# Linguistic and Cultural Challenges in Mandarin Translation:
# A Case Study in Aceh

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**Abstract.**This research is motivated by the fact that translators often face various difficulties in the process of translating from Mandarin to Indonesian and vice versa. The complexity of language and differing cultural contexts are the main factors affecting the accuracy and success of translation. The purpose of this study is to identify and describe the perceptions of translators in Aceh regarding the difficulties they face in translating Mandarin-language texts. This research uses a qualitative descriptive method with data collection techniques through interviews with several active translators residing and working in the Aceh region. The results of the study show that translators face various difficulties classified into two categories: intralingual and extralingual factors. Intralingual factors include difficulties in translating idioms and typical expressions, the use of slang, and the translator's limited knowledge of various topics or specific fields. Meanwhile, extralingual factors include illegible handwriting and the use of non-standard dialects by native Mandarin speakers, which often complicate the interpretation process. These findings provide a deeper insight into the contextual and cultural difficulties in Mandarin translation practice. Moreover, the results of this study are expected to serve as an important reference in the development of relevant translation training and curriculum in linguistically diverse regions such as Aceh, in order to enhance the competence and professionalism of translators.

**Keywords**: Aceh, extra lingual factors, intralingual factors, Mandarin translation, translator difficulties

## INTRODUCTION

Mandarin is known as a complex and meaningful language, not only due to its number of characters and tones but also because of the deep historical and cultural dimensions it contains (HSK & di Perguruan, n.d.; Irawan & Delijar, 2024; Isnaeni et al., 2018; Sari & Arista, 2024) In the context of translation, this poses a unique challenge, particularly when a translator encounters technical terms or

idiomatic expressions that do not have direct equivalents in the Indonesian language. On the other hand, Indonesian as the target language also has its own distinct linguistic characteristics, in terms of sentence structure, morphology, and semantics (Efendi, 2012; Eriyanti et al., 2020; Pusposari, 2017). These differences become even more complex when the translation involves oral communication in dynamic and high-pressure work environments. Translators in Aceh working in Chinese companies are expected to grasp not only literal meanings but also connotations, tone, and speaker intentions. When such understanding is not achieved, the risk of mistranslation increases, potentially causing harm to all parties involved in the collaboration.

One major obstacle found in translation is the limited vocabulary possessed by the translators (Asmarani & Santoso, 2014). Technical vocabulary in industries such as mining, mechanical engineering, and occupational health is often unfamiliar to translators, particularly those from non-linguistic academic backgrounds. This makes it difficult for them to find accurate and contextual equivalents. Many phrases or technical terms do not have one-to-one equivalents in Indonesian, requiring high level interpretation skills. Mistakes in term selection can cause confusion or even failure in carrying out work instructions. In a business communication context, such errors can affect productivity, safety, and professional relationships. Therefore, a translator's linguistic competence must be supported by sufficient sectoral knowledge. The lack of specialised training in this area is one of the core issues that requires immediate attention.

The complexity of translating Mandarin in Aceh reflects the close relationship between linguistic aspects and unique cultural contexts, demanding a cautious approach to achieve accurate and meaningful communication. In an era of globalisation that intensifies cross-cultural exchanges, understanding the challenges of translating Mandarin laden with idiomatic expressions and cultural nuances is essential. This study examines specific problems arising during the translation process from Mandarin into the Acehnese language and cultural context, emphasising the importance of translators being able to understand not only linguistic structures but also the embedded cultural meanings that affect message delivery. Furthermore, Aceh's cultural diversity enriches, yet complicates, the translation process. The multicultural influence in the region requires translators to possess deep understanding of local dialects and customs. For instance, translating idiomatic expressions is not merely a matter of language proficiency but also cultural sensitivity to local values that may not have direct equivalents in Mandarin. This becomes especially critical in Aceh, where communities consist of diverse ethnic backgrounds shaping unique patterns of social communication. Idiomatic expressions pose a challenge for translators, especially when unaware of the cultural differences between the source and target languages (Adelnia & Dastjerdi, 2011; Meryem, 2010; Sazdovska-Pigulovska, 2020; Vazifehkhah, 2017) Hence, translators need to equip themselves with both linguistic skills and cultural competence to effectively navigate these dynamics.

