

Original Research Article

The Translation of Spells in the *Harry Potter* Series from a Cross-Cultural Perspective

Abstract

As a world-renowned fantasy series, *Harry Potter* has garnered widespread acclaim and a global readership. Within the novels, magic incantations, characterized by their enigmatic and supernatural properties, play a crucial role. However, the translation of these magic spells presents significant challenges at linguistic, artistic, and cultural levels. This necessitates that translators skillfully navigate the cultural contexts of diverse nationalities and cultures. From a cross-cultural studies perspective, this research focuses on the translation of Harry Potter spells, comparing and analyzing the strategies and outcomes involved in translating the symbolic meanings embedded in the text. Through an examination of these translations, this study explores how cultural information is processed in the translation of magical elements, demonstrating the applicability and guiding significance of selected translation strategies for spell translation in cross-cultural communication. This, in turn, facilitates dialogue and cultural enrichment across different societies.

Key Words: translation strategy; domestication; foreignization; magic spell; cross-cultural communication

1. Introduction

The *Harry Potter* series captivates readers of all ages, yet predominantly appeals to younger audiences. The translation of this series, particularly the magic spells that are central to the narrative, poses unique challenges. These spells are not only crucial for character development and plot progression but also serve as primary means of interaction and conflict resolution among wizards.

In translating these spells, the intricacies of language and culture come into sharp focus. Spells, inherently different from everyday language, often embed deep cultural and historical contexts. They may involve special words used in specific circumstances, sometimes related to mystical or taboo aspects in certain cultures. Thus, the translation must not only capture the essence and mystique of the original but also consider cultural sensitivities and relevance in the target culture.

Moreover, the *Harry Potter* series is rich in magical terminology and cultural nuances. Effective cross-cultural communication is essential to navigate these complexities. This approach helps translators overcome language barriers, ensuring that the cultural essence is conveyed, thus enabling effective intercultural communication. Simplifying complex vocabulary and adapting it to fit the cultural and reading preferences of the target audience are crucial for making the spells both comprehensible and relatable.

Despite considerable interest in the translation of the *Harry Potter* series, particularly from the standpoint of purpose theory and children's literature translation, studies focusing on a cross-cultural perspective remain scarce. This thesis explores the translation of *Harry Potter* spells through a cross-cultural lens, aiming to highlight strategies that balance fidelity to the original text with the cultural expectations of the target audience. This balance is vital for maintaining the enchantment of the spells while making them accessible and respectful of the audience's cultural context.

2. Literature Review

The global acclaim of the *Harry Potter* series has positioned English fantasy fiction at the forefront of literary translation, prompting numerous translations worldwide. This review synthesizes key scholarly contributions, highlighting diverse theoretical approaches to translating this influential series, particularly its spells.

Initially developed by Hans Vermeer in the 1970s, Skopos theory challenges traditional equivalence-based translation by prioritizing the reader's needs. Building on this, Yu J.N. (2012) applies this theory to compare translations of the first *Harry Potter* book in Mainland China and Taiwan, emphasizing the adaptation to children's cognitive and reading levels. Furthermore, Yang G.Y. (2013) and Jiang Y.M. (2013) discuss Skopos theory, advocating for translations that meet specific purposes, particularly focusing on children's literature where the child-centered approach dominates translation strategies. Additionally, Xiang J. (2014) emphasizes the translator's role in mediating between the source text and the cultural and literary expectations of the audience, advocating for a flexible approach to translation based on the intended audience's needs.

Rooted in the ideas of Jauss and Iser from the Konstanz School, reception theory foregrounds the reader's role in the translation process. Expanding on this concept, Cao X.J. (2012) and Liu Y.X. (2014) argue for a deep understanding of the target audience's background, tastes, and appreciation levels, which are crucial for producing translations that resonate well with readers. This approach is particularly pertinent in children's literature, where engaging the young reader is paramount.

Moreover, scholars like Qin X.D. (2020) and Yu B.J.(2020) explore the specific challenges of translating the culturally rich and linguistically complex Harry Potter series into Chinese. They highlight issues such as the untranslatability of certain terms and cultural references that are deeply embedded in the English language and Western cultural contexts.

