



## Translation of Onomatopoeia Words in *The Republic of Wine* From the Perspective of Relevance Theory

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### Abstract

The novel *The Republic of Wine* is one of the masterpieces of Mo Yan with a large number of onomatopoeia words, which are used to make the novel more vivid and interesting. The novel was translated by Howard Goldblatt who conveyed the intention of the author in the original text to Western readers. The translation version is clear and logic which makes readers easy to understand. This paper analyzes the translation of the onomatopoeia words in Mo Yan’s novel *The Republic of Wine* in the light of Relevance Theory in order to make contribution to the translation of the onomatopoeia words. The method of omission will not change the intention of the author in original text and can make the translation text understandable for readers. Substitution can put correspond English onomatopoeia in the place of the original words in order to help the readers obtain sufficient contextual effects. Paraphrase is used to explain the exact meaning of the original onomatopoeia words.

**Key words:** Relevance Theory; *The Republic of Wine*; Onomatopoeia words; Translation

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### INTRODUCTION

Onomatopoeia word is usually difficult to translate because of its own characteristics. There are numerous published papers focusing on analyzing the similarities and differences of Chinese and English onomatopoeia words from the perspective of linguistic (Chen, 2006; Wang, 2012; Wen, 2014). Some scholars explore the translation methods of onomatopoeia words in literature works (Li & Gao, 2014; Lauren & Harold, 2017). From the perspective of Relevance Theory, few studies focus on the translation methods of onomatopoeia in Mo Yan’s masterpiece *The Republic of Wine*. This paper will pick up some particular Chinese onomatopoeia words from Mo Yan’s novel and its translation version to discuss the translation methods of Chinese onomatopoeia words used by Howard Goldblatt from the perspective of Relevance Theory.

### 1. ONOMATOPOEIA WORDS AND THE REPUBLIC OF WINE

Onomatopoeia is a word from the Greek word “νοματοποιία”, which means “name that I make”. It is a word phonetically imitates the sound that it describes. Onomatopoeia is defined by *The Oxford English Dictionary* as “the formation of a word from a sound associated with what is named”. In linguistics, as to the origin of the language, the “bow-wow” theory showed that in primitive times people imitated the sounds of the animal calls and speech developed from those words—onomatopoeia words. Influenced by culture, onomatopoeia words differ from languages, for example, the sound of a clock is expressed as “tick tock” in English while “滴答” in Chinese.

Polysemy and different part of speech are the main features of onomatopoeia words. The existence of several meanings in one onomatopoeia word is called polysemy.

In Chinese, the sound of crow, duck and frog can be described by “呱呱”. In English, “rumble” is a low, continuous noise of a car or a vibrating noise made by one’s stomach because of hunger. Onomatopoeia word belongs to different part of speech in different sentences. Chinese onomatopoeia words can be an adverbial, attribute or complement in the sentence. English onomatopoeia words can be a subject, predicate, object in the sentence.

Onomatopoeia words can be classified into: onomatopoeia of human voice and onomatopoeia of animals and onomatopoeia of objective things. As for onomatopoeia of human voice, some English onomatopoeia words are similar to Chinese onomatopoeia words in pronunciation, but some are different. For example, human voice of laugh “哈哈” in Chinese is equal to “Ha-ha” in English, but “嗤嗤” in Chinese is different from “titter” in English. As for onomatopoeia of animals, sound of cat “喵喵” in Chinese is equal to “meow” in English, but sound of sheep “咩咩” in Chinese is different from “bleat” in English. As for onomatopoeia of objective things, sound of rain “哗哗” in Chinese is equal to “patter” in English, but sound of thunder “隆隆” in Chinese is different from “rumble” in English.

Mo Yan’s masterpiece *The Republic of Wine* is a satirical novel which describes the official ecology in China by exploring the relationship between wine and people. In the novel, there are many onomatopoeia words used by Mo Yan to make the story more fun to read. The novel was translated to English by Howard Goldblatt and received praise from Western readers. The translation of the onomatopoeia words plays an important role in the translation process of the novel. To make foreign readers better understand the novel and the Chinese culture, Howard Goldblatt translated the onomatopoeia words in a flexible way by using different translation methods. This paper analyzes the translation of the onomatopoeia words in the light of Relevance Theory in order to make contribution to the translation of the onomatopoeia words.

## 2. RELEVANCE THEORY

Relevance Theory was put forward by linguistic Deirdre Wilson and anthropologist Dan Sperber in their work *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* in 1986. It is a pragmatic theory which focuses on the meaning and context in communication. The authors think that every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, p.158). The speaker makes an utterance which is an ostensive stimulus, and the hearer is unconscious of assuming that what the speaker say is optimally relevant to the communication and he will seek for an interpretation compatible with his presumption. Contextual effect and processing effort are two main

factors influence relevance. Human communication tends to expect the optimal relevance, which the hearer tries to get adequate contextual effects at minimal processing cost. The hearer goes on processing effort and looking for possible contextual effects, and intends to reach the understanding without the extra processing effort.

