

## Original Paper

# An Appreciation of The outlaws of the Marsh English Translation from the Perspective of Relevance Theory

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### **Abstract**

*This paper takes the relevance theory as the research perspective, selects the 1957 English translation of Shapiro 's The Outlaws of the Marsh as the core object, conducts a specific analysis using the explicit reasoning model, sorts out the relevant strategies of cognitive context reconstruction by comparing the original text and the translation, and focuses on how translators handle semantic fidelity and communicative validity in cross-cultural communication. A closer look reveals that Shapiro's translation is highly in line with the cognitive environment of the target readers. It not only retains the narrative features of the original work but also does a good job in the metonymy and reconstruction of cultural images. This provides a very valuable case for the cognitive pragmatics study of the translation of Chinese classical literature into foreign languages.*

*This paper takes the relevance theory as the basic perspective of research, selects the English translation of The Outlaws of the Marsh published by Shapiro in 1957 as the core research text, conducts a comparative analysis of the original text and the translation, sorts out various specific strategies of the translator to complete the reconstruction of cognitive context, and also focuses on analyzing the translator in the practice of cross-cultural communication. How can a balance be achieved between semantic fidelity and communicative effectiveness? After research, it can be concluded that in the process of translation, Shapiro fully considered the cognitive environment characteristics of the target readers. He not only completely retained the original narrative features of the original work but also made proper metonymy and reconstruction of the cultural images in the text. Such translation practice has also provided support for the cognitive pragmatics research in the direction of translating Chinese classical literature into foreign languages. It left behind typical cases of reference value.*

## **Keywords**

*Relevance Theory, ostensive, inferential*

## **1. Introduction**

As one of the four great classical masterpieces of China, *The Outlaws of the Marsh* not only established the literary norms of vernacular chapbook novels, but also unfolded a broad social and historical picture of the late northern Song Dynasty with a grand narrative structure. The book not only elaborately tells the core plots such as "official oppression and popular rebellion" and the eventual acceptance of amnesty by the heroes of Liangshan, but also vividly portrays the classic characters such as Lu Zhishen, Lin Chong and Wu Song in a three-dimensional way. It deeply conveys the tragic core of the difficulty in achieving both loyalty and righteousness as well as the humanistic spirit of resisting oppression. Its unique folk discourse system and large number of culturally significant characteristic words make this work a literary treasure worth promoting to the world.

Relevance theory has brought a practical approach at the cognitive pragmatic level to literary translation studies. It is more explanatory than many traditional viewpoints and does not merely focus on the rigid equivalence at the language level. Instead, it views translation as a dual explicit and reasoning process involving the original author, the translator, and the target reader. From this perspective, translation is far more than just simple code-switching. The translator must find the best connection in the constantly changing cognitive environment and strike a balance between the meaning of the original work and the reader's cognitive context. This method can help translators grasp the explicit meaning of the original text more clearly and also pass on similar contextual effects in cross-cultural communication.

This study employed two research methods: contrastive analysis and explicit reasoning model, and also took the classic English translation of *The Outlaws of the Marsh* by Shapiro as the main research object; This paper will analyze the text content from three core perspectives: the rhetorical presentation of character titles, the colloquial characteristics inherent in character dialogues, and the cultural transcoding of idioms and folk proverbs. The contrastive analysis method mainly focuses on the contrast of language styles at the micro level of the text, which can clearly identify the specific trade-offs made by the translator between domestication and foreignization strategies. The explicit reasoning model, on the other hand, will analyze the reasons behind translation decisions and how the translator adjusts contextual assumptions to bridge cultural differences.

## **2. Theory Framework**

### *2.1 Relevance Theory*

As an important theory spanning cognitive linguistics and pragmatics, relevance theory offers a very unique research perspective and can also help people more thoroughly analyze the diverse and complex language communication activities among humans. In 1986, Sperber and Wilson first constructed this theoretical prototype. The first point was that many scholars continuously carried out related research.

The second point was that the theoretical content was constantly refined and expanded. Over time, it grew into a mature theoretical system with clear logic and strong interpretive ability. This theory has always enjoyed high popularity in the academic circle since its emergence and has received extensive attention and research discussions from scholars from all walks of life.

Scholar Gutt adopted relevance theory to explain translation activities in his research in 1991. Translation is a professional language communication activity. Relevance theory provides a new theoretical basis for translation studies. It delivers full and in-depth explanations for many existing translation theories. Gutt regarded translation as a special form of verbal communication. Translators use the explicit reasoning model to grasp the content of original texts in the whole translation process. They complete dynamic adjustments and conversions in translation work. Translation is not the simple transfer of linguistic symbols. It requires precise grasp of specific context. It needs correct understanding of the original author's intentions. It helps translators obtain optimal relevance in translation practice.

