

# Application of Text Type Theory in Poetry Translation-- Analysis of *Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson* Translated by Zhou Jianxin

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## Abstract

Translation of poetry has always been a difficult problem. Questions like what form to adopt, whether to retain the original structure, how to choose words, etc. have long confused numerous experts and translators. The text type theory proposed by German translation theorist Katrina Rice believes that poetry, a typical expressive type, should be translated as faithfully as possible to the original text, and this theory provides a theoretical basis for translators to choose a better translation strategy. This paper takes *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* translated by Zhou Jianxin as an example to analyze the application of text type theory in poetry translation. The translation has high faithfulness to the original text, including not only the form and the meaning of the poem, but also its aesthetic features and the personal style of the poet, which is a good sample of the application of text type theory. It provides a reference for subsequent translators to translate poetry, and also shows a practical path for translations of foreign poetry.

**Keywords:** Text type theory; poetry translation; Emily Dickinson.

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## 1. TEXT TYPE THEORY AND POETRY TRANSLATION

Before the 1970s, translation theory of the western world was dominated by the linguistic school which is based on text-centrism, emphasizing translation equivalence while neglecting the cultural exchange. Less attention was paid to the communicative function of the translated text and readers' reaction. This constraint was broken by the German school of the functional approach. They chose to face the culture of the target language, which pointed out a new direction for translation research. Among them, the text type theory proposed by Katharina Reiss, one of the representative figures of this school, is of great significance.

Based on Czech linguist K. Bühler's trichotomy of language functions, Reiss's text type theory divides texts into three main types, including expressive texts, which are used to express emotional attitudes with aesthetic characteristics, informative texts, which convey facts such as information, knowledge and opinions, and operative texts, which are designed to persuade readers to take certain actions. Reiss believes that different translation strategies should be adopted for different types of texts, and there

is no such a strategy that can be used for all types of texts (Reiss 79). On the basis of this classification, Reiss proposes translation methods corresponding to different types of text. The translation of expressive texts should be faithful to the form of the original text and the emotion of the author; informative texts should convey the corresponding concepts through simple words and phrases; and operative texts can be more flexible, with the emphasis on the effect of infecting the readers.

Poetry, with beautiful words, metrical rhyme and rich meaning, is a typical kind of expressive text, aiming at expressing the author's emotion with high artistry. However, poetry is "a tough nut to crack" in literary translation. It is hard to achieve balance between the aesthetic form, content and emotion. Regarding the translation of English poetry, Mr. Yang Deyu has proposed five strategies: 1) translating into prose; 2) translating into free verse; 3) translating into classical Chinese metrical poetry; 4) translating into semi-free verse; 5) translating into modern Chinese metrical poetry, that is, vernacular metrical poetry (Yang 2). The text type theory, on the country, holds a different view. Expressive texts emphasize the form of expression, so when translating, the key is maintaining

the aesthetic form of the original text and keeping it as close to the original author's writing style as possible, which means that the form and structure of the original poem should not be changed casually. Therefore, how to keep balance between faithfulness and innovation, and make it easier for readers to understand and appreciate on the basis of preserving its original beauty, is a major challenge in Chinese translation of English poetry, which requires high level of comprehension, literacy and creativity of the translator.

As a famous American poet, Emily Dickinson's works has been discussed and studied by many Chinese translators and scholars. As one of the scholars, Mr. Zhou Jianxin has translated hundreds of Dickinson's poems, and the aesthetic value of these translations has been highly recognized. Scholars has been especially keen on appreciating and discussing the characteristics of the poem, such as its rigorous correspondence, appropriate choice of words, and the harmony of form and content; they have analyzed its translation methods by applying various translation theories, such as Nida's functional equivalence theory (Song 168); and many scholars have compared this version with other different translations. However, the application of text type theory has seldom been noticed in the study of this translation. This paper will discuss the role of text type theory in the translation of Dickinson's poetry through the analysis of selections from Zhou's version.

