

# An Analysis of the Translation of English Songs From the Perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory: A Case Study of Taylor Swift's Songs

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Since the Internet and people's minds are increasingly open in recent years, China and the rest of the world have engaged in an array of cultural exchanges. As a result, English songs of all genres and sizes have made their way to China, leaving an enormous mark on the nation's music industry as well as raising the eyebrows of many translators. This paper examines the translation strategies used in Chinese-English songs, using Taylor Swift's music as an example, from the standpoint of Eugene A. Nida's functional equivalence theory in order to help the target language audience get over cultural barriers and understand the emotions of English songs just like the audience of the source language.

*Keywords:* English song translation, functional equivalence theory, Taylor Swift

## Introduction

As the streaming media has grown and people's minds have become more open, China and the rest of the world have engaged in a variety of cultural exchanges. English songs of all genres and sizes have now reached China, having a significant impact on the growth of the country's music industry as well as piqued the interest of many translators in song translation. The majority of listeners choose American country and pop music over the vast array of other musical genres because of their gorgeous, contemporary aesthetic, and simple lyrics. Additionally, the related song translations have been widely disseminated online, sparking contentious debates.

From the standpoint of functional equivalency theory, this thesis examines Taylor Swift's significant musical compositions that have been translated into Chinese. The reproduction of information from the source language in the nearest natural language, from semantics to style, is known as functional equivalence. The theory of functional equivalence is consistent with the goal of our Chinese translation of English songs in that it places a deeper emphasis on reader response rather than a one-sided pursuit of grammatical and rhetorical style compatibility. In the process of translating English songs, in order to remain the meaning of the original text, it is necessary for translators to understand the connotation of the lyrics, so that Chinese listeners can obtain a similar sense of after-listening. In this thesis, the Chinese translation methods of English songs are divided into four categories: direct translation, free translation, adaptation, and other methods by analyzing examples of different types.

### **An Overview of Functional Equivalence Theory**

Famous American translation theorist Eugene A. Nida proposed the concept of formal and dynamic equivalence as two distinct sorts of equivalence. The term “functional equivalence” has supplanted “dynamic equivalence” from *One Language to Another*. To emphasize the idea of function and prevent misinterpretation of the term “dynamic”, functional equivalence has been substituted.

Functional equivalency is further broken down into two categories in *Language, Culture, and Translation*: the minimal level and the maximal level. The minimum level is defined as the ability of readers of a translated work to comprehend to the extent that they are able to visualize how the text’s original readers must have comprehended and valued it. The phrase “the essentially same manner as the original readers did” is used to describe the maximal level. “Dynamic equivalence” is characterized in Nida’s theory as having “receptors’ response” as its nature. Translation in Nida’s view is now more about “the response of the receptor” rather than the message’s format.

According to Nida, the critic should examine the “receptors’ response” rather than the formal structures of the source text and translation to determine if a translation is loyal to the original text or not. Such a translation can be judged as a dynamic equivalent translation if the translator discovers that the reader in the receptor language comprehends and values the translated text essentially in the same way and to the same degree as the reader in the source language did.

In contrast to critics’ subjective judgments, Nida’s idea of “readers’ response” highlights the significance of an intended reader’s reception of a translated work in the receptor language. In certain ways, Nida’s theory is useful for literary translation, but it does not solve the problem of conveying the aesthetic values of a literary work when it is translated.

Three factors highlight the insufficiency of Nida’s approach for literary translation:

1. Nida’s translation technique pays scant consideration to the transference of style;
2. Nida’s analysis of style is shallow and overly generic;
3. Nida’s functional theory of style does not offer a useful way to communicate the aesthetic values of a literary work.

In conclusion, formal equivalence avoids introducing the translator’s opinions and thoughts into the translation in order to stay as true to the original text as feasible. This translation is considerably closer to being word-for-word. When compared to formal equivalent, dynamic equivalence or functional equivalence takes a more “thought for thought” rather than “word for word” translation method. Using dynamic equivalence, each phrase or idea from the original text is taken. Dynamic equivalency entails taking each phrase or idea from the source text and converting it into a phrase in the target language that expresses the same meaning but may not exactly match the source text’s wording.

