

Experiential Meaning Equivalence in English–Vietnamese and Vietnamese–English Translation of Commercial Correspondence: A Theoretical Framework and Practical Guidelines

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Abstract

Commercial correspondence in English and Vietnamese communicates information, establishes commitments, allocates responsibilities, and directs action in transactions; inaccuracies may alter obligations and risks. This theoretical practical article draws on documentary analysis and illustrative examples, not corpus evidence. It integrates Halliday and Matthiessen's systemic functional linguistics with Koller's equivalence to propose a framework for bidirectional English Vietnamese translation. It identifies genre, transactional action, and context; analyses processes, participants, circumstances, and conditions; and evaluates source and target relations through equivalence types. Polysemy, technical terminology, collocations, nominalization, passive constructions, and conditional and temporal clauses are distortion sites. It proposes conditional principles preserving transactional content, responsibilities, genre conventions, and recipients' capacity to act. These principles require validation through an authentic, anonymized, transparently coded corpus.

Keywords: commercial correspondence; English–Vietnamese translation; Vietnamese–English translation; experiential meaning; translation equivalence.

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I. Introduction

In cross-border transactions, commercial correspondence in English and Vietnamese enables firms to make offers, submit enquiries, place orders, confirm orders and payments, handle complaints, and maintain business relationships. Such correspondence not only communicates information but also establishes commitments, allocates responsibilities, and directs action. Accordingly, inaccuracies in translating delivery terms, payment methods, or the party responsible may generate transactional risks. Incoterms® standardizes trade terms and delineates obligations, costs, and risks in contracts for the sale of goods (International Chamber of Commerce [ICC], 2020).

Translating this type of text is not a matter of lexical substitution alone. Before selecting target-language expressions, translators need to identify the transactional activity, the relationship between the parties, the communicative purpose of the letter, and the relevant genre conventions. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) maintain that language construes experiential, interpersonal, and textual meanings. Experiential meaning, in particular, realizes processes, participants, and circumstances; it therefore provides an important basis for interpreting technical terms, polysemous lexical items, collocations, and nominalization. Koller (1995) conceptualizes equivalence as a relationship between the source text and the target text, rather than as word-for-word formal replication.

Existing scholarship has not yet established an integrated, operationalizable framework specifically designed to assess the preservation of experiential meaning in English–Vietnamese and Vietnamese–English commercial correspondence. This article focuses on four linguistic sites at which processes, participants, circumstances, conditions, or transactional responsibilities may be distorted: polysemous lexical items, technical terminology, collocations, and nominalization/clause structures. The article does not present an authentic corpus and makes no claims regarding frequency or representativeness; its examples serve solely to illustrate the proposed framework.

The article addresses the following three guiding questions:

1. Which contextual cues of the transaction should be considered when determining the meaning of units that are susceptible to semantic distortion in English–Vietnamese and Vietnamese–English commercial correspondence?
2. What analytical framework can facilitate the comparison of translational shifts involving processes, participants, circumstances, conditions, and transactional responsibilities?
3. What conditional principles may support the selection of target-language expressions for each group of linguistic phenomena?

The scope of the article is limited to commercial correspondence, the two translation directions of English–Vietnamese and Vietnamese–English, and examples drawn from the sale of goods, transport, insurance, and international payment. The framework is not intended to support generalizations about all legal texts, contracts, or forms of business communication. Nor does it replace the verification of contractual terms, documents, and sector-specific rules applicable to individual transactions.

II. Literature Review and Research Gap

Studies on the Genre of Commercial Correspondence

Research on commercial correspondence lies at the intersection of discourse analysis, genre analysis, business communication, and translation studies. Internationally, genre-based approaches view offer letters, enquiries, negotiations, order confirmations, complaints, and complaint responses as purposive communicative acts characterized by distinctive rhetorical structures and linguistic conventions. Bhatia (1993) argues that professional genres are recognized by specialist communities; accordingly, translation should reproduce the function of the text rather than merely substitute individual words. Santos (2002) shows that negotiation letters commonly develop through moves that establish relationships, provide information, request action, and close the exchange. These structures assist translators in distinguishing obligatory information from supplementary information and in identifying the communicative force of the text.

English in International Business Communication

A further line of inquiry examines the role of English in international business. Nickerson (2005) reviews scholarship on English as a lingua franca in business communication. Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2013) develop the concept of English as a business lingua franca, emphasizing the ability to accomplish work-related tasks, share knowledge, and build relationships. These studies suggest that translation should preserve transactional objectives, clarity, and the parties' capacity to coordinate action. Their primary focus, however, is communication conducted in English and does not directly address the selection of translation equivalents in the English–Vietnamese and Vietnamese–English language pair.

