



Constructing the Performability in Translating Early Modern English Drama: A Case Study of the Chinese Translation of Excerpts from *The Revenger's Tragedy*

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Abstract

Guided by the theory of performability, this study investigates the construction of performability in the Chinese translation of early modern English drama, using Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* as a case study. It proposes a tripartite analytical framework, cultural localization, linguistic colloquialization, and character individuation, offering a novel perspective that bridges macro-cultural and micro-linguistic approaches in drama translation research. The research employs a case study methodology, analyzing selected excerpts from the play. To systematically identify and analyze conceptual metaphors, the study utilizes the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) complemented by corpus analysis via Wmatrix, followed by manual verification. The analysis demonstrates how performability is operationalized through three strategic pathways. First, the domestication of Western cultural metaphors transforms culture-specific signs into familiar aesthetic images for the target audience, thereby reducing cognitive barriers and enhancing emotional resonance on stage. Second, the colloquialization of archaic Early Modern English expressions restructures dialogue rhythm, aligning it with contemporary spoken conventions to facilitate natural actor delivery and instant audience comprehension. Third, the individuation of characterization in translated lines meticulously preserves characters' distinct linguistic styles and identities, providing a textual basis for vivid and multi-dimensional stage portrayal. The findings indicate that these integrated strategies enable the translated text to come alive in performance, with characters gaining fuller presence and stage action acquiring richer layers. This study contributes to the theoretical discourse on performability in drama translation and provides practical, actionable strategies for translators and practitioners working with classical English theatrical texts in Chinese contexts.

Keywords

Performability; Drama; Chinese-English Translation; *The Revenger's Tragedy*

1. Research Background

Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* is set in an Italian court, where the young nobleman Vindice, who seeks revenge after his fiancée is murdered by the old Duke and his sister Castiza is nearly sexually assaulted by the Duke's son Lussurioso, ultimately die with his foes.

This drama focuses on a revenge narrative and sharp social critique, permeated with a darkly ironic tone. As an early modern English drama, it retains certain archaic linguistic features. Therefore, the E-C translation should adopt the Ming-Qing dynasty classical Chinese opera stylistic form to enhance its literary quality. Besides, the principle of “performability,” advocated by Bassnett (1991, 1998), must be prioritized to suit actors’ delivery, audience comprehension, and stage pacing, thereby amplifying the dramatic tension.

Specifically, *The Revenger’s Tragedy* abounds with Western cultural metaphors, early modern English archaic expressions, and individualized lines (e.g., Vindice’s obsessive soliloquies, and Gratiana’s penitent monologues), which constitute essential pathways for constructing a “performable” translated script. Therefore, from the perspective of performability, this paper explores translation strategies for classical English drama through three aspects through case studies, aiming to offer practical insights.

2. Literature Review

Susan Bassnett (1980), an early proponent of performability in drama translation, argues that a play achieves completeness only in performance, where its full connotations are realized. Zich (1977) also notes in *The Aesthetics of Dramatic Art* that all semiotic systems involved in stage performance collectively construct the holistic framework of drama. Pavis (1989) asserts that drama translation should be based on performability, where staging always prioritizes orality, physicality, and characterization.

Chinese scholar Ying Ruocheng (1999) emphasizes the distinctive linguistic features of drama translation: colloquialism and conciseness. Johnston (2013) marks a progressive breakthrough in performability studies, proposing that drama translation fundamentally constitutes a reconstruction of performative poetics based on textual reinterpretation. With “writing forward” as its core, it exploits the performative potential of the source text to foster deep interaction between textual meaning and the target context. Thus, the focus of drama translation lies in achieving dynamic negotiation, with performability serving as a tool for balancing different cultural theatrical conventions to enable “writing forward” (Vassallo, 2022). These studies provide theoretical grounding for this study.

3. Strategies for Constructing Performability

3.1 Domestication of Western Cultural Metaphors

According to the Conceptual Metaphor Theory proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphor is not merely regarded as a literary rhetorical device, but also a cognitive mapping mechanism from the source domain to the target domain based on human experience. *The Revenger’s Tragedy* contains many conceptual metaphors, which feature unique Western culture and construct stage narrative, moral critique, and revenge tension.

To identify conceptual metaphors, this thesis employs the widely-recognized Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) in conjunction with Wmatrix. By utilizing advanced algorithms and key semantic analysis, it can detect metaphorical instances and distinguish them from literal language usage. The specific steps of MIP are as follows:

1. Read the text to get a general comprehension of its meaning.
2. Identify the lexical units.
3. Ascertain the contextual meaning of each unit. Determine whether it has a more fundamental meaning. Does the contextual meaning diverge from the basic meaning but can be understood in relation to it?
4. If so, mark the unit as metaphorical (Pragglejaz Group, 2007).

