

A Study on the Translation of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from the Perspective of Communicative and Semantic Translation

Ruixuan Wang*

Heilongjiang University, Harbin, Heilongjiang, China

*Corresponding author: Ruixuan Wang.

Abstract

This paper analyzes the translation strategies employed in Zhang Wanli's Chinese version of Chapter 15 in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* through the lens of Peter Newmark's semantic and communicative translation theories. By comparing the source text and the target text in terms of dialect handling, culture-loaded expressions, and narrative style, the study reveals how the translator strikes a dynamic balance between "fidelity to the original text" and "accessibility to the reader." The findings suggest that Zhang's translation primarily adopts communicative translation to enhance readability in the Chinese context, while also incorporating semantic translation to faithfully convey key information and the narrative tone of the original. This strategy not only accounts for the widespread acceptance of Zhang's version but also provides a valuable case study for the cultural adaptation of literary translations.

Keywords

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Zhang Wanli's translation, semantic translation; communicative translation, translation strategies

1. Introduction

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain, hailed by Ernest Hemingway as the wellspring of modern American literature, stands as a seminal work in American literary history, notable for its linguistic innovation and intellectual depth. Its masterful use of vernacular dialect, vivid colloquial narration, and unique regional cultural expressions have established it as a paradigm of American realist fiction. Set against the backdrop of antebellum America, the novel unfolds through the first-person perspective of the white adolescent Huck Finn, chronicling his journey to escape the hypocritical strictures of "civilized" society and his father's abuse. He flees alongside the runaway boy Jim, drifting on a raft down the Mississippi River. Far from being a mere children's adventure story, the work profoundly exposes the racial prejudices and moral hypocrisy prevalent in American society at the time, meticulously recording Huck's inner struggle between his innate conscience and the prevailing social norms. A central challenge in literary translation lies in achieving both semantic fidelity to the original and effective cross-cultural communication. Peter Newmark's theories of semantic and communicative translation provide a robust theoretical framework for addressing this challenge. Semantic translation seeks to reproduce, as closely as the semantic and syntactic structures of

the target language allow, the exact contextual meaning and aesthetic form of the original. Communicative translation, conversely, prioritizes the communicative effect and readability of the translation for the target audience.

This study focuses specifically on Chapter 15 in the novel, a chapter of considerable significance in Huck's character development and a pivotal turning point in the thematic arc. Following the dispersal of fog, a practical joke played by Huck on Jim elicits a powerful rebuke from Jim, who accuses Huck of behavior unbecoming a friend. The dense dialogue and Huck's introspective awakening at the chapter's end vividly encapsulate the novel's colloquial style, emotional intensity, and cultural specificity. The chosen translation by Zhang Wanli has garnered significant attention and discussion within both academic circles and the broader reading public. Widely circulated and highly regarded among Chinese readers and scholars, Zhang's version is praised for its fluent and natural language, successfully capturing the colloquial essence and character vitality of the original, thus offering valuable material for the study of literary translation.

The significance of this research lies in its application of Newmark's semantic and communicative translation theories to analyze Zhang Wanli's translational choices in rendering Chapter 15 of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The paper aims to dissect the translator's nuanced negotiation between semantic accuracy and communicative effect, exemplified by the rendering of terms like “trash” with its socio-cultural connotations of insult, and the representation of Black English vernacular alongside Southern English dialect features. Such an analysis not only illuminates the considerations and balances Zhang strikes between reproducing the original's style and ensuring readability for the target language reader but also offers fresh perspectives for literary scholarship and deepens our comprehension of the complexities inherent in literary translation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 An Overview of Communicative and Semantic Translation Theories

The concepts of semantic and communicative translation, introduced by the British translation theorist Peter Newmark, represent one of the most influential applied translation theories of the late twentieth century. Building upon the traditional dichotomy of “literal” and “free” translation, Newmark proposed a more nuanced analytical framework that situates translation methods within a broader consideration of text types and communicative functions. Newmark elucidates semantic translation as an endeavor to “render, as closely as the semantic and syntactic structures of the second language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original”. This approach prioritizes fidelity to the original author and the source text, striving to preserve the text's aesthetic value, individual stylistic features, and even cultural distinctiveness.