Poor or ineffective communication can lead to misunderstandings, conflicts, or financial losses in international business contexts. A literature review reveals that effective intercultural business communication can reduce these risks by allowing individuals to understand different cultures, norms, and business ethics, and avoid misinterpretations(Putranto et al., 2024; Rahayuningsih, 2014; Sazdovska-Pigulovska, 2020; Surya et al., 2022). Good intercultural business communication helps build strong relationships with partners from different cultures. When individuals show cultural sensitivity, respect, and understanding of their partners' needs and values, it can strengthen business relationships, improve collaboration, and build long-term trust (Husain, 2006) Intercultural business communication also fosters innovation and creativity. In multicultural environments, differing perspectives and approaches enrich one another. Open and inclusive communication allows the exchange of new ideas, exploration of new potentials, and creative problem-solving.

In this context, comprehensive understanding of local culture and adaptability become key success factors in translation practices. A competent translator must be able to recognise and anticipate potential misunderstandings arising from cultural differences so that intercultural communication can

run smoothly. By integrating cultural understanding into each translation process, the outcome is expected not only to deliver the message accurately but also to be relevant and acceptable to the target audience both contextually and culturally. Based on the aforementioned background, several key issues must be systematically explored to understand the complexity of Mandarin translation challenges within the context of cultural and professional interaction in Aceh. These research problems are expected to serve as a guide to sharpen and deepen the focus of the study. The formulated research question in this study is: What forms of linguistic difficulties do Mandarin translators in Aceh face in translating oral and written communication? This research is important as it provides a real picture of the gap between professional communication needs and translators' preparedness in the field. By deeply understanding the root of the problem, more targeted interventions can be designed. Moreover, the results of this study can serve as a foundation for developing training curricula that better suit industry needs. Previous studies that have discussed Mandarin translation include findings that the main difficulty lies more in cultural implications than linguistic differences (Rui, 2019). Zhang Rui's research discusses the challenges in translating culturally-loaded words from Chinese into English. The main difficulty lies in cultural differences rather than linguistic aspects. Zhang employs Newmark's communicative and semantic translation theories to analyse appropriate strategies. He also classifies culturally-loaded words into five main categories, such as ecology and material culture. In conclusion, translators need to understand both source and target cultures and apply flexible strategies to preserve cultural meaning in the translation.; Mandarin-English interpretation is significantly influenced by linguistic and cultural aspects due to different social and cultural backgrounds (Wu, 2000); linguistics and culture in Mandarin translation (Sun, 2024); The study reveals that translating Premier Li Keqiang's Government Work Report from Chinese to English presents complex challenges due to deeply embedded cultural connotations, such as classical allusions, idiomatic expressions, and political metaphors. These elements often lose their original meaning or impact when rendered literally into English, highlighting the limitations of direct translation. To address this, the translator must act not only as a linguistic expert but also as a cultural mediator who adapts messages to suit the target audience's understanding. The research applies eco-translatology to emphasise a dynamic, adaptive process where fidelity, cultural relevance, and communicative effectiveness must be balanced.

Ultimately, the findings stress that accurate political translation requires a strategic and culturally sensitive approach to preserve the report's original intent and rhetorical power.linguistic and cultural differences significantly challenge translation (Luo & Huang, 2025); linguistics and culture in Mandarin translation stem from significant differences in language structures and cultural contexts (Brazill, 2016); cultural differences create cultural gaps in Mandarin translation (Ma et al., 2011); non-native Mandarin speakers face linguistic and cultural challenges in translation, including significant differences in expressions between Mandarin and English(Dong, 2014; Hao & Li, 2024); linguistics and culture in Mandarin translation arise from differing mindsets between Chinese and Western cultures, leading to potential misunderstandings (Moratto, 2022; Ren, 2019)

**METHOD**

This This study adopts a qualitative approach using a descriptive-analytical method (Achjar et al., 2023; Assyakurrohim et al., 2022; Murdiyanto, 2020; Rahman, 2021; Sugiyono, 2013). The selection of this method is based on the main objective of the research, which is to explore and deeply understand the dynamics of linguistic and cultural challenges in business communication faced by Mandarin language translators in Aceh. The focus of the study is not limited to linguistic phenomena but also includes cultural aspects that influence the translation process within the work context of Chinese companies. This research does not aim to test hypotheses but to gain a holistic understanding of the informants lived experiences. Thus, this approach enables the researcher to reconstruct meaning from the translators' subjective experiences based on data obtained directly from relevant sources.

