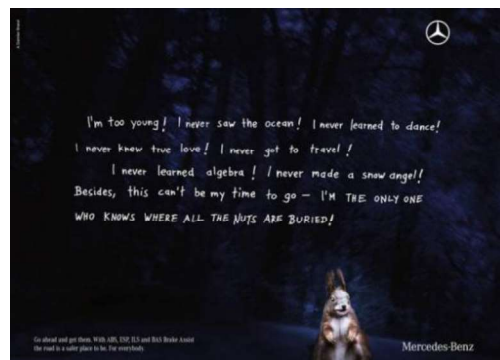


Figure 5. Function-prominent Feature

As one of the representatives of German cars, Audi is often regarded as a successful example of the German machinery industry. As shown in Figure 4, the advertisement for Audi A1 is a graphic with few words. From “A1” in the upper left corner to “End” in the lower right corner, various auto part icons are arranged in an orderly manner, and the text “BIG IDEA CONDENSED” in the middle gives the impression that the car is “condensed” from precision parts and big ideas from beginning to end, thus creating the outstanding simplified design and the structural feature of new Audi’s.

Another case is Mercedes-Benz, shown in Figure 5. It has adopted a different creative approach to marketing its safety technology features. The design of this advertisement is relatively simple, and there are more words: the text is in the tone of a little rabbit in the snowy forest, expressing its wishes, that is, “I’m too young! I haven’t seen the sea! I haven’t learned it yet. Dance! / I don’t know what true love is yet! I haven’t traveled yet! / I haven’t learned algebra yet! I haven’t built a snowman angel yet! / And, I can’t die because only I know where all the nuts are buried I’m too young! I never saw the ocean! I never learned to dance! / I never knew true love! I never got to travel! / I never learned algebra! I never made a snow angel! / Besides, this can’t be my time to go - I’M THE ONLY ONE/WHO KNOW WHERE ALL THE NUTS ARE BURIED!” Also, the smaller font below the picture, like a voice-over, comforts and encourages Bunny or readers: “go, go get the nuts! Equipped with an anti-lock braking system, electronic stability program, intelligent lighting system, and brake assist system, the road is safer. Everyone does. (Go ahead and get them. With ABS, ESP, ILS, and BAS Brake

Assist / the road is a safer place to be. For everybody.)” The advertisement highlights one of the prominent features of Mercedes-Benz, that is, safe driving.

2.2.3 CSR-Highlighting Feature

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is the obligation of an enterprise to maintain and promote social interests in addition to seeking to maximize the rights and interests of owners or shareholders, including humans (such as employees, creditors, and consumers), the environment (e.g., environment, resources, climate, species) and society (e.g., investment, philanthropy, community service). The responsibility of enterprises to the subjects as mentioned earlier is an essential factor that constitutes competitiveness and brand images. As far as the automobile industry is concerned, corporate social responsibility is particularly prominent in the environmental aspect, that is, minimizing the impact of the production and use of automobiles on energy and the environment is an essential manifestation of its social responsibility. For example, Tesla Motors disclosed in its *2020 Environmental, Social and Corporate Governance (ESG) Impact Report* that accelerating the world’s transition to sustainable energy is Tesla’s mission; specifically, in 2020, Tesla has saved a total of 5 million tons of carbon dioxide emissions during the use of cars and solar panels around the world, which has dramatically improved its corporate influence.

Here is an example of a multimodal ad from Fiat. Fiat, the largest automaker in Italy, manufactures one model of Fiat, one breed that focuses on corporate environmental awareness in its marketing ads. As shown in Figure 6, the advertisement picture shows a panda driving a Fiat, with the text “Engineered for a lower impact on the environment / THE LOWEST CO₂ EMISSION CAR RANGE IN EUROPE); “Environmental Impact” and “CO₂ Emissions” in the text activate readers’ associations with the natural environment and animals (such as pandas), showing the environmental concerns during the engineering of the breed.



Figure 6. Corporate Social Responsibility Highlights

Through the analysis of the above advertisements, it can be seen that car manufacturers create corporate images and market different concepts by highlighting different characteristics in their marketing advertisements, either brand image or special functional characteristics, or corporate social responsibility. Unlike single-modal slogans, multimodal advertisements, on the other hand, deepen the reader’s impression of the different characteristics of the autos through the stimulation of the visual image in the interaction between visual and verbal modes. These are significant for the creative design of marketing programs and translation of Chinese automobiles.

