

Original Paper

A study on the Foregrounding Language in the English

Translation of *Happy Dreams*

Hanchao Liu¹

¹ School of English Studies, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, China

Received: August 21, 2025 Accepted: September 5, 2025 Online Published: September 18, 2025

doi:10.22158/elsr.v6n3p166 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/elsr.v6n3p166>

Abstract

Jia Pingwa's rural novel Happy Dreams portrays the lived experiences of marginalized groups through the urban dream of the protagonist Liu Gaoxing, a scavenger. The novel employs a significant amount of foregrounded language, which serves as the central means of character construction. Drawing on Leech's theory of foregrounding as its analytical framework, this paper examines both the original text and its English translation Happy Dreams (translated by Nicky Harman), focusing on the translation strategies applied to various forms of foregrounded language, specifically lexical, grammatical, and dialectal foregrounding, through close textual analysis and comparative study. The findings reveal that the translator mainly adopts the domestication strategy, prioritizing reader accessibility. While this approach somewhat diminishes the rural authenticity and cultural otherness of the source text, it successfully facilitates cross-cultural communication, offering valuable insights into balancing literary integrity and readability in the translation of rural literature.

Keywords

Happy Dreams, Jia Pingwa, foregrounding, Leech

1. Introduction

Happy Dreams is a rural novel that tells the story of a scavenger named Liu Gaoxing's urban dream from a first-person perspective. Jia Pingwa is good at using various forms of foregrounded language, such as using "dog hair" to describe "talkative" as a lexical foregrounding, breaking grammar rules like "Why did Wufu still bring her to me if she knew I didn't want her?", dialect foregrounding such as "shouhuo", a dialect term, and register foregrounding formed by citing allusions from classics. These foregrounded language forms pose a significant challenge to literary translation. Based on this, this study focuses on two core questions: first, what types of foregrounded language exist in the text of *Happy Dreams*, and what functions do they serve in narrative and character development; second, which translation strategies does translator Nicky Harman usually adopt when translating these foregrounded languages to balance

the literary nature of the original text and the readability of the target language. The author analyzed 38 cases of foregrounded language translation in Chapter 3 of *Happy Dreams* as valid samples. The results show that the application of domestication strategies accounts for about 73.7%, while foreignization strategies account for about 26.3%. This data clearly indicates that domestication strategies are the dominant strategies most frequently adopted by translator Nicky Harman in translating the foregrounded language of *Happy Dreams*. Theoretically, this study further enriches the case analysis of Leech's foregrounding theory in the study of rural literature translation into English, providing a theoretical analysis perspective for the cross-cultural transformation of "linguistic foregrounding" in literary translation. Practically, its research results can provide a reference strategy model for the translation of rural literature into foreign languages.

2. Foregrounded Language

Foregrounding is the core concept of functional stylistics, and its theoretical origin lies in the formalist concept of Defamiliarization. Mukarovsky first applied the concept of foregrounding to stylistic studies in his book *Standard Language and Poetic Language*. Subsequently, scholars such as Jakobson, Halliday, Leech, and Short continuously enriched and developed the theoretical connotations of foregrounding. Mukarovsky (1964, p. 28) believed that foregrounding is a distortion of conventions and traditions, characterized in language by defamiliarization and anti-conventionality that challenge established norms, allowing readers to experience the unexpectedness, unusualness, and uniqueness brought by reading. Jakobson, from another perspective, emphasized another aspect of foregrounding, namely parallelism, and proposed two stylistic devices of foregrounding, variation and parallel structure. Halliday further pointed out that foregrounding is motivated prominence, meaning that only language prominence or foregrounding that is helpful for text comprehension can lead to foregrounding, while unmotivated prominence does not fall within the scope of foregrounding. Linguist Leech (1969) further divided foregrounding into qualitative foregrounding and quantitative foregrounding. Qualitative foregrounding refers to the foregrounding of the language code itself, in other words, the foregrounding of the conventional patterns of language, violating grammar or established cultural expressions is qualitative prominence. Quantitative foregrounding refers to the foregrounding of the expected frequency (Leech & Short, 2001, p. 48), in short, it is the intentional overuse or underuse of a certain language structure.

