

A Study on the Correlation of “Gaixia Ge” and Its English Translations from the Perspective of Experiential Metafunction

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to analyze and compare the transitivity processes of “Gaixia Ge” by Xiang Yu and its seven English versions from the perspective of the experiential function of Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics and makes a comment on the similarities and differences among them. Through the analysis of the transitivity of the poem and its translations, it is found that there are 6 versions for the first line, 2 versions for the second and the third lines, and 4 versions for the fourth line, in which the transitivity maintains a certain consistency with the original poem. After the analysis of similarities and differences between them, Spearman Correlation is applied in the SPSS. It shows that there is a significant positive relationship of transitivity between the version by Watson and the original poem, among which the translation by Watson is highly correlated with the transitivity of the original poem with the following coefficient, $\rho = 1.000$. This study can give clues to the study of poems and their translations, by exploring the differences of the transitivity processes, participants and circumstantial elements with the theoretical framework of Functional Grammar.

Keyword: Experiential metafunction; transitivity; “Gaixia Ge”; English versions; correlation


1. INTRODUCTION

“Gaixia Ge” (Chinese: 垓下歌) is a poem before the anticipated death of Xiang Yu (Chinese: 项羽), the overlord of the Western Chu. This poem summarizes Xiang Yu’s unparalleled hero image, expresses his pity for the famous foal and beauty due to the unfavorable time, and it also displays his helpless mood in the desperate situation of failure. The research on this poem mainly focuses on the comparative analysis of “Gaixia Ge” and “Dafeng Ge” (Chinese: 大风歌). For example, Tan (1975) explored the two classes reflected by the two poems, Ren (1988) compared these two poems, Liu (1995), Zhou (1998) and Wang (2006) discussed these two historical figures and their causes of success or failure, Wang (1999) contrasted the emotional mood of these two poems, and Zhang (2000) traced the historical background of the two poems. In addition, Li (1997) and Zhao (2015) interpreted the poem from literature and history perspectives. The English translation study of this poem has not yet been seen. Based on transitivity, what are the similarities and differences of each line between the original poem and the translations, and is there a positive correlation among them?

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2. METHODOLOGY

This paper will conduct experiential metafunctional analysis of seven translations of this poem from the Systemic Functional Linguistics perspective of Halliday (2004), so as to illustrate the correlation of transitivity between these seven translations and the original poem and provide a better English version of the Chinese poem. The experiential metafunction consists of multiple semantic systems, the most important of which is the transitivity system. Its role is to divide what people see and do in the real world into several kinds of processes, and to specify the participants and circumstantial elements related to the various processes (Hu et al., 1987, p. 71). Halliday believes that people can divide their human experience into six different processes through transitivity systems: (1) material process; (2) mental process; (3) relational process; (4) behavioral process; (5) verbal process and (6) existential process (Hu et al., 2017, p. 72). The following focuses on the transitivity of the original poem and its seven English versions. It analyzes and compares the similarity and difference among them in transitivity. After the transitivity analysis of the original poem and translations, which of all lines are labeled different numbers accordingly, Spearman Correlation is applied to show whether there is a significant positive correlation of transitivity between them.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Experiential Metafunctional Analysis of the Poem

From the perspective of the experiential metafunctional transitivity, “Gaixia Ge” (Wu, 1992, pp. 4-5) consists of the following processes, namely:

- (1) Material process/Material process: Li Ba Shan Xi Qi Gai Shi (Chinese: 力拔山兮气盖世);
- (2) Relational process/Material process: Shi Bu Li Xi Zhui Bu Shi (Chinese: 时不利兮骓不逝);
- (3) Material process/Material process: Zhui Bu Shi Xi Ke Nai He (Chinese: 骓不逝兮可奈何);
- (4) Material process: Yu Xi Yu Xi Nai Ruo He (Chinese: 虞兮虞兮奈若何);

In terms of functional discourse analysis, the participant and circumstantial element associated to various processes types need to be identified. The first line of this poem contains two material processes: the first process is “Ba (Chinese: 拔),” “Li (Chinese: 力)” acts as the actor, and “Shan (Chinese: 山)” functions as the goal; the second process is “Gai (Chinese: 盖),” “Qi (Chinese: 气)” acts as the actor, and “Shi (Chinese: 世)” functions as the range. The second line comprises a relational process and a material process. In the relational process, “Shi (Chinese: 时)” is the carrier, and “Bu Li (Chinese: 不利)” is the attribute; in the material process, “Bu Shi (Chinese: 不逝)” is the process, and “Zhui (Chinese: 骓)” is the actor. The third line includes two material processes. The first part is consistent with the second part of the previous line. “Zhui (Chinese: 骓)” is the actor, and “Bu Shi (Chinese: 不逝)” is the process. “Ke Nai (Chinese: 可奈)” is another material process, and “He (Chinese: 何)” is the goal. The last line is a material process. “Nai (Chinese: 奈)” is the material process, “Yu Xi Yu Xi (Chinese: 虞兮虞兮),” and “Ruo (Chinese: 若)” are recipients, and “He (Chinese: 何)” is the goal.

