

A Study on the English Translation of Dialects in *My Own Swordsman* from the Perspective of Translator Behavior Criticism

Yue Zhu

School of Culture & Education, Shaanxi University of Science and Technology, Xi'an, China
Email: 1522159123@qq.com

How to cite this paper: Zhu, Y. (2026). A Study on the English Translation of Dialects in *My Own Swordsman* from the Perspective of Translator Behavior Criticism. *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics*, 16, 51-58.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/ojml.2026.161005>

Received: December 28, 2025

Accepted: January 27, 2026

Published: January 30, 2026

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc.
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

Dialects are part of regional traditional culture, bearing distinct local characteristics and serving as markers of regional cultural identity. The theory of Translator Behavior Criticism posits that translators shoulder two different identities: the translator identity and the non-translator identity. Consequently, translators engage in both “truth-seeking” and “utility-attaining” translation acts. The different identities and translation behaviors of translators directly impact the effectiveness of the target text. In the practice of dialect translation, translators should fully consider the grammatical, semantic, and stylistic features of dialects. This paper employs the “truth-seeking—utility-attaining” continuum model of Translator Behavior Criticism to study the dialect translation strategies in *My Own Swordsman*, analyzing the truth-seeking and utility-attaining aspects of its subtitle translation, aiming to promote the development of English translation of dialects.

Keywords

Theory of Translator Behavior Criticism, *My Own Swordsman*, English Translation of Dialects

1. Introduction

My Own Swordsman is a masterpiece of domestic sitcoms. It is an 80-episode chapter-style ancient-costume sitcom directed by Shang Jing, starring Yan Ni, Sha Yi, Yao Chen, among others. Since its premiere in 2006, the online view count of *My Own Swordsman* has exceeded ten billion, second only to the 1986 version of *Journey to the West*. Behind the tremendous success of *My Own Swordsman*, dialects play an indispensable role. One of the most distinctive features of this sit-

com is that its dialogues and narration are primarily conducted in Northeastern Mandarin, Central Plains Mandarin, and Southwestern Mandarin, interspersed with other dialects. Dialects are records and witnesses of local culture, representing “all forms of linguistic expression with local characteristics, passed down orally, concise and popular, circulating among the people, reflecting to some extent the local customs, practices, and cultural traditions, such as ‘Marry a chicken, follow the chicken; marry a dog, follow the dog’” (Zhou, 2016). Dialects deviate from standard language norms, making translation challenging. In recent years, translation studies have begun to focus on how to translate the cultural connotations embedded in Chinese dialects into the target language.

Taking the English subtitles of *My Own Swordsman* as the research object, this paper applies the theory of Translator Behavior Criticism to explore the impact of translator identity and translation goals on the “degree of truth-seeking” and “degree of utility-attaining” in the target text, as well as the balance between them, in order to provide better references for the practice of Translator Behavior Criticism.

2. Current State of Dialect Translation Research

Research on dialect translation started earlier abroad, dating back to the 19th century. In recent years, foreign scholars have often explored dialect translation from the perspectives of practical strategies, the correlation between dialect and culture, and theoretical approaches. In contrast, domestic research on dialect translation started relatively late. In the early 21st century, to promote Chinese cultural construction and rejuvenate Chinese culture, the cultural “going global” strategy emerged. Domestic scholars began to focus on the translation of culture with Chinese characteristics, and dialect translation, embodying strong regional features, subsequently gained scholarly attention. Most scholars have attempted to explore the theoretical foundations of dialect translation, such as from the perspectives of functionalist Skopos theory, eco-translatology, memetics, context theory, and Skopos theory. Furthermore, the domestic translation studies community also tends to investigate dialect translation strategies based on literary texts, such as comparative studies of dialect strategies and studies on the domestication strategies of dialects.

Overall, domestic research on dialect translation exhibits the following characteristics: Firstly, regarding the text types studied in dialect translation research, although scholars have explored diverse types, including literary texts, practical texts, and audiovisual texts, studies focusing on practical texts and audiovisual texts remain in the minority. Secondly, the translated versions selected for dialect translation research show a trend of homogenization, mostly being Howard Goldblatt’s English translations of sinologist Mo Yan’s novels, with Goldblatt’s translation of *Red Sorghum* being a common subject of study. Thirdly, in dialect translation research, scholars pay more attention to translation strategies at the lexical or syntactic level, emphasizing the transfer of intra-linguistic effects, while ne-

glecting the consideration of cultural translation effects.

