

## *Original Paper*

# An Analysis of Translation of Literary Texts under the Guidance of Adaptation Theory— A Case Study of *White Teeth* (Excerpt)

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### **Abstract**

*As an important part of cross-cultural communication, the significance of translating literary works accurately is self-evident. In specific translation practice, how to clear cultural barriers, resolve cultural misunderstandings, and faithfully convey meanings have always been challenges for translators. Literary texts often have a large number of long and difficult sentences while Adaptation Theory advocates conforming to the linguistic characteristics and style of the translated text, which has a certain guiding effect on the translation of English-Chinese literary texts. Based on the translation practice of *White Teeth* (excerpts), this paper analyzes the specific role of Adaptation Theory in translation practice, with a view to providing specific references for the translation of literary texts.*

### **Keywords**

*White Teeth, Adaptation Theory, literary texts*

## **1. Introduction**

With the deepening of globalization, cross-cultural exchanges are flourishing, which leads to the spread of so many literary works around the world that makes people's demand for translation expand. Nowadays, the study of translation continues to develop, and the perspectives of the study as well as the contents that need to be translated are more diverse. How to promote foreign people to understand Chinese culture through translation has become the focus of more and more linguists.

*White Teeth* is a full-length novel written by British author Zadie Smith, set in London, which tells the story of two families, Archie Jones and Samad Iqbal, who are World War II comrades. The novel easily condenses the intersection of different racial beliefs and cultures, the psychological and communication rupture and misalignment between generations, as well as the century-long differences in time and historical absurdity into a few racially and culturally diverse neighborhoods, portraying a complex and

vast post-colonial picture at the end of the century. It inherits the tradition of early Dickensian realism, but at the same time has distinctive postmodernist characteristics. *White Teeth* explores the complex issues of race relations and national identity that arose in post-World War II England as it faced the challenges of the end of the old era and the redefinition of the nation. It is a novel reflecting the conflicts between parents and children, whites and blacks, religion and science, East and West, and about the impact that history and society have had on individual identity and ideology. It succeeds in recreating the inner fears of new immigrants raising the next generation in a foreign cultural atmosphere and delves into issues such as how to properly deal with race relations and reconstruct one's ethnic identity. Fundamentally, *White Teeth* is a novel concerned with the common destiny of mankind in the context of a pluralistic era. The work has won awards such as the 2000 Wheatbridge Award for Best Debut Novel and the Guardian Award for Best Debut Novel. A good translation of the work will help us to study a range of issues of new immigrants after World War II.

As a long literary work, *White Teeth* is written in a humorous style and uses a lot of long and difficult sentences with complex structure, covering a variety of topics such as genetics, gender, race, history, etc. Therefore, a good translation of this work must accurately convey the information of the source text while conforming to the linguistic expression habits of Chinese readers. Verschueren theory of adaption advocates that translators should make appropriate conformity changes in complex linguistic situations through different translation techniques in specific translation practices, and make flexible treatments of the original text, incorporating cultural factors, so as to make the target text more in line with the linguistic habits of the imported language, and to make up for the differences between Chinese and English expressions. This is an important guidance for the translation of literary texts.

## 2. Adaption Theory

In 1987, Verschueren first introduced the theory into linguistics in Pragmatics as a Theory of Linguistic Adaptation. Among domestic scholars, Ge was the first to combine Adaptation Theory with translation studies. She discussed the influence of contextual adaptation on word meaning (Ge, 2001) and argued that in the framework of Adaptation Theory, translation is an operational process of dynamic adaptation to the context and structure of the source language (Ge, 2002).

Verschueren proposes that language has three properties, namely variability, negotiability, and adaptability (Verschueren, 2000). Among them, variability and negotiability are foundation, and adaptability is the core. Variability makes language choice possible, negotiability ensures that language choice is not made mechanically and strictly according to rules or fixed form-function relationships, but on the basis of highly flexible pragmatic principles and strategies, and adaptability makes language choice flexible to meet communicative needs (He, 2003).

Adaptation Theory has four main dimensions including conceptual correlates of adaptation, structural objects of adaptation, dynamics of adaptability, and salience of adaptability (Verschueren, 2000). Conceptual correlates of adaptation amounts to the use and choice of language in response to the

context like the communicative context and linguistic context. Structural objects of adaptation is tantamount to choices made to adapt to linguistic factors, such as phonology, lexicon, syntax, code, style and discourse, in which adaptation is the purpose and result. Dynamics of adaptability signifies that the choice of language adaptation is a dynamic process. Saliency of adaptability refers to the fact that people show different degrees of saliency in their language choice and adaptation, and speakers will behave differently under different levels of saliency (Verschueren, 2000). At the same time, the fact that Adaptation Theory is a macro-guidance framework rather than a micro-operation framework (Qiu, 2016) should be noted, requiring us to adopt specific translation strategies and translation methods while taking the Adaptation Theory as a guidance in the translation process.