Conversely, communicative translation “attempts to produce on its readers an effect as close as possible to that obtained on the readers of the original” [1]. Its focus shifts decisively towards the target language reader and the intended effect, permitting the translator to reorganize, adjust, or even omit elements of the original to ensure a fluent and natural target text. Upon its introduction in China, this theory sparked considerable scholarly interest. Lin Xiaoqin posited that semantic and communicative translation are not mutually exclusive; translation rarely employs one method in isolation, often utilizing communicative translation for certain parts and semantic translation for others. There is no purely communicative or purely semantic translation; they are used interchangeably, with differing emphases, and sometimes even converge [2]. Yang Shizhuo introduced the specific connotations of Newmark's theories, analyzing the characteristics and divergences between semantic and communicative translation, while also noting limitations in both approaches [3]. Furthermore, scholars like Zhu Zhiyu have compared Newmark's theories with those of Eugene A. Nida, suggesting both frameworks effectively inform and guide translation practice [4]. Lao Long argued that despite differing investigative paths and modes of expression, Newmark's theories share fundamental principles with Yan Fu's triad of “faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance” and Nida's theoretical constructs [5]. Lin Kenan, in a comparative study, detailed the similarities and differences between Nida's and Newmark's approaches, observing that Nida's theory prioritizes reader response, whereas Newmark's emphasizes fidelity to the original author [6].

2.2 A Review of Studies on Translations of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Since its introduction to China in the 1920s, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been rendered into numerous influential Chinese versions by translators including Zhang Wanli, Cheng Shi, Xu Ruzhi, and Pan Qingling. Zhang Wanli's translation, one of the most widely disseminated and impactful, has elicited a characteristically ambivalent reception. It is highly regarded by general readers and some researchers for its fluent, natural language, vivid narration, and strong readability. Zhang's handling of long sentence structures and narrative pacing often involves restructuring that aligns with Chinese idiomatic usage, rendering the story accessible and engaging. This is frequently interpreted as an implicit or explicit application of communicative translation strategies, prioritizing the Chinese reader's experience [7]. Zhang's primary aim was to effectively promote and disseminate this world-renowned novel in China, making his strategies congruent with the socio-cultural context of the time. Conversely, from a more stringent academic perspective, the translation has faced criticism for its tendency to “domesticate” or downplay dialectal nuances and cultural specificities [8]. In contrast to Zhang's version, Cheng Shi's translation is often characterized as adhering more closely to the linguistic form and stylistic features of the original, exhibiting a stronger semantic translation orientation. Cheng's lexical choices are frequently more direct, and his syntax sometimes retains the original word order or rhetorical structures, aiming to convey more directly the “original appearance” and satirical edge of Twain's prose. For instance, when handling sensitive terms, Cheng may opt for a more literal rendering. While this strategy earns praise from researchers seeking academic rigor and textual fidelity, it is occasionally critiqued for producing a somewhat “stiff” or “Europeanized” translation that may impede fluent reading for a general audience [9]. Xu Ruzhi's translation presents a distinctive synthesis in its linguistic style: it preserves a vivid colloquial quality while undergoing a refined literary distillation, resulting in a poetic texture imbued with tension. However, this version has also sparked academic debate due to its pronounced “domestication” tendency. Critics contend that in the pursuit of linguistic fluency and literariness, the translator somewhat diminishes the original's unique dialectal features and cultural markers, potentially detaching the character Jim from his historical and cultural context and causing a certain distortion in cross-linguistic representation, thus compromising “cultural fidelity” [10].

Current scholarship generally identifies the central challenges in translating *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—and key dimensions for evaluating and comparing different versions—as twofold. Firstly, the reproduction of dialectal and colloquial style. A hallmark of Twain's writing is its use of vernacular for colloquial expression. Huck's first-person narrative employs the “Pike County dialect” of lower-class rural Missouri, while Jim's speech utilizes the Black vernacular of Missouri. This pioneering use of dialect is the soul of Twain's novel, giving authentic and vivid voice to marginalized social characters and underpinning its realism and humor. Consequently, rendering this colloquial, non-standard narrative voice in Chinese constitutes a primary challenge in translation [11]. Secondly, the difficulty of converting cultural background and specific cultural images. The novel is deeply embedded in the specific socio-historical context of the 19th-century Mississippi River region, containing numerous culture-loaded terms related to Southern folk religion, superstitions, and contemporary social customs. Examples include Jim's superstitious beliefs, the riverbank town life, and the cultural symbols exploited by the “King” and “Duke.” Simple literal translation is often insufficient. The translator must find appropriate expressions for these unique cultural concepts within the Chinese cultural context, enabling comprehension and appreciation without excessive “foreignization” that could lead to reader alienation or misunderstanding. This demands not only linguistic proficiency but also profound cultural insight to navigate the delicate balance between “fidelity” and “readability” [12].

