
RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Study on the Northern Shaanxi Folk Song Translation from the Perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics

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ABSTRACT

Northern Shaanxi folk songs are an integral part of China's folk-art heritage, renowned for their simplicity and the deep emotional expression they convey. As a vital component of traditional Chinese culture, the translation of these folk songs necessitates meticulous attention. However, in recent years, there has been a paucity of innovation in the study of northern Shaanxi folk songs, both in terms of research methods and study perspectives. This article aims to address this gap by applying Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to the translation practice of northern Shaanxi folk songs. This article first provides an overview of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), a linguistic framework developed by Michael Alexander Kirkwood Halliday (M.A.K. Halliday). It then utilizes SFL 'Context' theory to explore various translation techniques, drawing on appropriate examples from Wang Hongyin's *Voices from China's Northwest*. The objective of this research is to facilitate the external dissemination of northern Shaanxi folk songs by applying Systemic Functional Linguistics to their translation. This approach is intended to foster cross-cultural communication and understanding. In conclusion, the author's endeavours and research have yielded novel insights into the practice of translating northern Shaanxi folk songs and have advanced the English translation of folk songs to a modest extent.

KEYWORDS

Translation Practice; Systemic Functional Linguistics; Northern Shaanxi Folk Songs; Halliday.

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1. Introduction

Folk songs represent a significant cultural asset within Chinese society, serving as an exemplar of intangible cultural heritage. In particular, the performance of folk songs represents a means of articulating sentiment for the inhabitants of Northern Shaanxi. With a lengthy history of oral transmission, these songs have acquired considerable historical and cultural significance. As a significant element of the folk-song culture, the northern Shaanxi folk song has contributed a vibrant dimension to its evolution. Moreover, their continued popularity today attests to their enduring resilience and vitality. In his book *Chinese Folk Songs and Their English Translation*, Prof. Wang Hongyin posits that folk songs are not only the source of national literature but also the root of literary translation.^[11] It is, therefore, of great importance to translate the northern Shaanxi folk song into foreign languages and disseminate it to convey the essence of folk-song culture. In this context, the translation practice of folk songs merits particular attention, which will be explored through an analysis of techniques and illustrative examples.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Overview of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) originated from the work of M.A.K. Halliday and his colleagues in the 1960s in the United Kingdom, with subsequent developments occurring in Australia.^[10] Building on foundational contributions from influential linguists such as Bronislaw Malinowski and J.R. Firth, SFL has evolved to encompass a broad spectrum of applications, particularly in

language education and discourse analysis. Malinowski, a Polish anthropologist, conducted significant research in England, while Firth played a pivotal role in establishing linguistics as a recognized discipline in Britain. Firth expanded on Malinowski's emphasis on the importance of situational context in language, particularly through his exploration of 'prosodic phonology,' which facilitates the sharing of phonological features across consecutive phonemes (O'Donnell, 2011). Contemporary applications of the SFL approach continue to emphasize the social dimensions of language use, contrasting with perspectives that view language as a purely cognitive process. This focus underscores SFL's commitment to understanding how language functions within social contexts to achieve specific communicative goals rather than solely analyzing its structural components (O'Donnell, 2011)

2.1.1 Systemic Views

The origins of systemic linguistics can be traced back to the Firthian framework, aligning it closely with systemic structure theory. Firth posited that language functions as a system composed of various options relevant at different points within linguistic structures, a concept aligned with Saussurean principles. While Halliday builds upon the Firthian polysystemic principle, he diverges by emphasizing the significance of system over structure. Halliday underscores the interconnected relationships among various linguistic units within the system, focusing on paradigmatic relations rather than syntagmatic relations, which contrasts with Chomsky's predominant emphasis on the latter.

Halliday asserts that paradigmatic relations form the foundation of organization at each level of language. He conceptualizes the semantic system as a network of potential meanings, where each level represents a network of paradigmatic relations. This framework enables an exploration of the diverse paradigmatic choices available to English speakers in different contexts, highlighting the inherent complexity of language systems (Halliday, 2001).

The term "System" characterizes the theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) through its basis in "systems thinking." Matthiessen describes language as a dynamic system, and similarly, SFL as a theory is dynamic, open to both "reflection" and "action." (Matthiessen, 2009).

2.1.2 Functional Views

Function pertains to the perspective from which language is analyzed, encompassing both the functional roles of language and its meta-functions. Systemic-functional linguists commonly identify five distinct types of functions in language use: traditional functions, micro-functions, macro-functions, meta-functions, and grammatical functions. The interconnections and interdependencies among these functions are noteworthy; meta-functions derive from macro-functions, which in turn stem from micro-functions. Additionally, grammatical functions serve as the tangible manifestation of meta-functions within the lexicogrammatical tier. The practical manifestations of language include conventional functions such as greetings, acknowledgments, complaints, farewells, and others (Halliday, 2001).