## 2. BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO EMILY DICKINSON AND HER POETRY

Emily Dickinson, a famous 19th century American poetess, was born in 1830 in Amherst Banner, Massachusetts, and remained there for almost all her life. Dickinson's creative environment was a small house of her own, in which she lived in seclusion, refusing to enter the world. Instead, she chose to stand at the edge and observe things calmly, then examine it with her own unique perspective, reshaping everything with poetry. The simple and closed life brought Dickinson unusual calmness and grace. She can serenely accept loneliness, loss and death, and even treat them as indispensable nourishment in her life, respecting and loving them. But she was not indifferent; on the contrary, she was full of love for nature and never denied the greatness of life. In her quiet, isolated world, Dickinson's words are unexpectedly lively and powerful, using the simplest imagery to depict the most brilliant colors, and expressing her enthusiastic emotions in a straightforward and bold way. She is generous in her praise of beauty, using her unique language to compose wonderful pieces of music.

As a pioneer of modern poetry, Emily Dickinson's work is highly special, with simple and concise language but profound meanings. Her poetry

has been translated into many languages, widely spread and studied by literary enthusiasts. However, Dickinson's poetry is also innovative in its use of traditional metrical forms, such as the use of dashes to enhance the rhythm of the poems and make them more coherent. The poet is often inspired by a scene or an event, and the poems are not long and the context is not clear, so they are abstract and difficult for readers to understand and appreciate in depth.

Therefore, as a bridge between the reader and the poet, the translator also plays a crucial role. To accurately grasp the emotions that the poet wants to express, the translator needs to have an in-depth study of them, understand the special mind of the poet at a certain stage, and analyze, guess, and even imagine the author's creative intentions according to the characteristics of this stage. This requires the translator to have the ability of empathy and understanding. At the same time, how to express the author's intention in another language without losing the rhythmic beauty of the original poem also requires the translator to have good literary skills. Therefore, translating Emily Dickinson's poems is never an easy task.

## 3. APPLICATION OF TEXT TYPE THEORY IN THE TRANSLATION OF *THE POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON*

Difficult as the translation of Emily Dickinson's poetry is, there are still experts and scholars who have made bold attempts. As the British translator Susan Bassnet says, "Poetry is not what lost in translation; it is rather what we gain through translation and translators. (Bassnet 63)" As the one who analyzes and recreates the beauty of poetry, the translator also needs to be a poet. Therefore, Zhou Jianxin, who is a poet himself, has done a remarkable job in facing this challenging task.

Through analyzing some selections from Zhou Jianxin's translation of Emily Dickinson's poetry, this paper explores the application of text type theory in poetry translation from three perspectives, including the rigor of the sentence pattern, the subtlety of the word choice, and the closeness of the meaning.

### 3.1 Faithfulness in Sentence Pattern

According to the text type theory, the translation of poetry should preserve the aesthetic form of the original poem as much as possible, among which, the most important is the structure. It is a big challenge for translators to reproduce the specific characteristics of English poetry. Dickinson's poetry is famous for its unique personal style, with short and spontaneous sentences, and nice use of dashes. An important feature of Zhou's translation version is that it greatly conforms to the original work in syntactic level, without changing the structure of the original poems.

Truth—is as old as God—  
His Twin identity  
And will endure as long as He  
A Co-Eternity—  
(Dickinson 259)

真理——古老如上帝——  
论身份是他的孪生  
并长期和上帝一起  
忍受同样的永恒——  
(Zhou 259)

This part is taken from poem 836 in the poetry anthology, comparing truth with God, highlighting the fact that truth never dies in the long history and remains unchanged through torture and refinement, expressing the poet's respect and admiration for truth. The translation follows the use of dash in the original text,

which acts as an invisible thread to link the image, enhancing the rhythm and extending the meaning of words. In addition, the translator has retained the consonance of the even lines without altering the content and meaning of the poem, keeping the phonetic beauty of the original in the process of translation.

