

A Study of Modern Poetry Translation under the Perspective of Discourse Function: T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in Multiple Translations as an Example

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Abstract. From the discourse function perspective of Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, this paper compares and analyzes two Chinese translations of *The Waste Land* by Zhao Luorui and Zha Liangzheng (Mudan), exploring how the different translations creatively interpret and reconstruct the original text in accordance with the cultural context and aesthetic preferences of the target language. It further investigates how this reconstruction impacts and shapes the target readers' understanding and acceptance process. The study reveals that the translators' distinct orientations in translation strategies lead to significant differences in the translations regarding expressive effects and readers' experiences. Zhao's translation effectively maintains the discourse structure and linguistic style of the original text through a conservative and traditional translation approach. Conversely, Mudan's translation notably enhances the readability and acceptability of the translation with a flexible and innovative translation style. Overall, the latter translation is better suited to the aesthetic habits and cultural background of Chinese readers.

1 Introduction

T.S. Eliot's masterpiece *The Waste Land* is not only an important milestone in the 20th-century Western literature but also renowned for its profound influence on the development of modernist poetry. The work is daring and innovative in form, eschewing the constraints of traditional poetry and embracing modern techniques such as fragmented narrative, free verse, and stream of consciousness. It deeply analyzes the spiritual dilemmas of Western society and the psychological world of modern individuals in terms of content. Eliot's unique linguistic artistry skillfully blends the elegance of classical literature with the simplicity of urban vernacular, creating a distinctive rhythm and rhyme, and paving a new way for the evolution of modern poetry.

The reception and influence of *The Waste Land* in cross-cultural communication, particularly its translation within the Chinese context, has become a significant window into the study of modern poetry translation. As the first to introduce *The Waste Land* to China, Zhao Luorui's 1937 translation not only faithfully captured the essence of the original work

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but also took into account the cultural background and aesthetic expectations of Chinese readers. This opened the door to Western modernist poetry for Chinese readers and had a lasting impact on the development of modern poetry in China. Subsequently, Zha Liangzheng's (Mudan's) translation offered a fresh perspective and interpretation for the dissemination and reception of *The Waste Land* in China, preserving the literary and artistic qualities of the original while integrating his own poetic creation experience to creatively reproduce it.

Currently, research on modern poetry translation has shown a trend of diversification, encompassing translation theory, practical strategies, and cultural adaptation. However, in-depth analyses from the perspective of discourse function for classic works like *The Waste Land* are still lacking. This paper aims to bridge this research gap by conducting a detailed comparative analysis of the discourse similarities and differences among multiple translations of "The Waste Land," contributing new academic insights through the lens of discourse function.

Based on the theoretical framework of discourse function, this paper will employ comparative analysis, close textual reading, and other research methods to thoroughly examine the gains and losses of multiple translations of *The Waste Land* in terms of coherence, subject structure, information structure, and articulation system during the translation process. Through in-depth analysis, this paper seeks to reveal how different translations creatively interpret and reconstruct the original text according to the cultural context and aesthetic preferences of the target language, and further explore how this reconstruction influences and shapes the understanding and acceptance of target readers. The academic contribution of this paper is that it not only opens up new perspectives and depths for the translation study of *The Waste Land* but also provides valuable theoretical guidance and practical examples for the translation practice of modern poetry.

2 Theoretical framework

This paper is based on the solid theoretical foundation of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), which was first conceived by M.A.K. Halliday in the late 1950s and gradually developed during the 1960s. Systemic Functional Grammar analyses the central functions and roles of language in social interaction, focusing in particular on the nature of language as a social symbol system and exploring how it carries the communication of ideas, emotions, and intentions.

In his book *Language as a Social Symbol*, Halliday pointed out that language carries not only the Ideational Metafunction of describing the real world and expressing individual experiences [1], but also the Interpersonal Metafunction of constructing and maintaining social relationships, as well as the functions of organizing. It also has an Interpersonal Metafunction to build and maintain social relationships, and a Textual Metafunction to organize information and construct coherent discourse. These three metafunctions together constitute the theoretical framework of Systemic Functional Grammar, which provides a comprehensive perspective for understanding the functioning mechanism of language in social contexts.

