

# The Purposiveness Principle in Translation Evaluation

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**Abstract:** In recent years, the evaluation of translation quality has been widely commented upon in the domestic translation community, with numerous theoretical achievements. However, the author holds that rather than theory, it should be more of practice, in which the practical purposes of translation are involved. The purposes can be roughly classified into two: content-oriented translation and translation for overall appreciation. Different translation purposes should have different evaluation characteristics. In general, there are unified standards for the former; but for the latter, there appear widely accepted distinctions of merits and demerits, and also being complex and not absolutized. This paper, in the light of the purposive evaluation principle, typically discusses the respective evaluation in practice via translation examples.

## 1. Introduction

The evaluation of translation is inseparable from the purpose of translation. In general, translation purposes revolve around facilitating communication between China and foreign countries, that is, to communicate, introduce, and learn from each other in all fields such as politics, economy, ideology, culture, science, and technology. Translation purposes can be roughly categorized into two main types: translations focusing on acquiring ideological and information content, and translations aiming at overall cultural and literary appreciation, namely, “content-oriented translation” and “translation for overall appreciation”. These categories seem similar to what Newmark termed as “communicative translation” and “semantic translation” respectively, yet the latter obviously encompasses the significance of translation methods. To roughly distinguish between methods and purposes—given the unavoidable close connection, especially from the perspective of translation evaluation—our classification here should be more operable. The translation purposes of “content-oriented translation” and “translation for overall appreciation” generally determine significantly different evaluation standards, and they inevitably involve various factors affecting purposes and evaluations, such as subject matter, background, and time, especially the subjective factors in both purpose and evaluation. Considering the numerous complex factors that are difficult to be involved comprehensively in a short essay, we will temporarily exclude these factors, make a general distinction between the evaluation differences arising from these two translation purposes, and elucidate their distinct evaluation characteristics through the typicality analysis of translation examples.

## 2. Evaluation of content-oriented translation

The evaluation principles for content-oriented translation are characterized by the objective unity of evaluation and a certain degree of freedom and flexibility in translation.

### 2.1. Objective unity of evaluation

The so-called “content-oriented translation” naturally underscores faithfulness to the semantic meaning of the original text, and conveying it faithfully without any deviation should be the highest standard, while the expression form is generally negligible. However, information content always has distinctions of importance, with certain aspects being more crucial than others. Therefore, in many cases, the actual translations may not necessarily demand an “unaltered” translation of the original semantic meaning. Instead, methods like excerpting, condensing, compiling, and paraphrasing are more common. Given the complexity of such situations, we can only briefly discuss its highest standard, namely the unaltered “complete translation”.<sup>[1]</sup>

This kind of translation primarily involves applied texts such as scientific and technological materials, news reports, and business documents, whose purpose is to faithfully convey the conceptual content and semantic information of the original text. According to the highest standard of complete translation, when evaluating the quality of a translated piece, the emphasis is primarily on whether there is semantic loss or addition, with little consideration given to the expression form. In this case, the specific translation processing is generally quite consistent and easy to grasp. As long as translators are proficient in both languages, they can deliver a qualified

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translation that is approximately accurate by employing strict scientific analysis (both semantic and grammatical) of words and sentences, along with corresponding substitutions (this is achievable because the meanings and sentence patterns of many technical terms, official language, and time measurement terms are relatively fixed and single). Consequently, translators can deliver approximately accurate translations. Moreover, for a given original text, there is generally only one standard or widely accepted best translation. Insignificant differences in words can be ignored, making evaluations generally objective and unified without subjectivity. For example:

Original text: To appease their thirst its readers drank deeper than before, until they were seized with a kind of delirium.

Translation: 读者为了满足自己的渴望, 越读越想读, 直到进入了如醉如痴的状态。<sup>[2]</sup>

Here, if “满足自己的渴望” (satisfying one’s desire) is changed to “解渴材料性质” (thirst-quenching properties), it is not a problem; however, if “delirium” is translated as “coma”, or “drank deeper than before” is translated as “drinking deeper and deeper”, it is obviously an unqualified word-for-word translation. In such cases, the expression in the translated text does not faithfully convey the original meaning, or the translator does not genuinely understand the semantic nuances of the original text.

