

# Analysis of Transitivity in "A Moonlit Night on the Spring River" and its English Translations

Yiyang Xia

Xian International Studies University, Shaanxi Xian, 710128;

**Abstract:** This study applies Systemic Functional Linguistics' transitivity theory to analyze A Moonlit Night on the Spring River and two English translations. Using Halliday's ideational function, it examines material, mental, behavioural, verbal, relational, and existential processes in Zhang Ruoxu's poem, clarifying how these construct its artistic conception, emotions, and imagery. It compares translators' handling of transitivity structures, strategies for semantic equivalence and style reproduction, revealing language transformation patterns and difficulties in poetry translation. The goal is to offer new perspectives for translating Chinese classical poetry, enhance translation quality, and promote Chinese cultural dissemination.

**Keywords:** ideational function; transitivity; A Moonlit Night on the Spring River

**DOI:** 10.69979/3041-0843.25.03.017

## 1 Introduction

Against the backdrop of globalization, cultural exchanges are becoming increasingly frequent. A Moonlit Night on the Spring River, with its profound artistic conception, faces translation challenges due to Sino-English linguistic and cultural differences. Systemic Functional Linguistics' transitivity theory provides an effective tool to explore semantic construction in poetic texts.

### 1.1 Research Purpose

This study uses transitivity analysis to compare the original poem and two English translations in terms of transitivity processes, participants, and environmental elements. It explores how translators reproduce the poem's charm via transitive means, along with their strategies and problems, to inform better Chinese classical poetry translations.

### 1.2 Research Status

As an outstanding representative of Chinese classical poetry, A Moonlit Night on the Spring River has attracted the attention of numerous domestic and foreign scholars with its profound artistic conception, beautiful language and rich cultural connotations. The study of its English translations is conducive to promoting cultural exchanges between the East and the West and facilitating the spread of Chinese culture around the world. The following will analyze the research status of A Moonlit Night on the Spring River and its English translations from the perspectives of foreign and domestic studies respectively.

#### 1.2.1 Domestic Research

Scholars apply theories like functional equivalence and foreignization/domestication to analyze translation strategies, focusing on conveying the poem's artistic conception, emotions, and cultural connotations while considering English readers' reception. They emphasize interpreting cultural elements (e.g., Taoist/Buddhist thoughts, traditional customs) and their transmission, noting issues like over-interpretation. Comparative studies of different translations highlight differences in vocabulary, syntax, rhetoric, and the impact of translators' backgrounds.

#### 1.2.2 Foreign Research

Foreign scholars focus on translation strategies (e.g., combining literal and free translation with imagery explanations) but struggle with culturally loaded imagery (e.g., the "moon"). Studies on dissemination and reception show English readers face difficulties with cultural images and philosophy, while comparative studies of translations are scarce and subjective.

## 2 Theoretical foundation

### 2.1 Overview of System Functional Linguistics

Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics regards language as a social semiotic system, which has ideational function, interpersonal function and textual function. In Systemic Functional Grammar, transitivity is a central concept employed in the description of ideational meaning. Ideational meaning concerns the linguistic representation of the experiential world, which in Halliday's view is constructed as configurations of participants (nominals), processes (verbals) and circumstances (adverbials), Halliday refers to these configurations of constituents as (transitivity, thus employing the term in a broader sense than most other grammarians.

### 2.2 Transitivity

Halliday's transitivity theory is an important part of systemic functional linguistics, aiming to analyze how language constructs meaning and represents human experiences of the world. The systemic functional categorization of transitivity patterns is based on semantic as well as grammatical criteria and the processes types are material, mental, behavioural, verbal, relational and existential processes.

Material process: it represents actions of doing or happening, usually involving physical actions. For example, the workers built a building. Here, "built" is the material process, "The workers" is the agent (the one who does the action), and "a building" is the goal (the object affected by the action).

Mental process: this type relates to mental activities such as thinking, feeling, perceiving, etc. For instance, "I think she is right" or "He loves music". In these examples, "think" and "loves" are mental processes, "I" and "He" are the sensors (the ones who have the mental activity), and "she is right" and "music" are the phenomena (what the mental activity is about).

