

A Report on Chinese Translation of “Surely You Are Joking, Mr. Feynman!” (Excerpt)

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Abstract: This project reflects my translation of a literary work written by a famous physicist. The source text the translator chose to translate is the excerpt of “Surely You Are Joking, Mr. Feynman!” It is a special work that records Richard Feynman’s exciting experiences in his whole life and exposes his positive and righteous personal qualities. Hopefully, this translation will do well for young teenage readers because of its meaningful content. Due to its expressive text type according to Peter Newmark’s classification, the translator applied Newmark’s theoretical framework to guide translation in this project. Hence, the semantic translation strategy will be the primary translation strategy, supplemented by the communicative translation strategy. Besides, other translation methods and skills will also be adopted to make the translation more accurate, acceptable, and readable and enrich its childishness, a prominent feature of the source text. For the commentary part, the translator explained the decision-making process clearly and comprehensively during translation. She hoped that this translation would get different feedback and valuable suggestions.

1. Introduction

The first part will start with a concise overview of the original text and its author. And then the translator will also elaborate on the objectives of this translation initiative as well as its importance. It is anticipated that by presenting and examining the contextual details, the subsequent analysis will be more thorough and precise.

2. Author and the Source Text

2.1 About the Author

The book chosen to translate is “Surely You Are Joking, Mr. Feynman!” It was published in 1997 and written by Richard Feynman, a famous American theoretical scientist^[1]. Feynman was born in 1918, graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1939, entered Princeton University graduate school, and joined the Royal Morse Laboratory, contributing to the development of the atomic bomb. In 1965, he won the Nobel Prize in Physics. He died of cancer in 1988.

Throughout his lifetime, he rejected the constraints of authority and embraced a boundless

enthusiasm for all aspects of existence. From the rhythmic beats of bongo drumming to the intricacies of biology, the beauty of poetry, and the artistry of painting, Feynman exhibited a voracious curiosity for the world around him. Even in his final moments, as he investigated the tragic space shuttle Challenger incident, he fearlessly challenged the Washington establishment in his pursuit of truth. Perhaps most admirably, Feynman's infectious passion for life has inspired countless readers around the globe.

Feynman's ideas are unconstrained, never stubborn, and he has an intense thirst for knowledge. He is fond of mischief but often points out the world's absurdities. Feynman's lifetime of witty, almost childlike behavior was equal to his achievements in theoretical physics. There is no doubt that Richard Feynman is an outstanding theoretical physicist. During his whole life, he was awarded a series of distinguished honors, including the Albert Einstein Award, the Oersted Award, and the Nobel Prize in Physics. He published a few classic lectures for physics teaching and learning. And beyond most people's expectations, he also wrote life stories. His language is humorous, amiable, and philosophical. "Surely You Are Joking Mr. Feynman!" is unique among all his works. This book is free of complex scientific knowledge, which records the exciting things that happened to Feynman, and behind each item, it reveals the nature of humanity.

2.2 About the Source text

The book "Surely You Are Joking Mr. Feynman!" is based on conversations Feynman had over the years while playing drums with Ralph Leighton, the son of a colleague. Feynman played the drums and talked about his story while Leighton recorded the material, which Leighton later compiled into a book, and Feynman himself wrote the title. The four-part book tells Feynman's story from childhood to graduate school, after which he joined the Manhattan Project in the military and returned to school to teach. The prose style is light and humorous and makes people laugh, showing Feynman's scientific spirit and maverick character.

The excerpt the translator chose is "Judging Books by Their Covers"; in this chapter, Feynman memorized his experience of working with the army and the State Board of Education. He used an accessible tone and lifelike narration to express his feelings toward the government's corruption and inaction. Besides, as a theoretical physicist, he also proposed his perspective on the problems in the education of children, which reflected his education view: education is to put complex ideas into simple language if a teacher cannot teach others because he does not understand.

