

# Translation Strategies of Ambiguity in English Language and Literature

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**Abstract:** The translation of English language and literary works has always been crucial for cross-cultural communication. However, a key challenge in translating such works is the accurate communication of ambiguity, which refers to expressions deliberately used in English texts with unclear meanings. These expressions are often poetic and carry deep symbols and implications, adding a unique charm to literary works. This article explores the manifestations of ambiguity in English language and literature and the translation strategies that can be employed to optimize the translation of ambiguity in the English language and literature.

**Keywords:** English; Language and literature; Ambiguity; Translation

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## 1. Introduction

In the art and science of translation, the ambiguous conversion of English and literary works is undoubtedly challenging. This challenge arises from the multidimensional nature of ambiguity, which can be considered a type of literary style and a deep cultural expression. Although ambiguity gives readers a wide space for interpretation, the translator needs to find a delicate balance between being faithful to the original text and adapting to the target culture during the translation process<sup>[1]</sup>. This article focuses on how to effectively convey ambiguous meaning through the translator's interpretation, cultural adaptability, and language creativity so that the work retains its original beauty and reader response space.

## 2. The manifestation of ambiguity in English language and literature

Ambiguity is a common phenomenon in English language and literature, and it is reflected at all levels of writing. Ambiguity can be intentional to enhance the ambiguity and depth of a literary work, or it can be unintentional, leading to misunderstandings. Some manifestations of ambiguity in the English language and literature are shown in **Table 1**. Dealing with ambiguity in translation is a highly complex process requiring translators to have keen observation skills and deep understanding on multiple levels.

**Table 1.** The manifestation of ambiguity in the English language and literature

Manifestations	Details
Ambiguous vocabulary	(1) Homographs: Words with the same form but different meanings. For example, “bank” can refer to a river bank or a bank <sup>[2]</sup> . (2) Polysemy: A word has multiple associated meanings. For example, “bright” can mean bright light or high intelligence.
Ambiguous syntax	Sentence structure may lead to multiple interpretations. For example, “visiting relatives can be boring” can be interpreted to mean that visiting relatives is boring, or it may mean that the visiting relatives themselves are boring people.
Ambiguous statement	Intentionally vague statements are used to hide true intent or elicit different interpretations. This is more common in poetry and political speeches <sup>[3]</sup> .
Semantic ambiguity	The meaning of a sentence or phrase is unclear and needs to be determined from context. For example, “He saw the man with the telescope.” It is impossible to determine whether the man was seen through a telescope or was seen holding a telescope.
Ambiguous reference	Referential ambiguity occurs when a pronoun or demonstrative word can refer to two or more nouns in a sentence. For example, the “he” in “Bob told Harry that he would win the prize” can refer to Bob or Harry.
Rhetorical ambiguity	Deliberately ambiguous figures of speech are used in literature to create multiple meanings. For example, readers can get rich associations and interpretations using metaphors, symbols, iron curtains, irony, and other rhetorical techniques <sup>[4]</sup> .
Structural ambiguity	Different arrangements of sentence components may lead to different meanings. For example, “old men and women sat on the bench” may mean that they are old men and women, or it may mean that only the men are old and the women are of varying ages.

## 2.1. The impact of cultural differences on ambiguity understanding

Culture is the carrier of language, and ambiguity is often closely linked to cultural background. Cultural differences will cause the same words or expressions to have different ambiguous boundaries in different languages <sup>[5]</sup>. Some ambiguous expressions may resonate in the source language, but there may be no equivalent concept in the target language’s culture, causing difficulties in understanding. For example, metaphors or idioms in the source language may contain culturally specific ambiguous meanings, which may need to be translated into the target language by finding cultural equivalents or conveying them through interpretation. Furthermore, ambiguous expressions sometimes hide specific values and beliefs, leading to misunderstandings when translated, as differences in values and beliefs between cultures can hinder correct understanding.

