



Translation Methods of Chinese Prose from the Perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory

—Taking the Translation of *Wild Grass* by Zhang Peiji as an Example

Xiaopei Yang, Cun Gao

Tianjin University of Commerce, Tianjin, China

Email: 1147953669@qq.com

How to cite this paper: Yang, X.P. and Gao, C. (2020) Translation Methods of Chinese Prose from the Perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory. *Open Access Library Journal*, 7: e6956.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1106956>

Received: November 1, 2020

Accepted: November 9, 2020

Published: November 12, 2020

Copyright © 2020 by author(s) and Open Access Library Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

Modern Chinese prose is an important part of Chinese culture and literature, so translation of modern Chinese prose becomes increasingly important. Prose has the following unique features: flexible in form but condensed in spirit, with emotional, elegant and concise language. In order to convey these features in Chinese-English translation, we can adopt functional equivalence theory. With reader's response as its core, the theory holds that the closest natural equivalence should be achieved in translation so that the target readers will have the same response in terms of appreciating and understanding of the original text. This paper takes *Wild Grass* translated by Zhang Peiji as an example and proves that functional equivalence can be applied in the translation of modern Chinese prose.

Subject Areas

Linguistics, Literature

Keywords

Functional Equivalence Theory, Translation of Prose, *Wild Grass*

1. Introduction

China's exchange with the world develops rapidly, and more Chinese literary works are being translated into foreign languages accordingly.

China boasts a large number of outstanding authors who have written many excellent literary works. After the May 4th Movement, modern Chinese prose is an important literary genre. Modern Chinese proeses are flexible in form but condensed in spirit. They have much aesthetic value and convey true affections.

Since it is a great treasure in Chinese literary works, translation of modern Chinese prose deserves much attention.

Some scholars have made great contributions to the translation of prose. American poet and translator Burton Raffle (1994: 82) [1] proposed that syntax is an important element and the basic unit in the translation of prose. He holds that prose translation deals with both the message and the style of the original text and fine prose translation lies in the reproduction of original text style. Gao Jian (2006) [2] maintains that the style of prose can be translated. Liu Shicong (2002) [3] once puts forward the principle of “artistic flavor” in prose translation. It includes three aspects: rhythm, atmosphere and unique language.

Even though many scholars have devoted themselves to this field, the research in this field is far from being enough. Nida’s functional equivalence theory has been adopted in the translation of poetry, novel and other fields, while few people have employed it in translating modern Chinese prose.

As we all know, Nida’s functional equivalence theory has a big influence on western translation studies and has been applied to many text types. It emphasizes the reaction of the target language receptor to the target text should be equal to that of the source language receptor to the source text. Translation is a communicative activity among the original author, the translator and the target-language readers. Nida’s functional equivalence theory will be proved to be useful in the translation of modern Chinese prose in the following part.

2. Functional Equivalence Theory

2.1. Introduction of Functional Equivalence Theory

Nida’s functional equivalence laid a solid foundation and had a great influence on translation studies in both western and eastern countries.

Nida had pointed out that “Translation is to reappear information of the source language in the target language by selecting the closest natural equivalent of the original text according to first meaning, then style” (Nida, 2000:93) [4]. In Nida’s translation theory, he gives a definition of translation and indicates that translation is not only the equivalence on lexical level, but also the equivalence on semantics level, style level and genre level. Translation conveys both superficial lexical information and deep cultural information. There are four aspects covered in his functional equivalence theory: functional equivalence on lexical level; functional equivalence on syntactic level; functional equivalence on textual level and functional equivalence on stylistic level. Among these four aspects, Nida points out that “Translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style” (Nida, 2000: 81) [4]. Form may cover up the cultural meaning of source language as well as hinder communication among cultures. Tu Guoyuan (2001) [5] agrees with the idea that functional equivalence can be divided into two different levels: minimal and maximal level. The minimal level refers to that the readers of translated text should be able to

comprehend it. While the maximal level can be defined as that the target language readers should understand and enjoy the translation in the same way as the original readers do. This definition suggests that functional equivalence theory plays an important role in the communication of the source-language messages. Functional equivalence stresses that the target language readers have the same response as source language readers. Therefore, the translator should adopt different translation methods to achieve functional equivalence. Nida puts forward a lot of necessary correlative tenets to find a suitable functional equivalence of a source version.

