

A Study of Wang Zuoliang's Style of Verse Translation: A Text-typology Approach to His Chinese Version of My Heart's in the Highlands

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Abstract: This study examines Wang Zuoliang's style of verse translation through Peter Newmark's text typology theory, with a specific focus on his Chinese version of Robert Burns' My Heart's in the Highlands in comparison with that of Yuan Kejia. As the original text belongs to the expressive type, Wang's style is marked by musicality and readability, linguistic conciseness and refinement, poetic sensibility and cultural images. While he primarily adopts communicative translation to enhance reader engagement and emotional resonance, he also incorporates semantic translation to preserve the original formal and cultural elements. His translation maintains the same length as the source text and employs colloquial expressions and reduplicated words to achieve musicality and auditory beauty. The comparative analysis reveals that Wang's approach balance fidelity to the source text with readability and poetic elegance in the target language, offering valuable insights for poetry translation practice and theory.

Keywords: Wang Zuoliang; Yuan Kejia; translation style; Newmark's translation theory

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1. Introduction

Poetry, as the highest form of literature, has long been regarded as a formidable challenge in translation studies, which is often deemed "attempting the impossible" in the translation studies. The translation and introduction of classical poetry entails not merely linguistic transformation, but also cultural dialogue and aesthetic transmission. Wang Zuoliang, a renowned scholar, poet, and translator, is widely recognized for his significant contributions to English teaching, translation studies, and comparative literature. His extensive experience in poetry translation, shaped by his academic background at Tsinghua and Oxford Universities, allowed him to develop a distinctive translation theory from a poet's perspective. His major translated works include selected poems by Robert Burns, Byron, and Keats, as well as prose works such as Bacon's essays and Joyce's Dubliners. Therefore, a systematic and theoretical analysis of Wang Zuoliang's poetry translation style will contribute to a deeper appreciation of the artistic charm inherent in his translated poems, and offer valuable insights for contemporary poetry translation practices.

Scholarly interest in Wang's work is growing. Current studies, conducted by scholars such as Li Changbao^[1], Song Liuxiang^[2], have employed various theoretical frameworks -- such as markedness theory, stylistic markers, and Yan Fu's principles -- to analyze Wang's translation style. However, existing research on Wang's translations remains fragmented, often focusing only on specific texts like "A Red, Red Rose" or "Of Studies", while overlooking his broader translational style and theoretical insights. These case-study-based approaches often lack objectivity and comprehensiveness. Notably, although Wang emphasized the balance between creativity and fidelity in literary translation, his own theoretical system remains incomplete. This research gap calls for the application of Peter Newmark's text typology theory, which shares Wang's view that translation is both a science and an art. Newmark's emphasis on semantic and communicative translation provides a structured framework to examine Wang's translations more systematically.

This study, therefore, employs Newmark's theoretical lens to evaluate Wang Zuoliang's translations, with a focus on his renditions of Robert Burns' poetry compared to that of Yuan Kejia. The research highlights the importance of cultural awareness, theoretical guidance, and reader-oriented strategies in translation-all central to Wang's approach. By integrating Newmark's model, this paper seeks to offer a more nuanced understanding of Wang's translation style and contribute to perennial debate on balancing fidelity and elegance in literary translation.

2. Overall Framework of Newmark's Theory

The study attempts to apply Peter Newmark's Text Typology in the study of Wang Zuoliang's style of verse translation. Peter Newmark, an English translation theorist and a linguistic professor in Central London University, puts forward the theory of text typology where two translation methods are defined: semantic translation and communicative translation, according to the type of the original texts. In general, three types of texts can be classified: expressive text, informative text and vocative text. Newmark assumes that semantic translation is used in expressive texts because those texts are authoritative. The texts are the genuine expression from the original authors, and must be conveyed in the translated versions. Besides, informative and vocative texts must use communicative translation as translators must take readers' response into account. However, in this thesis, the current author attempts to apply both semantic translation and communicative translation in the study of Wang Zuoliang's translated works because during the process of translation, Wang clearly thinks about the response of readers in the sight of his translated works. The two ways combined will contribute to the study of Wang Zuoliang's style of verse translation.

