

Study on English Translations of “The Little Prince” from the Perspective of Descriptive Translation Studies

Xianting Yi*

School of Foreign Languages of Guangzhou Institute of Technology and Commerce, Guangzhou 510000, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

Copyright: © 2025 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: In modern society, the globalization of literary works is evident, with exceptional literary pieces from various countries spreading worldwide. Among these, children’s literature, due to the specificity of its target audience, imposes distinct requirements on children’s books, compelling translators to approach the text from a child’s perspective. “The Little Prince” has renowned both within and outside of China, and a careful reading of this work can provide us with much inspiration. To this end, the present study adopts the perspective of Gideon Toury’s Descriptive Translation Studies to conduct an in-depth analysis of the different English and Chinese translations in conjunction with the original French novel. This approach aims to better guide literary research and explores translation methods for children’s literature through the analysis of translation norms and rules.

Keywords: Gideon toury; Descriptive translation studies; “The Little Prince”; Children’s literature

Online publication: Oct 22, 2025

1. Introduction

“The Little Prince”, a work by the French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, is endowed with a very rich and concise content. It reveals profound philosophies and touching poetry through the depiction of children’s purity^[1]. With simple language, Saint-Exupéry expresses great truths and rich emotions. His words are pure, his form is refined, and he perfectly combines deep meaning with sober expression, which not only meets children’s expectations for fairy tales but also leaves room for reflection for adults^[2]. For all these reasons, “The Little Prince” has become the bestseller in the national and international scale. According to research, there are more than fifty translation versions of “The Little Prince”. However, most translators of the reprinted editions have limited knowledge of French and have not truly grasped the spirit and thought of Saint-Exupéry, which has led to a great disparity in the quality of translations and has not fully expressed the philosophy of this fairy tale book^[3].

This article chooses the Chinese-English-French version by Lin Xiuqing as the object of analysis. In her translation process, she strives to be clear and simple while preserving the philosophy and meaning of the ori-

ginal text ^[4]. By analyzing the differences between the English and French texts, as well as how Lin Xiuqing represented the thought and essence of Saint-Exupéry in her translation process, we can explore the application value of descriptive translation in literary studies. As for the innovations of this study, it is based on the original French edition, selects the tri-lingual Chinese, English, and French for comparison, and refers to Gideon Toury's descriptive translation theories to deepen the study of the concrete application of descriptive translation in literary studies ^[5].

2. Theoretical foundation

This article analyzes the work "The Little Prince" from the perspective of descriptive translation. Gideon Toury, a representative of descriptive translation studies, believes that the conversion from the source text to the target text should preserve as much as possible the semantic, contextual, and stylistic characteristics of the source text. Translation equivalence does not imply a fixed relationship between texts but can be considered a necessary hypothesis in descriptive translation studies ^[6]. Researchers can use it to define the relationships between texts within a specific cultural context. Descriptive translation studies no longer focus on the question of "whether the two texts are truly equivalent", but rather on revealing "what type and level of equivalence" they possess (Toury 1980:47) ^[7]. By analyzing these equivalence data, one can outline the translation rules of a given period and subsequently its translation norms. Toury conducted a systematic and comprehensive descriptive study of the numerous cultural factors involved in the translation of Hebrew literature into English in its early stages. Later, based on his previous research, he deepened the analysis of translation rules and cultural communication, and formulated corresponding hypotheses for descriptive translation. His research focused on elucidating translation norms ^[8].

2.1. Three norms

Regarding norms, Toury chooses to analyze them comprehensively within the corresponding cultural context. He believes that translators always carry out their work in a specific context, and their decisions at each stage of the translation activity are not only constrained by the two linguistic systems of the target and source languages but also by the two cultural systems. In actual translation, the translator is constrained by three types of norms: the initial norm, the preliminary norm, and the operational norm (Toury 1995:56–61) ^[9].