3.2 Experiential Metafunctional Analysis of Its Translations

On English translations of the poem “Gaixia Ge,” these seven versions have been collected (See Appendix). For narrative convenience, the following versions are arranged by the order of time: (Watson, 1984, p. 68), (Liu & Lo, 1990, p. 29), (Xu, 1996, p. 21), (Hong et al., 2006, p. 3), (Seaton, 2006, p. 39), (Zhao, 2007, p. 180), (Liu et al., 2009, p. 29) represent these seven translations. For comparison purposes, the analysis will be performed line by line below.

3.2.1 “Li Ba Shan Xi Qi Gai Shi”

Table 1. English Versions of “Li Ba Shan Xi Qi Gai Shi”

Translated By	Process	Participant	Circumstantial
Watson	Material process: plucked up	Actor: my strength Goal: the hills	
	Material process: shadowed	Actor: my might Range: the world	
Miao	Material process: to uproot	Actor: strength I had Goal: hills	
	Material process: dominated	Actor: my spirit Range: the age	
Xu	Material process: could pull	Actor: I Goal: mountains	Place: down Manner: with main and might
Wang	Material process: could lift	Actor: I Goal: a mount	
	Material process: quell	Actor: Range: the world	
Seaton	Material process: plucked up	Actor: the strength of my arm Goal: mountains	Place: in my shade
	Material process: did set	Actor: it Range: the world	
Zhao	Material process: can uproot	Actor: I Goal: mountains	
	Material process: top	Actor: I Range: the world	
Liu	Material process: could pluck	Actor: I Goal: mountains	Contingency: if I would
	Material process: was shadowed	Actor: Range: the world entire	Manner: e'en, just, by my might

The first line “Li Ba Shan Xi Qi Gai Shi” is discussed below. In terms of the process types, participants and circumstantial elements, these seven English translations (See Appendix) are analyzed in Table 1 above. The original poem contains two material processes, Xu’s version has only one material process, and all the other translations contain two material processes. The first material process of the original poem is “Ba,” Watson’s version agrees with the material process of Seaton’s, which is “plucked up.” Similarly, Liu translates it as “could, would pluck,” which has the same verb. Miao’s is similar to the material process of Zhao’s, whose processes are “to uproot” “can uproot,” and Xu’s and Wang’s material processes are “could pull” “could lift” respectively. The actor of the first material process is either translated as “strength” or “I.” Watson’s, Miao’s, and Seaton’s versions are “my strength” “strength I had” “the strength of my arm,” and Xu’s, Wang’s, Zhao’s and Liu’s versions are “I.” Since the translation of the target is “Shan,”

Watson and Miao put it as “(the) hills,” Xu’s, Seaton’s, Zhao’s, and Liu’s versions are “mountains,” and Wang’s is “a mount.”

Another material process of the original poem is “Qi Gai Shi.” Watson’s and Liu’s processes are “shadowed” “was shadowed” respectively, which are similar but different in voice (one uses an active voice, and the other is in passive voice). Miao’s, Wang’s, Seaton’s and Zhao’s material processes are “dominated” “quell” “did set” “top” respectively. Regarding the translation of the actor, Wang’s and Liu’s actors are not translated, which are omitted according to the previous context. Watson’s and Miao’s are “my might” “my spirit,” Seaton’s is “it,” and Zhao’s is “I.” Watson’s, Wang’s, and Seaton’s versions agree with the Zhao’s range “the world,” Liu’s is “the world entire,” similar to the former, and Miao’s is “the age.” Lastly, Xu’s version also has the circumstantial element “down,” representing the space, and the circumstantial element of manner “with main and might.” Seaton’s translation has a circumstantial element of space “in my shade,” while Liu’s has circumstantial elements “if I would” “e’en, just, by my might,” representing the contingency and manner. Through analysis, this line should be translated into two material processes, and Watson’s version is more in line with the original poem. Wen (1989, p. 16) believed that “this translation maintains the spirit of the original text, and the text is appropriate.” Now this version can be revised as “My strength plucked up the mountain; my might shadowed the world.”

