

A Study on Translation Strategies for Speech Texts Based on Reiss's Text Typology Theory—Taking Malala Yousafzai's Speech at the United Nations Youth Assembly as an Example

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Abstract: Based on Katharina Reiss's text typology theory—a cornerstone of German functionalist translation theory—this paper conducts an in-depth exploration of translation strategies for speech texts. Characterized by unique communicative purposes, strong emotional resonance, and specific contextual features, speech texts present considerable complexity and particularity in translation practice. Using Malala Yousafzai's renowned speech, "Books and Pens Are the Most Powerful Weapons," delivered at the UN Youth Assembly, as a case study, the paper first classifies its text type according to Reiss's framework. It analyses the manifestations of the informational, expressive, and operative functions at different levels and identifies the dominant functions. The paper finds that while Malala's speech conveys information, its core lies in moving the audience through personal narrative and emotional expression (expressive function) and ultimately inspiring them to take action or change attitudes (operative function), establishing the expressive and operative functions as dominant. Based on this typological classification, the paper further investigates how to select and apply corresponding translation strategies to maximally preserve the original text's emotional impact, persuasive power, and call-to-action effect. This paper aims to provide theoretical guidance and strategic reference for translating speech texts, enrich the application of Reiss's text typology theory to specific text types, and critically examine the applicability and limitations of the theory in practical contexts.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

With the acceleration of globalization and the increasing frequency of international exchanges, cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communication has become more important than ever before. Among various forms of communication, speech, as a direct, efficient, and highly impactful means of disseminating information, plays a pivotal role in fields such as politics, diplomacy, business, education, and social welfare. From an entrepreneur's motivational sharing, further to a social activist's advocacy appeal, speeches not only convey information but also carry the speaker's

viewpoints, emotions, values, and seek to influence the thoughts and actions of the audience.

However, when an influential speech crosses language barriers, whether its meaning and effect can be conveyed completely and accurately in the target culture depends on the quality of the translation. Translating speech texts is not a simple matter of language conversion. It involves a profound understanding of the original text's deeper meaning, emotional nuances, rhetorical techniques, cultural background, and the speech context. Furthermore, it requires finding appropriate expressions in the target language to achieve communicative effects similar to those of the original. Compared to other text types, such as scientific literature, legal documents, or literary works, speech texts possess distinct characteristics: they usually have a clear and strong communicative purpose (e.g., to persuade, appeal, or inspire), express emotions directly and intensely, often feature vivid and figurative language, and are intrinsically linked to a specific live context (audience, occasion, atmosphere). These features present numerous challenges for translating speech texts, such as: how to handle comprehension barriers arising from cultural differences, how to reproduce the original's emotional power and persuasiveness, and how to compensate in the translation for potential meaning loss due to the absence of the original context.

Katharina Reiss's Text Typology Theory is an early and significant contribution to functionalist translation theory. Starting from the communicative function of texts, it categorizes texts into three main types: informative, expressive, and operative, advocating that translation strategy selection should match the text type and its dominant function. This theory provides an important perspective for translation studies, helping translators formulate corresponding strategies based on text characteristics. Applying Reiss's theory to the study of speech text translation allows us to more clearly understand the functional attributes of this text type, thereby enabling a more scientific and systematic exploration of its translation principles and methods.

Malala Yousafzai is one of the most influential young activists of our time. Her speech at the United Nations Youth Assembly, with its courageous account of her persistence in pursuing education under Taliban terror, her profound call for the right to education, and her unwavering belief in the future, resonated powerfully across the globe. This speech is not merely a personal narrative (informative), but also a passionate and powerful declaration (expressive), and simultaneously a strong appeal to the international community, particularly to the younger generation (operative). Therefore, it serves as an excellent case study for researching translation strategies for speech texts. By defining the text type of this speech and analysing the strategies that should or ideally should be adopted in its translation, it can provide valuable reference for understanding and practicing the translation of speech texts.