2.3 The Purpose and Significance of the Translation

The decision to select this book as two factors influenced the source text. Initially, the translator was advised to read this book during her adolescence, and upon engaging with several chapters, she found the narrative both compelling and enriching. The author's adept use of language effectively simulates the experience of listening to an elder's storytelling, combining humor with moral insights in a manner that is neither tedious nor simplistic. Furthermore, a subsequent review of scholarly discourse surrounding the book's previous translations revealed a consensus regarding their inadequacies. Critiques commonly pointed to an overuse of colloquial language and dialectal influences, along with a misapplication of idiomatic expressions, which rendered the text challenging to interpret.

In the endeavor to refine the existing Chinese translations of this book, the translator sets forth an objective to enhance the textual delivery by employing a multifaceted approach to translation that emphasizes accuracy, vividness, and fluency, thereby rendering the content more accessible and engaging for the young readers, specifically those aged 11 to 17 years. This revised translation seeks to surpass its predecessors by prioritizing linguistic precision and the receptivity of teenage readers.

To captivate the youthful audience, the translator intends to infuse a degree of childishness into the narrative through strategic translation techniques. Moreover, efforts will be made to rectify previously inappropriate idiomatic expressions to preclude potential misinterpretations, thus facilitating a more precise understanding for young readers. The overarching goal is to pique the readers' interest in science, foster a dialogic engagement with the eminent physicist Feynman, and ignite their curiosity about the world, encouraging them to venture into the realm of the unknown. Besides, the narrative aims to impart the noble characteristics exemplified by Mr. Feynman and elucidate certain truths about humanity. While primarily targeted at a younger audience, this book also offers value to adult readers as a leisurely pursuit.

3. Major Translation Strategies and Techniques Applied in the Translation

In this translation project, the primary translation strategies employed include semantic translation and communicative translation to ensure both readability and accuracy. Various methods, such as conversion, division, combination, restructuring, etc., are utilized to tackle lengthy and complex sentences. Additionally, the translator incorporates interjections and reduplicated words to enhance its childishness.

3.1 Semantic Translation and Communicative Translation

Based on Peter Newmark's classifications of text types, namely expressive, informative, and operative, the source text can be categorized as an expressive text in terms of its function and genre. Peter Newmark (1981) proposed six translation strategies: literal translation, faithful translation, semantic translation, communicative translation, idiomatic translation, and free translation^[2]. In 1988, word-for-word translation and adaptation were added to this framework^[3].

Among those six translation strategies, Newmark posited that only semantic and communicative translation strategies could effectively achieve conciseness and accuracy in target language rendering. While both semantic and communicative strategies have their merits and drawbacks, a successful translation combines various strategies and techniques. According to Newmark, the choice of translation strategy is closely intertwined with text types. Semantic translation strategy is well-suited for expressive texts, while communicative translation is more appropriate for operative texts; however, the distinction is not absolute. Christiane Nord (2001: 83) further proposed that translations are typically intended for specific readerships, necessitating a clear function and purpose in the translation process tailored to these particular readers^[4]. From the perspective of Skopos theory, compared to the source text, the translations should prioritize their purpose and target audience. Therefore, translators must also consider the intended purpose of the translation as well as its specific target readership since functional considerations significantly influence the selection of translation strategies, such as Yan Fu's translation of "Evolution and Ethics", which targeted literati and officialdom in feudal China with vastly different cultural backgrounds. The translation strategy must be selected according to the target readers.

From the translator's perspective, this translation project aims to ensure its acceptance among teenagers. Therefore, semantic translation alone may not suffice to meet their needs; communicative translation is also crucial in enhancing fluency and readability.

3.2 Conversion, Division, Combination, and Restructuring

After reviewing the two translated versions, the translator has identified specific areas that still pose challenges regarding readability and fluency. Specifically, issues arise regarding translating lengthy and intricate sentences and unnecessary omissions and mistranslations. It is important to note

that young readers around 11 may struggle to comprehend these complex sentences, potentially leading to a loss of interest in this book. Consequently, it is necessary to reorganize these convoluted sentences using translation techniques such as division, combination, amplification, restructuring, conversion, etc.