3.2.2 “Shi Bu Li Xi Zhui Bu Shi”

Table 2. English Versions of “Shi Bu Li Xi Zhui Bu Shi”

Translated By	Process	Participant	Circumstantial
Watson	Relational process: were	Carrier: the times Attribute: against me	
	Material process: runs	Actor: dapple Goal:	Time: no more
Miao	Material process: cannot flee	Actor: my dappled steed Goal:	Time: now in this hour of misfortune
Xu	Material process: wanes	Actor: my good fortune Goal:	
	Material process: won’t fight	Actor: my steed Goal:	
Wang	Material process: fails	Actor: my steed Goal: me	Manner: e’en Time: at times absurd
	Relational process: wasn’t	Carrier: the time Attribute: right	
Seaton	Material process: can not break away	Actor: bold dapple Goal:	Time: now Manner: even
Zhao	Material process: will stop	Actor: my steed Goal:	Contingency: out of fortune Time: now
	Material process: should be forsaken	Actor: Goal: one	Time: once by luck
Liu	Material process: would fail to fight	Actor: one’s battle steed Goal:	

Now the translation of the second line “Shi Bu Li Xi Zhui Bu Shi” (See Appendix) is analyzed in Table 2. This original poem contains two processes: relational and material. Watson’s and Seaton’s two

processes are consistent with the original poem. The relational process of Watson's is "were," the carrier is "the times," and the attribute is "against me." The relational process of Seaton's is "wasn't," the carrier is "the time," the attribute is "right," "now" and "even" are the circumstantial elements of time and manner respectively. The second material process of Watson's and Seaton's is to translate "Zhui Bu Shi." Watson's material process is "cannot break away," the actor is "bold dapple," and "no more" is the circumstantial element of time. Seaton's material process is "runs," and the actor is "dapple."

Xu's and Liu's translations have two material processes. The first material process of Xu's is "waned," and the actor is "my good fortune"; the second material process is "won't fight," and the actor is "my steed." Correspondingly, the first material process of Liu's is "should be forsaken," the target is "one"; the second material process is "would fail to fight," and the actor is "one's battle steed." There is another circumstantial element of time "once by luck" in Liu's version. Miao's, Wang's and Zhao's versions have only one material process. The material process of Miao's is "cannot flee," the actor is "my dappled steed," and "now in this hour of misfortune" is the circumstantial element, representing the concept of time. The material process of Wang's is "fails," the actor is "my steed," and the target is "me." It also has the circumstantial elements of time "e'en" "at times absurd." Both versions explain "Zhui Bu Shi." The material process of Zhao's is "will stop," the actor is "my steed," and "out of fortune" "now" are circumstantial elements of contingency and time. The actor of these three versions is the same "steed." To keep it consistent with the original poem process, this line can be translated as "But now the time is not right; my steed does not run any more."

3.2.3 "Zhui Bu Shi Xi Ke Nai He"

Table 3. English Versions of "Zhui Bu Shi Xi Ke Nai He"

Translated By	Process	Participant	Circumstantial
Watson	Material process: runs	Actor: dapple Goal:	Time: no more
	Material process: can do	Actor: I Goal: what	Time: then
Miao	Relational process:	Carrier: dappled steed Attribute: unable to break away	
	Material process: is left	Actor: Goal: what hope	
Xu	Material process: will fight	Actor: my steed Goal:	
	Mental process: do not care	Senser: I Phenomenon:	
Wang	Material process: cannot preserve	Actor: my steed Goal: my life	
Seaton	Material process: be trapped	Actor: Goal: my dapple	
	Existential process: is	Existent: no hope for any deed	
Zhao	Material process: will stop	Actor: my steed Goal:	
	Material process: can do	Actor: I Goal: what	
Liu	Material process: 's to be done	Actor: Goal: what	Accompaniment: with my steed now spent

Then Table 3 presents the translation analysis of the third line “Zhui Bu Shi Xi Ke Nai He.” (See Appendix) This original poem contains two material processes. Watson’s and Zhao’s versions include two material processes. The first material process of Watson’s is “runs,” and the actor is “dapple”; the second material process is “can do,” the actor is “I,” the target is “what,” and “no more” “then” are the circumstantial elements of time. The first material process of Zhao’s is “will stop,” the actor is “my steed,” and the second material process is consistent with Watson’s.

