

# Discourse Analysis in Translation of Chinese Literature: The Case Study of Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang's Translation of *Kong Yiji*

LIU Miao

Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China

Since the early 1970s, discourse analysis has garnered significant attention across various academic disciplines, marked by the proliferation of numerous theoretical frameworks. Then the profound impact of discourse analysis on the field of translation research has become increasingly apparent, with a substantial body of translation studies embracing the discourse analysis approach. The disciplinary significance of discourse analysis has become undeniable. Contemporary China is in a relatively weak position in global cultural communication. To advance Chinese culture on the global stage, Chinese literary works serve as a precious channel. To effectively showcase the unique qualities of Chinese literature, translators must consider a multitude of influencing factors and address them judiciously to enable target language readers to fully immerse themselves in the essence of Chinese literary artistry. This paper takes Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang's translation of *Kong Yiji* as an example to elucidate the function of discourse analysis in translation of Chinese literature.

*Keywords:* discourse analysis, Chinese literature, translation, *Kong Yiji*

## Introduction

In 1952, Z. Harris first proposed the concept of discourse analysis, marking the inception of a discipline that would gradually evolve over time. By the early 1970s, discourse analysis has gained recognition across various academic fields and become a significant subfield of linguistics, with numerous theories emerging. Since the 1990s, the influence of discourse analysis on translation studies has grown substantially, leading to a proliferation of translation research employing the approach of discourse analysis. The academic significance of discourse analysis in translation studies cannot be overstated. Compared with textual analysis, discourse analysis encompasses a richer set of elements. To promote Chinese culture in the globe, Chinese literature is a valuable path. In order to fully demonstrate the characteristics of Chinese literature, a translator must consider many factors and handle them appropriately, so that the target readers can fully appreciate the flavor of Chinese literature. This paper will provide an overview of the definition and related methods of discourse analysis and conduct a discourse analysis of Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang's translations of *Kong Yiji* based on Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar.

### **Discourse and Discourse Analysis**

Discourse is also known as “text” or “speech”. Different scholars have different definitions of discourse. Taking English for example, some scholars have regarded spoken and written discourse as a continuum from informal spoken language to formal written language which encompasses seven types including casual conversation (Du, 2008, p. 93). Consequently, discourse analysis includes the analysis of both the discourse in spoken language and that in written language. According to Carter’s definition, discourse refers to the organization of text units beyond the level of sentence (Carter, 1982, p. 184). Hoey (1991, p. 266), on the other hand, sees discourse as the language organization that functions above grammar. Hu Zhuanglin (1994, p. 7) defines discourse as all forms of natural language that are not entirely constrained by grammar and can convey complete meaning within a specific context, with the purpose of taking language as a medium to accomplish specific communicative tasks. Hence, discourse can be a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph, or an entire article.

The theory of discourse analysis falls within the realm of functionalist and was initially proposed by American structuralist linguist Harris. In the early 1970s, discourse analysis gained prominence and developed into a vital branch of linguistics, and various theories and research methods gradually emerged. In discourse analysis, the content of a text serves as the basis for analysis, while the form of the text serves as the medium. Unlike simple text analysis, discourse analysis takes into account multiple factors, including cultural context, themes, central ideas, wording, structural features, writing styles, etc.

### **Systemic Functional Grammar and Halliday’s Discourse Analysis Model**

#### **Three Elements of Register and Meta-functions**

Halliday suggests that register comprises three variable elements: field, tenor, and mode. Field pertains to what language in the discourse is about, tenor refers to who the participants in the communication are, and mode signifies the manner in which the message is conveyed. Through lexical and grammatical choices, these three elements respectively reflect different meta-functions. Field represents ideational function, tenor reflects interpersonal function, and mode embodies textual function (Munday, 2016). Therefore, through coherent discourse (textual function), communication with others (interpersonal function) is achieved, reflecting the objective world and the inner world of the participants (ideational function).

#### **Discourse Analysis Model**

Halliday’s discourse analysis model, which originated from his Systemic Functional Grammar, offers new perspectives for translation studies. Many translation works have adopted functional linguistics as a theoretical framework. Systemic Functional Grammar focuses on language used in communication, sees meaning as a choice, and relates it to the socio-cultural framework in which it is embedded. “Choice” is a pivotal concept in Functional Linguistics. The forms of linguistic expression that people choose, consciously or unconsciously, whether in written or spoken language, depend on the context and actual needs. Choice determines the effect of a discourse, and each choice represents a different meaning or “function” (Huang, 2004, pp. 19-20). Halliday’s discourse analysis model involves the transformation and equivalence of language in terms of vocabulary, grammar, and pragmatics, which is applicable.

### **Discourse Analysis of the Translation of *Kong Yiji***

In the realm of translation, particularly in literary works, a translator must first grasp the original’s meaning and appreciate its artistic flavor. Only in this way can he select the most suitable linguistic forms for translation.