According to Wang (2012), regardless of the method employed by translating lengthy sentences, the translated text must conform to the structural and linguistic conventions of Chinese^[10]. Given the distinct characteristics of languages, such as hypotactic and paratactic, passive and active, as well as impersonal and personal forms, meticulous examination is required when translating long and complex sentences. The translator should initially divide these lengthy sentences into shorter segments and analyze their components; subsequently, they should rearrange the clauses in accordance with Chinese language habits; finally, they should incorporate sufficient conjunctions based on the meaning while connecting each clause.

3.3 Adding Interjections and Reduplicated Words

Another crucial aspect is to recreate the childishness of this book. Xu (2004) argues that evoking childishness is at the core of children's literature^[11]. This unique flavor of children's literature can be effectively conveyed through specific techniques such as vocabulary, grammar, and rhetoric. In translation, it is essential to consider the characteristics of the target language and readership, thoroughly comprehend and depict children's interests within these languages, convey the significant meaning determined by the context, and strive for a functionally equivalent translation. At the lexical level, interjections and reduplicated words can effectively enrich the childishness of the text and create a youthful tone. At the syntactic level, inversion is frequently employed to avoid redundancy. At the textual level, various rhetorical devices are utilized to heighten impact.

In this translation project, interjections and reduplicated words are primarily utilized to portray the character's mental activities and dialogues, particularly the dialogues that play a crucial role in children's literature translation. According to Xu (2018), Children's literature often incorporates numerous vibrant dialogues to construct a complete character image, thereby immersing readers in the scene and enhancing their interest and engagement with the work is significant^[12]. The language employed by child characters reflects their unique psychology and emotions, endowing the works with distinctive characteristics. Although the source text of this translation project is not strictly categorized as children's literature, the translator intends to employ these translation techniques to render it more appealing to teenage readers.

In conclusion, semantic and communicative translation strategies will be applied while considering various other translation techniques based on the intended purpose of translation and the specific target audience.

4. Translation Challenges and Solutions

In this section, the translator will provide examples of challenges encountered during translation and their solutions, using practical and straightforward analyses to explain the decision-making process.

4.1 Improvement of Accuracy

In "Surely You Are Joking Mr. Feynman!", the author uses vivid language to portray his thought processes and create a humorous persona in readers' minds. However, readers have reported issues with existing translations due to problems with idioms and vocabulary accuracy. Upon comparing the original text with two translations, it was determined that the translations lacked linguistic precision.

According to Peter Newmark (1981), the source text falls under the expressive type should be translated through semantic translation, which prioritizes the stylistic aspects of the source text over the effect. In order to address the vocabulary issues and improve linguistic accuracy, the translator utilized a combination of semantic and communicative translation strategies, allowing for the maintenance of the linguistic features while significantly reducing inaccuracies.

4.1.1 Semantic Translation

Semantic translation is closer to over-translation. When grammatical structures permit, preserving the original text's meaning results in greater objectivity and accuracy. To show the thinking process of the original work, semantic translation strives to keep the linguistic features and unique expression methods of the original work, exerting the expressive function of language.

Example 1:

English	Wang	wu	Author
shinging	zhaoshe	zhaoshe	zhaoyao
only	jinjin	cai	zhiyou

ST: And food grows only because the sun is shining. So it's because the sun is shining that all these things are moving.

In this example, from the translator's perspective, "is shining" and "are moving" form a paralleled construction. Their translations are understandable, but applying a semantic translation strategy using disyllables should be more appropriate to pursue a better aesthetic function of the text. In both Wu's and Wang's translations, they deal with "only" in the same way, and they put it in the midsentence. However, the translator put it at the beginning of a sentence to emphasize the causal relationship of law of development. Besides, the author's translation has a stronger sense of limitation than their versions, which fits the context more properly and expresses the source text more accurately.

4.1.2 Communicative Translation

The communicative translation is more subjective and focuses on the reflection of readers. Communicative translation aims to improve the original text's poor, inaccurate, and unclear expression, so although the translation may lose some semantic content, it will be more powerful and precise than the content expression in the original text.