Among them, Textual Metafunction, as one of the core components of the theory, focuses on how language can efficiently organize information and weave a coherent chapter structure in concrete use to ensure the accuracy of information transmission and smooth comprehension. It not only focuses on the construction of the surface structure of language, such as the logic of sentence arrangement and the clever use of connectives, but also goes deeper into the analysis of the deep structure of language, exploring the hierarchical layout of information, the natural evolution of themes, and other deep-seated issues. Captions/numbering

3 Comparative analysis

3.1 Coherence

Discourse coherence, as a core concept in linguistic communication, not only covers formal articulation (e.g., the coherent use of lexical and grammatical devices), but also emphasizes semantic coherence, i.e., the coherent unity of the message at the logical, conceptual, and emotional levels. From the perspective of cognitive function, Wang Yin emphasizes the notion of discourse as a meaningful whole [2], the need for illumination of conceptual components, indexicality of propositional development, and conformity in discursive reasoning among the propositions within it, which together ensure that discourse information is mentally linked, thus forming a unified cognitive world.

Example 1

Original: April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain.

Translation Version of Zhao Luorui: 四月是最残忍的月份, 从死去的 / 大地上发出嫩绿的芽, 混合着 / 记忆与欲望, 让春雨 / 搅动迟钝的根

Translation Version of Zha Liangzheng (Mudan): 四月是最残酷的季节, 荒地上 / 长着丁香, 把回忆和欲望 / 掺和在一起, 又让春雨 / 催促那些迟钝的根芽

In Zhao Luorui's translation, she strictly follows the narrative order of the original text, starting from the temporal starting point of 'April' and gradually progressing to the mixture of 'green shoots' and 'memory and desire', and then to the vivid depiction of 'spring rain stirring the roots' and 'memory and desire', and then to the vivid depiction of 'spring rain stirring up the roots'. This way of treatment ensures that the overall logic of the translated text is consistent with that of the original, i.e. the macro-logical structure of the text, so that readers can follow the author's thoughts and understand the deeper meaning of the text. A faithful reproduction of the semantic coherence of the original text is achieved. Although the translation of 'lilacs' in the sentence does not use the word 'lilacs' directly, the tender green buds also effectively express the image of lilacs growing tenaciously from the withered ground in the original poem, which is in line with the aesthetic and linguistic habits of Chinese readers. This treatment does not ignore the details of the original text but presents them in a way that is closer to the Chinese expression.

This treatment reflects the respect for the macroscopic formal structure and microscopic content structure of the original text, which makes the translation consistent with the original text as a whole and ensures that the readers can follow the development clues of the original text to understand and feel the author's emotions and intentions smoothly. Therefore, Zhao's translation ensures the overall coherence of the discourse.

Mudan's translation also maintains the coherence of the original text, but it is more flexible in expression. By adjusting the sentence pattern and word order, for example, translating 'mixing memories and desires' into 'mixing memories and desires', the translation is more in line with the Chinese expression habit, which enhances the coherence and consistency of the translated text. The consistency and readability of the translation are enhanced. Based on maintaining the basic coherence of the original text, more flexible sentence adjustments and changes in word order have been made. Although this treatment breaks part of the formal articulation of the original text, it makes the translation more fluent and natural as a whole and easy to accept and understand by Chinese readers by enhancing semantic coherence. Zha Liangzheng's translation cleverly employs conformity in pragmatic reasoning, and by adjusting the order and manner of information presentation, it guides the

readers to make positive cognitive reasoning, thus realizing the effective transmission of information in the discourse. Therefore, from the perspective of Wang Yin's theory of cognitive-functional coherence, Zha Liangzheng's translation also has a high degree of coherence, only that this coherence is more reflected in the semantic level and the reader's cognitive experience.

To sum up, the difference in coherence treatment between Zhao Luorui's and Zha Liangzheng's (Mudan's) translations reflects the different emphasis of different translation strategies in maintaining the coherence of the original text. Zhao Luorui's translation pays more attention to formal articulation and macrostructural correspondence, while Zha Liangzheng's translation pays more attention to semantic coherence and readers' cognitive experience. These two strategies have their own merits, and together, they demonstrate the complex relationship between form and meaning and between the local and the whole in the translation process. Through these analyses, the multidimensionality of discourse coherence and its specific manifestations in different translation practices can be more deeply understood.

3.2 Theme Structure

Within the framework of Functional Grammar, the Theme and rheme systems, as key concepts of discourse function, provide a powerful tool for understanding the flow of information and expressive effects under different translation strategies. Halliday and his followers, such as Thompson, have pointed out that the theme is the starting point of discourse, the starting point of information, which is not only the first constituent of a sentence but also the starting point of thought determined in the mind of the speaker, i.e., the 'mental subject' [1]. This definition emphasizes the centrality of the subject in the transmission of information and how it leads the reader to and understands the whole sentence or paragraph.