Translation Equivalence and Translational Function

Within translation studies, Koller (1995) conceptualizes equivalence as a relationship between the source text and the target text that may be examined in terms of denotative, connotative, text-normative, pragmatic, and formal-aesthetic dimensions. Nord (1997) and House (2015) emphasize the function of translation in its situation of reception while also requiring accountability to the source text. These approaches are particularly relevant to commercial correspondence, in which terminology, parties, conditions, deadlines, and responsibilities may entail substantive transactional consequences. Nevertheless, these foundational studies do not provide a ready-made comparative procedure for individual units such as polysemous lexical items, collocations, or nominalization in English–Vietnamese and Vietnamese–English translation.

Studies Conducted in Vietnam

In Vietnam, Nguyễn Trọng Đan (1996) examined commercial correspondence using English- and Vietnamese-language materials, thereby establishing a basis for comparing register, information organization, and communicative relations. Drawing on French–Vietnamese materials, Hà Văn Riển (2001) emphasized the necessity of linguistic knowledge, subject-matter expertise, and contextual awareness for the accurate transfer of transactional information. Nguyễn Thành Lân (2015) discusses several principles for translating commercial correspondence in both the English–Vietnamese and Vietnamese–English directions. These studies provide useful reference points for discourse analysis, transactional accuracy, and practical guidance. However, they do not present an integrated framework that explicitly specifies the sequence of relations among transactional context, experiential meaning, and types of translation equivalence.

Table 1. Overview of Related Studies and Research Gaps

Study/Studies	Data/Language Pair	Focus	Relevant Contribution	Gap Addressed by the Present Article
Bhatia (1993); Santos (2002)	Professional genres; negotiation letters	Communicative purpose, rhetorical structure, and genre conventions	Supports the identification of letter types and communicative acts	Does not establish criteria for comparing experiential meaning in English–Vietnamese/Vietnamese–English translation
Nickerson (2005); Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2013)	English-language international business communication	Clarity, work coordination, and relationship building	Emphasizes the usability of the message	Does not focus on equivalence selection in the language pair examined
Koller (1995); Nord (1997); House (2015)	Translation studies	Equivalence, function, and translation assessment	Provides criteria for assessing source-text–target-text relations	Does not directly relate to linguistic sites in commercial correspondence
Nguyễn Trọng Dân (1996); Hà Văn Riển (2001); Nguyễn Thành Lâm (2015)	English–Vietnamese and French–Vietnamese; correspondence/transactional texts	Discourse, transactional accuracy, and translation principles	Provides a Vietnamese foundation for comparison and practice	Does not explicitly integrate transactional context, transitivity, and types of equivalence

Note. The table synthesizes only the studies directly drawn upon in this article; it does not substitute for a systematic review of the entire field.

Building on the foregoing review, the article identifies three proposal-level contributions: (i) it situates the two translation directions, English–Vietnamese and Vietnamese–English, within a single comparative framework; (ii) it links transactional context to the processes, participants, circumstances, and conditional relations through which experiential meaning is construed; and (iii) it proposes an analytical procedure that may be applied to authentic extracts in future research. The third contribution constitutes a methodological orientation rather than a finding validated through corpus-based evidence.

III. Methodology and Scope of the Article

Article Type and Sources

This article is positioned as a theoretical and practice-oriented contribution. This positioning precludes claims concerning a corpus, frequency, intercoder coding, agreement rates, or Cohen’s kappa in the absence of verifiable authentic data. The materials drawn upon include foundational studies of genre, systemic functional linguistics, translation equivalence, document analysis, and qualitative content analysis (Bowen, 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Schreier, 2012), together with the sector-specific rules cited in the illustrative examples. Document analysis is employed here to develop and assess the internal coherence of the proposed framework, rather than to infer the frequency of phenomena in actual practice.

Status and Role of the Examples

The examples in Section 5 are numbered T1–T11 and are illustrative in nature. They were developed or standardized by the author on the basis of lexical items, terms, conditions, and transactional relations commonly encountered in commercial correspondence. They are not corpus extracts, do not carry codes such as E01–E120 or V01–V120, and do not represent the translations of any particular company, learner, or professional translator. Accordingly, the examples are used solely to illustrate analytical procedures and conditional translation options; they should not be treated as evidence of translational tendencies, translation quality, or the prevalence of particular errors.

