



A Study on Semantic and Communicative Translation of Magical Things in *Harry Potter*

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Abstract

Developing prosperously in the contemporary, fiercely competitive literary world, fantasy literature, with its mysteries, has attracted the attention of and been admired by readers from every corner of the world. Nevertheless, being worldwide popular regardless of countries and languages, its great success should be attributed to translators who introduced the spectacular works to the target language readers. As the fantasy literature is deeply rooted in Western Culture, in order to conform to the original texts' meaning and meet with the target language culture as well as be easily understood by readers, the paper chooses Peter Newmark's semantic translation and communicative translation theories as the guiding principles to analyze the translation of fantasy literature which takes both the Western and Chinese culture into consideration, keeps its mysterious magical mood and realizes the effects of clarity and straightaway. Semantic translation aims at replicating the original texts' forms within the target language, reproducing the original context, and retaining the characters of the SL culture in the translation. In contrast, communicative translation centers on the specific language and culture and focuses on the TL readers. The translation under this method is clear, smooth and concise. This paper takes the simplified Chinese version of *Harry Potter* as an example to illustrate the strategies used in the translation of magical things. It finds that there are generally three ways used in the translation of *Harry Potter*: semantic translation, communicative translation and the combination of the two.

Key words: Fantasy; *Harry Potter*; Magical Things; Semantic and Communicative Translation

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INTRODUCTION

Developing prosperously in the contemporary, fiercely competitive literary world, fantasy literature, with its mysteries, has attracted the attention of and been admired by readers from every corner of the world. Nevertheless, being worldwide popular regardless of countries and languages, its great success should be attributed to translators who introduced the spectacular works to the target language readers.

Fantasy

Fantasy, also named magic novel, belongs to the fantastic literature together with science fiction and horror fiction. Fantasy sprouted early, but it didn't establish itself as an independent literature genre until the late 19th century. In the 20th century, a number of special researches on fantasy began in the West. The publication of *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* in 1997, which was edited by John Clute and John Grant, made the official name "fantasy" popular. From the Latin literature *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, to the contemporary fantasy such as the *Harry Potter* series, vampire-related novels, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *A Song of Fire and Ice*, all of them have been chased after by readers, winning great success. At present, fantasy fictions are much more popular than works of other subject matters no matter in the book market or in the movie and TV drama market. What makes readers be so fond of it or what characteristics does it have that distinguish it from other genres? First of all, arising and developing in the West from the beginning, fantasy works have been closely related with the Western culture and literature that were affected by Greek and

Roman mythologies. Therefore, witches and wizards, elves, monsters, centaurs, werewolves, as well as the Gods in Greek mythology appear in the modern fantasy works time and again. Moreover, the individualistic heroism in these works also derives from Greek mythology, in which the heroes go through hardships to defeat the evil, to fight for justice and maintain peace with their strong will and superior wisdom. Secondly, fantasy literature is tremendously influenced by religions, which can be found either in the right guidance from religions on the positive side or in the defiance and dissatisfaction with them on the negative side. Thirdly, no matter in the West or in the East, fantasy builds a pure, beautiful and magical world distinct from the reality, providing a spiritual harbor for people living under tension and pressure, and serving as powerful arms against the cruel reality. For this reason, fantasy has become an evergreen tree in both the literature world and the entertainment circle, and without no doubt being admired by the mass public.

One feature that makes the fantasy catches the eyeballs and unique is the magical things that exist in the magical world constructed by the author but not live in the real world or that are unheard of by readers. Naturally, it is not easy for translators to translate things that not exist in the reality. Without personal experience, how to translate those magical things in the original texts in an easy-understanding way and complying with the original at the same time is a big challenge for translators to apply translation strategies and to comprehend the texts. Taking the simplified Chinese version of *Harry Potter* series translated by famous translators Ma Aixin, Ma Ainong, Cao Suling and Zheng Xumi as an example, this paper tries to analyze the translation of magical things in *Harry Potter* that do not exist in the real world, guided by semantic translation and communicative translation theories and summarizing the translation strategies, so as to make a contribution to the translation work of original English fantasy novels.

