

# The Application of Direct Translation in Literary Translation

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on Gutt's notion of relevance-theoretic account of translation, aiming to explore the significance of direct translation in literary translation through a series of case studies. The research employs a qualitative approach, analyzing specific examples of literary translations to demonstrate how direct translation can effectively preserve the stylistic and contextual nuances of the original texts. This thesis contributes to the field of literary translation by offering new perspectives and practical methods for translators to improve the quality and effectiveness of their work, ensuring that the translated texts not only convey the original meaning but also resonate with the target audience on an aesthetic level.

**Keywords:** *Relevance theory, Processing cost, Contextual effect, Direct translation.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the course of human civilization's development, translation plays a significant role. Translation is an interlingual communicative act, and the communicative approach is critical for studying translation. Sperber and Wilson initially proposed the Relevance Theory in their book "Relevance: Communication and Cognition." (关联: 交际与认知) Sperber and Wilson believe, "The notion of a contextual effect is essential to characterizing relevance. We want to argue that having a contextual effect is necessary for relevance and that other things being equal, the greater the contextual effects, the greater the relevance (Sperber & Wilson, 1986: 119)". Relevance Theory's explanatory power in linguistic communication lies in its dynamic reasoning based on a dynamic context. The contextual effect is manifested as follows: If all a contextualization does is add some or none of the new information to the context without otherwise altering the context at all, then this contextualization has no contextual effect. Otherwise, there is some contextual effect in the form of an erasure of some assumptions in the context, a modification of the strength of some assumptions in the context, or the derivation of contextual implications. (Sperber & Wilson, 1986:

117) Therefore, in the communication process, the assumptions or information provided by the speaker should not only be new but also capable of changing the listener's contextual assumptions; that is, they must produce a contextual effect. The proposition expressing new information can be relevant only by producing a contextual effect.

After the publication of "Relevance: Communication and Cognition" (关联: 交际与认知) by Sperber and Wilson in 1986, their student Ernst August Gutt conducted research on translation based on Relevance Theory. Five years later, in 1991, he published "Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context" (翻译与关联: 认知与语境), first applied Relevance Theory to translation studies, which has attracted widespread attention in the translation community.

## 2. GUTT'S RELEVANCE TRANSLATION THEORY: DIRECT TRANSLATION AND INDIRECT TRANSLATION

Gutt posits that "translation is an interlinguistic interpretive act." In the translation process, relevance is a relative concept, the strength of which depends on two factors: processing effort and contextual effects. Under the same conditions,

the less the processing effort, the stronger the relevance; the greater the contextual effects, the stronger the relevance. Optimal relevance is the maximum contextual effect obtained after making a practical effort to understand the discourse. Under the guidance of relevance theory, seeking the relevance of discourse becomes an essential way of understanding translation, and the communicative or informative intent becomes an important translation content. Whether the best relevance has been conveyed becomes the standard for translation evaluation. Translators must examine the discourse's contextual effects and the readers' cognitive effort to determine the translation strategy.

Direct translation and indirect translation are two strategies Gutt proposed based on relevance theory. Direct translation refers to the effort to retain all linguistic features of the original text that provide and guide readers to the intended meaning of the communicator. Direct translation relies on the "similarity of linguistic features." Indirect translation involves making significant changes to the linguistic features of the original text to preserve the "similarity of cognitive effects" of the original language. Thus, while altering the form of expression of the original text, it strives to retain its essential meaning.

Gutt views linguistic communication as an ostensive-inferential process, where the communicator provides ostensive stimuli, and the audience infers based on these stimuli rather than a representational act. He also notes that acts of communication about other acts of communication are higher-order acts of communication (HOAC), not meta-representational uses. In other words, translation is a HOAC, not a meta-representational act. According to Gutt, any HOAC that provides information about the two main elements of the original communication (the stimuli used and the understanding of intentions) is considered. A HOAC that focuses on "stimuli" is termed the stimulus-oriented mode (s-mode), which informs the readers of the target language about the form of the discourse used. Conversely, a HOAC that emphasizes "intentional understanding" is called the interpretation-oriented mode (i-mode), which conveys the meaning of the discourse to the readers. The i-mode HOACs closely resemble the interpretative use of discourse, while the s-mode HOACs encompass much more than what is included in the meta-representational use of language. They involve linguistic similarities and any perceivable similarities, including non-verbal

HOACs not covered by current meta-representational framework theories.

