

## SEMANTIC SHIFT OF ABSTRACT NOUNS IN CHINESE DURING TRANSLATION

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the phenomenon of semantic shift in the translation of abstract nouns from Chinese into other languages, with a focus on English and Uzbek. Abstract nouns, being culturally embedded and semantically complex, often undergo transformations in meaning during translation processes. The paper analyzes the linguistic, cultural, and cognitive factors that influence these semantic shifts, illustrates key examples of mistranslations or semantic approximations, and proposes strategies for preserving the original semantic value. The goal is to enhance awareness of semantic loss and cultural distortion in cross-linguistic and intercultural communication.

### **Keywords**

abstract nouns, semantic shift, Chinese, translation studies, cultural semantics, linguistic relativity, equivalence, intercultural communication.

**Introduction.** Translation is not merely a mechanical process of word substitution; it is an intricate cognitive and cultural activity, especially when it involves **abstract nouns**—terms that express intangible concepts such as values, emotions, philosophies, and social constructs. In **Chinese**, abstract nouns often embody deep-rooted **cultural, philosophical, and historical** meanings. When translated into structurally and culturally different languages such as English or Uzbek, these nouns are prone to **semantic shifts**.

The present study investigates how abstract nouns in the Chinese language (中文抽象名词) are semantically altered during translation, the underlying causes of such shifts, and the implications for meaning preservation. It also provides comparative examples and recommends best practices for translators dealing with culturally loaded abstract terms.

**Nature of abstract nouns in Chinese.** In Chinese, abstract nouns are frequently derived from classical texts, philosophical doctrines (e.g., Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism), and collective historical experience. Unlike many Western languages, which rely heavily on morphological derivation, Chinese abstract nouns often result from compounding, metaphorical extension, and conceptual blending.

*Examples of key Chinese abstract nouns:*

- 仁 (rén) – benevolence/humaneness (Confucian ethical concept)
- 道 (dào) – the way, path (Taoist principle)
- 德 (dé) – virtue/moral integrity
- 义 (yì) – righteousness
- 礼 (lǐ) – propriety, ritual, etiquette
- 和谐 (héxié) – harmony
- 自由 (zìyóu) – freedom/liberty
- 信仰 (xìnyǎng) – belief/faith

These words often carry **multiple layers of meaning**, including spiritual, moral, political, and social connotations.

**Semantic shift: definition and types.** Semantic shift refers to the change in meaning that occurs when a word or phrase is translated from one language to another. In the context of abstract nouns, semantic shifts typically result from:

- **Lack of conceptual equivalence** in the target language
- **Cultural or ideological differences**
- **Linguistic constraints or norms**
- **Contextual reinterpretation**

*Types of semantic shifts in translation:*

- **Reduction:** Loss of one or more components of meaning
- **Expansion:** Addition of new interpretative layers
- **Substitution:** Replacing the original concept with a culturally approximate one
- **Distortion:** Significant misrepresentation of the original meaning

**Factors leading to semantic shift in translation**

*Cultural embeddedness*

Chinese abstract nouns are often embedded in a **collective worldview**, shaped by hierarchical social relations, harmony with nature, and duty-based morality. For example:

- 义 (yì) has no exact equivalent in English. It encompasses duty, justice, and righteousness, but filtered through Confucian moral obligation.

When translating into English, "义" might be reduced to "justice" or "righteousness", losing its social and familial context.

#### *Philosophical esymmetry*

Many abstract terms in Chinese arise from unique **philosophical systems** that have no counterparts in Western epistemology. For example:

- **道 (dào)** is often translated as "way" or "path", which misses the metaphysical and cosmological implications central to Taoism.

#### *Lexical constraints*

Target languages may lack **lexical resources** or grammatical flexibility to capture the full nuance of Chinese abstract nouns. For instance:

- **礼 (lǐ)** may be translated as "ritual", but this neglects its connotations of social grace, respect, and hierarchy.

#### *Translator subjectivity*

The translator's background, ideology, or interpretative choices can influence the way abstract nouns are rendered, leading to **bias or simplification**.

### **Case studies: Semantic shifts in practice**

#### *Case 1: 仁 (rén)*

- **Chinese context:** Central Confucian value involving empathy, compassion, and ethical behavior within familial and societal structures.

- **English translation:** Commonly rendered as *benevolence* or *humaneness*.

- **Shift:** *Benevolence* lacks the Confucian hierarchical context and obligation embedded in "仁".

#### *Case 2: 自由 (zìyóu)*

- **Chinese context:** Often used with political or spiritual nuance; evolving in modern Chinese under influence of Western liberal thought.

- **Translation into Uzbek:** "Erkinlik"

- **Shift:** In Uzbek, "erkinlik" may be associated with national independence or physical freedom, while in Chinese, "自由" also involves inner liberation and may have collective overtones.

#### *Case 3: 和谐 (héxié)*

- **Chinese context:** A Confucian and political ideal denoting societal balance, peace, and unity.

- **English translation:** *Harmony*

- **Shift:** While *harmony* captures some meaning, it often lacks the political and social connotations it carries in Chinese government discourse.

### Challenges in translating abstract nouns

- **Untranslatability:** Some terms defy direct translation without long footnotes or cultural commentary.
- **Over-generalization:** Abstract nouns may be reduced to vague, generic terms.
- **Loss of aesthetic/moral force:** The emotive and ethical power of a term in the source language is weakened or neutralized.
- **Reader interpretation:** Target audience may not interpret the translated term as intended due to cultural distance.

### Strategies to preserve semantic integrity. Use of transliteration with explanation

For culturally dense terms like 道 (dào) or 仁 (rén), using pinyin plus a cultural note may preserve nuance. E.g., "dao (道): the cosmic principle of balance and flow in Taoism."

#### Footnotes or Endnotes

Providing brief explanations enhances **semantic transparency**.

#### Cultural Adaptation

In some cases, aligning with a concept in the target culture that shares core features may be more effective than literal translation.

#### Annotated Translations

Using glossaries or side-by-side source-target text with commentary is useful for academic and literary translations.

**Conclusion. Abstract nouns in Chinese pose serious semantic and cultural challenges in translation. Their dense philosophical and historical load, combined with cultural specificity, often results in semantic shifts when transferred to other languages. Understanding the nature of these shifts is essential for achieving accurate, meaningful, and respectful translations.**

Translators must balance **fidelity to meaning** with **accessibility for readers**, employing both linguistic skill and cultural sensitivity. Ultimately, translation of abstract terms should not merely aim for lexical equivalence, but for **conceptual resonance**.

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