Harry Potter and J. K. Rowling

Harry Potter is a series of magic novels describing the hero Harry Potter's life in and out of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and his fight against the evil Lord Voldemort together with his friends Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger. First published in 1997 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc in Britain as *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, the book conquered numerous readers with its mystery and unexpected magic, and has been one of the world's best-sellers ever since, winning numerous awards. In the following ten years, the other six were published one after another. They are *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998), *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999), *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000), *Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix* (2003), *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2005), and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007). These books have been translated into 67 languages. But

it was not until the year of 2000 that the Chinese versions of *Harry Potter* appeared, with the simplified Chinese version translated by Ma Ainong and Cao Suling etc. and published by People's Literature Publishing House, and the traditional Chinese version translated by Peng Qianwen and published by Crown Publishing Group. This magic series is so successful that the development of *Harry Potter* related industries have been promoted, such as films, games, toys, theme parks as well as the fantasy works written by other authors.

Of course, the books also made the name of its author—J. K. Rowling known to the world overnight. J. K. Rowling is the penname of Joanne Rowling, a British novelist born in 1965. In 1989 when she took a train from Manchester to London, she saw a thin, little wizard with black hair and glasses smiling to her outside the window. And that image inspired her to create Harry Potter—an 11-year old boy (in the first book), thin, with black hair and glasses and a scar in his forehead. In 1994, after estranging with her first husband, she was so depressed that she even wanted to commit suicide. Finally, she spent 9 months to receive treatment, and at the same time, she began her writing of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* in a coffee bar. And the feeling of her illness led her to create Dementors, a kind of creature that sucks people's souls. In 1995, she finished her manuscript and submitted the novel to 12 publishing houses, all of which rejected it, before Bloomsbury agreed to publish it.

Rowling graduated from the University of Exeter. Her university and many places in the city Exeter are the prototypes for some scenes that readers are familiar with in *Harry Potter*. For example, the dining hall of Hogwarts was inspired by her university's hall; the Diagon Alley was from Gandy Street, and the Leaky Cauldron from two bars in Exeter-- Old Firehouse and Blackhorse. The success of *Harry Potter* changed Rowling's life, from rags to riches. Before 1997, being jobless, she relied on the government's welfare benefits, and now, she is a world-famous, rich novelist as well as a notable philanthropist.

Semantic and Communicative Translation

Peter Newmark is a renowned British translation theorist and translation educator. He divided translation into "communicative and semantic translation" in his works *Approaches to Translation* which was first published in 1981, discussed different translation ways to reach the goal of "equivalence", and provided new ideas and approaches for translation practices. According to his communicative translation theory, translation is a kind of communication process, and translators should convert the source language (SL) culture into the target language (TL) culture as much as they can. During this transplanting process of texts from one culture to another, the translators should try to make the TL readers understand the SL author's thoughts, and make both the TL and SL readers share common ideas about the text. Genres that usually use the communicative translation method are news

report, textbooks, public announcement and many other non-literary works. On the contrary, semantic translation requires the translators to replicate the original form from the SL to the TL as much as possible. It regards the original words and phrases as sacred, even if there are some ambiguities and errors in the original text. Semantic translation generally applies to literature, scientific and technical literature, and other genres that treat the original language and contents as important as the translated ones. We can take the translation of some English idioms for further explanation:

“A burnt child dreads the fire.”

- (1) 烧伤过的孩子怕见火;
- (2) 一朝被蛇咬, 十年怕井绳.

The two translations both have the same meaning. Translation (1) is loyal to the original words under the semantic translation while translation (2) is completely domesticated into Chinese by borrowing a Chinese idiom which has the same meaning, and it is communicative translation, considering the TL readers' habit and the TL culture.

“A lazy youth, a lousy age.”

- (1) 少时懒惰, 老来虱咬。
- (2) 少壮不努力, 老大徒伤悲。

Again, in this example, the second translation sounds better because it satisfies Chinese readers' knowledge and culture. Of course, it does not mean communicative translation is better than semantic translation. To use which strategy depends on specific conditions. For example, “Pandora's box,” which derives from Greek mythology, meaning the beginning or source of all disasters. As Chinese readers know about this fairy tale, it is good to use the semantic translation and translate it into “潘多拉的盒子”.