In addition, to ensure accuracy, these metaphors are re-examined through rigorous subsequent manual verification and correction.

In cross-cultural metaphor translation, literal translation can not be adopted to mechanically reproduce Western cultural symbols, which deprives dramatic lines of performability. Because the lack of corresponding cultural cognition among Chinese readers results in a mismatch of the cognitive mapping mechanism. Thus, readers are unable to perceive the underlying abstract moral critique and emotional orientation from the literally rendered cultural symbols.

In *The Translator’s Invisibility*, Lawrence Venuti (1995) proposes the concept of domestication, a target-culture-oriented translation strategy that replaces culture-specific elements in the source text with idiomatic expressions familiar to target-culture readers, to align the translation with the linguistic and cultural norms of the target context. This paper further applies the domestication strategy adapted to the theatrical stage, so as to realize the cross-linguistic reconstruction of the cognitive mapping mechanisms, thus allowing Chinese audiences to intuitively perceive the core expression of the drama in the same way as Western readers.

Example 1: FEATHER IS LIGHTNESS, LEAD IS HEAVINESS

ST: Ven. Our hearts wear feathers, that before wore lead.

TT: 文狄切: 我们方才心如铅沉, 如负千钧, 如今身似羽衣, 轻盈翩然。

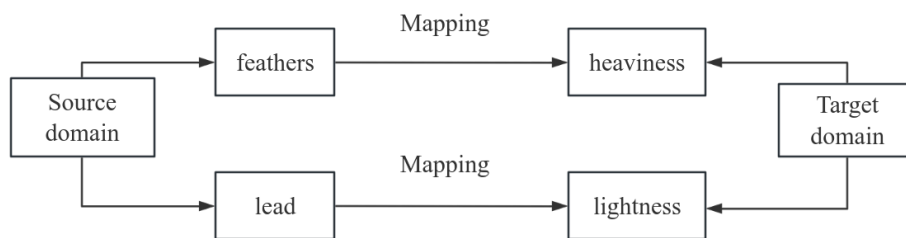


Figure 1. Cognitive mapping mechanism of feather and lead metaphors.

As shown in Figure 1 above, this line contains an ontological metaphor, which compares the abstract emotional state to tangible, perceptible objects. The target domain lead refers to the heavy psychological burden, while the target domain of feather refers to the lightness of mood, embodying Vendice’s emotional shift.

The translation first converts the metaphor into a simile by using markers “如” and “似”, whose meaning is “like”. Second, it employs Chinese idioms “如负千钧” (bearing thousands of kilograms) and “轻盈翩然” (light and graceful) to further elaborate the contrastive relationship while appropriately integrating traditional Chinese cultural imagery to achieve domestication.

“钧” (*Jun*) is a specific Chinese unit of weight (equivalent to 15kg), and the hyperbolic here highlights the severity of the Vendice’s psychological burden. Meanwhile, “轻盈翩然” echoes the “羽衣” (feather) imagery, evoking the immortal imagery in traditional Chinese culture among the audience. Phonetically, the antithesis and staggered pauses in the lines strengthen the rhythm and expressiveness, thus improving the performability of the translation.

Example 2: UNSTEADY WILL IS MALLEABLE WAX

ST: Ven. O you of easy wax!

TT: 文狄切: 唉, 你这耳根子软的性子!

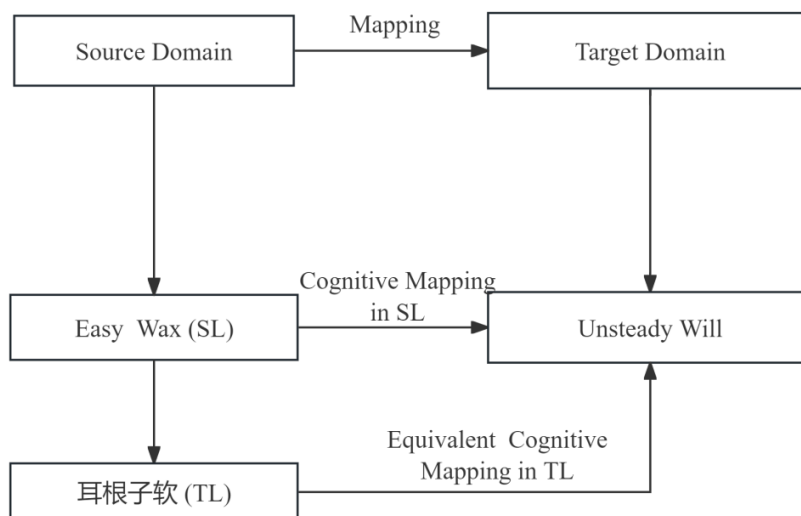


Figure 2. Cognitive mechanism of metaphor translation of UNSTEADY WILL IS MALLEABLE WAX.