Analytical Procedure

The following procedure is applied consistently to each example and may be converted into a coding procedure when future research is conducted using an authentic corpus.

1. **Identify the letter type and transactional action:** enquiry, offer, order, shipping notification, request for payment, complaint, or complaint response.
2. **Identify the transactional context, with primary attention to Field:** the relevant sector, stage of the transaction, goods or services, documents, participating parties, and conditional relations.
3. **Analyse the experiential meaning of the source unit** in terms of processes, participants, circumstances, and conditional or temporal relations.

4. **Identify linguistic sites susceptible to meaning distortion:** polysemous lexical items, technical terminology, collocations, nominalization, passive constructions, or clause structures.
5. **Compare the source-text and target-text renderings** by examining the preservation of the responsible party, action, object, conditions, deadlines, documents, and degree of obligation.
6. **Evaluate the rendering according to the relevant type of equivalence in Koller’s framework** and formulate a conditional principle, while observing the limitation that source-text information must not be added or omitted without justification.

Operationalizable Analytical Criteria

Table 2 specifies the questions and indicators employed in this article. It constitutes an analytical framework rather than the codebook of a completed corpus study. When the framework is adapted for empirical research, each indicator should be supplemented by exclusion criteria, multi-label assignment rules, borderline examples, and procedures for testing intercoder reliability.

Table 2. Analytical Criteria Framework for Illustrative Examples and Future Research

Component	Analytical Question	Identification Indicators	Source–Target Requirement	Comparison
Genre and transactional action	What does the letter seek to accomplish?	Letter type; request, confirmation, complaint, or request for remedial action	Preserve the intended communicative purpose and degree of obligation.	
Transactional Field	What activity, sector, and stage of the transaction are involved?	Goods; documents; delivery terms; payment methods; insurance; inspection	Do not replace a contextually activated technical meaning with a general-language meaning.	
Processes, participants, and circumstances	Who does what, to whom or what, where, when, and under what conditions?	Verb/process; responsible party; object; deadline; location; documentary conditions	Preserve responsibility, scope of effect, temporal reference points, and conditional relations.	
Polysemous lexical items and technical terminology	Does the unit carry a technical meaning or depend on documentary context?	Co-occurrence with a contract, invoice, bill of lading, L/C, insurance, or bank	Verify against authoritative sources, contractual definitions, and consistency across the entire document set.	
Collocations	Does the verb–noun combination accurately reflect the relevant transaction stage and agent?	settle an invoice; lodge a claim; arrange for an inspection	Select a natural target-language collocation without altering the process type.	
Nominalization, passive constructions, and clauses	Does the structure clarify or obscure the agent or conditions?	upon receipt; failure to deliver; was found damaged; if/in the event of	Restructure only where referential relations or communicative force are not lost.	
Type of equivalence	Which dimension of equivalence should be prioritized?	Transactional facts; degree of obligation; letter conventions; capacity to act	Prioritize denotative equivalence for obligations and transactional consequences; subsequently assess the other dimensions.	

Note. The criteria of register appropriateness and naturalness should be assessed only after transactional content, the responsible party, conditions, and deadlines have been preserved.

Limitations, Ethics, and Confidentiality

This article does not use company records, disclose corporate names, contract numbers, product codes, L/C numbers, or banking information, or claim to have obtained permission to use actual data. When developing a corpus-based study, the author should specify the data sources, the status of the translations, the inclusion and exclusion criteria, anonymization procedures, permissions for use, data accessibility, and procedures for resolving disagreements between coders. These requirements constitute necessary conditions for transforming the present framework into an empirical study that can be independently examined and replicated.

IV. Theoretical Foundations and Analytical Framework

Transactional Context, Register, and Experiential Meaning in Halliday’s Framework

Systemic functional linguistics views language as a meaning-making resource in social life rather than merely as a set of rules governing words and sentences. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) emphasize the relationship between linguistic choices and their contexts of use. A text is not a sequence of independent sentences; rather, it comprises a systematic set of choices through which a social activity is enacted. This

perspective is important for translation because a translation should reproduce the source text's capacity to function in its context of reception, rather than merely replicate its formal features.

Context may be specified through three register variables: Field, Tenor, and Mode. Field concerns the social activity being undertaken, including transactional content, processes, objects, and the degree of technical specialization involved. Tenor describes the participants, their roles, relative status, communicative authority, and degree of obligation. Mode concerns the role of language, the channel of communication, the degree of interactivity, the traceability of the message, and its organizational pattern. These three variables are contextual features and do not correspond one-to-one with the three metafunctions.

