

## *Original Paper*

# Research on Chinese Translation Strategies of Foreign Lyrics under the Guidance of Functional Equivalence Theory —Taking Country Music Represented by Taylor Swift as an Example

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### **Abstract**

*Chinese audiences have made higher requirements for the quality of lyrics translation amid increasingly deepened music communication between America and China in recent years. While numerous translators have produced English lyrics translations of varying quality, there persists a notable lack of systematic theoretical guidance in this field. The Functional Equivalence Theory, emphasizing substantive textual correspondence in both function and meaning, proves particularly relevant for achieving semantic fidelity in contemporary lyrics translation. Through an analytical examination of modern lyrics translations, this study extracts and evaluates their distinctive characteristics while assessing the applicability of Functional Equivalence Theory. Employing Taylor Swift's country music translations as case studies, the research proposes actionable translation strategies within the framework of Functional Equivalence Theory. To enhance both the aesthetic appreciation and creative innovation in target language renditions, this investigation seeks to effectively convey and reconstruct original lyrical meanings through theoretically informed translation approaches.*

### **Keywords**

*functional equivalence theory, lyrics translation, Taylor Swift*

## 1. Introduction

Eugene Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory, originally developed through biblical translation studies, remains one of the most seminal theoretical frameworks in traditional translation scholarship. Recognized for its methodological feasibility and analytical utility, this theory continues to inform diverse translation practices. This study focuses specifically on the translation of modern country music lyrics, a genre constituting the predominant share of English-Chinese song translations. Taylor Swift's discography serves as the primary analytical corpus, selected for its dual significance: as a cultural continuation of traditional American country music conventions and as a transformative force through her innovative integration of contemporary elements. By recontextualizing country music through accessible narratives and modernized aesthetics—exemplified in global hits such as *Love Story* and *You Belong with Me*—Swift's lyrical output demonstrates distinctive emotive immediacy and semantic transparency, rendering it particularly conducive to translation analysis. The research methodology comprises three systematic phases. First, a stylistic examination of Taylor Swift's lyrics identifies their defining characteristics, establishing a baseline for evaluating translation paradigms. Second, textual analysis of translated lyrics assesses the operationalization of Functional Equivalence Theory, particularly its efficacy in preserving source-text expressiveness. Finally, the study proposes evidence-based strategies to enhance semantic fidelity and artistic resonance in lyrics translation, grounded in the theoretical parameters of Functional Equivalence.

## 2. Literature Review

Domestic research on the application of Functional Equivalence Theory in lyrics translation primarily concentrates on two dimensions. The first examines the inherent characteristics and challenges of lyrics translation, emphasizing the necessity for heightened attention to ideographic functions and cultural transference (Feng, 2009; Zheng, 2018). The second involves empirical investigations into the practical implementation of Functional Equivalence Theory within this specialized field.

Regarding lyrics translation itself, Zheng Lina (Zheng, 2018) in *Analysis of English-Chinese Lyrics Translation* identifies four core criteria: faithfulness, lexical precision, aesthetic coherence, and performative adaptability. Meanwhile, Feng Xiaorui's *Research on English Lyrics Translation Strategies* (Feng, 2009) employs case studies of canonical songs to delineate two primary challenges: semantic ambiguity in source-text interpretation and cultural untranslatability in target-text reproduction, ultimately advocating for a culturally-grounded translation framework.

Nevertheless, existing scholarship remains predominantly confined to descriptive analyses of translational features, lacking both theoretical depth (e.g., insufficient engagement with equivalence hierarchies) and practical applicability (e.g., absence of operational strategies). As far as the application of Functional Equivalence Theory is concerned, the theory has been applied to different types of lyric texts. For example, Chen Yu studies the dynamic pairing through text analysis in "Lyrics Translation of

English Rock Songs from Dynamic Equivalence”, investigating the application of Functional Equivalence Theory in the Chinese translation of rock songs through the perspectives of lexical equivalence, cultural equivalence, and stylistic equivalence (Chen, 2020). Du Liping discusses folk songs through the analysis of translation texts in “The Aesthetics of Folk Song Translation Based on Functional Equivalence”, pointing out that the Functional Equivalence Theory can be applied to the translation of folk song lyrics based on their translation characteristics and adaptability (Du, 2016).

There are also many studies on lyrics translation through the analysis of “Bidding Farewell” and “Do Re Mi”, which have a strong poetic nature and discuss feasible approaches to lyrics translation. However, most of the literature references are case studies. Some studies have proposed adjustments to Functional Equivalence Theory in lyrics translation. For example, Sun Fengtian analyzes the history of lyrics translation in “Study on English-Chinese Lyrics Translation” and emphasizes that Functional Equivalence Theory should account for rhythm, sound effects, and stylistic equivalence in lyrics translation (Sun, 2004).