It can be seen that although the expression form need not be considered here, that only means “let the style manage itself”, that is, on the premise of truly understanding and being faithful to the original text, the expression form and style can be naturally reproduced due to their organic unity with semantic content. It absolutely does not suggest the existence of arbitrary expression form, and any randomness can only bring about the adverse consequence of distorting meaning through words. The key lies in the inseparability of content and form. In this regard, for scientific and technological materials, news reports, business documents, etc., attention must still be given to the professionalism of terminology, the directness, objectivity, and logic of expression, as well as the inherent forms such as the invariance of literary style. It seems that translators have little room for creative freedom in these cases. This should be a principle and standard that translators and evaluators must firmly adhere to, because only in this way can we ensure the best realization of the purpose of faithfully conveying information content. Another example is:

Original text: 甲方未能按乙方提供的技术文件, 按时完成厂房、场地及公用工程的建设, 而影响合同的执行时, 由甲方承担违约责任。

Translation: Party A shall be reliable for the breath of the Contract if it fails to complete the construction of the factory buildings, premises and other public projects according to the technical documents provided by Party B.<sup>[3]</sup>

The translations of such texts can even be said to be capable of achieving a word-to-word correspondence with the original text. This kind of translation demands accuracy in professional terminology and the stylization of writing structure and reflects a style that is accurate,

rigorous, and concise. It undoubtedly belongs to different forms of artistic expression compared to the lively (even gorgeous) literary style found in literary works, because it can effectively achieve the conveyance of semantic content and communication with its unique expressive force. In short, such language possesses much space to be studied and considerable emotional stimulating power.

## 2.2. Certain freedom and flexibility in translation

In terms of translation processing, translators are inevitably influenced by the original text, giving rise to a certain intuition and imagery, eliciting a particular mindset (mostly practical, straightforward, solemn, etc.). In the selection of words and construction of sentences in the translated text, these perceptual psychological factors are bound to dominate, permeating artistic aesthetic activities. Therefore, it is crucial to note that there exists a certain degree of freedom and flexibility in content-oriented translation. For example:

Original text: The program ready for the computer to “read” is prepared in a specially designed language.

Translation (1): 提供计算机“读”的程序用专门设计的语言编制。

Translation (2): 准备给计算机“读”的程序, 是用专门设计的语言编制的。

Original text: 中国科学院 44 岁的著名数学家陈景润, 过去五年在数论研究中取得了世界领先的成果。他的成就是对“哥德巴赫猜想”的研究。这个问题提出来已有 230 年, 经过许多数学家的不断努力, 始终悬而未决。

Translation (1): The noted 44-year-old mathematician Chen Jingrun of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, has in the past five years obtained results at advanced world levels in research on the theory of numbers. He has made progress on Glodbach Conjecture, raised over 230 years ago, which remained unsolved despite constant efforts by many mathematicians.

Translation (2): 44-year-old Chen Jingrun, a noted mathematician with the Chinese Academy of Sciences, has in the past five years made world-class achievements in research on the theory of numbers, that is, a push forward on the solution of Goldbach Conjecture, which was raised over 230 years ago and remained unsolved despite constant efforts by many mathematicians.

The Translations (1) in both examples are indeed commendable, but the Translations (2) are also acceptable—although their expression styles are slightly deviated from the original text, they have achieved the purpose and standard of faithfully conveying semantic information. The degrees of excellence in such achievements can vary in practice, including good, medium, and poor, allowing for differences in the subjective initiative of translators, leading to different translation creations. A superior translation not only faithfully and accurately conveys the semantic content of the original text but also faithfully and accurately reproduces the expression form and style, thus making the faithfulness of the translated text reach the highest and best

state—a kind of perfection similar to literary translation. Less skilled translators may convey the semantic content of the original text faithfully but often fail to faithfully reproduce its expression form and style, resulting in less accuracy and damaging the comprehensiveness of faithfulness. However, in the context of the translation purpose discussed here, such translations may still be considered acceptable.

Finally, it must be noted that there is a traditional viewpoint suggesting that articles related to science and technology are typical examples of literal translation, or the literal translation is deemed the safest method in such cases. However, as we have briefly observed its pitfalls above, the following are two more examples:

Original text: According to his way of thinking, a science was only really developed when it had reached a form in which it could make use of mathematics .

