

# Comparative Study of English-Chinese Translation of Psychological Texts from the Perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory: A Case Study of the Chinese Translations of *On Becoming a Person*

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**Abstract:** This study aims to investigate the similarities and differences in strategies adopted by different translators when translating the same psychological text from the perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory. Taking American psychologist Carl Rogers' *On Becoming a Person* as an example, it analyzes the specific translation strategies and methods between two Chinese versions, 《个人形成论》 (translated by Yang Guangxue, You Na, Pan Fuqin) and 《成为一个人》 (translated by Song Wenli). The study seeks to deepen the understanding of translators' styles in translating psychological texts and explores the potential impact of social and cultural backgrounds on the translation process, serving as a valuable reference for translation research.

**Keywords:** Functional Equivalence Theory; Psychological Texts Translation; English-Chinese Comparison; Translation Strategies; Cultural Adaptation

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## Introduction

When translators introduce ideas contained in foreign cultural discourse into their own culture or introduce their own culture to foreign culture, they will inevitably make their own value judgments about the cultural values of the target language and then decide on the conveyance strategy (Zeng Jianping, Cai Weili, 2015). The Functional Equivalence Theory emphasizes conveying the meaning of the original text and the effectiveness of reader reception. Applying this theory to the analysis of psychological text translation is of great importance. In this study, taking American psychologist Carl Rogers' work *On Becoming a Person* as an example, the paper compares and analyzes the strategies and methods in translating psychological texts and their differences from the perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory.

## 1. Functional Equivalence Theory

In 1964, Eugene A. Nida, in his book *Towards a Science of Translating*, first introduced "formal equivalence" and "dynamic equivalence," later renaming the latter as "functional equivalence." Nida noted, "the relationship between receptor and message should be substantially the same as that which existed between the original receptors and the message." (Nida, 1964). Thus, "functional equivalence" is mainly explained from the comparison of the original text receptors' understanding and appreciation of the original text with that of the translation receptors. The reliability of a translation depends on whether it allows readers to correctly understand and grasp the original work.

From the perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory in the translation of psychological texts, emphasis is placed on the target language readers' understanding and reception, rather than simple equivalent substitutions: first, target language reader understanding: different cultures vary in their degree of comprehension and acceptance of psychological phenomena and concepts; second, meaning transmission: translators must accurately convey the theories, experimental results, and psychological phenomena present in the text to ensure correct understanding by readers; third, language style and emotional expression: translators must be flexible enough to allow the target language readers to perceive the emotions of the original. Chinese readers have differences in understanding psychological

texts including language habits, cultural backgrounds, preference for terminology, and ideology, all of which lead translators to adopt different strategies to accommodate reader needs.

## 2. Case Analysis

### 2.1 Adoption of Translation Methods:

Example 1:

SL: I would only specify that this seems to be the process which is set in motion when the individual experiences himself as being fully received.

Yang, You, Pan Translation: 在此我只能具体地指出: 当个人的经验得到充分接受、个人真实地体验着自我的时候, 似乎就会启动上述的这一个变化过程。

Song Wenli Translation: 我所能確定的只是: 當一個人在體驗到他已被人充分接收之後, 他會發動起來而產生變化, 而我所描述的變化過程似乎正是這一種。

The Yang, You, and Pan version stays closer to the form of the original, retaining more details, and translating “experiences himself as being fully received” as “个人的经验得到充分接受、个人真实地体验着自我的时候,” which is finely articulated and accurately restores the original information. The Song Wenli version is more concise, translated as “一個人在體驗到他已被人充分接收之後,” omitting some details but still conveying the notion that “an individual will undergo some kind of change once fully accepted.” The Yang, You, and Pan version uses two parallel sentences to express this, while Song Wenli’s version uses a single long sentence, centering the emphasis on “一個人在體驗到他已被人充分接收之後,” with the latter elucidating this occurrence. “Process” refers to the individual’s psychological process, and “experiences himself as being fully received” points to the feeling of being completely accepted and understood in society. The Yang, You, and Pan version details this psychological state’s complexity and connotations, while the Song Wenli version, though simplifying expression, also allows readers to grasp the meaning of transformation upon full acceptance.

### 2.2 Emotion Reproduction and Conveyance of Values

Example 2:

SL: This will be one of the social value judgments which individuals and cultures will have to make.

Yang, You, and Pan Translation: 这是一个社会价值评判的问题, 它必然要由每个人和文化做出自己的取舍。

Song Wenli Translation: 這種價值判斷是各別的人, 或各別的文化所必當自行決定的。

The Yang, You, and Pan version faithfully retains the original meaning, with a sentence structure mostly similar to the original. Song Wenli’s version, however, makes moderate adjustments, eliminating redundant expressions; “individuals and cultures” in the Yang, You, and Pan version is translated as “每个人和文化,” emphasizing the contrast between individuals and the collective. Song Wenli’s version translates “individuals and cultures” as “各別的人” and “各別的文化,” accentuating the differences between individuals and cultures; the Yang, You, and Pan version is more compact, using a longer complex sentence to convey the original information. Song Wenli’s version breaks it down into two simple sentences, making the expression clear and easy to understand.

