

# A Study of Translation of Children's Literature from the Perspective of Communicative Translation Theory

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**Abstract:** With the growing emphasis on early education, children's literature is gaining momentum, and the communication and exchange of children's literature across different countries have become increasingly frequent. However, due to differences in social background, educational concepts, history, and culture, non-localized children's literature often struggles to resonate with young readers in a new cultural context. This lack of resonance can hinder children's engagement and limit the potential impact of otherwise meaningful stories. Peter Newmark's theory of communicative translation, which emphasizes the reactions and feelings of target language readers, offers a valuable framework for addressing such challenges. The theory aims to make the translation have the same impact on the target language readers as the original does on the source language readers, and has significant relevance for the translation of children's literature. In this paper, the author explores effective translation strategies from the perspective of communicative translation, aiming to enhance cross-cultural understanding and appreciation of children's literary works.

**Keywords:** Communicative translation theory; Translation of children's literature

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## 1. Background

In recent years, the increasing emphasis on early childhood education has propelled children's literature into a position of significant importance globally. As works of children's literature traverse cultural boundaries, they carry with them the potential to enrich young minds worldwide. This domain is no longer confined within national borders but is characterized by a growing momentum in international communication and exchange. Therefore, the translation ideology of children's literature combines the universality and specificity of translation ideology and research, and has significant research value<sup>[1]</sup>.

However, this cross-cultural journey is fraught with challenges. Profound differences in social contexts, educational philosophies, and historical and cultural traditions often mean that non-localized children's literature fails to resonate with its new, young audience, which might lead to incomplete or even incorrect interpretations of the translation by the target language readers<sup>[2]</sup>. Thus, it is of vital importance for the translators to have a reader-oriented mindset during children's

literature translation<sup>[3]</sup>.

This disconnect highlights a critical need for effective translation strategies that can bridge the cultural gap without compromising the literary and educational value of the original works. Therefore, this research seeks to address the core problem of cultural resonance by exploring how Newmark's communicative translation theory can inform and guide the development of effective strategies for translating children's literature.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. A Brief Introduction to Newmark's Text Types

On the basis of their previous studies of language functions, Newmark made some adaptations and came up with his own definition of text functions and translation theory. He divided language functions into six types: expressive function, informative function, vocative function, phatic function, aesthetic function and metalingual function, among which the previous three types are the chief functions.

Newmark (2002) elaborated on these three chief functions and divided them based on the "core" – the texts' target, and the author's status<sup>[4]</sup>.

**Table 1.** Core and Author's Status of Text Types (Peter Newmark, 2002, 40)

Function	Expressive	Informative	Vocative
Core	Writer	'Truth'	Readership
Author's status	'Sacred'	'Anonymous'	'Anonymous'

Expressive texts include serious imaginative literature, authoritative statements, essays, autobiography, etc., in which the author aims to "express his feelings irrespective of any response"<sup>[4]</sup>. Informative texts include textbooks, reports, paper, etc., which emphasize information conveying.

Vocative texts place the core in readership, which include notices, instructions, publicity, propaganda, popular fiction, etc., "whose purpose is to sell the book/entertain the reader". The term "vocative" is "in the sense of 'calling upon' the readership to act, think or feel"<sup>[4]</sup>. This type of texts requires the content to be instantly comprehensible to the receptors. Therefore, children's literature should belong to the vocative type. As Newmark pointed out, "Semantic translation is used for 'expressive' texts, communicative for 'informative' and 'vocative' texts"<sup>[4]</sup>.

### 2.2. Principles of Communicative Translation

According to Newmark's definition, communicative translation concentrates on the "force" of the content. Principles of communicative translation can therefore be inferred.

#### 2.2.1. Economy and Accuracy

The principle of economy helps avoid subjective and redundant paraphrasing, thereby ensuring accuracy. In regard to accuracy, although translators can be freer when applying communicative translation, like explaining the context, correcting the mistakes, it is still the unshakable rule. Newmark emphasized that accuracy cannot be neglected during translating. "... it should be generally accepted that translations must always be accurate... Accuracy is the common property of both semantic and communicative translation"<sup>[5]</sup>. Besides, Newmark also commented that a communicative translation "is likely to be smoother, simpler, clearer, more direct, more conventional, conforming to a particular register of language, tending to undertranslate"<sup>[6]</sup>, and fulfills the two main aims of translation - accuracy and economy<sup>[4]</sup>.