This article gives priority to Field and experiential meaning. Tenor and Mode are considered only as supplementary evaluative factors when they directly affect the force of a request, the degree of obligation, or the referential clarity of the correspondence. This delimitation avoids making broad claims about register variables without providing corresponding analytical indicators. For example, "Please arrange immediate replacement" may function as a polite request, a strong demand, or an urgent notice, depending on the nature of the defect, the contractual terms, and the history of prior exchanges. Interpersonal cues must therefore be considered before selecting such Vietnamese renderings as *đề nghị* [request], *yêu cầu* [demand], *vui lòng* [please], or *khẩn trương* [urgently].

Experiential Meaning and Linguistic Sites Susceptible to Distortion

According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), experiential meaning is most prominently realized through the transitivity system, comprising process types, associated participants, and attendant circumstances. Transitivity analysis addresses the following questions: who performs an action, what action is performed, what entity is affected, by what means, where, when, and under what conditions? In commercial correspondence, these are simultaneously questions of transactional operation and responsibility.

The four groups of phenomena selected in this article are not treated as four coequal components of experiential meaning. Rather, they constitute linguistic sites at which the construal of processes, participants, circumstances, conditions, or transactional responsibilities may be distorted. Polysemous lexical items and technical terminology are points at which specialized meanings must be established; collocations assist in examining process type, agency, and degree of completion; and nominalization is treated as a mode of meaning organization that may involve grammatical metaphor when a process is packaged as a referential entity. Passive constructions and conditional or temporal clauses are distinguished from nominalization because they operate through different mechanisms in clarifying or obscuring agents, conditional relations, and deadlines.

For example, in the sentence "The seller shall replace the damaged goods within ten days," *replace* realizes a material process; *the seller* is the responsible agent; *the damaged goods* are the affected entity; and *within ten days* is a temporally bounded circumstance carrying obligatory force. Rendering "the seller" as an unspecified participant, omitting the deadline, or translating *shall* as discretionary possibility would weaken the experiential meaning and may alter the communicative force of the text. Similarly, "Payment will be effected against presentation of the required documents" links the payment process to a documentary condition. The translator must preserve this conditional relation, rather than merely rendering *payment* as "thanh toán" and *documents* as "chứng từ."

Types of Equivalence in Koller's Framework

Koller (1995) regards equivalence as a relationship between the source text and the target text rather than as word-for-word identity. In this article, the five types of equivalence are referred to consistently as follows: *denotative equivalence*, *connotative equivalence*, *text-normative equivalence*, *pragmatic equivalence*, and *formal-aesthetic equivalence*.

Denotative equivalence is conditionally prioritized when an extract contains parties, goods, documents, conditions, deadlines, costs, risks, or obligations that give rise to transactional consequences. This priority does not exclude pragmatic or text-normative equivalence: translators must still organize the correspondence in accordance with target-language conventions and produce a message that enables the recipient to act. However, an adjustment intended to increase naturalness or politeness must not alter the responsible party, payment or delivery conditions, deadline, or documentary scope. Where a conflict arises, the translator should first preserve the transactional relationship and then select the most natural target-language formulation compatible with that relationship.

The Supporting Roles of Genre and Translational Function: An Integrated Framework

Bhatia (1993) is used to identify letter types and communicative actions, rather than to undertake a full analysis of rhetorical moves. Nord (1997) and House (2015) are retained as supplementary theoretical foundations: they underscore that a translation must function in its situation of reception, while also recognizing that functional considerations do not permit arbitrary alterations to source-text content. Halliday and Koller

constitute the two principal operational pillars of the framework: the former describes how meaning is construed in the source text, whereas the latter evaluates the relationship between source and target texts.

Table 3 presents the integrated analytical sequence. This sequence distinguishes three levels that are often conflated: (i) accuracy at the level of commercial and legal content; (ii) accuracy in the construal of experiential meaning; and (iii) translation adequacy.