### 3. Case Analysis

#### 3.1 Conceptual Correlates of Adaptation

Conceptual correlates of adaptation state that language use and selection must be adjusted for the given situation and the communicative and linguistic contexts make up the majority of the context. Among these, the physical, mental, and social worlds constitute the communicative context; on a macro level, the linguistic context is broken down into cohesion, intertextuality, and sequencing; on a micro level, the context influences how words and sentences are understood (Chen, 2006). A “decoding-encoding” process underlies translation, during which in order to guarantee “faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance” during the encoding and decoding process, the translator should enhance their understanding of the cultural background and informational implications of the source language, as well as to fully comprehend the source language’s connotations. This will help them to better recode the source language and convey its true meaning in the context.

In order to make the grammar, vocabulary, and cultural background of the source text more understandable, amplification requires us to add necessary linguistic elements during the translation process (Dong, 2021), clarifying information absent from the source text or implied meaning. Because of the differences between English and Chinese, there are not one-to-one correspondence among many words. Therefore, in order to make the translation more fluid and natural and to conform to the linguistic habits of the target language readers, appropriate components should be added during the English to Chinese translation process based on the meaning of the original text as a lot of grammatical differences between English and Chinese. In English context, prepositions are always used to replace verbs. Not only that, there are so many inflected forms with flexible ideographic functions in English which makes it difficult to find one-to one corresponding meanings in Chinese that some words need to be added.

#### 【Example 1】

ST: Overhead, a gang of the local flying vermin took off from some unseen perch, swooped, and seemed to be zeroing in on Archie's car roof only to perform, at the last moment, an impressive U-turn, moving as one with the elegance of a curve ball and landing on the Hussein-Ishmael, a celebrated halal

butchers.

TT: 头顶，一群不知从何处飞来的鸽子从空中猛扑下来，一开始仿佛瞄准了阿吉的车顶，却在最后来了个漂亮的大转弯，优雅堪比棒球手投出的曲线球。鸽子降落在一家有名的清真肉店：侯赛因-以实玛利肉店。

The passage is the original description of Archie's first suicide when the Archie truly desires to die. The fact that pigeons at first seem to pounce on the roof of Archie's car at last but around and later Archie was saved by mistake forms a clever echo. Successful environmental description can enhance the realism of the story, render the atmosphere, pave the way for the development of the plot and even mobilize the reader's emotions. The original text uses a number of verbs and noun phrases with prepositions to describe the pigeon's unexpected turn when it was initially about to swoop down on the roof of Aji's car. However, if the translation process relies on noun and prepositional phrases, a rigid reproduction will only make the translation read confusing as if nothing is happening; but the translator, in the course of dealing with the example, has transformed static into movement by adding “猛”，“瞄准”，and “来了个漂亮的大转弯”，which are in line with the language habits of the readers of the translated text. At the same time, the translator also added “一开始……却在最后……” to indicate the time connection allowing the target audience to clarify the logical relationship, and more directly feel the ups and downs of a moment. In the process of translation practice, the translator successfully reproduced the scene of Archie's suicide by adding words as the various images complement each other.

### 3.2 Structural Objects of Adaptation

The adaptation of structural objects can be regarded as the adaptation of linguistic context, which is both a further adaptation made by the translator on the basis of the Skopos theory and a dynamic adaptation of the translator to present the nature of translation and translation standards (Yang, 2012). As one of the basic elements of language, words play an important role in translation. At the same time, a word often has multiple meanings, including structural meaning, conceptual meaning and emotional meaning. In translation practice, translators should explore the extended meaning and the most appropriate expression of words in specific contexts.

#### 【Example 2】

ST: And in the moment between focusing on the sweaty bulk of a brown-skinned Elyis and realizing that life was still his, he had a kind of epiphany. It occurred to him that, for the first time since his birth……Frantically, he wound down both his windows and gasped for oxygen from the very depths of his lungs. In between gulps he thanked Mo profusely, tears streaming down his cheeks, his hands clinging on to Mo's apron.

