

# Research on the Translation of Tourism Text from the Perspective of System-Functional Linguistics--Based on Guilin tourism texts

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## Abstract

**Guilin landscape tops those elsewhere. However, there are few studies and analyses on the translated versions of Guilin tourism. In order to fill the gap in it and have a better analysis, the article selects representative English versions of Guilin tourism translation from major tourist attractions, analyzes the problems in the original translation under the guidance of system-functional linguistics, and provides targeted suggestions for the problems from the perspectives of three major metafunctions.**

## Keywords

**System-functional linguistics, Guilin tourism, Metafunction.**

## 1. Introduction

China enjoys a highly developed tourism industry with a multitude of tour resources. In the field of tourism, the translation of tourism promotional texts plays a crucial role, serving as a window to the outside world to attract foreign tourists to visit and explore. Currently, there are numerous articles related to tourism translation, and various issues in tourism translation have been analyzed and addressed in several papers. However, upon investigation, the author found that there are only a few papers - only four in total - that apply systemic functional linguistics to analyze tourism translation texts. Furthermore, the issues analyzed mainly revolve around universe problems such as spelling errors, grammar, transliteration, and translation mistakes. Therefore, the author intends to use Guilin tourism translation as an example and, guided by systemic functional linguistics, to utilize the three metafunctions to discover and address issues from new perspectives.

Guilin, with its rich historical and cultural heritage, is a renowned tourism city in China boasting abundant natural beauty. The famous saying "Guilin's landscape is the finest under heaven" has drawn numerous domestic and foreign tourists to visit. To appeal to foreign tourists, the English translation of scenic area signs, site names, and introductions need to align with the thinking habits of English-speaking tourists. It should enable foreign visitors to understand clearly while appreciating the brilliant Chinese cultures. With increasing attention, researches on Guilin's tourism translation materials have gradually gained recognition from scholars. Xie Linlin (2018) conducted research from an ecological translation perspective and delved into the tri-dimensional transformation of language, culture, and communication in guiding the application of English translation in Guilin's tourism. Fu Zhiyi (2011) surveyed the English translations of various attractions in Guilin city and identified several issues such as "linguistic distortion, cultural misunderstandings, and the loss of essence", as well as "poor-quality translations, homogenization, and mutual misunderstanding." Bearing this in mind, he based his research on the textual validity and reliability, exploring the development trend of Guilin's tourism external translations. Guided by the Purpose, Wang Dandan & Wei Chuxue (2021) analyzed issues emerging in the translation process of red tourism texts in Guilin and clarified

the future development trend of translating Guilin's tourist attractions. They suggested that the literal translation method helps in achieving faithfulness, while the free translation method ensures the coherence of the translation, and the addition method assists in conveying more information to the readers. Xia Feifei (2019) carried out an analysis from the perspective of reader acceptance regarding the common errors in English translations of tourism materials in Guilin. They also proposed multiple translation methods and strategies to address the common errors. However, an overview of the aforementioned research reveals that there is still a lack of a systematic study on Guilin's tourism external translation texts and a scarcity of macro-level strategies proposed. At the same time, the search query "Guilin tourism texts" yielded a total of 13 literature pieces, among which only three analyzed and researched Guilin's tourism texts and attractions from the perspective of functional equivalence theory, which is somewhat similar to the theme of this study. Nonetheless, there are fewer literature pieces that analyzed the translation of Guilin's tourism texts using various theoretical frameworks. The application of systemic functional linguistics to analyze Guilin's tourism translation texts offers significant research potential.

Therefore, this paper aims to conduct research under the theoretical guidance of systemic functional linguistics with the three metafunctions of systemic functional linguistics - ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions. It will select Chinese promotional texts for Guilin's main tourist attractions and, through analyzing the original translations, discuss potential issues in the translation of Guilin tourism texts, identify shortcomings, and propose solutions.

## 2. The Systemic Functional Linguistics

The father of modern general linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), was the first to provide a comprehensive explanation of the system concept of language. He argued that the language system possesses "social historicity, symbolic nature, and psychological processing characteristics, as well as synchronic value relationships."

