

# ***The Application of the Functional Equivalence Theory in Prose Translation- Taking the Sight of Father's Back Translated by Zhang Peiji as an Example***

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**Abstract:** Eugene Nida makes the Functional Equivalence Theory claim, an American famous linguist, and translator, which emphasizes that the goal of translation is to translate a message into the target language as accurately and organically as feasible. In order for the intended readers to respond and feel the same as the original readers, it heavily emphasized the informational and formal comparability. Chinese prose, a flexible kind of narrative fiction that reveals the actual feelings of the author, is one of the most significant genres in Chinese literature. Therefore, prose translation should not be underestimated and should be fully integrated with the Functional Equivalence Theory to better serve the information included in the source language, as well as the formal features of the language and the target readers' reading background. This paper examines the functional equivalence theory's application to the translation of contemporary Chinese prose by using a famous passage from *The Sight of Father's Back* to compare and contrast the source text and target text.

**Keywords:** functional equivalence, *The Sight of Father's Back*, prose translation

## **1. Introduction**

Transnational, cross-ethnic, cross-cultural, and economic interactions are growing daily, providing us with various opportunities to communicate with foreigners, which is beneficial for deepening our understanding of the global society. Chinese literature also plays a very important role in cross-cultural communication, so more and more excellent classical Chinese literature is being translated into English for foreigners to read and enjoy. Modern Chinese prose, as a typical type of Chinese literature, is a flexible and relaxed style of writing without much restriction. Authors could use various ways to write prose expressing their true feelings and thoughts. Therefore, Translations of contemporary Chinese writing serve as a conduit between the original author and the intended audience, and as such, they should be treated seriously and thoroughly researched.

Professor Zhang Peiji, a famous Chinese translator, had worked tirelessly in the translation world for 50 years, his translations and monographs have had a huge impact on the academic world and are collected in libraries both at home and abroad. His works have long been studied by scholars at home and abroad and there are so many people who are amazed by how he translated prose in a

natural and elegant way, fully reflecting the philosophy of translation. He has provided guidance and reference for many scholars and students of translation and is a rare and good translator in the world. In this paper, in order to identify some useful strategies and abilities that could be applied in the future when translating Chinese modern prose, the author attempts to analyze the translation of *The Sight of Father's Back* by Zhang Peiji from the standpoint of Eugene Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory.

## 2. Functional Equivalence Theory

Eugene Nida's translation theory had made a wide impact on the translation studies of both western and eastern countries for so many years. Thanks to his great contributions in translation studies' field, there are so many scholars and students benefited a lot from him.

Translation itself is a process of cultural exchange, and how source readers and target readers can better communicate with each other through the text relies heavily on the translator's translation. The Dynamic Equivalence Theory served as the foundation for the Functional Equivalence Theory. Dynamic Equivalence refers to the message of the original text has been translated into the language of the receptor in such a way that the response of the receptor is basically identical to that of the original receptors. which made some people misunderstood and thought that a translation must be a good example of dynamic equivalence if it has a significant influence [1]. Nida pointed out that "Translation consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style" [2]. In contrast to Nida's earlier translation ideas, the emphasis on translation has recently shifted from the message's shape to the receptor's response. His functional equivalence theory addresses four topics: functional equivalence on the lexical level, syntactic level, textual level, and stylistic level. Nida's theory of functional equivalence corroborates this view, emphasizing the target readers' appreciation and understanding of the text.

With regard to "the Functional Equivalence", Nida proposed translation equivalence in Language, Culture, and Translation, and he emphasized that the so-called "equivalence" is split into "the maximal equivalence" and "the minimal equivalence". The term "maximum equivalence" refers to a translation that achieves a high level of equivalence, allowing readers of the target language to comprehend and value the source text in a manner similar to that of readers of the original language. According to Nida, this level of translation is impossible to attain, especially given how unlike the linguistic and cultural systems of the two languages are. The lowest level of reciprocity indicates that enough of the original is understood and appreciated by the reader of the target language as well as the reader of the source language. This is the most basic requirement, and translations that fall below this requirement are difficult to accept [1].

## 3. Prose Translation and Functional Equivalence Theory

Modern Chinese prose has a unique characteristic that is scrambled in the form of language but united in the spirits and emotions of the prose [3]. When writing prose, authors have not so many restrictions in how they organize the structure of the prose and how they use different types of skills to write. Unlike many other literary genres, for instance, expository essays need to have a strict writing structure and contain arguments and proofs, modern Chinese prose is a literary genre for authors to express their true and strong emotions. When putting modern Chinese prose and the Functional Equivalence Theory together to compare, it is obvious that there is something in common that is they both emphasize on the meaning and the message not the form of the language.