3. Theory of Translator Behavior Criticism

The theory of Translator Behavior Criticism was first proposed by Chinese scholar Zhou Lingshun, representing an indigenous Chinese innovation in the field of translation criticism. In the realm of translation criticism theory, Zhou Lingshun, through his works *A Theoretical Framework for Translator Behavior Criticism* and *Approaches to Translator Behavior Criticism*, presented his innovative research in translation criticism theory, playing a positive role in promoting the construction of translation criticism theory and serving a guiding role in translation practice through criticism. Translator Behavior Criticism combines translation studies with sociological research, focusing on the role-playing of the volitional translator in the process of translation socialization and the general behavioral patterns characterizing their impact on the text (Zhou, 2014a). This theory starts from translator behavior to provide a comprehensive and objective evaluation of translation quality.

Guided by this theoretical framework, the translator possesses a dual identity: one pertains to linguistic behavior, i.e., intra-translation behavior; the other pertains to social behavior, also known as extra-translation behavior. The target text is completed through the combination of intra-translation and extra-translation behaviors. The “truth-seeking—utility-attaining” evaluative model of continuum is constructed on this basis. “Truth-seeking” is a necessary condition for achieving translation; the translator, as a linguistic agent, faithfully conveys the source language to the readers. “Utility-attaining” means that, based on “truth-seeking”, the translator, as a volitional agent, considers other social factors while being responsible to the source text. Therefore, a balance must be struck between “truth-seeking” and “utility-attaining” in the process of translation. The term “continuum”, borrowed from mathematics, denotes a seamless and gradable spectrum. In this evaluative framework, “truth-seeking” and “utility-attaining” function as the two poles of the continuum, with multiple gradations lying between them. Translator Behavior Criticism should thus begin by assessing the “degree of truth-seeking”—that is, the extent to which the translator adheres to the source text—before examining the “degree of utility-attaining,” or how effectively the translator fulfills pragmatic aims (Zhou, 2014a). What the translator must do is balance both, striving to unify “truth-seeking” and “utility-attaining.” Translator Behavior Criticism has opened up a new avenue for translation criticism research, describing “translation” and “the translator” under the “truth-seeking—utility-attaining” evaluative model of continuum, laying a solid foundation for further theoretical research in translation criticism.

4. Truth-Seeking and Utility-Attaining in the Subtitle *Translation of My Own Swordsman*

From the perspective of Translator Behavior Criticism, the relationship between

“truth-seeking” and “utility-attaining” is manifested as follows:

First, the two principles of “truth-seeking” and “utility-attaining” are mutually constraining. The former serves as the foundation for the latter, while the latter necessarily presupposes the former. When challenges arise in adhering closely to the source text, pursuing pragmatic effectiveness becomes a way to achieve the highest feasible level of fidelity. Second, in practice, translators inevitably lean either toward the author and source text or toward the reader and target culture. However, both fidelity and function exist along a continuum and should not be treated as entirely separate. Effective translation without any regard for the source text is inconceivable, just as rigid fidelity that ignores practical function cannot truly fulfill the social role and value of translation (Huang & Wang, 2018). Third, the translator embodies both linguistic and social attributes. The pursuit of fidelity reflects the linguistic dimension, whereas a focus on pragmatic effectiveness underscores the translator’s social role. Consequently, in practice, the relationship between these two principles constitutes a dynamic process. Translators consistently seek to maintain a desirable equilibrium: preserving the otherness of the source text while ensuring the translation fulfills its intended social function. The following analysis applies this continuum-based evaluative model to examine the translation of dialects in the English version of *My Own Swordsman*, assessing how well the balance is struck between authenticity and function.