### *2.2 Ostensive-inferential Model*

The ostensive-inferential model is the core part of relevance theory and has largely changed the academic community's view on the essence of translation. As a special form of communication, translation is regarded as a cross-cultural interpretive activity, which involves two explicit reasoning processes. This model breaks the single "code pattern" perspective in traditional communication theory. It no longer regards communication as the decoding of static language symbols but reconstructs it as a dynamic process involving complex cognitive psychological mechanisms. Specifically, "ostensive" refers to the conscious use of words by the communicator (that is, the original author or translator) to stimulate and present their communication intentions to the audience. This includes both the information intentions conveyed through the literal meaning and the communication intentions hidden behind the literal meaning. "Inferential" is the process in which the audience (the translator or the reader of the translation), based on the assumptions of the current context, invoke their own cognitive abilities and encyclopedic knowledge to infer the true intentions of the communicator from the explicit information. In this framework, the translator assumes a dual role. One is as a reader of the original text, who needs to reason and grasp the intention based on the explicit information provided by the original author. The other is as a producer of the translation, who needs to make another explicit statement to the target readers. This model places great emphasis on the dynamic interaction and cognitive cooperation in communication, requiring translators to find the best connection between the source language and the target language. While minimizing the unnecessary cognitive efforts of the audience, it aims to achieve the greatest contextual effect, thereby ensuring the effectiveness and fidelity of cross-cultural communication.

## **3. An Appreciation of Sidney Shapiro's Translation from the Perspective of Relevance Theory**

### *3.1 Translation Analysis of Characters' Addresses*

The addresses in *The Outlaws of the Marsh* are far more than just titles; they are a set of highly condensed biographies and a symbolic system with value orientation. Most of these nicknames are derived from

animal totems, mythological images and professional identities. They not only accurately depict the physical features and personality traits of the characters through plain description, but also carry profound folk worship and the aesthetic tastes of the common people. Through this naming art characterized by binary oppositions and exaggeration, the author elevates the fate of individual heroes to the level of typified hero symbols, significantly enhancing the dramatic tension and dissemination vitality of the story, making these characters highly recognizable spiritual emblems in the gallery of Chinese literary figures.

Example 1:

Source Text: 宋江一及时雨

Shapiro's Translation: Timely Rain

Song Jiang has a well-known address called "Timely Rain" (及时雨), which praises his good quality of helping others. He always shows up when others are in the most difficult time and in the most urgent need of a helping hand. This kind of timely assistance is just like the sudden rain after a long drought, easing the drought and bringing vitality and vigor to the earth. It is completely in line with the metaphorical meaning of the term "timely rain". When translating this character title, Shapiro keenly chose "The Timely Rain" as the corresponding translation. This translation not only retained all the metaphorical images in the original text, but also enabled foreign readers to intuitively and accurately understand the weight of this nickname, as well as Song Jiang's rare virtue.

Example 2:

Source Text: 鲁智深一花和尚

Shapiro's Translation: Tattooed Monk

The title “花和尚” comes from a unique feature of Lu Zhishen’s appearance. The character refers to the delicate tattoo patterns covering his body. Shapiro uses the English translation “Tattooed Monk” for this classic nickname. The term “Tattooed” matches the literal meaning of the Chinese character “花”. This character specifically describes decorative patterns and body tattoos. The word “Monk” accurately corresponds to Lu Zhishen’s social identity. This translation follows a literal translation strategy. It preserves the basic language characteristics of the original text. It gives foreign readers direct access to the literal meaning of this address. The single character “花” carries rich cultural and symbolic meanings in Chinese context. Traditional Chinese culture links “花” with aesthetic charm and varied life states. It also implies worldly vitality and unrestrained personal temperament. Lu Zhishen’s tattoos are distinct physical marks on his body. They reflect his uninhibited and bold inner traits. Shapiro’s translation features simple wording and clear expression. It fails to fully show Lu Zhishen’s tough martial quality and heroic temperament. The translation cannot completely display the full personality of this literary character.

### 3.2 Translation Analysis of Character Dialogues

The characters' dialogues in *The Outlaws of the Marsh* are quite distinctive, mainly manifested in the aspects of individuality, vividness and expressiveness. Each person's way of speaking is closely bound to their identity, character and emotions. The dialogues in the book are often straightforward, forceful

and full of vitality, which greatly enhances the sense of reality and warmth of the entire work. The author also put a lot of thought into writing the dialogue. Rhetorical devices such as metaphor, parallelism and hyperbole are all used very skillfully, making the characters' words more vivid, more visual and more impactful. Moreover, the address differences and implications hidden in these dialogues are often quite thought-provoking.

Example 3:

Source Text: 赵员外便道：“若是留提辖在此，诚恐有些山高水低……”

Shapiro's Translation: “Things might turn out badly if I kept you here, Major,” the squire admitted...