2.1. Semantic Translation

As Peter Newmark makes the definition of semantic translation, he believes that "Semantic translation focuses primarily upon the semantic content of the source text."^[3] During this period, the most famous translation theory internationally is Eugene Nida's theory of Dynamic Equivalence. As a translation theorist of importance in the school of linguistics, Peter Newmark puts forward semantic translation on the basis of Eugene Nida's formal equivalence and literal translation after decades of his own translation practice and teaching. Like formal equivalence, semantic translation requires the strict sameness of form and meaning as semantic translation demands faithfulness to the original texts. "In line with semantic translation, the translator tries to, centering on the words and syntactic structure of the source text, achieve the closest natural equivalence to the source texts."^[3]

However, as is known to us all, since Chinese belongs to hieroglyph writing while English, alphabetic writing, there are at least three major differences between Chinese and English. Still, a large number of characters and words cannot be literally fitting with equivalence between Chinese and English. Firstly, Chinese pays much attention to verbs while English, nouns, amounting to the difficulties of equal translation. Secondly, Chinese triggers ambiguity in simple sentences, sometimes more than two verbs shown in one sentence, which is rarely observed in English. Thirdly, English tends to use passive voice while Chinese prefers to active voice. Therefore, the above-mentioned differences between Chinese and English make semantic translation rarely seen in translation between Chinese and English.

2.2. Communicative Translation

Peter Newmark defines communicative translation as that “communicative translation focuses essentially upon the comprehension and response of receptors.”^[3] Compared with semantic translation, communicative translation pays more attention to the response of readers.^[3] The method calls on translators to consider readers’ response before they translate. Thus, communicative translation sounds more like free translation. Taking readers’ response into consideration, communicative translation combines the strengths of both free translation and domestication. In spite of forms, communicative translation requires the translator to reorganize the syntactic structure and word orders of the source text as a result of fluency and expressiveness in the target language. Owing to the great differences between Chinese and English, communicative translation is generally used in translation.^[3]

2.3. Comparison and Contrast between Semantic Translation and Communicative Translation

Semantic translation and communicative translation adopt different ways to translate the original texts. Faithfulness to the original text, semantic translation gives full play to formal equivalence and literal translation. Taking readers’ response into account, communicative translation combines the strength of free translation and domestication. Semantic translation requires the strict sameness both in form and meaning while communicative translation first thinks how to make foreign language-speaking readers have the same response as those speaking in native languages. However, communicative translation still sticks to the “faithfulness” to the source language, depending on the extent of “faithfulness” as it is still a method of translation.

2.4. Proposed Theoretical Mode of the Thesis

Wang Zuoliang’s translated works all concentrate on literary translation, namely, expressive texts in Peter Newmark’s text typology. In general, expressive translation needs to use semantic translation as they are also authoritative texts. This type of texts requires translators to pay respect to the authority of the original authors as “the mind of the speaker, the writer, the originator of the utterance. He uses the utterance to express his feelings irrespective of any response”^[3]. Meanwhile, translators “have to make several assumptions about the SL readership” and consider the TL readers at all when translating a poem^[4]. Accordingly, the current authors attempt to apply communicative translation in the study of Wang Zuoliang’s translated works as his translated works render the elegance of translation. He himself once had a debate with Xu Yuanchong, another well-known translator, as to whether literary translation could reduce the faithfulness needed in translation. He gives an answer to the debate that literary translation requires the balance between faithfulness and elegance. The current authors try to apply semantic translation and communicative translation in the study.