4.1. Translator’s “Truth-Seeking” Effect

“Truth-seeking” is the translator’s linguistic performance of being faithful to the source text, focusing on intra-translation phenomena, and constituting behavior that considers the meaning of the source text (Zhou & Du, 2017). It is the foundation of translation behavior, where the translator faithfully conveys the meaning carried by the source language to the audience. For example:

Example (1)

Source Text: 放下屠刀，立地成佛，佛
佛、佛法无边，普度众生，生
生、生亦何欢，死亦何惧，惧
惧、据说明天有雨

Target Text: It’s never too late to turn, turn
Turn to buddhism, put down your weapon and become a buddha, buddha,
Buddha’s endless power can save life, life
Life and death are the same for people, people
People say that it’ll rain tomorrow

This is a chain of proverbs, an intellectual game. Its rule is that the first character of the subsequent sentence is the same as or homophonic to the last character of the preceding sentence. Example (1) is what Tong Xiangyu and others say to persuade Guo Furong, one of the Demon Couple, to forsake darkness for light. This content skillfully blends the linguistic characteristics of the Shaanxi dialect with the Chinese proverb-chain game, creating a distinctive comedic effect. The

unique drawn-out repetition of characters in the Shaanxi dialect (e.g. “佛佛”, “生生”, “惧惧”) vividly simulates Tong’s stuttering tone in a state of nervous panic. The relay format of one person speaking after another adds humor and wit to the scene. The translation preserves this chain-like form, achieving formal correspondence with the source text, allowing the foreign audience to appreciate the intended meaning of the original to the greatest extent.

Example (2)

Source Text: 娘吃的盐比你吃的饭还多呢

Target Text: I’ve eaten more salt than the rice you have

Source Text: 那是您口重

Target Text: That is because you like salty food

The phrase “娘吃的盐比你吃的饭还多”, commonly used in northern dialects, emphasizes the rich life experience of elders through its colloquial and exaggerated style. When Dazui’s mother advises her son, she uses the comparison between her salt consumption and his rice consumption to show her greater life experience; the translator chooses to literally translate this saying, taking into account the subsequent response from Dazui: “That is because you like salty food.” If a free translation were used, such as rendering “吃盐多” as “I have more experience”, it would not correspond to Dazui’s reply. By ensuring coherence in form, the translator essentially achieves truth-seeking in terms of connotative meaning.

4.2. Translator’s “Utility-Attaining” Effect

In translation activities, “utility-attaining” is behavior that considers the needs of the readers, closely adhering to the source language while also considering the application of the target text, regarded by translators as a higher goal. The subtitle translation of *My Own Swordsman*, while scrutinizing the degree of utility-attaining in terms of pragmatics, pays attention to social and cultural factors, presenting a relatively good degree of utility-attaining in the target text.

Example (3)

Source Text: 好小子，跟我们要赖怎么着

Target Text 1: You little brat! Trying to welsh on us

Target Text 2: You little brat. You’re trying to cheat us

“Xiaozi” originally derives from the dialect of northern Shaanxi and later spread to other northern regions such as Shandong and northeastern China. In northern Shaanxi, the term broadly refers to a young boy or can also mean “son”. “Hao xiaozi” is typically used to praise a boy, though it may also carry a contemptuous or mocking tone in certain contexts, serving as a derogatory or teasing form of address. In the series, after discovering that Bai Zhantang has deceived him, a customer confronts him, using “Hao xiaozi” as a sarcastic remark under these circumstances. “You little brat” is an informal and often unfriendly or derogatory expression in English, commonly employed to convey dissatisfaction or anger toward someone perceived as mischievous or disobedient. Target Text 2 intentionally avoids the culturally specific phrase “welsh on”-which may be unfamiliar to

some audiences and carries controversial etymological connotations—and opts instead for the more universal and culturally neutral term “cheat”. This choice ensures unimpeded comprehension among audiences of diverse backgrounds. This approach aligns with the principle in subtitle translation that prioritizes simple sentence structures, where conciseness is paramount as long as it does not compromise viewer understanding (Zhang, 2021). In this translation, the approach leans toward the pragmatic end of the spectrum, adopting a free translation strategy. The translator accurately conveys the intended meaning within the context of the series while effectively rendering the emotional undertones, thereby providing the audience with a more authentic and immersive viewing experience.

Example (4)

Source Text: 行了，别叫板了

Target Text: All right, stop provoking each other

“Jiaoban”, a Chinese lexical term, originally refers to the rhythmic delivery of the final line of spoken dialogue in traditional Chinese opera, which serves as a transition into the ensuing vocal melody. This term can also denote using physical gestures to set the rhythm for the following aria. In contemporary usage, particularly in dialectal contexts, it has evolved to signify actions such as provoking trouble, defiance, or issuing a challenge. Guided by a primarily pragmatic translation approach, the translator renders “jiaoban” as “provoke each other”, conveying the sense of mutual incitement or confrontation. In the series, the characters Bai Zhantang and one of the Demon Couple each hold hostages and demand the other to release theirs first. Their actions are essentially mutual provocations. Through this interpretive translation, the translator effectively conveys the underlying connotation of the term.