Example 2

Original: I will show you fear in a handful of dust

Translation Version of Zhao Luorui: 我将向你展示一撮尘土中的恐惧

Translation Version of Zha Liangzheng (Mudan): 我给你一把手的尘世的土 / 你看看

In Zhao Luorui's translation, the subject is 'I', and the nominative is 'will show you the fear in a handful of dust', which directly corresponds to the original text and maintains the original's nominative information as the starting point of the message. This kind of translation follows the principle of Halliday's principle of the subject as the starting point of the message, taking 'I' as the subject to play the role of the subject in the sentence, which directly and explicitly leads to the subsequent content of the nominative 'will show you a handful of fear in the dust', i.e., the content of the nominative [3]. This translation strategy maintains the information structure and logical order of the original text so that readers can quickly grasp the core information of the sentence, reflecting the role of the subject as an information guide in functional grammar. This approach maintains the order of information flow and logical structure of the original text so that readers can clearly understand the intention and focus of the original text. The subject 'I', as the starting point of the message, emphasizes the speaker's initiative and the directness of the action, making the whole sentence seem direct and clear.

In Muthan's translation, the subject is changed to 'I give you a handful of earthly soil'. By changing the structure of the subject and the speaker, he transforms the direct statement of the original text into a more action-oriented and graphic scene, which, although the subject is changed, still maintains the intention and focus of the original text as a whole. This change not only alters the starting point of the message of the original text but also enriches the

sentence by increasing the sense of action and scene. Mudan's translation transforms the direct statement of the original text into a specific action scene, making the reader feel as if he or she is in a concrete situation and thus feeling more deeply the emotion and mood that the original text is trying to convey. Although there is a change in the dominant position, Muthan still maintains the intention and focus of the original text, i.e., the existence and feeling of 'fear' through clever arrangement, showing the powerful function of the dominant position as the starting point of association.

On the whole, the two translations differ in the way they present information, with Zhao Luorui's translation focusing more on conveying the message of the original text directly and explicitly, while Mudan's translation pays more attention to creating an atmosphere through actions and scenes so that readers can understand the original text through feelings. This difference reflects the different preferences of different translators in understanding and expressing the original text. Mudan's translation increases the action and picture sense of the sentences by changing the subject structure, making the translation more aesthetically appealing. This kind of translation can stimulate readers' imagination and emotional resonance and enhance the infectious and expressive power of the translation.

3.3 Information structure

Information theory states that information is what the sender conveys to the addressee, where the arrangement of new and known information constitutes the information structure of the sentence. In linguistics, the Theme, usually located at the beginning of a sentence, is the starting point of the sentence's information, which can be either known information or new information, while the rheme is the information following the Theme, which often contains new information or further elaboration of the Theme [4].

Halliday further promoted the application of information theory in linguistics, and he gave it new life by combining in-depth analyses of discourse function and chapter structure [5]. According to him, based on the information structure feature of discourse function, sentences tend to favor known information mentioned in the previous text as the pronominal position, as a way to build coherence in the context, both to carry on the previous text and to lead to the subsequent one. From a structural point of view, the primary position often carries known information, while the referent position contains new information [6], and this 'known-new' order of information constitutes the most common information unit structure.

Example 3

Original: Unreal City / Under the brown fog of a winter dawn / A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many / I had not thought death had undone so many

Translation Version of Zhao Luorui: 虚幻的城市, / 在冬日的晨雾褐色下 / 一群人涌过伦敦桥, 如此众多 / 我没有想过死亡竟毁灭了这么多

Translation Version of Zha Liangzheng (Mudan): 那么多的人, 我已不是第一个 / 来到这圣洁的十字架下受难 / 当然也不是最后一个 / 我追想他们的悲哀, 我失去了的

In English, generally speaking, new ideas and important information are placed at the end of the sentence, forming the high point of new information [7]. In Luo Zhao's translation, the information structure is clear and follows this principle of known information before new information. For example, 'the illusory city (虚幻的城市)' and 'under the brown winter morning mist (在冬日的晨雾褐色下)' are placed at the beginning of the sentence as background information (known information), which is the dominant position, and the dominant position takes on the role of the known information to provide background and support for the new information in the narration, and pave the way for the subsequent

description of the scene. provides a pretext for the subsequent description of the scene. Subsequently, 'A crowd of people poured across London Bridge' appears as new information and unfolds in the nominative, while the final personal sentiment 'I had not thought that death had destroyed so much', serves as the focus and conclusion of the whole sentence, further emphasizing the impact of the new information.