Example 2:

English	Wang	wu	Author
some guy	na zhu er	jiahuo	jiahuo
introduce	jieshao	jieshao	yingjian

ST: I went to the meeting and noticed that some guy who had introduced me to all the people at the cocktail party was sitting next to me. He was apparently some flunky assigned to be at my side at all times. On my other side was some super general I had heard of before.

In the example above, the previous two translators translated "some guy" into different words. The first translation is influenced by dialect, which is overly exaggerated for children's and teenagers' work. The second translation is more neutral and better suited to this context. While considering the language environment, it would be more appropriate and formal to apply the author's translation. Wang's translation of "some flunky assigned to be at my side at all times" is acceptable, however, it overlooks the function of "at my side at all time." By employing a communicative translation strategy and rendering it as "monitoring me in 24 hours," the author's disguised tone can be strengthened and made it more closely to the source text.

Is similar to the above one. However, the apparent mistranslation and omission decrease the quality of translation, and the processing of long modifiers in the existing translations may be not so close to

the source text. Thus, the translator tried to improve its translation by doing some modifications.

Example 3:

English	Wang	Wu	Author
coffee break	kafei shijian	xiu xi he ka fei	chaxie
shepherd	shou ming bu li	gen zhe	kan hu

ST: During the next coffee break the guy who had been assigned to shepherd me around said, “I was very impressed by the things you said during the discussion. They certainly were an important contribution.”

In the above example, the translator employed a communicative strategy to address the phrases and modifiers. Wang’s directly translation of “coffee break” may make the readers confused. Wu utilized conversion to create a time clause, and it is in accordance with the source text. From the translator’s perspective, my translation could perfectly convey the meaning of coffee break while being more localized. The phrase “The guy who had been assigned to shepherd me around” is an attributive clause.

On the one hand, the translator believed there was no need for a word-for-word translation of this attributive clause due to the different language structures between English and Chinese. On the other hand, “shepherd” lacks specific cultural elements in Chinese, so another precise and accurate word can be used as a replacement. The translator chose the verb, hoping to sincerely express the original meaning while personifying it to maintain its metaphorical effect intact.

Subsequently, exaggeration was employed by translating “very impressed” into a four-letter word that ultimately reflects the hypocrisy of “the guy.” The author’s translation of “important” also serves an exaggerated function similar to expressing admiration with the source text.

Lastly, an instance is mentioned where idiomatic translation was mistakenly applied within this context. Another translated version also omitted some preexisting information, which resulted in insufficient loyalty and accuracy.

Example 4:

English	Wang	Wu	Author
You'll be joining us.	tong zhou gong ji	na me ni hui...	na me ni hui...

ST: Until then I didn’t let on any of my feelings about the situation to the chairman of the meeting—the big shot who had invited me in the first place. As we were packing our bags to leave, he said to me, all smiles, “You’ll be joining us, then, for the next meeting...”

In this example, Wang’s thinking of using four-letter words was appreciated, but the register of words still needed to be considered. In Chinese, people often use this word to describe the united spirit, especially when encountering difficulties. Thus, this word does not fit the occasion of this language. By comparison, the author’s translation may make the whole sentence more readable and fluent.

4.2 Improvement of Readability and Acceptability (Translation of Complex Sentences)

One approach to enhance the readability and acceptability of lengthy and intricate sentences is to break them down into smaller segments and restructure them using techniques such as division, combination, restructuring, and conversion. The segments can be rearranged in accordance with Chinese language conventions, while conjunctions can be employed to connect them.

The initial example consists of a relatively short yet complex sentence; however, some omissions in its translation result in an incomplete original meaning.

Example 5:

ST: I stopped and thought about my “contribution” to the logistics problem and realized that a man like the guy who orders the stuff for Christmas at Macy’s would be better able to figure out how to

handle problems like that than me.