The application research of foregrounding theory in linguistics, stylistics, and literary creation has a long history. At the beginning of this century, scholar Ye Zinan (2001) proposed the theoretical assumption of foregrounding translation studies. Since then, a wave of research on foregrounding translation has emerged in China, with many scholars discussing topics such as Foregrounding Theory and Translation Criticism, Translation Stylistics Research, Literary Aesthetics and Foregrounding Theory, and Foregrounding Theory and Translation Strategies. In the past five years, most of the review literature has focused on the translation and introduction of *Happy Dreams* and its translation strategies, such as by Cui Li, Wang Qianyu, and Liu Lu (2023), Ji Changju (2022), etc. Others, such as Shi Mengjia and Wang

Lijun (2023), Zhang Sijia (2024), mainly explored the translation of culture-loaded words from the perspective of relevance and Newmark's translation theory. Tang Lixian (2021) studied the overseas dissemination mechanism of *Happy Dreams* from the perspective of adaptation theory, while Ma Rutao and Feng Zhengbin (2021) and Shi Chunrang (2023, 2024) from the perspective of sociology translation studies, Zhu Fangping (2021) from the perspective of translator subjectivity, and Liu Yuan (2022) from the perspective of Eco-translatology studies. However, current research has not systematically explored the translation strategies of foregrounded language in *Happy Dreams*. In view of this, this study mainly focuses on the qualitative foregrounding framework of Leech and Short, concentrating on the foregrounded language translation strategies in Jia Pingwa's novel *Happy Dreams* and its English translation, and explores the role of foregrounded language in literary expression and its translation practice in a cross-cultural context.

3. Analysis of Translation Examples in *Happy Dreams*

In his book *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry*, Leech summarized the stylistic features of language foregrounding from the aspects of form, application and semantics, and proposed that foregrounding is a purposeful foregrounding of art. At the same time, eight different forms of foregrounding were summarized: lexical foregrounding, phonological foregrounding, grammatical foregrounding, graphological foregrounding, semantic foregrounding, register foregrounding, dialectal foregrounding and historical period foregrounding. As Tan Xiangheng pointed out, Jia Pingwa is adept at pursuing a alienated aesthetic effect through abnormal expression techniques. In *Happy Dreams*, Jia Pingwa extensively employs foreground language, and each type of foreground language is involved to varying degrees. The following is a detailed analysis of five types of prospective languages: lexical foregrounding, phonological foregrounding, graphological foregrounding, register foregrounding, and dialectal foregrounding.

3.1 Lexical Foregrounding

Source Text: 但人家要说起来了, 我肯定得寸进尺, 话多得像狗毛。(Jia Pingwa, 2012, p. 138)

Translated Text: *but the minute she spoke, I couldn't help myself. Words came tumbling out.*

There are common metaphors such as "as many as cow hairs" and "stars" to describe a large quantity. Jia Pingwa breaks the conventional combination by using dog hair as a metaphor, which belongs to lexical foregrounding. Dog hair is a common image in life, which fits Liu Gaoxing's identity as a scavenger and his plain language style, and is closer to the protagonist's original state. The narrator is closer to a standard English speaker, adopting a domestication strategy, discarding the original image of dog hair, and retaining the core meaning of being talkative. The English idiom "words came tumbling out" conveys the uncontrolled state of language, and the add-on translation of "couldn't help myself" can explain the psychological motivation. However, the foregrounding of the vocabulary also weakens the rustic texture of dog hair and the humorous color of the character's self-deprecation through dog hair.

3.2 Dialectal Foregrounding

Source Text: 那男的哎哎叫着要扑出来, 我拦住了, 我说你别惹他, 他是二杆子! (Jia Pingwa, 2012, p. 69)

Translated Text: *and the man shouted, "Hey!" He was about to launch himself at Wufu, but I stood in his way. "Don't go getting on the wrong side of Wufu. He's got a temper like a mad bull!" I warned.*

The translator extracted the core meaning of "two poles", and replaced it with the familiar colloquial metaphor "temper like a mad bull" for English readers. Nicky Harman adopted the domestication strategy, using "got a temper" and "mad bull" to retain the warning meaning of the original sentence and avoid the translationese. English readers may not be familiar with the dialect meaning of "two poles". The metaphor of "mad bull" is a successful case of cross-cultural transformation.

3.3 Phonological Foregrounding

Source Text: 一辆大车鸣儿鸣儿叫着从兴隆街拐了进来, 以为是消防车, 哪儿有火灾了? (Jia Pingwa, 2012, p. 22)

Translated Text: *and the man shouted, "Hey!" He was about to launch himself at Wufu, but I stood in his way. "Don't go getting on the wrong side of Wufu. He's got a temper like a mad bull!" I warned.*

The function of onomatopoeic words is to transform sounds into written symbols and evoke auditory imagination through visual text. The reduplicated and erized sounds of "wuer wuer" are simulations of the horn sound when a large vehicle is in motion. Such phonetic visualization can enhance the reader's senses. Nicky Harman adopted the domestication strategy, using the present participle phrase "horn blaring" to echo the grammatical function, avoiding the lengthy explanation of "making a 'w' 'er' sound", maintaining the fluency of the sentence and not disrupting the reading rhythm. The cross-cultural transmission of literary effects has been successfully achieved through semantic compensation.

