

Translating Coherence: An SDRT-Based Comparative Study of Lin Yutang's and Graham Sanders's Versions of Six Chapters of a Floating Life

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Abstract. This study conducts a comparative analysis of Lin Yutang's and Graham Sanders's English translations of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* through the lens of Segmented Discourse Representation Theory (SDRT). By examining rhetorical relations such as Result, Elaboration, Background, and Parallel, the paper analyzes how each translator constructs coherence, negotiates cultural nuances, and adapts narrative strategies. Lin's version reveals a more implicit, aesthetic approach rooted in Confucian values, while Sanders's translation favors directness and emotional transparency aligned with Western rhetorical norms. Also the study expresses the impact of Skopos theory on translation decisions. It shows how differences in translation purpose decide rhetorical choices. Through detailed analysis of representative passages and relational structure, this research offers insights into how discourse coherence is restructured in cross-cultural translation. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates the usefulness of SDRT as a tool for translation analysis and promotes a more systematic understanding of how translators mediate between language, culture, and communicative intent.

Keywords: Segmented Discourse Representation Theory (SDRT); Coherence; Lin Yutang; Graham Sanders.

1. Introduction

Six Chapters of a Floating Life is a highly influential work that belongs to the genre of autobiographical prose presented in a note-like and episodic structure. The writer Shen Fu described his daily life together with his wife, Chen Yun. Observing Shen Fu, particularly his significant marital experiences, provides insights on Chinese culture and customs. This is why *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* remains well-known and revered by people today after so many years.

SDRT is a formal theory of discourse structure that emphasizes the implication of coherence relations, such as parallel, contrast, and elaboration—in creating meaningful and connected texts[1]. Therefore, SDRT theory can offer a promising approach to solving such issues effectively. Using SDRT, researchers can gain a better understanding of the text's structure, observe how different translators interpret and make sense of the logic, and assess how the various rhetorical relations impact the literary effect of the translated texts.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Segmented Discourse Representation Theory (SDRT)

SDRT has profoundly influenced literary analysis. It evolved from Discourse Representation Theory (DRT), proposed by Hans Kamp in 1981 to address issues in anaphora and tense semantics [2]. In the 1990s, Nicholas Asher and Alex Lascarides introduced the core concepts of SDRT, emphasizing segmented discourse structures and rhetorical relations [3], which they systematically elaborated in their 2003 seminal work [1]. Within SDRT, Asher and Vieu also distinguished subordinating from coordinating discourse relations, a distinction that affects the Right Frontier Constraint (RFC) [4]. Lascarides and Asher further formulated SDRT as an integration of rhetorical relations, dynamic semantics, and defeasible reasoning to model discourse coherence [5].

Rohde et al.'s large-scale experiments show that readers interpret inter-sentential relations not merely through discourse adverbials but also by drawing on context and commonsense reasoning—an insight crucial for literary analysis [6]. Wang Chunliu explores discourse coherence from a cognitive perspective, focusing on conceptual order, holistic understanding, and mental representation [7]. The dimension of communicative purpose in SDRT also invites a comparison with Skopos Theory [9]. Collectively, these studies provide valuable frameworks for analyzing complex discourse in literature.

2.2 Translations of Six Chapters of a Floating Life

Six Chapters of a Floating Life (浮生六记) was written around 1810 by Shen Fu, a poor Chinese literatus and painter from the southern city of Soochow. Of the six original chapters, only four were found when the manuscript was discovered in 1877; until now, Shen Fu's work remains a torso[8].

Obviously, with the translation of traditional culture, four-character idioms, archaic Chinese prose, and classical poetry, *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* is difficult to translate. There are currently five English translations of this work, and this paper focuses on a comparative analysis of Lin Yutang's and Graham Sanders's versions. Sanders' s translation includes certain elements from Lin' s work [10], and analyzing their similarities and differences through the SDRT can help researchers better understand the cultural and cognitive differences between Chinese and Western.