Table 3. Integrated Analytical Framework for Translating Commercial Correspondence

Step	Question/Concept	Linguistic and Transactional Indicators	Decision/Criterion
1. Identify context	What letter type and transactional action are involved?	Offer; order; shipment; payment; complaint; complaint response	Use genre to identify the communicative purpose and obligatory information.
2. Describe register	Which Field is dominant? Do Tenor and Mode exert a direct influence?	Sector; documents; parties; modality; urgency; traceability	Prioritize Field; consider Tenor and Mode when they alter communicative force or referential clarity.
3. Analyse experiential meaning	What processes, participants, circumstances, and conditions are involved?	Verbs; nominal groups; locations; deadlines; documentary conditions; temporal clauses	Preserve who does what, to which object, when, and under what conditions.
4. Identify linguistic sites susceptible to distortion	Which units are susceptible to meaning distortion?	Polysemy; technical terminology; collocations; nominalization; passive constructions; clauses	Distinguish general-language from technical meanings and identify mechanisms that obscure or clarify responsibility.
5. Compare source and target texts	Have the participant, process, condition, deadline, or document changed?	Source text; target text; referenced contractual provisions and documents	Distinguish operational errors, shifts in experiential meaning, and inadequacies of expression.
6. Evaluate equivalence	Which type of equivalence should be prioritized?	Transactional facts; connotation; letter conventions; capacity to act	Prioritize denotative equivalence where obligations or consequences are involved; then assess connotative, text-normative, and pragmatic equivalence.

Note: *The sequence Transactional context → experiential meaning → source–target comparison → equivalence evaluation is an analytical sequence; it is not an automatic substitution algorithm.*

V. Analysis and Practical Guidelines: Preserving Experiential Meaning in the Translation of Commercial Correspondence

Presentation Template and General Principles

This section does not report corpus-based findings. Each case, T1–T11, is presented according to the same template: transactional context; processes, participants, circumstances, or conditional relations; the linguistic site susceptible to meaning distortion; the proposed translation option or direction; and the limits of application. The objective is not to identify a fixed lexical substitute, but rather to select an expression that enables the target text to preserve transactional information, transactional responsibilities, and the recipient's capacity to act.

In T3, “The seller shall deliver the goods CIF Hai Phong by 30 June 2026,” the translator must retain the responsible party, the action, the CIF term, the designated place, and the deadline. The Vietnamese rendering, “Người bán phải giao hàng theo điều kiện CIF tại Hải Phòng chậm nhất ngày 30 tháng 6 năm 2026,” preserves these components. This rendering is appropriate only where the contract refers to the relevant version of Incoterms® and Hai Phong is the named place. Because Incoterms® clarifies the respective obligations, costs, and risks associated with delivery (ICC, 2020), CIF cannot be replaced by a general explanatory expression.

Polysemous Lexical Items in Transactional Context

Polysemous lexical items are difficult to handle because their general-language meanings do not necessarily coincide with the meanings activated in a transaction. A bilingual dictionary provides only an initial range of possibilities; the translation decision must be based on context, collocations, the type of document involved, and the relationship between the parties. Lexical items such as *draft*, *policy*, *claim*, *tender*, *balance*, *discount*, and *negotiation* may be interpreted differently depending on the Field. Before selecting an equivalent, translators should examine the network of co-occurring items, the participants involved, the type of document, and the relevant stage of the transactional process.

Table 4. Illustrative Examples of Polysemous Lexical Items and Contextual Evidence

Code and Source Example	Context/Co-occurring Units	Experiential Meaning to Be Preserved	Risk and Conditional Translation Guidance
T1. “ <i>negotiation of drafts under a documentary credit</i> ”	Documentary credit; nominated bank; bills of exchange; presented documents; beneficiary.	“ <i>Negotiation</i> ” does not merely denote the activity of bargaining; “ <i>draft</i> ” may refer to a bill of exchange. The transactional relationship concerns the nominated bank’s purchase or negotiation/discounting of a bill of exchange or complying documents and its advance of funds or undertaking to advance funds to the beneficiary.	Do not translate literally as “ <i>đàm phán hối phiếu</i> ”. The Vietnamese rendering must accurately reflect the transaction under the letter-of-credit terms and the bank’s role. The relevant documents must be examined before choosing “ <i>mua</i> ”, “ <i>chiết khấu</i> ”, or another designation.
T2. “ <i>Our open policy covers all shipments from the date of dispatch.</i> ”	Insurance; scope of cover; shipments; dispatch date.	“ <i>Open policy</i> ” denotes a type of open cover in an insurance context, rather than “ <i>chính sách mở</i> ”.	Translate the term in accordance with the designation used in the contract, while preserving the insured subject matter, scope of cover, and temporal reference point. Do not infer a legal designation where the documentation stipulates a different term.
T2a. “ <i>claim</i> ”	When co-occurring with <i>buyer, defective goods, compensation</i> : complaint. When co-occurring with <i>insurer, policy, loss</i> : insurance claim.	The same linguistic form may activate different process types and participant relations.	Do not determine the meaning solely by selecting a dictionary equivalent. Consult preceding correspondence, the contract, invoice, or insurance clauses.