The initial norm stands at the pinnacle of the normative system and represents the scientific and reasonable choice of the translator based on the cultural rules of the target and source languages. This norm permeates the entire translation process and its various aspects, governing in a comprehensive manner the behavior of the translator and the product of translation. In the multilingual literary system, translated literature occupies a relatively high position and has a decisive influence on the initial norm of translation. When the translation culture is placed at the center, the translator tends to favor the culture of the source language and adopts a translation strategy that emphasizes the comprehensiveness of the translation, aiming to faithfully reproduce the textual relationships of the original text. Conversely, when translated literature is on the periphery, the translator is more likely to start from the culture of the target language, take more into consideration the reception context and the audience, and opt for a translation strategy that prioritizes the acceptability of the translation, hoping to find a suitable national model for foreign works by directly using expressions ^[10].

As for preliminary norms, they are often characterized by the reflectivity of translation policies and associated translation practices. Translation policies refer to the factors that determine the types of texts, or even

individual texts, that a particular culture/language chooses to import through translation at a given time. The reflectivity of translation denotes the tolerance or acceptance of a translation from a third language in a particular culture (Toury 1980:53-54) ^[7]. They come into play during the preparation phase of translation and mainly influence the translator's choice of the source text. In most cases, the translator's choice of the source text does not solely depend on personal interests but also on ideological, cultural, economic, and social factors. If the translator neglects the preliminary norms in the translation process, their work could be rejected by the target language readers or even not be published or disseminated. As for operational norms, they serve as a reference for the translation decisions made by the translator and encompass both the matrix and textual-linguistic norms.

Among them, the matrix norm determines, at a macro level, the form of the target material that replaces the source language material, such as whether the translation is complete or partial, how chapters, paragraphs, acts of the play are divided, and more. The textual-linguistic norm, on the other hand, influences at a micro level the translator's choice of the target material, including linguistic or textual decisions regarding word choice, sentence construction, punctuation, and more ^[11].

2.2. Two laws

The objective of descriptive translation studies is to identify norms within translation activities, to accumulate and verify them continuously, and to derive more universal laws of translation. The construction of descriptive translation science can be summarized in three steps.

- (1) Placing the translation within the cultural system of the target language and observing its significance and acceptability as a translated text.
- (2) Comparing the original and the translation to identify deviations of the translation from the original, and then extracting and abstracting behavioral norms in translation.
- (3) Defining the norms obtained from the analyses as criteria to govern future translation activities (Toury 1995:36-38) ^[9].

Toury has identified two fundamental laws of translation through a large-scale case analysis: the law of growing standardization and the law of interference. The law of growing standardization involves translating the source text into a linguistic mode adopted by the source text, using common expressions from the target language system. Toury believes that translators convert the strange and unique texts of the source language into content that fits the aesthetic tastes and reading habits of the target audience, thereby enhancing the acceptability of the translation. The law of interference refers to the reproduction of various attributes that constitute the source text, such as lexical and syntactic features. For Toury, it is the influence of the textual system that plays a decisive role in the level of tolerance for interference. For translated works from a dominant language or culture, the public has a greater tolerance.

Toury's method of descriptive translation research has taken a significant step forward in the development of the discipline of translation studies. Its greatest impact has been to abandon the pre-established normative equivalence between the original and the translation in traditional translation theories. Starting from the literary system of the target language, it examines the actual form of translated texts, explores the norms that influence the translation process, and advocates for inducing probable laws of translation activities from a large number of case studies. Scholars of translation studies should not study a translated text in isolation but observe it within its literary and cultural system; equivalence or completeness no longer constitute a prerequisite for regulating the relationship between the original and the translation, as this relationship can evolve with changes in the social, historical, and cultural context of the text ^[3]. Toury has included culture and the literary system in his re-

search framework, guiding future research on translation.

3. Study of translations from the perspective of descriptive translation studies: The case of the English and French versions of “The Little Prince” by Lin Xiuqing

“The Little Prince” is a famous children’s novel written by the French author Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. It narrates the adventures of the Little Prince through the perspective of a “pilot”, revealing the emptiness, rigidity, and blindness of the adult world through the eyes of a child ^[12]. It is an outstanding literary work. Below, this study will analyze some excerpts from Lin Xiuqing’s translation of “The Little Prince” to explore the application of descriptive translation studies in literary translations.