3. Case Analysis

Zhang Wanli's translation of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, first published in 1954, has remained one of the most popular and influential versions in the Chinese-speaking world. It holds significant value for literary dissemination and has shaped the understanding of this classic for generations of Chinese readers. Therefore, this paper selects Zhang's translation for detailed analysis, exploring its specific translation strategies and methods.

ST: I see the fog closing down, and it made me so sick and scared I couldn't budge for most a half a minute it seemed to me -- and then there warn't no raft in sight; you couldn't see twenty yards.

TT: 我眼看着大雾从四面八方聚拢起来，心里觉得又难过、又害怕，弄得我呆了至少有半分钟，一点儿也不能动弹-----然后那个木筏就看不见了：二十码以外的地方，你根本就看不清楚。

This example also adheres to semantic translation principles through literal translation. The core psychological state “sick and scared” is rendered accurately and concisely, faithfully conveying Huck's emotion. Furthermore, factual descriptions of distance and orientation are literally translated; “twenty yards” becomes “二十码,” with the unit directly converted, ensuring informational accuracy.

ST: “Goodness gracious, is dat you, Huck? En you ain' dead -- you ain' drowned -- you's back agin? It's too good for true, honey, it's too good for true. Lemme look at you chile, lemme feel o' you. No, you ain' dead! you's back agin, 'live en soun', jis de same ole Huck -- de same ole Huck, thanks to goodness!”

TT: “啊呀，你并没有死啊！你又活蹦乱跳地、平平安安地回来啦，还是咱们原来的老哈克-----还是原来的老哈克，真是谢天谢地啊！”

This translation exemplifies communicative translation. The translator adopts a free translation strategy, completely abandoning the attempt to simulate the original's phonetically spelled dialect through Chinese equivalents. Instead, the rendition uses fluent, idiomatic, and emotionally charged Chinese colloquial expressions (such as “活蹦乱跳” [alive and kicking] and “谢天谢地” [thank goodness]) to convey Jim's profound excitement and concern. This allows Chinese readers to experience an emotional resonance similar to that of the original audience, avoiding potential comprehension barriers that might arise from a literal rendering of the dialectal form.

ST: It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger; but I done it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterwards, neither.

TT: 我呆了足足有一刻钟，才鼓起了勇气，跑到一个黑人面前低头认错-----我到底那么做了，以后也从来没有后悔过。

This rendering follows communicative translation principles, employing free translation and amplification. The phrase “work myself up to,” which might be awkwardly rendered literally as “to rouse oneself to do something,” is effectively translated as “鼓起了勇气” (mustered the courage). This precisely captures Huck's difficult internal struggle and self-conquest against his ingrained prejudices. The plain statement “but I done it” is enhanced by adding the emphatic word “到底” (finally/after all), resulting in “我到底那么做了” (I finally did it). This single word subtly and effectively conveys the psychological weight of Huck's decision—“although it was very difficult, he ultimately succeeded”—making his effort more palpable for the reader.

ST: What's the matter with you, Jim? You been adrinkin'?”

“Drinkin'? Has I ben a-drinkin'? Has I had a chance to be a-drinkin'?”

“Well, then, what makes you talk so wild?”

TT: “吉木，你是怎么回事儿呀？你喝醉了吗？”

“喝醉了？我喝醉了吗？我哪儿来的工夫喝酒呀？”

“那么，你为什么说话这么不着边儿呀？”

The translation of this dialogue segment is consistent with semantic translation principles. The translator adheres to the colloquial nature of the original. In Huck's dialogue, “talk so wild” could be rendered as speaking absurdly or nonsensically. The translator's choice, “说话这么不着边儿啊” (talking so off-the-wall), accurately retains the questioning and slightly incredulous tone while also potentially eliciting an appreciative smile from the reader, mirroring the original's effect.

ST: We slept most all day, and started out at night, a little ways behind a monstrous long raft that was as long going by as a procession. She had four long sweeps at each end, so we judged she carried as many as thirty men, likely. She had five big wigwams aboard, wide apart, and an open camp fire in the middle, and a tall flag-pole at each end. There was a power of style about her. It amounted to something being a raftsman on such a craft as that.

TT: 我们几乎睡了一整天，到了夜里才动身走，有一排很长很长的木筏，好像一大队游行的人马似的，在我们的前面漂着。它每一头有四根长桨，我们猜想那上面恐怕至少载着三十个人。筏子上搭着五个大窝棚，彼此离得很远，木筏当中还生着一个露天的大火堆，每一头还有一根大旗杆。它的气派实在是大极了。在这样的筏子上当个伙计，那才真够神气的哪。

This passage demonstrates a blend of semantic and communicative translation. When describing objective facts and objects (sweeps, wigwams, campfire), the translation tends towards semantic translation, using literal methods to ensure informational accuracy. However, when handling figurative language, evaluations, and character perspective, it shifts towards communicative translation. Phrases like “好像一大队游行的人马似的” (like a huge procession of marchers), “大极了” (really grand), and “真够神气的哪” (really something to be proud of) employ distinctly Chinese expressions to vividly recreate Huck's observational perspective and inner feelings, making the translation dynamic and engaging.