Note: T1–T2a are illustrative examples rather than corpus extracts. Verification against the relevant contract and documentation is a mandatory prerequisite before any translation option is used in an actual transaction.

The general principle is not to select a dictionary meaning before establishing the Field; priority should be given to evidence within the document chain, and conceptual equivalence should be distinguished from surface-level equivalence. A literal translation may still be incorrect if it changes the type of transaction or the party responsible.

Specialized Terminology and Documentary Information

Specialized terminology is more highly conventionalized than general vocabulary. In commercial correspondence, such terminology may activate obligations under contracts, payment rules, or carriage practices. Translators need to distinguish among internationally standardized terms, terms defined in contracts or documentary records, and company-internal terminology. Standardized terms should be verified against sources issued by the relevant specialist bodies; contract-specific terms should follow the usage established in the relevant documentation; and internal terminology should be used consistently, but should not automatically replace standardized terms.

At first occurrence, abbreviations should be spelled out and then used consistently: letter of credit (L/C), documents against payment (D/P), documents against acceptance (D/A), and telegraphic transfer (T/T). These abbreviations are not labels that can be translated freely; translators must determine whether the correspondence refers to a payment method, the status of documents, a bank obligation, or an amendment to the credit.

Table 5. Illustrative Examples of Standardized Terminology and Documentary Roles

Code and Source Example	Commercial/Legal Information	Experiential Meaning to Be Preserved	Translation/Verification Guidance
T3. “ <i>The seller shall deliver the goods CIF Hai Phong by 30 June 2026.</i> ”	CIF; Hai Phong; deadline; seller.	The delivery process, the party bearing the obligation, the named place, the term, and the deadline.	“ <i>Người bán phải giao hàng theo điều kiện CIF tại Hải Phòng chậm nhất ngày 30 tháng 6 năm 2026.</i> ” Verify the cited version of Incoterms® and the named place.
T4. “ <i>Please quote your best price FCA Noi Bai Airport, Incoterms 2020.</i> ”	FCA; Noi Bai Airport; Incoterms® 2020.	A request for a quotation linked to a trade term, rather than merely to a physical location.	“ <i>Đề nghị báo giá tốt nhất theo điều kiện FCA Sân bay Nội Bài, Incoterms® 2020.</i> ” Do not paraphrase FCA as “ <i>delivery at the airport</i> ,” as this may omit the scope of responsibility and the named place.

Code and Source Example	Commercial/Legal Information	Experiential Meaning to Be Preserved	Translation/Verification Guidance
T5. “complying presentation” / “beneficiary”	UCP 600; applicant; beneficiary; issuing bank; confirming bank; nominated bank.	The role of the bank or beneficiary and the status of the documentary presentation.	Beneficiary is generally “người thụ hưởng,” not automatically “người nhận”; complying presentation is “xuất trình chứng từ phù hợp” under the credit terms, UCP 600, and international standard banking practice. Verify the relevant role in each letter.

Note: ICC (2007) and ICC (2020) should be used to verify standardized terminology; however, the contract and documentation for the specific transaction remain the primary reference where they define a term separately.

Names of documents, reference numbers, product codes, ports, and corporate names must be reproduced accurately. Vietnamese explanatory glosses should be added only where the recipient is unfamiliar with the term and should not replace the original provision. Terminological accuracy at the commercial/legal level is an important prerequisite; however, translation analysis must also identify the linguistic mechanism through which a term construes a process, participant, condition, and consequential allocation of responsibility.

Collocations and Process Accuracy

Collocations construe experiential meaning through the simultaneous selection of processes, participants, and objects. A verb may be semantically appropriate in general terms but unsuitable for the noun with which it co-occurs in commercial discourse. Payment may collocate with make, effect, receive, remit, or settle; contract may collocate with conclude, execute, perform, amend, terminate, or breach; and claim may collocate with lodge, file, substantiate, settle, or reject. These choices differ in terms of agency, transactional stage, and degree of completion. Accordingly, the Vietnamese verb thực hiện cannot be rendered by a single English verb in all contexts.

