

# Application of Functional Equivalence Theory in Children's Literature Translation: A Case Study of “Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone”

Hongmei Chen<sup>1</sup> Youliang Xie<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Foreign Languages, Huaiyin Institute of Technology, Huai'an, China

<sup>2</sup> Jiangsu Qingjiang Middle School, Huai'an, China

## ABSTRACT

Eugene Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory emphasizes achieving functional equivalence between source and target texts, enabling target readers to experience the text similarly to source readers. By using “Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone” as a case study, this paper explores into how functional equivalence guides children's literature translation across three levels: lexical, syntactic and stylistic levels. By analyzing some concrete examples, it illustrates how the Chinese version achieves functional equivalence while adapting to children's cognitive characteristics and reading habits.

**Keywords:** Functional equivalence, “Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone”, Children's literature translation.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Children's literature is aimed at young readers with limited life experience and cognitive abilities, and translating it into Chinese requires not only linguistic conversion but also the adaptation to children's psychological and cognitive characteristics. Eugene Nida's functional equivalence theory argues that “translation consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style” (Nida & Taber, 1969). This theory shifts the focus from formal correspondence to functional equivalence, which is particularly applicable to children's literature translation, ensuring that young readers can understand and appreciate the text as vividly as the original readers. “Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone”, written by the famous British author J.K. Rowling, is a classic of contemporary children's fantasy literature. Its Chinese version (translated by Su Nong and published in 2024) has been widely loved by Chinese children, making it an ideal case to study functional equivalence in children's literature translation. This paper aims to explore into translation strategies adopted in the

Chinese version from lexical, syntactic, and stylistic levels, with some specific examples to illustrate how functional equivalence is realized in children's literature translation.

## 2. EUGENE NIDA'S FUNCTIONAL EQUIVALENCE THEORY

Eugene Nida bases functional equivalence theory on his understanding of language as a tool for communication. He distinguishes between “formal equivalence” and “dynamic equivalence” (later revised to “functional equivalence”), emphasizing that functional equivalence focuses on the response of the target reader, which should be comparable to that of source readers (Nida, 1993). In the translation of children's literature, this means: at the lexical level, the translator should use familiar words to convey the meaning and connotation of the original words; at the syntactic level, the translator should simplify complex structures to fit children's reading abilities; at the textual level, the translator should maintain coherence and logical flow to ensure smooth reading; and at the stylistic, the translator should

preserve the childlike and vivid features of the original text.

Recent studies have further explored into the application of functional equivalence in children's literature. For instance, Yue Pei and Zhao Xin (2021) analyze the translation strategies of *The Little Prince* under the guidance of functional equivalence theory. They hold that in children's literature translation, accuracy, clarity, faithfulness, and smoothness should be ensured, along with semantic, stylistic, and cultural equivalence. Wen Jin and Xue Zhi (2022) examine the application of functional equivalence theory in the translation of *Oliver Twist*, a classic children's literature work by Charles Dickens. They analyze the translation from lexical, syntactic, and stylistic aspects and aims to explore how functional equivalence theory is concretely applied in children's literature translation. Hu Dongping and Yang Zixuan (2023) and Lei Meng (2021) have delved into the translation of proper nouns in "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone" under the guidance of functional equivalence. Through case analysis, they hold that translators mostly use different translation methods flexibly to translate proper nouns, thus achieving lexical meaning equivalence. All these studies collectively evidence that functional equivalence theory provides a valuable theoretical basis for children's literature translation. This paper is aimed at analyzing the translation of "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone" under the guidance of functional equivalence from lexical, syntactical and stylistical levels, translation methods adopted by the translator and whether the Chinese version achieves the same effect on Chinese readers.

### 3. APPLICATION OF FUNCTIONAL EQUIVALENCE IN TRANSLATION OF "HARRY POTTER AND THE SORCERER'S STONE"

#### 3.1 Equivalence at Lexical Level: Conveying Meaning and Connotation

Lexical translation in children's literature needs to balance accuracy and readability, ensuring that young readers can quickly grasp the meaning while perceiving the emotional color of words. For example:

Example 1: "Voldemort" is translated into "伏地魔". "Voldemort" is the primary villain in the series of Harry Potter. The Chinese version "伏地魔"

combines transliteration (伏地) and semantic implication(魔): "伏" means "to lie hidden," and "魔" means "demon", which conveys the character Voldemort's hidden and evil nature. This translation is more vivid and imaginative than a pure transliteration(伏地莫特)and helps children associate the name with villainy, thus achieving functional equivalence in connotation.

