

On the Chinese Translation Techniques of Dialogues in *The Old Man and the Sea* from the Perspective of Social Semiotics

-- A case study of Huang Yuanshen's version

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Abstract: The theory of social semiotic translation, which believes the opinion that translating language is translating meaning and that the meaning and function of speech are inseparable, provides a new perspective for translation studies. This paper examines on the dialogues in Huang Yuanshen's translation of *The Old Man and the Sea* and explores how social semiotics can elucidate the translator's choices. Based on the three core principles of social semiotics and combining them with the subject, form, and spirit of the original dialogues, this study analyzes translation techniques such as addition, division, shift, negation, combination, and conversion. This study demonstrates that social semiotic translation theory effectively guides the translation of dialogues in literary works, enabling a better conveyance of the author's original meaning and style while enhancing the readability and cultural transmission of the Chinese version.

Keywords: *The Old Man and the Sea*, Dialogue Translation, Social Semiotics, Huang Yuanshen.

1. Introduction

Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* is a masterpiece of world literature, widely acclaimed for its distinctive style and profound thematic depth. Mr. Huang Yuanshen's Chinese translation has exerted a profound influence among Chinese readers, with its rendering of dialogue especially praised for vividly recreating the emotional resonance and artistic flavour of the original. In recent years, integrating social semiotic theory with translation studies has underscored that translation transcends mere linguistic transfer, constituting an act of cross-cultural semiotic meaning transmission. This perspective helps uncover the influence of cultural differences, power relations, and ideology within the translation process.[1]

This study aims to address the gap in the research on the Chinese translation techniques of dialogues in *The Old Man and the Sea* from a social semiotic perspective. By conducting a detailed analysis of Huang Yuanshen's version, it aims to elucidate the socio-cultural factors influencing his translation choices and their effect on meaning construction. This endeavor not only contributes to enriching the theoretical framework of translation studies but also provides fresh perspectives and methodologies for cross-cultural communication research.

2. Theoretical Framework

Social semiotics is an interdisciplinary field that studies the use and meaning of signs in social contexts. When applied to translation, it emphasizes the reconstruction of meaning and function rather than mere linguistic transfer. Three principles are particularly pertinent:

Meaning Matching and Functional Similarity: the translation should strive for equivalence in referential, intralingual, and pragmatic meanings, while preserving the

communicative function of the original.

Meaning as Relationship: Meaning arises among relationships, signs and their social, cultural, and experiential contexts.

Decoding and Encoding: The translator acts as a mediator who decodes the source text and re-encodes it for the target audience, navigating cultural disparities and asymmetries between sign system.[2]

These principles collectively form the theoretical basis for examining how Huang's version achieves cross-cultural transmission of semiotic meaning.

3. Analysis of Dialogue Characteristics in *The Old Man and the Sea*

Hemingway's dialogues are celebrated for their conciseness and depth, embodying his "iceberg theory"-where much remains unstated beneath the surface.

Subject: The dialogues are multifaceted, exploring themes such as Man-Nature (Santiago's communion and struggle with the sea and fish), Man-Self (his introspective monologues), Man-Other (his interactions with the boy Manolin), and Loneliness-Greatness (revealing strength and dignity in isolation).

Form: The form is characterized by a "telegraphic" style-short, concise sentences with ample omissions; rich subtext, where much meaning is implied rather expressed; strong symbolism; and varied modes of discourse.

Spirit: The dialogue spirit embodies an indomitable will ("A man can be destroyed but not defeated"), reverence for nature, perseverance and self-redemption through solitude, and the "code hero" spirit- maintaining grace under pressure.

4. Chinese Translation Techniques Under Social Semiotics

This chapter forms the core empirical part of the study. Grounded in the three social semiotic principles established in the former chapter, it analyses the techniques Huang Yuanshen employed in translating the dialogues. Representative techniques under each principle (e.g., Addition, Division; Shift, Negation; Combination, Conversion) are explored through typical examples, demonstrating how these techniques serve meaning reconstruction, achieve functional equivalence, and mediate cross-cultural transformation of sign relations. This analysis underscores the guiding efficacy of social semiotic theory for translation practice, highlighting its value in navigating semantic, functional, and intercultural challenges. [3]

4.1. Translation Techniques under the Principle of Meaning Matching and Functional Similarity

This section focuses on techniques Huang used to achieve equivalence in referential, intralingual, pragmatic meaning, and communicative function. It analyses how Addition supplements implied cultural/contextual information, and how Division restructures source text syntax to suit Chinese expression, ensuring similar reading effects and functions in the target context.