This essay focuses on two versions of the work—Lin Yutang's version[11]and Graham Sanders's Version[10]. Lin was the first translator to introduce *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* to English readers. Scholars primarily focus on the application of Skopos theory, eco-translatology, or explicitation phenomena in Lin's English translation of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*[13][14]. Sanders's translation, first published in 2011, is relatively recent. Scholars have noted that it relies heavily on contextual interpretation and tends to convey characters' emotions in a more affective and expressive manner. However, it doesn't mean that there are no shortcomings[15]. In most cases, Graham Sanders's translation closely expresses the original in terms of expression, discourse structure, and linguistic style[16], but sometimes it is not lively and expressive enough.

3. Methodology

SDRT can analyze the relations between individual sentences through rhetorical relations (Narration, Elaboration, Explanation, Contrast, Result, etc.), and it can also analyze the relations among multiple sentences belonging to a discourse segment, provided that the analysis adheres to the RFC.

SDRT is also a very effective analytical method that helps us clarify the structure of a text. It can divide the entire text into smaller units and, by analyzing the rhetorical relations between these units, build a logical map which helps better understand the internal logic of the whole story.

The story in *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* is quite simple. Shen Fu describes his daily life in a clear, straight timeline. Therefore, specific chapters or paragraphs in the book are selected to analyse how different translations address rhetorical relationships. It is necessary to select specific sections of the text for analysis. For example, those that emphasize the deep love between Shen Fu and Chen Yun, or clearly highlight Chinese culture elements, or show the translation process of different translators' thinking patterns. Afterwards, the chosen text is split into EDUs, and then their rhetorical relations are recognized and examined. And then build up the discourse structure graph accordingly. If the two translations have the same rhetorical relations, it is necessary to analyze why they are the same in terms of whether they make the rhetorical structure explicit. If rhetorical relations are different, this study will try to find out their possible reasons, whether it is because of the translators' cognitive tendency or some other kind of cultural distinction in their choices.

4. Analysis

4.1 Differences

Different choices of rhetorical strategies made by translators show their own habits, preferences for values of culture and cognitive orientation.

4.1.1 Caused by Cultural Divergence.

By comparing the two translations (Table 1), it is noted that both translators preserved the original word order in rendering the phrase “余年十三，随母归宁”. There are no changes to the order, although the expressions differ slightly. Nevertheless, the Background relation between the two EDUs: “I was thirteen years old” and “I went with my mother to her maiden home”, is established in both versions.

Table 1. Comparison of two translations

Original text	Lin’s version	Sanders’s Version
余年十三，随母归宁，两小无猜，得见所作，……，告母曰：“若为儿择妇，非淑姊不娶。”	When I was 13 years old, I went with my mother to her maiden home and there we met. As we were two young innocent children, she allowed me to read her poems. ... I once told my mother, if you were to choose a girl for me, I won't marry anyone except cousin Su[11].	When I was 13, during a trip with my mother to visit her side of the family, Yun and I got along famously, and I was even able to see some of the poems she wrote... Even so, I could not get her out of my mind and declared to my mother, if you would choose a wife for me, let it be Sister Shu Zhen, or I will not marry at all. [10]

However, there is a significant difference between the two translations of the phrase “两小无猜，得见所作”. Correspondingly, the rhetorical relations they choose are also different.

In Lin’s translation (see Figure 1), “I was allowed to read her work” is the result of “We were two young innocent children.” Moreover, the original sentence in the translation contains a clear connective word “as”, indicating the reason for the action. Lin’s version emphasizes the causal relationship between the two segments.

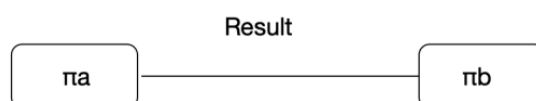


Figure 1. Relational structure between 2 EDUs (Lin’s version)

EDUs: π_a : As we were two young innocent children; π_b : Yun allowed me to read her poems.

In Sanders’s translation (see Figure 2), the word “even” emphasizes the special nature of the act of “reading poems” and, in fact, serves as a supplementary clarification or deeper explanation of the statement “we were close”. “I was even able to see some of the poems she wrote” serves as a concrete example of the preceding statement “Yun and I got along famously.” Therefore, the rhetorical relation between the two is Elaboration.