Example 2: "Muggles" is literally translated into "麻瓜" with sound approximation. "Muggles" refers to non-magical people in the source text. The Chinese version "麻瓜" is a phonetic approximation, and "瓜" in Chinese colloquially implies "naive" or "unworldly" or "silly or foolish", subtly distinguishing Muggles from the magical world. This translation helps children understand better the term's meaning through familiar word parts.

Example 3: "Quidditch" is transliterated into "魁地奇" with the addition of "比赛". In the source text, "Quidditch" refers to a magical sport, which is of great importance in the whole book, and in Chinese, it is transliterated into "魁地奇", and the addition of "比赛" in context clarifies its nature as a sport, ensuring that children recognize it as an activity or a sport rather than an abstract concept, which is easy for young children in the target language to understand the sport quickly.

Example 4: "Horcrux" is semantically translated into "魂器" according to its function. "Horcrux" is a new word created by the author, which refers to an object used to contain a piece of a wizard's soul. In Chinese, "Horcrux" is creatively translated into "魂器", where "魂"(soul) and "器" (vessel) directly explain its function to contain one's soul. This semantic clarity helps young children grasp the term's significance quickly, which is critical for readers to understand Voldemort's evil plan.

Example 5: "Hogwarts" is tranlitereted into "霍格沃茨(学院)" and the transliteration of the school name retains its magical tone. The Chinese version "霍格沃茨" sounds strange to the young reader in China and have no strong semantic associations in Chinese, allowing young children to accept it as a unique, fantasy place name. With the addition of "学院", it is equivalent to the original readers' perception of an unfamiliar magical school.

Example 6: "Privet Drive" is literally translated into "女贞路". In English, "Privet" refers to a type of shrub, and "Drive" is often used in the names of roads and denotes a residential street. In the Chinese version "女贞路", the translator directly translates "privet" as "女贞", the Chinese name for

the same shrub, while “路” corresponds to “Drive”. This preserves the original’s function, which identifies a specific, ordinary suburban street with a plant-related name, allowing Chinese readers to visualize the setting just as English readers do.

In the examples above, the translator adopts different translation strategies like transliteration, transliteration + semantic translation, literal translation, semantic translation, etc. to achieve functional equivalence and help Chinese young readers sense the charm of the magical world and arouse their imagination and curiosity in the wonderful book.

### 3.2 Equivalence at Syntactic Levels: Adapting to Children’s Cognitive Habits and Meanwhile Maintaining Coherence and Logical Flow

The English language tends to use complex sentences with multiple clauses, while the Chinese language prefers to use simple, concise structures. And children’s literature usually relies on clear narrative and logic and coherent texts to keep young readers engaged in the story. In translating, translators need to adjust complex syntaxes to meet the needs of children’s reading abilities and meanwhile employ cohesive devices to ensure textual equivalence with the original text.

Example 7: Mrs. Dursley was thin and blonde, and had nearly twice the usual amount of neck, which came in very useful as she spent so much of her time craning over garden fences, spying on the neighbors. (Chapter 1, P1)

德思礼太太是一个瘦削的金发女人。她的脖子几乎比正常人长一倍。这样每当她花许多时间隔着篱墙引颈而望、窥探左邻右舍时，她的长脖子可就派上了大用场。(Chapter 1, P1)

The original English is a complex sentence: a main clause (Mrs. Dursley was thin... and had...) + a non-restrictive attributive clause (which...) + an adverbial clause (as she spent...). This complex and compact structure uses two subordinate clauses to link the description of Mrs. Dursley’s physical trait (long neck) to its purpose (aiding her spying), while the Chinese version splits this long sentence into three shorter, independent clauses, connected by logical conjunctions (“这样” and “每当...时”). This adjusting of sentences accords with Chinese syntactic preferences — (Chinese people prefer parataxis to hypotaxis). Moreover, the original text employs a flowing, uninterrupted sentence structure to pack information densely, mirroring the

connection between Mrs. Dursley’s appearance and behavior, while the Chinese version, with its shorter clauses and rhythmic pauses, presents the same information in a way that feels natural in Chinese. Despite the differences in form, both versions achieve the same functional goal: efficiently conveying Mrs. Dursley’s character trait (long neck) and its role in her nosy behavior.