But it's worth noting that "accuracy" doesn't go extreme. It neither refers to literally word-for-word "precise"

translation nor denies the flexibility to focus on the receptors' feelings and response. Instead, it leads translators to keep respect for the original texts and deal with texts carefully.

### **2.2.2. Comprehensibility**

As Newmark pointed out, "A communicative translation must not be more difficult to understand than the original"<sup>[5]</sup>. The children are too young to comprehend complex messages and difficult words, and meanwhile, they don't have enough social experience to recognize certain cross-cultural information. If special terms appear in the plots, such as idioms, dialects, humor elements, ironic language, etc., which are often closely related to the country's language habits, current or historical events and culture, it is difficult for the children to understand the meaning if the translation is too "foreign". Therefore, the translation of children's literature, under the guidance of communicative translation, should make the content and language readily acceptable and comprehensible to the young readers.

### **2.2.3. Reader-Oriented**

The core of communicative translation is to make the effect of translation on the target language receptors the same as that of the source language on the original receptors. So, this principle also points to a reader-oriented pursuit. In Newmark's view, "... 'equivalent effect' is the desirable result, rather than the aim of any translation"; "... in the communicative translation of vocative texts, equivalent effect is not only desirable, it is essential"<sup>[4]</sup>.

When there are conflicts between content and the force, communicative translation will choose to be effective rather than be informative. "Communicative translation addresses itself solely to the second reader, who does not anticipate difficulties or obscurities, and would expect a generous transfer of foreign elements into his own culture as well as his language where necessary"<sup>[5]</sup>. Compared to semantic translation which tends to present foreign and exotic vocabulary, communicative translation tends to make the concepts blend into a culture.

## **3. Discussion and Case Analysis**

### **3.1. The Features of Children's Literature and the Applicability of the Communicative Translation Theory**

First, children's literature has distinct phonological features. These features fit children readers' thinking and meet adults' needs to read to children. Second, its language and diction have two key traits. One is directness (not complexity) to ensure children's understanding; the other is vivid, imaginative expressions to build rounded characters and bring immersive experiences. Third, it contains interactive conversations, some of which are educational.

Thus, the communicative translation theory can improve children's reading experience and remove their reading barriers. The theory focuses on comprehensibility, economy, accuracy and reader orientation. It helps prioritize children's reading experience, pursues comprehensibility and effect equivalence, and cares about readers' feelings to stimulate empathy with characters - adapting unfamiliar expressions to the target culture can maximize reader resonance. However, the "economy" principle is less suitable, as proper additions often enhance expression. Details will be discussed below.

### **3.2. Case Study**

On the basis of the previous discussions, some examples featuring children's speaking habits (like onomatopoeic words and reduplicative words), modal particles, and accents or dialects will be analyzed from the angle of the principles of communicative translation theory.

#### **3.2.1. Adaptation to Children's Speaking Habits**

In this category, the translation examples apply onomatopoeic words and reduplicative words that are funny and "childish" in order to, firstly, keep in line with children's expressing habits; and secondly, allow the texts to be read out.

Chinese and English are two very different languages, and their long literary traditions have formed their own distinctive expression habits – reduplication, is a typical characteristic in Chinese children language. In these examples, onomatopoeic and reduplicative words are frequently used, which make the target language more colloquial and livelier. In Examples 1 and 2, reduplications like “游戏游戏” (have fun) and additions like “正正经经” (set to work) “一口一口” (finished off) make the language more childlike. In Example 3, the added onomatopoeic word “浦叉浦叉” (soothing splashing about) brings the readers a more authentic auditory sense. In Example 4, instead of translating the original words into “肮脏的” (dingy), “潮湿的” (wet) or “乌黑的” (sooty), the translator tries to vividly “voice” the scene, and also avoids stiffness of the language. By doing so, the children readers can better feel and understand the scenes since the language becomes more felicitous and vivid and the expressing effect is enhanced.

### 3.2.2. Modal Particles

In this category, translators adapt or add the modal particles to create a reading effect as similar as possible to the original language.