There are significant disparities in sentence structures between the Chinese and English languages. In English, there is a strong emphasis on sentence hypotaxis, necessitating the use of various function words, such as conjunctions and prepositions, to connect different components of a sentence. Conversely, Chinese places greater importance on parataxis, resulting in less diversity in word composition. A notable characteristic of lengthy Chinese sentences is the utilization of multiple verbs to highlight the actions of the object (Wang 2012). Taking this particular sentence as an example, “that” serves as the diving point where it can be split into two clauses. The first clause contains no subordinate clauses: “I stopped and thought about my ‘contribution’ to the logistics problem and realized.” However, the second clause includes an attributive clause: “the guy who orders the stuff for Christmas at Macy’s, which can further be divided into two parts again. The subsequent step involves clarifying logic with the sentence structure. The word preceding “that” functions as a complete verb. “Realize,” indicating that what follows is an object clause. Attention should be focused on refining the main clause while addressing modifiers accordingly. Due to differences in language expression order, certain coordinating conjunctions must be added to enhance fluency and strengthen logical relationships within sentences, particularly for teenage readers who find highly readable sentences more appealing.

When encountering long and complex sentences with similar logical order and expression as their Chinese counterparts, they can generally be translated sequentially following the original text (Zen 2010)^[16]. When faced with challenging English sentences whose logical order is opposite to that of Chinese, it is necessary to translate them by reversed method. Because of the differences and similarities between English and Chinese expressions, the sequential translation and reversed method are not absolute in translation of long and complex sentences. Therefore, comprehensive translation is needed.

The second example is pretty long, with a few clauses, which makes it tricky. By comparison with the two existing translations, it can be found that the translation of the later part of the sentence probably makes the whole sentence hard to understand, which may also be an obstacle for teenage readers. So, the focus is located on the processing of clearing the logic to make it readable.

Example 6:

ST: When we took our recommendations to the Board of Education, they told us they didn’t have as much money as they had thought, so we’d have to go over the whole thing and cut out this and that, now taking the *cost* into consideration, and ruining what was a fairly balanced program, in which there was a *chance* for a teacher to find examples of the things (s)he needed.

The entire statement comprises several subordinate clauses within a complex structure. Its initial segment functions as a temporal adverbial clause while employing “so” to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between ideas. Furthermore, “taking” and “ruining” serve as present participles followed by an attributive clause introduced by “in which.” During translation processes, it proves advantageous to rearrange these clauses based on their logical relationship. The primary distinction between the three versions lies in resolving the final attributive clause. Both Wang and Wu translated the whole sentence according to the original order, which may make the attributive sentence hard to understand. Thus, the translator decided to split the whole sentence into two sentences and remove the attributive clause at the beginning of the second sentence so that the translation may conform to the Chinese readers’ reading habits.

According to the content of this sentence, the most essential information delivered should be “ruining what a fairly balanced program was,” so the translator put it at the end of this sentence to show its essence.

4.3 Creation of Childishness

Since the targeted audience of this translation is teenagers, the book should incorporate elements of childlike innocence alongside educational content. However, given that the source text does not fully embody children's literature, it is worth exploring how to create a sense of childishness.

4.3.1 Amplification: Adding Interjections and Reduplicated Words

In teenage literature, reduplicated words, onomatopoeias, and interjections are frequently employed and play a significant role. Using reduplicated words can heighten readers' linguistic experience and evoke a sense of phonetic beauty. Interjections can make dialogues more lifelike and effectively convey characters' emotions.

Example 7:

English	Wang	Wu	Author
Star	xing	xing qiu	xingxing

ST: Finally I come to a book that says, "Mathematics is used in science in many ways. We will give you an example from astronomy, which is the science of stars." I turn the page, and it says, "Red stars have a temperature of four thousand degrees yellow stars have a temperature of five thousand degrees..." —so far, so good. It continues: "Green stars have a temperature often thousand degrees, blue stars have a temperature often thousand degrees, and violet stars have a temperature of... (some big number)." There are no green or violet stars, but the figures for the others are roughly correct.

In this example, in comparison with Wang's and Wu's translations, the translator has incorporated interjections and reduplicated words into the text. By doing so, they may successfully intensify readers' emotional perception. Considering Mr. Feynman's curiosity about applying mathematics to science within his language environment, he read the books attentively; however, he ultimately discovered that he had been deceived by its deceptive nature, highlighting his resilient character trait. Therefore, the translator deemed adding an interjection at this point.