Subsequently, the representative of the Copenhagen School, Louis Hjelmslev (1899-1965), further elaborated on the system concept. Building upon Saussure's "associative relationship" and "combinative relationship," he proposed the distinction between "language as a system" and "language as discourse as a process," the latter ultimately manifested as "discourse as a finished product." Dominating the discourse process are the phonological, semantic, and grammatical systems.

Building on the aforementioned research, the founder of the London School, J.R. Firth (1890-1960), defined structure and system: "Structure contains elements with inherent combinatorial relationships, these elements position themselves according to an expected sequence, and categories established by position and sequence are identified in the structure and utilized in relation to abstract resources." "System refers to replaceable units or items used to describe the aggregative value of related elements" (Firth 1957c/1988:114).

As the doctoral supervisor of the British linguist M.A.K. Halliday, Firth had a significant influence on Halliday. Building on this foundation, Halliday proposed Systemic Functional Linguistics.

As a linguistic theory, it can be divided into two aspects: general linguistic systemic functional linguistics and applicable linguistic systemic functional linguistics. The former had been initially documented, asserting that systemic functional linguistics is essentially a theory of general linguistics and belongs to theoretical linguistics. On the other hand, the latter was proposed by Halliday in 2002 upon receiving the Gold Medal from the "International Association of Applied Linguistics" (AILA) in Singapore. The systemic functional linguistic focus of applicable linguistics lies in its application, and both aspects, within systemic functional linguistics, are independent yet complementary.

Halliday regards systemic functional linguistics as a problem-oriented theory, designed to address language-related issues in human activity. Therefore, both theory and practice are equally important and should not be undervalued. Consequently, Halliday's proposed three metafunctions have been acknowledged by the academic community and widely applied, becoming an important theoretical basis for disciplines such as linguistics and translation studies.

The three metafunctions are conceptual, interpersonal, and textual. The conceptual function is related to the topic and involves transitivity, voice systems, and modal meanings. The interpersonal function is associated with the immediate speech context, encompassing mood systems and modal meanings. The textual function is linked to the internal structure of language, addressing how to interconnect language constituents to create a semantically cohesive whole. These three metafunctions carry high practical value, and the subsequent discussion will illustrate the application of systemic functional linguistics in tourism translation through examples.

### 3. The application of systemic functional linguistics

#### 3.1. The application of conceptual function

The conceptual function includes experiential function and logical function. The experiential function is manifested through the transitivity system, while the logical function is reflected through logical dependency relationships and logical semantic relationships. In tourist translation texts, the conceptual function is mainly reflected in the translation of scenic spot names. The names of the scenic spots are the first part of the tourist introduction, so it is important to translate the names of the scenic spots well. However, the translation of scenic spot names is not a fixed equivalent translation. Instead, it is word-for-word transliteration. This translation method does not achieve the desired effect for some scenic spot names. Some use transliteration plus explanation, which to some extent can also convey the conceptual function. Another translation method is to supplement the specific scenic spot names, which can also achieve a good effect and make it clearer and easier to understand at a glance, thus maximizing the conceptual function.

Example 1: 靖江王陵是朱明王朝封在靖江（今桂林）历代诸王的陵园。[3]

Translation: The Tombs for Prince Kings of Jingjiang are those generations of prince kings of the Ming Dynasty enfeoffed in Jingjiang (present-day Guilin). —Translated by Han Rongliang[3]

Analysis: This is the first sentence of the introduction of the Jingjiang Wangling(The National Archaeological Heritage Park of Mausoleums of Jingjiang Princes), explaining the origin of this scenic spot name. The original translator used a literal translation, but it did not produce a good effect in conveying the conceptual function. The original translation lacks clarity and comprehensibility, and readers, especially foreign tourists, remain confused about what Jingjiang Wangling is. Additionally, the term "Ming Dynasty" can be perplexing for tourists unfamiliar with Chinese history. Furthermore, based on research findings, it is known that Jingjiang Wangling has become a "National Archaeological Heritage Park". Therefore, adding this title as the nature of Jingjiang Wangling should be included. Thus, it is proposed to retranslate the original text as: "The National Archaeological Heritage Park of Mausoleums of Jingjiang Princes are dedicated to generations of princes from the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644)." This translation approach better conveys the conceptual function, making it clear to tourists what Jingjiang Wangling is.