At the same time, there is a growing research foundation on the theoretical choices in lyrics translation, particularly regarding the differences between Newmark’s and Nida’s theories. In “The Application of Western Popular Music Lyrics Translation”, Zhou introduces strategic research combining Functional Equivalence Theory and Newmark’s text function translation theory through the analysis of Adele’s lyrics translations (Mu, 2005). In “Comparison of Nida and Newmark’s Translation Theories”, Lin Kenan distinguishes the different focuses of these two theories and establishes criteria for selecting appropriate theories for lyrics translation (Lin, 1992).

The above research provides valuable references for modern country music lyrics translation, though most studies prioritize musical compatibility—ensuring translated lyrics can be sung to original melodies. However, given the current diminishing poetic density in contemporary lyrics, greater scholarly attention should be directed toward lyric transcreation rather than mere singability. This constitutes the critical research perspective the author seeks to establish.

### **3. Characteristics of Modern Lyrics Translation**

While modern lyrics exhibit greater formal flexibility and semantic openness, they retain fundamental poetic attributes—rhythmic cadence, linguistic economy, and aesthetic resonance—that necessitate poetry-informed translation strategies. These established techniques remain methodologically relevant for contemporary lyrics translation. Crucially, modern lyrics translation prioritizes affective immediacy and audience engagement through direct emotional expression, distinguishing itself from traditional poetry translation paradigms focused on textual fidelity.

### 3.1 Current Situation and Demand of Modern Lyrics Translation

Accompanied by the emergence of digital album songs and their frequent updates, modern English songs are rapidly and widely spreading in China. Simultaneously, audiences have developed tolerant attitudes toward music. An increasing number of people regard English songs as a way to communicate with others, particularly among young people who tend to share translated lyrics to express their feelings and attitudes toward life. Consequently, this trend has generated stronger demands for high-quality lyrics translations. However, only a portion of listeners with advanced English proficiency can fully appreciate songs' meanings through original lyrics.

As a crucial metric for evaluating song quality, lyrics translation significantly influences the popularity of foreign music in China, indicating substantial market potential for English lyrics translation. Currently, most popular songs are translated by specialized teams on platforms like Net Ease Cloud Music. With internet advancements, numerous freelance translators also spontaneously participate in lyrics translation.

Therefore, audiences have developed more intuitive criteria for evaluating translations. The quality of lyrics translations—encompassing semantic accuracy, emotional clarity, aesthetic coherence, and rhythmic consistency—is now critically scrutinized. Modern lyrics translation practices require more robust theoretical foundations to remain contemporarily relevant. The selected theoretical framework must align closely with modern lyrics translation's functional orientation.

### 3.2 Characteristics of Modern Lyrics Translation

Accurate and faithful translation is the basic principle of all kinds of text translations, so here, this section only emphasizes the uniqueness of modern lyrics translation compared with other text translation.

#### 3.2.1 Audience Orientation

The translation of English lyrics mainly focuses on Chinese music audiences. Modern listeners pay more attention to the expression of ideas and attitudes in musical choices, making lyrics the most direct and primary means for audiences to understand a song's message. The effectiveness of lyrics translation will directly affect Chinese audiences' perception of English songs. To accurately and completely convey a song's meaning, we must consider Chinese audiences' comprehension of translated lyrics, "avoiding confusion while preventing misinterpretation" (Zhu, 2017). Therefore, when translating lyrics into Chinese, the audience's interpretive experience should be prioritized, enabling them to grasp the song's meaning with minimal cognitive effort. In other words, modern lyrics translation requires achieving a degree of "domestication" while emphasizing the expressive effectiveness of translated lyrics.

Example 1 Once bitten and twice shy,

一朝被蛇咬,十年怕井绳

Example 2 A face on a lover with a fire in his heart,

曾以为你我爱火在心中熊熊燃烧,

A girl under cover but you tore her apart. (Taylor Swift, last Christmas)

可你却把我的梦撕得粉碎。

Example 3 So it's gonna be forever,

要么白头偕老,

Or it's gonna go down in flames, (Taylor Swift, Blank Space)

要么付之一炬,

As demonstrated in the examples, when translating these lyrics, the translator adapts original expressions through Chinese cognitive patterns and establishes textual coherence. By employing culturally resonant Chinese proverbs, the translator enhances audience comprehension. In Example 2, building on semantic foundations, the translator supplements explicit references (e.g., specifying subjects like “a face” and “a girl”) to clarify contextual meanings. Regarding Example 3, lexical substitutions with higher cultural familiarity are implemented to explicate implicit content. These strategies collectively demonstrate that modern lyrics translation prioritizes audience-centric text accessibility, effectively reducing cognitive load caused by linguistic ambiguities.