From the three examples above, now you can see the differences between communicative and semantic translation more clearly. Of which, the most essential one lies in their different emphasis. In communicative translation, the basic unit of translation is sentence while that is word for semantic translation; the former is functional while the latter is expressive; the former does not rigidly adhere to the SL culture background while the latter is based on the SL culture. Then, communicative translation focuses on the TL readers, attempting to solve or eliminate any reading or communicative problems and obstacles to perform the communication activity smoothly. However, in semantic translation, translators take the original texts as the *Bible*, sticking to the SL culture, just explain the original meaning to help the TL readers understand the texts. In addition, they are different in expressive forms. Semantic translation tries to make the translation as close to as the original text and reserves the original's homophonic effect in the translation. When the content conflicts with the homophonic effect, it will give up the effect to retain the content. Different from that, the communicative translation emphasizes on effect more than the content.

Nevertheless, semantic and communicative translation cannot be distinguished absolutely as there are some overlaps between them as well. If the information in the original text is universal without specific cultural characteristics, the information content has equal importance with the expressive ways and methods, and the TL readers' knowledge and interests correspond to that of the SL readers, then both communicative and semantic translation can be applied, which is almost to be the “idealist” translation, because the conditions of the original author and the translator, the SL and the TL readers are all taken into account. “Strike while the iron is hot” is a perfect example for this. Its Chinese translation is “趁热打铁,” not only complies with the target language culture but also conforms to the original meaning. It is more often that semantic translation and communicative translation complements each other in the same works, some parts are translated according to the semantic translation and some use the communicative translation. Examples will be given in chapter 2.

Literature Review

Since Newmark put forward his semantic and communicative translation theories, there have been numerous researches and studies on them. Some studies compare them from the theoretical aspect—their differences and application. Some analyze them in some specific literature texts, like *A Dream of Red Mansions*, *The Tale of the Peach Blossom Spring*, *The Marshes of Mount Liang* or in the translation of news reports. But they seldom use the theories to study the translation of the fantasy or more specifically, the magical things in *Harry Potter*. For this reason, this paper attempts to do the first trial.

The paper consists of three parts: chapter 1 is the introduction, briefly introducing some basic information about fantasy, *Harry Potter*, J. K. Rowling, and the semantic and communicative translation; chapter 2 is the main body, using the theories to analyze the translation of magical things in *Harry Potter*, which is subdivided into three sections—semantic translation analysis, communicative translation analysis and the combination of semantic and communicative translation; and chapter 3 is the conclusion part.

1. ANALYSIS OF THE TRANSLATION OF MAGICAL THINGS IN FANTASY

1.1 Semantic Translation Analysis

Peter Newmark's semantic translation intends to reserve the form of the original in translation and to reproduce the original contextual meaning as closely as possible. Keeping the SL culture's characteristics, focusing on the mediator's thinking process, and organizing key information, it can help the TL readers to comprehend the text's meaning. It is applicable to complicated, detail-attentive and information-intensive translation work.

1.2 Semantic Translation Analysis From the Pronunciation Level

Although semantic translation has some differences from the traditional “word-for-word translation”—the former takes the context into account while the latter does not—they are almost the same, both loyal to the original text and culture. Semantic translation from the pronunciation level refers to abiding by the pronunciation rules and adopts the way of transliteration in the translation process. This kind of translation method is often used in the translation of names and proper nouns. In the magical world of *Harry Potter*, there are numerous things that do not exist in the reality. They have their own special names, of which some are derived from similar words, some are borrowed from Latin and French, and some are totally created by the author herself. The first word which was translated in this way that the Chinese readers can think out is surely to be “muggle”. Before *Harry Potter*, this is a word with no meaning in any language. It is completely made up by Rowling. As it exclusively refers to people who cannot play magic, the translators translated it based on the pronunciation into “麻瓜”. “Aquavirius Maggots,” for example, whose Chinese translation is “阿卡危蛆”, is a white magical creature fed in the Ministry of Magic. In reality, there is no such a word of “aquavirius”. Considering it is an animal’s name, the translators chose to transliterate it and be loyal to the original text. Another example is “Animagi” (“阿尼马吉”), a kind of spell that can turn people into any animal following their inclinations. In any language, there is no corresponding derivation, therefore, what the translator could do was to translate based on its pronunciation, and then added some explanation about its usage to help readers understand. Also, “flobberworm,” whose Chinese translation is “弗洛伯毛虫”, is the name of a kind of worm. “Flob” in English means to spit (“吐唾沫”), then why didn’t the translators translate it into “唾沫虫”? The reason is that, as proper nouns, translating according to the pronunciation will make the things more mysterious and special, highlighting the uniqueness of the magical world. Similarly, a large number of medicine and food names in *Harry Potter* are translated in this way.