## 2.2. The role of language habits and context in conveying ambiguity

Linguistic habits include grammatical structures, expression habits, and common understandings of ambiguity in a specific language <sup>[6]</sup>. Context refers to the specific situation in which speech occurs, profoundly affecting ambiguity in communication and interpretation. Some language structures are inherently prone to ambiguous expressions, such as omissions and inferential expressions in daily conversations. These require the translator to translate the text and understand and express its vague meaning. Modifying and emphatic words may provide some ambiguity in the source language, while the target language may require different means of modification to achieve a similar effect. Furthermore, semantic ambiguity is often closely related to specific contexts. The translator must understand the source language text and fully understand the context of the target language to convey the message accurately.

## 2.3. Reader acceptance and expected response

The target readers’ expectations and acceptance levels largely determine the choice of translation strategy. Facing different reader groups, the processing of ambiguity in translation will differ. Translators need to

anticipate what information and experiences readers expect from the text. For academic texts, readers may expect more precise and clear expression, while readers of literary works may have a higher tolerance for the aesthetic value of ambiguity. Vague expressions may need to be adapted to the target culture to better fit into the reader's cultural context and elicit appropriate emotions and reactions. Sometimes, the translator may need to provide additional explanations or contextual information for readers to understand ambiguous semantics correctly <sup>[7]</sup>. This intervention must be handled carefully to avoid over-interpretation that spoils the flavor of the original text.

### **3. Translation strategies for ambiguity**

#### **3.1. Application of literal translation and free translation**

##### **3.1.1. Applicable situations of literal translation**

- (1) Terminology and professional vocabulary: When the text contains terminology and professional vocabulary in a specific field, the literal translation is often the first choice because these vocabulary words must accurately convey the professional information of the original text.
- (2) Legal and official documents: In translating laws, contracts, and formal documents, the literal translation is usually more likely to be adopted because these texts require accuracy over the beauty of the language.
- (3) Rhyme and rhythm in poetry: While retaining the rhyme and rhythm of English poetry, sometimes literal translation can preserve the acoustic characteristics of the original text as much as possible, although compromises may be required in terms of artistic conception.
- (4) Occasions that do not affect understanding: If ambiguity does not affect the understanding of words, phrases, or sentences in the text, literal translation may be a feasible option.

##### **3.1.2. Applicable situations of free translation**

- (1) Culture-specific concepts or customs: When English contains specific cultural references, slang, idioms, or ambiguous cultural references, free translation can better convey the original meaning while making the target language text understandable to readers.
- (2) Maintaining the sense of language and beauty of the original text: In literary translation, especially the translation of poetry, prose, and novels, free translation can not only convey information but also preserve or reproduce the author's style and the emotional color of the text as much as possible.
- (3) Hidden meanings and puns: If the original text uses ambiguous language in rhetorical devices such as hints, metaphors, or puns, free translation helps the translation convey its hidden meaning, not just the literal meaning.
- (4) Fluency and naturalness: While literal translation may cause the translation to sound stiff or unnatural, free translation can make the translation more fluent and natural in the target language.

##### **3.1.3. A hybrid strategy that combines literal translation and free translation**

- (1) Combined use: In the actual translation process, literal and free translations are often combined. Literal translation can be used to preserve the exact message of the original text, while paraphrasing is used to adapt the text to the target culture and readers.
- (2) Balancing the original text's fidelity and the target language's acceptability: Using a hybrid strategy can balance the original text's fidelity and the target language's acceptability. This is especially suitable for literary works that contain deep emotions and complex ideas.

## **3.2. Cultural adaptation and localization strategies**

### **3.2.1. Building cross-cultural bridges**

When building cross-cultural bridges, we must first study the cultural background in-depth. Translators must deeply understand the background of each culture involved, including history, religion, social customs, values, and local expressions. This cultural literacy is integral to translation, especially when dealing with ambiguous semantics in literary works <sup>[8]</sup>. Secondly, cultural elements must be identified and translated. Translators must identify cultural elements in the source text, such as idioms, allusions, folk customs, and contextual meanings, and find appropriate ways to translate them into the target language to be meaningful in the target culture <sup>[9]</sup>. At the same time, cultural biases and stereotypes must be avoided. During the translation process, translators should be careful to avoid their own cultural biases and stereotypes from affecting the translation and always maintain respect and objectivity for the original text. In addition, when the ambiguous semantics in the source text cannot be expressed through direct translation, the translator needs to creatively find or construct equivalent expressions to resonate with the target culture without losing the original meaning. For content that is difficult to adapt culturally in the text, the translator can use annotations or footnotes to provide necessary cultural or contextual information and explain the original meaning of the source text.