### 3.2.2 Appreciability

Although the translation of modern lyrics emphasizes meaning, it cannot be separated from the appreciation of the lyrics themselves. If lyrics are translated into flat, straightforward narrative texts, the value and beauty of the songs themselves will be reduced. Modern lyrics not only emphasize the expression of the original text but also require the expressions to be appreciated and readable within the Chinese context.

Example 1 He knelt to the ground and he pulled out a ring (Taylor Swift, Love Story )

梦中的他此时正虔诚地跪在我的面前,呈出手中的戒指

Example 2 Last night I heard my own heart beating

昨夜我听到自己的心跳

Sounded like footsteps on my stairs

像有人一步步登我楼梯/正似踏在我心中阶梯上的步调

Example 3 Six month's gone and I'm still reaching

六个月已过,我还在伸手/半载已逝,我仍试图捕捉你的残影

Example 4 Locked up in your arms and our friends are laughing

被你搂在怀里,朋友都笑翻了天/挽着你的手臂,朋友的笑语在耳后回荡

Example 5 Cause nothing like this ever happened to them (Taylor Swift, If This Was A Movie)

因为这种情景,他们从不曾体验/只因他们的经历没有如此美妙

We can see from these examples that not only the choice of words but also the descriptive language employed by the translator in the second version gives the audience a deeper connection to the lyrics. The latter translations resemble poems with a strong sense of grace, while the former are more colloquial. Modern lyrics require both an understanding of their meaning and visual-auditory enjoyment. The translation of phrases like “pull out”, “footsteps”, “six month”, and “reaching” effectively constructs scenes of love experiences. All of this shows that even though modern lyric translation has moved away from traditional forms, it still upholds the fundamental requirements of lyrical appreciation and beauty.

### 3.2.3 Keeping Original Style

On the whole, different singers have distinct lyrics and musical styles. For example, rock lyrics tend to be more open and focus primarily on emotional expression and self-assertion. The lyrical logic may appear weak, but the rhythmic intensity compensates for it. In country music, as Charles Peterson notes in *Making Country Music: The Crafting of Authenticity*, “the formation of ‘authentic’ country music exemplifies a characteristically restrained style”. Country music features fresher arrangements and employs more euphemistic, gentle lyricism. Its wording remains relatively restrained, prioritizing the expression of inner emotions while achieving greater aesthetic subtlety compared to rock lyrics. Therefore, from the perspective of modern Chinese audiences, lyric translations must not only convey the original meaning but also maintain stylistic consistency between the lyrics and musical genre.

### 3.2.4 Expression of Emotion

Modern music has increasingly become a channel for contemporary audiences to express and access emotional experiences. Audiences interpret the songwriter’s emotions through lyrics, thereby using them as a conduit to articulate their own feelings. Most modern songs carry distinct emotional signatures, necessitating translations that amplify or accentuate the original’s affective dimensions to foster emotional resonance.

Example 1 And my daddy said stay away from Juliet

我爸爸气急败坏地叫你离我远一点

Example 2 I got tired of waiting,

我厌倦了似乎无穷无尽的等待

Example 3 But you were everything to me. (Taylor Swift, Love Story)

我又怎么能够承受没有你的痛苦

In Examples 1 and 2, the translator adds emotional words to enhance the lyrics and intensify the protagonist’s mood. To strengthen the feelings of endlessly waiting for a loved one—a simultaneously agonizing experience—the translator uses “无穷无尽” (endless) to convey this duality, depicting a girl whose love remains brave, sincere, and unadorned. In Example 3, rather than explicitly translating the boy’s significance, the translator chooses to portray the fear of loss as an expression of the girl’s devotion. All these translation strategies prioritize building emotional connections between the song

and its audience.

### 3.2.5 Re-Creation

Given the cultural divergences between Eastern and Western contexts, lyric translation necessitates interpretive adaptation by translators to achieve cross-cultural semantic equivalency. Furthermore, contemporary listeners demand greater lyrical sophistication, prompting modern lyric translation to manifest three core processes: nuanced transposition of source-language lyrics, culturally attuned recontextualization, and aesthetic augmentation. Through such multidimensional linguistic mediation can the poetic essence of lyrics be preserved and enhanced across cultural boundaries.