Example 8: Mr. Dursley hummed as he picked out his most boring tie for work, and Mrs. Dursley gossiped away happily as she wrestled a screaming Dudley into his high chair. (Chapter 1, P2)

德斯礼先生哼着小曲，挑出一条最不让人喜欢的领带戴着上班，德斯礼太太高高兴兴，一直絮絮叨叨，把唧哇乱叫的达力塞到了儿童椅里。(Chapter 1, P2)

The source text uses a compound sentence joined by “and”, with two parallel independent clauses (Mr. Dursley hummed... and Mrs. Dursley gossiped...). The Chinese version splits this compound sentence into two coordinated clauses in Chinese, which omits the explicit conjunction and but maintains the parallel relationship through semantic coherence — which is a common syntactic feature in Chinese (logical connections are often implied rather than overtly marked). Besides, in the original text, “as he picked out his most boring tie for work” is a subordinate clause following the main verb “hummed”. The translation rearranges this to “挑出一条最不让人喜欢的领带戴着上班” placed after the main action “哼着小曲”, which conforms to Chinese word order (In Chinese, actions and their accompanying details are often sequenced linearly). Similarly, “as she wrestled a screaming Dudley into his high chair” is translated into “把唧哇乱叫的达力塞到了儿童椅里”. The Chinese version uses “把” to emphasize the action’s effect, which is a syntactic pattern typical in Chinese, retaining the causal and sequential relationship. What’s more, the original English uses a balanced, conversational rhythm with parallel structures, and the translation mirrors this rhythm through concise, colloquial Chinese phrases (“哼着小曲”, “絮絮叨叨”), ensuring the syntactic flow matches the original’s casual, descriptive tone.

Example 9: The brick he had touched quivered - it wriggled - in the middle, a small hole appeared - it grew wider and wider - a second later, they were facing an archway large enough even for Hagrid, an archway onto a cobbled street that twisted and turned out of sight. (Chapter 5, P71)

他敲过的那块砖抖动起来，开始移动。中间的地方出现了一个小洞，洞口越变越大。不多时，他们面前就出现了一

条足以让海格通过的宽阔的拱道。通向一条蜿蜒曲折，看不见尽头的鹅卵石铺砌的街道。(Chapter 5, P55)

The source text uses dashes to create a rhythmic, breathless flow, linking short, fragmented clauses to emphasize the dynamic, unfolding process while the Chinese version gives up the dash-driven fragmentation and instead uses a series of independent but logically connected clauses separated by periods. This change adapts to Chinese people's preference for parataxis rather than hypotaxis, maintaining the sense of sequential action without depending on English punctuation conventions. The source text also uses "it" (referring to the brick/hole) to avoid redundancy, while the Chinese version clarifies the subject clearly in the first clause (他敲过的那块砖) and then relies on ellipsis (omits "砖") for following actions (中间的地方出现了一个小洞), which agrees with Chinese syntactic habits of using explicit initial subjects followed by context-dependent ellipsis. The final English clause ("an archway onto a cobbled street...") uses apposition to expand on "archway". The Chinese splits this into two clauses (出现了一条...宽阔的拱道。通向一条...街道), omitting the repeated "拱道" in the second clause — which is again a typical Chinese syntactic choice to prioritize fluency over repetition.

In the examples above, the translator attempts to adapt syntactic structures to Chinese norms, preserving the original's logical relationship and communicative effect rather than adhering strictly to English syntactic patterns. Moreover, the Chinese version takes coherence and logical relationship into consideration, helping young readers understand the text clearly and coherently.