The relationship between systemic grammar and functional grammar is both essential and integrative. Together, they form a comprehensive framework known as systemic functional linguistic theory. Systemic grammar analyzes the intricate internal connections within language, conceptualizing it as a complex network of meaning potentials composed of various subsystems available to language users. In contrast, functional grammar examines how language is utilized, exploring the relationship between the functions language serves and the language itself. It illustrates how language functions as a tool for social interaction, fulfilling diverse communicative needs in varying contexts. Consequently, the development of language structure is influenced by the various functions it serves across different settings, integrating functional aspects within the systemic grammar, while the theoretical foundation of functional grammar is inherently systemic.

2.1.3 Stratification Views

Drawing on Hjelmslev's concepts of the plane of expression and the plane of content, the stratificational ideas within systemic functional linguistics value the interconnectedness of form, meaning, and expression. Following Hjelmslev's theoretical framework, Halliday proposes that language functions as a complex code system composed of three distinct levels: semantic, lexicogrammatical, and phonological. Moreover, intricate realization relationships exist among these levels, with choices made at the semantic level actualized through form selection at the lexicogrammatical level and form choices manifested through phonological substance selection. Thus, language can be understood as a multi-layered code system, wherein each subsystem is intricately intertwined with others, illustrating the interconnected nature of linguistic structures (Matthiessen, 2009).

2.2 The 'Context' Theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics

Halliday posits that language functions as a dynamic and intricate system capable of generating multiple meanings, which are only realized through practical application within various contexts. In any given situation, individuals can convey a range of interpretations and utilize diverse phrasings.

As previously discussed, systemic-functional linguists prioritize the concepts of system, function, and stratification. These ideas are integral to the framework of the context within the systemic-functional school. The evolution of this perspective on context can be traced from Malinowski's foundational insights to Halliday's elaboration on register categories such as field, mode, and tenor, indicating a continual development within the systemic-functional approach.

2.2.1 Malinowski's View on Context

Malinowski, a prominent professor of anthropology at the London School of Economics, introduced the theory of contextual meaning through his research on the language of the Trobriand Islanders in the South Pacific. His extensive study led him to reject the traditional approach to meaning, which solely focuses on the relationship between words and their referents. Instead, he advocated for a semantic framework that emphasizes analyzing sentences within the specific context of their utterance (Butler, 1985).

Malinowski found that to fully understand the meaning conveyed in communication. One must also grasp the cultural nuances of Trobriand society, particularly the situational contexts in which various forms of speech are employed. These cultural contexts are intricately linked to a broader cultural framework, thus broadening the definition of context beyond its conventional boundaries.

2.2.2 Firth's View on Context

In his evaluation of Malinowski's theory, Firth provided a more abstract interpretation and introduced his unique perspectives. Approaching the topic through a sociological lens, Firth emphasized the concept of the context of a situation and elaborated on a contextual model. He argued that the context of a situation is not merely a backdrop for words, highlighting the significance of relevance in differentiating between environment and context (Eggs, 2004). Firth contended that not all elements in the environment qualify as context; only those pertinent to language activities should be included.

While Firth, like Malinowski, prioritized the study of situational context, he also emphasized linguistic and cultural contexts. Viewing context from a systematic perspective, Firth proposed that it is stratified, with the overarching cultural context at the highest level. In discussing the context of the situation, he referred to interconnected contexts, with each subsequent context encompassing the previous ones, thus underscoring the interrelatedness and contributions of all situational contexts to the overall cultural context.

2.2.3 Halliday's View on Context

Halliday offers a framework for examining the context of communication through three key components:

- A. Field: Indicates the topic or subject matter being discussed.
- B. Tenor: Identifies the participants in the communication and their relationships.
- C. Mode: Describes the role of language in the interaction and its form (written or spoken).

These components are articulated through concepts such as purposive role, medium relationship, and addressee relationship. They form the foundation for understanding field, mode, and tenor choices, which shape the linguistic characteristics of various registers within a language. The alignment of field, mode, and tenor across texts results in similarities in grammatical and lexical structures, placing them within the same register. These variables are closely connected to linguistic strata, guiding semantic, lexicogrammatical, and phonological choices within texts. The semantic stratum is further delineated into ideational, interpersonal, and textual components, with field representing the ideational function, tenor expressing the interpersonal function, and mode embodying the textual function. Any alteration within this complex interplay of ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings significantly impacts overall interpretation.

