

A Contrast on the Function Words in English and Their Chinese Translation in *Stray Birds* from the Perspective of Newmark's Communicative Translation Theory

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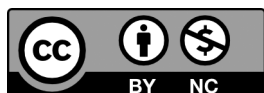
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Abstract: As a great work of Indian literature introduced to China during the May Fourth Movement, *Stray Birds* brought a breath of fresh air to the turbulent literary scene of China in that era, aiming to propagate the gospel of peace and love. Its ideas of sympathizing with the oppressed, opposing violence, extolling the spirit of patriotism, praising the beauty of nature, and human emotions aligned with the aspirations of intellectuals of the time. The renowned literary figure Zheng Zhenduo's translation of *Stray Birds* into vernacular Chinese provided innovative inspiration to literary translation and creation in that period and even for future generations.

In an era dominated by scientific rationalism, the widespread incorporation of modern Chinese function words into poetry became a distinct feature in the transformation of Chinese poetic forms. Translating function words involves a profound understanding of language and cultural contexts. As language evolves with societal changes, understanding contemporary characteristics becomes crucial for accurate translation. In current academia, there is a growing trend to do research on modern Chinese poetry with linguistics, yet the exploration from the perspective of modern Chinese function words remains limited.

Therefore, this essay will analyze and compare the translation of function words in *Stray Birds* by Zheng Zhenduo and Feng Tang spanning across a century, taking into account the characteristics of their respective eras and translation philosophies by using Newmark's Communicative Translation Theory. It will also summarize the developmental trends in the translation of English function words into Chinese, explore the profound meanings behind the evolution of function words, and discuss the challenges and responsibilities faced by translators in the current social and cultural context.

Keywords: *Stray Birds*; Zheng Zhenduo; Feng Tang; Modern Chinese Function Words; Literary Translation; Newmark's Communicative Translation Theory



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1 Introduction

The translation of poetry into Chinese has evolved differently under the social contexts of the May Fourth period and modern society. As a significant feature of the Chinese language, the evolution of function words greatly reflects

changes in people's ideologies, aesthetic tastes, and language habits, carrying certain socio-cultural significance. Newmark's communicative translation theory aims to convey information in a manner acceptable to the target readers, based on their language habits. Therefore, analyzing the translation of function words in poetry through the lens of communicative translation theory is an optimal choice. Exploring the challenges and missions faced by translators in specific cultural contexts is a crucial topic that requires in-depth investigation in the new era.

2 Literature Review

Before analyzing the evolution of the translation of English function words into Chinese and their socio-cultural significance, the author will comprehensively review existing domestic and international literature, particularly studies on the evolution of poetry translation into Chinese. This will facilitate subsequent research. In this chapter, the author not only briefly introduces the translation philosophies of Zheng Zhenduo and Feng Tang, Newmark's communicative translation theory, and relevant information about Tagore and his work *Stray Birds*, but also supplements historical context regarding the origin and development of modern Chinese poetry. This lays the groundwork for future research on the evolution of English function word translation into Chinese and its socio-cultural significance.

2.1 Domestic and International Literature

Research on the use of function words in modern Chinese poetry is predominantly conducted within Chinese linguistic circles, with limited studies abroad. Domestic scholars Wang Zelong and Qian Renren, in their article *Function Words in Modern Chinese and the Transformation of New Poetry Forms*, analyze how the extensive use of function words in modern Chinese poetry directly influenced the modernization of Chinese poetic forms, providing a research perspective for this paper. Xie Xiaojuan and Li Junling, in *On the Scientism Trend During the May Fourth New Culture Movement*, systematically introduce the historical background of the introduction of scientism to China, offering historical context for this paper. Zhang Xinyi and Zhou Jun, in *The Possibility of Dialogue with Tradition: A Brief Discussion on New Paths for Poetry Development in the 21st Century*, focus on the development and challenges of modern Chinese poetry in the contemporary era, providing references for this essay's exploration of the translator's mission in the new era. Pan Wenguo's book *A Comparative Outline of Chinese and English* offers theoretical guidance on the historical context of function words, providing a basis for diachronic research on their translation into Chinese.