### 3.2. The application of Interpersonal Function

In other words, the main purpose of interpersonal interaction is to elucidate the speaker's life experiences, to showcase their inner world, and also to present their identity, social status, and viewpoints to the audience in a direct or indirect manner, such as their expectations and evaluations of specific situations. In tourism translation, the interpersonal function is mainly reflected in whether the expression of a word or definition can convey a positive tone or connotation, allowing readers to grasp the meaning of the word and truly serve the purpose of tourism promotion. However, in current tourism translation texts, there are still many instances of literal translation or rigid translation of vocabulary, resulting in a negative attitude and emotions being conveyed, which can lead to an unpleasant reading experience for the readers. Here, I will continue to use Guilin tourism promotional text as an example.

Example 2: 漓江蜿蜒于群山之中，两岸奇峰竞秀，碧水澄澈.....[3]

Translation: Meandering among piles after piles of hills with grotesque peaks flanking the emerald and limpid water, it is.....  
—Translated by Han Rongliang [3]

Analysis: In this sentence, the term "奇峰" (grotesque peaks) is translated as "grotesque peaks," which is inappropriate. The "奇" in "奇峰" means "magnificent" or "extraordinary," while the English term "grotesque" means "strange in a way that is unpleasant or offensive; extremely ugly that is often frightening," which clearly does not align with the meaning of "奇峰." Therefore, translating it as "grotesque" would create a negative impression and convey unpleasant attitudes and emotions to foreign readers, which is not conducive to tourism promotion. Thus translating it as "magnificent" would be more effective.

Example 3: 岩洞是由于岩层受地下水和雨水的长期溶蚀而形成的。[3]

Translation: The cave is formed through a joint action of dissolution by rainwater and underground water during the long past. —Translated by Han Rongliang[3]

Analysis: In this sentence, we encounter an issue of incorrect expression, which goes against the idea in the interpersonal function that "the translator's inference, judgment, and evaluation of things should convey a positive attitude." The phrase "由于受地下水和雨水的长期溶蚀而形成" is translated as "is formed through a joint action of dissolution by rainwater and underground water," which is not appropriate. "A joint action of dissolution" sounds very rigid and does not provide a pleasant reading experience for the readers. Instead, it may feel like non-native English. In fact, "地下水和雨水的溶蚀" corresponds to "erosion," not "dissolution." Furthermore, "erosion" also conveys a slow process, which aligns with the intended meaning of the original text. "A joint action of" is unnecessary and can be revised as "The cave is formed through the erosion of rainwater and underground water for a long time."

Grammar is also a reflection of the interpersonal function. Here, it does not emphasize "correct to the point of being rigid" grammar, but rather, under the guidance of the interpersonal function, correct grammar can enhance the reading experience for foreign readers, improve the readability of tourism translation texts, and ultimately achieve the goal of communication and promotion. Currently, grammar issues are one of the most common problems in tourism translation texts, which stem from the deep understanding and expression differences between Chinese and English thinking.

Example 4: 有的石幔，假如你轻轻敲击一下，还会发出“丁冬”悦耳的响声，令人感到神奇莫测。[3]

Translation: Some of the stone-screens if you make a strike on them, can even produce so fantastic a melody that nobody knows how. —Translated by Han Rongliang [3]

Analysis: The translator directly translates the sentence in the order of the Chinese text, resulting in a colloquial and unsuitable style for tourism translation. Additionally, there are grammar and punctuation errors, making the sentences difficult to read and failing to achieve the purpose of interpersonal communication. A revised translation could be: "Some of the stone-screens can produce amazing and mysterious sound when you make a strike on them." This translation provides a better reading experience and fulfills the interpersonal function.

### 3.3. Application of Discourse Function

Discourse function can be manifested in three ways: textual structure, information structure, and cohesion. Halliday believes that discourse function refers to how the various components of language are interconnected[1]. Discourse function is generally reflected in slightly longer translations, where the faithful conveyance of the original concept is important, while also considering the differences in discourse structure between the target language and the source language. Otherwise, the translation may appear structurally inconsistent and lack discourse coherence[2].