Additionally, Han D.Q. (2019) investigates the application of domestication and foreignization strategies in the Harry Potter series, discussing how these techniques are influenced by cultural, linguistic, and reader-specific factors. This analysis helps illuminate the broader implications of translation choices in children's literature.

Finally, Mastropiero Lorenzo (2020) provides a detailed analysis of the translation of reporting verbs into Italian, offering insights into how linguistic features are adapted across languages and their impact on character development. Similarly, Zhao Y.D. (2019) uses comparative literature methods to examine how Harry Potter has influenced the development of Chinese children's literature, particularly in terms of publication strategies and localization.

In conclusion, the translation of Harry Potter spells and other elements has been extensively studied from various theoretical perspectives. These studies provide a valuable foundation for the current research, which seeks to further explore cross-cultural translation strategies that preserve the enchantment of the series while making it accessible and culturally sensitive to non-English speaking audiences.

3. Theoretical Framework

The concept of intercultural communication was significantly advanced by American anthropologist Edward T. Hall, who first introduced it in *The Silent Language* (1959). By 1970, the International Communication Association (ICA) had officially recognized intercultural communication as a mature scientific discipline. This field emphasizes the necessity of understanding, adapting, and interacting across diverse cultural boundaries, acknowledging that different cultural backgrounds influence communication styles, values, and cognitive patterns, potentially leading to misunderstandings.

Hall's pivotal contributions included the concepts of "high context" and "low context" cultures, detailed in his book *Beyond Culture* (1976). In high-context cultures, communication relies heavily on implicit understanding and shared contextual knowledge, making much of the communication unspoken or indirectly conveyed through cues that members of the culture easily interpret. In contrast, low-context cultures depend on explicit verbal communication, where clear and direct language is essential because less is assumed to be understood from context alone.

Furthermore, Hall explored the significant role of non-verbal behaviors in cross-cultural communication. He argued that non-verbal cues—such as gestures, facial expressions, and body language—often communicate more effectively than words across different cultures. Recognizing and interpreting these signals correctly is crucial for effective intercultural interactions.

Lastly, Hall addressed the impact of cultural differences on the use and interpretation of time, space, and non-verbal communication. He posited that these elements are deeply influenced by cultural backgrounds and that a deep understanding of these differences is essential for effective communication across cultures.

Overall, Edward T. Hall's research provides a foundational framework for analyzing and improving intercultural communication. His theories help elucidate how cultural differences shape interactions and highlight the importance of cultural adaptability in global communication contexts.

Based on Edward T. Hall's framework, this paper addresses the following questions:

RQ1: What are the linguistic and cultural characteristics of the spells in the *Harry Potter* series?

RQ2: Based on these linguistic and cultural characteristics, what translation strategies and methods should be adopted to achieve cross-cultural communication?

4. Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach to thoroughly interpret and analyze the complex challenges inherent in translating culturally-rich content within specific contexts. The primary data for this analysis consist of selected samples from the *Harry Potter* series, specifically focusing on 11 spells. These spells were chosen based on their significant cultural loading and relevance to the series' narrative. The qualitative analysis aims to uncover the nuances of cultural adaptation and translation strategies employed to maintain the integrity and effectiveness of these spells across different languages and cultural backgrounds. This method provides a detailed examination of the intricacies involved in cross-cultural translation within a literary context.

5. Result and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study on the translation strategies employed for the *Harry Potter* series spells, emphasizing their cultural implications and the challenges encountered in cross-cultural communication. By analyzing examples of domestication and foreignization translation techniques, this research sheds light on the nuanced process of adapting magical incantations from the series into different cultural contexts.

5.1 Domestication Translation

Domestication is one of the methods proposed by Lawrence Venuti (1995), an American translator. He emphasizes the need for the words translated to be close to the culture of the language to be translated, but this method may also lead to the loss of part of the original information. Venuti believed that naturalization derives from this famous translation thesis, "as little as possible to disturb the reader." However, according to Venuti, naturalization carries a derogatory connotation, because naturalization actually reflects a policy common to dominant cultures, namely, "blind use of monoglossia to shut out foreign cultures." He also argues that the dominant cultural society "is accustomed to accepting easy to understand translations, concealing the values of foreign texts within the values of its own country, so that readers can still enjoy their own culture in the face of other cultures" (1995:15).