3.4 Graphological Foregrounding

Source Text: 有姑娘抱着狗走过了, 走得婀娜多姿, 那群人突然齐声吆喝: 舒——服! (Jia Pingwa, 2012, p. 22)

Translated Text: *A girl came by, walking gracefully with a dog in her arms, to a chorus of catcalls from the drunks.*

By using dashes to separate "shu" and "fu", this writing form mimics the prolonged tone of "that group of people" to convey the unrestrained nature of the common folk. Nicky Harman abandoning the alienated "comfortable" (unable to convey "jeering or teasing") and opts for the domestication strategy, choosing "catcalls" (whistles or strange calls made for teasing or mocking), capturing offense and frivolity. Under the domestication strategy, the image of "that group of people" translated is more in line with the ill-educated group in the lower classes of the common people. It is consistent with the overall character development of the novel and the ecology of the lower society.

3.5 Register Foregrounding

Source Text: 我甚至还要举例说.....但五富只读到小学就辍学了, 他肯定不知道, 对牛弹琴, 我就不说了。(Jia Pingwa, 2012, p. 18)

Translated Text: *It was like playing your lute to a cow, talking to Wufu, and I shut up.*

Liu Gaoxing quoted allusions from classic to demonstrate that he had a certain level of literary accomplishment. However, Wu Fu's "not understanding" contrasts with Liu Gaoxing's "understanding". Although they are at the same social status, the two have a spiritual deviation, avoiding homogenization. Wufu dropped out of school after primary school and has a relatively low cognitive level. Here, the register foreground language creates a dislocation between "elegant expression" and "insufficient reception ability", highlighting the ineffective communication between the two. If classics are distorted, English readers may fail to understand their connotations due to their unfamiliarity with the background of classics. Nicky Harman retains the core metaphor of playing the lute to a cow, omits cultural details, adopts a domestication strategy, focuses on ineffective communication, and avoids reading obstacles for foreign language readers caused by cultural background differences. However, the domestication strategy also weakens the register foregrounded effect of the original text, English readers cannot perceive the contrast between the refined register and the popular register through the allusions in classical art.

4. Analysis of Nicky Harman's Common Strategies for Translating Prospective Languages

The author listed the number of foreground languages in 10 chapters and compared the original text and translation of Chapter 3, where foreground languages appear most frequently. The data is as follows:

Table 1

Chapter	The number of foregrounded language
Chapter 1	28
Chapter 2	19
Chapter 3	45
Chapter 4	26
Chapter 5	37
Chapter 6	29
Chapter 7	34
Chapter 9	21
Chapter 10	20
Chapter 11	19

Table 2

Source Text	Translated Text	Translation Strategy
汗出了一层又出一层	he started to pour with sweat	domestication

楼是一幢一幢高低胖瘦往空中戳着	There were block after block of buildings, big and small, fat and thin, poking up into the sky.	foreignization
曲里拐弯	twisting and turning.	foreignization
在人和车搅和得像蚂蚁窝一样的闹市里	Downtown was like an ant's nest, a hurly-burly of humans and cars, all mixed up together.	domestication
我得轻松一下，	I tried to lighten the mood.	domestication
哈娃你能！我当然能。	“You're a smart guy, Hawa!” Of course I am.	domestication
紧天火炮的，脸憋成紫黑。	How he needed to go so bad, his piss was going to hit the ceiling. He was purple in the face from holding it in.	domestication
抬蹄割掌哩！	“It's a dog-eat-dog world here!”	domestication
我们怀疑鬼在日弄我们，	it seemed like they were messing with us.	foreignization
巷道就狭窄幽深。	and the lanes between them were narrow and dark.	foreignization
这楼坍得下来？	“Will those buildings fall down?”	foreignization
半空的电线像蜘蛛网，天就成了筛子。	I looked up at the spiderweb of electric cables overhead, crisscrossing the sky like a sieve.	foreignization
一捆葡萄酒	a bottle of wine	domestication
送人酒不送个起子？！	“I hate it when people give you wine but don't give you a bottle opener!”	domestication
打手机，	he was on the phone.	domestication
一人得道鸡犬升天么。	you've made it, so now everyone else wants to get in on the act!	domestication

老虎吃天没处下爪么，	We're like tigers, hungry enough to eat the sky. We just don't know where to start.	domestication
你干啥我们在你手下混个嘴。	We'll do whatever you tell us.	domestication
哄谁去！	<i>Who're you kidding?</i>	foreignization
清风镇人来这里凭啥哩，	People come here from Freshwind with zero—no skills, no money.	domestication
你卖×呀？！	Do they expect to sell their asses?	domestication
讲的是拾破烂的大千世界。	Then Han started to instruct us in the world of trash collection. He made it sound as complicated as the realms of Buddhist cosmology, and by the time he'd finished, I was an initiate.	domestication
蛇皮袋子	a big laundry bag	domestication
一把铁钩	a garbage-picker hook.	domestication
架子车	three-wheeler	domestication
转悠	you could pull your cart or pedal your three-wheeler around the streets, but only on your allotted patch.	domestication
蝗虫不能吃过界。	You couldn't descend like locusts anywhere you wanted.	domestication
不辛苦跑街了	didn't need to do street collections.	domestication
眼活嘴乖，	sharp-eyed,	domestication
耍大了	the big guys	domestication
进贡	pay them regular kickbacks.	domestication
破烂王	The Kings of Trash	foreignization
大拿	Power.	domestication
啊哈，	Yup.	foreignization