Wang and Wu translated the star into one single character and planet. After reading the excerpt, we may know that Mr. Feynman was selecting teaching books for children, so the words used in books should be more childish. Alternatively, we may think about Mr. Feynman's tone. He was so witty and childish; the author's translation does fit him better.

The above example shows the function of adding interjections and reduplicated words to reflect the character's tone and create childishness. And the effect will be more substantial when interjections are used in dialogues.

Example 8:

ST: It was the kind of thing my father would have talked about: "What makes it go? Everything goes because the sun is shining." And then we would have fun discussing it:

"No, the toy goes because the spring is wound up," I would say.

"How did the spring get wound up?" he would ask.

"I wound it up."

"And how did you get moving?"

"From eating."

The given example presents a dialogue between the author and his father during the author's childhood. Upon comparing it with the two existing translations, it is observed that the translator has incorporated interjections to enhance the liveliness of the conversation and intensify the interrogative tone, thereby reflecting the innocence of a child and aligning with the speakers. Consequently, by incorporating these interjections, there has been a significant improvement in capturing the essence of childishness with this translation.

5. Discussion

In his famous work “Approaches to Translation”, published in 1981, Peter Newmark defined both semantic translation and communicative translation. In semantic translation, the translator tries to reproduce the meaning of the original text’s context as accurately as possible under the conditions of the semantic and syntactic structure of the target language. Communicative translation attempts to render the exact contextual meaning of the original in such a way that both content and language are readily acceptable and comprehensible to the readership (Newmark, 1981: 39). But in 1988, “A Textbook of Translation”, he proposed that semantic translation differs from “faithful translation” only in as far as it must take more account of the aesthetic value of the source language text, compromising on “meaning” where appropriate so that assonance, word-play or repetition jars in the finished version. Thus, the difference between semantic translation and communicative translation may be narrowed (Newmark, 1988: 46). In translation, both communicative and semantic methods are complementary and necessary. Newmark believes every translation must have semantic and communicative components, but they should be viewed as a unified whole with different emphases.

Back to the theory of selecting translation strategies based on text type, the translator opted for an expressive source text and proposed that the six linguistic functions sometimes overlap, interweave, or even are inseparable, in the specific use of language. When applying the text-type classification method, it is crucial to consider readers’ particularity as it greatly influences the choice of translation strategy.

The framework presented by Peter Newmark reflects the Westerner expectations towards translation and holds significant guidance. However, there is no absolute correspondence between text type and translation strategy. Thus, one translation strategy cannot be exclusively assigned to a single text type.

In translating this text, the translator placed better emphasis on comparing different versions of translations to seek improved and more suitable strategies and skills with hopes of filling gaps in existing translations. Furthermore, considering the targeted readership and purpose of translation, adjustments were made to the applied translation strategies for the expressive source text. It is anticipated that these modifications will enhance acceptance and improve overall equality.

6. Conclusion

While undertaking the translation project, the translator extensively drew upon Peter Newmark’s theoretical framework research achievements of other eminent scholars as references, which facilitated the selection of appropriate translation strategies and enabled thorough text analysis. The predominant translation strategies employed encompassed semantic and communicative translation, while various translation techniques, such as amplification, conversion, reconstructing, and combination, were utilized to enhance textual rendition. Additionally, interjections and reduplicated words were incorporated to heighten the childishness of the source text and captivate its intended readership.

Simultaneously, this translation endeavor allowed the translator to hone their skills by engaging in earnest work tailored for a specific audience. Throughout the process of translating and modifying, dialectical thinking was invoked, fostering a more profound comprehension of Newmark’s theories.

The decision to translate this particular text stemmed from its inherent excellence in reflecting Feynman’s quality and spirit and because it had served as an inspiration during their formative teenage years, lighting a passion for science and all things unknown within them. Consequently, this book comes highly recommended with considerable effort invested by the translator toward achieving an advanced version.

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