1.2. Values

This paper holds certain theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it advances the applied research on Reiss's text typology theory. Although Reiss's theory is seminal, its application to specific text types, such as speeches, remains underexplored. Through a concrete case analysis, this paper examines and elucidates the applicability and effectiveness of Reiss's theory in guiding the selection of translation strategies for speech texts, thereby enriching the scope of application and explanatory power of the theory. Simultaneously, it broadens the theoretical perspective of research on speech text translation. Current studies on speech translation primarily focus on specific techniques or case analyses; systematic explorations from a functionalist perspective, particularly using text typology theory, are relatively scarce. This paper helps introduce a functionalist perspective into speech translation studies, providing novel theoretical tools and analytical frameworks for the field.

Regarding the practical significance, this paper can enhance the quality of speech text translation.

By emphasizing the importance of preserving the original text's emotional impact, persuasive power, and call-to-action effect in the translated version, this paper helps translators pay closer attention to the communicative effect of translation. Consequently, it contributes to improving the quality of speech text translation, thereby better serving cross-cultural communication. At the same time, this paper can provide valuable insights for translating related texts, such as TED Talks. Speech texts share functional attributes with other text types characterized by strong emotional and operative elements. Therefore, the findings and strategic recommendations from this paper also hold implications for translating these similar texts.

2. Reiss's Text Typology Theory

2.1. Overview of Reiss's Text Typology Theory

Katharina Reiss proposed a classification method based on textual function in her work *Translation Criticism: The Potentials and Limitations of Translation Criticism*.^[1] She contended that any text originates from a specific communicative intention that determines its primary function. Reiss primarily categorized texts into three types:

Informative Texts, whose core function is conveying objective facts, information, or knowledge, with emphasis placed on content^[2]. Such texts typically employ clear, precise, and concise language devoid of subjective emotions, exemplified by news reports, scientific literature, instruction manuals, and economic reports. Reiss advocated a “content-focused” translation strategy for informative texts, prioritizing accurate transmission of original information while allowing flexibility in linguistic form.

Expressive Texts primarily serve to express the author's thoughts, emotions, attitudes, or artistic creativity, emphasizing the sender and their embodied “world”—the author's creative intent and artistic style. Characterized by unique, aesthetic, and emotionally charged language, this category includes literary works, such as poetry, novels, plays, serious philosophical or historical writings, and personal letters. Reiss maintained that expressive texts demand a “form-focused” or “author-focused” translation strategy, aiming to reproduce the original's literary style, artistic appeal, and unique expression, even at the cost of absolute informational precision.

Operative Texts primarily function to elicit specific reactions or behaviours from the receiver, such as persuasion, exhortation, appeal, or warning, with emphasis on the effect produced upon the receiver. Featuring direct, persuasive, and impactful language, typical examples encompass advertisements, promotional materials, legal contracts, political speeches, and open letters. Reiss asserted that operative texts require an “effect-focused” translation strategy, striving to achieve equivalent communicative impact on the target-language receiver as the original.

Reiss further observed that while texts may exhibit multiple functions simultaneously, one function typically dominates. Translation strategy selection should principally align with this dominant function. Additionally, she recognized that the nature of the translation brief—including purpose, target audience, and publication requirements—significantly influences strategy choice. This insight laid the groundwork for subsequent functionalist translation theories such as Skopos theory.

2.2. Applicability Analysis of Reiss's Theory to Speech Texts

The question of whether Reiss's theory is suitable for classifying and guiding the translation of speech texts can be answered affirmatively, though its inherent complexity must be acknowledged.

Social life and academic exchange are inseparable from speech. As a vital form of social communication, speeches constitute one of the most significant domains of practical language

application[3]. First, speech texts often serve multiple functions simultaneously. Many speeches—particularly those in political, social, or motivational contexts—frequently undertake multiple tasks: conveying information (providing background and facts to the audience), expressing emotion (eliciting resonance and conveying conviction), and issuing calls to action (urging support, change, or participation).

Second, different types of speeches prioritize distinct functions. Academic presentations or technical lectures may lean predominantly toward the informative type; poetry recitations or artistic critiques may emphasize the expressive dimension; while campaign addresses, protest speeches, or mobilization rallies are distinctly dominated by the operative function. Consequently, when applying Reiss's theory to analyse speech texts, the critical step lies in accurately identifying the predominant function of the specific speech in question.

