

Applying Relevance Theory in Advertisement Translation: A Particular Look into Electronic Product Advertisement

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Abstract

Competition among different electronic product manufacturers has become increasingly fierce, and advertisement translation now significantly influences both product sales and brand image. Relevance Theory, situated within the realm of cognitive pragmatics, demonstrates great compatibility with translation and proves to be effectively applicable. Viewing electronic product advertisement translation through the lens of Relevance Theory, this study regards it as “ostensive-inferential” communication. This study analyzes the advertisement translation of some renowned foreign electronic products and the translation strategies employed. It points out that translators must consider the cognitive environment of target language readers and flexibly adopt translation strategies to help them recognize advertiser’s communicative intention with minimal referencing effort and achieve contextual effects, and concludes that the key to successful translation lies in whether the translation aligns with the principle of optimal relevance.

Keywords: Relevance Theory, translation, electronic product advertisement, optimal relevance

1. Introduction

In the era of globalized trade, where competition among electronic product brands intensifies, advertising stands as a powerful tool for promoting sales. In this context, advertisement translation needs to be effective and accurate to convey the original intention of the advertiser. Successful advertisements can persuade potential consumers to purchase products by using vivid and impressive expressions. However, nowadays, many advertisements are still translated verbatim, which poses difficulties for the audience or readers of the advertisements, making it arduous for them to

be attracted or convinced. The repercussions of improper advertisement translation are far-reaching, leading to potential misunderstandings that can undermine the overall effectiveness of publicity campaigns, yielding unsatisfactory outcomes.

Facing this dilemma, considering the inherent communicative nature of advertising, pragmatics provides a cross-disciplinary perspective, with Relevance Theory being one of the guiding theories in this regard. Advertising transcends simple information transmission; it involves a complex communicative process intertwined with context, culture, and cognitive

factors. In this context, Relevance Theory offers a theoretical foundation to address the contextual challenges in advertising translation. Many scholars have substantiated this point through their research, including Yang (2016), Valdés (2019), Abuarrah and Jarrar (2023), and others. However, the majority of research in this domain has been discussed from a broad perspective, with no dedicated exploration specifically focusing on electronic product advertising. To address this gap, the present study endeavors to delve into this specific realm. This focused exploration aims to contribute insights of how Relevance Theory can be effectively applied in the translation of electronic products advertisements and provide targeted recommendations for enhancing the quality of electronic product advertisement translation. To achieve this goal, the present study selects advertisements from well-known electronic brands as examples, such as Apple, Canon, Samsung, and others. Additionally, this paper analyzes some relatively unsuccessful translation cases to provide counterexamples.

2. Relevance Theory

Relevance Theory was first proposed in 1986 by Deidre Wilson and Dan Sperber. According to Wilson and Sperber (2001: 32), its aim is to “identify underlying mechanisms which are rooted in human psychology, and illustrate the way how human beings communicate with one another”. Although Relevance Theory was not initially developed for translation, it has demonstrated great compatibility with the field. In 1991, German scholar Ernst Gutt recognized the explanatory power of Relevance Theory for translation and subsequently applied it. Gutt systematically explained his ideas in his doctoral thesis *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context*. According to Gutt (2004: 25), as a form of inter-lingual communication, translation can also be seen as ostensive-inferential communication within Relevance Theory.

According to Wilson and Sperber (2001), three principles can be seen as the core of Relevance Theory: Cognitive Environment, Ostensive-Inferential Communication and Optimal Relevance. In the following sections, these three principles will be elaborated upon in detail to enrich the theoretical framework.

2.1 Cognitive Environment

Wilson and Sperber (2001: 39) defines Cognitive Environment as “all the facts that an individual

can perceive or infer: all the facts that are manifest to him” in their work. “To be manifest” means to be “perceptible or inferable”. Cognitive environment consists of two parts: all the facts that an individual is aware of in his physical environment. (Physical environment refers to the part of the human environment that includes purely physical factors) All the facts that he is able to infer, namely, he is capable of becoming aware of based on his available cognition.

As mentioned above, according to Relevance Theory, people’s communication is seen as cognitive activity. When people from different cognitive environment communicate with each other, they make efforts to understand their partner’s cognitive environment, and their cognitive environment intersect. So they share their cognitive environment with each other. Sperber and Wilson (2001: 45) defines “any shared cognitive environment in which it is manifest which people share it” a mutual cognitive environment. We are living in the same physical world, so our cognitive environment overlaps, and we share a lot of information and construct the best possible mental representation of it. For example: “the sky is blue”, “winter is cold”. When people discuss such topics, they easily understand each other’s meaning.