“Social value judgments” refers to social concepts or moral judgments which require individuals and different cultures to make choices. The Yang, You, and Pan version conveys this view, directly stating that individuals and cultures must make their selections, compatible with China’s emphasis on collectivism and social integrity. Song Wenli’s version, however, highlights the parallel relationship between individuals and cultures in making value judgments, leading readers to focus on the autonomy of individuals and cultures in value judgment. Both versions focus on information restoration in the fulfillment of functional equivalence.

### 2.3 Choice of Style

Example 3:

SL: I have tried to sketch, in a crude and preliminary manner, the flow of a process of change which occurs when a client experiences himself as being received, welcomed, understood as he is.

Yang, You, and Pan Translation: 当一个当事人体验到自己被接纳、受欢迎以及被人理解的时候, 变化过程就会出现; 我已试着用一种粗糙的方式初步地勾勒了这个流动的变化过程。

Song Wenli Translation: 我嘗試用比較原初、半生不熟的方法對人格變化的流動樣式作了一幅大略的速寫。我所說的變化是發生在一個人體驗到自己的本然面目被人接受、歡迎和瞭解之時。

The Yang, You, and Pan version is more faithful to the original, with slight additions and adjustments, and relatively succinct expression. Song Wenli’s version has more significant changes, with a somewhat more complex sentence structure. “The flow of a process of change” denotes the fluid nature of a psychological change, while “when a client experiences himself as being received,

welcomed, understood as he is” describes the state in the psychotherapeutic process when a client feels received, understood, and welcomed by others. The Yang, You, and Pan version straightforwardly conveys this viewpoint, breaking the original into two simple sentences for a more concise expression. Song Wenli’s version uses a longer compound sentence and adds adjectives and modifiers to expand expression, emphasizing “individual’s inner psychological change” as a dynamic process with descriptions like “人格變化” and “流動樣式.”

### 3. Differences and Commonalities

#### 3.1 Differences are secondary; commonalities are primary

Every language inevitably possesses its own culturally distinctive forms of expression, including the condensed wisdom of proverbs, vernacular expressions closely related to people’s lives, and names with deep cultural connotations, the differences of which may stem from the natural outcome of the language’s formation and evolution. (Shen Jie, Wang Hong, 2019) When introducing discourse from a foreign culture that contains different values into their own culture, translators will inevitably make value judgments about those values, and then decide on the strategy for relaying them: whether to be straightforward or to communicate the meaning implicitly; whether to produce a carbon copy or to reinvent (Wang Dongfeng, 2003). For example, Yang, You, and Pan translates “individuals” as “人民” (the people), while Song Wenli translates it as “個人” (individual)... Although these examples are microscopic, they are insightful enough to reflect different translators’ varied focuses on social and cultural understanding, individual notions, and value expression. Nevertheless, in the two Chinese translations, there are seldom split differences, and the commonalities are quite clear:

##### 3.1.1 Mutual understanding of psychological concepts

The translators of both Chinese versions have a significant overlap in understanding psychological terms and concepts. For instance, in the example “the flow of a process of change,” Yang, You, and Pan translates it as “流动的变化过程,” whereas Song Wenli translates it as “人格變化的流動樣式.” Translators from both regions understand this concept and convey it to readers in their familiar ways.

##### 3.1.2 The common pursuit of communication goals

Both Chinese versions aim to enable readers to grasp the theoretical views of psychology and to master its practical applications through precise translation.

#### 3.2 Advantages and Disadvantages of the Translations

(1) Advantages of the Yang, You, and Pan version: Literal translation expresses information accurately, complying with contemporary Chinese linguistic habits, facilitating understanding among readers, and aiding the popularization of knowledge; Disadvantages: It may lose some detail and emotional nuance due to its brevity.

(2) Advantages of the Song Wenli version: Preserves traditional literary style, emphasizes emotional color, and has a neat written appearance; Disadvantages: The sentence structure is more cumbersome, increasing difficulty in understanding and somewhat disconnecting from contemporary spoken Chinese language.

### Conclusion

When faced with psychological texts, translators need to balance accurately conveying the original information and adapting to the target readers. Translators should select appropriate translation methods based on specific circumstances and the background of the target readers to achieve functional equivalence and cultural adaptation. In addition, translators should grasp the core meaning of the original text, avoiding over-explanation or loss of the main content. Also, depending on different cultural contexts, flexible use of idiomatic or literal translation should be employed to ensure that the translation conveys the original meaning while resonating emotionally with the target culture readers.

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