Time feels so vast that were it not  
For an Eternity—  
I fear me this Circumference  
Engross my Finitude—  
(230)

时间给人感觉如此宽广  
假如他不是奔向永恒——  
我担心这种浩瀚  
会耗尽我有限的一生——  
(230)

This stanza is taken from the 802nd poem of the poetry anthology, expressing the poet's reverence for the vastness of time and the sense of regret for the brevity of life. In English poetry translation, the handling of the order of words is a difficult point, and the translator needs to maintain a balance between keeping the structure of the original and reducing the difficulty of reading for the reader. In dealing with this stanza, Zhou does not simply lay out the original poem word to word, but combines the clause of condition separated by the first two lines of the original poem and re-breaks the sentences, solving the problem of top-heaviness that may arise when translated into Chinese. The translation is more in line with the reading habits of Chinese people. It conforms as closely as possible to the original text without being completely bound by its structure, making the poem more fluent and natural and enhancing its readability.

and scholars for years. The text type theory holds that expressive text should focus on the closeness of the text and the reproduction of the beauty of the original work. Due to the precious uniqueness and research value of the poet herself, it is especially valuable and important to retain the basic features of Dickinson's poems, and Mr. Zhou Jianxin's translation has precisely met this requirement.

### 3.2 Faithfulness in Word Choice

In the Chinese translation of English texts, the correspondence and choice of words also play a crucial role in its success. Cultural differences between the source language and the target language lead to subtle differences in words and imagery, and in order to meet the criteria of the text type theory of "faithfulness", not only must the words correspond, but also the affective tendency must be the same. Therefore, the translator should have a deep and accurate understanding of the poem in order to achieve rigorous correspondence and appropriate expression in word selection.

Whether to entirely reproduce the pattern of a specific literary genre in the source language when translating has been discussed and debated by experts

The Trees like Tassels—hit—and  
swung—  
There seemed to rise a Tune  
From Miniature Creatures  
Accompanying the Sun—

树木似流苏——碰撞——  
摇摆——  
恍惚一支幽歌  
起自微小的众生  
与太阳应和——

A Bird sat careless on the fence—  
One gossiped in the Lane  
On silver matters charmed a Snake  
Just winding round a Stone—

一只鸟在篱笆上悠然坐着——  
有人在小巷里絮叨  
那银色的故事迷住了一条蛇  
它将一块石头紧紧缠绕——

Bright Flowers slit a Calyx  
And soared upon a Stem  
Like Hindered Flags—Sweet  
hoisted—

鲜艳的花朵绽开花萼  
蹿上一根枝头  
像被压抑的旗——美美地  
升起——

With Spices—in the Hem—  
(6)

芳香馥郁——在花瓣四周——  
(6)

This part of is taken from No. 606 poem of the poetry anthology, where the poet expresses her admiration and love of nature through the different scenes of summer, with a cheerful and bright tone as well as detailed and vivid descriptions. Thanks to the profundity of Chinese, the choice of words in this version is both precise and extraordinarily clever. For example, the none ‘tune’ is translated as ‘幽歌’ rather than ‘曲调’, and ‘creature’ as ‘众生’ rather than ‘生物’ makes for a mood of distance and expansion, with a glimpse of the lushness and prosperity of the summer landscape through the swaying branches. The choice of verbs is also noteworthy, for example, the translation of ‘Accompanying’ as ‘应和’ is a clever use of personification based on the original text, adding to the dynamic beauty of the picture and reflecting the harmony and brightness of the summer day; the translation of ‘gossiped’ as ‘絮叨’ and ‘soared’ as ‘蹿’ is closer to the habits of Chinese readers and is more friendly and easy to understand.