However, it is impossible for people to fully share their cognitive environment. Because “there are differences in our physical environment”, and “people’s cognitive abilities differ from each other” (Wilson & Sperber, 2001, p. 38). Different cognitive environment lead to different cognition and understanding of the same thing or concept. For example, in China, red has the meaning of courage, enthusiasm and joy, so red is often used in weddings and celebrations. While in western countries, red represents danger and evil, and dragons in mythical stories are often red.

Translation is a cross-language communication and a cognitive activity. People from different countries and cultural backgrounds possess diverse cognitive environments. Translators must consider these differences in people’s cognitive environments during the translation process, flexibly adopt translation strategies, and avoid word-for-word translation.

2.2 Ostensive-Inferential Communication

Sperber and Wilson (2001: 46) claims that

“people’s communication is a kind of Ostensive-Inferential Communication”. Human communication consists of two parts: ostension and inference. The meaning of “ostension” is that the speaker makes his information manifest or more manifest to the hearer. While the

meaning of “inference” is that the hearer infers the communicative intention of the speaker from the information he has received in the communicator’s cognitive environment. The Ostensive-Inferential Communication can be illustrated in the following figure:

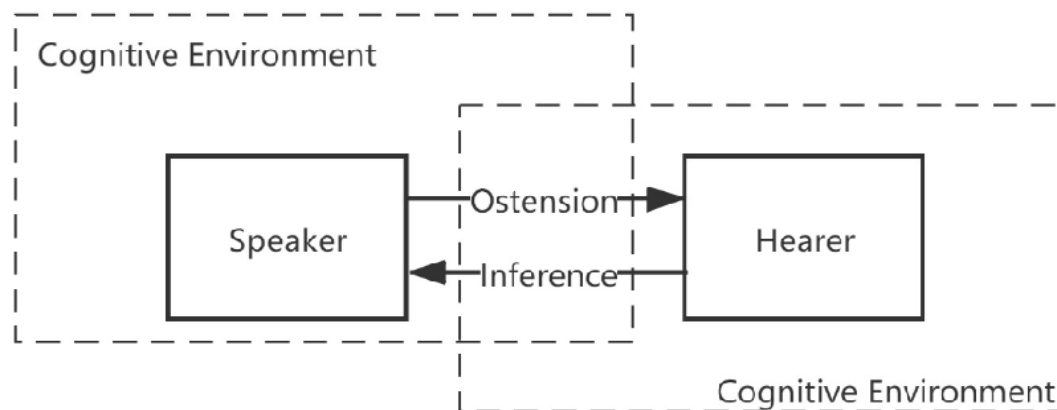


Figure 1. Ostensive-Inferential Communication

Only if the communicative intention is successfully conveyed can an effective and successful communication be achieved. A successful communication helps to enlarge speaker and hearer’s cognitive environment, and through communicating, both of them get new knowledge and information from the other’s cognitive environment.

Translation consists of two communication activities: the communication between the translator and the source language text; the communication between the translator and the target language audience (Wang 2009: 154). In translation, the process of ostensive-inferential still exists, and the translator undertakes the responsibility of double inferences. From the perspective of translator, the source language is a kind of information ostension, the translator

needs to infer its communicative intention through his constructed cognitive environment, in other words, to understand its main idea. In the process of translation, the translator needs to consider the cognitive environment of the target language audience and choose proper translation strategies, which help him to convey the communicative intention. The translated text is a kind of information ostension for the target language audience. Then they derive the translator’s communicative intention through their constructed cognitive environment, which means they can also recognize the communicative intention of the advertiser, and the purpose of translation is realized. The above translation process can be illustrated in the following figure:

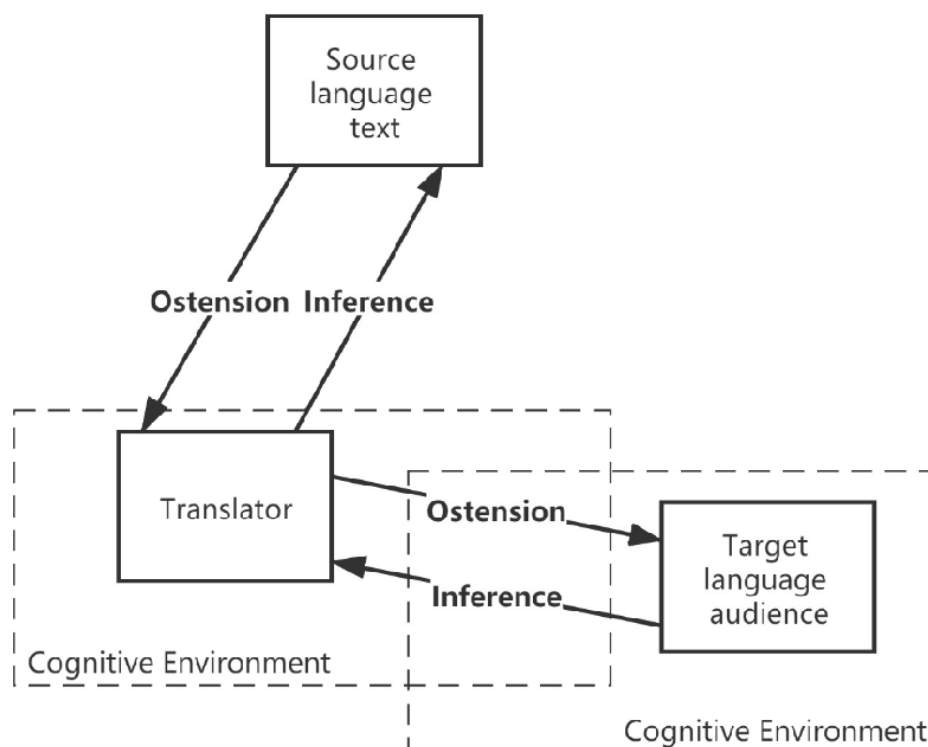


Figure 2. Process of Translation

According to Relevance Theory, the translator plays the most important role in translation activities. Gutt (2004: 164) believes that Translation depends on translator's interpretation of original text, namely, on what the translator considers to be the intended interpretation of the original text.

2.3 Optimal Relevance

A successful verbal communication must follow the principle of optimal relevance. In order to explain optimal relevance, the concepts of "relevance" is first briefly introduced.

Sperber and Wilson defines "relevance" as "the relation between a proposition and a set of cognitive assumptions" (2001: 118), in other words, the ostension information that speaker expresses must be relevant to hearer's assumptions in his cognitive environment. The speaker should "provide information which is relevant to the hearer's cognitive environment to attract the attention of the hearer, so as to help him understand and infer the speaker's intention" (He & Ran, 1999).

They (2001: 122) also claims that "An assumption is relevant in a context if and only if it has some contextual effects in the certain context". Simply put, if the hearer gets effective

contextual effect, then it means that the hearer successfully understands the speaker's communicative intention. The degree of relevance can be measured by the contextual effect, and the more contextual effects the hearer achieve, the more successful a verbal communication will be. If the hearer gets the best contextual effect with little referencing effort, then we can say that the dialogue achieves optimal relevance.

In translation, translator needs to consider the cognitive environment of target language audience, as well as a set of assumptions they may make. By adopting proper translation strategies, translated text should have optimal relevance with the assumptions of target language audience, so as to successfully convey the intention of original text. The translator must pay attention to the optimal relevance principle, "if the translator ignores the optimal relevance, the translation communication is not likely to succeed" (Huang, 2009, p. 36).

3. Applying Relevance Theory in Electronic Product Advertisement (EPA) Translation

From the perspective of Relevance Theory, translation of electronic product advertisements is an ostensive-inferential communication among advertisers, translators and

advertisement readers. Based on constructed cognitive environment, they find optimal relevance and recognize advertisers' communicative intention. In the process of advertisement translation, translators have to employ proper strategies to realize optimal relevance, so as to attract potential customers and stimulate their purchasing desire.

In this section, a detailed analysis of translation strategies of electronic product advertisements from the perspective of Relevance Theory is illustrated. Considering relevance between source text and target text, four translation strategies are explored, which included literal translation, liberal translation, expansion and abridgement. How to realize optimal relevance is illustrated by examples from multiple categories of electronic products, such as computers, mobile phones and headphones.