3.1. Application of initial norms

The initial norm, positioned at the pinnacle of the normative system, guides the translator in their generalized choice between the cultural norms of the target language and those of the source language ^[3]. The translator is more likely to start from the culture of the target language, taking more into account the reception context and the intended audience, which leads to prioritizing the acceptability of the translation ^[13,14]. In the original French works, “Or mon petit bonhomme ne me semblait ni égaré, ni mort de fatigue, ni mort de faim, ni mort de soif, ni mort de peur” translates to “Now, my little man did not seem to me to be lost, not dead from fatigue, not dead from hunger, not dead from thirst, not dead from fear” ^[15].

English translation:

“And yet my little man seemed neither to be straying uncertainly among the sands, not to be fainting from fatigue or hunger or thirst or fear”.

Chinese translation:

“而这小家伙，在我看来，既不像迷了路，也没有半点疲乏，饥渴，惧怕的样子。”

In reality, this appears to be a normative correspondence of vocabulary and structure between the target language and the source language, but the translation of this sentence has taken into account the general trend. For example: “I opened my eyes, astonished by the little man who had suddenly appeared. Remember, I was in an isolated place thousands of miles from human habitation, and this little guy... he did not resemble a child lost in the desolate desert at all”. The sufficiency and acceptability mentioned by Toury form an indivisible continuum, because in the actual translation process, the translation can neither be completely sufficient nor completely acceptable, and always lies in the intermediate zone between the two poles of the translation norms continuum.

3.2. Application of preliminary norms

In the original, the snake is referred to as “le serpent”. In English, it is translated as “snake”. In Chinese, it is translated as “shé”. The cultural differences between the West and China are evident. In Western culture, the snake represents death with great power, symbolizing evil. As mentioned in the text:

“Un de ces serpents jaunes qui vous exécutent en trente secondes”.

“Quelle est cette histoire -là ! Tu parles maintenant avec les serpents !”

English translation:

“One of these yellow snakes that can kill you in thirty seconds”.

“What’s going on here? You’re talking to snakes now?”

Chinese translation :

“只见一条半分钟就能叫人致命的黄蛇。”

“这是怎么回事！你居然跟蛇在讲话！”

In Western countries, the snake often represents evil, treachery, and virulence. As soon as the pilot sees the snake, he scares it away with his gun. In Eastern culture, the snake is a particularly important symbol, representing beauty and kindness. Therefore, during translation, we must be aware of the cultural differences regarding objects and integrate them into the cultural context to deeply understand the connotations of the images^[16]. This perfectly illustrates the preliminary norms from the perspective of Toury's descriptive translation studies, particularly translation policy and the direction of translation. The choice of texts, or even individual factors, in a particular culture/language at a given time, while considering the acceptability of a translation through a third language in a specific culture, reflects the sociocultural dimension of translation activities^[3].

3.3. Application of operational standards

Operational standards guide translators in their translation decisions in the actual translation process. At the macro level, they influence the partial or complete translation of sections, chapters, paragraphs, or the entire document, determining the form that the source language material will take in the target language. At the micro level, they affect the translator's choices regarding the target language material, including linguistic or textual decisions related to word selection, sentence construction, punctuation, and so on^[17].

In the original French works", Mais à elle seule elle est plus importante que vous toutes, c'est elle que j'ai arrosée. Puisque c'est elle que j'ai abritée par le paravent. Puisque c'est elle dont j'ai tué les chenilles (sauf les deux ou trois pour les papillons). Puisque c'est elle que j'ai écoutée se plaindre, ou se vanter, ou même quelquefois se taire. Puisque c'est ma rose"^[15].

English translation:

"But in herself alone she is more important than all the hundreds of you other roses: because it is she that I have watered; because it is she that I have put under the glass globe; because it is she that I have sheltered behind the screen; because it is for her that I have killed the caterpillars(except the two or three that we saved to become butterflies);because it is she that I have listened to, when she grumbled, or boasted, or even sometimes when she said nothing. Because she is my rose".