The research subjects consist of three Mandarin language translators working in Chinese-owned

companies in Aceh, each with a minimum of two years of work experience. Informants were selected purposively, considering criteria such as relevant professional experience and alignment with the research focus(Achjar et al., 2023; Rusli, 2021). The primary data collection technique used in this study is in depth interviews, aiming to explore the translators' perceptions, experiences, and challenges in their professional practice. The data were collected through interviews with open question and were audio-recorded and transcribed to maintain data accuracy. The researcher also took note of non-verbal responses and situational contexts during the interviews as part of the qualitative data for analysis The research was conducted for a month.

The collected data were analysed using an inductive approach (Maleong, 2012). The inductive approach is a method of reasoning that begins with specific observations and proceeds to broader generalisations or conclusions. The analysis process involved several stages: data reduction, categorisation, theme and finding identification, and conclusion drawing. The data were classified based on similarities in meaning and relevance to the research focus. The findings were then interpreted within the framework of intercultural communication theory, translation theory, and applied linguistics, and compared with previous research findings. This approach aims to provide a deep, relevant, and contextual understanding of the translator's role in bridging cultural and linguistic gaps in multinational work environments

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The researcher conducted interviews with three individuals working as Mandarin language translators. These interviews aimed to gather information regarding the difficulties faced by Indonesian-Mandarin translators in translating both spoken and written Indonesian into Mandarin, and vice versa. The following discussion will highlight several key challenges that need to be addressed in intercultural business communication in the era of globalisation. Some of the main difficulties encountered by Indonesian-Mandarin translators are outlined below, and Table 1 attempts to summarise the findings of this research.

**Table 1.** *The intralingual and extra lingual factors challenges faced by translators*

| No. | Theme | Findings | Category |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | **Lack of Target Language Vocabulary** | Some phrases cannot be translated using a word-for-word strategy. The meaning of certain unfamiliar words is difficult to interpret. It is challenging to choose the appropriate word meaning from dictionary entries. | Intralingual |
| 2. | **Use of Idioms** | It is difficult to match the meaning of idioms with similar idioms or phrases in the target language. | Intralingual |
| 3. | **Dialectal Differences Among Ethnic Groups** | Limitations arise due to dialectal differences between the learned language and the target language. | Intralingual |
| 4. | **Use of Slang** | Slang tends to be informal and often lacks the structure of standard language. This can make interpretation subjective and vary among individuals. | Extralingual |
| 5 | **Handwriting** | In cursive writing, letters are often connected, which can obscure the boundaries between them. This makes it difficult to distinguish where one letter ends and the next begins. | Extralingual |
| 6 | **Tone Differences** | Errors in determining tone can lead to incorrect translations. | Extralingual |

Effective translation, especially between linguistically and culturally distant languages such as Mandarin and Indonesian, demands more than mere fluency. It requires a deep cognitive and cultural sensitivity. The findings in the table reveal a layered set of challenges that translators in Aceh encounter, falling broadly into intralingual and extra lingual categories. On the intralingual side,

difficulties emerge from within the language system itself: insufficient vocabulary in the target language, idiomatic expressions that defy direct translation, and regional dialects that differ even among speakers of the same language. These barriers reflect not only linguistic gaps but also a lack of exposure to contextual and cultural nuances that shape language use in practice. Meanwhile, extra lingual factors introduce complexity from outside the language system, such as interpreting informal slang, deciphering unclear handwriting, and navigating tone variations. These issues underscore the importance of situational awareness, sociolect knowledge, and even visual literacy in effective communication. Taken together, these challenges point to the need for a holistic training approach for translators one that includes behavioural interpretation, cultural immersion, and semiotic awareness, alongside traditional linguistic education. As we delve deeper into each category, we can begin to formulate targeted strategies to empower translators not just to translate accurately, but to connect meaningfully across cultures.