3.1 Literal Translation

According to Relevance Theory, as we are living in the same physical world, our cognitive environment overlap partly, and we have consensus on many things. We can share a lot of information with each other. Literal translation is commonly adopted if there is no specific cultural connotation in electronic product advertisements, which means people from different cultural backgrounds have basically the same understanding of those electronic product advertisements. Usually, this type of advertisement is simple and short. Although people's cognitive abilities differ, generally, they are able to understand the advertisements. By successfully creating contextual effects and conveying the advertiser's communicative intention, literally translated advertisements can conform to optimal relevance. For example:

- (1) ST: Thin. Light. Powerful. And ready for anything. (MacBook Air)

TT: 纤薄、轻巧、强劲。为一切准备就绪。

This is an advertisement for Apple's MacBook Air. The original advertisement is simple and easy to understand, showcasing the powerful functionality and lightweight design of the MacBook Air. Furthermore, this advertisement does not contain cultural connotations, allowing people from different cognitive environments to essentially have the same understanding of it. In this situation, even if the translator employs the strategy of literal translation, individuals still won't need to expend much effort to achieve contextual effects. They can successfully

comprehend the original advertisement's communicative intention and achieve optimal relevance.

- (2) ST: Feel the new space. (Samsung)

TT: 感受新世界。

- (3) ST: Life Unlimited. (LG)

TT: 生命无极限。

- (4) ST: Challenge the Limits. (Samsung)

TT: 挑战极限。

The above examples also employ the literal translation strategy. To ensure that the advertisement is concise, rhythmically rich, and easy to remember, the sentence structure in many advertisements is very simple, and the sentence length is relatively short. By adopting literal translation, the translated text can not only retain the main idea of the original advertisement, successfully convey the communicative intention, and conform to the optimal relevance principle, but it can also preserve the structure, rhythm, and style of the original advertisement. When creating advertisement texts, many electronic product brands prefer using relatively fixed sentence structures or rhythms to solidify their brand styles, and literal translation can help them achieve this.

It can be concluded that if the original advertisement meets the following requirements, the translator can use literal translation: firstly, there is no specific cultural connotation, and people from different cognitive environments have similar understandings of it; secondly, the advertisement is simple and short, allowing people with different cognitive abilities to easily infer the communicative intention of the advertisement. If the advertisement audience or readers can obtain effective contextual effects with little referencing effort, then we can say that the translated advertisement achieves optimal relevance.

3.2 Liberal Translation

Unlike literal translation, liberal translation pays more attention to maintaining the main idea of the source text rather than its form. As we all know, language is the carrier of culture, so people from different cultural backgrounds may have varying interpretations of advertisements. "It is necessary to recognize those differences, so as to achieve intercultural communication" (Tan, 2018, p. 107). According to Relevance Theory,

once the advertiser's communicative intention has been conveyed to the target language audience, the translation is considered successful. To convey communicative intention, advertisement translation needs to achieve contextual effects and conform to the optimal relevance principle. In the process of translation, the translator should consider the differences in people's cognitive environments. The translator should not overly focus on form or structure, and can incorporate their own creativity to some extent. For example:

- (1) ST: I chocolate you. (LG chocolate series mobile phone)

TT: 爱巧克力呦。(Back Translation: I love Chocolate.)

"Chocolate" is a noun, but in LG's English advertisement, it is used as a verb. In Western culture, chocolate usually evokes feelings of "love" or "liking", so in this context, "chocolate" not only refers to the LG chocolate series mobile phone but also conveys the message: "I love LG Chocolate series mobile phones."

In the Chinese version, LG translated the slogan into "爱巧克力呦", which means "I love chocolate". When this advertisement was launched in China, it was not successful. This failure is not only because the translated text fails to mention mobile phones, but also because it overlooks the Chinese cognitive environment and cultural background. It must be emphasized that not all Chinese consumers are aware of the symbolic meaning of chocolate, which is "love". Therefore, these individuals are unable to construct a cognitive environment and make assumptions that possess optimal relevance. As a result, achieving the contextual effect of the advertisement becomes difficult, and the communicative intention cannot be conveyed successfully, leading to translation failure.

An improved translation could be "你的挚爱之选, LG 巧克力系列手机 (BT: Your beloved choice, the LG Chocolate Series Mobile Phones.)". The revised translation retains the concept of "love" from the original advertisement, and it also specifies that the product is the LG Chocolate series mobile phone. It emphasizes the affection for LG's chocolate phone and highlights the superior performance of the device, making it a worthwhile purchase. From the perspective of Relevance Theory, the revised translation is more accessible for potential consumers to understand, allowing them to achieve the best

contextual effect with minimal referencing effort. In this way, we can say that this advertisement achieves optimal relevance.