In light of this, Gutt (2004a; 2004b) acknowledged issues with his previously proposed "direct translation mode" and "indirect translation mode" and introduced the "stimulus-oriented translation mode" (s-mode) and "interpretation-oriented translation mode" (i-mode). He believed that the theoretical basis of the original modes was an interpretative similarity, with complete or maximum possible similarity belonging to the direct mode, which is the ultimate similarity of interpretative use. Other degrees of similarity were categorized under the "indirect mode." The drawback of this analytical model was that translations emphasizing the preservation of linguistic features could not be uniformly included in interpretative use. However, this could be achieved within a broader framework of relevance theory.

Additionally, since complete interpretative similarity is a key criterion for distinguishing between indirect and direct translation and is almost unattainable in translation, the direct and indirect modes seemed to be based on an idealized state. However, the "stimulus-oriented translation mode" and "interpretation-oriented translation mode" more clearly address these issues. They differentiate between "what is said" (stimuli) and "what is meant" (understanding). Thus, translations that emphasize linguistic feature similarity ("what is said") can be classified under the "stimulus-oriented translation mode."

In contrast, those that emphasize interpretative similarity ("what is meant") fall under the "interpretation-oriented translation mode," providing a unified explanation for all translation phenomena. Consequently, indirect translation, which initially emphasized various degrees of interpretative similarity, naturally becomes an "interpretation-oriented translation." However, direct translation, which initially emphasized complete interpretative similarity, is not automatically included in the "stimulus-oriented translation" because Gutt (2004a; 2004b; 2004c) believes that direct translation has unique characteristics. To achieve complete interpretative similarity in the original context during translation, it is necessary not only to ensure that the specific features of the translation and the original text are the same but also to guarantee that their communicative cues are identical. Communicative cues depend on the original text's features and the

understanding of its intentions. Therefore, direct translation is a highly hybrid form that combines characteristics of both the “stimulus-oriented translation mode” and the “interpretation-oriented translation mode.”

Gutt emphasizes that direct and indirect translation are “interlinguistic interpretive uses”. He likens the phenomenon of translation to a “continuum”. He writes, “...indirect translation covers most of the continuum, and direct translation picks out the limiting case.” However, direct translation plays a crucial role in the translation of literary works.

### 3. DIRECT TRANSLATION AND THE PRESERVATION OF LITERARY STYLE

Style is how literary works express ideas. Marcus Cicero believed that “translation should achieve stylistic equivalence”; in his “Essay on the Principles of Translation”, Tytler pointed out that a good translation should reproduce the distinctive features of the original work. Literary works are an art of language, and the translation of literary works is a process of faithfully reproducing the style of the original.

#### 3.1 *Uncertainty and Openness of Meaning*

Human communicative activities rely on inference. Sperber and Wilson introduced the concept of “implicature”, suggesting that speakers use implicatures to imply meanings beyond their words. Gutt also posits that “not all the meaning of the text is explicitly expressed”.

In literary translation, the uncertainty and openness of the original language’s meaning do not need to be stated explicitly. The artistic effect of literary works largely depends on the existence of implicatures. These implicatures, known as “weak implicatures” in Relevance Theory, create contextual effects that allow readers to appreciate the subtlety and beauty of literary works.

Literary works often achieve implicit meanings through linguistic polysemy, symbolism, and metaphor. For example, a simple description of a natural scene can celebrate natural beauty and metaphorically represent a character’s inner emotions. This polysemy and implicitness require readers to infer and associate more, enhancing the reading experience. In the translation process, translators need to carefully capture these implicit

meanings and convey them to readers in the target language through appropriate linguistic expressions.

- Example (1): 枯藤老树昏鸦，小桥流水人家，古道西风瘦马。

夕阳西下，断肠人在天涯。

(马致远, [天净沙] 秋思)

The first line of this poem, with its nine noun phrases, fully captures the essence of “autumnal longing.” The appearance of a “the traveller” in the second line suddenly brings the background of “autumnal longing” to life. Wen Yiduo believed reading such classical poetry was like appreciating mountains and lakes under the moonlight, where everything was veiled in a silvery mist, and that only through imagination could one discern precise contours.