Moodan's translation, although a major rewrite of the original text, shows the same clear structure of the message. He begins the sentence with the quantitative new information 'so many people (那么多的人)' and cuts directly into the topic, making the subject position the carrier of the new information and emphasizing and highlighting the topic by breaking the conventional information structure. The strategy of placing new information at the beginning of the sentence shows a higher degree of naturalness and relevance in the Chinese context. This phenomenon profoundly reflects the fundamental difference between Chinese and English in the principle of information organization [8]. The treatment disrupts the original text's structure where known information precedes new information, yet it effectively captures the reader's attention. Subsequently, further elaboration and expansion on the theme are made through sentences like 'coming to suffer under this holy cross,' culminating in an expression of personal loss, creating a complete emotional arc. In contrast to the conventional approach, the author employs a more direct and intense method, starting with new information to quickly seize the reader's interest and focusing more on the articulation of personal emotions and the exploration of the inner world. Through rewriting and reconstruction, the translation achieves a more profound emotional and artistic impact.

The Chinese language prefers to place key new information at the beginning of the sentence as a means of highlighting the focus of the information, and, at the same time, promoting the smooth construction and logical coherence of the sentence. This practice not only accelerates the process of capturing the core meaning of the information receiver but also enhances the strength and vividness of language expression by placing the new information in front, reflecting the unique aesthetics of Chinese expression.

Therefore, in the process of English to Chinese translation, to faithfully reproduce the original information, it is also necessary to take into account Chinese expression habits and aesthetic standards. Translators need to take the initiative to adjust the information structure of the original text and elevate the new information that may have been hidden in the middle or at the end of the sentence to the beginning of the sentence to conform to the reading expectation and comprehension mode of Chinese readers. This strategy not only ensures the accurate transmission of information content but also preserves the original text's mood and flavor at a deeper level, which promotes the depth and breadth of cross-cultural communication and reflects the important role of translation as a cultural bridge.

3.4 Articulation system

Language style is not dependent on its length or form (verbal or written) but crucially on its existence as a complete whole. Everything from a short sentence to a complex collection of multiple speech acts can constitute a discourse. However, most discourse is not a collection of isolated speech acts but the product of an organic combination of multiple acts. Articulation is a kind of discourse schema meaning, a cross-sentence meaning relation embodied by non-structural components [9]. This question of holistic construction - i.e., why speech acts within a discourse are tightly connected rather than jumbled and how this tightness is achieved - has been the focus of linguists' research since the 1960s.

Example 4

Original: Between the idea / And the reality / Between the motion / And the act / Falls the Shadow

Translation Version of Zhao Luorui: 在理想与现实之间 / 在动机与行为之间 / 落下阴影

Translation Version of Zha Liangzheng (Mudan): 在思想和感情之间 / 在言语和动作之间 / 总是隔着一道阴影

Zhao Luorui's translation closely follows the sentence structure and semantic logic of the original text, corresponding almost word for word to the original sentences. The repetitive structure of 'between ... and ...' makes the translation highly consistent with the original in form, and enhances the readability and comprehensibility of the translation. By maintaining the contrasting relationship (ideal and reality, motive and behavior) of the original text, Zhao's translation maintains a high degree of semantic coherence. Readers can feel the philosophy and tension embedded in the original text. The repetitive sentence structure not only enhances the coherence of the translation but also gives it a unique sense of rhythm. This sense of rhythm makes the translation more fluent and natural when it is read aloud, and it is easy to arouse readers' empathy.

The translation by Zha Liangzheng (Mudan) adopts a more flexible and creative approach to constructing the articulation system. Instead of strictly corresponding to the vocabulary of the original text as in Zhao's translation, Zha's translation makes appropriate substitutions in accordance with the habits of Chinese expression. For instance, 'ideal and reality' is replaced with 'thoughts and feelings', and 'motion and act' with 'speech and action'. Although such substitutions may alter the literal meaning of the original text, they align more closely with the cultural background and thought processes of Chinese readers. By broadening the semantic scope of the original text, Cha's translation is enriched and rendered more nuanced in expression. For example, 'between thoughts and feelings' emphasizes the internal conflicts and dilemmas of human beings more than 'between ideals and reality'; 'between speech and action' does the same in comparison to 'between motives and behaviors'. 'Between Speech and Action' is more precise than "Between Motivation and Behavior" in capturing the intricacies and ambiguities of human conduct. Cha's translation offers greater diversity in articulation, avoiding over-reliance on repetitive structures, as seen in Zhao's translation. By adjusting the word order and employing connectives, the translation is made more supple and expressive while still preserving coherence.

The Zhao translation is highly praised for its faithfulness to the original text, its rigorous structure, and its strong sense of rhythm. It enables readers to feel the essence and charm of the original text and, at the same time, demonstrates the translator's profound linguistic skills and translation techniques. However, this high degree of fidelity may also lead to a lack of innovation and individuality in certain aspects of the translation.