### **Translation Strategies of English Songs From the Perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory**

“Functional equivalence”, the central tenet of Nida’s translation theory, states that translation is the reproduction of information from the source language in the most appropriate, natural, and equivalent language possible, from semantic to stylistic levels. The best results are obtained when the translation has the same impact on the target language audience as the original had on the audience speaking the source language.

It's important to completely comprehend the connotation of karma when translating English songs, so that the Chinese audience will feel the same way after hearing, in addition to honoring the original text's content. We are aware that functional equivalence theory places a greater emphasis on readers' reactions than lexical, grammatical, and rhetorical style correspondence, which is congruent with the goal of translating English songs into Chinese. As a result, the functional equivalence theory can be used to assess the Chinese translation technique of English song lyrics.

### **Literal Translation**

China and the United States have different civilizations, although all human cultures have some characteristics. The cultures of many nations may have been similar or even identical in the past. The songs convey this as well. This idea is the foundation of the literal translation approach, which is one of the most popular ways to translate English songs into Chinese. Most of the lyrics are simply translated using this method.

Example 1:

Oh darling don't you ever grow up

亲爱的/你永远不要长大

Don't you ever grow up just stay this little

永远不要长大/像这样小小的就好了

Oh darling don't you ever grow up

亲爱的/你永远不要长大

Don't you ever grow up it could stay this simple

永远不要长大/像这样简单就好了

The lines are from Taylor Swift's song "Never Grow Up", written in the context of Taylor formally leaving her parents' home and relocating on her own (Don't grow up). The song encourages young kids who are growing up to think that everyone will grow up to be what they dream of and is about the idea of "growing up" and Taylor's goal that people can always keep a youthful innocence. From the lyrics, it is clear that Taylor believes that one should have a peaceful mind and try to keep a childlike innocence in the process of growing up. In China, most people think the same way about growing up, so a direct translation can accurately convey the original meaning of the lyrics.

Example 2:

We are happy free confused and lonely at the same time

我们迷惘孤独/却不失自由幸福

It's miserable and magical

有些青涩苦楚/却奇妙得像魔术

The lyrics are from the song "22" which was written to commemorate the summer Tyler and her friends spent together when they were 22 years old. Friendship in Chinese means people who can share happiness and suffering and in the West as well, which is evident in the translation: loneliness and happiness together, misery and magic together.

### **Free Translation**

The goal of free translation is to allow the audience of the target language to understand the meaning of the song as much as possible and achieve the purpose of conveying the emotion of the song when a direct translation

cannot accurately convey the meaning of the original text. The original meaning is retained while making free wording choices.

Example 3:

Cause you were Romeo I was the scarlet letter

因为你是罗密欧，我是一个红色的字母

In the song “Love Story”, NetEase translates “Cause you were Romeo I was the scarlet letter” as: “因为你是罗密欧，我是一个红色的字母”. The translator did not understand the cultural connotation behind the word “the scarlet letter” and only translated it as “红字” according to the literal meaning of the phrase. The scarlet letter is a work of fiction by American author Nathaniel Hawthorne, which tells the story of a romantic tragedy in colonial North America, in which the heroine is punished by the church for her unwed pregnancy by wearing the red letter “A” for “adultery” for public display. Because of this cultural context, the “the scarlet letter” in this lyric cannot simply be understood as the “红字”, but rather as the “禁忌之爱” between Romeo and Juliet. Therefore, the method of free translation should be used, which is translated as “因为你就是罗密欧，我就是红字中的女主和你的感情不被认同”.

Another song, “Blank Space”, has the following lyrics.

Example 4:

But you will come back each time you leave

但你每次都会回到我的身边

Cause darling I'm a nightmare dressed like a daydream

因为亲爱的，我是个伪装成天使的恶魔

The original meaning of the lyrics is “我是个伪装成白日梦的噩梦”. “Daydream” and “nightmare” are opposite images, one romantic and the other horrible, which would be puzzling if translated directly. If the lyrics are translated into the more familiar “天使” and “恶魔”, it not only makes the meaning of the words clear at a glance, but also retains the contrast effect of the original text, making the atmosphere of the lyrics more romantic and beautiful in a different way.

Another lyric that sticks in my mind is a song in Taylor's new album “Midnights”.