Relational process: it is used to express the relationship between entities, such as identity, attribution, etc. For example, "This book is mine" (expressing identity) and "The flower is beautiful" (expressing attribution). In "This book is mine", "is" is the relational process, "This book" is the carrier, and "mine" is the attribute. In "The flower is beautiful", "is" is the relational process, "The flower" is the carrier, and "beautiful" is the attribute.

Behavioral processes: these involve physical and psychological behaviors that are intermediate between material and mental processes, like "He is laughing" or "She is crying". Here, "laughing" and "crying" are behavioral processes, and "He" and "She" are the behavers.

Verbal processes: they represent the process of saying or communicating. For example, "He said that he would come" or "She told me a story". In these sentences, "said" and "told" are verbal processes, "He" and "She" are the sayers, "that he would come" and "a story" are the verbiage (the content said), and "me" is the receiver (in the case of "She told me a story").

Existential processes: this type is used to represent that something exists or occurs. For example, "There is a tree in the garden" or "There occurred an accident yesterday". In "There is a tree in the garden", "is" is the existential process, "a tree" is the existent, and "in the garden" is the circumstance of location. In "There occurred an accident yesterday", "occurred" is the existential process, "an accident" is the existent, and "yesterday" is the circumstance of time

## 3 A Comparative Analysis of Transitivity in English Translations of A Moonlit Night on the Spring River

### 3.1 Overview

The 36-line poem depicts spring river scenery, integrates separation longing, and reflects on life/universe. This study analyzes translations by Xu Yuanchong and Liu Dabai, renowned for distinct styles.

#### 3.1.1 Material Processes

When translating “春江潮水连海平，海上明月共潮生”，Xu Yuanchong's translation uses smooth English expressions, such as "In spring the river rises as high as the sea, and with the river's tide uprises the moon bright". It accurately conveys the dynamic sense of the original poem. "Rises" and "uprises" respectively correspond to "rises level with the sea" and "rises with the tide", and the relationship between the doer and the action is clear. For “鸿雁长飞光不度，鱼龙潜跃水成文”，Xu

Yuanchong translates it as "Though the geese fly afar, their light cannot reach me; the fish leap out of the water, but leave no trace in the waves". Verbs like "fly" and "leap" vividly reproduce the actions of wild geese and fish, maintaining the vividness of the material processes in the original poem.

## 3.2 Transitivity Analysis of Xu Yuanchong's Translation

### 3.2.1 Mental Processes

Xu Yuanchong translates “谁家今夜扁舟子?何处相思明月楼?” “Who in a lonely boat tonight is rowing? Where is the one who misses me in the bright moonlit tower?”. Through the word "misses", it directly expresses the feeling of longing, clearly presenting the emotional factor in the mental process and making it easier for readers to understand the pain of separation and longing between the travelers and their wives. When dealing with “不知乘月几人归,落月摇情满江树”, Xu Yuanchong renders it as "I do not know how many people will return by moonlight, and the setting moon shakes the feelings all over the river trees". "Do not know" corresponds to "wonder", retaining the tone of doubt in the original poem. At the same time, "shakes the feelings" vividly conveys the complex emotional fluctuations of the poet, well reproducing the mental process.

### 3.2.2 Relational Processes

For “江流宛转绕芳甸,月照花林皆似霰”, Xu Yuanchong's translation is "The river winds around the fragrant islet, and the moon shines on the flowered forest like snow". "Winds around" and "shines on" accurately express the relationships between "the river" and "the fragrant islet", and "the moon" and "the flowered forest". Through the metaphor "like snow", it further elaborates the relationship of "look like hoarfrost", making the translation both faithful and poetic in handling the relational process. When translating “白云一片去悠悠,青枫浦上不胜愁”, Xu Yuanchong renders it as "A piece of white cloud floats away slowly, and on the Green Maple River there is too much sorrow to bear". "Floats away" depicts the leisurely state of the white cloud, and "too much sorrow to bear" clearly expresses the relationship of “不胜愁”, making the relational expression in the translation clear and natural.

### 3.2.3 Other Processes

In terms of behavioral processes, “玉户帘中卷不去,捣衣砧上拂还来” is translated as "Rolled up from the jade window, the curtain cannot be removed; brushed from the washing stone, the moonlight still returns". "Rolled up" and "brushed" accurately translate the actions of “卷” and “拂”, retaining the characteristics of the behavioral process. In Xu Yuanchong's translation, the verbal process is reflected through the overall context and emotion. For example, when describing the emotions of the travelers and their wives, it implies their inner words and emotional exchanges. Although there are no direct verbal verbs, readers can sense the verbal meaning. In the translation of the existential process, “江畔何人初见月?江月何年初照人?” is translated as "By the riverside, who saw the moon first? When did the river moon first shine on man?". By retaining the interrogative sentence pattern, it conveys the reflection on the existence of man and the moon, echoing the existential process in the original poem.