In Example 5, the repeated “well” shows a sarcastic attitude, and the translation expresses the ironic and deriding tone in Chinese. In Example 6, many modal particles are added to better demonstrate Alice’s being “smug”. In English, there are hardly any modal particles, on which the Chinese depend very much to express different feelings. Even in the same sentence, the meanings can vary greatly if different modal particles are added at the end. Just as Example 6, if modal particles like “呵”, “啦!” and “哼” are deleted, the tone will be completely different - Chinese children readers might wonder if Alice gets really angry and discouraged instead of sensing that Alice is acting cute. Therefore, the translators must care for the receptors’ response, and should not convey the original meaning and emotion incorrectly, which is the very emphasis of the principle of “reader-oriented” in communicative translation theory.

### 3.3.3. Accents, Dialects, or Mispronounced Words

In certain circumstances, the characters’ speaking style, diction and accent can reflect their personality, background, mood, etc., which can enrich the character image and add more foreshadowing to the plot. For example, if Chinese readers read an out-of-the-way accent or non-standard Mandarin, they can quickly pick up on the character’s background or even social status, and thus have a quick acquaintance with the character and, if possible, better appreciate the humor or sarcasm. And for the children readers, it is also a good way to learn about social diversity. Therefore, how to enhance the expressing effect and avoid fading the effect on the original readers is a challenge.

Just like when Chinese people hear the northeast accent, they can always sense a bit of humor, but it seems perfectly normal for overseas audience, and vice versa. In this example, with a large number of slang and grammatical mistakes, the source text vividly depicts the image of a coarse coachman. But in TT1, the translation is flat and the distinct image of the coachman is ignored. The readers can’t tell his characteristics. While TT2 adds accent-wise humorous elements, phrases like “甬叨叨” (“Stow your gab!”), “啥娃子” (no kids), “基道” (I knows), “俺一打眼儿” (I sees), and “呱呱叫的小伢子” (a first-rate yearling), which are a funnier and more “rural” way to express emotions, smartly accord with the slang and grammatical mistakes in the source text, and also reshape the character better.

Examples 8 to 10 all include purposefully mispronounced or misspelled words, which in the source text are to create a sense of humor and to demonstrate the childish innocence. If the translators translate word for word (TT1), the children readers will feel confused and find it difficult to understand the text, and the translation becomes less and even not at all humorous, which violates the principle of comprehensibility and reader-oriented. But in Example 8, and the TT2 in Example 9 and 10, the translators didn’t rigidly adhere to the original object, but make certain adaptation for better reading effect (humor) and understanding – “鲤鱼” (carp, which has similar pronunciation to “reason” in Chinese) instead of the original meaning “鼠海豚” (porpoise) to match the similar pronunciation “理由” (reason); likewise, “撇浆” (paddle) to match “别讲” (don’t say).

## 4. Conclusion

### 4.1. Major Findings

Communicative translation theory emphasizes readers' comprehension and response, making it highly applicable to children's literature translation. It ensures that young readers can understand, accept, and emotionally engage with the story. By prioritizing comprehensibility, it helps avoid confusion in plot comprehension; through a reader-oriented approach, it preserves the original reading experience. Thus, even if techniques like deletion are less used, communicative translation effectively guides children's literature translation and enriches the reading experience when properly applied.

### 4.2. Limitations

The author spent most of the energy on finding cases in E-C translation, but did not study cases of Chinese translation into English. First, the translation of children's literature has not been under systematic investigation in China, and there are not enough academic researches and sample cases on C-E translation of children's literature for research. Second, for the author, as a native Chinese speaker, it is comparatively easy and accurate to judge whether a Chinese translation is of high quality. However, if C-E translation is to be judged, the author might fail to stand in the receptors' shoes and try to accurately comment on a translation with their mindset.

Therefore, for the translation of children's literature under the background of cross-cultural communication, the focus is more on the cases in E-C translation in order to avoid wrong and subjective judgment. Hopefully, the author could have more opportunities to improve the research and make deeper exploration in the future studies.

#### Appendix

Example 1:

Source Text (the following will be abbreviated as ST):

It means to have fun, to frolic, to run and skip and make merry.

Target Text (the following will be abbreviated as TT):

它的意思是游戏游戏、玩耍玩耍、跑跑跳跳，逗逗乐儿。<sup>[7]</sup>

Example 2:

ST: So she set to work, and very soon she finished off the cake.

TT: 所以她就正正经经地一口一口地把那块糕都吃了。<sup>[8]</sup>

Example 3:

ST: Just then she heard soothing splashing about in the pool a little way off.

