

# A Comparative Study of Yan Fu's Translation Theory and Lederer's Interpretive Translation Theory

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**Abstract:** "Faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance" of Yan Fu and interpretive translation theory of Lederer share similar focuses of attention and theoretical requirements, such as conveying the ideas and meanings of the source texts, and pursuing both faithfulness and adaptability to target language readers. Their difference is also significant, which is mainly because of the distinction between Chinese and western culture. By exploring the similarities and differences of these two translation theories, benign conditions can be generated for translators to better understand different translation theories and rationally use translation theories to guide practice.

**Keywords:** Faithfulness; Expressiveness; Elegance; Interpretive Translation Theory; Comparative Study.

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## 1. The Interpretive Translation Theory

The development of Chinese and western translation thoughts is characterized by "similarity", which is not restricted by language, culture, time and space. Although scholars from different periods and countries have put forward various kinds of translation theories, these seemingly different theories have striking similarities in the deep level of epistemology. In the preface of *Modern translation: The Modal Interpretation*, Lederer (2001) said that their ideas are quite similar to Yan Fu's translation thoughts and his three translation criterions.

### 1.1. The History of Interpretive Translation Theory

After the Second World War, the exchanges among countries became more and more frequent, which provided a necessary practical basis for the study of interpretation studies. Seleskovitch was one of the earliest scholars to study it, and his publication of *Interpreters for International Conferences* in 1968 marked the birth of the interpretive theory. The interpretive theory puts the starting point and destination of its study into the teaching of interpretation. This theory draws lessons from cognitive psychology, language psychology, neurology, philosophical linguistics, information theory and other related disciplines (Lederer, 1976, p.52). Its depth and breadth have been continuously expanded. The scope of the study extends to the fields of science and technology, law, literature and other fields, involving the relatively mature interdisciplinary translation theory of language and non-language translation. Seleskovitch and Lederer, representatives of the interpretive theory, believe that translation is not the conversion between codes, but the expression of the thoughts and information carried by the language. Language is only a symbol to express thoughts, not thoughts (Wittgenstein, 1922, p.131).

Thought and information are the purposes of mutual communication and understanding in translation activities. Translation is a communicative activity in which the translator interprets or translates the meaning of the original text through linguistic symbols and his or her own cognitive supplement. The translator should pursue the equivalence of the meaning or effect of the original text rather than the

equivalence of linguistic units. In other words, translation is not word to word, even sentence to sentence, but discourse translation, because discourse is fundamentally the product of the combination of linguistic knowledge and extralinguistic knowledge. Additionally, discourse is the object of translation and the reason for the existence of translation.

### 1.2. The Characteristic of The Interpretive Translation Theory

According to the general theory, there are three aspects of translation, that is, word-to-word translation, sentence translation without context, and text translation with linguistic knowledge combined with non-linguistic knowledge. Scholars from interpretive theory believe that word-to-word translation and sentence translation without context are only linguistic equivalence, and this equivalence is not translation in the real sense. Only the communicative translation that excavates the deep connotation of the original text and reflects the objective facts can be a successful translation. The interpretive theory makes a clear distinction between grammar and semantics, emphasizing that translation is essentially "interpretive". They believe that language meaning does not contain non-verbal meaning, and the translator should translate the content is "meaning", that is, "communicative meaning".

The focus of interpretive translation theory is the process of translation. The scholars divide translation activities into three processes: understanding the original text, breaking away from the original language, expressing the understood content and emotion in another language. While understanding is the first step and the foundation of translation. The translator must understand the meaning expressed by the original language firstly, to achieve the purpose of understanding. In addition to mastering the language, the translator must also learn certain cognitive knowledge. Lederer, (2001) mentioned that understanding a text requires language proficiency as well as encyclopedic knowledge.

The core idea of interpretative translation is the process of translation out of the shell of the original language. That is to say that going through language is a stage of understanding a text and rephrasing it in another language. For example, during the process of interpretation, the interpreter obtains

“meaning” through cognitive processing of the speech transmitted by the speaker. The speech will disappear, but the “meaning” will be preserved in memory as a conscious state. Then, the interpreter expresses the “meaning” in another language, which is the stage of expression. This also reveals the core idea of interpretive theory: forget the form of the source language and express the idea of the source language. The phenomenon of “equivalence” occurs in the process of translation. That is, firstly, in the ideal communicative situation, the translator should completely understand the equivalence between the “meaning” and the “the contents that the author intend to express” of the original text. Subsequently, completing the equivalence between the meaning understood by the readers of the original language and the meaning expressed by the translation, which defines the issue of faithfulness in translation. The French translation theorist Albee put forward three evaluation criteria of fidelity of meaning: fidelity to the author’s intention, fidelity to the expression of the original language and fidelity to the target language readers. These three reference elements are an indivisible whole, which constitute a three-dimensional relationship. Hung (2005) emphasized that “faithfulness” is not faithful to the words of the original text, but “faithfulness” to “the words author intends to express”. By this way, the “faithfulness of meaning” proposed by Albee breaks away from the shackles of language, and integrates into every link in the process of translation.