Ernst-August Gutt was the first scholar who applied the Relevance Theory of communication to translation studies. He believes that translation is an act of communication and the inferring process is based on relevance in the context of communication (Gutt, 1991). The principle of relevance constrains the translation, which should consider both what it is intended to convey and how it is expressed. Translation is a kind of “interlingual interpretive use” between two languages, and translator would consider relevant assumptions, especially those relevant to the communicative context. In the process of translation, the translator seeks for optimal relevance to convey the ideas and the reader derives information with minimal processing efforts. The intended interpretation of the translation should resemble the original, which offers adequate contextual effects and be expressed in a way that reader needs no extra processing effort to understand. The translation should be adequately relevant to the target language reader and be clear and natural in expression for reader to understand easily. The translator determines in what respects the translation should resemble the original and has to make a choice about what properties he wants to preserve. The translator should use his knowledge to make assumptions about the cognitive environment of the reader and the potential relevance that any aspects of the interpretation would have in that cognitive environment.

## 3. TRANSLATION METHODS OF ONOMATOPOEIA WORDS

Relevance Theory assumes that both verbal and non-verbal behaviours can be equally communicative (Wilson & Wharton, 2006, pp.1559-1579). Pragmatic inference is playing an important role in the interpretation of communicative behaviours, and the framework of Relevance Theory enables us to bring inference into the interpretation of onomatopoeia. Onomatopoeia focuses on the similarity of phonetic forms and realistic events. In Relevance Theory, an impression can convey a non-propositional interpretation, which is the same as onomatopoeia. Onomatopoeia can show the relationship between code and inference by conveying the optimal relevance of what the speaker wants to say. Onomatopoeia depends on the context, which makes it possible to be analyzed from the perspective of Relevance Theory. Onomatopoeia in Chinese can be divided into six types(Chen, 2006): a) X type with one word, for example “砰”, “嘘”, “咻”, “吱” and “噤”; b) XX type with two same words, for example “呦呦”, “嗖嗖”, “砰砰”, “沙沙” and

“叭叭”；c) XY type with two different words, for example “咔嚓”，“嘀嗒”，“咣当”，“啾啾” and “叮咚”；d) XYY type with three words, including one word repeated, for example “轰隆隆”，“哗啦啦” and “淅沥沥”；e) XYXY type with four words, including two words repeated, for example “叮当叮当”，“扑通扑通”，“咕咚咕咚”，“哗里哗里” and “呼噜呼噜”；f) XYYY type with four words, including the repeated words closely connected, for example “滴滴答答”，“嘟嘟囔囔”，“乒乒乓乓”，“丁丁当当” and “哗哗剥剥”。The types of onomatopoeia words in English are different from Chinese: words can be used as verbs, for example “to howl”，“to roar”，“to squeal” and “to twitter”；words can represent the animal itself, for example “cricket” and “cuckoo”；ricochet words, for example “hibble-babble”，“dilly-dally” and “prittle-prattle”。This paper will focus on the types of onomatopoeia words in Chinese to analyze the translation methods.

In *The Republic of Wine*, Mo Yan mainly used three types of onomatopoeia: XX, for example “呜呜”，“叩叩”；XYY, for example “气哄哄”；XYYY, for example “噼噼啪啪”。The translation methods of omission, substitution and paraphrase are adopted by Howard Goldblatt in to translate those onomatopoeia words.

### 3.1 Omission

Omission is a translation technique opposite to amplification. It means taking away unnecessary words in the translated version based on an accurate comprehension of the original text to make the translation idiomatic and expressive. According to the Relevance Theory, the translator determines the relevance of the translation text and the original text. Translator’s choice can influence the quality of the translation text and the response from the reader. For some difficult Chinese onomatopoeia words which have no equivalence in English, the translation method of omission is adopted. The omission of the onomatopoeia will not change the meaning conveyed by the author in the original text and the translation text can be clear enough for translated text readers.

#### Example 1:

男人的脚在她右侧直竖着，凉冰冰的。她拉拉被角为他遮盖。小宝在她左边蜷着，呜呜地打着均匀的呼噜。(Mo Yan, 2008)

Her husband’s feet stuck out from under the covers to her right, icy cold. She covered them with a corner of the quilt. Little Treasure slept curled up on her left, his breathing deep and even. (Goldblatt, 2000)

The word “呜呜” is a Chinese onomatopoeia which refers to the low sound made by a person. There is no equivalence in English. According to the context, the omission of this onomatopoeia word does not affect the information transmitted by the entire sentence. Therefore, the cognitive environment of English readers in the process of translation is considered and the method of omission is adopted.

#### Example 2:

(男人)又摸到火镰、火石、火绒，噼噼啪啪打起火来。(Mo Yan, 2008)  
He picked up a flint, a stone, and some tinder to make a fire. (Goldblatt, 2000)

In the original sentence, “噼噼啪啪” describes the continuous sound of the object being beaten. In the translated version “噼噼啪啪” is omitted without influencing the original meaning of the sentence.