Example 1 When we go crashing down, we come back in every time

我们分分合合。依旧甜蜜如初

We never go out of style (Taylor Swift, Style)

因为我们就是天造地设/ 因为我们的爱永葆青春

Example 2 You belong with me (Taylor Swift, You Belong with Me)

我希望你能和我一起/ 我私心以为你应该和我一起/ 你的心本该属于我

These two lyrical segments with distinct translations recur throughout the same song. In Example 1, the original phrase “go out of style” semantically conveys perpetuity, yet the translator forgoes direct translation and strategically reconstructs the text through hermeneutic engagement with its subtext. Regarding Example 2, the same lyrics undergo semantic progression across repetitions. The translator elects not to employ literal translation, but orchestrates a gradated recreation that mirrors both the psychoemotional trajectory embedded in the source lyrics and their interpretive synthesis. The evolution from “和我一起” (be with me) → “私心以为应在一起” (selfishly believing we should unite) → “属于我” (belong to me) codifies the male protagonist’s burgeoning affection while foregrounding the heroine’s emotional ambivalence—a dialectic of coy restraint and audacious yearning. This epistemological shift in modern translation praxis, particularly lyric translation, liberates practitioners from strict formal adherence to source texts. Translators now operationalize substantive transcreation predicated on textual exegesis and sociocultural reception imperatives to optimize lyricosemiotic transmission.

### 3.3 Uniqueness of Taylor’s Lyrics Translation

As the representative of country music in America, Taylor has her own way of creation, so her songs and lyrics have high recognition. To better translate Taylor’s songs, it is necessary to conclude the uniqueness of her lyrics and ways to translate. Based on data collection and analysis, we can divide her songs into two main parts: songs for description and songs for expressing emotions.

#### 3.3.1 Focusing on Narrative Expression

As far as Taylor’s lyrics are concerned, her early words are more inclined toward everyday life—plain, fresh, and girlish. At the same time, the lyrical style tends to be simple and warm. There are numerous narrative descriptions in her lyrics; whether in the profile descriptions of people or the narration of

events, most adopt direct narration, resulting in relatively simple lyrics (Zhang & Jin, 2019).

Taking the albums *Fearless* and *Lover* as examples, the former was produced in her early career while the latter in recent years. In the first album, 13 songs include only two without descriptive language—for instance, “You take my hand and drag me head first” (from *Fearless*) and “You’re on the phone with your girlfriend, she’s upset” (from *You Belong With Me*)—which record events or convey impressions of people. The remaining songs in this category all contain a large quantity of narrative expression. Meanwhile, only 6 out of 18 songs in her later works retain narrative expression, as she moves beyond mere event description to place greater emphasis on inner feelings.

### 3.3.2 Emotionality

Almost all of Taylor’s lyrics use a large quantity of words to describe the characters’ own feelings about relationships, which can be regarded as their greatest feature. Sometimes it is for the happiness of meeting someone new, and sometimes it is for the pain of lost love. All of her emotional experiences in relationships are conveyed through the lyrics. For example: “You’re the only one of you, baby that’s the fun of you” expresses the value of self-identity; “to end up with you, swear to be overdramatic and true” reflects faith in love and marriage. Whether joyful or sorrowful, her lyrics always express her or her characters’ emotions, which manifest as a blend of fear and expectation for the future, ultimately conveyed through a positive tone of hope.

## 4. Reflection of Functional Equivalence Theory in Lyrics Translation

Functional Equivalence Theory (or Dynamic Equivalence) emphasizes the centrality of the reader, which gauges translation quality based on the target audience’s comprehension level. It posits that translation should closely and naturally reproduce equivalent information in the target language, prioritizing semantic fidelity over stylistic consistency (Nida & Waard, 1986). Nida distinguishes two levels of equivalence: “The highest level of equivalence”, where source-language and target-language audiences exhibit similar interpretive and emotional responses to the original and translated texts; “the lower level of equivalence”, where the target audience achieves basic comprehension of the source text but may diverges in nuanced reactions (Lin, 1992). This section analyzes the principles of Functional Equivalence Theory and their application to Taylor Swift’s lyrics.

### 4.1 Analysis of the Choice of Lyrics Translation Methods

At present, two primary theories are applied to analyze lyric translation: Eugene Nida’s Functional Equivalence Theory and Newmark’s Semantic/Communicative Translation Theory. However, the author argues that contemporary lyrics, with their distinct characteristics, have limited necessity to be reproduced in another language while preserving the original melody. Given the substantial flexibility in modern lyric translation, translators play a pivotal role in interpreting and creatively reworking the source text.