The translation by Zha Liangzheng (Mudan), on the other hand, has won the readers' favor with its unique creativity and profound insight. He gives the translation new vitality and expressiveness through flexible lexical substitutions and varied articulations. Although there are certain differences compared with the original text, such differences are precisely the charm of the art of translation. It allows readers to feel the translator's style and depth of thought while enjoying the translation.

To sum up, Zhao Luorui's translation and Zha Liangzheng's (Mudan's) translation adopt different strategies and methods in constructing the articulation system, which directly affects the expressive effect of the translation and the readers' feelings. Both have their own merits, but in terms of the articulation system, Cha's translation shows more of its characteristics.

4 Discussion

After an in-depth comparative analysis of Zhao's and Mudan's translations of *The Waste Land* in terms of discourse functional coherence, subject structure, information structure, and articulation structure, one can discern the distinctive differences between the two translators regarding the use of translation strategies. These differences profoundly affect the strength of the translations' expression and the readers' reception experience. Building on the detailed analyses from the previous section, this part aims to further explore how translation strategies subtly influence the quality of modern poetry translations and to uncover the underlying motivations.

Firstly, focusing on the choice of translation strategies, Zhao's translation exhibits a more cautious and traditional methodological inclination. It is centered on preserving the discourse framework and linguistic flavor of the original text, striving to reproduce the essence of Eliot's original work to the greatest extent possible. This strategy is particularly evident in the handling of subject position and information structure. Zhao's translation meticulously maintains the original text's subject position and information flow, ensuring a high degree of logical coherence in the translation. However, this may also limit the translation's flexibility to some extent, making it somewhat restrictive in expression and challenging to integrate seamlessly into the cultural ecology of the target language.

Conversely, Mudan's translation style is more flexible and innovative. In his translation practice, Mudan pays special attention to reading fluency and audience acceptance of the translated text. Through strategies such as subtly adjusting the primary structure, optimizing the arrangement of information, and strengthening the means of articulation, the translated text faithfully conveys the spirit of the original text while aligning more closely with the reading habits and aesthetic preferences of the target language readers. This strategy not only significantly enhances the naturalness and affinity of the translated text but also deepens the readers' understanding and perception of the original work.

Further analysis reveals that this difference in translation strategy reflects the translators' deep insights into the purpose of translation, the needs of readers, and the cultural gap. Zhao's translation may reflect the pursuit of rigor and fidelity in academic research, while Mudan's translation leans more towards the wide dissemination and in-depth acceptance of literary works. It is these differing translation interests that guide the translators in focusing on their own strategic choices, thereby shaping the unique style and effect of the translation.

From the perspective of discourse function, the essence of translation is far more than the mere conversion of linguistic symbols; it is the process of transmitting and re-creating cultural meanings [9]. The divergence in the realization of discourse function between Zhao's and Mudan's translations is the outcome of the translators' in-depth interpretation and creative reproduction of the original text's cultural meaning, guided by different translation strategies. This difference not only enriches the form of *The Waste Land* translations but also provides valuable empirical materials and profound insights for the study of modern poetry translation [10].

5 Conclusion

Through an in-depth comparative analysis of Zhao's and Mudan's translations of *The Waste Land*, focusing on discourse functional coherence, subject structure, information structure, and articulation structure, this paper systematically explores the profound impact of translation strategy choices on the quality of modern poetry translation. It is found that the different orientations of translators in their strategies directly influence the significant differences in translation in terms of expressive effect and readers' experience. Zhao's translation successfully preserves the discourse structure and linguistic style of the original text through a conservative and traditional approach. In contrast, Mudan's translation

enhances the readability and acceptability of the translated text with a flexible and innovative style.

This paper's academic contribution lies in opening new perspectives and pathways for the study of modern poetry translation, emphasizing the pivotal role of translation strategy selection. The comparative analysis also reveals the unique perspectives and common pursuits of different translators when engaging with the same text, offering valuable references and lessons for translation practice.

However, this paper acknowledges certain research limitations. Firstly, the relatively small sample size may restrict the universality of the findings, and the analysis is limited to some discourse function-related content within the text samples; secondly, the discourse function analysis does not encompass all dimensions and requires further expansion and deepening in future research. This paper anticipates future research to 1) diversify samples by including more translations in comparative studies; 2) expand and deepen analysis dimensions to explore translation strategies' impact on modern poetry translation quality; and 3) integrate recent translation theories and practices for a more comprehensive understanding of modern poetry translation.

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