Another thing Eugene Nida mentioned in his Dynamic Equivalence Theory was "The message of the original text has been so transported into the receptor language that the response of the receptor

is essentially like that of the original receptors" [2]. However, the expression "dynamic" is easily misunderstood. In 1993, Nida changed "dynamic equivalence" to "functional equivalence" to clarify issues and emphasize the idea of "functional." Therefore, Functional Equivalence emphasizes that the target audience should experience the source content similarly to the original audience. In Nida's book *From One Language to Another*, he mentioned that the translated text should be understood by the translation process to the extent that it may be compared to how the first receptors of the original text must have understood what they read [4]. The reaction of the target reader is really crucial, which might greatly influence the quality of the target text. Chinese is a difficult language to learn and understand not only for foreign speakers but even for native speakers. Modern Chinese prose contains many Chinese native expression and cultural imagery of special times, whether these kinds of terms and expressions can be translated in an accurate way is the most difficult thing for translators. Based on the things discussed above, the application of the Functional Equivalence Theory plays an important role in modern Chinese prose translation.

#### **4. Introduction to Modern Chinese Prose and The Sight of Father's Back**

Prose is a distinct literary genre with a number of defining traits. Prose distinguishes itself from other kinds of writing thanks to a number of characteristics. For instance, it has a condensed spirit but is emotional, elegant, brief, and adaptable in form. When reading modern Chinese prose written by different authors, readers could feel the richness of emotions while appreciating the richness of writing techniques and the beautiful language of different authors.

Zhu Ziqing wrote a piece of Chinese writing called *The Sight of Father's Back* in 1925. He was a well-known Chinese prose writer, poet, and scholar. This prose is about when the author departed from Nanjing for Beijing, his father accompanied him to the train station and bought him oranges. The author considers his father's back, which he saw when he ascended and descended the platform to purchase the oranges for him, to be the most striking thing. The article takes the father's back as the main clue, and describes his back in detail.

One particular language aspect is the use of straightforward, uncomplicated phrases to convey the father's tender, real, and loving affection for his son. The article uses a series of actions and details to describe the father several times. There are no gorgeous words in the article, the whole article basically uses some very lifelike daily expressions, but it is also these simple words more deeply into the hearts of people. At the same time, the language of the prose is characterized by a mixture of classical Chinese and vernacular Chinese, fully demonstrating the special linguistic color given to the petty-bourgeois intellectuals of that era.

#### **5. The Functional Equivalence Theory Applied in Zhang peiji's Translation of The Sight of Father's Back**

Four aspects are included in his functional equivalence theory: lexical level, syntactic level, textual level, and stylistic level. In this part, the author will discuss and analyze the source text (ST) and the target text (TT) from the level of lexical and syntactic.

##### **5.1. Lexical Level**

In *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, Nida made clear explanations on the referential meaning and the connotative meaning. Referential meaning, Nida pointed out "the words as symbols which refer to objects, events, abstracts, relations", which is the fundamental meaning of a word or sentence, serving as a prerequisite for aiding translators in comprehending and accurately expressing the referential meaning to replicate the original's meaning and obtain its correct meaning in the target language. Connotative meaning is the part of the meaning that deals with how words

affect us emotionally. There are various factors that may affect the connotative meaning, for example, the speaker, the context, and even the setting of linguistic. The ability of the target text to transmit the meaning of the source text is substantially impacted by the translators' knowledge of the connotative meaning [2].

### 5.1.1. Literal Translation

Once more, the lexical words are isolated and translated into their closest translations in the target language using the grammatical structures of the source language [4].

ST:我那时真是聪明过分，总觉他说话不大漂亮

TT: I was then such a smart aleck that I frowned upon the way father was haggling [10].

ST:唉，我现在想想，那时真是太聪明了！

TT: Oh, when I come to think of it, I can see how smarty I was in those days [10].

In these two sentences, the author both used the word “聪明”. But this is not essentially complimenting others, but expressing one's derogatory meaning through positive words. These two-source sentences are ironic, which is the author's mockery of himself. Mr. Zhang translated into ‘a smart aleck’ and ‘smarty’ in the target sentence. In Cambridge Dictionary, ‘smart aleck’ means ‘someone who tries to appear smart or who answers questions in a funny way that annoys other people, and ‘smarty’ means ‘someone who wants to appear to be clever. These two words contain meaning of irony and were correctly chose by Mr. Zhang. Although literal translation is used, the translator can choose words that are accurate and have the same cultural imagery to translate the original, which demonstrates the employment of functional equivalence theory during the translation process.

### 5.1.2. Free Translation

Free translation is the reproduction of information without the original's form or style. In Nida's The Theory and Practice of Translation, he mentioned that since every language has a unique form, which is the fundamental difference between them, changing the forms in order to communicate the information is only normal. [2].

ST:父亲和我都是东奔西走，家中光景是一日不如一日。

TT: Both father and I have been living in an unsettled life, and the circumstances of our family going from bad to worse [10].

In the source sentence, “东奔西走” means moving around for a living or for a purpose, which is a Chinese idiom. “光景一日不如一日” is a daily verbal language to living conditions are getting worse. Instead of translating “东奔西走” directly into ‘run from east to west’, Zhang used free translation to translate the sentence by maintaining their original meanings and change the form, which is similar to Nida's view in translation that the form can be adjusted to achieve functional equivalence.