Admittedly, the differences in the choice of rhetorical relations can be caused by many factors. However, in this example, the most prominent influencing factor is cultural differences. As a Chinese person, Lin Yutang was deeply influenced by Chinese culture and had strong confidence in it. Since Confucianism forms the foundation of Chinese culture, it can be said that Lin’s translations are closely intertwined with Confucian values[17]. Confucian culture places great emphasis on propriety and social norms. As stated in The Book of Rites: Nei Ze (《礼记·内则》): “Men and women shall not hand things directly to each other, shall not sit together, and shall not bathe together.” This reflects the clear boundaries that were required between men and women in ancient Chinese society. Lin’s

translation implicitly reflects this idea. It does more than simply narrate the passage of time to show the intimacy between Shen Fu and Yun. Also, it provides a reasonable explanation of their behavior of “reading her poems”, aligning it with cultural norms. This is a culturally grounded interpretation, indicating that “reading her poems” could only take place under appropriate conditions, such as a proper relationship (being cousins) and an innocent context (being young). Lin’s translation uses Result to achieve a sense of legitimacy and propriety for the action. At the same time, the use of the Result relationship renders the emotions in the translation more restrained and implicit. Lin conceals the couple’s budding affection beneath the veil of ethical propriety. The aim is to help target-language readers make clear the cultural logic and emotional expression characteristic of Chinese tradition.

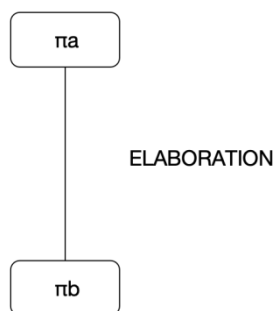


Figure 2. Relational structure between 2 EDUs (Sanders’s version)

EDUs: πa: Yun and I got along famously; πb: I was even able to see some of the poems she wrote.

As for Sanders, he may have overlooked certain aspects of the Chinese cultural background and relied more heavily on Western empiricism. In his translation, “read her poems” serves as a further elaboration of “we were close”. At the same time, Sanders’s emotional expression is more outward and direct. He visualizes the abstract idea of “being close” through the concrete action of “reading her poems”, allowing readers to empathize more readily. This directness is also evident later in the passage: “if you would choose a wife for me, let it be Sister Shu Zhen, or I will not marry at all.” Compared to Lin’s version, Sanders places greater emphasis on the consequence of not marrying Yun, emphasizing the openness and explicitness of emotional expression in Western culture.

4.1.2 Different Translation Purposes (skopoi)

“The top-ranking rule for any translation is the Skopos rule, which means that a translation is determined by its purpose.” [9] Skopos theory is a commonly applied theory in translation practice. It also has a certain influence on the translator’s choice of rhetorical relations. Table 2 presents a typical example.

Table 2. Comparison of two translations

Original text	Lin’s version	Sanders’s Version
见渺小微物，必细查其纹理， 故时有物外之趣。	I could see the tiniest objects and loved to observe the fine grains and patterns of small things, from which I derived a romantic unworldly pleasure. [11]	When I saw tiny and insignificant things, I just had to examine the patterns on their surfaces in minute detail, and often I would be transported by their otherworldly charms.[10]

The two versions differ in their choice of rhetorical relations when translating the sentence “见渺小微物，必细查其纹理。” A more in-depth explanation can be provided based on the Figure 3.

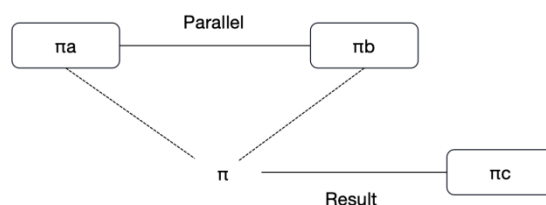


Figure 3. Relational structure of 3 EDUs (Lin's version)

EDUs (Lin's version): π_a : I could see the tiniest objects; π_b : I loved to observe the grains and patterns of small things; π_c : I derived a romantic unworldly pleasure.