### **3.2.2. Considering the cultural expectations of target language readers**

Before translation, the translator should analyze the target readers' expectations, cultural level, and knowledge of the source culture to decide on a suitable translation strategy. It is necessary to compare the habits and styles of expressing vague concepts in the source and target languages to find the corresponding expression that most resonates. A good translation should balance the original text's fidelity with the target culture's readability. The translator needs to modify sentences and adjust word order while maintaining the artistic conception of the original text to ensure that the translation is loyal to the original text and close to the target language culture. When there is no direct correspondence, the translator can use cultural assimilation (cultural substitution) techniques to replace elements in the source culture with equivalent elements in the target culture <sup>[10]</sup>.

## **3.3. Techniques for retaining the ambiguity of the original text**

Preserving the ambiguity of the original text during translation is a major test of the translator's language skills and cultural understanding. When dealing with ambiguous semantics in the English language and literature, maintaining this ambiguity can ensure the authenticity of the original work and achieve the literary effect intended by the author <sup>[11]</sup>.

### **3.3.1. Using annotations to explain cultural and contextual differences**

Before translation, the translator should identify the cultural and contextual roots of ambiguous semantics. Translational ambiguity may be due to specific cultural backgrounds, historical periods, or special contexts. For some expressions with ambiguous meanings, translators should avoid using deterministic interpretations to reproduce the same ambiguous effect in the target language. When ambiguity plays an important role in understanding the text, the translator can provide notes or footnotes next to the translation without removing the ambiguity directly in the text <sup>[12]</sup>. Notes should be concise and clear, explaining why the vague expression is used and what it means culturally and contextually. In addition, for ambiguous parts that require more explanation, more detailed cultural and historical background information can be placed in the endnotes or appendices of the book to provide in-depth information without interfering with the reading experience.

### 3.3.2. Creative language equivalence techniques

To protect the ambiguity of the original text, the translator can choose an equivalent vague expression when translating. That is, to find or create equivalent ambiguous expressions in the target language to maintain the ambiguous feeling and style of the original text<sup>[13]</sup>. If an expression in the source text is deliberately ambiguous, the translator should try to find or create an expression with a similar sense of ambiguity in the target language. Secondly, translators can help readers naturally infer ambiguity from the context by cleverly constructing the context around sentences and paragraphs rather than interpreting it directly<sup>[14]</sup>. This approach encourages readers to engage in active interpretation and thereby experience the richness of the original text. Rhetorical techniques such as hints, metaphors, and symbols can also be used to maintain the ambiguity of the original text. These techniques can be very effective in reproducing the ambiguous artistic conception of the original text in the target language. Sometimes, retaining a special word or concept from the original text and using it carefully in context can preserve the ambiguity and cultural distinctiveness of the word. By appropriately introducing the original vocabulary into the target text, readers can directly experience the flavor of the original work<sup>[15]</sup>.

## 4. Conclusion

Translating ambiguous semantics in English and literature inevitably involves a deep interpretation of the source text and an in-depth understanding of the target culture. The translator must become a cultural mediator and a language artist, delivering ambiguous aesthetic effects through sensitive insights and creative expression of the original work. Different translation strategies, including but not limited to the reproduction of context, the use of literary translation, the supplement of annotations, and the use of language flexibility, are all key elements to ensure the quality of translation. Ultimately, an excellent translation should allow readers to enjoy a new literary experience while allowing the ambiguous beauty of the original work to continue and shine in a new cultural context.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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