Example (5)

Source Text: 好一个闭月羞花，沉鱼落雁的绝世美人儿！

Target Text: My beauty made the fish sink and wild geese fall, made wild geese alight and fish dive down for shame.

The phrase “闭月羞花，沉鱼落雁” is a classic idiom in Chinese classical literature used to describe feminine beauty. This line appears in a scene where Tong Xiangyu is putting on makeup in her room, admiring herself in the mirror and engaging in self-praise. In translating this sentence, the translator distinctly employs a “utility-first” strategy. First, to ensure that the core exaggerated logic and humorous effect are comprehensible to the target audience, the translator does not strictly distinguish between the two sets of images—“闭月羞花” and “沉鱼落雁”—but instead integrates and reconstructs them, avoiding potential information overload and comprehension difficulties that could arise from a literal translation. Second, a crucial explanatory addition is made to the translation by including “for shame” to clarify the motivation behind “the fish sinking and the geese falling”. This significantly enhances the self-consistency and acceptability of the translation in the target context, enabling audiences unfamiliar with the cultural allusion to grasp the exaggerated, self-mocking comedic tone.

In summary, as a masterpiece of domestic sitcoms, dialect is one of the most distinctive features of *My Own Swordsman*. Dialect translation is also a key and challenging aspect of the entire translation process. For dialects with strong local characteristics, due to linguistic and cultural differences, it is difficult to achieve complete truth-seeking towards the source text. To achieve better reception of the target text in the English-speaking world, the translator's behavior prioritizes "utility-attaining", upon which the examination of "truth-seeking" is added, thereby reducing flaws in the target text.

5. Conclusion

Taking the English translation of dialects in the sitcom *My Own Swordsman* as a case study, this paper further explores dialect translation through the lens of the "truth-seeking—utility-attaining" evaluative model. In practice, the translator prioritizes pragmatic utility while grounding decisions in textual fidelity, predominantly employing literal translation and explanatory free translation. This approach serves the target audience while striving to retain faithfulness. According to Translator Behavior Criticism, fidelity forms the basis for functional effectiveness. Fidelity represents the translator's inherent linguistic response, constrained by the very nature of translation—a conclusion derived from understanding translation's fundamental attributes and the translator's role at the basic level (Zhou, 2014b).

Influenced by a combination of subjective and objective factors, translators may, at different times, emphasize either fidelity to the source or pragmatic adaptation. It is argued that an equilibrium should be maintained between these two poles: remaining faithful to the original author while adequately serving the target reader. Moreover, due to the unique nature of dialects—marked by conciseness, vividness, and strong regional identity—their full comprehension often relies on a shared cultural background. Translators should therefore first ensure an accurate understanding of their meaning before proceeding, so as to prevent misinterpretation.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Huang, Q., & Wang, Q. L. (2018). An Exploration into the Translation of Dialects in Lin Taiyi's Translation of *Jing Hua Yuan*: Truth-Seeking or Utility-Attaining? *Foreign Language Research*, No. 1, 103-109. (In Chinese)
- Zhang, X. Y. (2021). A Brief Discussion on the Subtitle Translation of Dialogue in the Film *Cock and Bull* from the Perspective of Transmedia Communication. *Overseas English*, No. 24, 78-79. (In Chinese)
- Zhou, L. S. (2014a). *A Theoretical Framework for Translator Behavior Criticism*. The Commercial Press. (In Chinese)
- Zhou, L. S. (2014b). *Approaches to Translator Behavior Criticism*. The Commercial

Press. (In Chinese)

Zhou, L. S. (2016). Research on the Translation and Criticism of Folk Language. *Foreign Languages Research*, No. 4, 77-82. (In Chinese)

Zhou, L. S., & Du, Y. (2017). On the Degree of Translator Behavior in Howard Goldblatt's Translation of Chinese 'Folk Language'—From the Perspective of the 'Truth-Seeking—Utility-Attaining' Continuum Model. *Shanghai Journal of Translators*, No. 6, 21-26+93. (In Chinese)