## 2. Yan Fu’s Translation Theory

There is no shortage of supporters of “faithfulness” in China’s translation thought, among which Yan Fu is the most supportive. However, the core of his translation theory is different from the interpretive translation theory mentioned above. Yan Fu, a newly enlightened thinker of the late Qing Dynasty, mentioned the three difficulties in translations: faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance. It’s hard enough to stay true to the original idea. However, if the original text is understood correctly but not “expressed” in a smooth translation, it is equivalent to no translation. Therefore, attention should be paid to “expressed” at this time (Cheung, 2006, p.31).

### 2.1. The History of Yan Fu’s Translation Theory

After the Opium War, Chinese intellectuals in modern times translated a large number of foreign works, most of which were natural subjects. As an Enlightenment thinker, Yan Fu translated many classical works of the western bourgeoisie, including economic thought, political and legal theory, social theory, scientific methodology, positive philosophy and so on. Besides, he used the Chinese classical literary theory, to summarize his rich translation experience, to carry on a high degree of theoretical generalization, and to clearly put forward the translation criterion of “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance”, through absorbing the essence of the ancient Chinese Buddhist sutra translation thought. The famous translation criterion is not only the principle and standard in a general sense, it should be said that it is the core of traditional Chinese translation, and the guiding of traditional Chinese translation thought. The translation theories of Lu Xun, Fu Lei and Qian Zhongshu are developed and extended on this basic criterion.

### 2.2. The Characteristic of Yan Fu’s Translation Theory

Yan Fu made a pithy demonstration of “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance” in his *Evolution and Ethics*. He considered that these three standards are a complete organism, taking “faithfulness” as the “fundamental”, “elegance” as the “appearance”, and “expressiveness” as the “bond”. Yan Fu believed that “faithfulness” is the most important, which means not going against the original text, that is the translation should be accurate, not deviate, not omit, and not add or subtract the meaning at will, which is faithful to the original text. And “expressiveness” signify that not be confined to the original form, and that the translation is smooth and clear. “expressiveness” serves “faithfulness”, and “faithfulness” and “expressiveness” are both the premise and basis of “elegance”. The “faithfulness” mentioned by Yan Fu should strive to be faithful to the meaning of the original text in both form and content, but often must give up the form of fidelity in order to be “faithfulness” in content. Thus, Yan Fu pursues the “expressiveness” of the whole for the “faithfulness” of the whole. It can be seen that his translation thought is not a “sentence-oriented” thought, but a “paragraph-oriented” thought. This shows his translation thought with a unique and complete theory.

While, the meaning of “elegance” has been the focus of debate among quite a few scholars in China for the past hundred years. From the perspective of dialectical materialism of Marxist, there are three meanings of elegance. First, “elegance” shows the literary and artistic value of the translated works. Guo Moruo once said that the so-called “elegance” is not profound or embellished, but has high literary or artistic value (Hung, 2005, pp.11-15). Translation is an art, and the essence of art lies in creation. Yan Fu made translation as an art all his life, so his translated works have both permanent academic value and eternal literary and artistic value. Second, his “elegance” is just for “expressiveness”. Its purpose is to conform to the psychology of specific target readers, which is the choice made by Yan Fu in the specific historical era in line with the translator’s purpose, rather than invariable. Third, “elegance” is a theoretical “framework” on the basis of “keeping up with the times”. Later generations can enrich the connotation of translation theory with the development of The Times, and deepen understanding of translation theory. In different historical periods, there should be different criteria of elegance. Therefore, without Yan Fu’s foundational theoretical framework, there would be no progress in translation theory today. This is exactly Yan Fu’s contribution to the development of translation theory (Wang B. &, Wang J. 2004, pp.38-39). The three aspects of “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance” are not only balanced and equal, but also related to cause and effect: Elegance represents the style of text, faithfulness is the basis of translation, and expressiveness is the process. The three are mutually reinforcing, restricting and complementing each other, and cannot be ignored.