## 3.3 Transitivity Analysis of Liu Dabai's Translation

### 3.3.1 Material Processes

Liu Dabai translates “春江潮水连海平,海上明月共潮生” as "Spring river tides merge with the sea level, and on the sea, the bright moon rises with the tides". The word "merge" vividly expresses the state of the river water connecting with the sea, and "rises" corresponds to "rises with the tide". The translation of the material process is relatively accurate, but compared with Xu Yuanchong's translation, the language is a bit plain. For “鸿雁长飞光不度,鱼龙潜跃水成文”, his translation is "Wild geese fly long, yet their light cannot reach; fish and dragons leap in the water, leaving ripples". The use of verbs like "fly" and "leap" is similar to that in Xu Yuanchong's translation, but in terms of vivid expression, it is slightly inferior. For example, the translation of "leave ripples" for “水成文” is relatively simple.

### 3.3.2 Mental Processes

When translating “谁家今夜扁舟子?何处相思明月楼?”, Liu Dabai's translation is "Whose boatman is out tonight in a lonely boat? Whose heart aches in the bright moonlit tower?". "Heart aches" expresses the pain of longing, reflecting the mental process. However, compared with "misses" in Xu Yuanchong's translation, the direct expression of emotion is

slightly weaker. For “不知乘月几人归，落月摇情满江树”，Liu Dabai renders it as "I wonder how many people will return by moonlight, and the setting moon stirs up emotions all over the riverside trees". "Wonder" corresponds to “不知”, retaining the tone of doubt, but "stirs up emotions" is not as intense in expressing emotions as "shakes the feelings" in Xu Yuanchong's translation.

### 3.3.3 Relational Processes

Liu Dabai's translation of “江流宛转绕芳甸，月照花林皆似霰” is "The river winds its way around the fragrant meadow, and the moonlight shines on the flower forest, making it look like snow". "Winds its way" and "shines on" accurately express the relationships, but the use of the metaphor "making it look like snow" is a bit stiff, not as concise and natural as "like snow" in Xu Yuanchong's translation. When translating “白云一片去悠悠，青枫浦上不胜愁”，Liu Dabai renders it as "A piece of white cloud floats away leisurely, and on the Green Maple River, there is an overwhelming sadness". "Floats away leisurely" expresses the leisurely state of the white cloud, but "an overwhelming sadness" is a bit too heavy in semantics, deviating slightly from the artistic conception of the original poem.

### 3.3.4 Other Processes

Behavioral processes: "In the jade window, the curtain cannot be rolled up and removed; on the washing stone, the moonlight cannot be brushed away" (for "玉户帘中卷不去，捣衣砧上拂还来") is less fluent. Verbal processes lack emotional delicacy. Existential processes: "By the riverside, who was the first to see the moon? When did the river moon first shine on people?" (for "江畔何人初见月？江月何年初照人？") is less concise.

## 3.4 Comparison and Discussion of the Two Translations

### 3.4.1 Similarities

The two translations basically maintain consistency with the original poem in the main types of transitivity processes. They both accurately identify and translate the material processes, mental processes, relational processes, etc. in the original poem, and are able to convey the basic semantics and artistic conception of the original poem. In the handling of participants and environmental components, both translations also try to follow the logic and structure of the original poem. Through reasonable vocabulary selection and sentence arrangement, the translations reproduce the scene and atmosphere of the original poem to a certain extent.