Trying to determine the characteristics of the readership of the original text according to the type of language used in the original text, and then determining the characteristics of the readership of the target text, and accordingly determining how much attention should be given to the target language readers. (Newmark, 1998)

Newmark asserts that literal translation should serve as the primary approach in translation practice. He argues that a skilled translator may deviate from literal translation only when it causes significant semantic distortion or fails to preserve the text's expressive and informational functions. Conversely, incompetent translators, in his view, excessively avoid literal translation despite its foundational value. Nida, however, prioritizes semantic equivalence over formal correspondence. The author contends that, given the unique demands of modern lyric translation, Functional Equivalence Theory provides a more valuable framework for guiding contemporary practice.

#### *4.2 Expression of Lexical Equivalence in Lyrics Translation*

The lexical and syntactic equivalence of Functional Equivalence Theory are integrated here as the fundamental criteria that any translation must meet. In the translation of Taylor Swift's lyrics, lexical equivalence is largely reflected throughout the entire translation due to the absence of highly obscure vocabulary. Syntactic equivalence, however, is primarily manifested in the treatment of parallelism, sentence structures, and rhyme schemes. In lyric translation, numerous translators enhance the contextual logical connections of the original text, thereby aligning the syntax with Chinese linguistic conventions and achieving syntactic equivalence in cross-language contexts.

Example 1 You see me in hindsight, tangled up with you all night, (Taylor Swift, Wildest Dreams)

你以后见之明的眼光看着我,忆起与你在星河下纠缠的过去。

Example 2 Your necklace hanging from my neck,

你的项链垂荡在我颈上,

The night we couldn't quite forget,

那晚我们终生难忘,

To move the furniture so we could dance,

移开家具,好让我们在屋里跳舞,

Baby, like we stood a chance, (Taylor Swift, Out of the Woods)

亲爱的 这一切历历在目。

"Hindsight" refers to the ability to comprehend an event retrospectively, even if it was not understood initially (Collins, 1819). Here, the translator employs the term "后见之明", derived from the Chinese idiom "先见之明", to convey the precise meaning through a culturally familiar expression, enabling Chinese audiences to grasp the concept of "hindsight" more intuitively.

In Example 2, “neck” rhymes with “forget”, and “dance” rhymes with “chance”. To replicate the rhythmic quality of the original lyrics, the translator uses rhyming pairs in Chinese: “上 (shàng)” with “忘 (wàng)”, followed by “跳舞 (wǔ)” with “历历在目 (mù)”. This approach preserves the formal structure of the original lyrics, achieving equivalence in lyrical form and allowing the target audience to directly perceive the original rhythm when listening to the song. This exemplifies the formal equivalence principle in Eugene Nida’s Functional Equivalence Theory.

#### 4.3 Ideographic Equivalence in Lyrics Translation

According to Eugene Nida’s theory, a good translation should achieve equivalence in form, ideography, and culture simultaneously. However, if semantic expression and formal consistency cannot coexist in a translation, the translator should prioritize conveying the lyrics’ meaning over adhering to formal constraints, aiming to reproduce the original text’s semantic and cultural essence. Ideographic equivalence emphasizes maximizing the target audience’s comprehension of the original text, enabling listeners to achieve harmonized interpretations of the lyrics across linguistic boundaries.

Example 1 Are we out of the woods yet?

我们是否已穿过丛林,

Are we out of the woods yet?

我们是否已走出阴霾,

Are we out of the woods yet?

我们是否已渡过劫难,

Are we out of the woods?

我们是不是都走出来了, (Taylor Swift, Out of the Woods)

Example 2 You got that James Dean day dream look in your eyes (Taylor Swift, Style)

你眼神中透露着年少轻狂,放纵不羁 (詹姆斯 迪恩, 美国男演员, 因车祸去世, 享年 24 岁)

To translate the word “woods”, the translator employs three distinct terms to convey its layered meaning. The first term “丛林” reflects its literal sense, but since “woods” carries metaphorical depth in the lyrics, the translator provides explanatory interpretations based on the text’s contextual understanding. The progression from “丛林” to “阴霾”, then to “劫难”, and finally the simplified “走出来” collectively captures the original lyrics’ full essence. This approach demonstrates the translator’s prioritization of the listener’s perspective by abandoning lexical rigidity to mirror the emotional progression intended in the source text.