3. Features of Wang Zuoliang’s Style of Verse Translation

In the course of translation, the first thing to do is to know the style of the source text. Before translating any literary version, the translator must first recognize the writing style of the original author. For a translator, the first task is to accurately convey the original style of the source text. Wang Zuoliang himself believes that as a translator, he might translate just one style, which is similar to his own writing style. If a translator tries to translate all styles regardless of his strength and weakness, this way would lead to a poor translated version. Only when a translator knows the style of the original author will he easily understand the ideas and will his translated version fit the source text. Wang’s translation is faithful, expressive, natural, lucid, concise and accurately reproduces the aesthetic style of the source text.

As for his translated version of Robert Burns’s poems, Wang obviously has at least four characteristics: musicality and readability, linguistic conciseness and refinement, poetic sensibility, and cultural images.

3.1. Musicality and Readability

Robert Burns’s original poem exhibits a highly regular and intensely musical characteristic in its rhythm and rhyme.

Composed in iambic tetrameter, it features a brisk and fluid rhythm, with dense rhymes that create a strong forward momentum and a song-like quality. Meanwhile, the form serves the content. The steady rhythm mimics a heartbeat or the act of running, while the cyclical rhyme and repetitive stanzas reinforce the poet's eternal and unwavering longing for the Highlands.

The translated versions by Wang Zuoliang and Yuan Kejia reflect different translational orientations. Yuan Kejia leans toward semantic translation, striving to remain faithful to the original poem's metrical structure. For instance, rendering "deer/roe/go" as "麋 / 儿 / 里" in an effort to construct a rhyming pattern in Chinese, thereby demonstrating respect for the formal aspects of the source text. In contrast, Wang Zuoliang tends toward communicative translation. Rather than adhering strictly to the end rhymes of the original, he recreates an internal rhythmic flow in Chinese, adhering to the spirit rather than the letter of the text. By repeating the core line "我的心呀在高原"(four times) and using parallel structures such as "再见吧"(also four times), he constructs a cadence and rhythm that evokes a heartbeat's intensity and a folk song's cyclical recurrence. This approach sacrifices formal, mechanical equivalence but achieves a powerful emotional and rhythmic equivalence, resulting in a more audibly impactful rendition.

3.2. Linguistic Conciseness and Refinement

From the perspective of Newmark's theory of Text Typology, the two translations distinctly reflect the contrast between semantic translation and communicative translation in terms of linguistic economy and stylistic effect.

Yuan Kejia's version aligns closely with Newmark's concept of semantic translation, which prioritizes accuracy and adherence to the original semantic and syntactic structures. His diction is precise and literarily elevated. For instance, "麋鹿"(deer), "獐儿"(fawn), "溪壑"(streams and gullies), and "急川"(torrents), imbues with the text with a classical scholarly tone. However, this approach occasionally results in complexity and slight redundancy, as exemplified by phrases such as "枝丫纵横的丛林"(woods with tangled branches), which preserves descriptive fidelity at the expense of conciseness.

Wang Zuoliang's translated poem, conversely, exemplifies communicative translation, which aims to achieve equivalent effect on the target reader through fluent, natural, and reader-centered language. Wang employs a highly colloquial and condensed style, selecting the most vivid and rhythmically potent expressions: "追赶"(chase after) conveys more dynamic motion than the standard "追逐"(pursue), while "跟踪"(track closely) suggests vigilant and delicate movement. Particularly noteworthy is his rendering of "wherever I go" into "别处没有我的心"-a concise, emotionally charged negative declaration that strengthens affective resonance. This reformulation transcends literal meaning to produce a rhetorically striking and heart-stirring effect, fully embodying the principle of functional equivalence in communicative translation.

In summary, Yuan's translation strives for semantic and cultural authenticity within the poetic form, whereas Wang's version emphasizes rhythmic vitality and emotional immediacy, aligning with Newmark's advocacy for appropriateness of method according to text type and purpose.