1.3 Semantic Translation Analysis From the Meaning Level

Semantic translation from the meaning level, as the name implies, means finding corresponding words directly in the target language in accordance with their meaning in the original text. In the translation of fantasy novels, it is usually applied to things that do exist in real life. For example, “tarantula” is a kind of rare spider in the reality, hence, it is translated into “狼蛛” according to its meaning; “unicom,” though not exist in the real world, often appears in fairy tales, so it’s totally acceptable to use the recognized translation of “独角兽”; “crumple-horned snorkack”(“弯角鼩兽”) is not a real animal in the reality,

and had never been mentioned in any literary works before, then why didn’t the translator translate it based on the pronunciation? Because in translation practices, considering the long length of some words combination, it’s not convenient to use transliteration. In such cases, translation as per the meaning is much more preferable. Besides, “弯角鼩兽” is vivid enough for readers to literally grasp the magical animal’s features. Most of the spells in *Harry Potter* are derivatives or combination of Latin or French words. As Latin is an ancient language, it makes the spells seem to be ancient and mysterious. Good examples are: “scourgify” (“清理一新”), a cleaning spell used to clean dirt, is derived from the Latin word “scurare” (使劲地搓); and “petrificus Totalus” (“统统石化”) is a combination of the English word “petrify” (石化、使僵硬) and the Latin word “totalis” (全部的). When translating these words, the translators found their prototypes on the first step, and then loyally translated them into Chinese from word to word after analyzing their original connotation.

1.4 Communicative Translation Analysis

Peter Newmark said, the purpose of the communicative translation is to make the TL readers have the same feeling as the SL readers about the text, and to clarify the translation version. Centered on specific language and culture, it pays attention to the TL readers, and delivers domesticated content to them. In order to achieve the goal of clearness, fluency and concision, some semantic contents may be lost.

1.4.1 Translation as Per Specific Purposes and Forms

In the application of the communicative translation, translators will translate the original texts in a way that will be easy to understand by the TL readers. It tries to deliver the original information accurately in the target language. But when the original information is in conflict with the communicative purpose, equivalence effect will be chosen as a compromise or mediator. The translation of some magical things in *Harry Potter* and other fantasy novels may have different meanings compared with their original literary meanings. In such cases, the translators will redefine them based on their shapes, forms or functions in the context so as to be easily understood by the TL readers. Here are three examples from *Harry Potter*. The first is “acromantula”. In fact, this word does not exist in any language. According to semantic translation, it should be translated based on its pronunciation, but that will lead readers to confusion about what it really is. Therefore, the translators decided to use communicative translation and translated it into “八眼蜘蛛” as the animal has eight eyes. From its Chinese name, the TL readers are able to know what it is at the first instant. The second is “knarl”, literally meaning “roar” (纠结, 咆哮). However, here in the novel, it is an animal’s name which looks like a hedgehog, so the translators translated it into “刺佬儿” on the basis of its

characteristics which is a vivid description for readers to imagine. The third is “tenebrus”, a Latin word meaning “ominous” (不吉利). In the novel, it refers to a creature that only people who have seen death can see it. Hence, the translators related it with darkness and extended its meaning to “乌乌”.

1.4.2 Translation as per Chinese Readers' Customs

Aiming to be fluent and authentic in translation, communicative translation needs to fully consider about the discrepancy between the TL culture and the SL culture. During the translation process, a transformation from SL culture to TL culture should be completed, so as to adjust the translation version to the TL readers' cultural background and be easy-understanding. For this reason, the translation of some magical things needs to conform to the TL culture. “Dementor”, originally meaning “devil” (魔鬼), is an evil creature absorbing humans' souls in *Harry Potter* with its Chinese name being “摄魂怪”. The word “怪” (monster) caters to Chinese readers' knowledge about and customs of evil things. For the magical medicines in the novel, the translators also translated them with “药” “膏” “剂” and other words in Chinese describing drugs to show their functions clearly from the names. For example, the Latin phrase “felix felicitis” means “lucky” (幸运的). If it was translated into “幸运”, the readers would have been confused about its function, but with “福灵剂” the meaning is much clearer. Other examples are “antidote” (“解毒剂”) and “veritaserum” (“吐真剂”), etc.. Talking about magic, spells surely cannot be missed. No matter they are long or short, derived from Latin, French or created by the author herself, Chinese translators translated them into 4-word (Chinese characters) phrases similar to Chinese idioms, complying with Chinese readers' reading or speaking habit. “Accio” (“飞来飞去”) is a spell to call up distant objects flying to one's own hand. In fact, the word means “summon” (召唤) in Latin. Translated into “飞来飞去” not only describes the spell vividly, but also rhymes in Chinese. Another similar example is “riddikulus” which literally means “funny” (滑稽). But the translators reduplicated it into “滑稽滑稽” to make it more oral. In addition, the translator also created some words out of the words' or phrases' original meaning, for instance, “reducto” (“粉身碎骨”) which is used to drive hard and tough things away to clear a road. Not adopting its Latin connotation “return” (返回), but introducing a completely irrelevant phrase based on its meaning in the original context, the translators intended to help the TL readers better understand it by putting them into a similar context to the original one.