But Zhou is not satisfied with a simple lay out of the original poem through a direct translation, and

Each Life Converges to some Centre—  
Expressed—or still—  
Exists in every Human Nature  
A Goal—

Embodied scarcely to itself—it may be—  
Too fair  
For Credibility’s presumption  
To mar—

Adored with caution—as a Brittle  
Heaven—  
To reach  
Were hopeless, as the Rainbow’s Raiment  
To touch—

Yet persevered toward—sure—for the  
Distance—  
How high—  
Unto the Saint’s slow diligence—  
The Sky—

Ungained—it may be—by a Life’s low  
Venture—  
But then—  
Eternity enable the endeavoring  
Again.  
(103)

there are also his own understanding and reproducing of the details. For example, the word ‘spices’ in the original is translated into ‘芳香馥郁’, which expresses the author’s fondness more clearly and strongly, as if the words were expressed by the fragrance of the flowers, enhancing readers’ sense. At the same time, the use of four-character phrases is in line with the expressions of the Chinese people, making the verses more phonetically beautiful.

### 3.3 Faithfulness in Feeling Expression

As mentioned above, due to the uniqueness of Emily Dickinson’s life experience and writing style, a translator can only convey the emotions she wants to express more accurately with a thorough understanding of the poet. Zhou Jianxin is not only a translator, but also a scholar who has studied Emily Dickinson in depth, so he is able to better present the tone of the poem, more precisely convey the meaning and connotation of the original, and achieve “likeness” in not only the level of form, but also the level of meaning and emotion.

每个生命都向每个中心汇集——  
轰轰烈烈——或静悄悄——  
每个人心里  
都有个目标——

它几乎不显型——或许——  
它太美好  
可信的推测  
也无法抹掉

小心仰慕——像对易碎的  
天堂——  
要进入  
无望，像彩虹的霓裳  
难得一触——

但仍坚持前进——更坚定——向远  
方——  
多么高远——  
对圣徒们迟缓的勤奋而言——  
那苍天——

一生平凡奋斗——也许——毫无所  
获——  
但是——  
永恒会令人振作  
再次。  
(103)

The above is the 680th poem in the poetry selection, which is the poet's description of the image of 'goal'. The 'goal' here is actually more like a 'dream', either ambitious and great or mundane and small, but all are beautiful and unattainable. Everyone strives for it, even if they fail several times; they get back up and keep on fighting, out of the desire to achieve it. The poet Dickinson does not lose her love of life because of the isolation of her environment; on the contrary, she admires and celebrates the good quality of men's persistent pursuit of their goals. According to text type theory, the translator also needs to present this theme in the translation, reproducing the sense of struggle and strength of the original poem.

In this version, 'Expressed' and 'still' are translated as '轰轰烈烈' and '静悄悄'. The use of reduplicated words precisely shows the two states of 'goal', either powerful or silent. The translation of 'sure' as '更坚定' and 'high' as '高远', both express the appreciation of the relentless pursuit of dreams and the admiration of the tenacity of life. The translation of 'Eternity enable the endeavoring' as '永恒会令人振作' emphasizes the subject 'Eternity' and stresses the role of 'human'. It is logical and at the same time stunning, and the word '振作' echoes the word '再次', highlighting the strong will of man as the master of life. All of them correspond closely with the emotion expressed in the original text and meet the requirements of text type theory for the translation of expressive texts.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Text type theory provides a more accurate idea for the translation of poetry, which is based on the faithfulness to the original text, not breaking its structure, conveying the attitude and emotion of the poet, and retaining the beauty of form and rhythm as much as possible. In other words, the translation of

expressive texts should emphasize the 'likeness' both in shape and in spirit, so that the readers can understand the connotation of the original poem and at the same time appreciate the exquisite design of the creation. Zhou Jianxin's translation of Emily Dickinson's poems basically meets the above requirements and is a good sample for the application of this theory in poetry translation.

Under the guidance of the text type theory, Zhou's translation of Dickinson's poems are more closely matched to the original works and better reproduce the original beauty of the poems for readers. The successful application of this theory in the translation of Dickinson's poetry proves its feasibility as a guiding theory in the Chinese translation of English poetry, provides a direction for how to deal with the structure and word choice of foreign poetry, and points out a practical path for translators to cope with translation of literary texts.

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