ST: “...sometimes just a narrow channel between, and some that I couldn't see I knowed was there because I'd hear the wash of the current against the old dead brush and trash that hung over the banks.”

TT: “.....还有许多沙洲我根本看不见，可是我知道是有的，因为我听见河水哗哗地冲刷着那些挂在岸上的枯树枝子和乱七八糟的东西。”

This example comprehensively reflects both principles. For factual elements like sounds and objects, semantic translation is applied through literal methods, accurately conveying core images. However, in overall sentence organization and rhythm, communicative translation guides the process. The translator restructures the complex English syntax into idiomatic Chinese expressions, employing vivid colloquialisms like “哗哗地” (onomatopoeia for gurgling/rushing water) and “乱七八糟的” (messy/chaotic). This choice effectively recreates the environmental confusion, the critical situation, and Huck's internal anxiety, significantly enhancing the text's visual imagery and readability.

4. Conclusion

Guided by Newmark's theories of communicative and semantic translation, this comparative analysis of the source text of Chapter 15 in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Zhang Wanli's Chinese translation leads to the following conclusion: Zhang's translation predominantly follows a strategy led by communicative translation, supplemented by semantic translation. The version not only retains aspects

of the original's linguistic form, recreating its literary essence for Chinese readers, but also flexibly employs various translation methods to ensure a satisfying reading experience for the target audience.

Under the guidance of semantic translation theory, the translation adopts methods like literal translation that stays close to the original's form and structure, faithfully conveying the content and reflecting the unique linguistic style, narrative rhythm, and foreign cultural elements. Informed by communicative translation theory, the translation transforms unfamiliar cultural terms into concepts recognizable to target readers when necessary, effectively mitigating cultural barriers and ensuring narrative fluency. In handling dialect and colloquial speech, prioritizing the reader's experience leads the translator to selectively forgo surface-level phonetic correspondence in favor of pursuing functional equivalence of effect.

References

- [1] Newmark, Peter. *Approaches to Translation*. Oxford: Pergamon, 1981.
- [2] Lin Xiaoqin. (1987). Newmark on Communicative and Semantic Translation. *Chinese Translators Journal*, (01), 50-51.
- [3] Yang Shizhuo. (1989). A Brief Analysis of Newmark's Semantic and Communicative Translation Theories. *Foreign Languages in Fujian*, (Z2), 68-71.
- [4] Zhu Zhiyu. (2006). Newmark's Translation Typology. *Journal of Foreign Languages (Journal of Shanghai International Studies University)*, (06), 51-57.
- [5] Lao Long. (1990). "Different Paths to the Same Goal" – On the Consistency of Translation Theories of Yan Fu, Nida, and Newmark. *Journal of Foreign Languages (Journal of Shanghai International Studies University)*, (05), 52-54+64.
- [6] Lin Kenan. (1992). A Comparison of Nida's and Newmark's Translation Theories. *Chinese Translators Journal*, (06), 2-5.
- [7] He Juan. (2016). An Analysis of the Distinctive Features of Chinese Translations of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. *Guangxi Education*, (23), 110-111.
- [8] Liu Yingkai. (1994). Chinese Paratactic Tradition Viewed from the Perspective of English Hypotactic Tradition. *Journal of Shenzhen University (Humanities & Social Sciences Edition)*, (04), 61-70.
- [9] Chen Fan. (2012). A Comparative Study of Translation Strategies in Two Chinese Versions of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Master's thesis). Chengdu University of Technology.
- [10] Tan Qingyan & Chen Ping. (2011). A Comparative Appreciation of Black English Translation in Cheng Shi's and Xu Ruzhi's Chinese Versions of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. *Journal of Chifeng University (Philosophy and Social Science Chinese Edition)*, 32(01), 176-178.
- [11] Xue Xindong, & Wu Jun. (2004). A Comparative Appreciation of Two Chinese Translations of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. *Journal of Chengdu College of Education*, (12), 84-86+92.
- [12] Tang Xiuqiong. (2006). English Culture-loaded Words and Their Chinese Translation. *Journal of Southwest Agricultural University (Social Science Edition)*, (01), 126-130.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

This paper is an output of the science project.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author (s), with first publication rights granted to the journal. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).