- Translation 1:

Autumn

Crows hovering over rugged trees wreathed with rotted vine—the day is about to be done. Yonder is a tiny bridge over a sparkling stream and a pretty little village on the far bank. But the traveller has to go down this ancient road, the west wind moaning, his bony horse groaning, trudging towards the sinking sun, farther away from home.

(by Weng Xianliang)

- Translation 2:

Tune to “sand and sky”

—Autumn Thought

Dry vine, old tree, crows at dusk,

Low bridge, stream running, cottages,

Ancient road, west wind, lean nag,

The sun westering

And one with a broken heart at the sky’s edge.

(by Schleppe)

In translating poetry, the treatment of imagery is of paramount importance. In Translation 1, “Crows hovering over” are described as “Crows hovering over”, and the “wreathed with the vine” is translated as “wreathed with the vine”. Comparing Translation 1 with the original text, the original is primarily composed of noun phrases, while the translation consists of sentences and verb phrases; the original is static, whereas the translation is dynamic; the descriptive language in the translation

obliterates the implicit meanings of the original poem.

Translation 2 employs direct translation, in which the translator reproduces the noun phrases from the original text using the “modifier + headword” structure, remaining faithful to the original work’s style.

Poetry is the most literary form of writing, carrying the marks of its time and culture. Moreover, Chinese and English poetry have distinct structural systems, so special attention must be paid to relevance during translation. Relevance is not a simple binary concept but a matter of degree, and it is universally present in communicative activities. This implies that translators must consider various factors to achieve the best translation effect in translating Chinese classical poetry into English.

Poetry is created within specific historical periods and national cultures. Without considering the immediate context, one cannot truly experience the thoughts and feelings of the original poet in the background of each poem. This requires translators to analyze the context of the poetry’s creation through the text and related background knowledge. There are always differences in linguistic form between any two languages. When translating Chinese classical poetry’s vocabulary, grammar, and prosody into English, specific standards must be adopted, and Relevance Translation Theory can offer guidance. The degree of relevance between the artistic conception created by the original poem and that produced by the translated poem will determine the quality of the translation.

Poetry is imbued with characteristics of uncertainty and openness. It does not describe facts but creates images, which is a savouring of them. Poetry allows for different imaginations, and implicit meanings provide readers with the space for free interpretation. As readers explore the implicit meanings and make cognitive efforts, they interpret literary language based on their life experiences, cultural literacy, and personal preferences. In poetry translation, making implicit information explicit limits the reader’s imagination and the translator’s interpretation.

When translating poetry, it is essential to consider how the imagery is portrayed. The translator must decide whether to maintain the original’s static quality or introduce dynamics that may not be present in the source text. The choice between using noun phrases, as in the original, or verb phrases and sentences, as in Translation 1, can

significantly impact the reader’s perception of the poem. Noun phrases often create a sense of stillness and focus on the objects themselves, allowing readers to fill in the blanks with their interpretations. In contrast, verb phrases and sentences can introduce action and movement, which may shift the focus away from the imagery and onto the events or actions taking place.

Direct translation, as seen in Translation 2, strives to maintain the poem’s original structure and style. Using “modifier + headword” constructions, the translator preserves the noun phrases central to the poem’s imagery. This approach allows readers to engage with the text in a manner closer to the experience of reading the original poem. It respects the poet’s choices and the cultural and linguistic nuances embedded in the source text.

The beauty of poetry lies in its ability to evoke emotions and thoughts through imagery. The uncertainty and openness of poetry invite readers to participate in the creative process, to imagine and interpret the images uniquely. This participatory aspect of poetry diminishes when implicit information is made explicit in a translation. Readers can no longer explore the multiple layers of meaning and make connections based on their experiences and cultural backgrounds. Instead, they are presented with a single interpretation, which may not resonate with them as strongly as the original poem would have.