When choosing the macro-structure of the discourse, the form of sentences, phrases, and words, the translator should try his best to convey the semantic meaning and context of the original (Huang, 2004). Therefore, when conducting a discourse analysis of a translated work, we can focus on the choice of form, meaning, coherence, and cohesion. The following is a discourse analysis of the translation of *Kong Yi Ji* based on this mode of analysis.

### Choices in Form

#### Example 1:

Original: 孔乙己等了许久，很恳切的说道，“不能写罢？……我教给你，记着！这些字应该记着。将来做掌柜的时候，写账要用。”我暗想我和掌柜的等级还很远呢，而且我们掌柜也从不将茴香豆上账；又好笑，又不耐烦，懒懒的答他道，“谁要你教，不是草头底下一个来回的回字么？”

Translation: After waiting for some time he said earnestly: “You can’t write it. Eh? I’ll show you. Mind you remember. You ought to remember such characters, because you’ll need them to write up your accounts when you have a shop of your own.”

It seemed to me that I was still very far from having a shop of my own; in addition to which, our boss never entered aniseed-peas in his account book. Half amused and half exasperated, I drawled, “I don’t need you to show me. Isn’t it the hui written with the element for grass?”

The translation above reflects the flexibility in handling the form. In terms of paragraph division, the original consists of a single paragraph, while the translation divides the words into two paragraphs, changing the structure of the discourse. This is because the translator understands the meaning of the passage clearly and divides the description of Kong Yi Ji and the narrator into two paragraphs, allowing for a sharp contrast between the characteristics of Kong Yiji and the narrator. For the readers, the effect is better. Regarding the translation of phrases, the phrase “我暗想我和掌柜的等级还很远呢” is paraphrased as “It seemed to me that I was still very far from having a shop of my own”. “暗想” means “think for oneself”, while “等级” means “level” in Chinese. Yet the translation is different in form from the original and avoids word-for-word translation. This prevents comprehension difficulties while maintaining the intended meaning. All this reflects that the translator, when dealing with the translation, does not copy the form of the original text or translate it word by word, but adjusts the form very flexibly to achieve the best effect for the target language readers.

### Choices in Meaning

#### Example 2:

Original: 幸而写得一笔好字，便替人家钞钞书，换一碗饭吃。可惜他又有一样坏脾气，便是好喝懒做。坐不到几天，便连人和书籍纸张笔砚，一齐失踪。

Translation: Luckily he was a good calligrapher and could find enough copying work to fill his rice bowl. But unfortunately he had his failings too: laziness and a love of tipping, so after few days he would disappear, taking with him books, paper, brushes, and inkstone.

In this example, the translator’s careful choice in handling meaning is evident. In Chinese, “坏脾气” usually refers to “bad temper”. Without comprehensive understanding of the whole discourse, a literal translation might have been “irritability”. However, according to the following details, Kong Yiji is indolent and every time after several days of work he will disappear with the books, paper, and ink. It can be deduced that the deeper meaning of “bad temper” here is equal to “shortcoming”. Thus the translator, through discourse analysis, uncovers the deeper meaning under the surface of the word which ensures that the translation is reasonable and readable.

Example 3:

Original: 孔乙己自己知道不能和他们谈天，便只好向孩子说话。

Translation: Knowing that it was no use talking to the men, Kong Yiji would chat with us boys.

In this case, the phrase “不能” is translated as “no use”, which differs from a literal translation as “cannot”. If the translator only focuses on this sentence or this paragraph, he cannot translate in this way. The translators must consider the main idea of the article that Lu Xun portrayed an image of a scholar who was ridiculed repeatedly but pretended to be self-important. Kong Yiji did not lose the ability to speak or did not have the chance to talk to the adults. The real reason why he did not engage in conversation with the adults is that he knew that even if he did talk to them, it would not be of any significance, and he would only be rewarded with taunts and ridicule. This choice ensures that the translation remains faithful to the broader meaning of the whole discourse.

### Choices in Cohesion and Coherence

Example 4:

Original: 孔乙己着了慌，伸开五指将碟子罩住，弯腰下去说道，“不多了，我已经不多了。”直起身又看一看豆，自己摇头说，“不多不多！多乎哉？不多也。”于是这一群孩子都在笑声里走散了。

Translation: Growing flustered, he would cover it with his hand and bending forward from the waist, would say, “There aren’t many left, not many at all.” Straightening up to look at the peas again, he would shake his head and reiterate, “Not many, I do assure you. Not many, nay, not many at all.” Then the children would scamper off, shouting with laughter.

Given the cultural differences between Chinese and English, translating this sentence presented certain challenges. Apart from using logical connectors to maintain cohesion between sentences, the repetition of words in the context is another means of maintaining coherence. While it is a recognized rule that “Chinese favors repetition, whereas English avoids repetition”, in this instance, retaining the repetition is preferable to create the comical and awkward image of Kong Yiji. The repetition of the phrase “not many” connects the two sentences effectively in the translation. Through repetition of words in the context, the translation realizes the cohesion and coherence of the discourse.