"山高水低" is a weighty Chinese idiom. Literally, it means that the mountains are very high and the waters are very low. It vividly depicts the scene of towering mountains and meandering rivers in nature, and vividly sketches out the complexity, variability and beauty of the undulating terrain. This expression is not only a delicate depiction of the natural landscape, but also carries a profound cultural connotation and symbolic color. On a larger scale, it is often used as a metaphor for unexpected disasters or misfortunes in life, especially when discussing life and death, safety and danger. The tone of this word becomes particularly solemn, often related to a person's death, and implies a dangerous or ominous omen. When dealing with this word, Shapiro ingeniously chose the way of free translation, using "things might turn out badly" to convey the kind of disaster that "山高水低" specifically refer to in the Chinese context; Although this translation method to some extent abandons the literal correspondence of each word and sentence, it accurately captures the deep intention and emotional undertone that the original author intends to convey. It enables the target language readers to transcend cultural barriers and more deeply appreciate the meaning and emotions hidden in the original text, truly achieving effective communication and response between the original text and the translation.

Example 4:

Source Text: 陈太尉初下船，昂昂然，旁若无人，坐在中间。

Shapiro's Translation: When marshal Chen first came on board he was lofty and aloof as he took a seat in the center.

The idiom "旁若无人" describes a state where a person acts as if everything around them has come to a standstill, completely disregarding others and only immersing themselves in their own world, not caring at all about the feelings or reactions of others. This sometimes reveals a kind of admirable confidence, and at other times, it also shows a hint of imperceptible arrogance. However, when doing cross-cultural translation, if these four words are directly translated literally as "he acted like nobody besides him", it is more likely to confuse foreign readers, making them unable to understand the meaning the original text intends to convey or the author's true intention, and adding unnecessary obstacles to understanding. When encountering such idioms with a particularly strong cultural flavor, translators often need to come up with more flexible free translation strategies. The core is to explain the deep meaning in the original text clearly and fluently, so that readers can grasp the essence at a glance and effortlessly grasp the core.

### 3.3 Translation Analysis of Idioms and Sayings

*The Outlaws of the Marsh* contains a large number of idioms and proverbs, which not only vividly depict the characters' personalities, but also reveal the social atmosphere and value orientation of that time. However, these idioms are rich in meaning and have a strong sense of imagery, which also brings considerable trouble to translation. Although translating idioms is indeed quite difficult, it's not completely impossible to get started. As a condensed carrier of culture, the core of idiom translation lies in handling the cultural aspect properly. Overall, there are obvious differences in historical and cultural backgrounds between Chinese and English, which leads to different ways of thinking between Chinese people and those from English-speaking countries. Therefore, most idioms are expressed in different forms in the two languages. From the perspective of association theory, the same image may evoke completely different associations in different cultures, while different forms of expression may instead convey similar meanings.

Example 5:

Source Text: 岂不知泰山之恩，提携之力，感激不尽！

Shapiro's Translation: Of course I know how much I owe your noble father in the Eastern Capital. I can never thank him enough for his help!

The expression "泰山之恩" is derived from the ancient Chinese saying "重于泰山". It describes a kind of grace as profound as Mount Tai and immeasurable. Mount Tai is the first of the Five Great Mountains. It is no longer merely a natural landscape but has gradually become a symbol of the Chinese national spirit, representing nobility and greatness. Therefore, using "泰山" to address others in respect will push the emotions of respect and admiration to the highest level. When Shapiro translated this sentence, he very ingeniously used the expression "I know how much I owe your noble father in the Eastern Capital". The first point is to accurately grasp the core connotation of "Taishan's favor". The second point is to directly convey the deep respect and gratitude of the original author towards the other party or the other party's father through "how much I owe". The third point is to further elevate the noble status and character of the character by means of "noble father". Such a handling method enables the translation to be faithful to the meaning of the original text. It will also appear particularly infectious, and when read, it will carry a very strong sense of weight and emotional intensity.

## 4. Conclusion

From the perspective of relevance theory, this paper analyzes the English translation of *The Outlaws of the Marsh* by Shapiro, explores how relevance theory works in real translation scenarios, and also proposes methods for translation practice. Relevance theory has a high explanatory power in the field of translation studies. It describes translation as a complex psychological process involving explicit reasoning. Translators need to refer to the core intention of the original text and the specific context to find the best relevance in the target language output. This basic mechanism can help accurately and thoroughly convey the information of the original text. When dealing with *The Outlaws of the Marsh*,

Shapiro employed this set of theoretical thinking, which not only thoroughly grasped the surface content and hidden meaning of the original text, but also took into account the cognitive ability and cultural background of the target English readers. This translation method made the information transmission between the original Chinese work and the English translation very effective.

When doing translation practice, translators must master the core concepts and analytical methods of relevance theory. They should not only recognize the explicit information and implicit meaning in the original text but also acknowledge the differences in cognitive level and background culture among the target readers. Translators can choose strategies based on specific translation scenarios and flexibly switch between literal translation and free translation. These flexible methods can build an effective bridge between the original text and the translation. Translators also need to constantly improve their cultural literacy and cross-cultural communication skills. Such personal growth helps to resolve various cultural differences and difficulties in translation. Relevance theory does indeed bring fresh perspectives and methodological support to translation research and practice. By skillfully applying it, translators can more accurately grasp the original author's intention, and also convey the original text information more naturally and completely, thereby promoting deeper cross-cultural communication and mutual understanding.

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