### 3. The Comparative Study of The Two Theories

It is of great practical significance for the development of translation studies to analyze the similarities and differences between Chinese and western translation theories. To make a concrete comparison between Chinese and western

translation theories, we can start from both the macro and micro basis, and adopt three methods: horizontal comparison, vertical comparison and thematic comparison... To obtain the best comparative results, the three comparative methods must not be used in isolation, but must be integrated and flexible (Cheung, 2006, p.39).

The interpretive theory, which originated in the 1960s and matured in the 1980s, is the product of the development stage of contemporary western translation theories. Based on the theories of linguistic psychology, cognitive psychology, neurology, philosophical linguistics and informatics, it explores the mechanism of speech, the relationship between language and discourse, and translation studies (Hung, 2005, p.97).

In contrast, Yan Fu, based on Chinese classical literary theory, integrates the translation thoughts of ancient Chinese Buddhist scriptures, philosophical essence and aesthetic issues, and proposes the core of traditional Chinese translation theory based on his own rich translation experience. They have different theoretical roots, different starting points and different aims. Yan Fu put forward the idea of saving and strengthening the country, which has a strong political purpose. The theory of interpretive with the characteristics of The times emphasizes translation teaching and training, which has strong commercial practicability. From the micro basis, the thoughts of interpretive school is in keeping with the characteristics of western translation theories: it emphasizes technique but not art, that is, it conducts rigorous logical reasoning through specific experiments, so as to draw verifiable conclusions with characteristics of concreteness, accuracy, objectivity and diversity. Inversely, the translation of “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance” is more of an artistic tendency, with the traditional Chinese translation thinking of “emphasizing art over technique”. Accordingly, traditional translators express their inner feelings through beautiful and profound language, which becomes an art with “aesthetic feeling”. This kind of language art is usually a kind of vague and holistic subjective feeling, rather than a “skill” based on logical analysis. In other words, the translation with “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance” is centred on integrity, fuzziness, subjectivity and singleness. The differences between the two are as follows.

### 3.1. Concreteness and Wholeness

After years of practical research on interpretation, the founders of the interpretive theory, Seleskovitch and Lederer (1989), from perceptual inference to experiment, through the objective and rational analysis of the translation object, finally summed up the relative perfect interpretation model, which was extended to other translation fields, becoming a systematic translation theory. This kind of theory does not draw conclusions only by imagination, but induces concrete scientific theories applicable to practical activities after countless concrete practices. On the contrary, the translation criterion of “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance” does not make a specific analysis of the specific translation practice, but generalizes it, which weakens the scientific and accurate nature of the evaluation theory.

### 3.2. Accuracy and Ambiguity

Scientific reasoning is based on precise concepts. While, based on the theories of linguistic psychology, cognitive psychology, neurology and other scientific theories, the

interpretive school can be discussed with the help of precise concepts in these disciplines, and give relatively strict definitions of evaluation criteria. Comparatively speaking, Yan Fu does not use traditional Chinese linguistics, and let alone western linguistics to accurately explain the concept of “faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance”. Because of this, the debate on the meaning of the three criterion in Chinese translation circles has lasted for more than a century.

### 3.3. Objectivity and Subjectivity

Objectivity is one of the characteristics of scientific practice. The objectivity of interpretive theory is reflected in the following two aspects: On the one hand, interpretive theory is the study of translation process. They apply general linguistics, cognitive psychology, neurology and other relevant knowledge to translation practice in order to analyze and determine the essential meaning of language in translation. It can be seen that these theoretical analyses are objective activities without the transfer of subjective consciousness. On the other hand, they emphasize that both the readers of the source language and the readers of the target language should have similar reactions to the text, which is the criterion for evaluating the success of translation activities. This evaluation standard is independent of the translator’s subjective consciousness with scientific objectivity. On the contrary, “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance” emphasizes the subjective feelings of the translator and the evaluator, and it is really biased to evaluate the quality of the translation based on the intuition of the translator and the evaluator.