2.2 Introduction to Translators' Philosophies

During the New Culture Movement, Zheng Zhenduo, as a prominent translator, played a significant role in introducing foreign literature and advanced foreign cultures to China. He emphasized that translations should preserve the original text's ideological content and writing style while striving for fluency, opposing literal translation. He believed that translations should be faithful to the original while elegantly expressed, and that translators serve as bridges in cultural exchange, introducing advanced theories and excellent works to promote the transformation of Chinese cultural traditions, offering guidance and inspiration for the translation field.

In contrast, Feng Tang, a scholar of the new century, advocates for a free translation style in the internet era, adapting to rapidly changing reader demands and creative ecosystems. He proposes the "self-expression" realm,

emphasizing the translator's self-expression and poetic pursuit, even if it sometimes surpasses the original text's intent. He focuses on using exaggerated techniques and unique rhythms to express himself, advocating for a free balance between faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance, without rigidly adhering to the original poem.

The translation philosophies of Zheng Zhenduo and Feng Tang reflect their respective historical contexts and stylistic differences. Despite their differing styles and influences, both demonstrate their translation capabilities, artistic achievements, and pursuit of "beauty, nature, and freedom," providing valuable comparative and learning materials for future generations.

2.3 Newmark and His Communicative Translation Theory

Peter Newmark, a renowned British translator and translation theorist, defined the concepts of communicative translation theory in his book *A Textbook of Translation*. Newmark posits that communicative translation aims to make both the content and language of the translation easily acceptable and understandable to readers, accurately conveying the original text's contextual meaning while focusing on the target readers' comprehension and reactions. In text selection, communicative translation theory is easily applicable to informative and vocative texts. He believes that translators should prioritize readers, ensuring that the translation has an equivalent effect on its readers as the original text has on its readers. Communicative translation theory emphasizes conveying the main points rather than detailed content. Newmark argues that communicative translation frees itself from the constraints of the source language structure, requiring translators to follow the cultural and language habits of the target readers for flexible translation, achieving concise and clear expression in the most natural way.

Translating foreign poetry into Chinese involves introducing the foreign language and culture to China, allowing domestic audiences to experience something similar to the source language audience. This requires choosing expressions that align with Chinese language habits while preserving the original poem's cultural essence, skillfully retaining the poetic elements of "imagery, rhythm, and rhyme" that highlight the poem's literary nature. Considering Newmark's classification of informative texts, the communicative translation strategy is effective in conveying the creator's intent and eliciting audience reflection and resonance. Therefore, the author chooses to adopt the communicative translation strategy for translating function words in poetry.

2.4 Tagore and His *Stray Birds*

Stray Birds, the original text of the translation to be studied in this paper, was written by the Indian literary giant Rabindranath Tagore. British politician Professor Gilbert Murray once praised Tagore as "a true poet, and a new kind of poet, who can make the imaginations of the East and the West understand each other. His genius is lyrical." This is not only due to his rich talent and exceptional writing skills but also because of his focus on world culture, opposition to feudal oppression, advocacy for the working class, love for peace, and pursuit of noble human qualities. The English original title of *Stray Birds* includes 325 beautiful, untitled short poems, first published in 1916. The poems mostly praise nature, celebrate the freedom, equality, and fraternity of life, advocate for harmony between humans and nature, and are fresh, lively, and elegantly profound. The poet integrates daily life's feelings, thoughts, and emotions into the poems in a casual essay style, written in prose form without strict meter.

The publication of *Stray Birds*, especially Zheng Zhenduo's translation, inspired the creation of short poems in the 1920s literary scene. Zheng Zhenduo once said in the preface to *Stray Birds*: "Recently, short poems have flourished.

Most of their authors have been directly or indirectly influenced by Tagore's collection." This shows that Tagore's *Stray Birds* not only brought ideological liberation to the Chinese people but also provided innovative inspiration in literary form.

3 The Developmental Patterns of Function Words in Chinese: A Comparative Study of Ancient and Modern Usage

Function words, as an indispensable part of the Chinese language, have evolved in tandem with the overall development of Chinese. Their usage has varied across different historical periods and social contexts. This section will focus on the primary characteristics of the colloquialization of function words, examining their evolution as reflected in the translations of *Stray Birds* by Zheng Zhenduo and Feng Tang. The discussion will explore the internal and external reasons behind these changes and conclude with an analysis of the challenges and responsibilities faced by translators in contemporary social and cultural contexts.