Just as Figure 2 shows above, the source domain is the soft wax that melts easily and is malleable, capable of being reshaped arbitrarily by external forces. While it is intelligible to Chinese readers, it is not an idiomatic expression. The target domain is mapped onto the unsteady will, extremely susceptible to manipulation by others’ words. The translation replaces it with the highly familiar Chinese idiom “耳根子软” (soft ear). Although the source domain is changed, the core cognitive mapping is fully preserved, achieving localized equivalence.

3.2 Colloquialization of Early Modern English

The Revenger's Tragedy is written in Early Modern English (15th-17th century). As defined by David Crystal and Ben Crystal (2002) in *Shakespeare's Words: A Glossary and Language Companion*, it features the coexistence of archaic vocabulary (e.g., thou/thee) and colloquial contractions (e.g., 'tis/'twould), as well as syntactic structures that bear remnants of Middle English and the initial form of Modern English. As Table 1 shows below:

Table 1. Types and frequencies of Old English expressions

Types of Old English Expressions	Examples	Frequencies
Archaic Personal Pronouns	thou, thee, thy, ye	191
Archaic Verb Conjugations	dost, didst, canst, shouldst, hast...	39
Archaic Colloquial Contractions	tis, 'twill, 'twould, 'mongst, ne'er...	84
Archaic Interjections	Heart! Alack! Pish!	22
Archaic Content Words	Hither, thither, wherefore, wot	117
Total		453

From the perspective of performability, a rigid literal translation of these Old English expressions into Chinese would violate the contemporary colloquial expression conventions. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct a vernacular reconstruction of the archaic vocabulary and alien syntactic structures in Early Modern English in translation. The process renders the speech colloquial, concise, and explicit, aligns the dialogue rhythm with stage effects, and ensures natural delivery by actors and instant comprehension by the audience.

Example 3

ST: Hip. It should be so, knew'st thou thy office well.

TT: 希波利托: 你若真晓得自己的罪过, 叫你老虔婆半点不冤!

In the lexical level, “knew'st” is the second-person singular past tense inflection, equivalent to “you knew” in Modern English; “thou” corresponds to “you”, and “thy” to “your”. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “office” denotes “duty, task, function”, specifically referring to “the duties of a mother” in this context. So this sentence can be restructured as “It should be so, if you knew your office well”.

In terms of plot, the two brothers are filled with intense anger at Gratiana for persuading their sister to abandon her chastity to the Duke's son. In this context, priority must be given to meaning conveyance and syntactic fluency. Therefore, “office” is translated as “罪过” (sin), the filthy transaction between Gratiana and the Duke's son.

As Peng (2023) notes, Chinese shows a stronger preference for repetition, especially the repetition of previously mentioned people, objects, and actions; the use of substitution would result in ambiguous meaning and imbalanced syntactic structure. Accordingly, the pronoun “so” in the source text is translated into the noun “老虔婆” (a derogatory term for a hypocritical old woman, referring to Gratiana) from the preceding context, supplemented by the idiom “半点不冤” (completely deserved) to enhance the vividness.

Example 4

ST: Hip. Alack! I'm sorry. Sfoot, just upon the stroke, Jars in my brother; 'twill be villainous music.

TT: 希波利托: 天呐! 还真是差点啊。偏偏在这节骨眼上, 我兄弟来这添乱了。

“Alack!” is a late Early Modern English archaic interjection, equivalent to modern English “Oh no!”. Furthermore, “Sfoot” is an archaic slang contraction of “God's foot”, used as an exclamatory expression of frustration. Besides, “'twill” is a Archaic contraction of “it will”. Contextually, this is Hippolito's stage aside, expressing his anxiety about the revenge plot being exposed as the disguised Vendice enters. His lines use Early Modern English colloquial stage vernacular (not formal prose) as a lower-class identity. The Chinese translation thus uses grounded slang like “节骨眼” (critical juncture) and “添乱” (mess things up), while matching the concise, fast-paced quality of stage asides to fit theatrical performance rhythm.

3.3 Characterization Individualization in Lines

The Revenger's Tragedy features sharply defined characters: Vindice, resolute in his revenge and resourceful yet conceited; Hippolito, loyal, prudent and pragmatic, who assists in eradicating treacherous court villains and serves as a steadfast, reliable ally in the revenge plot; Gratiana, who forsakes righteousness for profit and fails in her maternal duties, even coercing her biological daughter to surrender her chastity for jewelry and wealth, in violation of maternal obligations and moral conscience; and Castiza, pure and unyielding, the only character of complete innocence and virtue.