For Example 2, the original lyrics use a person’s name to symbolize a specific concept. Directly translating this name would not only confuse Chinese audiences unfamiliar with the cultural connotations associated with the figure in the source language but also impose unnecessary interpretive burdens. In this translation, the translator clarifies both the person’s identity and the symbolic imagery they represent, enhancing the audience’s comprehension of the lyrics. This strategy exemplifies the

ideographic equivalence principle in Functional Equivalence Theory, ensuring cross-cultural semantic alignment.

#### 4.4 Cultural Equivalence in Lyrics Translation

Cultural equivalence is to realize a higher level of equivalence that is achieved by looking for a conversion method between the source language and the target language when changes in form are not enough to fully or accurately express the meaning and culture conveyed by the text. Recreation is an important translation technique to achieve cultural equivalence. It overcomes cultural differences to make the source language and the target language achieve equivalence in meaning. Recreation refers to the transformation of the deep structure of the source language into the surface structure of the target language — that is, using target-language vocabulary that shares the same cultural connotations as the source language text to completely convey the original meaning.

Example 1 thought heaven can't help me now, nothing lasts forever. (Taylor Swift, Wildest Dreams)

然而我却在想天高皇帝远,没什么能永恒不朽。

Example 2 He's so tall, and handsome as hell, (Taylor Swift, Wildest Dreams)

他身材高挑,有该死的恶魔般俊俏的脸庞。

Example 3 I can make all the tables turn,

我可是会翻脸不认人,

Rose garden filled with thorns,

让我们的关系跌入谷底。

For Example 1, "Heaven" can be directly translated as "天堂" in Chinese. It means the place where God lives, where good people go when they die, and where everyone is always happy (Collins, 1819). However, there is no relevant reference in the Chinese context. Therefore, the translator chose to localize the highest-ranking God in Western culture as the emperor of China, using the Chinese proverb "天高皇帝远" (the emperor is far and helpless to someone) to express the meaning of the original words. Through the connection of cultural similarity, the cultural image in the source language is transformed into the target language in a more acceptable way for Chinese audiences. It has realized the cultural transformation of the source and target language.

In the translation of Example 2, similar to Example 1, there comes an expression of "Hell", representing people in Hell and usually used to explain the tone of "oh my god". The writer uses the word to describe how wonderfully handsome the dream boy is. The translator retains the meaning of it rather than directly using an adverb such as "无与伦比" to indicate the handsomeness of him. This choice of translation can be explained by the Functional Equivalence Strategy of metaphor translation, which has been researched by many other authors. Example 3 shows the translator's choice of audience orientation. He uses the Chinese proverb "翻脸不认人" to express "make the table turn" to show the character's attitude.

## 5. Application of Equivalence Theory in Country Music Translation

When translating lyrics, the translator should first fully understand the meaning of the lyrics in the context of the source language. Then, through the choice of literal translation, form equivalence, meaning expression, and the balance between simple translation and creative translation, they can properly render the lyrics. All of this should be aimed at achieving functional equivalence and should also be guided by the principle of achieving functional equivalence as the standard.

### 5.1 Consistency of Form and Complete Expression of Meaning

Retain rhymes between sentences for auditory comfort, ease of transmission, and memorization. When translating lyrics, the translator should try to achieve a sense of rhythm in the Chinese version. The author thinks that, in some cases, the rhythm of the original lyrics is a necessary part of the song's overall style and the author's attitude. Accordingly, to make the audience fully immerse in the music, we should retain the original form and rhythm to the minimum degree possible in the Chinese version. Although we don't have to reach the level of sung melodies or strictly adhere to the original sentence length and form, splitting and combining translation methods should be applied more freely.

The entire Chinese version should align with the overall form of the original text, including Chinese rhymes, to maximize the listener's understanding and "empathy" toward the original work. For example, if the original lyrics use parallel structures, the Chinese translation should also employ parallel phrasing as much as possible. If the original text emphasizes rhythm in specific sections, the translated text should also strive to preserve rhythm in Chinese. This may appear to focus on formal equivalence, but it is actually part of the original textual expression, allowing listeners to deeply engage with the lyrical atmosphere.

Example 1 We might just get away with it,

我们一定会摆脱这虚妄，

The altar is my hips,

我的曲径正通往那神坛，

Even if it's a false god, (Taylor Swift, False God)

即使是伪神居住于其间。

Example 2 Rosé flowing with your chosen family, (Taylor Swift, The 1)

同所选择的定终生之人 选交杯桃红酒。

Example 3 Now I'm in exile seeing you out, (Taylor Swift, Exile)

如今我流离失所 你也不在眼前。

It can be seen that although the original lyrics of Example 1 are relatively scattered and have varying lengths, the Chinese text becomes more aesthetically cohesive through the translator's rendition. The three translated sentences are of the same length in Chinese, with formal, regular language consistent with traditional Chinese lyrical context. The choice of words such as “虚妄” and “曲径” is particularly poetic.