3. Text Type Analysis of Malala Yousafzai's Speech

Malala is a Pakistani women's rights and education activist who has been committed to fighting for women's right to education. Her stance made her a target of the Taliban. On October 9, 2012, Malala was assassinated by Taliban gunmen while on her way home from school on a school bus, being shot in the head and neck, and her life was in critical danger. But this terrible attack did not defeat her; instead, it made her more determined to fight for women's right to education.

The Youth Assembly at the United Nations presents both an enormous opportunity and a challenge to stimulate and ensure youth engagement and participation in achieving an inclusive and sustainable future where no one is left behind[4][4][2]. At the 2014 UN Youth Assembly, Malala stood on the podium and, starting from her own experience, profoundly expounded on the importance of education. She emphasized that the power of education makes terrorists afraid, and the power of women's voices makes them afraid. She called on the world to attach importance to women's right to education, pointing out that only when everyone can receive education can society truly progress. "Books and pens are the most powerful weapons. A pen, a teacher, a book, and a pen can change the world." This sentence has become a classic expression in the speech, vividly showing her firm belief that education can change the world.

This speech is not just an expression of Malala's personal views, but more represents the strong demands of 61 million out-of-school children worldwide. It has prompted people to re-examine the issue of educational equity, especially the numerous obstacles women face in accessing educational resources. With her own personal experience and fearless courage, Malala has inspired young people around the world to actively engage in promoting social change and contribute to achieving educational equity.

3.1. Analysis of Informative Function in the Speech

Although the speech's primary purpose was not purely informational, its informative function remains significant and indispensable.

First, the speech provides key details about Malala's personal experiences, particularly her being targeted by the Taliban for advocating girls' education. This information contextualizes her motivations and lends her appeal a personalized and irrefutable authenticity. For example, her direct statement, "They shot me in the head. I thought it was the end of my life," conveys concrete event details and her psychological state at the time.

Second, the speech includes background information on educational conditions in Swat Valley, such as the Taliban's destruction of schools, policies banning girls' education, and the plight, especially women faced by local communities. These facts establish a foundation for understanding the crisis's severity and pervasiveness.

Third, the speech communicates Malala's vision for the future—her advocacy for the power of “books and pens” and her belief in peace and education. This information forms the speech's structural backbone, supporting the expressive and operative functions. However, compared to these dominant functions, the informative element occupies a relatively smaller proportion, and requirements for absolute accuracy and objectivity are less stringent than in purely informative texts.

3.2. Analysis of Expressive Function in the Speech

The expressive function constitutes the core essence of Malala's speech, serving as the primary source of its emotional impact and influence.

First, it manifests through intense emotional articulation. Malala conveys sorrow, anger, and fear—yet more prominently, resilience, courage, and hope. Her recollection of the attack's terror, condemnation of Taliban atrocities, and mourning for fallen classmates and teachers transmit visceral emotions through vivid language and tonal shifts, eliciting profound audience resonance. For instance, her declaration “I am not a lone voice; I am the voice of all girls.” exemplifies emotional transcendence that amplifies the speech's power.

Second, expressive potency derives from strategic rhetorical devices. The speech extensively employs parallelism, metaphor, and personification. The triadic repetition “We are not cowards. We are not victims. We are not weak.” reinforces feminine strength; metaphors like “Education is a lamp in darkness, an oasis in the desert.” tangibly illuminate education's significance. These techniques transcend ornamental language, intensifying emotional conveyance.

3.3. Analysis of Operative Function in the Speech

The operative function constitutes the pivotal purpose of Malala's speech—to galvanize listeners into action or attitudinal change. This call permeates the address with unmistakable clarity. First, it manifests as concrete action-oriented appeals. Most iconic is her reiterated mantra “Let us pick up our books and pens”, urging education and knowledge as weapons against ignorance and violence. She explicitly calls upon governments, international organizations, and individuals to invest in education—particularly girls' schooling—by providing resources for schools and safeguarding teachers and students.