3. Strategies for Translating Multimodal Auto Ads

Existing literature on the translations of automobile advertisements can be reviewed and summarized as follows. First, the research object is mostly automobile advertisement slogans, that is, researchers focus on a single mode of language, especially the rhetorical research of automobile advertisement language (see Hu, 2013; Wang, 2021). Second, studies are generally done by drawing on popular translation theories, and the most-cited one is Skopo Theory. Third, most research corpora are often-cited car slogans rather than creative multimodal ads. The present study expands the discussion by employing multimodal theory and translation concepts to explore first-hand multimodal ads. This is for the purpose of research and design to provide reference and inspiration for Chinese auto companies to “go global.”

3.1 Pragmatic Equivalence Principle for Graphical Puns

In our selection of car ads, puns and metaphorical advertisements take the lion’s share. Among them, a pun is a play on words that can produce humorous effects either by using a word that entails two or more meanings, or by exploiting similar sounding words with different meanings. This rhetoric device can leave a deep impression of the brand image and thus urge potential consumers’ desire to buy (Wang, 2021: 62). In English, the word “drive/driven” is often exploited to carry across two meanings. For example, in Ford as “Better ideas. Driven by you,” the word means that ideas come from clients, and cars are created for clients. Also, it is the same in GM’s ad “Drive your passion,” and Ford’s “Everything we

do is driven by you.”

When analyzing the translation of Audi A1 advertising slogans, researchers tend to discuss the text in the monomodal context, explaining that “the small model A1 is a perfect combination of high performance and innovative design. The integration of the compact model and the upgraded standard configuration reflects the excellent design ideas of Audi A1” (i.e., 玲珑小巧的奥迪 A1 是高性能和创新设计的完美结合 in Chinese) (Lu & Wang, 2014: 45). By putting the slogan in the visual-verbal context, we can easily connect the words with the pictorial factors, and we can understand that the “big” in the text modifies the idea or design concept, the “condensed” font is the smallest and placed at the end, and the parts of the car are “compressed” together with the text; so the “condensed” in the multimodal context is a graphic pun, that is, it not only expresses the pragmatic intention of “reducing the integration of auto parts and condensing the design concept,” but also expresses the design concept of “the fusion of language symbols and other graphic symbols” through picture symbols. Therefore, when translating, we should pursue the equivalence of the compounded meaning of graphic, text, and pragmatics, and translate it in its original verbal-visual context. One possible version could be the following one: “大创意 精简至,” which is equivalent to the original slogan in both lingual and pictorial modes.



Figure 7. Transcreation of Multimodal Ad of Audi A1

3.2 Transcreating Principle for Visual Metaphors

Metaphors are often used in advertising, and are generally used as a metaphorical expression (form) in a single-modal slogan. In contrast, multimodal metaphor is a mix of more than one mode, such as verbal-visual combination and verbal-video one. Existing studies have analyzed (multimodal) metaphorical auto advertisements qualitatively, quantitatively, or combined. For example, Gong (2011) investigates conceptual and pictorial metaphors in auto ads, and finds out that they are designed “concisely, exclusively, easy-to-understand and beautiful.” Wang and Xiang (2016) classify 250 pieces of auto print advertisements into seven types, according to source domain (SD), target domain (TD), image (I), and text (T), and conclude that Chinese auto ads employ more SD-T +TD-I, while foreign prints tend to be primarily I+TD graphic metaphors. Based on these findings, Wang and Liang (2018) point out that the translation of metaphorical multimodal advertisements needs to create the metaphorical tension between pictures and texts, to achieve a similar effect of vivid images, namely, transcreation is required.

In 2002, Ford Fusion made its debut at the Geneva Motor Show. It transcended the traditional models of ordinary and small cars by fusing the modern style with spacious interior space, creating the first “Urban Activity Vehicle” (UAV, see Figure 8). In the print ad, we can see the car key looks like a miniature of various buildings in a city, and the words read “The city is in your hands,” forming an image metaphor and belonging to the TD-I + T type (namely, image-target domain graphic and text category metaphor). Translation majors render the slogan into “城市在您的手心里,” and translations like the one mentioned fail to reconstruct the similarity of the imagery meaning creatively. To achieve this, we transcreate the slogan as “福特在手，说走就走” (With a Ford in hand, you can go whenever you like) or “福特座驾，满城度假” (福特座驾，满城度假) by achieving rhythms.