Literal translation: 按照他的思想方法, 一种科学只有在达到能利用数学的形式时, 才会有真正的发展。

Adaptation translation: 按照他的思想方法, 一门科学如果还运用不上数学, 那就不成其为真正的科学。

Original text: 本品给你回味无穷。

Literal translation: This food will give you endless after taste.

Adaptation translation: Its pleasant flavor stays long after you eat it. <sup>[4]</sup>

These two examples are taken from Zhang Jinghao's *On Translation*, and his adaption translation and comments pinpoint the crux of the problems, so there is no need to elaborate further. The authors only emphasize that “content-oriented translation” is absolutely not a simple literal translation, or even a “word-for-word translation” or a “rigid translation”. Instead, it often requires a considerable level of technique.

### 3.Evaluation of translation for overall appreciation

“Translation for overall appreciation” is expected to fully and faithfully reproduce the original text from semantic content to form and style, with its highest standard being a translation that resembles the original text, achieving a state of “deification” or “perfection”. This aspect is typically seen in the translation of literary classics, including general literary works and translations of important ideological and academic works, whose characteristics are quite evident: extremely demanding artistic creation. However, due to the strong subjective artistry of such original texts and the subjective artistic creativity and appreciation involved in their translation, it is extremely difficult to unify the practical evaluation standards. Past experiences and lessons tell us that the appropriate attitude is to consider pursuing the perfect “deification” translation as the ultimate goal while acknowledging the infinity and certain flexibility inherent in this pursuit. Therefore, we can initially distinguish roughly the accepted merits and demerits of the translations, but we should avoid absolute judgments simultaneously. The following is the discussion of these two situations separately.

### 3.1. Evaluation and analysis of the merits and demerits of translations

Undoubtedly, the first thing to evaluate the merits and demerits of “translation for overall appreciation” is to take the faithfulness of semantic content as the basic standard, much like in scientific and technological translation. However, literary translation has distinct characteristics different from scientific and technological translation, that is, in many cases, the meaning of single words cannot be understood in isolation, and the semantic content is inseparable from the form and style. Therefore, the evaluation of merits and demerits of translations is always holistic, where scientific faithfulness and artistic reproduction are organically unified. For example:

Original text: “Never! Never! I made up my mind as soon as I saw—What I ought to have seen sooner; And I won't come”

Translation (1): “我决不回去, 决不回去! 我明白——我早就该明白的道理, 我就打定了主意。我决不回去。”

Translation (2): “不能, 永远也不能。我刚明白过来, 我就打定了主意了。我应该早就明白了才是。我不愿意跟你去。”

This is from Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, where Tess decisively leaves after losing her virginity to Alec D'Urberville, sternly refusing his “pleas” for her to stay. The original text fully expresses her resolute attitude and reveals her “latent stubborn nature”. A large portion of its context can also attest to the author's intention, but Translation (2) evidently lacks the same tone and attitude. This is not only a matter of differing stylistic forms, which makes it worse in artistry than Translation (1), but also an imprecise conveyance of meaning, being inferior to faithfulness.

Because appreciative translations in literature are much more artistic than translations of information content such as science and technology, it is often possible to evaluate their merits and demerits based on the form and style. The fundamental reason lies in the fact that content and form and style are ultimately two aspects with differences and contradictions, especially between Chinese and English, making it often challenging to translate correspondingly. Pointing out this source is not to defend poorer translations but rather to illustrate that mastering the unity of contradictions and seeking comprehensive correspondences are essential to producing high-quality translations. Therefore, attention must also be given to the fact that scientific faithfulness can never be disregarded when evaluating based solely on form and style, as content and form are inseparable. This can also explain why people often attribute form and style to content, advocating for a comprehensive “faithfulness”. The following are a few more examples:

Original text: Mrs. d'urberville was not the first mother compelled to love her offspring resentfully, and to be bitterly fond.