3.1 The Evolution of Function Words in Modern Chinese Poetry

During the transitional period of the early 20th century, when the old system collapsed, the Chinese people began to feel alienated from the millennia-old value system and cultural authority, leading to fierce criticism and rejection. Intellectuals sought a new cultural authority to chart a new path for society. At this time, "scientism," which contradicted the traditional values of the old society, became a weapon for Chinese intellectuals, led by Hu Shi, to critique the old civilization (Xie & Li, 2019: 3-12). The Chinese began to re-examine and choose their traditional culture and Chinese literature, including Chinese poetry. Tagore, as a pioneer of Indian prose poetry, came into view. Although his prose poetry abandoned the traditional meter of Indian poetry, it retained an intrinsic rhythm and a distinct sense of cadence.

This new literary form inspired Zheng Zhenduo, who was the first to translate in the form of prose poetry, causing a significant impact and becoming a driving force behind the birth of "new poetry." Westernized ideas began to profoundly influence intellectuals during the May Fourth period, and the logically rigorous grammatical systems of European languages gradually influenced the written Chinese language. The so-called "Europeanized writing" (Pan, 2005: 327), which emphasized complete sentence structures, clear parts of speech, and functional divisions, led the Chinese to develop from a purely semantic language to a more morphological one. Among these changes, the transformation of function words was particularly notable. The frequent use of function words in modern poetry can be seen as a conscious borrowing from the vocabulary and grammatical systems of English, Japanese, and other poetic languages (Wang & Qian, 2014: 146-161). Of course, due to the inherent stability of the Chinese language, some classical function words were retained in modern Chinese expressions, such as "而" (indicating contrast or result), "则" (indicating consequence or condition), and "与" (indicating connection or addition). For example, in Zheng Zhenduo's translation:

Example 1:

Source text: Life has become richer by the love that has been lost.

Zheng's Translation: 生命因为付出了的爱情而更为富足。(Zheng, 2009)

Under Newmark's communicative translation theory, Zheng's translation retains the causal relationship of the original text, using the function word “而” to achieve communicative goals, allowing readers to understand the deeper meaning of the original. This also reflects the faithful preservation of the original text's ideas in communicative translation.

Similarly, in Feng Tang's more recent translation, the causal usage of “而” appears: “如果因为思念太阳而终日哭泣，星星也将离你而去” (If you cry all day because you miss the sun, the stars will also leave you).

However, compared to the retention of function words, their transformation is more noticeable. The most significant trend in the development of function words is the increased use of colloquial particles, auxiliary words, and prepositions. As Wei Huiping notes in *Research on the Evolution of Chinese Word Meanings*: “Classical Chinese often uses ‘obscure’ words, which modern readers naturally find unfamiliar” (Wei, 2005). The development of modern function words is a process of gradually shedding this “obscurity,” which, during the May Fourth Movement, symbolized outdated traditional ideas and the barrier between the aristocratic, fragmented classical poetry and the general public. The colloquialization of function words reflects a populist consciousness, expressing the humanistic ideals and aesthetic tastes of modern intellectuals. It disrupted the aristocratic aesthetic and metrical norms of classical poetry and broke down the linguistic and conceptual barriers between poetry and the general public (Yang, 2015). One manifestation of this is the replacement of classical function words like “之” (a possessive or descriptive particle), “乎” (a classical question particle), “者” (a nominalizing particle), and “也” (a classical emphasis particle) with modern colloquial particles such as “吧” (indicating suggestion or softening tone), “啊” (expressing emotion or emphasis), “呢” (indicating a question or continuation), and “哦” (expressing realization or mild surprise), which convey richer emotions and tones. For example, in Zheng Zhenduo's translation:

Example 2:

Source text: Find your beauty, my heart, from the world's movement, like the boat that has the grace of the wind and the water.