Example 5: 象鼻山位于阳朔和漓江汇流处，它的形状颇像一头大象站在漓江岸边，伸长着鼻子在那里吸水。该山原称漓山，因其突出水中的一端形状极似象鼻，故又称象鼻山，或象山。它是桂林市的象征。象鼻山上有石级可供游客曲折攀登而上。[3]

Translation: Located at the confluence of the Yangjiang and the Lijiang Rivers, the Elephant Trunk Hill is shaped very much like a giant elephant standing by the riverside, gulping water from the river with its long trunk dipping into it. It was formerly known as Li Hill and because one end of the hill protruding into the water looks very much like an elephant trunk, hence the name the Elephant Trunk Hill or the Elephant Hill, a symbol of the city of Guilin. There are stone steps for visitors to scale up the hill. —Translated by Han Rongliang [3]

Analysis: In this paragraph, the translator faithfully conveys the meaning of the original text in terms of structure and expression. However, when considering the thinking patterns and reading habits of the target language readers, the translation lacks the necessary discourse coherence. Apart from inappropriate vocabulary choices and some syntactical issues, the lack of discourse coherence makes it difficult for readers to understand and fails to achieve the purpose of promotional communication. A revised translation could be: "Resembling an elephant drinking water from the Lijiang River with its long trunk, Elephant Trunk Hill (Originally named Li Hill) towers more than 55 meters above the water. It is the symbol of Guilin tour City, which has a history of tourism stretching back more than 1,000 years. You can walk upstairs the hill to enjoy a great view from top." This revised translation, while integrating the same meaning and retaining the essence of the original text, provides additional information to introduce the height of Elephant Trunk Hill and the historical significance of Guilin as a tourist city. It is concise and clear, allowing readers to gain a preliminary understanding of the hill and aligning with the target language readers' information consumption habits, providing simplicity and clear information, while also demonstrating a certain level of discourse coherence.

Example 6: 山下在象鼻与象身之间有一大圆洞，为著名的水月洞。洞内可划游艇。明月之夜，可于水中见到明月洞之倒影。对此，宋代有诗云：水底有明月，水上明月浮；水流月不去，月去水还流。[3]

Translation: At the foot of the hill between the elephant trunk and body there is a big round hole known as Water-moon Cave, which is possible for boat to go through and especially in the moonlit night you'll see the moon being reflected in the water below through the hole. About this charming scene a Song poet wrote a poem as follows: There is a moon at the bottom of water, And floating on the surface is another moon. The moon stays when water flows on, When the moon's gone water keeps to go on. —Translated by Han Rongliang[3]

Analysis: The translator attempts to faithfully translate the Song Dynasty poem, aiming to showcase the beauty and artistic conception of the Water-Moon Cave and the poetic charm of ancient Chinese poetry. However, it is counterproductive. The translation fails to capture the rhythm and cadence of the poem, merely conveying the literal meaning. Most of foreign readers would not be able to appreciate the philosophical significance expressed in the poem or understand the beauty of the Water-Moon Cave, making it feel bland and even incomprehensible. Additionally, it deviates significantly from the discourse structure and coherence of the target language. Therefore, when it comes to ancient Chinese poetry in tourism translation, unless it is a well-known poem widely recognized and appreciated overseas, it is often better to omit the translation, reducing the burden of understanding for foreign readers while ensuring discourse structure consistency with the target language.

#### 4. Conclusion

American expert David Du has discussed the issues in Chinese tourism translation, summarizing them as follows: hyperbole, dates, brevity and succinctness, redundancy in the use of city, overly educated, and verbosity and hackneyed words[4]. Gu Weiyong also mentioned that when describing things, Chinese people often quote ancient poetry for validation, which leaves a deep impression on Chinese readers and provides artistic pleasure. However, for foreigners, this may seem forced and irrelevant. These issues are recurring errors in tourism translation.

The concepts of systemic functional linguistics discussed earlier, including ideational function, interpersonal function, and discourse function, play a significant role in addressing the problems encountered in tourism translation. They provide theoretical guidance, practical applicability, and help translators better translate tourism promotional texts in line with the expectations of the target language readers, achieving effective promotion of China's tourism resources. By applying these concepts, translators can overcome the challenges and ensure that the translated texts are accurate, engaging, and culturally appropriate. This will ultimately contribute to the successful promotion of China's tourism industry.

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