## A. Lack of Target Language Vocabulary

Difficulty in understanding the topic of discussion is often caused by the translator's limited competence in the subject matter being discussed. Technical terms from various academic or professional disciplines are frequently unfamiliar to translators, leading to inaccurate translations and potential misunderstandings of the speaker's intended meaning. This highlights the importance of mastering terminology and understanding the context of specific fields prior to undertaking the translation process, especially in academic or professional settings that are rich in specialised terminology.

Example:

Work environment measurement '工作环境检测 ' (Gōngzuò huánjìng jiǎncè)

After extensive discussions and field experience, it was found that the correct translation is '职业危害因素检测' (Zhíyè wéihài yīnsù jiǎncè）

## B. The Use of Idioms

Difficulties often arise in the use of idioms, especially during formal events such as speeches and large meetings, where Mandarin speakers frequently use various expressions and idioms to enhance the style of their delivery. A deep understanding of the meaning and cultural background of a word or idiom in Mandarin greatly assists translators in accurately conveying the meaning from Indonesian to Mandarin, and vice versa, in accordance with the linguistic context and norms of each language.

For example:

'百闻不如一见' (Bǎi wén bùrú yī jiàn)

It can be translated directly as hearing something a hundred times is not as good as seeing it once. This example illustrates that all the constituents forming the phrase 百 bǎi (hundred), 闻 wén (hear), 不如 bùrú (not as good as), yī (one), and 见 jiàn (see) collectively convey an idiom that retains the meaning of its individual parts: hearing something a hundred times is not as good as seeing it once. By simply understanding the meanings of each constituent in the idiom, the overall meaning of the idiom can be easily inferred.

Another example:

'秦 晋之 好'(Qínjìn zhī hǎo)

It cannot be translated directly, as it literally means 'the good relationship between Qin and Jin,' but its actual meaning refers to marriage or a strong alliance between two families. This example shows that the meaning of an idiom cannot always be fully derived from the literal meanings of its constituents. All the words forming the phrase 秦 Qín (State of Qin), 晋 Jìn (State of Jin), 之 zhī (a linking particle), and 好 hǎo (good/good relationship) literally refer to 'the good relationship between Qin and Jin.' However, the idiomatic meaning of 'a marriage that bonds two families' or 'an alliance through

marriage' can only be understood by knowing the specific historical context of the marital alliance between the Qin and Jin states during the Warring States period in ancient China. To strengthen their kingdoms, the two states forged cooperation and family ties by marrying off their sons and daughters. By doing so, they hoped their states would become stronger and remain in a state of peace and harmony. As a result, this idiom came to symbolise unity in harmony. Today, this expression is commonly used among the Chinese community to congratulate someone who is getting married, with the wish that the couple will always live in harmony.

Thus, simply analysing the literal meanings of each constituent in the idiom does not allow one to infer the complete meaning (i.e., marriage or alliance") without knowledge of its historical background.

## C. Dialectal Differences Among Ethnic Groups

Indonesian translators encounter numerous language barriers because workers from China come from various regions within their home country. Dialectal influence is more significant among older workers and those with lower educational backgrounds, compared to younger and more highly educated workers, who tend to have adequate Mandarin language proficiency and are less affected by their regional dialects.

This study found examples such as the following:

The standard Mandarin word for 'what' is '什么' (Shénme), but in practice, workers may use '啥' instead.

Many dialects in Northern China (including some Mandarin sub-dialects), as well as several Wu dialects, use '啥' (shá) instead of the standard '什么' (shénme).

For example: '你吃啥呢？'(Nǐ chī shá ne?) – What are you eating?In the Ningbo dialect, the word '啥' (shá) has three different pronunciations depending on the region or context, or even depending on different words. This highlights the phonetic and lexical diversity within regional dialects, making it more challenging for translators to understand and interpret accurately.  In Cantonese dialect, the character 乜 (miē / yē) is often combined with other particles such as '嘢' (yéh), which means 'thing' or 'object,' forming 乜嘢 (mat1 yéh). Although it literally means 'what thing,' this phrase functions as the interrogative word 'what.'