### Points of Contention

While analyzing the translations by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, the author has identified certain aspects that require further consideration.

Example 5:

Original: 倘肯多花一文，便可以买一碟盐煮笋，或者茴香豆，做下酒物了，如果出到十几文，那就能买一样荤菜，但这些顾客，多是短衣帮，大抵没有这样阔绰。只有穿长衫的，才踱进店面隔壁的房子里，要酒要菜，慢慢地坐喝。

Translation: Another copper will buy a plate of salted bamboo shoots or peas flavored with aniseed to go with the wine, while a dozen will buy a meat dish; but most of the customers here belong to the short-coated class, few of whom can afford this. As for those in long gowns, they go into the inner room to order wine and dishes and sit drinking at their leisure.

In this passage, “短衣帮” and “穿长衫的” represent two groups of class distinctions. Those of lower social status wear short coats and engage in physical labor, while the educated individuals wear long gowns signifying their exemption from manual labor. The original text includes a clarifying note for “短衣帮” as “a term of old

referring to the laboring class dressed in short coats”. However, in the translation there is no note which aids readers unfamiliar with the cultural context in understanding its implications. English readers may find it challenging to grasp the significance.

Example 6:

Original: 孔乙己便涨红了脸，额上的青筋条条绽出，争辩道，“窃书不能算偷……窃书！……读书人的事，能算偷么？”

Translation: At that Kong Yiji would flush, the veins on his forehead standing out as he protested, “Taking books can’t be counted as stealing... Taking books... for a scholar... can’t be counted as stealing.”

In Chinese, “窃” is a synonym of “偷”, the two of which both means stealing in English. The word “窃书” in the original text is actually just a different way of saying “偷书”, which essentially means petty theft. However, the translation treats it as taking books, which is lacking in tone and deviates from stealing. In the author’s opinion, the word “pilfer” is more appropriate. The Oxford Dictionary’s explanation of pilfer is to steal things of little value or in small quantities, especially from the place where you work, which is obviously closer to the original text than take, retaining the original style and reflecting the situation that Kong Yi Ji is trying to cover up and highlight the irony.

### **Conclusion: The Significance of Discourse Analysis in Translation Studies**

Discourse analysis and translation studies are two distinct yet interdisciplinary fields of research. The convergence of these two fields enhances their interdisciplinary nature and enriches discourse translation (Zhang, Pan, Chen, & Luo, 2015, p. 30). Zhang Meifang and Huang Guowen have pointed out that traditional linguistics in translation studies focuses primarily on sentences, considering meaning as determined by words and sentences. In contrast, discourse analysis in translation research focuses on the entire discourse, considering meaning as reflected in linguistic structures.

Discourse analysis helps translators gain a more comprehensive understanding of the original text. Successful literary translation relies on a correct understanding of the original text’s discursive meaning. Coherence will be guaranteed if translators are mindful of source text’s discourse. Viewing individual sentences in isolation can lead to the neglect of deeper connotations within the text, resulting in incomplete understanding or a significant departure from the author’s original intent. Moreover, discourse analysis provides a theoretical basis for literary translation. It offers translators systematic and rich theoretical support to assist in determining translation strategies, selecting translation methods, and defining translation styles. Failure to consider the contextual discourse may either ignore the underlying meanings or disrupt the linguistic nuances of the text. Lastly, discourse analysis ensures the preservation of the original literary essence. In the case of poetic or prose texts rich in imagery and rhetorical devices, without a proper discourse analysis, the translation will leave readers bewildered for the underlying meaning is obscured.

In conclusion, in translation, it’s important to consider the bigger picture and understand the whole discourse. By employing discourse analysis in translating Chinese literature, we can boost the dissemination of Chinese culture on the global stage, thereby enhancing China’s cultural influence.

### **References**

- Carter, R. (1982). *Linguistics and the teacher*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.  
 Du, J. B. (2008). A Study on the theories and methodologies of discourse analysis. *Foreign Language Research*, 31(1), 92-98.  
 Hoey, M. (1991). *Patterns of lexis in text*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Hu, Z. L. (1994). *Textual cohesion and coherence*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Huang, G. W. (2004). A functional linguistics approach to translation studies. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 26(5), 17-21.
- Jaworski, A., & Coupland, N. (1999). *The discourse reader*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Lau, J. S. M., & Goldblatt, H. (2007). *The Columbia anthology of modern Chinese literature*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Munday, J. (2016). *Introducing translation studies: Theories and applications* (4th ed.). London: Routledge.
- Schiffrin, D. (1994). *Approaches to discourse*. Hoboken: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- Zhang, M. F., Pan, H. T., Chen, X., & Luo, T. (2015). The development of discourse analytical approaches to translation studies: A bibliometric over. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 36(5), 25-32+127.