Second, it embodies appeals for ideological transformation. She demands universal recognition of education's inviolable sanctity and every girl's inherent right to learning—a right impervious to gender, geography, or belief. By challenging the Taliban's extremist ideology, she summons collective opposition to violence and solidarity for peace.

Third, it strategically converts emotional resonance into activism. Through sharing personal trauma and conviction, Malala forges visceral connections with her audience, transmuting empathy into momentum for her cause. Her objective transcends mere sympathy; she compels listeners to become active champions of educational rights. Thus, the operative function represents both the speech's foundational objective and the core manifestation of its societal impact.

4. Translation Strategies for Speech Texts Based on Reiss's Theory

4.1. Functional Orientation of Speech Texts

Speeches, as a distinctive genre of discourse, rarely serve singular functions but typically encompass multiple dimensions such as information delivery, emotional expression, and calls to action. However, guided by Reiss's theoretical framework, we can analyse a speech's primary functional inclination to determine its dominant text typology.

The core purpose of a speech generally lies in persuading the audience, evoking emotions, guiding perspectives, or prompting action. This intrinsic objective establishes the operative text type as the most fundamental classification for speeches. Through meticulously crafted language, speakers directly appeal to listeners, expecting emotional resonance, cognitive acceptance of viewpoints, and behavioural responses, such as supporting a cause, changing attitudes, or taking concrete actions. For example, political mobilization speeches aim to secure votes or policy support; commercial promotional speeches seek to boost product sales; while advocacy speeches like Malala's strive to awaken global attention to educational rights and drive international action.

Certainly, many speeches also incorporate significant informational components (informative function), such as contextual background, factual statements, or policy explanations. Simultaneously, the emotions, attitudes, and stances of the speaker or their represented institution are often fully manifested through linguistic style and rhetorical devices (expressive function). Consequently, speech texts consistently exhibit a hybrid functional profile: predominantly operative, frequently complemented by informative and expressive dimensions.

When translating speech texts, while balancing informational accuracy and emotive vividness may be necessary, the central task unequivocally remains maximizing the preservation of persuasive force and impact in the target context—ensuring equivalence in operative effect. This necessitates translators prioritizing how the target text can achieve equivalent effect with the source text among its intended audience.

4.2. Translation Strategies for Informative Elements in Speeches

Informative elements in speeches include factual details, historical context, and statistical data, which form the logical foundation of the discourse. For Malala's speech, these elements encompass her personal background (e.g., Pakistani women's rights and education activist), key events (e.g., the 2012 assassination attempt), and tangible calls for action (e.g., "ensuring every child receives free compulsory education").

In translating such elements, the core strategy is semantic equivalence, ensuring that information is transmitted accurately without distortion. Translators must prioritize precision in terminology and chronological details. For instance, the phrase "61 million out-of-school children worldwide" is a critical statistic; its translation must retain numerical accuracy to preserve the urgency of the issue. Similarly, when referencing specific entities like "the Taliban" or "the UN Youth Assembly," consistency in nomenclature is essential to avoid confusion.

Additionally, explication may be employed to clarify culturally specific references for target audiences unfamiliar with the source context. While Malala's audience at the UN likely grasped the significance of "Taliban gunmen," translators targeting broader readerships might add brief contextual notes (e.g., "a militant group opposing girls' education") to enhance comprehensibility—though such additions should be minimal to avoid disrupting the speech's flow.

4.3. Translation Strategies for Expressive Elements in Speeches

Expressive elements in speeches are reflected in the speaker's emotional expression, rhetorical devices, and personal style, all crucial for enhancing the speech's appeal. In addition, as an expressive text, the translation of speeches requires maximum adherence to the source language's expressive conventions, where flexible handling of sentence structures determines the quality of the translation[5][5]. Malala's speech is rich in emotional depth: "Books and pens are the most powerful weapons" uses metaphor to express her firm belief in education's power.

Translating expressive elements hinges on achieving emotional equivalence—reproducing the original text's emotional connotations in the target language to evoke the same resonance in the

target audience. For metaphors with consistent cultural connotations across languages, metaphorical transplantation is effective.