3. Methodology

The Register Theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) emphasizes the importance of the context in which language is used and interpreted. It posits that "language changes according to its function and varies according to its occasions." The selection of a language type that aligns with the situational context is referred to as "register."

3.1 Phonology

Phonology encompasses the sound system, writing system, and vocabulary system (Love, 1986). Phonetics is typically defined as the study of speech sounds (刘振聪, 2005). The essence of Northern Shaanxi folk songs lies in their auditory appeal, requiring that translated versions capture the original's sonic beauty. Characterized by distinctive tones and rhythms, folk songs exemplify this aesthetic. Therefore, translations should strive to preserve not only the meaning but also the auditory beauty of the original verses.

3.2 Lexicon-Grammar

Lexicon-grammar refers to the integration of grammar and vocabulary as a unified layer, portraying language as a holistic system that incorporates both lexical and grammatical elements. The significance of a folk song is intricately connected to its lexicon. As

a unique literary form, folk songs compel translators to consider their visual impact when rendering them into another language. Functional linguists assert that lexicon embodies meaning; thus, any alteration in lexicon can lead to a shift in meaning. Consequently, translators should aim to maintain appropriate lexicon-grammar in their translations.

3.3 Discourse-Semantics

The discourse-semantics framework includes three distinct metafunctions: interpersonal metafunctions, which pertain to social interactions; ideational metafunctions, which relate to the representation of ideas and concepts; and textual metafunctions, which address the structure and organization of text. Discourse-semantics focuses on the role of relationships within the context in which these questions are examined. During communication, new registers may emerge due to differences among participants, including their nature, social status, and roles. Given its diverse historical and cultural contexts, aesthetic meaning should encompass a faithful reproduction of the original poem, preserving its contextual integrity, exploring its poetic mood, and ensuring that the target audience experiences the same emotional depth as the original audience.

4. Expressive techniques in phonology

Alliteration is a prominent sound device characterized by its emphasis on phonemes, distinguishing English poetry from its comparatively rare occurrence in Chinese poetry. It functions as a form of parallelism, enhancing the aesthetic appeal of English verse. The diverse patterns of alliteration in various poems convey distinct nuances and aesthetic ideals. By manipulating phonemes adaptively, alliteration amplifies the aesthetic impact of both poetry and natural landscapes.

Example 1:

神仙挡不住人想人
哎哟呀，嗨嗨，
山挡不住云彩，
树挡不住风，
神仙也挡不住人想人，
神仙也挡不住人想人。

God on High Stops No Man Thinking of a Woman
Aiyiya haihai..
A mountain high stops no cloud sailing, sailing.
A tree tall stops no wind blowing, blowing.
And God on high stops no man thinking, thinking of a woman.
And God on high stops no man thinking thinking of a woman, a woman.

In this case, Prof. Wang Hongyin consciously adopted alliteration in his translation of this folk song. For example, the alliterative words at the beginning of every line are “Ai,” “A,” and “And,” which share the same phoneme [A]. This phoneme [A] successfully imitates the voice while expressing love to each other. In addition, simple sentences in Chinese frequently undergo great changes when translated into English, losing their simplicity and thus failing to achieve the intended purpose of expression. Thus, English translation adopts the repetitive structure in folk thinking to produce a lingering effect. Not only that, but the semantic problems also need to be overcome; otherwise, the translation of “man think of a woman” as “man thinks of man” there is seemingly a little bit sense of homosexuality. If the wind doesn’t blow and the clouds don’t flutter, there is no doubt of “blocking” or “not being able to block.” The word “fairy” translated as “God in the sky”, serving a similar purpose.^[14]

4.2 Rhyme

According to Hornby in the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary*, rhyme is defined as a word that shares similar sounds with another word or ends with the same sound. Rhyme typically involves the repetition of identical or similar sounds, often found within poetic lines or at their ends. It serves to structure organized stanzas and forms a fundamental aspect of poetic composition. Consistent letter patterns for rhyming within lines contribute to a uniform poetic style, with rhymes occurring consecutively or at intervals across lines.