Chinese translation:

“可是，她单独一朵比你们全体更可贵，因为我给她浇过水，因为我给她盖过罩子，因为我给她用屏风挡风，因为我给她身上除过毛虫（除了留下两三条，好让它们变为蝴蝶），因为我倾听过她的怨艾，她的夸口，有时甚至倾听她的沉默。因为她是我的玫瑰花。”

In actual translation practice, initial norms, preliminary norms, and operational norms do not constitute a unidirectional relationship of control and subordination. Chronologically, preliminary norms precede operational norms, with the former concerning the selection of material to be translated and the latter pertaining to the process of text generation. To some extent, they can reflect the initial norms. Initial norms determine the general direction of translation and play a role in logical guidance, but they do not restrict every aspect of preliminary and operational norms. In translation, initial norms, preliminary norms, and operational norms interact and jointly influence translation activities^[18].

3.4. Application of the progressive standardization

Toury pointed out that the level of standardization of a translated work depends on the status that the translation occupies within the literary poly-system of the target language. The more marginalized or weaker the position of the translation in the target language's literary poly-system, the higher its level of standardization; conversely,

the lower its level of standardization. In original French works, “Si je vous ai raconté ces détails sur l’astéroïde B612 et si je vous ai confié son numéro, c’est à cause des grandes personnes. Si vous dites aux grandes personnes: J’ai vu une belle maison en briques roses, avec des géraniums aux fenêtres et des colombes sur le toit...”^[15].

English translation:

“If I have told you these details about the asteroid B612, and made a note of its number for you, it is on account of the grown-ups and their ways. If you were to say to the grown-ups: I saw a beautiful house made of rosy brick, with geraniums in the window and doves on the roof...”

Chinese translation:

“我之所以这样详细地告诉你们 B612 小行星的来历，并把它编号说出，是由于那些大人的缘故，大人们喜欢数字。要是你对大人们说：我看见一幢漂亮的房子，用玫瑰红砖头砌的，窗口种着天竺葵，屋顶还有鸽子 ...”

The cultural poly-system is extremely complex, constantly evolving, and interacting with other social systems. This means that translation is not a closed or entirely autonomous system but is inevitably subject to certain constraints and factors. If we only observe actual translations or acts of translation, it is difficult to precisely determine the norms that have led to these translation decisions.

3.5. Application of the intervention

In original French works, the description of actions requires not only precision in the choice of verbs but also the appropriateness of modifiers, which must accurately convey the speed, intensity, and scale of movements. This brings the characters to life and perfectly presents their personalities and thoughts. For the rhetorical components commonly used in action descriptions, translations can include adverbs, prepositions, adverbial phrases, or words that express the natural or psychological reactions of the characters^[19,20]. In *The Little Prince*, verbal modifiers are abundant and their meanings are highly fitting, playing a significant role. “Mais elle s’était interrompue. Elle était venue sous forme de graine. Elle n’avait rien pu connaître des autres mondes. Humiliée de s’être laissé surprendre à préparer un mensonge aussi naïf, elle avait toussé deux ou trois fois, pour mettre le petit prince dans son tort^[15].”

English translation:

“But she interrupted herself at that point. She had come in the form of a seed. She could not have known anything of any other worlds. Embarrassed over having let herself be caught on the verge of such a naive untruth, she coughed two or three times, in order to put the little prince in the wrong.”

Chinese translation:

“她没说下去。她来的时候是一颗种子，哪里见过什么别的世界。她撒的谎是那么幼稚，让人抓住只觉得有点下不了台，于是她咳上两三声，想把错处推到小王子身上。”

The author used expressions such as “embarrassed over” and “on the verge of such a naive untruth” to modify the main verb “cough”, revealing the particularly awkward and shameful state of the little rose and highlighting her vanity. Toury believes that if the linguistic features of the source text are reproduced without anomaly in the target language, it can be considered a positive conversion; if they become anomalous in the target language, they should then be regarded as a negative conversion. Descriptive translation studies focused on the target language have also shifted their focus toward the interaction between culture and text.