A character's individuality in drama is externalized through their lines; the loss of identifying markers in dialogue will result in a one-dimensional character image (Yang & Wang, 2025). In translation, only an authentic reproduction of the characters' linguistic style from the source text can make character images vivid. Through the design of syntactic length and the adaptation of semantic orientation in the lines, the translator can restore the core personality traits and behavioral logic of the characters. This provides a textual basis for actors' physical performance and facial expression delivery, ensuring that character images are recognizable and conform to the character's plot logic.

For instance, Gratiana's repentant and humble expressions, such as "O my sons" (哦, 我的儿啊) and "I kneel to you" (给你们跪下了), present moral degradation to repentance, and provide textual support for the actor's stage action of "kneeling and weeping".

Example 5

ST: Cas. Now, mother, you have wrought with me so strongly that what for my advancement, as to calm the trouble of your tongue, I am content.

TT: 卡斯蒂查: 母亲, 您劝说得这般恳切, 为成全我的前程, 也为省去您苦苦劝说的气力, 我答应便是。

In the ST, Gratiana takes advantage of her daughter Castiza's kindness and filial piety to force her to submit to the Duke's son. Though Castiza is determined to preserve her chastity, she cannot bear to reject her mother, and ultimately agrees to follow her arrangement out of helplessness.

In the TT, the use of "恳切" (earnest) and "苦苦劝说" (persistent persuasion) reflects Castiza's consideration for her mother out of her kind nature. The sentence-final modal particle "便是" indicates that her consent is not sincere, but a helpless compromise out of forbearance. These adjustments convey the character's inner psychology through the lines, enriching the character's individuality and the layers of the actor's performance, and enhancing the performability of the translation.

Example 6

ST: Ven. Almost struck blind; This bright unusual shine to me seems proud; I dare not look till the sun be in a cloud.

TT: 文狄切: 这金光亮得太放肆, 简直要把我的眼给扎瞎了。太阳不钻进云里, 我都不敢抬头看了。

In this scene, Lususioso takes out gold coins to bribe Vendice and test his loyalty. Vendice deliberately put on a money-hungry act. In reality, he remains fully alert, luring Lususioso step by step into his revenge trap through his pretense.

According to the plot, "放肆" (arrogant) personifies the core meaning of "proud", accurately conveying the superficial psychology of Vendice, who deliberately feigns being "overwhelmed by the radiance of money". The highly colloquial and folksy expression aligns with Vendice's disguised identity as a down-and-out young cynic, precisely restoring his dual persona: outwardly obsequious and abject, yet inwardly shrewd and scheming.

4. Conclusion

This study takes Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* as the research corpus, with Susan Bassnett's performability theory of drama translation as the overarching theoretical framework, supplemented by Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the Pragglejaz Group's Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP), and Venuti's domestication translation strategy. It explores the translation strategies for constructing performability in the Chinese translation of classical English drama through three dimensions, with case studies of representative lines from the play. The core findings of this research are summarized as follows.

First, for the abundant culture-specific conceptual metaphors embedded in the play, which carry unique Western cultural connotations, moral critique, and revenge tension, this study combines the MIP protocol with Wmatrix to achieve systematic and accurate identification of metaphorical instances. It proposes a stage-adapted domestication strategy to reconstruct the cross-domain cognitive mapping mechanism in the target language. By replacing Western-specific metaphorical source domains with familiar Chinese idiomatic expressions and traditional cultural imagery, the translation fully preserves the core cognitive connotation and emotional contrast of the original metaphors, while eliminating cross-cultural cognitive barriers for Chinese audiences.

Second, in response to the linguistic features of Early Modern English in the play, including archaic personal pronouns, verb conjugations, colloquial contractions, and Middle English syntactic remnants, this study conducts a corpus-based statistical analysis of the types and frequencies of archaic expressions, and puts forward a colloquialization reconstruction strategy for archaic language. Converting archaic vocabulary and alien syntactic structures into concise, natural, and colloquial Chinese stage language conforms to contemporary oral expression conventions. This strategy aligns the rhythm of the dialogue with the requirements of stage pacing, ensuring the natural delivery of lines by actors and instant comprehension by the audience.

Third, for the sharply individualized linguistic styles of the play's distinct characters, this study demonstrates that the individualization of line translation is a core factor of constructing performability. Through targeted adjustments to syntactic length, modal particle selection, and semantic orientation of the lines, the translation accurately restores the core personality traits and behavioral logic of each character. This not only makes the character images vivid and recognizable to the audience but also provides a solid textual basis for actors to design physical performances, facial expressions, and emotional delivery, thus amplifying the dramatic tension of the play on stage.

To conclude, this study practically provides a referable operational paradigm for the translation and introduction of Jacobean English revenge tragedies and other early modern English dramatic works into China. By balancing the literary quality of Ming-Qing classical Chinese opera style and the practical requirements of stage performance, this study also offers translation insights for the localized stage adaptation of classic Western drama in the Chinese context.

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