For rhetorical devices like contrast and parallelism, maintaining the rhetorical effect of the original is key. The parallel structure “the power of education makes terrorists afraid; the power of women’s voices makes them afraid.” strengthens the tone; its translation should retain this parallelism to preserve momentum and emotional intensity.

In emotional expression, translators must select words with matching emotional weight. Malala’s use of “terrible” and “critical danger” to describe the attack conveys fear and sorrow, and translations should employ words with similar emotional intensity to replicate this state.

4.4. Translation Strategies for Operative Elements in Speeches

Operative elements in speeches aim to persuade the audience to act or adopt specific viewpoints, serving as the core purpose of many speeches. Malala’s speech calls on governments, societies, and individuals to prioritize girls’ educational rights, such as “call on governments to ensure every child receives free compulsory education” and “appeal to developed countries to provide more educational opportunities for girls in developing countries”.

Translating operative elements focuses on maintaining the original’s persuasive power to motivate the target audience. To achieve this, translators can use functional equivalence—adjusting the original form, when necessary, to align with target language habits and cultural psychology while preserving communicative function. For example, the tone and wording of appeals should adapt to the target audience’s cultural background. In some cultures, direct, forceful appeals are effective; in others, indirect expressions work better. Malala’s direct appeals to governments should retain this directness in translation to preserve urgency and resolve, as in “call on governments to ensure every child worldwide receives free compulsory education.”.

Additionally, collective pronouns enhance audience identification and strengthen persuasion. Malala frequently uses “we”, as in “we must fight for education”; translations should retain “we” to foster a sense of participation and responsibility, such as “we must fight for education.”.

In conclusion, Reiss’s text type theory serves as a robust framework that guides speech translation to prioritize the communicative function at its core. This involves a meticulous analysis of the speech’s purpose, whether it is to inform, persuade, or entertain. Translators must then flexibly apply strategies based on the unique characteristics of various elements within the speech, such as rhetorical devices, cultural references, and emotional appeals. For instance, when dealing with rhetorical questions or metaphors, translators may need to adopt adaptation or paraphrasing strategies to ensure the intended impact is maintained in the target language.

Balancing information accuracy, emotional transmission, and persuasive power is of paramount importance. By accurately conveying the factual content of the speech while simultaneously capturing the emotional nuances and maintaining the persuasive force, translators can ensure that the translated text achieves the same communicative effect as the original. This requires not only a deep understanding of both the source and target languages but also cultural sensitivity and a nuanced appreciation of how different linguistic and cultural elements interact to convey meaning. Through this approach, speech translation can effectively bridge linguistic and cultural gaps, facilitating successful communication across diverse audiences.

5. Conclusion

This paper, anchored in Katharina Reiss’s text typology theory, explores translation strategies for speech texts, with Malala Yousafzai’s address at the United Nations Youth Assembly as a primary case study. Through progressive analysis across preceding sections, this paper have not only

elucidated the core tenets of Reiss's framework and its implications for translation practice but also delved into specific strategies applicable to speech texts under this theoretical paradigm, validating their utility and efficacy through concrete examples from Malala's speech.

Reiss's classification of texts into informative, expressive, and operative types—coupled with her advocacy for strategy-text alignment—provides a lucid analytical framework for navigating translation complexities. Speech texts, particularly those like Malala's that intertwine personal narratives with global issues, rarely exhibit singular functionality; instead, they organically integrate multiple communicative purposes. This inherent multifunctionality precludes rigid, one-size-fits-all approaches and underscores the adaptability of Reiss's theory in guiding such translations. This paper confirms Reiss's text typology as an invaluable compass for speech translation. It elevates translators beyond linguistic transfer, empowering them to approach tasks through a macro-functional lens and make strategically sound decisions. By identifying and prioritizing dominant functions, translators better serve the ultimate purpose: enabling target audiences to comprehend accurately, connect emotionally, or act decisively. For Malala's speech, judicious application of Reiss-guided strategies ensured her voice transcended linguistic barriers, retaining its primal impact, persuasive power, and power to inspire—achieving true equivalence in cross-cultural resonance.

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