An analysis of Lin's version reveals that π_a and π_b share the same subject "I", with both predicates describing the speaker's actions directed toward "tiny things" as the object. The two clauses are connected by the conjunction "and", which serves merely as a neutral link without adding strong rhetorical emphasis. Therefore, PARALLEL can be held between π_a and π_b . Provided that π_a and π_b are treated as a single macro-unit due to their parallel structure and shared discourse function, it is legitimate under SDRT to establish a RESULT relation between this combined unit and π_c .

Unlike Lin's version, Sanders' s translation(Figure 4) aligns more closely with the logic of the original text. Due to the presence of "when", π_a does not merely stand in a parallel relation with π_b . It functions as a temporal condition or background for π_b . Furthermore, π_c (I would be transported) is not the result of both π_a and π_b combined. According to the RFC, the RESULT relationship should be established only between π_b (examine the patterns) and π_c (be transported), as π_b is the most recently accessible node in the discourse structure.

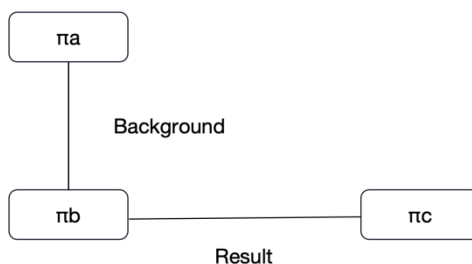


Figure 4. Relational structure of 3 EDUs (Sander's version)

EDUs (Sanders's version): π_a : The time I saw tiny and insignificant things; π_b : I examine the patterns on their surfaces; π_c : I would be transported by their otherworldly charms.

Skopos theory is founded on three core principles: the Skopos rule, the coherence rule, and the fidelity rule. These principles can be applied in conjunction with SDRT to examine the differences between the two translations. Also, it guides the translation process. While both translators share the primary goal of introducing Chinese literature to Western readers, subtle differences exist in their specific purposes.

Lin Yutang's translation was published relatively early and is characterized by a more restrained and subtle style, as previously discussed. Although the content remains faithful to the original, he made noticeable adjustments to the sentence structure. Instead of adopting a literal, word-for-word translation, Lin reorganized the structure to improve rhythm and literary elegance in the target language. This strategy is closely related to the audience he intended to reach. Lin's translation was primarily aimed at readers with a certain level of literary literacy, most of them are capable of appreciating the aesthetic connection between the translated version and the original text. As a result, when translating the sentence "见渺小微物，必细查其纹理", he chose a PARALLEL + RESULT structure. By placing "see" and "love to observe" in parallel, he not only emphasized the subject's act

of observation but also expressed the emotional response that arises from it. This kind of structure enhances the rhythm and balance of the sentence and reflects a common stylistic feature in Chinese prose, where emotion is often evoked through the contemplation of small things. Through this adaptation, Lin successfully integrates aesthetic form with emotional expression, which demonstrates his awareness of both the stylistic norms of Chinese literature and the expectations of his target readers.

In contrast, Sanders's translation is closer to the original in terms of sentence structure. Unlike Lin Yutang, Sanders reinterprets Chinese culture from the perspective of an English native speaker. His target readers are mainly English speakers who do not know Chinese but are interested in Chinese literature. As a result, Sanders pays more attention to fidelity to the original than coherence. His translation uses conjunctions like "when" to show the links between different clauses so that the reader can tell the timeline of events or the cause-and-effect better. This approach ensures that the translation maintains excellent rhythm, is easy to read in the target language, and retains a structure that is closer to the original. So readers can understand the meaning and emotional tone of the paragraph without having to add more inference.

4.2 Similarities

Different translations often apply the same rhetorical relations to the source text, even though translators may choose different rhetorical relations in the translation process due to cultural differences or varying translation purposes. But why did both translators, despite their differences in cultural background, linguistic expression, and translation purpose, still choose the same rhetorical relations?

Both translators tend to adhere to the core logical structure of the original text. When the source contains clear logical sequences—such as cause-and-effect relations or chronological order—they generally follow the narrative structure intended by the original author. In *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, there is frequent use of connectives that link clauses, such as *gu* (故, indicating result), *yin* (因, indicating result), and *wei... cai...* (唯.....才....., indicating condition). When these connectives appear, both translators, in most cases, choose to preserve the same rhetorical relations expressed in the original sentence.