TT: 正在那时，她听见不远处有个什么东西在池里浦叉浦叉地溅水。<sup>[8]</sup>

Example 4:

ST: Sara looked out of the window into the dingy square, where the sparrows were hopping and twittering on the wet, iron railings and the sooty branches of the trees.

TT: 莎拉看着窗外那脏糊糊的广场，那里有些麻雀正在湿漉漉的铁栏杆和黑糊糊的树枝上跳来跳去，唧唧喳喳地叫。<sup>[9]</sup>

Example 5:

ST: "Well, well, well - Arthur Weasley." It was Mr. Malfoy. He stood with his hand on Draco's shoulder, sneering in just the same way.

TT: “啊呀呀——亚瑟·韦斯莱。”是马尔福先生。他一只手搭在德拉科的肩上，脸上挂着和儿子一模一样的讥笑<sup>[10]</sup>。

## Example 6:

ST: “Well!” thought Alice to herself, “after such a fall as this, I shall think nothing of tumbling down stairs! How brave they’ll all think me at home! Why, I wouldn’t say anything about it, even if I fell off the top of the house!”

TT: “呵！”阿丽思自己想到，“我摔过了这么一大回跤，那再从梯子上滚下去可算不得什么事啦！家里他们一定看我胆子真好大啦！哼，哪怕我从房顶上掉下来，我也会一句都不提的！”<sup>[8]</sup>

## Example 7:

ST: “Stow your gab!” the coachman rejoined. “You don’t want no kids, and, if you did, one kid’s the same as another to you. But I’m a married man and a judge of breed. I knows a first-rate yearling when I sees him. I’m a-goin’ to ’ave him, an’ least said soonest mended.”

TT1: “闭上你的嘴吧！”车夫反驳他说，“你根本不要孩子，就算要，哪个孩子对你都一样。可我是一个结过婚的，孩子好坏我能看出来。我一看就知道他是个一流的孩子。我要把他弄到手，多说反而坏事。”<sup>[11]</sup>

TT2: “甬叨叨了！”车夫反驳道，“你要啥娃子？！就算要，哪个娃子对你都一样。我可结过婚呐，娃子好坏基道得很！俺一打眼儿就晓得这是个呱呱叫的小伢子。他，俺要定了，废话少说！”<sup>[12]</sup>

## Example 8:

ST: “Why, if a fish came to me, and told me he was going a journey, I should say ‘With what porpoise?’”

- “Don’t you mean ‘purpose’?” said Alice.

TT: “你想，假如有个黄蟹来找我，对我说它要旅行上哪去，我第一句就要问它，‘你有什么鲤鱼’？”

阿丽思道，“你要说的不是理由吗？”<sup>[8]</sup>

## Example 9:

ST: “Mine is a long and sad tale!” said the Mouse, turning to Alice, and sighing.

“It is a long tale, certainly,” said Alice, looking down with wonder at the Mouse’s tail: “but why do you call it sad?”

TT1: “关于我的故事是个结局悲伤的长故事。”老鼠对爱丽丝叹着气说。爱丽丝没有听清老鼠的这句话，她看着老鼠的尾巴嘀咕着：“你的尾巴确实很长，可是为什么说尾巴是悲伤的呢？”<sup>[13]</sup>

TT2: 那老鼠对着阿丽思叹了一口气道，“唉！我的历史说来可真是又长又苦又委屈呀！”阿丽思听了，瞧着那老鼠的尾巴说，“你这尾是曲啊！可是为什么又叫它苦呢！”<sup>[8]</sup>

## Example 10:

ST: “Feather, I say!” “Why do you say ‘Feather’ so often?” Alice asked at last, rather vexed. “I’m not a bird!” “You are,” said the sheep: “you are a little goose”

TT1: “撇浆呀，我说！”阿丽思有点儿觉得她频气了，她就说，“你干嘛老说‘别讲’啊？我也没讲啊！”“什么没浆！”那绵羊说，“你手里摇的是什么，你简直是个笨猪。”<sup>[8]</sup>

TT2: “我说，羽毛！”“为什么你老是说‘羽毛’？”爱丽丝觉得烦了，终于问道，“我又不是禽鸟！”“你是禽鸟，”绵羊说，“你是只小鹅。”

## Disclosure statement

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