2. COMBINATION OF SEMANTIC AND COMMUNICATIVE TRANSLATION

The boundary between semantic and communicative translation is not fixed or absolute. Under certain

circumstances, depending on the registers, languages, language users, the roles of translators, genres and functions of the texts, they can be exchanged in application or employed at the same time. In translating fantasy works, it is inevitable to meet some words and contexts that will not appear in normal reality-based works. Sometimes, it's a good choice to combine various translation methods to produce a version both loyal to the original and easy-understanding. The combination method can be further divided into two subgroups. The first is transliteration plus paraphrase, obviously meaning to use transliteration for a part and paraphrase for the other part at the same time. “Alohomora” (“阿拉霍洞开”), for example, has no traces in any language, means “open the door locked” in the novel, therefore, the translators decided to transliterate it by “阿拉霍”; and in order to make readers clear of its function, they added “洞开” for explanation. Another similar usage is “Avada Kedavra” (“阿瓦达索命”). The phrase is from an ancient language—Aramaic, meaning “to destroy it”. Considering the spell's function is to kill people, the translators took the combination method of transliteration and paraphrase. The second type is semantic addition—to make the translation meet the TL culture or easy understanding through adding words. In the novel, “broomstick” (“飞天扫帚”) is the main traffic vehicle in the magic world which can fly freely in the sky. Its original meaning is “扫帚”, but for readers, it sounds a little bit different between “骑着扫帚来来去去” and “骑着飞天扫帚来来去去”. The adjective “飞天” reflects the magic of it and makes the thing more attractive. Similarly, “tergeo” (“旋风扫净”) means “to clean” (弄干净) in Latin and has the same meaning in the novel. But with “旋风” highlighting its fastness in cleaning, the Chinese readers can feel the spell's mystery more intensely.

CONCLUSION

In contemporary, the fantasy novels, led by *Harry Potter*, are developing prosperously in the literature field around the globe. Rising to fame overnight, being admired by numerous readers ranging from teenager to adults, they have driven various related industries, the film industry in particular, to grow rapidly. However, most of them are written in foreign languages, hence, it is the translators who should be awarded for their hard work to introduce these wonderful books to Chinese readers. The magical or mysterious world in the books is different from our real one. The translation of magical things totally depends on the translators' understanding of the original texts and knowledge about the SL and TL culture and readers. Semantic and communicative translation theories put forward by Peter Newmark play an important role in guiding the translation of fantasy works. They have provided theoretical direction for adopting specific translation strategies in the translation of magical things

that were unheard of in the reality. Semantic translation aims at replicating the original texts' forms within the target language, reproducing the original context, and retaining the characters of the SL culture in the translation. It can be subdivided into two types: semantic translation from the pronunciation level (transliteration) and from the meaning level (paraphrase). In contrast, communicative translation centers on the specific language and culture and focuses on the TL readers. The translation under this method is clear, smooth and concise. It can be further grouped into translation as per specific purposes and forms, and as per Chinese readers' customs. Besides, the combination of the two methods is applicable to the fantasy translation in some cases, complementing each other to keep the original's mysterious aura in the translation contents on one hand, and to make the TL readers understand and feel like being personally on the scene regardless of the culture differences.

It is undeniable that this paper has some shortcomings, such as the insufficient number of examples, the lack of deep theoretical analysis and explanation. However,

the author hopes what she has done could provide some insight for future researches on the translation of fantasy.

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