Zheng's Translation: 我的心呀，从世界的流动找你的美吧，正如那小船得到风与水的优美似的。(Zheng, 2009)

Newmark's communicative translation theory emphasizes that the translation should convey the same function as the original. Zheng uses the colloquial particles “呀” (expressing emotion) and “吧” (indicating suggestion), making the translation more accessible to readers and enhancing communication. This aligns with the principles of communicative translation and reflects the modern poetic works' indirect call for readers to seek truth, goodness, and beauty in the world, finding beauty in natural imagery.

With the rapid development of technology and the widespread use of the internet, the speed and scope of information dissemination have expanded unprecedentedly. Leveraging the convenience of new media, the creation and translation of poetry have become more democratized, leading to varying quality in works. To stand out in this flourishing scene, many translators resort to ornate language, excessive metaphors, and even a return to classical poetic meters, often at the expense of the emotional and spiritual expression of the original English texts. Feng Tang and Zheng Zhenduo have different views on poetic form. Feng believes that “poetry should rhyme. Poetry without rhyme is as awkward as a girl without hair. Even first-rate poetry without rhyme is inferior to second-rate poetry with rhyme”

(Feng, 2015: 335). However, his translations often prioritize rhyme over the aesthetic appreciation of the text and the restoration of the original poem's essence (Wu, 2021: 196-197). The following analysis compares their translations:

Example 3:

Source text:

The night kisses the fading day, whispering to his ear,

"I am death, your mother. I am to give you fresh birth."

Zheng's Translation:

夜与逝去的日子接吻，轻轻地在他耳旁说道：

“我是死，是你的母亲。我就要给你以新的生命。” (Zheng, 2009)

Feng's Translation:

白日将近

夜晚呢喃

“我是死啊

我是你妈，

我会给你新生哒。” (Feng, 2015)

Under Newmark's communicative translation theory, Zheng's translation remains more faithful to the original, preserving its emotional and logical depth. In contrast, Feng's translation, in pursuit of rhyme, uses particles like “啊” (expressing emotion) and “哒” (a colloquial particle for emphasis), which add a colloquial tone but fail to effectively convey the original's deeper emotions and spiritual essence. The result is a forced combination of form and content that feels awkward and lacks coherence. Feng's insistence on rhyme, to some extent, contradicts the purpose of the extensive use of function words in modern poetry—to break free from the external constraints of traditional poetry and promote the liberation of poetic style and language. It also contradicts Tagore's intention in using prose poetry, which avoids strict rules of composition, parallelism, allusions, and tonal patterns, instead pursuing objective realism, candid expression, and philosophical reflection. The prose beauty and rhythmic beauty of *Stray Birds* are difficult to find in Feng's translation.

3.2 The Mission of Translators in the New Era

How to excel in translating English poetry into Chinese is a critical issue for translators in the new era. Newmark's communicative translation theory emphasizes that translations should convey the original text's function and elicit a similar response from readers as the original text does. Therefore, translators must not prioritize classical poetic meters at the expense of modern Chinese characteristics, nor should they blindly replicate Western poetic forms and lose the spiritual core of Chinese culture. The mission of translators in the new era is to convey the essence of traditional culture while maintaining the authenticity of the language (Zhang & Zhou, 2023).

4 Conclusion

4.1 Research Findings

This paper explores the social and cultural implications behind the colloquialization of function words in modern Chinese from the perspectives of the May Fourth period and modern society. It concludes that the development of Chinese function words is closely tied to the influence of Western thought, as well as changes in language habits and aesthetic preferences. While the specific missions of translators vary across different eras, their shared goal is to develop the core of traditional Chinese culture carried by language, thereby promoting the sustained and healthy development of Chinese culture.

4.2 Research Significance

By applying Newmark's communicative translation theory, this paper compares the use of function words in modern poetry across two eras spanning a century, offering a new research perspective. It also discusses the challenges and missions faced by translators in the current social and cultural context, providing a reference for future translation practices.

4.3 Shortcomings and Prospects

In an era dominated by entertainment, the perseverance of Chinese poets offers the possibility of breaking through the current predicament of poetry in the new century. However, relying solely on the innovation and attempts of poets is not sufficient to create a favorable situation. It requires institutional reforms from all sectors of society, as well as dissemination, encouragement, mobilization, and a greater emphasis on education. Only by absorbing the accumulation and nourishment of traditional poetry can we welcome a new future.

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