Example 1

English version: Crucio

Chinese version: 钻心剜骨

Example 1 shows that the translator chose to do free translation, which means that the spell in the original text is expressed in similar or similar words or expressions in the target language. The original "Crucio" is derived from the Latin verb "crux", meaning "crucifix". In ancient Babylon, Persia, and Rome, crucifixion, or crucifixion, was the most severe punishment, so the incantation meant pain and suffering. So "Crucio" is the most abusive, chilling, and painful of all the *Harry Potter* spells. The cursed person will not die immediately, but will feel a thousand arrows pierced through the heart, feel the fire burning the body, feel the skin like oil, and the real survival must not ask for death. The Chinese translation is "钻心剜骨".

The translation combines the Chinese idiom “piercing the heart” with “removing the gall and the heart”, and vividly reflects the pain brought by the spell, which is similar to cutting the body with a knife and removing the gall and the heart, so that readers can intuitively understand the effect and meaning of the magic. This method can not only preserve the features and mystery of the original text, but also allow readers to better accept and understand the meaning of the curse.

Example 2

English version: Avada Kedavra

Chinese version: 阿瓦达索命

There are three unforgivable spells in *Harry Potter*, the most terrifying of which is “Avada Kedavra”, a powerful spell that can take the life of its target in a split second. The mantra comes from the Aramaic word “adhadda kedhabhra”, which means “to destroy things.” In example 2, the translator cleverly chose to retain the word “Avada” and transliterate it into “阿瓦达”, while the second half of the word “Kedavra” is translated into “索命” and directly points out that this is a life-taking mantra. Readers can not only retain the sense of substitution when chanting the mantra, but also intuitively understand the role of this mantra.

5.1.1 Free Translation

The free translation method is a kind of domestication strategy. The free translation refers to translation based on the general idea of the original text rather than the literal translation. They are often used to translate sentences, phrases, or larger groups of meanings, especially when there are significant cultural differences between source and target languages. From the angle of cross-cultural communication and cultural exchange, free translation emphasizes the relative independence of source language culture system and source language culture system.

Example 3

English version: Impervius

Chinese version: 水火不侵

Example 3 shows that the original curse “Impervius” in Latin is “Impervious”, it means “unaffected.” In the original text, the purpose of this spell is to make the target of the spell waterproof and fireproof. Therefore, the translator chose “水火不侵” for translation, it can reflect the functions and characteristics of the spell, in line with the Chinese expression, so that readers can quickly understand the function of the spell.

Example 4

English version: Expecto Patronum

Chinese version: 呼神护卫

In the original work, each person has his own unique patronus. In the translation, the translator makes good use of the free translation method, “expecto” means “expectantly”, and “patronum” corresponds to “guard”, while the middle “God” is the attribute of the patronus, which can better shape the beautiful image of the patronus. The literal translation of the spell is “Guardian of Expectation”. Taking into account the translation and content of the spell name, the translator chose the translation of “呼神护卫”, which corresponds to the name.

Example 5

English version: Lumos

Chinese version: 荧光闪烁

In the Example 5, Lumos translates as “荧光闪烁”, “fluorescent scintillation.” In Latin, “Lumen” mean “light” + “os” mean “to have” because it’s figurative, it means to have light, and it’s similar to fluorescence, it’s darker. But this metaphor is not a

Chinese idiom and may not be immediately accessible to Chinese readers. Therefore, it needs to be able to reflect the function and properties of the spell. The translator chose “荧光闪烁” for translation, which conforms to the Chinese expression and enables readers to quickly understand the effect of the spell.

Literally and freely translated are related to each other and complement each other. Simultaneously, they are mutually complementary, and cannot be separated. Because the original mantra often has a certain mystique, and its meaning is often closely related to a particular culture and background, a literal translation may not accurately convey its mystical effect. For English speakers, and even Latin speakers, you can easily see their Latin roots, thus partially guessing or even understanding their effects or meanings. For Chinese readers, however, most incantations are translated freely, with the aim that Chinese readers are able to understand them at first glance. As a result, translators are able to interpret a curse in accordance with its cultural background and language habits of the target audience, so as to make the curse more concise and powerful, and have better understanding and readability in the translated text, which can make the curse more vivid and fascinating in the translated text.

