



**REVIEW AND CRITICAL DISCUSSION ABOUT PETER NEWMARK'S SEMANTIC TRANSLATION AND COMMUNICATIVE TRANSLATION**

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**ABSTRACT**

Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, people had argued for long about whether translation should be literal translation or free translation. In 1981, Peter Newmark's division of different types of texts into three types- expressive texts, informative texts and vocative texts and his proposal of semantic translation and communicative translation ended the dispute. Considering the importance of the semantic translation and communicative translation, this paper reviewed his division of different texts and the semantic and communicative translations to help readers better understand his translation methods, had a critical discussion about these two translation methods, and found two disadvantages of them: The semantic translation neglects aims of literary works for children and their target readers' sociocultural backgrounds when translating, and the correlative approach of semantic translation and communicative translation is not suitable for translating tourism texts that contain poems and idiomatic expressions. Translators should fully consider the purposes and characteristics of the source texts and then choose the suitable translation method so as to convey fine target texts to readers.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which period was called "the pre-linguistics period of writing on translation"(Newmark, 1981, P38), when it came to translation, different opinions from minds like Luther, Dryden, Tytler, Goethe, Schleiermacher, and Buber would swing between literal translation and free translation. Those who were in favor of literal translation believed that translation should be author-oriented and focus on the source texts and languages. While for others who were advocating free translation, they thought translation should be reader-oriented and emphasize the target texts and languages.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the disputes between literal and free translation from linguists and translators continued. In this period, one group of linguists or translators represented by Nida, Firth and Koller placed the emphasis of translation on the readers of translated texts to inform the readers of the texts' meanings and messages effectively and appropriately. Another group of linguists or translators, such as Benjamin, Valery and Nabokov, stated the fact that literal translation was isolated and restrained to high literary translation (Newmark, 1981, P38).

Peter Newmark (1916-2011), a translator and translation theorist from Britain, was influenced by the different opinions above about literal translation and free translation. In 1974, he became a professor at Surry University, taught lessons about translation theories, and applied these theories into translation

practice. After that, he began to form his own thought about translation. In 1981, he put forward his own translation theory in the book *Approaches to Translation*. In this book, he discussed about translation criteria, the relations between translation and other subjects, and reasons why loss of meanings happened in the processes of translation. Most importantly, he divided different texts into three types, and then proposed the Semantic Translation (ST) and Communicative Translation (CT), which ended up the dispute on whether translation should be literal or free.

Considering the significance of the ST and CT in the development history of translation theories, this article aims to review and critically discuss advantages and disadvantages of these two kinds of translation methods.

**Three Types of Texts**

Before Peter Newmark, many theorists had divided different texts according to their subjects, such as literature, institutions and technology. However, Peter Newmark agreed with the idea from some theorists like Buhler that different texts should be divided based on their language functions. In the book *Approaches to Translation*, he proposed that different texts could be divided into three types based on the functions of their languages: expressive texts, informative texts and vocative texts.

The first type of texts is expressive texts. This type of texts focus on the writers' personal use of languages and feelings,

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and thus are author-centered. When translating this type of texts, translators should emphasize the source languages and cultures. A typical example of this type of texts is literature texts, in which the authors depict their mental world to express certain feelings and thoughts (Peter Newmark, 1981, P12-14).

The second type of texts is informative texts. This type of texts aim to inform the readers certain information and knowledge. The ideal style of this type of texts is neutral and objective, and translators should focus on target languages, cultures and readers when doing translation work. A good example of this type of texts is technical texts, in which the author tries to tell readers exact methods on how to use certain technologies (Peter Newmark, 1981, P13-45).

The last type of texts is vocative texts. They are texts in which the authors try every effort to persuade the readers to take some actual actions, such as following certain rules and buying certain products. Representative examples of this type of texts are advertisements and publicity brochures, in which the authors try to attract the readers and audience to buy something (Peter Newmark, 1981, P13-45).

### **Semantic Translation and Communicative Translation**

After Peter Newmark divided different texts into three types, he then proposed two kinds of translation methods that can be applied to these types of texts: semantic translation and communicative translation.

As for semantic translation, it “attempts to render, as closely as the semantic and syntactic structures of the second language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original (Peter Newmark, 1981, P38).” It strengthens the meanings, structures, emotions and manners of the original texts. Also, it focuses on the source languages and cultures. This kind of translation is mostly applicable to the translation of expressive texts, authoritative documents, and technical texts in order to keep their original characteristics as possible as translators can.

For communicative translation, it “attempts to produce on its readers an effect as close as possible to that obtained on the readers of the original (Peter Newmark, 1981, P38).” To achieve this ideal effect, this kind of translation focuses on target readers, languages and cultures. It is mostly applicable to informative and vocative texts, such as advertisements, public signs and users’ guidebooks, to inform the readers certain information and appeal to them to take actual actions.

Recognizing the importance of the fact that there were overlaps between different types of texts, Newmark added that “Communicative and semantic translation may well coincide—in particular, where the text conveys a general rather than a culturally (temporally and spatially) bound message and where the matter is as important as the manner... Further, there are often sections in one text that must be translated communicatively (e.g. non-lieu-“nonsuit”) and others semantically (e.g. a quotation from a speech) (Peter Newmark, 1981, P40).” This means some parts of a texts, which contain such important matters and manners, as cultural elements and the authors’ true emotions, may be translated by semantic translation and other parts, which just convey general meanings, may be translated by communicative translation. For example, in the Government Work Report of 2020, the sentence

“但是我们确定了保居民就业、保基本民生、保市场主体等六保的目标任务，这和经济增长有直接关系。(see [16])” is translated into “In the meantime, we have formulated a series of goals and tasks in

six key areas which are closely connected with economic development, with a particular focus on protecting employment, people’s basic living needs, and market entities.” Here, “六保” is an important Chinese government policy and it is necessary to convey it to the target readers in order to publicize Chinese culture, so it is rendered into “six key areas” semantically. For the rest, they convey general information, so they are translated communicatively.