Miao’s version consists of a relational process and a material process, the carrier of relational process is “dappled steed,” and the attribute is “unable to break away”; the material process is “is left,” and the target is “what hope.” Xu’s translation has a material process and a mental process: the material process is “will fight,” and the actor is “my steed”; the mental process is “do not care,” and the senser is “I.” Seaton’s comprises a material process and an existential process: the material process is “be trapped,” and the target is “my dapple”; the existential process is “is,” and the existent is “no hope for any deed.” Wang’s and Liu’s versions have a material process. The material process of Wang’s is “cannot preserve,” the actor is “my steed,” and the target is “my life.” The material process of Liu’s version is “’s to be done,” the target is “what,” and “with my steed now spent” is the circumstantial element of accompaniment. Because half of the line is the same as the previous line, the translation of the line focuses on the second part “Ke Nai He,” which can be translated as “What to do now?” “What should I do?” or “What is to be done?” Hence, this line can be translated as “When my steed does not run any more, what’s to be done?”

3.2.4 “Yu Xi Yu Xi Nai Ruo He”

Table 4. English Versions of “Yu Xi Yu Xi Nai Ruo He”

Translated by	Process	Participant	Circumstantial
Watson	Relational process: will be	Carrier: Yü, my Yü, your fate Attribute: what	
Miao	Relational process: will become of	Carrier: lady Yü, my Yü, you Attribute: what	
Xu	Material process: can do	Actor: I Goal: what	Accompaniment: with you, my lady fair
Wang	Material process: can do	Actor: I Goal: what Recipient: you, my dear wife	
Seaton	Existential process: could be	Existent: what hope Recipient: you, my lady Yu, thee Actor: I	
Zhao	Material process: can do	Goal: what Recipient: my lady, my lady Actor:	
Liu	Material process: to be spared	Goal: Recipient: thyself	Accompaniment: with thee, my fair

Lastly, the translation of the fourth line “Yu Xi Yu Xi Nai Ruo He” (See Appendix) is illustrated in Table 4. The original line of this poem is a material process. Watson’s and Miao’s, Seaton’s are the existential process, and Xu’s, Wang’s, Zhao’s and Liu’s are the material process. The relational process of Watson’s is “will be,” the carrier is “Yu, my Yu, your fate,” and the attribute is “what”; Miao’s relational process is “will become of,” the carrier is “lady Yu, my Yu, you,” and the attribute is “what.” The existential process of Seaton’s is “could be,” the existent is “what hope,” and “you, my lady Yu, thee” is the recipient. The material process of Xu’s, Wang’s and Zhao’s is “can do,” the actor is “I,” the target is “what,” all of which are

consistent. Xu's version also indicates the circumstantial element of accompaniment "with you, my lady fair." Wang's and Zhao's have additional recipients "you, my dear wife" "my lady, my lady." The material process of Liu's is "to be spared," the recipient is "thymself," and "with thee, my fair" represents the circumstantial element of accompaniment. Combined with the analysis, this line has only one material process, and is similar to the second half of the previous line, which can be tentatively translated as "Ah Yu, Ah Yu, what's to be done for you?"

3.2.5 Correlation of Transitivity

Table 5. Spearman Correlation of Transitivity

		Correlations								
		Original								
		Poem	Watson	Miao	Xu	Wang	Seaton	Zhao	Liu	
Spearman's rho	Original Poem	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	1.000**	-.316	.500	.000	.949	.000	.707
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.	.684	.500	1.000	.051	1.000	.293
		N	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
	Watson	Correlation Coefficient	1.000**	1.000	-.316	.500	.000	.949	.000	.707
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.	.684	.500	1.000	.051	1.000	.293
		N	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
	Miao	Correlation Coefficient	-.316	-.316	1.000	.316	.258	-.200	.894	-.447
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.684	.684	.	.684	.742	.800	.106	.553
		N	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
	Xu	Correlation Coefficient	.500	.500	.316	1.000	-.544	.738	.236	-.236
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.500	.500	.684	.	.456	.262	.764	.764
		N	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
	Wang	Correlation Coefficient	.000	.000	.258	-.544	1.000	-.258	.577	.577
		Sig. (2-tailed)	1.000	1.000	.742	.456	.	.742	.423	.423
		N	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
	Seaton	Correlation Coefficient	.949	.949	-.200	.738	-.258	1.000	.000	.447
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.051	.051	.800	.262	.742	.	1.000	.553
		N	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
	Zhao	Correlation Coefficient	.000	.000	.894	.236	.577	.000	1.000	.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	1.000	1.000	.106	.764	.423	1.000	.	1.000
		N	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
	Liu	Correlation Coefficient	.707	.707	-.447	-.236	.577	.447	.000	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.293	.293	.553	.764	.423	.553	1.000	.
		N	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

In terms of the transitivity of each line in the original poem and translations, all the lines have been labeled with different numbers according to the six processes. After the analysis of the transitivity, Spearman

Correlation in Table 5 shows that there is a significant positive relationship of transitivity between the version by Watson and the original poem ($p < 0.01$), among which the translation by Watson is highly correlated with the transitivity of the original poem with the following coefficient, $\rho = 1.000$.