### ***3.2 Representation of the Author’s Writing Intention***

Relevance Theory posits that intentionality is an essential characteristic of communication. The intentional nature of communication dictates that successful communication must be predicated on intentionality. Translators should aim to reproduce the original author’s intent in the translation, enabling the target language readers to understand the author’s purpose and ensuring that the communication proceeds accurately and smoothly. Wang Jianguo has put forward the Relevance-Intention Translation Theory, which suggests that intention can serve as a benchmark for faithful translation. Translators must engage in dual reasoning based on explicitness throughout the translation process. First, they must search the source text for the original author’s communicative intention and the possible assumptions the author intends to convey to the readers through the text. Then, they use the target language to interpret these

assumptions, adding contextual information to reason out the final translated text. Literary works exhibit “literariness,” which brings about aesthetic and poetic effects. In showcasing “literariness,” authors often make certain information implicit, using writing techniques to guide readers to focus on the expressive forms of language.

To elaborate, “literariness” refers to the unique qualities that distinguish literary works from other forms of writing. It encompasses the aesthetic and poetic effects of the author's intentional use of language and form. Authors often employ various writing techniques, such as metaphor, symbolism, and imagery, to create a rich tapestry of meaning that goes beyond the literal words on the page. These techniques allow the author to convey complex ideas, emotions, and themes in an engaging and thought-provoking way.

To effectively convey the author's intent and the literariness of a work, translators must pay close attention to the nuances of the original text. This includes the choice of words and phrases and the language's structure, rhythm, and tone. By carefully considering these elements, translators can strive to create a translation that captures the original work's essence and allows readers to experience the same sense of wonder and appreciation that the author intended. Furthermore, translation can be seen as a form of interpretation and reinterpretation. Translators must balance their understanding of the text with making it accessible and meaningful to readers in the target language. This requires a deep understanding of the source and target cultures and a sensitivity to how language and meaning can shift across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

- Example (2)

Although school mistresses, letters are to be trusted no more nor less than churchyard epitaphs; yet, as it sometimes happens that a person departs his life, who is deserving of all the praises the stone-cutter carves over his bones, who is a good Christian, a good parent, child, wife or husband; who does leave a disconsolate family to mourn his loss...

(William Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*)

- Translation:

一般来说，校长的信和墓志铭一样靠不住。不过偶然也有几个死人当得起石匠刻在他们朽骨上的好话，真的是虔诚的教徒，慈爱的父母，孝顺的儿女，尽职的丈夫，贤良的妻子，他们家里的人也真的哀思绵绵的追悼他们。

(杨必 译)

In analyzing Yang Bi's translation of “Vanity Fair”(名利场), we can observe a typical example of how to handle the word “good” in the original text. Thackeray used only the descriptive phrase “good,” while Yang Bi's translation interprets “good” as “pious,” “loving,” “filial,” “diligent,” and “virtuous.” Although this explicit translation enriches the connotations of the text, it also poses particular problems.

The word “good” in the original text has openness and polysemy, and the author intentionally allows readers to explore the true meaning of “good.” This uncertainty enables readers to understand the term based on their experiences and values. However, when the translator provides multiple interpretations for the word “good,” this openness is diminished. The readers' imaginative space is confined to the several interpretations given by the translator, preventing them from freely associating and contemplating as they would when reading the original text. Besides, such explicit translation may distort the author's intent. Thackeray's use of the word “good” in the original text may not have been intended to be limited to a specific interpretation but rather to provoke thought and discussion through its ambiguity. Yang Bi's translation, however, concretizes this ambiguity, which may prevent readers from fully grasping the deeper meanings the author intended to convey. Moreover, this translation approach can also lead to the loss of some contextual effects. In the original text, the polysemy and ambiguity of the word “good” add rich contextual impacts to the entire sentence, allowing readers to understand and feel the text from different perspectives. When the translator concretizes the term “good,” these contextual effects are weakened, affecting the readers' overall experience of the text.

Although Yang Bi's translation enriches the text to some extent, its explicit nature also presents specific issues. In literary translation, how to remain faithful to the original text while preserving its openness and polysemy is a question worth further exploration.

### 3.3 Preservation of Communicative Cues

Gutt posits that authors incorporate certain communicative features into texts to guide readers toward a correct interpretation. These features are referred to as “communicative cues,” and direct translation is a method that preserves these cues. In literary translation, retaining communicative cues is

crucial for conveying the original work's style and intent. Communicative cues include semantic representations, syntactic features, phonological characteristics, polite expressions, onomatopoeia, and stylistic vocabulary, all essential elements in expressing the stylistic features of the original work.