From a mental representation of discourse coherence [7] perspective, even if a sentence or some sentences lack any connective words, these sentences may already have semantic links. These kinds of underlying logical relations usually have a bigger effect on the translation compared with the translators' own cultural background, personal stylistic preferences, and target readership. Therefore, different translations can find themselves in the same coherent relationship, even if these external differences exist.

5. Results and Discussion

It can be seen that when it comes to translating *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, Lin and Graham Sanders both overlap and differ in choosing rhetorical relations. It is these differences that become striking where culturally sensitive or emotionally charged parts of a piece are involved.

For example, in the sentence “两小无猜，得见所作”，Lin Yutang uses a Result relation. “Reading her poems” is a natural consequence of being “innocent children”. The sense of behavioral propriety is within the context of Confucianism. But Sanders uses an Elaboration relation. He expresses the closeness between Shen Fu and Yun through their shared activity of "reading poems" and highlights the subtle romantic relationship they had before marriage. Meanwhile, it makes the emotional dimension explicit. In the example “见渺小微物，必细查其纹理，” Lin Yutang uses a Parallel + Result to achieve a rhythmic and reflective tone to emphasize the internal aesthetic experience. But Sanders applies a Background + Result relation. He then presents a more straightforward logic and improves the temporal flow by using connectives, such as “when”. It is worth noting that despite their differences in cultural background and stylistic translating skills, both

translators tend to make similar rhetorical judgments when the source text contains clear logical markers (e.g., gu “故”, yin “因”, or wei... cai... “唯.....才.....”). This also suggests that in structurally explicit segments, the impact of the original often outweighs variations in translation style or cultural orientation. These patterns reveal how cultural cognition, linguistic norms, and translation purposes influence rhetorical relations in translation.

As reflected in Lin Yutang’s translation, cultural norms embedded in Confucian values often shape the structuring of meaning. He employs the Result relation in intimate or morally sensitive contexts, reflecting Chinese culture’s preference for indirectness and contextual implication over direct statements. Sanders, in contrast, draws upon a Western rhetorical orientation characterized by clarity and directness. His preference for Elaboration over Result in emotionally charged moments allows for greater immediacy and relatability for English readers. In addition, combining SDRT with Skopos theory provides researchers with a fresh perspective to analyze the reasons behind differences in translations, allowing for a more in-depth study.

SDRT plays an important role in the analysis of translated texts. First, it could help us to analyze rhetorical forms, so that researchers would be able to see how different translators restructure and recast rhetorical forms as a translation continues onward. It also helps to bring out the deeper logic and cultural meanings when a text is translated into another language by comparing different translations. While SDRT is not a translation theory, it helps scholars better understand translators’ processes to make decision and the causes behind variant translations. One limitation is that SDRT should be integrated with more theories, such as translation ethics and translation adaptation theory, in order to analyze the differences in rhetorical choices across different translations and their underlying causes from multiple perspectives.

6. Conclusion

This paper compared Lin Yutang’s and Graham Sanders’s English translations of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* using SDRT. By analyzing rhetorical relations like Result, Elaboration, Background, and Parallel, the study explored how each translator builds coherence in their version.

The results show that Lin Yutang uses a lot more subtle and artistic rhetoric. Affected by traditional Chinese culture and Confucian values, he likes to express feelings in a roundabout way. He also use Result and Parallel to explain behavior or a soft emotional tone. In contrast, Sanders employs clearer and more straightforward structures. He would often use Elaboration and Background to help readers better follow emotional connections. However, when the original Chinese text includes clear logical signals, like classical connectives (e.g., “故”, “因”), both translators tend to make similar choices. This shows that the logic of the original text can sometimes be stronger than the translator’s personal style or cultural background.

In short, how a translator builds coherence is closely tied to their cultural understanding and translation goals. This analysis shows translation not only as language transfer, but as a thoughtful process shaped by context and intention. Future research can apply SDRT to other works or combine it with reader feedback to better understand translation reception.

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