### 3.2 Substitution

Substitution is used to replace the words of the original expression with Chinese or English synonyms or idioms according to different situations. According to Relevance Theory, people instinctively hope to get contextual effects in the process of communication, and do not want to pay too much processing effort to understand the meaning of words. In the process of translation, the translator should consider the cognitive environment of the target readers, and the translation of onomatopoeia words should be concise. Substitution is adopted to make the readers obtain sufficient contextual effects.

#### Example 3:

锅里的水吱吱地响起来，女人紧着往灶里填草。(Mo Yan, 2008)  
The water gurgled to a boil and the woman added more kindling to the stove. (Goldblatt, 2000)

The word “吱吱” in the original describes the short and sharp sound of boiling water in the pot, which is common in Chinese. In English culture, the word “gurgle” is usually used to describe the bubbling sound of water flowing from a bottle with a narrow neck. The translator uses “gurgle” to replace “吱吱” rather than translating the onomatopoeia literally. Readers can obtain sufficient contextual effects and get the intent of the author.

#### Example 4:

小宝准确地把乳头抢进嘴里，嗓子里发出呜呜啦啦的声响。(Mo Yan, 2008)  
Little Treasure took a nipple into his mouth and immediately began gurgling contentedly. (Goldblatt, 2000)

“呜呜啦啦”describes the sound of baby sucking milk. In English, “gurgle” is usually used to describe the baby who is making a sound in their throat similar to the gurgling of water. The translator used equivalence onomatopoeia word “gurgle” in English to replace the Chinese one, which is conform to the expression of English. The meaning of the Chinese is conveyed and the translated text gets optimal relevance to the original text.

#### Example 5:

男人吭吭着，拉开房门走到院子里，把一个破了沿的黑色大瓦盆拎进来。(Mo Yan, 2008)  
He grunted a reply and went into the yard, quickly returning with a chipped black ceramic basin. (Goldblatt, 2000)

The word “吭吭” in the original means someone makes a low sound especially because he is annoyed which has the similar meaning of “grunt” in English. The method of substitution is used by the translator and the English equivalence is chosen to replace the Chinese onomatopoeia word. English readers are familiar with the word and its expression, which helps them understand the intent of the author.

### 3.3. Paraphrase

Paraphrase is to translate the meaning of the original without adopting the specific description words. According to the Relevance Theory, the translated text should conform to the presumption of the optimal relevance and make sufficient contextual effects. The translator uses paraphrase to explain the exact meaning of the original onomatopoeia words.

Example 6:

男人把烟袋锅往炕壁上叩叩，清清嗓子，慢吞吞地说……  
(Mo Yan, 2008)

The man *knocked* the bowl of his pipe against the bed, cleared his throat, and said hesitantly... (Goldblatt, 2000)

In the original sentence, “叩叩” describes the sound of hitting something several times. The translator uses the paraphrase to explain the meaning of the Chinese onomatopoeia word. The two characters “叩叩” is translated into one word “knock”, which is optimal relevant to the presumption of the original text.

Example 7:

小男孩也歪斜地哭起来，金元宝拍着他的屁股，哼哼唧唧地说：

“宝儿，小宝儿，不要哭，爹给你洗澡。” (Mo Yan, 2008)

When he started crying, Jin Yuanbao patted him on the bottom and *made cooing sounds*: ‘Treasure, Little Treasure, don’t cry. Daddy’s going to give you a bath.’ (Goldblatt, 2000)

The adjective “哼哼唧唧” in the original means speaking or singing in a low sound. The translator paraphrases the adjective words into verb phrase “making cooing sounds”, which means someone speaks in a very soft, quiet voice. The change of part of speech makes the translated text conform to the presumption of the optimal relevance of the original text and easy to understand.

Example 8:

金元宝拍了宝儿屁股一巴掌，气哄哄地说：“嚎！嚎什么？！” (Mo Yan, 2008)

Jin Yuanbao patted his bottom, harder this time, and said *angrily*: ‘What are you screeching about?’ (Goldblatt, 2000)

In Chinese, “气哄哄” means speaking loudly because of anger. The translator paraphrases the adjective into

the adverb “angrily”, which makes sufficient contextual effects and transmits the exact meaning of the original onomatopoeia words.

## CONCLUSION

One of the special characteristics of *The Republic of Wine* is that Mo Yan used a large number of onomatopoeia words to make the story a greater pleasure to read. Therefore, the translation of the onomatopoeia words is worth of studying to make English readers better understand the novel and the Chinese culture. This paper analyzes the translation of the onomatopoeia words in *The Republic of Wine* from the perspective of Relevance Theory. We can learn from Howard Goldblatt that the flexible translation methods of omission, substitution and paraphrase are used in order to transmit the optimal relevance of the presumption of the original words. Sufficient contextual effects can be obtained by readers so that they can fully understand the novel.

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