- (2) ST: Intel Inside — Intel Pentium. (Intel Pentium processor)

TT: 给电脑一颗奔腾的 "芯" (BT: A Pentium "chip" for the computer).

The literal translation of the original advertisement, "英特尔里面——英特尔奔腾", is confusing and may pose difficulty for customers to understand. In order to make the translated text acceptable and attractive to target consumers, the translator employed liberal translation. In the cognitive environment of Chinese consumers, "芯" refers to the machine's chip, a powerful and crucial component. Consumers can understand that it refers to the processor in a computer. Meanwhile, the word "芯" in Chinese sounds the same as the word "心 (heart)", which is the most important organ in the human body. So, the translated text not only indicates that the product is a computer processor but also emphasizes the powerful processing capability of the Intel Pentium processor and its significant function.

From the perspective of Relevance Theory, this is a successful translation. The translator considered the cognitive environment of Chinese customers and successfully created excellent contextual effects. The more contextual effects the advertisement reader achieves, the more successful an advertisement will be. In this way, the communicative function of the advertiser is achieved, and the advertisement attains optimal relevance. Here is another example:

- (3) ST: Perfect pairings. (Apple accessories)

TT: 天作之合, 神仙眷侣。

In Chinese culture, "天作之合, 神仙眷侣" refers to two people who are perfectly matched and have a good relationship. In this way, consumers in China can easily understand what this advertisement means and recognize that Apple's accessories can perfectly complement its products. By employing liberal translation, the translator provides information that is highly relevant to the cognitive environment and assumptions of the Chinese advertisement audience, helping them infer the advertiser's intention and achieve contextual effects.

- (4) ST: It's mini in a massive way. (Apple iPad mini)

TT: 小身材, 大作为。(BT: Compact Stature, Grand Achievements.)

The above advertisement has used the rhetoric of personification. Rhetorical devices are commonly adopted in electronic product advertisements. The use of rhetoric is one of the methods of liberal translation. Although literal translation can convey the main idea, sometimes it is challenging to attract potential consumers and arouse their interest in buying the product. Rhetorical sentences help advertisements become vivid, impressive, and interesting by providing information that is relevant to the advertisement audience or reader. This, in turn, creates contextual effects and successfully conveys the communicative intention.

To sum up, liberal translation is a suitable choice under the following conditions: firstly, when there is a specific cultural connotation, and people from different cognitive environments have varying understandings of it; secondly, when a literal translation cannot attract potential customers and generate an excellent contextual effect.

3.3 Expansion

Expansion translation means to add information that original advertisement does not have, so as to make translated text much more intelligible. To start with, if the advertisement contains specific cultural references unfamiliar to the target customers, the translator should employ expansion translation to provide appropriate explanations for the target language customers. Due to differences in cultural backgrounds, certain expressions may be absent from customers' cognitive environments. Therefore, a word-for-word translation of the advertisement might hinder customers from grasping contextual effects and communicative intentions. For example:

- (1) ST: Enjoy Music from the Garden of Eden. (iAUDIO MP3)

TT: 纵享伊甸园之乐。

The advertiser literally translated the slogan into “纵享伊甸园之乐”. However, not all Chinese consumers know about the Garden of Eden. Given that this advertisement was launched in China, describing beautiful music as the joy of the Garden of Eden might not resonate with Chinese consumers. An improved translation could be “纵享伊甸园之乐——仙乐般音质 (BT: Enjoy Music from the Garden of Eden —

Fairy-like music)”. Because almost all Chinese can understand “仙乐 (Fairy-like music)”. “仙乐” exists in the cognitive environment of Chinese consumers, making it easy for them to make assumptions with optimal relevance and recognize the advertiser's communicative intention.

Secondly, if there is a special or new term in the original advertisement that not all consumers are familiar with, the translator needs to provide an explanation in the translated text. For example:

- (2) ST: Bentgate? Impossible on LG GFlex. (LG GFlex phone)

TT: 弯曲门? LG GFlex 手机与它无缘。

In 2015, some users complained that their iPhone 6S bent, and this scandal was called “Bentgate”. In this example, LG literally translated the original slogan without considering whether all Chinese consumers knew about “Bentgate”. The accurate interpretation of this advertisement depends on customers' information and knowledge reserves. To assist those audiences who may not be familiar with “Bentgate” in constructing a cognitive environment, the translator needs to provide a brief explanation after the translated text. So an improved translation could be “弯曲门? LG GFlex 手机与它无缘。(‘弯曲门’指机身弯曲现象)” (BT: Bentgate? Impossible on LG GFlex. (‘Bentgate’ refers to the phenomenon of the phone body bending)).