5.1.2 Transcreation

In translation studies, transcreation refers to an adaptation of content from original language while preserving its intended meaning, style, and tone. Unlike traditional translation, which only needs to be faithful to the original text, transcreation is a combination of translation and content creation, and is an extremely creative translation process, sometimes interpreted as creative translation, combining the two attributes of translation and creation, it does everything that translation does and goes far beyond the scope of translation. This is the process of “Trans+Creation”.

Example 6

English version: Levicorpus

Chinese version: 倒挂金钟

This spell can suspend people upside down in the air. “Levi-” in this spell is a Latin root meaning “to raise”, and “corpus” is Latin for “body”. If the translator uses a literal translation approach, the translation of “抬高身体” does sound clear and easy to understand, but it does not match the effect of the mantra produced in the book, and also destroys the beauty of the mantra. The translator used the transcreation to translate the mantra into “倒挂金钟”.

In fact, “upside down golden bell” this flower, its petals hanging upside down hanging from the branches, and the wizard is hit by a spell when the wizard robe is hanging down very similar, and there is a martial art move called “倒挂金钟”, its posture is also similar to the effect of the spell. Obviously, in the Chinese context, people are more familiar with the word “倒挂金钟”, and this translation is more vivid, achieving the goal of communicative translation.

5.2 Foreignization Translation

Foreignization translation can make readers feel the original flavor of the original text by preserving the syllables, phonology and morphology of the original text. Foreignizing tactics consist of both transliteration and literal translation. In the context of cultural integration, alienated translation builds a bridge to bring readers into direct contact with the cultural background and historical origins of Western languages. By understanding and comparing the differences in culture and values between the West and the East, it is possible to mitigate cultural conflicts and promote cultural pluralism.

5.2.1 Literal Translation

In specific translation practice, the following examples illustrate the use of literal translation in translating strategies of foreignization.

Example 7

English version: Accio

Chinese version: 飞来飞去

Example 7 results indicate that when translating spells, the translator usually uses a literal translation approach to search for the corresponding words in Chinese. Thus, it is possible for the target language to be translated to achieve the goal of communication. For example, the curse “Accio” in the original means “fly around”, and this direct translation it as “飞来飞去”.

Example 8

English version: Expelliarmus

Chinese version: 除你武器

The original spell “Expelliarmus” means “disarm”, it means to disarm the other side, but also the acquisition of the arms of the other party. The Latin word “Expelliarmus”, which contains the root words “expel” and “arm(u)s” (weapon), and this is a direct translation of the words “除你武器”, which not only shows the magic’s significance, but also shows the magic’s effectiveness. Thus, it is possible for the target language to be translated so as to achieve the goal of communication. Direct translation means translating the word of a curse directly into the target language, keeping the original form and taste, is one of the important translation strategies. The advantage of direct translation is that it can accurately convey the meaning and characteristics of the original text and maintain the original flavor. This method of translation is usually used for those spells that have a strong cultural background or a specific meaning.

Although foreignization translation can better convey the mystery and magic elements of the original, it may also face the challenge of understanding and acceptance of the target audience. Because the primary aim of translating is to make it easier for the reader to comprehend and receive it, foreignization translation is not suitable for all cases. The researchers recommend carefully considering the exact translation, considering the cultural background and understanding ability of the target readers to determine whether to adopt foreignization translation. In some cases, the appropriate naturalized translation method may be more in line with the reader’s habits and understanding.

It should be pay attention to the fact that both Foreignizing and Domesticating can be considered as an extension of the concept of Literal Translation and Free Translation. The key problem in both English and English is that it should be handled in terms of language, whereas Foreignizing and Domesticating can be applied to language, culture and aesthetics. According to Venuti, domestication is “bringing the original author into the culture of the target language”, while foreignization is “accepting the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text and bringing the reader into the foreign situation”. In the context of cross-cultural communication and communication, appropriate translation strategies and skills can promote cultural exchange and understanding, so that readers can better experience and understand the cultural connotation and uniqueness of the original work.

Transliteration translation is a common strategy when translating spells. Transliteration refers to translation of source language words as sounds, without regard to the correspondence of meanings. Transliteration translation is a common strategy when translating spells. Transliteration refers to the translation of the words

of the source language in the form of sounds, without regard to the correspondence of meanings.