Translation (1): 天下当母亲的, 迫于无奈, 气儿子又疼儿子、恨儿子又爱儿子的, 可就多着呢, 德伯太太并不是头一个。 <sup>[5]</sup>

Translation (2): 杜博维尔太太并非是头一个怀着怨

恨爱自己的后代、而且爱得很苦很深的妇女。<sup>[6]</sup>

The original text seems bland, but to translate it authentically, careful consideration of each word and phrase is indeed necessary. It is clear that Translation (1) is more authentic and fluent than Translation (2), devoid of any translationese, possessing good form and style. The authors believe that being more faithful to the internal logic and semantics of the original text is the key to the artistic optimization of the translation. The following is another example:

Original text: Fellow delegates, we are all convinced that our work will go down in the history of mankind, demonstrating that the Chinese people, comprising one quarter of humanity, have now stood up. The Chinese have always been a great courageous and industrious nation; it is only in modern times that they have fallen behind. And that was due entirely to oppression and exploitation by foreign imperialism and domestic reactionary governments.

Translation (1): 代表先生们，我们都认为我们的工作将写进人类的历史，表示占有类四分之一人口的中国人从此站起来了。中国人一直是一个伟大、勤劳、勇敢的民族，只是现在落后，这完全是被帝国主义和本国反动政府压迫和剥削的结果。

Translation (2): 诸位代表，我们有一个共识，这就是我们的工作将载入人类的史册，它将表明，占人类总数四分之一的中国人从此站起来了。中国人从来就是一个伟大、勇敢和勤劳的民族，只是在近代落伍了，那完全是外国帝国主义和本国反动政府的压迫和剥削造成的。

The original text is simple, almost resembling scientific and technological language; however, as a speech discourse, it places significant emphasis on expression form and style, being concise, solemn, and resolute. The superiority of Translation (2) over Translation (1) lies precisely in this aspect. This seems to be purely a standard of form and style, but in fact, it can be determined and applied objectively and scientifically. If it does not conform to it, it evidently cannot be considered a completely scientifically faithful conveyance of information content—lacking the expressive force that accurately reproduces the original text.

### 3.2. Non-absoluteness of merits and demerits evaluation

The evaluation of “translation for overall appreciation” is widely accepted to have discernible merits and demerits. Its standards are grounded in semantic faithfulness while also emphasizing form and style. In reality, these two aspects are often intertwined, making it difficult to separate scientific faithfulness from artistic creation. Its basis lies in the restriction of the content and form of the original text, which must be emphasized. Another crucial fact is that for literary works, simple reading and appreciation are inevitably subject to varying opinions, and when translation and evaluation are added, the multitude of subjective factors cannot be denied. Moreover, due to the objective existence of the contradictions

between bilingual content and form, it has already provided an “absolute” basis for the non-absoluteness of the standard of merits and demerits. This highlights the fundamental contradiction in translation: the objectivity constraint of the original text, the objectivity of bilingual contradictions, and the subjectivity of the translation and evaluation subjects. This contradiction is extremely complex and cannot be thoroughly discussed here, thus only a few examples of the non-absoluteness of evaluation caused by subjective factors are briefly mentioned. In many cases, multiple translations are evenly matched with each other, and individual differences can be ignored.

Original text: 君子笃于亲，则民兴于仁；故旧不遗，则民不偷。<sup>[7]</sup>

Translation (1): When those who are in high stations perform well all their duties to their relations, the people are aroused to virtue. When old friends are not neglected by them, the people are preserved from meanness.

Translation (2): When the gentleman feels profound affection for his parents, the common people will be stirred to benevolence. When he does not forget friends of long standing, the common people will not shirk their obligations to other people.

Except for the overly general meaning of “virtue” in Translation (1) and the narrowness of “parents” in Translation (2), both of them seem difficult to distinguish in terms of merits and demerits, even though they differ significantly in conveying the original text. Certainly, we do not mean errors offsetting each other when talking about being evenly matched.