3.3. Poetic Sensibility

Yuan Kejia employs a strategy consistent with semantic translation, which emphasizes fidelity to the original text's form and content. His translation is marked by academic precision and lexical elegance, evoking the detailed refinement of classical tradition. Terms such as "麋鹿"(deer) and "急川"(torrents) demonstrate a conscious preservation of the source text's semantic nuances, while constructions like "枝丫纵横的丛林"(woods with crisscrossing branches) retain syntactic complexity, albeit at the expense of conciseness. Yuan's approach prioritizes the author's linguistic context, producing a translation that serves as an objective, scholarly representation of Burns's original—an embodiment of Newmark's semantic method, which is often applied to expressive texts. Yuan Kejia "advocated that appropriateness should be mastered and form can be somewhat sacrificed for the sake of smoothness"^[5].

Wang Zuoliang, in contrast, operates firmly within the mode of communicative translation, which seeks to create

equivalent effect for the target reader rather than adhere strictly to source-text structures. His version is infused with romantic passion and poetic reinvention, characteristic of a translator who is also a poet. For example, he transforms “loud-pouring floods” into “雷鸣般的浪潮”(thundering surges), converting an auditory descriptor into a vivid multisensory image that enhances poetic grandeur and emotional resonance. Similarly, his render of “the birth place of Valour, the country of Worth” as “你是品德的国家、壮士的故乡”(You are the land of virtue, the home of heroes) introduces culturally elevated address that dramatically intensifies lyrical intimacy and expressive impact. Such adaptations exemplify Newmark’s principle of communicative translation, where the translator prioritizes the emotional and aesthetic experience of the target audience over formal correspondence. Wang rectifies beautiful forms. Wang’s translated version has got the same length as the source text.^[6] “The rhythm is good with good sound group and the rhyme scheme varied from that of the source text.”^[5] Wang believes that poems may be lost, to some extent, in the course of translation, but what we can attain is a new poem. We, therefore, obtain a brighter world.

In summary, Yuan Kejia’s translated poem aligns with the semantic method through its scholarly precision and structural faithfulness, treating the source text as an artifact to be preserved. Wang Zuoliang’s version, through its creative liberty and affective power, exemplifies the communicative mode-aiming not to replicate the original literally, but to reproduce its poetic force in a new language and cultural context. Poems use concise words to reproduce man’s spiritual world. Wang Zuoliang deeply believes that “it takes all a translator has got to turn out a good verse translation. He needs the right kind of sensibility and the right kind of poetic language.”^[6] A translator needs to have a good command of the source poems, and then apply different translation styles in different texts. Verse translation needs not only elegance, but also the artistic conception, rhythm, images, etc. The two translators both retain poetic form but they make different choices.

3.4. Cultural Images

From the standpoint of Peter Newmark’s text-typology theory, the treatment of cultural imagery in poetry translation reflects a fundamental choice between semantic translation and communicative translation, each serving different textual functions and readerly expectations. Yuan Kejia adopts a strategy consistent with semantic translation, which prioritizes fidelity to the original lexical and cultural elements. For instance, he translates “roe” as “獐儿”(roe deer) -- a direct rendering that preserves the foreignness and specificity of the source culture. While this approach maintains semantic accuracy, it implicitly requires the target reader to possess specific cultural or zoological knowledge for full comprehension. Such as method aligns with Newmark’s semantic translation, often applied to expressive texts where the originality of the author’s voice and cultural context is to be retained, even at the potential cost of immediate reader accessibility.

Wang Zuoliang, by contrast, employs a communicative translation strategy, adapting cultural references to resonate with the target audience. His rendering of “roe” as “小鹿”(little deer) draws on culturally embedded connotations: in Chinese tradition, the deer is a mythical and poetic creature symbolizing beauty, purity, and natural elegance, evoking far more positive and familiar associations than the more zoologically specific roe deer. This shift not only enhances readability and emotional accessibility but also achieves functional equivalence in arousing kindred aesthetic and affective responses. By reducing cultural barriers and strengthening lyrical appeal, Wang’s approach exemplifies Newmark’s communicative method -- prioritizing the effect on the target reader over strict lexical correspondence.