### **3.3 Equivalence at Stylistic Level: Preserving Childlike Features**

The style of children's literature is characterized by vividness, simplicity and playfulness. In translating, translators need to adopt colloquial and imaginative language to match this style and achieve functional equivalence in style.

Example 10: Something came whistling down the kitchen chimney as he spoke, and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, 30 or 40 letters came pelting out of the fire. Like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air, trying to catch one. (Chapter 3, P41)

他正说着，有东西嗖嗖的从厨房烟囱里掉了下来，狠狠的砸在他的后脑勺上。接着三四十封信像子弹一样从壁炉里

射出来。德思礼一家忙着躲避，哈利却一窜老高，伸手想抓住一封。(Chapter 3, P30)

The source text uses short, action-driven clauses (Something came whistling..., Next moment, 30 or 40 letters came pelting...) and very sharp verbs (whistling, caught, pelting, ducked, leapt) to create a rapid, urgent rhythm, reflecting the suddenness of the events. The Chinese version retains this brisk pace with concise phrases (嗖嗖的从厨房烟囱里掉了下来，接着三四十封信像子弹一样...) and vivid verbs (砸, 射, 躲避, 窜), making sure that Chinese readers feel the same sense of immediacy and chaos as in the original. In the original text the author employs sensory details (whistling for sound) and a striking metaphor (like bullets) to emphasize the letters' force and the scene's tension, mixing the great surprise (at the sudden onslaught) and Harry's eager anticipation for a letter. And the Chinese version reproduces this imagery with equivalent sensory language ("嗖嗖的" to convey sound) and retains the bullet metaphor (像子弹一样), while verbs like "狠狠的砸" reinforce the impact. The strong contrast between the Dursleys' fear (忙着躲避) and Harry's eagerness (一窜老高, 伸手想抓住) mirrors the original text's emotional duality—tension for the Dursleys and excitement for Harry. Moreover, the source text adopts a straightforward, narrative style with simple syntax, avoiding formality to match the scene's spontaneity (a sudden, unplanned event), while the Chinese version mirrors this informality through conversational expressions (他正说着, 一窜老高) and short, simple sentences, ensuring that the tone remains accessible and immediate just like the original text.

Example 11: A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles all the hair. (Chapter 4, P46)

门口站着一个彪形大汉。他的脸几乎完全被蓬乱的长发和纠结的浓密胡须掩盖了，但你仍能看见他那对眼睛在头发下像黑甲虫似的闪闪发光。(Chapter 4, P35)

The source text uses vivid imagery (glinting like black beetles) and detailed modifiers (long, shaggy mane of hair, and wild, tangled beard) to create a rough, mysterious atmosphere. The Chinese version retains this descriptive style by adopting corresponding vivid expressions (像黑甲虫似的闪闪发光, 蓬乱的长发, 纠结的浓密胡须), making sure that Chinese readers receive a similar sensory experience of the giant's wild and imposing appearance. In the original text, the author conveys

a sense of awe and strangeness through words like “giant”, “shaggy”, “wild” and the metaphor of eyes as “black beetles”, while the Chinese version uses “彪形大汉” to translate “giant of a man” in conveying a sense of size and power, and keeps the “black beetle” metaphor (黑甲虫) to preserve the original’s tone of mystery and a little unease. Therefore, both versions provoke similar emotional responses in their respective readers.

Example 12: She pointed at the last and the youngest of her sons. He was tall, thin, and gangling, with freckles, big hands and feet, and a long nose.(Chapter 6, P93)

她指着最后也是她最小的儿子说。这孩子又瘦又高，显得笨手笨脚，满脸雀斑，大手，大脚，长鼻子。(Chapter 6, P72)

The source text adopts a plain, realistic style, using a series of adjectives (tall, thin, and gangling) and noun phrases (freckles, big hands and feet, and a long nose) to describe Ron’s physical features without elaborate words. This creates a straightforward, unembellished portrait, typical of casual character description in narrative. And the Chinese version reproduces this simplicity with concise, parallel phrases (又瘦又高，显得笨手笨脚，满脸雀斑，大手，大脚，长鼻子). It avoids using complex syntax or flowery language, retaining the original’s directness and ensuring that readers receive the same plain impression of the character’s appearance. Moreover, the English description of Ron is neutral, neither positive nor negative, simply stating his physical traits to introduce the character. This neutrality helps readers form an objective first impression of Ron. Also the Chinese translation retains this neutral tone. Terms like “笨手笨脚” accurately convey the meaning of “gangling” (awkward in movement) without adding judgment, and phrases like “满脸雀斑” present Ron’s features factually. By doing so, Chinese readers can experience the same functional effect as English readers—forming a clear, unfiltered mental image of the character through straightforward, unbiased details.