4.1.1. Addition

Addition involves adding elements implied or unstated in the ST to the TT for clearer, more natural comprehension by target readers. Its core purpose is to bridge grammatical, cultural, or expressive gaps. Its essence is building linguistic-cultural bridges by making the implicit explicit, ensuring accurate information transfer aligned with reader cognition.

Example1:

ST: "I know you did not leave me because you doubted." [4]

Literal TT: "我知道你没有离开我, 因为你没有怀疑。"

Huang's TT: "我知道你没有离开我, 你离开我也不是因为你不信过我。" ("I know you did not leave me, nor did you leave because you mistrusted me.") [5]

Analysis: The ST's telegraphic style, through Santiago's words to the boy, shows deep trust, implying Santiago's awareness and understanding of the boy's departure, reflecting the Man-Other dialogue theme. Huang uses addition, adding "你离开我也" ("nor did you leave") and "信不过我" ("mistrusted me"), clarifying implied information.

Meaning matching is achieved by conveying the core trust; functional similarity is enhanced by intensifying emotion, aligning with Chinese expression and reader understanding.

Benefits: richer emotion, clearer perception of trust, improved readability and impact.

4.1.2. Division

Division involves splitting structurally complex or information-dense ST sentences into multiple TT units to suit target language expression, enhancing fluency and logical clarity. Its core lies in breaking syntactic constraints and restructuring.

Example:

ST: "He was an old man who fished alone..."

Literal TT: "他是个老人, 独自划着小船在海湾中捕鱼, 八十四天没捕到鱼了。"

TT: "他是个老人, 独自划着小船在墨西哥湾流中捕鱼。""八十四天来, 一条鱼也没逮住。"

Analysis: ST telegraphic language depicts Santiago's solitude. Huang uses division, splitting into shorter Chinese sentences.

Meaning matching: conveys core information. Functional similarity: creates solitude, sparks curiosity, sets the tone. Achieves principle, preserving literary effect and narrative tension.

4.2. Translation Techniques under the Principle of Meaning as Relationship

This section explores how Huang's translation, guided by the "Meaning as Relationship" principle, uses specific techniques to handle complex sign relations within dialogues (e.g., voice indicating active/passive relations, tone reflecting character relations, cultural signs linking background). It analyses how Shift adjusts voice/tone/structure for Chinese expression, and how Negation conveys deeper semantics and relations more naturally through affirmative/negative interchange.

4.2.1. Shift

Shift involves adjusting ST linguistic forms (voice, tone, structure, cultural reference) to conform to target language habits while maintaining semantic equivalence.

Voice Shift: Hemingway often uses passive voice for objectivity; Chinese prefers active. Huang shifts voice contextually.

Example1:

ST: "The old man was beaten by the sharks."

Huang's TT: "鲨鱼击垮了这位老人。" ("The sharks beat/overcame the old man.") (Passive→Active)

Analysis: ST concise statement implies tragic defeat against nature. Huang shifts voice and adjusts wording.

Reflects Meaning as Relationship: clarifies Man-Nature antagonism. Strengthens theme, concise language aids understanding of fate's weight.

Structural & Cultural Shift:

Example1:

ST: "'Agua mala,' the man said." (Spanish: literally "bad water," meaning jellyfish/Portuguese man o' war)

Huang's TT: "老人说: '水母。(西班牙俗语)'" ("The old man said: 'Jellyfish. (Spanish colloquialism)'" (Literal translation+ Gloss)

Analysis: ST concise utterance implies Man-Nature interaction. Huang uses literal translation + gloss" (西班牙俗语)" ("Spanish colloquialism"). Preserves dialogue scene (theme) and aids cultural understanding, clarifying Man-Nature relation.

Summary: Huang employs shifts in voice, tone, structure, and culture in his translation, preserving the original style and meaning while conforming to Chinese expression. This enhances readability and natural comprehension.

4.2.2. Negation

Negation involves interchanging affirmative and negative forms in the TT for more natural target language expression, breaking free from ST surface structure to convey deep meaning flexibly.

Example1:

ST: "'It is not bad,' he said. 'And pain does not matter to a man.'"