Example 2:

黄河情歌
黄河水长流，
漂去了一只舟。
情郎哥哥撑船哟，
每日水上游。
船儿水上游，
(二那)妹子招一招手。
有两句的(那个)知心话，
你牢牢记心头。

A Love Song by the Yellow River
Far the River flows,
Away a boat, a boat.
My love, a boatman,
The fishing boat he rows,
Away the boat flows,
I wave goodbye to you.
I have a few words
Just let you know

In Chinese folk song lyrics, rhyme is expressed in these words “流” “游” “头,” while in the English translation, the obvious rhyme is “flow,” “rows,” “know,” the pronunciation is [əʊ]. In addition, English adopts a similar “Oh’s to express faint thoughts against a light

background (in stanzas 1, 2, and 4), and the question or adopts the scattered and scattered rhyme to express decisive commands and vows (in stanzas 3 and 5). Simple narrative, pure lyricism, straightforward confessions, and languid rhymes are all of those that have achieved gripping and touching effects (王振国, 1995).

4.3 Onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeia replicates the sounds of objects or mirrors natural noises. In Northern Shaanxi folk songs, their primary role is to reflect artistic concepts, like their function in English poetry, where onomatopoeic terms echo the sounds of nature.

Example 3:

小河滴水哗啦啦
小河滴水哗啦啦，
过我门前不停住。
我家有个小板凳，
谁坐谁儿高高兴兴。

The brook murmurs as it flows,
Passing my door, it never slows.
In my house, a small wooden stool lies,
Whoever sits, joy reflects in their eyes.
The brook murmurs as it flows.

The original text utilizes “哗啦啦” to evoke the auditory sensation of water flowing, thereby conjuring the imagery of a babbling brook. The repetition of “谁坐谁儿高高兴兴” enhances the rhythmic quality, lending the entire song a more musical cadence. In the translation, “The brook murmurs as it flows,” conveys the essence of “小河滴水哗啦啦.” The choice of “murmurs” aids in capturing the lyrical quality of the original text in English, while “joy reflects in their eyes” offers a more nuanced depiction compared to the literal translation of “happy.” This description not only enriches the meaning conveyed by “高高兴兴” but also aligns more closely with English idiomatic expressions. Throughout the translation, efforts are made to preserve the musicality of the original text, such as rendering the onomatopoeia of “哗啦啦” as “murmurs,” which imbues the English rendition with a sense of melody. Maintaining consistency in sentence length and syllable count between the original and translated versions ensures that the song’s rhyme and rhythm remain intact (王振国, 1995).

5. Expressive techniques in lexicon-grammar

5.1 Antithesis

Antithesis skillfully evokes specific moods through deliberate contrast, encompassing three key elements. First, there should be parallelism between the components of both lines: nouns paired with nouns, verbs with verbs, and adverbs with adverbs. Second, each component should correspond in content: names with names, locations with locations, frequencies with frequencies, and activities with activities. Third, there should be consistent imagery between the lines: objects mirroring objects and scenery mirroring scenery. Effective translation often necessitates highlighting this antithesis.

Example 4:

小寡妇上坟
人家个成双咱成(啊)单，
好像孤雁落沙滩。
一对枕头两条毡，
一个人睡觉实在难。
一头绣的洞宾戏牡丹，
一头绣的吕布戏貂蝉。
我说挂在奶上看，
你说到金盆湾弯手段。

A Young Widow Crying over Her Husband's Grave
See the happy and merry couples one by one,
But I am here alone, like a solitary wild goose.
Our pillows and felt rugs are there still in pairs,
But without you, my husband, I simply can't sleep
I embroidered Eros playing with a peony,
And also Cupid flirting with a beauty, for a change.
Then, I would like to wear my bib over my breasts,
But you go to the Gold Basin Bay to show off.

In the original poem, “洞宾戏牡丹” corresponds with “吕布戏貂蝉,” both are the activities of “play” and suggest a certain mood of love. At the same time, Wang Hongyin’s translation faithfully preserves the original form, thereby capturing its aesthetic essence. The structured arrangement and four-line format effectively communicate this aesthetic quality. The verbs “playing with” and “flirting with,” The name “Eros” and “Cupid”, The object “peony,” and “beauty” all establish a beautiful contrast, and thus enhancing the overall poetic effect (王振国, 1995).

5.2 Repetition

Wang Zhenguo and Li Yanlin assert that “Repetition is an important figure of speech in the coherence of language. Its function is to emphasize and stress.” While repetition is often regarded as verbose and typically avoided, it can be intentionally employed in specific contexts to stimulate readers’ senses and engage them emotionally.