Original text: 天净沙·秋思

枯藤老树昏鸦，  
小桥流水人家，  
古道西风瘦马。  
夕阳西下，  
断肠人在天涯。

Translation (1): Tune to “Sand and Sky”: Autumn Thoughts

Dry vine, old tree, crows at dusk,  
Low bridge, stream running, cottages,  
Ancient road, west wind, lean nag,  
The sun westering,  
And one with breaking heart at the sky’s edge. (Trans. Schlepp)

Translation (2): Clear Sky Over the Sand: Autumn  
O’er old trees wreathed with rotten vine fly evening crows

’Neath tiny bridge beside a cot a clear stream flows  
On ancient road in western breeze a lean horse goes.  
Westward declines the sun  
Far, far from home is the heartbroken one. (Trans. Xu Yuanchong)

In terms of individual word choices, one could argue that the former is slightly superior, but the latter also effectively conveys the meaning and has a good expression—not to mention that it essentially retains the original rhyme scheme. Especially when looking at the last sentence, the former opts for a more “literal” method, making the semantic meaning of “断肠” (breaking heart) somewhat ambiguous for English readers, while the latter



translates the true meaning of “lonely and desolate love” (far, far from home is the heartbroken one), employing paraphrasing method to allow English readers to understand it just as Chinese readers would. Therefore, determining which is better or worse becomes challenging.

Original text: The church was surrounded by yew trees which seemed almost coeval with itself. Its tall Gothic spire shot up lightly from among them with rooks and crows generally wheeling about it.

Translation (1): 这教堂的四周由和它一样古老的紫杉包围着。它的高高的哥特式塔尖矗立在它们中间, 时有乌鸦飞翔在它的周围。

Translation (2): 教堂四周, 有杉树环合, 两者几乎一样古老。教堂高高的哥特式塔尖矗出树梢, 时有鸦群萦绕飞翔。

Translation (1) retains the English expression form, which can be regarded as following the source language orientation; whereas the latter, following the principles of parataxis and simplicity in Chinese, adheres to the target language orientation. As a result, evaluators may have their own preferences.

Original text: It was an old woman, tall and shapely still, though withered by time, on whom his eyes fell when he stopped and turned.

Translation (1): 他站住, 转过身来, 定睛一看, 是个年迈的妇女, 她身材很高, 而且仍然匀称, 虽然受了时间的折磨而有点憔悴。

Translation (2): 他站住, 转过身来, 定睛一看, 原来是个年迈的妇女。她身材修长, 虽受岁月的折磨而显憔悴, 但风韵犹存。

These two translations are essentially the same, except that the latter uses more elegant expressions like “修长” (slender) and “风韵犹存” (retaining its charm). Whether it is necessary here may be debatable. Additionally, the former translates the phrase “虽然” (although) later in the sentence—a style known as Europeanization. Whether this is appropriate might also be debatable.

Original text: Ye are better than all the ballads  
That ever were sung or said;  
For ye are living poems,  
And all the rest are dead .

Translation (1): 你们胜过所有的民歌,  
无论是说过的, 唱过的;  
因为你们是活的诗篇,  
其余的诗都没有生气。

Translation (2): 一些说过的、唱过的歌谣,  
全都赶不上你们;  
只有你们是活的诗篇,  
别的诗都是死气沉沉。

Due to space constraints, the authors only quote the last stanza of H.W. Longfellow’s poem *Children* along with the translations by translators Zha L. Z. (Translation 1) and Yang D. Y. (Translation 2). While it can be said that the former translation is more “literal” and the latter is more “alive”, on the whole, both translations faithfully convey the poet’s love and praise for vibrant children and capture its bright freestyle.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper focuses on a brief discussion of the purposiveness principle in translation evaluation through the analysis of translation examples, specifically addressing the principles of “content-oriented translation” and “translation for overall appreciation”. Although it generally discusses their different situations and characteristics in terms of the faithfulness of information content and reproduction of realistic style, it illustrates the problem very concretely, practically, and typically: the former has a more unified standard, while the latter is more subject to the widely accepted standard of merits and demerits and complex, which cannot be absolutized. In summary, the purposiveness principle, considering these two major purposes, is discussed in each practical evaluation scenario rather than theoretical resolutions through translation examples. The exemplification analysis in this study holds certain enlightening significance for the scientific application of translation principles.

## Projects

1. The Science and Technology Innovation Program of Hunan Province (No.2022WZ1045).

2. Key Scientific Research Project of Hunan Provincial Department of Education: Research on the Negative Impact and Coping Strategies of Western Culture Infiltration on Young College Students in the All-Media Era. Xiang Jiao Tong [2020] No.264 (No.: 20A167).

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