Regarding Example 2, the translator splits the sentence into two semantic units to clarify the implied meaning of “Rosé flowing”. Simultaneously, the phrase “chosen family” is interpreted as “a lifelong companion”. By analyzing the lyrics’ content, the translator abandons the original sentence structure, splits the text, and reinterprets key terms, thereby enhancing the translated version’s ideological resonance.

Similarly, Example 3 contains two distinct semantic stages. The translator divides the sentence based on meaning and explicates the phrase “see out”, reducing the listener’s interpretive burden. In summary, the translation should strive to preserve poetic quality within the Chinese context while employing splitting techniques to convey the lyrics’ meaning comprehensively and concisely.

### 5.2 *Literal Translation and Free Translation*

As mentioned above, Functional Equivalence Theory emphasizes that the audience can achieve a deep understanding of the source text through translation, thereby ensuring consistency in ideographic function. Does this mean that, under the guidance of this theory, free translation should be prioritized in lyric translation? In the author’s opinion, even if listener orientation or meaning expression is the core of modern lyric translation, this does not imply that free translation should dominate. While modern lyrics prioritize direct and simple meaning expression—unlike the Bible, which served as the basis for Eugene Nida’s Functional Equivalence Theory—free translation should still be applied judiciously, guided by the translator’s understanding of the lyrics and context. For example, in lyric translation, to emphasize the protagonist’s emotions and intent, relevant emotional terms may be interpreted or even supplemented to enhance expressive clarity.

Although literal translation and free translation differ in orientation, they share the same ultimate goal: conveying information. For the translation of lyrics, conveying the core meaning and emotion of the source text is of vital importance. If the lyrics are simple, literal translation can effectively express their meaning. However, if the lyrics emphasize personal feelings, contain repetitive phrases, or use complex sentences, free translation should take precedence. Nevertheless, both literal translation and free translation should achieve ideographic functional equivalence.

Example 1 Your back beneath the sun, (Taylor Swift, August)

阳光倾洒于你的背脊之上。

Example 2 We never painted by the numbers, baby, (Taylor Swift, The 1)

亲爱的 你我从未按常规出牌。

Example 3 I hit the ground running each night,

每晚我满怀激情上路 追逐内心所想。

Example 4 I have none,

对于行事适可而止,

For never leaving well enough alone, (Taylor Swift, The 1)

我并非一窍不通。

For Example 1, the literal translation should be “your back is under the sun”, but the translator changes the descriptive perspective. By grasping the artistic conception of the entire lyrics, the translator uses the sun as the subject and explains the lyrics so that listeners can understand them more intuitively. For Example 2, normally, it should mean “we cannot be measured by rules or standard guesses”, but in translation, the translator also changed the perspective and adopted free translation, interpreting it as “we have our own ideas that cannot be guessed”. This translation reflects a corresponding Chinese expression found in the target language after a deep understanding of the lyrics’ inner meaning.

Regarding Example 3, the translator provided an emotional interpretation of “hit the ground” to express the protagonist’s enthusiasm, while supplementing the explanation of the purpose of “running”. Based on the protagonist’s attitude in the context, the translation emphasizes “chasing inner thoughts”, abandoning the literal meaning in favor of expressing the lyrics’ deeper significance. For Example 4, the original sentence is “left when something is already good enough”, but the translator combined the text’s meaning with a Chinese idiom, replacing it with “一窍不通”. This fully reflects the translator’s deep understanding of the lyrics.

In the above examples, free translation plays a pivotal role in conveying the lyrics’ inner meaning. Therefore, when translating, translators should appropriately choose between literal or free translation based on a deep understanding of the lyrics, especially when the original sentence is vague. In such cases, free translation should be reasonably employed to achieve functional equivalence.

### *5.3 Plain Translation and Creative Translation*

The author believes that the so-called “plain translation” refers to the complete expression of the original lyrics’ meaning, achieving corresponding formal and lexical equivalence based on Eugene Nida’s functional equivalence theory. Creative translation holds obvious necessity in modern lyrics translation, as it builds upon expressing the lyrics’ meaning. To highlight or emphasize certain expressive methods or effects, or even to evoke listeners’ resonance with the lyrics, translators enhance textual meaning through creative translation. All creative translations must align with the lyrics’ general direction and overall style.