Huang's TT: "'这不算坏,' 他说。'疼痛对一个人来说"

不算什么。””(“‘This isn’t bad,’ he said. ‘Pain doesn’t matter to a man.’”)

Analysis: ST simple dialogue directly conveys code hero spirit (perseverance), expressing defiance against hardship. Huang uses literal translation, keeping negation (“not bad” → “不算坏”, “does not matter” → “不算什么”).

Reflects Meaning as Relationship: accurately conveys Santiago’s relationship with hardship/pain, highlighting resilience. Readers feel his spiritual strength.

Huang skillfully employs negation to remain faithful while adapting to Chinese expression. These examples show its importance in conveying emotion, tone, and character, making the TT natural and fluid while retaining Hemingway’s concision and depth.

4.3. Translation Techniques under Decoding and Encoding

This section analyses techniques Huang used as a “semiotic mediator” while decoding ST dialogue sign meaning (considering socio-cultural context) and re-encoding it for the target language. It focuses on how Combination merges information for coherence, and how Conversion adjusts parts of speech to suit Chinese grammar, reflecting the translator’s balance between decoding accuracy (understanding ST relational networks) and encoding adaptability (constructing new TT relations).

4.3.1. Combination

Combination involves merging multiple ST sentences or units into a single TT structure to simplify expression and enhance, especially for repetitive information or loose sentence groups, aligning with Chinese preferences for compactness.

Example 1:

ST: “I wish I could see him,” he said. “I wish I could see him only once to know.”

Huang’s TT: “我希望能看见它，哪怕只看一眼也好，让我知道它的样子。”(“‘I wish I could see it,’ he said, ‘even if just one glance, to know what it looks like.’”) (Combines the two wishes and extends “to know”)

Analysis: ST Man-Self telegraphic dialogue expresses intense desire to see the marlin; repetition and progression imply obsession, expectation, curiosity. Huang combines and slightly extends “to know” → “让我知道它的样子” (“let me know what it looks like”). Decoder understands emotion/psychology; encoder renders fluently.

Benefit: retains concise power while enhancing understanding of deep feelings, improving impact/readability.

Huang flexibly uses combination to enhance fluency and naturalness in Chinese. Through omitting repetition, merging short sentences, adjusting word order, supplementing implied meaning, and shifting expression, he achieves fidelity while improving readability and artistry.

4.3.2. Conversion:

Conversion involves changing the part of speech of ST words (e.g. noun → verb, adjective → adverb) in the TT to conform to target language grammar and expression, overcoming formal differences for flexible semantic transfer.

Example 1:

ST: “What did you do with the big one that came nearly alongside the boat?” the boy asked.”

Huang’s TT: “那条上了钩的大鱼呢？你把它怎么啦？”孩子问。”(“‘what about that big fish that took the hook? What did you do with it?’ the boy asked.”)

Analysis: ST boy’s direct question (Man-Other) shows curiosity/concern, reflecting trust/admiration. Huang uses conversion: “big” adj. → “大鱼” noun; paraphrases “came nearly alongside” → “上了钩” (“took the hook”). Decoder grasps emotion/intent; encoder adapts idiomatically. Preserves information, makes dialogue natural, enhances perception of emotional exchange.

This example illustrates Huang’s skilful application of conversion (and related adjustments) to align the TT with Chinese expression. While not always strict conversion, the translator flexibly handles ST parts of speech for fluency and naturalness.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Huang Yuanshen’s translation effectively reconstructs the socio-semiotic meaning of Hemingway’s dialogues in *The Old Man and the Sea* through a variety of techniques guided by social semiotic principles. The translation not only preserves the original’s stylistic brevity and emotional depth but also enhances its readability and cultural resonance for Chinese readers. The three principles of social semiotics provide a systematic methodology for literary dialogue translation, particularly suitable for handling the simplicity, subtext, and cultural symbols in Hemingway’s “telegraphic” style. The flexible application of translation techniques confirms the value of the theory in guiding practice- prioritizing the transmission of symbolic meaning while considering formal adaptation and functional equivalence.

The main limitation of this study is its focus on a single version. Future research could conduct comparative analyses of multiple translations or incorporate empirical methods such as surveys to assess reader reception. Nonetheless, the social semiotic perspective offers a novel and effective approach to literary translation studies, with significant implications for both theory and practice.

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