TT: 就在他凝视着这个的褐色大块头、意识到自己还活着的当儿，他感到一种灵光闪现。他觉得，有生以来……他拼命摇下两边的车窗，深深地大口吸着氧气，喘息着对摩千恩万谢，眼泪沿着双颊汨汨而下，双手紧抓着摩的围裙。

The passage describes Aggie's reaction after being saved by Mo (the butcher store owner) at the last

moment when death is approaching. One of the important features of literary works is to portray typical characters in order to express emotions and promote justice. Therefore, characterization has also become a top priority in the process of translating literary works. In the first sentence of the original example, the translator's treatment of the prepositional time clause is very skillful. The adjective "sweaty" is treated as the "汗淋淋" which is familiar to the readers of the translated text, and "in the moment" has not been rigidly translated as "在.....之时" but as the catchy "当儿", which is pronounced with a paeodphonic sound. These two treatments reproduce the original text from different cultural backgrounds in a way that is familiar to the target audience. In the latter example, after Archie realized that he was saved by Mo (the butcher) and did not die, with the flexible use of image thinking, the original noun was changed to a verb "拼命地大口吸着氧气" so that Archie's hesitation, apprehension, fear of the dissipation of the complex characters that he wants to die but do not dare to die leap to the paper; and words "千恩万谢" and "汨汨流下" stimulate the target audience's image thinking and reproduce the image of Archie in a foreign culture.

### *3.3 Dynamics of Adaptability*

As the key to Verschueren's Adaptation Theory, Dynamics of adaptability requires us to flexibly process the information of the target language as well as to accept the cultural information of the target language which means flexibility and adaptability. Therefore, the translator should flexibly integrate the cultural information contained in the text into the context in the specific translation practice, so that the target language can convey the ideas of the original text and be more easily accepted by readers. Dynamics of adaptability is composed of three aspects: 1) Conformity with time sequence. The meaning of words or sentences may change in different times and contexts. 2) Contextual constraints on language choice. 3) Changes in the linear order of language. In the process of translation, we should take into account the differences in the language structure of the source language and target language, adjust the order of the sentences appropriately to produce a translation with no indication of translation (Yang, 2012).

In order to achieve the reader's reading expectation and realize the best reading effect, the translator uses the dynamic adaptation translation strategy in the concrete translation process. Specifically, translators will use sentence reconstruction and domestication. In the process of the change from English to Chinese, due to the differences in thinking modes, English emphasizes formal logic while Chinese emphasizes dialectical thinking, so the adjustment of words order is very common. In addition, at the linguistic level, English emphasizes hypotaxis while Chinese emphasizes parataxy (Huang, 2011). In short, English sentences tend to be compact, have perfect logical relationships and emphasize grammatical functions; Chinese sentences, on the other hand, have coherent meanings but seem to be loose. Therefore, when dealing with specific sentences, translators must grasp the differences and characteristics of languages and adjust sentence structure to conform to the expression habits of the target language to make translation more readable.

**【Example 3】**

ST: The Unlucky. These pigeons had an instinct for the Unlucky, and so they passed Archie by.

TT: 这不吉利·鸽子本能地感觉到了不吉利以至于它们飞过阿吉身旁时都没有停留。

The grammatical units in English include sentences, clauses, phrases, words and morphemes, but Chinese is entirely different. Due to the strong differences between English and Chinese, the concrete translation practice often involves the reconstruction and conversion of sentences. In Example 3, the author uses "the+ adjective" as a separate sentence, which is used to refer to a class of people in general or to refer to a single person in particular. In this sentence, the structure specifically refers to Archie who committed suicide from the perspective of a pigeon. In sentence conversion, the translation between words and phrases and between words and sentences can be well considered, so the translator converts the adjective phrase that indicates the meaning of the noun into the sentence “这不吉利”, which to a certain extent adds the color of anthropomorphism to the pigeon and is more suitable for the scene of Archie’s suicide. If it is translated as “unlucky Agi”, it is too blunt.

**4. Conclusion**

By analyzing the translation of *White Teeth* (excerpts), we must affirm the guiding role of adaptation theory in translating literary works. On the one hand, the translator must consider the adaptation to the context and language structure in the process of translation. On the other hand, the dynamic nature of adaptation is complemented by the significant impact of the adaptation process. In the process of translation of literary works, the proper application of adaptation theory to guide translation practice can help translators give full play to their subjectivity, so as to adopt corresponding translation strategies and make the translation more targeted. In addition, through the analysis of this translation practice, the translator's definition of adaptation mode in translation has become more clear. Firstly, the translator should interpret the original text and choose the appropriate meaning. Secondly, the translator should choose appropriate expression strategies and skills while expressing the meaning in the target language. Finally, the translator should clarify the purpose of translation and choose the object or dimension of adaptation to achieve the corresponding adaptability (Song, 2004)

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