Example:

'你食乜嘢呀？(Nǐ sik miē yé aa?)  What are you eating?

In some Min dialects such as Hokkien/Minnan, the word '各' (kò) serves a similar function as an interrogative word meaning 'what' or 'which' in certain sentence constructions. However, Hokkien also has other interrogatives for 'what,' such as '啥物' (siáⁿ-mih), which may be more commonly used in some regions.

Example:

'你做各？'(Lí chòe kò?)  What are you doing? / What do you want to do?

## D. The Use of Slang

Modern Chinese slang reflects changes in social, economic, and cultural spheres, illustrating the reciprocal influence between social processes and slang as a part of language. Slang is typically informal and creative, relying on wordplay, metaphors, and inventive language use. Translating slang requires creativity and flexibility to capture the playful or expressive nature of the original expression. Slang terms often carry multiple meanings or connotations, which may not be immediately obvious even to native speakers. Translators must consider various interpretations of slang words and select the most appropriate translation based on context. Slang evolves rapidly, with new expressions constantly emerging and older ones falling out of use. Translators must stay up-to-date with current slang trends to ensure their translations remain relevant and authentic. Slang frequently arises from specific cultural

contexts and may not have direct equivalents in other languages. Translating slang demands not only linguistic skills but also cultural understanding to accurately convey the intended meaning. Slang terms can vary significantly between regions, even within the same language. A slang term commonly used in one country may be unfamiliar or have a different meaning in another. Therefore, translators need to be aware of these regional variations in order to provide accurate translations.

## E. Handwriting

Figure 1 means Cursive Mandarin handwriting refers to a highly stylised and flowing form of Chinese script, often called Grass Script. This style is characterised by its rapid, connected strokes where characters may be abbreviated, merged, or altered for speed and expression. It is traditionally used by calligraphers and artists to convey emotion, spontaneity, and elegance, rather than for everyday writing. Cursive script can be difficult to read for those unfamiliar with it, as it departs significantly from standard printed forms. Its purpose is often more artistic than functional. Mandarin orthographic characters can be highly complex, composed of numerous strokes arranged in various combinations. Some characters contain dozens of strokes, making them visually intricate and difficult to distinguish. The structural complexity of Mandarin characters affects their recognisability, as syntactic approaches may be suitable for recognition but face challenges due to variability in writing styles. Character recognition in Mandarin is difficult due to the large number of categories, complex structures, similarities between characters, and variations in fonts or handwriting styles. There are two main sets of Mandarin characters: simplified characters and traditional characters. Simplified characters were introduced in mainland China to improve literacy by reducing the number of strokes in complex characters. Traditional characters are still used in regions such as Taiwan and Hong Kong.
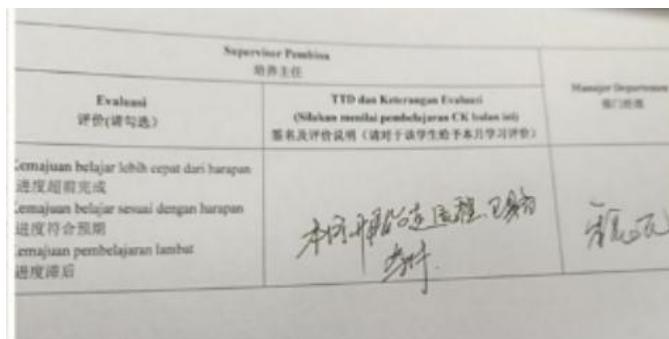


***Figure 1.*** Cursive Mandarin handwriting

As with cursive scripts in other languages, Chinese handwritten characters can vary significantly from one person to another. Different writers may have distinct handwriting styles, which can make character recognition challenging especially for those unfamiliar with these variations. In this study, we found that translators often struggle to recognise and understand handwriting, particularly with the frequent use of cursive script. Continuous strokes and the occasional omission of certain strokes further complicate interpretation. Chinese characters often heavily rely on context for proper understanding. Unlike phonetic alphabets, where each letter represents a sound, Chinese characters represent meaning. This means the meaning of a character can change depending on its context, making it difficult to recognise characters in isolation.