他银盆大脸呀，一颗一颗麻子都放着光彩。	He had a big broad face, dotted with gleaming pockmarks.	foreignization
用碟子去盛水怎么也不如碗，可碟子就是装大菜的。	plates might not be as good as a bowl for water, but plates were what you needed for a feast.	foreignization
好猫牌。	Lucky Cat!	domestication
恁贵？	Aren't they expensive?	foreignization
要贵！	We want expensive ones!	foreignization
最窄狭也最僻背	s a long way from anywhere, and very narrow.	domestication
简易屋	brick-built rooms	domestication
叮咛得乏了	I was tired of listening to his instruction.	domestication

According to the classification of the two translation strategies of domestication and foreignization proposed by Lawrence Venuti in *The Translator's Invisibility* in 1995, combined with the analysis in the above Table2, it can be concluded that when Nicky Harman translated the foregrounded language in Chapter Three of *Happy Dreams*, the domestication strategy was dominant. Among the 38 valid translation examples, those related to domestication strategies accounted for approximately 73.7%, and those related to foreignization strategies accounted for approximately 26.3%. For visually striking expressions that can be understood without cultural background, such as “high, low, fat and thin”, translator Nicky Harman tends to adopt an foreignization strategy to balance readability and the characteristics of the source language. For expressions with dialect, regional characteristics and colloquial expressions such as “tight sky cannon”, “lifting hoof and cutting palm”, “snake skin bag” and “setting up a cart”, translator Nicky Harman tends to adopt a domestication strategy, transforming them into concepts familiar to English readers to avoid understanding obstacles caused by cultural differences.

5. Discussion

This study takes Leach's Foregrounding theory as the framework to explore the English translation strategies of foregrounded languages in *Happy Dreams* and its English translation. The author believes that Jia Pingwa wrote about Leach's eight foregrounded languages to varying degrees in *Happy Dreams*, while translator Nicky Harman often used the domestication strategy when translating. This study enriches the case support of Leach's Foregrounding theory in the English translation of local literature and can provide strategic references for subsequent related translations.

References

- Bassnett, S. (2014). *Translation studies* (4th ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203488232>
- Feng, Z. B., & Dang, Z. S. (2019). A study on the translation strategies of foregrounded language: A case study of Howard Goldblatt's English version of *Ruined City*. *Foreign Language Education*, 40(1), 84-89.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1973). *Explorations in the Functions of Language*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Harman, N. (2017). *Happy Dreams*. Seattle: Amazon Crossing.
- Jakobson, R. (1960). Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics. In T. A. Sebeok (Ed.), *Style in Language* (pp. 350~377). Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Ji, J., & Wang, X. W. (2018). On the possibility and future of the overseas translation of contemporary Chinese literature: A case study of the English version of Jia Pingwa's *Happy Dreams*. *Contemporary Writers Review*, 6, 165-173+186+2.
- Jia, P. W. (2012). *Happy Dreams*. Anhui Literature and Art Publishing House.
- Leech, G. (1969). *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry*. London: Longman.
- Leech, G. (1970). *Linguistics and Literary Style*. Holt, Rindhart and Winston: New York.
- Shen, D. (1998). *Narratology and the Stylistic Study of Fiction*. Peking University Press.
- Shen, S. Y. (2025). A brief discussion on Jia Pingwa's "sub-bottom narrative": Focusing on the novels *Happy Dreams*, *The Lantern Bearer*, and *The Pole Flower*. *Modern Chinese Literature Studies*, 20(2), 28-37.
- Shi, C. R., & Zhao, H. F. (2023). A comparative study on the overseas dissemination of the English translations of the novels *Happy Dreams* and *Life*. *Translation Research and Teaching*, 2, 7-12.
- Wang, Q. Y. (2023). On the translation of dialect words in the English version of Jia Pingwa's *Happy Dreams*. *Modern English*, 15, 87-90.
- Zhang, S. J. (2024). A study on the English translation of culture-loaded words in *Happy Dreams* from the perspective of semantic translation and communicative translation. *New Legend*, 20, 25-27.
- Zhou, L. S. (2016). The translation of "local language" and its criticism. *Foreign Languages Research*, 33(4), 77-82.
- Zhu, Z. W., & Han, N. (2025). Translation is an art of communication and compromise: An interview with British sinologist Nicky Harman. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 46(1), 131-135.