3.2.6 Translation of “Gaixia Ge”

Table 6. English Versions of “Gaixia Ge”

No.	Translated by	Version
1	Watson	—
2	Miao	Song of Kai-hsia
3	Xu	XIANG YU’S LAST SONG
4	Wang	Song of Gaixia
5	Seaton	Song at Kai-hsia
6	Zhao	Song of Gaixia
7	Liu	The Last Song at Gaixia

The title of the poem “Gaixia Ge” is translated as above (See Appendix), Watson’s has no translated title. Miao’s agrees with Seaton’s as “Song of Kai-hsia,” in which here Wade-Giles romanization is used. Wang’s and Zhao’s are “Song of Gaixia,” both of which are the same, employing modern Chinese pinyin. Liu’s is “The Last Song at Gaixia,” which adds “the last.” Xu’s is “XIANG YU’S LAST SONG,” which uses the free translation method. Overall, this title can be translated as “Song at Gaixia.”

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the perspective of the experiential metafunction of Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics, “Gaixia Ge” and its seven English translations have been discussed. Through a comparative analysis, and comprehensive understanding of each version, the rhyme is considered, and the original translated poem is adjusted and modified. The rhyme of the whole poem presents as “aabb,” with 14 syllables in each line. Finally, a new revised version is displayed as follows:

Song at Gaixia

Xiang Yu

My strength plucked up mountains; my might shadowed the world before.

But now the time is not right; my steed does not run any more.

When my steed does not run any more, then what is to be done?

Ah Yu, Ah Yu, what is to be done for you, my loved one?

Due to the author’s limited research on translation, this article is not a review on the translations of famous translators, but just hopes to discuss the English translation of ancient poetry from the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics. Through transitivity analysis of the experiential metafunction of the original poems and its English versions, the language analysis can deeply describe the transitivity of the original poems and the translations, and the differences and similarities of the participants and circumstantial elements related to the various processes, which will facilitate the more accurate understanding and translation of the original poems, and can effectively improve the level of the translation works. For future researchers, they

may integrate the other two metafunctions—textual metafunction and interpersonal metafunction with ideational metafunction in the translation study of poetry.

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APPENDIX①

Watson: / My strength plucked up the hills, / my might shadowed the world. / But the times were against me / and Dapple runs no more. / When Dapple runs no more, / what then can I do? / Ah Yü, my Yü, / what will your fate be? (Watson, 1984, p. 68)

Miao: // Song of Kai-hsia // / Strength I had to uproot hills, / my spirit dominated the age; / Now in this hour of misfortune, / my dappled steed cannot flee. / Dappled steed, unable to break away, / What hope is left? / Ah, Lady Yü, my Yü! / What will become of you? / (TR. RONALD C. MIAO) (Liu & Lo, 1990, p. 29)

Xu: // XIANG YU'S LAST SONG // / I could pull mountains down, oh! with main and might, / But my good fortune wanes, oh! my steed won't fight. / Whether my steed will fight, oh! I do not care. / What can I do with you, oh! my lady fair! (Xu, 1996, p. 21)

Wang: // Song of Gaixia // / I could lift a mount and quell the world, / But e'en my steed fails me at times absurd. / Now that my steed cannot preserve my life, / What can I do for you, oh my dear wife! (Hong et al., 2006, p. 3)

Seaton: // Song at Kai-hsia // / The strength of my arm plucked mountains up. Oh, / did it set the world in my shade! / But the time wasn't right, ah... / Now not even bold Dapple can break away. / And if even my Dapple be trapped? Ah, / then there is no hope for any deed. / Oh you, my Lady Yu, ah! / What hope could there be for thee... (Seaton, 2006, p. 39)

Zhao: // Song of Gaixia // / Xiang Yu / Mountains I can uproot, o the world I top. / Out of fortune now, o my steed will stop. / My steed will stop, o what can I do! / O my lady, o my lady, what can I do! (Zhao, 2007, p. 180)

Liu: // The Last Song at Gaixia // / E'en mountains I could, if I would, just pluck, / The world was shadowed entire by my might. / Should one be forsaken once by luck, / One's battle steed would fail to fight! / O what's to be done with my steed now spent? / With thee, my fair, for thyself to be spared? (Liu et al., 2009, p. 29)

Note: ① English translation lines are separated by "/" lines and titles by "//."

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