4. Conclusion

Children’s literature is rich in rhetorical devices and makes effective use of figures of speech such as metaphors,

personification, and exaggeration, while employing language that is more vivid and concise. Translators require a fertile imagination and a precise understanding of language to produce a good translation. Toury regarded translation as any text in the target language that is presented or considered as a translation. The translation of children's literature follows the same logic, as, due to the specificity of its target audience, it must not only reproduce the information of the source text in easily understandable language but also remain as faithful as possible to the original to recreate its writing style. The translation by Lin Xiuqing cited in this article is worthy of careful study, as it attempts to use concise and vivid language, along with translation methods and techniques, to reproduce the stylistic features of the source language, reflecting the lively and familiar traits of the original text while considering the cultural and linguistic differences between English and French, thereby maximizing normalization and acceptability between the source text and the translation. This study, referencing the original French novel *The Little Prince*, conducts a comparative analysis of two different versions in English and Chinese. Through Toury's theories on descriptive translation, a comparative analysis of the English and Chinese translations with the French original reveals that Toury's descriptive translation has had a profound influence on literary studies. The innovation of this article lies in its skillful use of descriptive translation theory in literary studies, as well as in its analysis of its adaptability.

An in-depth analysis of the implications behind the three norms and two laws fully demonstrates the importance of descriptive translation. The application of descriptive translation in literary studies is an innovation, as the use of descriptive translation theories to explain literature offers a fresh and unique perspective for literary studies. It is highly beneficial to explore the relationships between the contents of literary studies from the perspective of descriptive translation and to conduct a thorough analysis.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest

References

- [1] Wang X, 2014, Report on the Translation Project of "The Little Prince", thesis, Nanjing Normal University.
- [2] Hou X, 2016, The Translation of "The Little Prince" Guided by Adaptation Theory, thesis, Beijing Foreign Studies University.
- [3] Wang D, 2020, A Study on the Development of Translation Theories Abroad, thesis, Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press: 12.
- [4] Li Y, 2012, An Analysis of the Retranslation Phenomenon of "The Little Prince" from the Perspective of the Manipulation Theory of Translation, thesis, Guangxi University for Nationalities.
- [5] Zheng S, 2018, A Comparative Study of Three Chinese Versions of "The Little Prince" Based on Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory, thesis, Jinan University.
- [6] He Y, 2019, Two Translations of "The Little Prince" from the Perspective of Skopos Theory. *Northern Literature*, 2019(24): 271–272.
- [7] Toury G, 1980, In Search of a Theory of Translation, thesis, The Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics.
- [8] Wang X, 2014, Report on the Translation Project of "The Little Prince", thesis, Nanjing Normal University.
- [9] Toury, G, 1995, Descriptive translation studies and beyond. John Benjamins Publishing Company, 56-61
- [10] He Y, 2019, Two Translations of "The Little Prince" from the Perspective of Skopos Theory. *Northern Literature*, 2019(24): 271–272.

- [11] Li Y, 2012, An Analysis of the Retranslation Phenomenon of “The Little Prince” from the Perspective of the Manipulation Theory of Translation, thesis Guangxi University for Nationalities.
- [12] Hou X, 2016, The Translation of “The Little Prince” Guided by Adaptation Theory, thesis, Beijing International Studies University.
- [13] Zhang C, 2019, A Brief Discussion on the Chinese Versions of “The Little Prince”. *Changjiang Series*, 2019(10): 102–103.
- [14] Liang Y, Pan H, 2020, A Comparison of Linguistic Differences in Chinese Translations of “The Little Prince”—Taking the Two Translations by Zhang Xiaoxian and Zhou Kexi as Examples. *Social Sciences and Humanities Education*, 2020(2): 97–100.
- [15] Saint-Exupéry A, 2011, *The Little Prince*. Translated by Lin X. Changsha, Hunan Literature and Art Publishing House: 8.
- [16] Chen L, 2016, An Essay on the Integrated Language Education Model. *Learning English (For Teachers)*, 2016(6): 4–8.
- [17] Zhang C, 2019, Brief Remarks on the Chinese Translated Versions of “The Little Prince”. *Changjiang Collection*, 2019(10): 102–103.
- [18] Zheng S, 2018, A Comparative Study of Three Chinese Translations of “The Little Prince” Based on Nida’s Functional Equivalence Theory, thesis, Jinan University.
- [19] Zhao D, 2011, Brief Remarks on Nida’s Functional Equivalence Theory. *Literary Education (Middle School Edition)*, 2011(3): 54–55.
- [20] Cao Q, 1995, Nida’s Theory and Intercultural Translation. *Journal of Zhejiang University of Social Sciences*, 1995(3): 98–103.

Publisher’s note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.