### **Critical Discussion about ST and CT**

Peter Newmark’s division of different texts into three types helps people understand diverse functions of texts, and his proposal of semantic translation and communicative translation in 1981 brought an end to the dispute on whether translation should be literal or free. Chen Kai and Zhang Jianhui (2008) wrote: “Peter Newmark’s translation theory has great inspiring guidance for modern translation theories and our translation practice”. Zhang chunhui (2009) regarded Peter Newmark’s division of different texts and his proposal of semantic translation and communicative translation as major significance for translation studies.

However, Peter Newmark’s translation theory also has its disadvantages. Li Qingming and Yin Pi’an (2003) stated in their paper “A Research on Peter Newmark’s Translation Theory From the Perspective of Crossculture” that the translation of expressive texts like literature works and cultural elements was not always semantic, and that translators were required to have a deep cultural awareness and clear knowledge of the authors’ purposes, texts’ type and target readers so as to achieve the effectiveness of translation. Based on the above research works, the author of this article mainly talks about two disadvantages in terms of translation of literary works for children and translation of tourism texts.

First, Peter Newmark’s semantic translation does not take the concrete conditions of target readers and specific aims and functions of literary works into full consideration. The semantic translation is mainly used to translate expressive texts, in which literature works are included. Based on this translation method, the translation of literary works should be authors-centered, source cultures-centered, and it should keep the forms and structures of literary works.

However, this method would not be suitable when it comes to the translation of literary works for children. As for children, it would be more comfortable for them to read those literary works which include a lot of short sentences, reduplicated words, interjection words, and rigorous sentences. For example, Yang Wuneng (2005) translated the verse “Princess! youngest princess! Open the door for me! Do you not know what you said to me yesterday by the cool water of the well? Princess, youngest princess! Open the door for me! (Jacob Grimm & Wilhelm Grimm, 2005)” into “小公主啊小公主，快给我把门开开！难道你已经忘记昨天说过什么话，在那清凉的讲台？小公主啊小公主，快给我把门开开 (Yang Wuneng, 2008)” This translation version contains lots of reduplicated words like “开开” and has rhythm such as “开(kai)” and “台(tai)”, making it more easy and fun to read and memorize for children. On the contrary, if the verse is translated into corresponding literary form based on the semantic translation which keeps the complicated structures of the original works, dictions, and cultural elements, children will find the translated version hard to follow due to their own being under-educated

to read well-written and fabulous literary works. The semantic translation at this time neglects the sociocultural background and the age of target readers, which are significant factors in translation.

The second disadvantage is that Peter Newmark's correlative approach of the semantic translation and communicative translation cannot be applied to some translation of tourism texts, which include some artistic structures, such as poems and idiomatic expressions. Tourism texts aim to inform tourists the history, scenes, historical figures related, location and other information of the scenery spots, and let readers finish reading the texts in a short time so as to attract potential visitors. Generally speaking, this type of texts should be informative and vocative texts. However, there are always poems, fine structures, and idiomatic expressions included in tourism texts, making this type of texts a mixture of expressive, informative and vocative texts. Take all the above into account, the translation of tourism texts should use both semantic and communicative translation according to Peter Newmark.

However, tourism texts' purposes are to tell tourists information about the scenery spots and attract them to visit the spots, and tourists are often eager to visit the places if they are there in flesh. In this situation, too much cultural elements and idiomatic expressions would bore them, especially those foreign visitors who are from a totally different cultural background. Therefore, semantic translation is always abandoned, and communicative translation is employed to translate the tourism texts. For instance, when translating a piece of tourism text for Xijiang, which reads “唐代著名诗人李白为好友王昌龄写过一首诗，‘杨花落尽子规啼，闻道龙标过五溪；我寄愁心与明月，随君直到夜郎西。’诗中提到的五溪就是当时苗族的主要聚居地”(Li Tianyi, 2019), the translator omits the verse “杨花落尽子规啼，闻道龙标过五溪；我寄愁心与明月，随君直到夜郎西”(see [12]), and translates the texts into “Li Bai, one of the famous poets in the Tang Dynasty, once wrote a poem for his good friend Wang Changling. He mentioned ‘Wuxi’ in the poem, which was the major habitation of the Miao people at that time.” In this situation, the translator uses the communicative translation and abandons the semantic translation, and the omission of the verse is proper and suitable for visitors to better understand the introduction in a short time.

## CONCLUSION

Peter Newmark's division of different texts into expressive, informative and vocative texts has helped people understand different functions of texts, and his proposal of semantic and communicative translation ended the dispute on whether translation should be literal or free. However, his semantic translation and communicative translation have their disadvantages. When getting involved with the translation of literary works for children, the emphasis of semantic translation on the source texts' languages, structures and cultures would make it hard for children to understand the translated version. When translating the tourism texts which maintain lots of cultural elements, the correlative approach of ST and CT is not applicable anymore because semantic translation should usually be abandoned to attract tourists in a short time.

All in all, whether translating different texts, translators should take the diverse characteristics, purposes and functions of the source texts and such perspectives of the target readers as cultural backgrounds and education levels into consideration and then decide which translation method should be employed.

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