By preserving these communicative cues, translators can provide target language readers with a similar cognitive space as the source language readers, enabling them to achieve the same interpretation within the context set by the original text, thus reaching optimal relevance. For instance, linguistic devices such as emphasis, contrast, and repetition in the original text are important communicative cues that translators must convey to the readers through appropriate translation strategies. Preserving communicative cues helps translators better express the author's communicative intent. Before translating, translators should fully consider the original text's linguistic environment and cultural factors to understand the author's communicative intent. By preserving the communicative cues from the source language, readers of the translation can appreciate all the stylistic meanings of the original work just as the readers of the source text do. Although accurately grasping the communicative cues of the original text is not an easy task, translators must exercise their initiative, taking into account various factors such as the original expressions, the linguistic environment of the source text, the historical context, and the author's writing style, to accurately capture the communicative cues of the source language.

- Example (3):

I had no communication by letter or message with the outer world. School rules, duties, notions, voices, faces, phrases, costumes, preferences, and antipathies are all that I know of existence.

(Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*)

In the excerpt from "Jane Eyre" (简爱), the most striking elements are the repeated occurrences of the words 'school' and 'and'. This repetition deviates from standard grammar, and from a literary perspective, it conveys Jane Eyre's depressed state of mind. The repeated use of the word 'school' expresses Jane's aversion to where she lives and studies. In contrast, the successive use of 'and' unabashedly presents her dissatisfaction with her living conditions. Although these communicative cues may seem cumbersome, they

enhance the contextual effect, allowing readers to experience Jane's inner world deeply.

This repetition is a powerful communicative cue that helps the reader understand the protagonist's emotional state and perception of her environment. By emphasizing the monotony of her life through the repetitive structure, Charlotte Brontë effectively conveys the oppressive atmosphere of the school and the protagonist's longing for something more. The use of 'and' creates a sense of accumulation, suggesting that each additional element mentioned adds to the burden and monotony of Jane's existence.

- Translation:

我和外面的世界不通信息。学校的规章，学校的职责，学校的习惯，还有见解，声音，脸容，习语，服装，偏爱，恶感；对于生活，我就只知道这些。

(祝庆英 译)

This translation exemplifies the application of indirect translation, where the communicative cues from the original author have mainly been lost. With the disappearance of these cues, the contextual effects and the pleasure of reading are also diminished. The communicative cues in literary works are often embedded within the structural style of the text. By preserving the original structure, one also preserves the communicative cues left by the author. The repeated use of "school" and "and" in Charlotte Brontë's passage from *Jane Eyre* (简爱) is not merely a stylistic choice but a deliberate technique to emphasize the monotony and confinement of Jane's life at the school. This repetition creates a rhythm that mirrors the relentless nature of the school's rules and routines, which are all that Jane knows of the world.

In translation, the repetitive structure is not maintained, which results in a loss of the original text's emphasis and rhythm. The translation presents the list of elements in a more straightforward manner without the cumulative effect achieved by the repetition. Consequently, the sense of being overwhelmed by the school's all-encompassing presence is not as palpable in the translation as in the original text. The translation's simplification of the structure may lead readers to perceive the passage as a mere enumeration of items rather than a reflection of Jane's constrained and monotonous existence. The original text's structure invites readers to engage with the text on a deeper level, to feel the weight of the school's

influence on Jane's life, and to empathize with her sense of isolation and longing for something beyond her current circumstances. Preserving communicative cues by maintaining the original structure is vital in literary translation. It allows the translation to convey not only the explicit content of the text but also the subtleties of the author's intent, the emotional resonance, and the aesthetic qualities that contribute to the overall reading experience.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Applying Relevance Theory in translation studies has provided a deeper understanding of the nature of translation. The translation strategies of direct translation and indirect translation are harmoniously unified within the framework of Relevance Theory. However, when it comes to literary translation, due to considerations such as the uncertainty and openness of meaning, respect for the original author's communicative intent, and the preservation of communicative cues, it is preferable to use direct translation methods as much as possible to reproduce the original style in the translation faithfully. Professor Liu Zhongde pointed out, "We should recognize the difficulty of reproducing the original style, but we must not give up because of the difficulties. Instead, we should face the challenges head-on and strive for excellence... to achieve a close match and try to get as close as possible to the original work's charm and style..."

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