2.2. Application of Functional Equivalence Theory in Prose Translation

Modern Chinese prose has following characteristics. The modern Chinese prose stress the meaning, the content of the prose rather than form. Nida pays attention to the meaning in translation. "This means that certain rather radical departures from the formal structure are not only legitimate but may even be highly desirable" (Nida and Taber, 2004: 13) [6]. Unlike other literary works, which stress the form, the translation of modern Chinese prose needs to lay more emphasis on the meaning. That is the first reason why Nida's theory of functional equivalence is appropriate for translating modern Chinese prose.

The second reason is that the theory of Nida's functional equivalence is different from other old translation theories. Nida's functional equivalence pays may attention to the reaction of the readers of the target language. The translation of this kind of works aims at the target language readers which can have the same feeling as the source language readers when reading the translated texts. The translated prose doesn't have to imitate every word of the original, but only to express the internal and external meaning of the original. Nida's functional equivalence theory highly of the readers' response, and the modern Chinese prose is translated with the aim of being fully understood by the target language readers. Since they two both take the response of the readers seriously, the theory of Nida's functional equivalence fits the translation of modern Chinese prose well.

Based on the above reasons, it is appropriate to adopt the theory of Nida's functional equivalence in modern Chinese prose translation.

3. Introduction to Prose and *Wild Grass*

There are several features of prose that make it unique from other forms of writing. For instance, it is emotional, elegant, concise and flexible in form but condensed in spirit. In this part, the writer gives a brief introduction to the definitions and language features of prose. Also, the author discusses the features of *Wild Grass*.

Modern Chinese prose has developed in several decades and reflects the Chinese social life comprehensively. Prose is defined as a piece of literary writing

with clear-cut theme, exquisite language, short length and genuine emotion. It records what I (the author) experience, what I see and hear, what I feel and think (Liu Xiqing, 2001) [7]. The writer adopts Liu Xiqing's definition in this paper.

Language Features of Prose and *Wild Grass*

As a special literary genre, prose is endowed with some typical characteristics. There are several features of prose that make it unique from other forms of writing. For instance, it is emotional, elegant, concise and flexible in form but condensed in spirit.

As we read modern Chinese prose, we can feel rich emotions from the prose. The prose writers tend to write their true feelings into the prose. Different literary genres have their own unique ways to express emotion, while prose expresses emotion through the beautiful language.

Xiao Yunru (1961) [8] puts forward the theory that prose is flexible in form but condensed in spirit. This theory is important and spread far and wide. "Flexible in form" means that the prose features a wide selection of topics and various forms of expression. "Condensed in spirit" means that the true thought that the author wants to reflect is supposed to be distinct and specific. All without exception serve mainly for a graceful expression of the thought.

Wild Grass is a famous prose written by Xia Yan in his early days. In *Wild Grass*, the author expresses his contempt for the weight of the dark reality and his trust in the strength of the people through his praise and affirmation of seed vitality. The article reveals a truth that the power of the people is invincible.

The most prominent characteristic of *Wild Grass* is deep philosophy and strong implication. The author was a staunch revolutionary at that time, and what he wrote are not candy floss romances but revolutionary works. His emphasis on the power of *Wild Grass*, the power of weeds that people trample on, is intended to arouse people to their own power and to act so as to achieve the purpose.

What the author writes is the Wild Grass in nature, but what he hints is the darkness in social life. The author, like many revolutionary writers at that time, wrote revolutionary literature rather than flamboyant prose.

As for language features, there are many colloquial expressions, parallel structures and run-on sentences. The colloquial expressions conform to the writing style of Xia Yan and make the prose smooth and authentic; with many parallel structures, the language of *Wild Grass* is powerful with strong emotions; although there are some run-on sentences in this prose, they all focus on a central topic." In order to achieve the function of the prose and create a response of target readers similar to that of the original text readers.

4. Case Analysis in the Zhang Peiji's Translation of *Wild Grass* under Functional Equivalence Theory

In this chapter, the author will discuss the application of functional equivalence

in the levels of words and sentences. Some examples are showed for analyzing.

4.1. Lexical Level

Zhang Peiji has a deep cultivation of modern Chinese prose, which is shown easily in his good translation, including many idioms that have raised readers' interests. Idioms are highly concise in modern Chinese prose. The author should translate them into their referential meaning or connotative meaning. According to Nida's theory, referential meaning is the basic meaning of a word or a sentence, which works as a basic requirement to help translators to understand and express the referential meaning correctly, in order to reproduce the meaning of the original and get its correct meaning in the target language. However, compared with the translation of the referential meaning of a word, the translation of the connotative meaning is much more difficult, because the connotative meaning is usually subjective, transient, and unsystematic.