## F. Tone Differences

Mandarin orthographic characters can be highly complex, composed of numerous strokes arranged in various combinations. Some characters contain dozens of strokes, making them visually intricate and difficult to distinguish. The structural complexity of Mandarin characters affects their recognisability, as syntactic approaches may be suitable for recognition but face challenges due to variability in writing styles. Character recognition in Mandarin is difficult due to the large number of

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## CONCLUSION

The difficulties faced by translators in translating Mandarin into Indonesian and vice versa can be summarised into several key points. First, translators often encounter obstacles due to limited vocabulary. This leads to difficulties in both oral and written translation, especially when dealing with phrases that cannot be translated literally, unfamiliar words, or words that do not have suitable equivalents in the target language. In addition, the educational background of translators, which does not always directly relate to the field of translation such as graduates of education majors working in the mining industry further widens the competence gap.

The second difficulty arises from translating sentences containing idioms, mainly due to the challenge of finding appropriate idiomatic equivalents in the target language. Many idioms have not been learned previously or do not have equivalent meanings. Third, the variety of dialects used by native Chinese speakers is also a distinct challenge. Mandarin mixed with regional dialects, especially from older speakers, often confuses translators who are unfamiliar with such variations. Fourth, the use of slang, which lacks standard rules and evolves quickly, also complicates translation since a single word may have different meanings depending on the context and region of use.

The fifth difficulty often encountered is recognising and understanding handwriting, especially cursive writing commonly used by Chinese workers. The connected script and minimal specific strokes make it even harder to identify, even for experienced translators. Lastly, errors in tone recognition are also a serious problem. Since Mandarin is a tonal language, a change in tone can drastically alter the meaning of a word. Failing to catch the correct tone can lead to misunderstandings in translation.

The work culture of Chinese workers also influences local translators, particularly in Aceh, to adapt to the work ethic applied by the company. Values such as speed in completing tasks, loyalty to superiors, as well as effectiveness and efficiency at work are learned indirectly. Based on the various difficulties found, researchers offer several suggestions, one of which is vocabulary enrichment. Translators are advised to become active listeners, take notes of new vocabulary, use language learning apps, and regularly read and listen to materials in Mandarin to broaden their contextual linguistic knowledge.

To overcome difficulties related to idioms, dialects, and slang, translators are encouraged to interact directly with native speakers and join language communities. Using online references, asking questions to speakers, and regularly listening to audiovisual materials will help familiarise themselves with various communication styles. In terms of handwriting, translators should pay attention to recurring patterns and not hesitate to ask for help when facing obstacles. For difficulties in understanding tones, methods such as shadowing, listening to podcasts with transcripts, and using listening practice apps are highly recommended. With consistent and comprehensive strategies, translators can improve

accuracy and reliability in cross-cultural and cross-language translation.

Based on the challenges identified in translating Mandarin into Indonesian and vice versa, future research should explore several key areas to support more effective and culturally sensitive translation practices. First, in-depth studies are needed to examine vocabulary acquisition strategies specifically tailored for translators working with Chinese–Indonesian language pairs, especially in professional contexts such as industry or government. Second, more focused linguistic research should investigate idiomatic equivalence and cultural adaptation, providing practical frameworks or databases of idioms and their contextual Indonesian counterparts.

Third, future studies should explore dialectal variation and its impact on translation accuracy, particularly examining how regional Mandarin dialects affect comprehension among non-native translators in Indonesia. Fourth, given the significant difficulty with cursive handwriting recognition, research should be conducted on technological aids, such as AI-based handwriting recognition tools, and training methods to support manual interpretation of written Mandarin texts. Lastly, there is a pressing need for psycholinguistic and acoustic studies on Mandarin tonal perception among Indonesian speakers, which could inform improved pronunciation training models and tone recognition technologies. Such future research would not only fill existing knowledge gaps but also contribute to the development of more targeted translator training programs, digital tools, and cross-cultural communication frameworks.

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