Example 13: They were looking straight into the eyes of a monstrous dog, a dog that filled the whole space between ceiling and floor. It had three heads. Three pairs of rolling, mad eyes; three noses twitching and quivering in their direction; three drooling mouths, saliva hanging in slippery ropes from yellowish fangs.(P160)

他们正对着一条怪物般的大狗的眼睛。这条狗大得填满了从天花板到地板的所有空间。它有三个脑袋，三双滴溜溜

转的凶恶的眼睛，三个鼻子——正朝他们这边抽搐、颤抖着，还有三张流着口水的嘴巴，口水像黏糊糊的绳子，从泛黄的狗牙上挂落下来。(P124)

The original text employs a concise, urgent narrative rhythm with short, direct clauses (“They were looking straight into...”; “It had three heads.”) and parallel structures (repetition of “three” to list the dog’s eyes, noses and mouths), which creates a sense of immediacy, as if the terrifying scene is unfolding just before the reader’s eyes. And the Chinese version mirrors this rhythm vividly: it uses equally direct phrasing (“他们正对着...”，“这条狗大得...”) to maintain the fast-paced, immediate feeling. The parallel listing of the dog’s features (三个脑袋，三双...眼睛，三个鼻子...，还有三张...嘴巴) maintains the cumulative effect of the original’s repetition of “three,” reinforcing the sense of overwhelming threat. Furthermore, the original text relies on vivid, unsettling imagery to evoke horror: “Monstrous dog” and “filled the whole space” emphasize the creature’s overwhelming size, creating a sense of horror to the reader. Descriptive words like “rolling, mad eyes”, “twitching and quivering noses”, and “drooling mouths” with “saliva hanging in slippery ropes” highlight the dog’s ferocity and grotesque appearance. The Chinese version successfully conveys this horror through “怪物般的大狗” and “填满了从天花板到地板的所有空间” to preserve the sense of the dog’s intimidating size. “滴溜溜转的凶恶的眼睛” (rolling, mad eyes) captures the madness while adding “凶恶的” to reinforce threat. “口水像黏糊糊的绳子，从泛黄的狗牙上挂落下来” retains the gross, tactile imagery of “slippery ropes” and clarifies “yellowish fangs” as “泛黄的狗牙”，making the grotesqueness more tangible for Chinese readers.

From the analysis above, it is evident that the Chinese version attempts to employ various translation methods to achieve stylistic equivalence with the original. By reproducing the original’s rhythm, vivid sensory imagery and emotional tone, it helps Chinese readers to experience the same functional effects—feeling terror, urgency, vividness, character dynamics, etc. as English readers.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Eugene Nida’s functional equivalence theory provides a valuable framework for children’s literature translation, as demonstrated by the great success of “Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone”. The examples discussed above illustrate that the translator Su Nong implements effectively

functional equivalence theory in the Chinese version of “Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone”. At the lexical level, he skillfully employs transliteration, a combination of transliteration and semantic translation, literal translation and semantic translation to convey the original meaning, including sound and meaning; at the syntactic level, he simplifies complex structures to fit in with children’s cognitive abilities and use cohesive devices to maintain coherence; and at the stylistic level, he adopts a childlike language to maintain the original work’s vividness and arouse children’s interest and imagination. In a word, the translation achieves a high degree of functional equivalence, allowing Chinese children to experience the same wonder and excitement as English readers. However, there remains some challenges in the translation of children’s literature, especially in translating the great series of Harry Potter. Future research on children’s actual reading feedback could further prove the effectiveness of functional equivalence theory, thus promoting the development of children’s literature translation.

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