5.2.2 Transliteration

Transliteration refers to translation into source language, which is similar in pronunciation. In this way, it does not transfer the original meaning, but retains the original language. Pronunciation. When there are no equivalent words in the target language, the transliteration retains its cultural features and exoticism.

Example 9

English version: Wingardium Leviosa

Chinese version: 羽加迪姆勒维奥萨

In Example 9, “Wingardium Leviosa” is the only transliteration spell in *Harry Potter*. It can cause a person or object to float in the air and is a levitating spell. Literally, “wing” means “翅膀”, “levi” means “升起”, and the continental text is translated as “Wingadim Leviosa”. The Chinese translation is “羽加迪姆勒维奥萨”. The translator’s processing in order to cooperate with the plot of the story: When Hermione attempted to instruct RON to recite the incantation, she found it hard to memorize because of the length of the chant. She had to be careful not only of sound and intonation, but also of proper hand motions, so RON could not correctly grasp the tone of voice and arm posture, and Hermione had to correct it several times. Therefore, for the sake of developing the plot, the translator selects the transliteration.

5.2.3 Transliteration and free translation coexist

Example 10

English version: Alohomora

Chinese version: 阿拉霍洞开

It can be seen from Example 10, the translation adopts both transliteration and free translation method, which retains part of the original pronunciation to give readers a novel feeling, as well as an explanation of its function. For example, the original curse “Alohomora” means “to open locks and doors and Windows,” and it is also known as “the thief’s friend”. The translator chooses to transliterate “Alohomora” as “阿拉霍” and add “洞开”, which not only retains the exotic style of the original text, but also indicate the use of incantation, because “洞开” generally refers to a large opening such as a door ora window.

Example 11

English version: Petrificus Totalus

Chinese version: 统统石化

“Petrificus Totalus” in Greek, “petra” means rock, and “perify” means to fossilize something. “Perified” also describes someone who is petrified and can’t move. And the Chinese pinyin for “统统” is tong tong, similar to the first half of “totalus”. In addition, it is easy for English readers to associate “all” with the meaning of “entirely”. Therefore, the translator chose to translate as “统统石化”. The translation closely resembles the original while retaining some pronunciation.

However, transliteration translation also has some problems. Due to differences in language and culture, transliteration translation may lead to confusion in the target reader’s understanding of incantations. Secondly, transliteration may make the translation inconsistent with the customs and oral expressions of the target culture. Therefore, in transliteration translation, translators need to use translation skills flexibly on the basis of retaining the original style to ensure the accuracy and smoothness of the translation.

While maintaining transliteration, it makes it more in line with the habits and

understanding of Chinese readers, and conveys the syllable and meaning of the curse through a combination of transliteration and free translation, this method well reflects the adaptation principle of cross-cultural adaptation. This kind of translation strategy plays an important role in cross-cultural communication, promoting the spread and understanding of culture. In the context of cross-cultural communication and communication, these translation methods have played a positive role in promoting cultural exchange and understanding.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the spells within the *Harry Potter* series exemplify a rich tapestry of imaginative language that captures the essence of magical incantations. With their unique sounds, rhythms, and often enigmatic meanings, these spells enhance the narrative by contributing to the story's magical atmosphere and advancing key plot elements. As integral components of the wizarding world's lore, they demonstrate the depth of wizardly knowledge and the characters' abilities to overcome various challenges. This study highlights the importance of employing nuanced cross-cultural translation strategies to preserve the spells' original charm and mystique while making them accessible and engaging to a diverse audience. The dichotomy between foreignization and domestication translation methods underscores the need for translators to adapt their approach based on the cultural and linguistic context of the target audience. Moreover, the combination of literal, free, and transliterated translations plays a crucial role in conveying the inherent power and mystery of the spells. This analysis serves as a valuable reference for enhancing cross-cultural communication and understanding, proposing that while foreignization should be the primary approach to maintain the spells' uniqueness, domestication may be necessary to ensure clarity and relatability. Future research should continue to explore dynamic translation strategies that evolve with changing cultural landscapes, thereby enriching our appreciation of literary translation in a global context.

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