The author argues that lyrics translation differs from other textual translations because it not only bears the weight of conveying the lyrics’ inherent meaning but must also provide aesthetic experiences, artistic appreciation, and even a Chinese sense of rhythm, as E-C lyrics translations directly face the audience. Comparative analysis reveals that translations recreated by translators offer audiences a more intuitive emotional experience when listening to songs, outperforming simplistic literal translations. Therefore, in modern music production—particularly for lyrics—translation should incorporate creativity alongside plain translation.

Example 1 August slipped away into a moment in time,(Taylor Swift, August)

八月犹如白驹过隙 悄然消逝。

Example 2 Love you to the moon and to Saturn Passed down like folk songs,

我对你的爱穿梭于银河日月间 犹如民谣悠扬传颂,

The love lasts so long, (Taylor Swift, Seven)

这份爱绵延不绝 永恒亘古。

Example 3 The light and noise are blinding,

声音嘈杂,灯光炫目,

It's all in the timing, (Taylor Swift, New Romantics)

时间流逝,倒计时中。

Regarding Example 1, the translator re-expresses the lyrics based on an understanding of their meaning, describing the speed of time's passage with phrases like “白驹过隙” and “溜走”. This reflects the translator's creative reworking of the lyrics, making the Chinese translation more vivid and engaging. As for Example 2, the translator creatively translates “to” as “穿梭”, a choice that is highly literary and aesthetic. Similarly, “pass down” is rendered as “传颂”, a uniquely poignant adaptation. Notably, in the second part, “so long” is reimagined as “绵延不绝、永恒亘古”, showcasing the translator's re-creation of Chinese lyrical expression through distinctly poetic and culturally resonant phrasing.

For Example 3, the original term “blinding” emphasizes dazzling light and chaotic noise. The translator deconstructs the word's meaning and reinterprets it contextually. In the second paragraph, the creative use of “流逝” to depict “indulging in joy as time slips away” fully demonstrates the translator's ingenuity in localizing the lyrical text.

Thus, in lyrics translation, translators should fully leverage their Chinese literary proficiency to enhance the translation's aesthetic quality. Translators must avoid treating lyrics translation as a passive reproduction of the original text; instead, they should actively employ subjective creativity and aesthetic judgment. When interpreting lyrics, translators ought to infuse their own insights to produce translations that resonate more deeply with Chinese listeners' aesthetic sensibilities. However, all creative adaptations must remain grounded in achieving functional equivalence of the lyrics' linguistic intent.

## 6. Conclusion

Modern lyrics translation, based on the textual analysis of Taylor Swift's lyrics, exhibits the following characteristics: listener orientation, original-style preservation, aesthetic appreciation, emotional expression, and creative reworking. Taylor's lyrics are highly narrative and emotionally charged, demanding heightened focus on conveying both the meaning and emotional depth of her lyrics during translation. Drawing from these features, this article introduces Eugene Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory, specifically its four equivalence criteria and three translation principles. Building on this

framework, the article proposes translation methodologies applicable to modern country lyrics translation, such as balancing literal translation and free translation; maintaining formal consistency while prioritizing meaningful expression; combining plain translation with creative adaptation.

Therefore, through the analysis of lyrics text and Functional Equivalence Theory in this paper, it can be concluded that modern lyrics translation has a strong ideographic nature. The objectives of Functional Equivalence Theory—lexical equivalence, ideographic equivalence, and cultural equivalence—as well as the three translation principles it proposes, conform to the characteristics of modern lyrics translation. This theory is not only suitable for modern lyrics translation but can also serve as theoretical guidance for lyrics translation. At the same time, the degree of realization of functional equivalence in lyrics texts can also become a standard for measuring the quality of lyrics translation. Modern lyrics translation should be devoted to the substantive equivalence of ideograms. For one thing, the translator should pay attention to the rhythm of the Chinese translation and the beauty of the lyrics; for another, the translator should lay emphasis on the complete expression of the lyrics' meaning, including appropriate supplementation of meaning. Besides, creative translation can be widely used to realize consistency in emotions and values between the translated lyrics and the source text.

This paper is a practical strategy study for modern translation, especially for country music translation. Due to the limitations of time and knowledge, the author has only applied one part of the Functional Equivalence Theory and referenced several translation techniques. In terms of specific lyrics translation, other translation techniques and theories need to be considered as well. This will be the aspect for the author to focus on in her further study.

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