4.1.1. Literal Translation

The literal translation emphasizes the correspondence of both content and form, in other words, it means reflecting the original not only in content but also in form.

Example 1:

它必须要曲曲折折地，但是顽强不屈地透到地面上来，它的根往土壤钻，它的芽往地面挺。

The young plant will labor tenaciously through twists and turns to bring itself to the surface of the ground no matter how heavy the rocks overhead may be or how narrow the opening between them. While striking its roots deep into the soil, the young plant pushes its new shoots above-ground [9].

Analysis: In order to strengthen its expressiveness, Xia Yan adopts several parallel sentences to show the tenacious spirit of the *Wild Grass*, thus its Chinese version combines strong aesthetic and appealing effect. In the original text, the author uses a lot of detail descriptions, such as “透” “钻” and “挺”. In the translated text, Zhang Peiji uses a lot of detail descriptions. Using lots of detail descriptions in translated text can achieve functional equivalence. For example, “deep into the soil”, “pushes its new shoots above ground”. All these details are translated perfectly and vividly. The author also analyzes the optimistic spirit of *Wild Grass*. No matter how terrible the condition is, the grass will not be pessimistic and it is born to belligerence. It is confident to its future. The power of grass is tenacious, optimistic and promising. The humanized grass symbolizes the great Chinese nation in the long war of resistance against Japan and the grass growing out of debris the bright future of the national war. From the perspective of functional equivalence theory, it reflects the *Wild Grass*' unyielding spirit and reaches the functional equivalence.

Example 2:

上面的石块，丝毫不足以阻挡，因为它是一种“长期抗战”的力，有弹性，能屈能伸的力，有韧性，不达目的不止的力。

The rock is utterly helpless before this force—a force that will forever remain militant, a force that is resilient and can take temporary setbacks calmly, a force that is tenacity itself and will never give up until the goal is reached. [9]

Analysis: In this sentence, Zhang Peiji uses literal translation method to translate it. In the sentence, the author wants to express the spirit of the grass. The spirit of the *Wild Grass* is not easy to be seen but is easy to be felt. The *Wild Grass* holds the huge power which cannot be seen easily. The power can overturn the boulder and the *Wild Grass* never gives up until it succeeds. The translated text adopts parallel structure to stress the force of people. This force is militant, resilient and it cannot be destroyed. And it uses the parallel structure “a force ...; a force ...; a force ...” in target language to explain the source language correctly and visually. The target readers can understand the meaning of source language with the adoption of literal translation method in this sentence. Moreover, in the original text, the author uses parallelism to emphasize what the force is, and the repetition of “a force” in the translated text also constitutes parallel structure, which plays an important role in making the reader feel the strength of this force, so the functional equivalence is realized. This translated text reflects the people’s confidence in the victory of the war of resistance against Japan. So, meaning equivalence is achieved in this sentence through literal translation method.

4.1.2. Free Translation

Free translation pays more attention to the consistency of the meaning, while it pays less to the form and literal content. The purpose of free translation is to faithfully

express the original ideological content and style. And according to Nida’s theory, he stresses more importance on meaning.

Example 3:

一粒种子所可以显现出来的力，简直是超越一切。

The great strength which a seed is capable of is simply matchless [9].

Analysis: In this description, Zhang Peiji uses free translation method and emphasizes the content similarity. In the translated text, Zhang Peiji translates “超越一切” into “matchless”. Using free translation method can reflect the spirit of seed. The spirit of the seed is growing and expanding. When growing, the grass does not pursue the speed but pursue growing strongly gradually. In the course of the war of resistance against Japan, the Chinese people, just as the *Wild Grass*, do not seek to fight quickly, but form an anti-Japanese national united front. Negative affixes such as “matchless”, “priceless” and “peerless” are often used in English to indicate positive meaning, which is actually an indirect affirmation. The source text uses “超越一切” to stress the spirit of seeds. In this indirect form of affirmation, the translation also highlights the degree and makes the reader feel the power of the seed which reflects the functional equivalence. An expressive function achieved in the source text has to be realized in the target culture. In *Wild Grass*, we can see that *Wild Grass* is almost a kind of embodiment, revealing to the readers its attitude and spirit.

Example 4:

后来忽然有人发明了一个方法，就是把一些植物的种子放在要剖析的头盖骨里，给它以温度与湿度，使它发芽。

It so happened that, at the suggestion of someone, some seeds of a plant were placed inside a human skull awaiting dissection before heat and moisture were applied to cause them to grow [9].