Figure 8. Metaphorical Ad of Ford Fusion

3.3 Recreation Principle for Multi-devices and Multiple Meanings

Verbal-visual advertisements have the features of “prominence, fancy and creativeness” (Wang & Xiang, 2016: 91). To achieve this, advertisement designers use various rhetorical devices and design theories to create. The former includes the combination of various rhetoric, such as pun and oxymoron mentioned above, and pun and metaphor to be discussed below; the latter refers to the integration of specific scenes and product features. Multimodal multi-devices are essentially “a cognitive process of establishing the cross-domain mapping relationship between the source domain and the target domain and completing the meaning representation through the synergy of multiple modal resources” (Zhu, 2020: 93), the translation of which is “a dynamic online processing process” (Xie & Fang, 2021: 86).

Take one of Honda’s ads for example. It is created to promote the engine start-stop tech of one breed (see Figure 9). This advertisement combines the engine start-stop technology with cosmetics, which belongs to the above-mentioned graphic metaphor. In the auto context, the eyelash brush, powder pad, and blush in the picture lose the meaning of cosmetics, but represent the senses of street lights, airbags, and lanes, respectively. The pictures and the text both express the meaning in the target domain (automotive products). Translation majors render it into “停止化妆，安全驾驶，” which is a word-for-word translation and thus neglects the pictorial meaning. Feng (2011: 29) thinks that in advertising, “the meaning of the metaphor is mapped onto the target domain and supplemented by images;” this idea is also suggested by Wang and Xiang (2016). Thus, we can say that the multi-layered meanings of multi-devices and multi-modes are integrated and constructed in the mind of the translator.

In our case, the meaning of the ad comes from the pictures, the text, the font, and even the scenes. Specifically, the words “STOP” and “START” beside the red button trigger our cognition and help us learn that it is the start-stop switch; then, “SAFE” in red is foregrounded and contrasts with the damaged scenes; finally, “MAKE-UP” is the difficulty in understanding and translating the slogan. As the target domain here is the car (driving) rather than cosmetics, the sense related to the cosmetic application is backgrounded. At the same time, that of replacement (i.e., material added to replace material that has been used up) is activated and mapped onto the target domain. Thus, this metaphorical-pun ad carries a warning to drivers (both women and men) and a prominent feature of the brand. So we may translate it as “停下粉饰，‘驶’于安全” to transfer the metaphorical and the pun meaning.

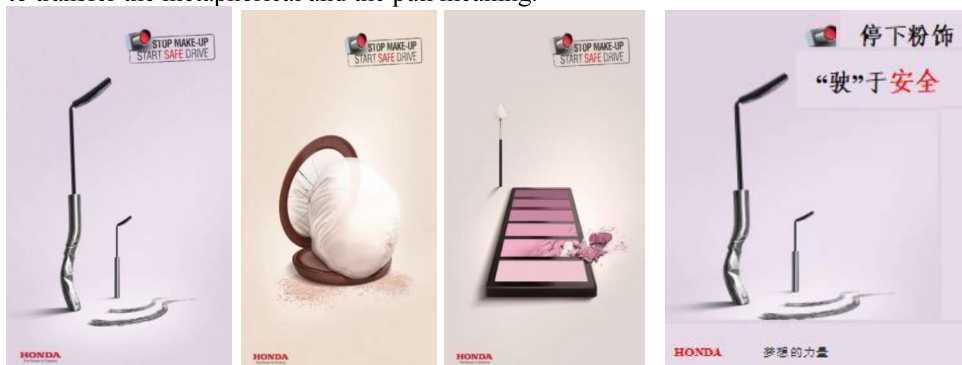


Figure 9. Metaphor-puns in Honda Ad and Its Transcreation

4. Conclusion

China’s automobile industry is booming, but it is in urgent need of going-global and foreign markets. The present study first carries out a comparative and contrastive study of the monolingual and multimodal features of Chinese and foreign car ads. It then proposes several strategies for translating the auto publicity. In addition to verbal-visual ads and the rhetoric analyzed above, other modal synergies and rhetorical devices are open to further research.

Notes:

① In 2006, Elon Musk revealed his “master plan“ for Tesla, a long-term strategy that consists of three steps: (a) Build an expensive sports car named “Roadster”; (b) Use the money earned to build a cheaper car called Model S/X; 3. Use the money earned to build a more economical and popular model named Model 3.

② See <https://www.designyourway>

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