In summary, Yuan Kejia’s translation preserves the semantic and cultural authenticity of the original, in accordance with the principles of semantic translation, whereas Wang Zuoliang’s translation strategy emphasizes emotional and cultural accessibility, embodying the core objective of communicative translation.

4. Conclusion

Applying Peter Newmark’s theory of text typology to the comparative analysis of Wang Zuoliang’s and Yuan Kejia’s

translation texts of *My Heart's in the Highlands* reveals two distinct translational paradigms. Yuan Kejia's version aligns closely with semantic translation, prioritizing formal accuracy, lexical precision, and cultural authenticity, thus serving as a scholarly and structurally faithful representation of Burns' original poem. In contrast, Wang Zuoliang's translation exemplifies communicative translation, emphasizing emotional resonance, rhythmic vitality, and target-reader accessibility, as he "adopted a less idiomatic formulation but kept the metaphors intact"^[7]. Through innovative rhythmic reconstruction, refined diction, poetic sensibility, and the naturalization of cultural imagery, Wang transforms the Scottish ballad into a vibrant Chinese poem that captures the spirit rather than the letter of the original. His practice demonstrates that the highest form of fidelity in poetry translation lies in conveying the soul and emotion of the source text, achieving spiritual resemblance beyond formal likeness. Wang's work not only introduces Chinese readers to Burns' poem, but also enriches it with enduring artistic emotional value, leaving a profound legacy for future translation studies.

Appendix:

My heart's in the Highlands, my heart is not here,
 My heart's in the Highlands, a-chasing the deer;
 Chasing the wild-deer, and following the roe,
 My heart's in the Highlands, wherever I go.
 Farewell to the Highlands, farewell to the North.
 The birth place of Valour, the country of Worth;
 Whereever I wander, whereever I rove,
 The hills of the Highlands for ever I love.
 Farewell to the mountains, high-cover'd with snow.
 Farewell to the straths and green vallies below;
 Farewell to the forests and wild-hanging woods,
 Farewell to the torrents and loud-pouring floods.
 My heart's in the Highlands, my heart is not here,
 My heart's in the Highlands, a-chasing the deer;
 Chasing the wild-deer, and following the roe,
 My heart's in the Highlands, wherever I go.^[8]

译文一（王佐良译）

我的心呀在高原，这儿没有我的心，
 我的心呀在高原，追赶着鹿群，
 追赶着野鹿，跟踪着小鹿。
 我的心呀在高原，别处没有我的心！
 再会吧，高原！再会吧，北方！
 你是品德的国家、壮士的故乡，
 不管我在哪儿游荡、到哪儿流浪，
 高原的群山我永不相忘！
 再会吧，皑皑的高山，
 再会吧，绿色的山谷同河滩，
 再会吧，高松的大树，无尽的林涛，
 再会吧，汹涌的急流，雷鸣的浪潮！
 我的心呀在高原，这儿没有我的心，
 我的心呀在高原，追赶着鹿群，
 追赶着野鹿，跟踪着小鹿。

我的心呀在高原，别处没有我的心！^[9]

译文二：（袁可嘉译）

我的心呀在高原，我的心不在这里，

我的心呀在高原，追逐着鹿糜。

追逐着野鹿，跟踪着獐儿，

我的心呀在高原，不管我上哪里。

别了啊高原，别了啊北国，

英雄的家乡，可敬的故国，

哪儿我飘荡，哪儿我遨游，

我永远爱着高原上的山丘。

别了啊，高耸的积雪的山岳，

别了啊，山下的溪壑和翠谷，

别了啊，森林和枝丫纵横的丛林，

别了啊，急川和洪流的轰鸣。

我的心呀在高原，我的心不在这里，

我的心呀在高原，追逐着鹿糜。

追逐着野鹿，跟踪着獐儿，

我的心呀在高原，不管我上哪里。^[10]

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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