Analysis: In this description, Zhang Peiji uses free translation method to translate it. Zhang Peiji translates “有人发明了一个方法” into “at the suggestion of someone” rather than “someone invented a method”. The word “发明” in the original text is not a real invention. Based on the context, it should be understood as that someone has come up with a method, so Zhang Peiji does not confine himself to the original form and translate it into “invent”. Apart from that, this part serves as a parenthesis in the sentence, which strengthens the key information of the original text, namely, the power of the seed. The target text highlights the main information so that the reader feels the power of the seed, which embodies functional equivalence.

4.2. Syntactic Level

In the book *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, Nida points out “It is one thing to analyze the components of style and often quite a different thing to work out the means by which a satisfactory style can be produced” (E. J. Brill, 1982; 157) [10]. From these two sentences, the present author can make a conclusion that except achieving the functional equivalence on words, Nida’s functional equivalence theory also requires to realize the correspondence in style of sentences, which means translators should achieve the functional equivalence both on sentences and the original writing style. Therefore, in the process of translation, a qualified translator should not only get the accurate meaning of the source text, but also should try his best to show the original style through many translation strategies, so as to achieve the equivalent equivalence on whole text.

4.2.1. Reorganization

The characteristics of Chinese sentences are short, flexible and expressive, and the semantic relationship between them is loose with less correlative words. But there is a clear logic in the context, mainly by temporal relation. Parataxis is fully embodied in Chinese characteristics.

Example 5:

人的头盖骨，结合得非常致密与坚固，生理学家和解剖学者用尽了一切的方法，要把它完整地分出来，都没有这种力气。

The bones forming a human skull are so tightly and perfectly fit together that all physiologists or anatomists, hard as they try, are powerless to take them apart without damaging them [9].

Analysis: When the author translates this sentence, the first thing he does is to analyze this sentence according to sense-groups. Later, the author reorganizes

this long sentence catering to English customs. So the author thinks that the importance is that translators should make an effort to understand the writer's state of mind, grasp the spirit of the source text, and bring out a translation, which conforms to the original style.

Example 6:

它为着向往阳光，为着达成它的生之意志，不管上面的石块如何重，石块与石块之间如何狭，它必定要曲曲折折地，但是顽强不屈地透到地面上来，它的根往土壤钻，它的芽往地面挺，这是一种不可抗的力，阻止它的石块，结果也被它掀翻，一粒种子的力量的大，如此如此。

Seeking sunlight and survival, the young plant will labour tenaciously through twists and turns to bring itself to the surface of the ground no matter how heavy the rocks overhead may be or how narrow the opening between them. While striking its roots deep into the soil, the young plant pushes its new shoots above-ground. The irresistible strength it can muster is such as to overturn any rock in its way. See, how powerful a seed can be! [9]

Analysis: When the author translates this sentence, at first, he analyzes this long sentence according to sense-groups. Later, the author reorganizes this long sentence and divides this sentence into four short sentences, which conforms to the style of the original. When the author translates this Chinese sentence, he realizes that this sentence includes several parts according to sense-groups. In other words, Zhang Peiji describes the process of grass's development. So the author translates this long Chinese sentence according to the process and steps of treatment. In Nida's functional equivalence Theory, he mentioned that translators should realize the correspondence in style of sentences, which means translators should achieve the functional equivalence both on sentences and the original writing style.

4.2.2. Addition

When translators translate some words and sentences, they often add something relevant according to their own experiences. But as long as the translators can make the translation conform to the main spirit of text, they can change the structure of the sentences. Because there are differences between the expression and syntactic structure in English language and Chinese language.

Example 7:

一发芽，这些种子便以可怕的力量，将一切机械力所不能分开的骨骼，完整地分开了。

Once they started to grow, they let loose a terrific force to separate all the skull bones, leaving each of them intact. This would have been impossible with any mechanical power under the sun [9].

Analysis: When the author translates this sentence, he should fully understand the whole sentence and add the "under the sun" to complete the translation. Because English sentences are connected through lexical devices and syntactic devices, while Chinese connections are more likely through "meaning" and "context". The author finds this Chinese sentence "机械力所不能分开的骨骼" has

omitted the explanation, which can complete the whole sentence as “普天下机械力所不能分开的骨骼”. When translating, the author adds the “under the sun”. So translators should take this fact into consideration, which is more helpful to translate the text and achieve Nida’s functional equivalence on sentences.