Table 6. Illustrative Examples of Collocations, Agency, and Deadlines

Code and Source Example	Process–Participant–Circumstance Analysis	Translation Risk	Conditional Translation Guidance
T6. “The buyer shall settle the outstanding invoice within seven banking days.”	Settle denotes completion of the payment obligation; the buyer is the agent; outstanding invoice refers to an unpaid invoice; and within seven banking days functions as a temporal circumstance.	Translating outstanding invoice as “hóa đơn tồn đọng” in the absence of an accounting context; reducing “seven banking days” to “seven days.”	“Bên mua phải thanh toán hóa đơn chưa thanh toán trong vòng bảy ngày làm việc của ngân hàng.” Verify whether the contractual context provides a different definition of banking day.
T7. “Chúng tôi đề nghị quý công ty tiến hành giám định lô hàng ngay khi phát hiện tổn thất.”	The recipient may be an insurer, a survey organization, or the party directly responsible for conducting the inspection; the temporal reference point is immediately upon discovery of the loss.	Automatically translating the sentence as perform an inspection without clarifying the allocation of responsibility or agency.	Where the recipient is expected to arrange the inspection: “We request that you arrange for an inspection of the shipment immediately upon discovery of the loss.” Where the recipient is to conduct the inspection directly, conduct an inspection may be more appropriate.
T7a. “lodge a claim”	The process concerns the formal submission of a claim under an established procedure and differs from an ordinary complaint.	Arbitrarily replacing the expression with raise a complaint in a reply letter, thereby creating inconsistency in the degree of technicality.	Maintain terminological consistency across the document set; identify the party entitled to submit the claim, the subject matter of the claim, and the stage of processing.

Note. Naturalness in the target language should be assessed only after the process type, the participants’ rights and obligations, and the degree of completion of the action have been determined.

Nominalization, Passive Constructions, Clauses, and the Preservation of Responsibility

Nominalization is a means of organizing meaning. In English commercial correspondence, it may package an event as an entity that can be referred to, quantified, conditioned, or linked to responsibility, as in payment, delivery, performance, inspection, cancellation, non-compliance, and settlement. Constructions such as “upon receipt of the documents,” “in the event of delay,” and “failure to deliver” enable an event to be referenced as a conditional point or as the basis for subsequent action. However, nominalization does not automatically make a text more precise; excessive use may obscure agency, temporal reference, or causal relations.

Table 7. Illustrative Examples of Nominalization, Passive Constructions, and Conditional/Temporal Clauses

Code and Source Example	Structural Mechanism	Meaning/Responsibility to Be Preserved	Translation Guidance or Caution
T8. “Upon receipt of the shipping documents, we will arrange payment.”	Nominalization of the event of receiving the documents; a temporal-conditional clause.	Receipt of the shipping documents is a precondition for we to arrange payment.	“Sau khi nhận được bộ chứng từ vận tải, chúng tôi sẽ thu xếp thanh toán.” Preserve both the temporal-conditional relation and the agent.
T9. “Delay in delivery has caused losses.”	Nominalization/generalization of the process of delayed delivery.	The source text does not itself specify an agent; agency should be made explicit only where it has been established in the context.	Do not add responsibility without evidence. Where the source text or context identifies the responsible party, “Việc quý công ty giao hàng chậm đã gây thiệt hại cho chúng tôi” is more explicit than “Việc chậm giao hàng đã gây thiệt hại.”
T10. “Sau khi chúng tôi nhận được xác nhận của ngân hàng về việc sửa đổi thư tín dụng, chúng tôi sẽ tiến hành giao hàng.”	A lengthy temporal clause that may be rendered as a nominalized structure in English.	The bank’s confirmation is a condition precedent to shipment; chúng tôi is the responsible agent.	“Upon receipt of the bank’s confirmation of the amendment to the letter of credit, we will arrange shipment.” Where the agent providing confirmation needs to be emphasized: “We will arrange shipment after the bank confirms the amendment to the letter of credit.”
T11. “The goods were found damaged upon arrival.”	The passive construction foregrounds the result rather than the person who discovered it.	The condition of the goods and the temporal reference point must be retained; the source does not identify the discovering agent.	Retain the passive where the result is the informational focus. Where the source provides specific evidence, the agent may be stated: “Our surveyor found that the goods were damaged upon arrival.” Do not add surveyor where the source does not identify one.

Note. Nominalization, passive constructions, and conditional or temporal clauses should be analytically distinguished because each structure operates through a different mechanism for clarifying or obscuring agency and responsibility.