Example 5:

<p>下四川 一溜的山(来者哟哟哟哟哟), 两溜溜山, 三溜溜山(啊), 脚夫哥哥下了(的个)四川(哟哟哟哟) 脚夫哥哥下了(的个)四川。 今日子牵(来者哟哟哟哟哟), 明日子牵, 每日(哟哟哟哟), 夜夜的晚夕里梦见(哟哟哟哟)。</p>	<p>Go to Sichuan One mountain ridge, Two mountain ridges and three mountain ridges ahead, I drive my loaded cattle to Sichuan. I drive my loaded cattle to Sichuan. Today and tomorrow And every day, I think constantly of you so much, and oh, That I dream of you every night.</p>
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In the second section, the translation utilizes the dual structure of conjunction and exclamation, as well as the means of expressing the degree of result, to strengthen the sense of weight, and thus the original meaning is basically conveyed. (And every day I think constantly of you so much and oh / That ...). The third stanza further strengthens the degree of love by thinking about it day and night. (And day and night, I think of you so much) (王振国, 1995).

6. Expressive techniques in discourse-semantics

6.1 Transliteration

Transliteration, as its name implies, translates text based on the sounds of the original language rather than its meaning. Catford and Aexela argue that transliteration is particularly effective for rendering proper nouns into phonetic equivalents in the target language. Its primary function is to analyze the pronunciation of words in the source language and identify counterparts with similar sounds in the target language. Transliteration is typically employed when the original text lacks clear meaning, is inventive or unique, or contains names of individuals or locations.

Example 6:

<p>听见哥哥唱着来 我老远听见马蹄子响, <u>扫炕铺毡换衣裳。</u></p>	<p>Hearing the hoofbeats approaching from the distance, I hurry up, clearing the <u>kang</u>, and change my clothes. Hearing the Voice of My Dear Boy</p>
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The word “kang” in the above article has been translated phonetically. The kang is a common indoor heating device in northern China, a sleeping platform made of bricks and adobe, which is not available in English-speaking countries. The author has adopted the phonetic translation method, directly using the Chinese pinyin “kang” for “炕” to express this object with local characteristics in its original form (王振国, 1995).

6.2 Literal translation

According to Wang Zhenguo and Li Yanlin, literal translation involves preserving the original language’s form—its lexis, syntactic structure, and figurative expressions—while ensuring that the target language flows smoothly and is readily understandable to readers. Literal translation can be divided into two components: syntactic literalness and lexical literalness. This approach aims to maintain both the form and substance of the source text, often referred to as word-for-word translation. It involves converting the grammatical structure of the original language into the nearest corresponding structure in the target language, maintaining a one-to-one correspondence between vocabulary items without considering contextual nuances, as described by Peter Newmark (Newmark, 2011).

Certain folk music terms consist of only one or a few words, making literal translation an effective strategy for preserving their meanings. However, when translating such terms, translators should also consider the aesthetic appeal of the translated name, as a positively connotated translation can attract potential readers’ interest.

Example 7:

<p><u>猪皮筏子</u>— pig-skinned raft (kayak) <u>放羊铲</u>— sheep-spade (grazing tool) <u>腰鼓</u>— waist drum (musical instruments)</p>	<p><u>泪蛋蛋</u>— teardrops (tears) <u>油糕</u>—sweet fried cakes (cooked wheaten food)</p>
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One of Etienne Doré's "Five Principles of Translation" emphasizes the avoidance of word-for-word translations, which could deviate from the original meaning and the beauty of the language (Dolet, 2010). There are many words in the Northern Shaanxi folk songs about people's clothing, food, housing, and transportation, many of which can be directly taken as a literal translation if the meaning of the words is clear and specific and does not diverge from the original text.

7. Results and Discussion

To surmount linguistic barriers and facilitate mutual understanding and cultural exchange, it is imperative that translators enhance the calibre of their translations of northern Shaanxi folk songs. In this article, *Voices from China's Northwest* is selected as a representative example of northern Shaanxi folk culture. Guided by the principles of SFL, which has rarely been studied by predecessors, this paper delves into the nuances in the English translation of folk songs. It applies the "Context" theory to specific examples and then meticulously examines and appreciates the translation strategies that effectively convey the emotive impact.

8. Conclusion

As Peter Newmark aptly notes, Context is the overarching factor in all translation, taking precedence over any rule, theory, or primary meaning (Newmark, 2011). It is imperative to avoid any misunderstanding that may arise from cultural differences by ensuring an accurate conveyance of the original text's meaning. In conclusion, it is suggested that translators follow the guidance provided by SFL in future translation practice; translators can gain a deeper understanding of the context of the original text and the cultural background of the target language, which in turn enables them to convey the original meaning more accurately in the translation. In an era marked by intensified cultural exchanges, it is incumbent upon all to disseminate folk-song culture on a global scale and to foster cultural integration.

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