Example 8:

种子不落在肥土而落在瓦砾中，有生命力的种子决不会悲观和叹气，因为有了阻力才有磨练。

When a seed falls under debris instead of on fertile soil, it never sighs in despair because to meet with obstruction means to temper itself [9].

Analysis: On the basis of analysis, the translation strategy of “addition” is suitable for the purpose of achieving functional equivalence in translation of modern Chinese prose. This sentence “有了阻力才有磨练” has omitted the subject. Before translating, the author completes the whole sentence as “有了阻力它自己才有磨练”. So when the author meets this situation, he should add what has been emitted in the original text, which could make the whole translation more fluent.

4.2.3. Omission

There are differences between the expression and syntactic structure in English sentences and Chinese sentences. According to the linguists, the vital differences between English and Chinese are hypotaxis and parataxis. Hypotaxis means that connections inside sentences and among sentences in English are through lexical devices and syntactic devices, while connections in Chinese are more likely through “meaning” and “context”, which makes the C-E translation sometimes need to subtract or omit some words to express the logic relationship clearly in translation.

Example 9:

一粒种子的力量的大，如此如此。

See, how powerful a seed can be! [9]

Analysis: Repetition is an instance of using a word, phrase, or clause more than once in a long sentence or in a short passage. In Chinese text, people always use repetition to emphasize the author’s idea or express some kinds of emotion. However, repetition in English sentences is not very common. Therefore, the author has omitted the Chinese phrase “如此如此” to achieve the functional equivalence on sentences.

5. Conclusion

This paper takes *Wild Grass* translated by Zhang Peiji as an example and proves functional equivalence is very useful for the translation of modern Chinese prose. In this paper, the author not only further strengthens the awareness of modern Chinese prose, learns the plain and simple writing style of Zhang Peiji, but also improves the literature attainments. What’s more, the author has made a deep understanding of Nida’s functional equivalence theory and obtained some translation methods in this study under the guidance of Nida’s translation

theory which has played an important role in today's translation. Indeed, this paper has its own limitations. First, the modern Chinese prose involves a great number of works. It's impossible to consider all kinds of prose. Here, it mainly researches on Xia Yan's prose, so the amount of prose analyzed above is limited. Various kinds of prose and a larger number of proeses should be researched in the further studies. Second, Nida's functional equivalence theory cannot represent all translation theories, thus it must have its own limitation on guiding the translation of proeses. Other translation theories can be adopted in the further studies.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- [1] Button, R. (1994) *The Art of Translating Prose*. The Pennsylvania State University, USA.
- [2] 高健. 翻译与鉴赏[M]. 北京: 外语教学与研究出版社, 2006.
- [3] 刘士聪. 英汉·汉英美文翻译与鉴赏[M]. 北京: 译林出版社, 2002.
- [4] Nida, E.A. (2000) *Language and Culture: Context in Translating*. Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, Shanghai.
- [5] 屠国元. 阐释与解构:翻译研究文集[M]. 合肥: 安徽文艺出版社, 2001.
- [6] Nida, E.A. and Taber, R.K. (2004) *Translation Criticism: The Potentials & Limitation*. Peking University Press, Beijing.
- [7] 刘锡庆. 当代散文创作发展的几个问题[J]. 北京师范大学学报, 2001(1): 77-84.
- [8] 肖云儒. 形散神不散[M]. 北京: 人民日报出版社, 1961.
- [9] 张培基. 英译中国现代散文选 1 [M]. 上海: 上海外语教育出版社, 2007.
- [10] Brill, E.J. and Leiden (1982) *The Theory and Practice of Translation*. The United Bible Societies, the Netherlands.

Appendix (Abstract and Keywords in Chinese)

功能对等理论下中国散文翻译方法分析——以张培基《野草》英译本为例

摘要: 中国现代散文是中国博大精深的文化和文学作品中的重要一部分, 中国现代散文的翻译也愈加受到中外学者的青睐。散文具有以下独特的特点: 形散神不散, 情感丰富优美, 语言凝练优雅。功能对等理论的应用可使散文的特点在英译中得以再现。该理论以读者的反应为核心, 以最贴切、最自然的对等再现原文信息, 使译文读者能具备和原文读者一样地了解 and 欣赏原文的水平。本文以张培基英译的《野草》为例, 论证了奈达的功能对等理论对指导中国现代散文的英译具有重大意义。

关键词: 功能对等理论, 散文翻译, 《野草》