Accordingly, no general rule should be adopted that Vietnamese–English translation must always employ nominalization or that English–Vietnamese translation must always employ verbalization. Decisions concerning structural shifts should be based on the informational purpose of the text and the need to clarify responsibility. Where the source text needs to identify the party bearing an obligation explicitly, an active clause or a passive construction with an expressed agent may be more appropriate than an abstract nominal group. Where the text needs to refer to an event already specified in a contract or to establish a condition for a subsequent clause, nominalization may be an effective option. In Vietnamese, nominal groups remain necessary in established legal-commercial expressions such as “việc giao hàng” [delivery], “điều kiện thanh toán” [payment terms], “việc thực hiện hợp đồng” [contract performance], and “trách nhiệm bồi thường” [liability for compensation].

Comparing the Two Translation Directions and Conditional Principles

The examples above make it possible to place the two translation directions within a common analytical framework; however, they do not warrant the conclusion that either direction “typically” obscures participants or is more difficult in terms of terminology in the absence of an authentic corpus. Each comparison must examine whether a change results from systemic differences between the languages, genre conventions, the translator’s choices, or characteristics of the data. Table 8 summarizes the conditional principles and their limits of application.

Table 8. Conditional Translation Principles by Linguistic Site of Access to Experiential Meaning

Phenomenon	Contextual Condition	Translation Risk	Proposed Principle	Exception/Limitation
Polysemous lexical items	The item co-occurs with documents, banking, insurance, transport, or claims.	Selecting a general-language meaning; translating surface form literally.	Establish the Field, co-occurrence patterns, and participant relations before selecting an equivalent.	The contract and document chain must be consulted; meaning should not be inferred from an isolated sentence.
Standardized terminology	Incoterms® terms; L/C, D/P, D/A, T/T, UCP	Loss of the scope of responsibility, version	Retain the standardized term and reference information;	A contract-specific definition should take priority within the

Phenomenon	Contextual Condition	Translation Risk	Proposed Principle	Exception/Limitation
	600; document names.	of rules, or participant role.	explanatory notes should be supplementary only.	relevant transaction.
Collocations	Processes involving payment, contracts, claims, inspection, or compensation.	A target-language verb that is overly generic or inappropriate to the stage of action.	Identify the agent, degree of completion, object, and deadline; select a natural collocation.	Near-synonymous expressions should not be treated as equivalent in degree of technicality.
Nominalization	An event must be referred to or used to establish a conditional point.	Obscuring agency, temporal reference, or causal relations.	Retain nominalization where it supports reference; use a verbal construction where action or responsibility needs to be clarified.	Do not introduce an agent that is not specified in the source text.
Passive constructions and conditional/temporal clauses	The result, evidence, documentary condition, or deadline is informationally salient.	Shifting the informational focus; omitting a condition or temporal reference point.	Verify the agent, condition, and deadline before restructuring the clause.	Greater naturalness must not weaken the binding force of the text.

Note. The principles are formulated conditionally and do not replace comparison with the source text, contract, documentary evidence, and sector-specific rules applicable to each transaction.

Conclusion

This article proposes a theoretical and practice-oriented framework for English–Vietnamese and Vietnamese–English translation of commercial correspondence. The framework combines Halliday and Matthiessen’s account of context, register, and experiential meaning with Koller’s types of equivalence. Halliday and Matthiessen are used to describe processes, participants, circumstances, and conditional relations in the source text, whereas Koller is used to evaluate source-text–target-text relations. Bhatia supports the identification of genre and communicative action, while Nord and House serve as reminders of function in the situation of reception without replacing the principal analytical criteria.

Polysemous lexical items, specialized terminology, collocations, nominalization, passive constructions, and clauses are treated as linguistic sites at which experiential meaning may be distorted. The proposed procedure requires translators to establish the transactional relationship before selecting lexical items; to preserve the parties involved, responsibilities, conditions, deadlines, documents, and scope of effect; and only then to adjust structures in accordance with target-text norms and the recipient’s capacity to act. Denotative equivalence is prioritized where information creates obligations or transactional consequences, but connotative, text-normative, and pragmatic equivalence must subsequently be assessed.

Because the article does not use an authentic corpus, it draws no conclusions concerning frequencies, patterns of difference, or translation quality in the two directions. The next stage of research should develop a dataset with clearly identified sources, authentic translations, anonymized extracts, a codebook, multi-label rules, reliability reporting for each variable, and coded corpus cases. The present framework can then be tested, refined, and developed into an empirical study.

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