### 3.4. Diversification and Simplicity

The interpretive theory emphasizes the communicative function of language, incorporates pragmatic factors into its theory, and is closely integrated with other disciplines. It is easy to absorb the achievements of linguistics, psychology, sociology and so on to make it a comprehensive discipline. In turn, it can be popularized and applied to other disciplines, such as computer linguistics and machine translation. However, the perspective of “faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance” is relatively simple from the perspective of aesthetic aesthetics, and the combination with other disciplines is weak. In addition, driven by interpretive theory, the study of interpretation in the 1980s shifted from descriptive to normative. In order to explain the separation of language and meaning in the code-switching process, Seleskovitch and Lederer (2004) proposed a triangular model of the interpreting process, which presented the overall ideal state of the interpreting process from a normative perspective. It is another manifestation of the scientific tendency that the interpretive theory strives for the normalization of the procedure. Instead, “faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance” attaches importance to the study of the result of “translated works”, but has little to do with the process of translation. The success of a translated work is judged mainly by the subjective impression or intuition of the evaluator, and it is impossible to give a specific evaluation answer.

The reason behind the difference between the theory of “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance” and the interpretive theory is complex. Despite the great differences between the two theories, there are also striking similarities. Both of them belong to prescriptive translation theories. Additionally, despite the hundreds of thousands of miles of space and time distance, there are media differences between

interpretation and translation, but they share the same theoretical perspective, namely, translation content, language expression and stylistic characteristics, and put forward similar theoretical elaboration in these three aspects, and both pursue the principle of fidelity and reader adaptability. In terms of translation content, both the “faithfulness” of Yan Fu and the “meaning equivalence” of the interpretive theory insist that the translated text be faithful to the connotation and deep meaning of the original text, not only the correspondence between words and words. In terms of language expression, “expressiveness”, “break away from the shell of the original language” and “expression” all imply that the translation should not be bound by the phonetic form of the original text, conform to the habits of the target language, and express the meaning of the original text fluently, idiomatic, correct and complete. In terms of stylistic features, the interpretive theory also has the requirement that “elegance”, that is, expresses the original text in an appropriate style, but Yan Fu lays more emphasis on language rhetoric. Moreover, both theories pursue the faithfulness of the target text to the original text, but this “faithfulness” is based on meaning equivalence rather than language correspondence. Simultaneously, both theories emphasize that the target text should adapt to the target language readers, taking into account the acceptability of the target language readers to the translation. This is the main feature of the development of translation thought—the embodiment of connectedness, which is not subject to the constraints of linguistic and cultural differences. Yan Fu’s theory of “faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance” and the theory of the interpretive theory of translation has the resonance of translation principles, the internal commonality in the development of translation activities.

#### 4. Conclusion

Translation, a special practical activity with both scientific and artistic nature, is a unity of binary opposites. For instance, Interpretive theory gives a scientific description of the translation process, revealing the internal and objective laws of the source language and the target language. Its studied object is the objective existence that is not transferred by the will of the translator. Meanwhile, the interpretive theory points out that the quality of the translated works is not determined by the subjective consciousness of the translator, but by the objective situation of the target language readers’ acceptance of the translated text. It can be seen that from the objective object to the whole process of taking objective evaluation as the end result, the interpretive theory has given a rigorous and highly operational theoretical model, flashing the light of science. The translation standard of “faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance” is a little inferior. The three criteria does not pay attention to the translation process, but only gives the criteria for evaluating translated works. These criteria are also based on the translator’s subjective judgment. There is no specific evaluation criterion, and the theory is not clear and fuzzy.

However, the essence of translation is the organic unity of science and art. Translation practice is an activity that reproduces art through language media. In other words, people express their desire for beauty while pursuing the objective truth. It is difficult for mechanical logical concepts to control these subjective factors, and it is impossible to give a perfect ultimate standard for the pursuit of abstract beauty. At this time, “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance” with strong artistic tendency makes up for the deficiency of the interpretive theory to a great extent. Its relatively broad and fuzzy evaluation criteria leave room for people’s imagination, which is conducive to stimulating the translator’s subjective initiative and creativity. On top of that, this vague translation standard stimulates people’s thinking and establishes a general direction for the aesthetic standard of translation. While, Translation is a complex practical activity. The objects of translation are all inclusive, including both rigorous and accurate scientific texts and literary works with strong artistic flavor. This requires the combination of subjectivity and objectivity in the process of translation. The complexity and universality of translation activities make us know that a single perspective and isolated theory can not complete its mission. Only exchange and integration are the only way to enrich and perfect the theory. That is to say, it needs to be based on the rigorous and scientific interpretive theory, and also needs the abstract and fuzzy “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance” to create a gorgeous artistic atmosphere. Only by absorbing the advantages of eastern and western translation theories, integrating the essence of them, and learning from each other’s strong points to make up for their weaknesses, can we develop a set of translation theories with its own characteristics. Furthermore, it can facilitate more translators to apply these theories into translation, creating more superior works.

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