## 5.2. Syntactic Level

Syntax refers to the structure and order of components in a sentence. Lexical equivalence involves only words, while syntactic equivalence involves not only words, but also the relationship between words, and the syntax of the sentence [5]. The sentence structure in Chinese and English is quite different from one to another and needs to be adjusted in the process of translation if it is necessary. Nida mentioned seven aspects in his book The Theory and Practice of Translation, such as word choice, sentence construction, double negatives, active and passive sentences, etc [2].

Chinese is a topic-prominent language, meaning that the subject of a sentence typically refers to a topic, and the predicate is used to provide narrative commentary on the topic. Meanwhile, Chinese

is parataxis referring to the use context to express the logical relationship between sentence elements or sentences. In Chinese, sentences without subjects can be seen frequently and allow zero conjunction sentences to appear [6].

Unlike Chinese, English is a subject-prominent language and hypotaxis. In reading papers or articles written by an English native speaker, a sentence usually begins with a subject directly related to the topic, and many conjunctions are used to indicate clear logical relationships. When comparing Chinese and English together, it is obvious that Chinese is more implicit, and English is more explicit. When doing C-E translation, translators usually convert paratactic language into hypotactic language to reach functional equivalence.

### 5.2.1. Amplification

Amplification is the inclusion of pertinent information at the proper time to help the intended audience grasp the subject matter of the source text [7]. Chinese sentences are short and flexible, usually strung together with meaning, and usually do not need to use phrases to connect between sentences, mostly using parallel sentences. Although there is no signal to indicate the logic between different sentences, the logic itself is clear in the context. The translator can add appropriate connecting words to make the logical relationship between the translations clearer, based on his or her correct understanding of the original text.

ST:我们过了江，进了车站。我买票，他忙着照看行李。

TT: We entered the railway station after crossing the river. While I was at the booking office buying a ticket, father saw to my luggage [10].

The source sentence is expressed in two complete sentences, including four small phrases, which are consistent with Chinese expression habits, in which the author does not use relevant words to suggest the logical relationship of the original text. When translating the sentence, Zhang used conjunctions ‘when’ and ‘while’ to specify the chronological order, which is more in line with the target readers’ reading habits and helps them easier to understand the source text.

### 5.2.2. Word Order Adjustment

According to the difference of Chinese and English thinking patterns and speaking habits, translators usually need to make appropriate sequencing according to the needs of the target language. For example, English expressions prefer to put the modifying part after the main sentence, while Chinese expressions prefer to put the modifying part before the main sentence [9].

ST:其实我那年已二十岁，北京已来往过两三次，是没有什么要紧的了。

TT: As a matter of fact, nothing would matter at all because I was then twenty and had already traveled to Beijing-Pukou Railway a couple of times [10].

In the source sentence, the author expresses himself in the same way as he thinks in Chinese, and the order of words is the same as the logical relationship in Chinese, with details first followed by feelings and conclusions. The English language, however, happens to be the opposite of the Chinese expression habits, where the conclusion and the most important content come first, and the details and related supplementary content come later. Based on the difference between Chinese and English, translator adjusted the sequence of the target sentence and used conjunction ‘because’ to make the implicit logic explicit.

## 6. Conclusion

Using the Functional Equivalence Theory as a foundation, this paper analyzes The Sight of Father’s Back translated by Zhang Peiji from lexical level and syntactic level. An in-depth analysis of the text reveals that functional equivalence theory has a wide application in this translation.

The author discovers that literal translation and free translation are widely utilized after



conducting lexical level analysis. Literal translation is often used by translators when there is an expression or cultural equivalence between Chinese and English. By retaining the expression of the source text, literal translation allows target readers to understand the content of the source text clearly while achieving a certain degree of cultural output. However, it is not always possible to find direct equivalence between two languages, especially in the case of colloquialisms and slang, and in such cases, translators usually use paraphrase, which supports the idea of functional equivalence theory and is more concerned with maintaining the meaning of the original text than with how it is expressed. From the perspective of syntactical level, the sentence structure and expression habits between Chinese and English are the primary considerations. Considering the difference between Chinese and English sentences in terms of parataxis and hypotaxis, translators often need to use amplification and the adjustment of sentence order to achieve the purpose of conforming to the reading habits of target readers.

In fact, the paper has its own limitations. There are many great works of modern Chinese prose, and different translators have different feelings and understandings based on their own readings and use different translation techniques and methods. Therefore, the conclusions based on Zhang Peiji's translation of *The Sight of Father's Back* are not necessarily applicable to all translations of prose. At the same time, the Functional Equivalence Theory is not necessarily applicable in the translation process of every text. Future research should focus on how to make diverse translation theories and techniques better serve modern Chinese prose translation and better let target readers feel the wonderful side of Chinese literature.

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