Thirdly, if the original advertisement is overly brief, the translator should appropriately expand the translation to make it more attractive. Many electronic product advertisements consist of only one or two words. Although concise, they often lack variety. From the perspective of Relevance Theory, the degree of relevance can be measured by the contextual effect, and the more contextual effects the audience achieve, the more successful a verbal communication will be. An advertisement that is too short may not generate sufficient contextual effect or leave a lasting impression on readers. Therefore, it would be advisable for the translator to expand the translation. Here are some examples:

- (3) ST: You. At a glance. (Blackberry phone)

TT: 黑莓手机, 让你一见倾心。(BT: BlackBerry phone, capturing your heart at first sight.)

- (4) ST: Focus on Life. (Canon camera)

TT: 难忘人生片段，永存珍贵记忆。(BT: Unforgettable moments in life, preserving precious memories eternally.)

To sum up, expansion is a good choice in the following situations: firstly, if there is a specific cultural reference that customers may not be familiar with, the translator should expand the translation to provide a brief explanation in the translated text; secondly, if there is a special or new term in the original advertisement that not all consumers have heard about, the translator needs to briefly explain it; thirdly, if the original advertisement is overly brief, the translator should expand it to generate sufficient contextual effect. The strategy of expansion helps to confirm to optimal relevance, as it makes the advertisement information more complete and clearer, so target language consumers can infer the communicative intention of advertiser with minimal effort.

3.4 Abridgement

According to Gutt (2004: 107), translation should “produce his intended translation without putting the audience to unnecessary processing effort”. If the original advertisement contains redundant or unimportant expressions, the translator should employ the abridgement translation strategy. This approach can make the translated text clearer, emphasizing useful information. For example:

- (1) ST: Everything you need in a space-saving 20-inch all-in-one desktop with an easy one cord set up and responsive performance. (Dell computer)

TT: 小空间，大有为。(BT: Small space, big potential.)

The direct translation of this advertisement would be overly cumbersome and does not align

with the fundamental characteristics of advertising, which should be concise. As mentioned earlier, each advertisement typically lingers in people’s minds for about 30 seconds. Therefore, electronic product advertisements must be brief and easily memorable. By employing the abridgement strategy, the translation “小空间，大有为(BT: Small space, big potential)” not only conveys the compact size of the Dell computer but also highlights its superior performance. From the perspective of Relevance Theory, if the hearer gets the best contextual effect with little referencing effort, then we can say that the dialogue achieves optimal relevance. Abridgement can not only make it easier for target consumers to recognize the communicative intention of the advertiser but also reduce economic costs. This ensures that the translated advertisement conveys information with a minimal number of words and stimulates consumers’ purchase desire.

4. Conclusion

This study explores advertisement translation from the perspective of Relevance Theory, taking electronic product advertising as an example. Based on analysis, it can be concluded that the translation of electronic product advertisements is a kind of ostensive-inferential communication, and the translator needs to consider the cognitive environment of target language audience and choose proper translation strategies, so as to help them achieve contextual effects and recognize advertiser’s communicative intention with little referencing effort. Four translation strategies are discussed in detail in this study: literal translation, liberal translation, expansion and abridgement. The table below summarizes different situations and their corresponding translation strategies:

Table 1. Summary of EPA Translation Strategies

Translation Strategy Adopted	Characteristics of EPA	Theoretical Basis
Literal translation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Without specific cultural connotation; • Simple and easy to understand. 	Cognitive environment overlaps
Liberal translation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific cultural connotation; • Difficult to understand if literal translated. 	Provide information relevant to audience’s cognitive environment
Expansion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unfamiliar specific cultural reference; • Overly simple; • Unknown special or new term. 	Provide information relevant to audience’s cognitive environment

Abridgement	• Too long and having redundant information.	Get the best contextual effect with little referencing effort
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Through a targeted analysis of the translation of electronic product advertisements, this study is hoped to offer insights for the translation of electronic product advertisements with guidance and inspiration from Relevance Theory. While providing valuable insights, this study focuses solely on English-Chinese advertisements. A crucial aspect left unexplored is the translation of electronic product advertisements from Chinese to English. Future research endeavors could specifically target this aspect.

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