Example 5:

Cause there were pages turned

毕竟局面已然翻转

With the bridges burned

退路已被燃烧殆尽

Everything you lose is a step you take

你失去一切 这都在你的计划范围内

In NetEase's translation, the lyrics “with the bridge burned” are translated as “退路已被燃烧殆尽” by obviously using literal translation. In fact, “burn the bridges” is actually an American idiom, which means not to leave yourself any way back. It is so closely tied to “破釜沉舟” in Chinese culture. When we viewed in context, the song is a very moving and inspiring look at Taylor's journey of growth. What is shocking is that she cleverly snuck it in her commencement speech at NYU a few months before her album drop, which the author thought was both genius and psychotic. The name of this song can be translated as “孩子，你正孤身独行”，which means that you got freedom and got a whole life ahead you. Although the lyrics are inspiring, it always makes people

sobering, which means that you should deal with your life and be independent. Therefore, it is an acceptable way to translate it as “你的人生将开启新的章节”. And the next lyric can correspond with the new chapter in translation and be translated as “遗憾铸就你前行的路”, which let the targeted audience get the real meaning of Taylor and feel inspired.

### **Adaptation**

Compared with free translation, the retranslation method is more liberal, and the translator can recreate the original song appropriately while respecting its connotation and meaning.

Example 6:

We are never ever ever getting back together

爱情不是你想买

We are never ever ever getting back together

想买就能买

The song's words, “We are never ever ever getting back together”, are used here. This song, which is also about love, was composed when Taylor and a friend discussed the possibility of her and her ex-boyfriend reconciling. It demonstrates Taylor's open-mindedness toward her long-dead affections. The lyrics “We are never ever ever getting back together” appear repeatedly, and if all of them are translated as “我们再也无法回到当初了”, and it will cause aesthetic fatigue to the listeners, which is not conducive to the expression of the emotion of the song. In order to avoid repetition and to enhance the comedy of the song, the translator can accept the alteration and repeat it. This not only prevents repetition but also gives the music a sense of humor, allowing listeners to truly feel the song's upbeat mood.

### **Transliteration**

Sometimes, unexpected outcomes can be obtained by transliterating English words into Chinese characters with a comparable pronunciation. This is particularly true when the Chinese character used combines sound and meaning by having a pronunciation that is close to English and retaining English meaning.

Example 7:

Cause the players gonna play, play, play, play, play

因为伪君子的人会一直装 / 装 / 装 / 装 / 装

And the haters gonna hate, hate, hate, hate, hate

黑粉们会一直黑 / 黑 / 黑 / 黑 / 黑

The lyrics are from the song “Shake It Off”, the main expression of the song. Taylor's attitude and views on public opinion are also expressed in the following lines. Although people cannot control what others say about them, they can control their own reactions, and when faced with such a situation, they generally have two choices: The first is to let public opinion change them; the second is to get rid of it. The translation of the lyrics cleverly translates the words “play” and “hate” into the characteristic Chinese characters “装” and “黑” which stand for “act” and “hate” respectively. The former represents those hypocrites who act in a way that is inconsistent with what they say, while the latter represents those villains who do not think and denigrate others at will.

More importantly, the Chinese character “黑” is an online term that has emerged in recent years, meaning “slander, defame”, and is used here to express the original meaning of the lyrics, and is pronounced similarly to the word “hate”. So, the use of transliteration in translation can make translation more vivid and interesting, attaining the same responses between source language people and target language people.

### Conclusion

Songs, the primary form of music, are significant in peoples' lives as entertainment. English songs are gradually making their way into Chinese society as a result of social advancement and continued mental expansion, and the Chinese translation of English songs has also come to the attention of the translation community as a problem. The functional equivalency theory is used in this essay to evaluate and research the Chinese translation of English songs using Taylor Swift's musical compositions as an example. The literal translation method, free translation, and adaptation are mainly introduced, and the transliteration method is briefly introduced. Regardless of the translation technique employed, the goal is to make the target language audience share the same emotional experiences as the audience of the source language in order to improve music appreciation and encourage the spread of music throughout the world. The translation of English songs is unpredictable, which involves a lot of different language habits and cultural connotations. In modern society, all kinds of words are used endlessly, which will lead to a lost in translation. In future studies, we should use different translation strategies to meet the needs of listeners and understand the deep meaning and cultural connotation behind the lyrics, so as to translate English songs more perfectly.

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