### 3.4.2 Differences

In terms of specific vocabulary selection, Xu Yuanchong's translation pays more attention to the vividness and imagery of vocabulary, being able to convey the emotions and artistic conception of the original poem more precisely. For example, when describing dynamic scenes and emotional fluctuations, more expressive verbs and adjectives are used. In contrast, Liu Dabai's vocabulary selection in some places is relatively plain, resulting in a lack of vividness in the translation. In the handling of relational processes, Xu Yuanchong's translation is more natural and fluent in the use of metaphors and expressions, being able to better reflect the subtle relationships between things in the original poem. Liu Dabai's use of some metaphors is a bit stiff, affecting the overall aesthetic feeling of the translation. In terms of conveying the cultural connotations of the original poem, Xu Yuanchong's translation can better guide readers to understand the cultural images and emotions in the original poem through clever vocabulary and sentence adjustments. Liu Dabai is slightly insufficient in this regard, and some translations may cause certain difficulties for readers to understand the cultural connotations of the original poem.

## 4 Conclusion

Through the transitivity analysis of the original poem of A Moonlit Night on the Spring River and its two English translations, it is found that the original poem constructs a poetic and philosophical picture through a rich variety of transitivity processes, vividly depicting the beautiful scenery of the spring river, flowers, moonlit night and the emotional world of the homesick travelers and their longing wives. The two English translations have their own advantages and disadvantages in the handling of transitivity. Xu Yuanchong's translation excels in aspects such as vocabulary selection, the expression of relational processes, and the conveyance of cultural connotations, and is better able to reproduce the artistic charm of the original poem. Although Liu Dabai's translation can also convey the basic meaning of the original poem, it has

some deficiencies in details, such as the vividness of vocabulary and the naturalness of relational expressions.

#### 4.1 Significance of the Research

As an important analytical tool in systemic functional linguistics, the application of transitivity analysis to the study of *A Moonlit Night on the Spring River* and its English translations further verifies the feasibility and effectiveness of this theory in the research of poetry translation. It is conducive to a deep understanding of how the ideational function of language is realized in poetic texts. By analyzing the transitivity processes in the original poem and its translations, it reveals how language constructs the meaning and artistic conception of poetry through different process types, participant roles, and environmental elements, thus deepening our understanding of the relationship between language and thinking, as well as the relationship between language and the real world.

Enhance the scientific nature of the quality assessment of poetry translation. The evaluation criteria established based on transitivity analysis are more objective and systematic. It can evaluate poetry translations from multiple dimensions, such as the integrity of transitivity processes, the accuracy of participant roles, and the appropriateness of environmental components. This avoids the problem of excessive subjectivity in traditional evaluation methods and provides a scientific and quantifiable basis for the quality assessment of poetry translation. It is helpful to identify the problems and deficiencies in existing translation versions. By comparing the handling of transitivity in different translations and analyzing their advantages and disadvantages, it provides specific and targeted references for translation criticism, prompting translators to continuously improve their translation methods and enhance the translation quality.

Promote cross-cultural communication and cultural dissemination. High-quality poetry translations contribute to introducing the cultural treasure of Chinese classical poetry to the world. By accurately conveying the artistic conception, emotions, and cultural connotations in *"A Moonlit Night on the Spring River,"* international readers can gain a better understanding of the profoundness and richness of Chinese culture. This enhances mutual understanding and appreciation among different cultures, thus promoting cross-cultural communication and cooperation. Stimulate foreign readers' interest in Chinese classical poetry and culture. Excellent translation works can attract readers with their unique artistic charm, inspiring them to explore Chinese culture in depth and facilitating the global spread and promotion of Chinese culture.

#### 4.2 Research Limitations and Prospects

This study only selected two English translations for analysis. The limited samples may not cover all translation styles and strategies. In future research, the sample range can be further expanded to conduct in-depth comparisons of more translations. Although transitivity analysis is an effective research method, it still has certain limitations in the study of poetry translation. Future research can combine other theories and methods, such as cognitive linguistics and cultural translation studies, to comprehensively and thoroughly explore poetry translation issues from multiple perspectives.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Kress G, van Leeuwen T. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*[M]. London: Routledge, 1996/2006.
- [2] Gibbons, A. *Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature*[M]. London: Routledge, 2012.
- [3] HALLIDAY MAK. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*[M]. London: Edward Arnold, 1994.
- [4] Lei Qian. Exploring an Innovative Research Model of Multimodal Discourse from a Transdisciplinary Perspective[J]. *Foreign Language Education*, 2023, 44(01): 39-45.
- [5] Lei Qian. Key Issues in the Theoretical Construction of Multimodal Functional Stylistics: A Discussion on Several Important Aspects in Broussonetia Papyrifera[J]. *Foreign Language Education*, 2018, 39(02): 36-41.