

# A Study on the English Translation of Vague Language in Tang Poems from the Perspective of Deconstruction: A Case Study of Xu Yuanchong's Song of a Pipa Player

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**Abstract:** The extensive use of vague language in Chinese classical poetry poses significant challenges for translation. Xu Yuanchong's English translation of Song of a Pipa Player focuses on reconstructing and reproducing the poem's imagery, striving to convey its linguistic and rhythmic beauty. This paper analyzes the English translation of vague language in Song of a Pipa Player based on deconstruction translation theory. The theory emphasizes the importance of context and the translator's subjectivity, providing valuable guidance for translating vague language in Tang Dynasty poetry.

**Keywords:** Deconstruction translation theory; Vague language; Song of a Pipa Player

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## 1. Introduction

Chinese classical poetry is an important part of Chinese culture. It is rich in content and diverse in form, containing profound wisdom and unique aesthetics. Its English translation is not only an important way of cultural dissemination but also of far-reaching significance for enhancing international cultural influence. In order to implement the major policy of "promoting Chinese culture globally", it is necessary to conduct a special study on "what translation methods can be adopted to maintain the national characteristics of literary and cultural works and effectively gain good international acceptance"<sup>[1]</sup>. Undoubtedly, the English translation of classical poetry is one of the most challenging parts of cultural translation. Studying the translation of classical poetry can not only guide specific translation practices but also help more classical poems go global and become well-known to foreign readers.

After the linguistic and cultural turns in the field of translation studies, more attention has been paid to describing translation phenomena and evaluating translations by combining the inside and outside of translation.

Therefore, the research on the English translation of ancient poems has shifted from semantics, rhetoric, rhythm, and style to image transmission<sup>[2]</sup>. However, the translatability of poetry has always been a focus of debate in academic circles. Although some scholars believe that poetry is untranslatable, practice has proved that Chinese classical poetry has been successfully translated and recognized overseas. Currently, it is generally believed in academic circles that although factors such as culture, history, and religion limit the complete equivalence between the translation and the original text, poetry is still partially translatable. Since the 1990s, Chinese translation studies have developed significantly, showing a trend of interdisciplinary development. The perspectives of translation studies are novel and unique, injecting new vitality into translation research<sup>[3]</sup>. In recent years, some scholars have explored the rhythmic beauty in the English translations of *Song of a Pipa Player* from an aesthetic perspective. Moreover, some have investigated how the rhythm in *Song of a Pipa Player* is translated into the target language from the perspective of translator subjectivity. There are also scholars who have studied the translation of metaphors in the English translation of *Song of a Pipa Player* from a cognitive perspective. For example, Xu Ju and Guo Yi took Xu Yuanchong's translation of *Song of a Pipa Player* as an example to explore the reconstruction of imagery in the English translation of Chinese classical poetry<sup>[4]</sup>.

However, no scholar has yet explored the English translation of vague language in *Song of a Pipa Player* from the perspective of deconstruction. This paper takes Xu Yuanchong's translation as an example to analyze how he deals with the vague language in the original text, aiming to enable target-language readers to have a reading experience similar to that of source-language readers and provide theoretical guidance for the translation of classical poetry, helping it gain wider recognition in international dissemination.

## **2. Deconstruction and translation**

### **2.1. Deconstruction**

At the end of the 1960s, French society was in turmoil, and various ideological trends emerged. Deconstruction emerged against this background. The main representatives of the deconstruction trend of thought include Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Julia Kristeva. Jacques Derrida is the founder of the deconstruction school, and he was the first to propose “deconstruction”<sup>[5]</sup>. Deconstruction questions traditional structures and meanings, but it does not completely subvert them. People often misunderstand it as irrational or nihilistic. In fact, it challenges authority and centrism and opposes essentialist theories. Derrida pointed out that deconstruction exists wherever there is a language experience, indicating that deconstruction emphasizes that meaning depends on context rather than being fixed.

### **2.2. Enlightenment of deconstruction on translation**

In recent years, there has been a trend of cross-cultural and interdisciplinary research in translation studies. Scholars in the translation field are often inspired by literary theories, combining literary theories with translation to explore translation phenomena from unique perspectives and guide translation activities. As a result, the “deconstruction” concept of deconstruction has injected vitality into translation studies. Scholars are no longer confined to traditional translation concepts but re-examine translation phenomena from the perspective of deconstruction, further providing more feasible suggestions for translation practices<sup>[6]</sup>.

#### **2.2.1. “Deconstruction” of the original author in deconstruction theory**

Deconstruction questions “authority”, and its “de-centering” idea has a profound impact on translation studies.

The traditional view of translation emphasizes “fidelity”, and the translator is like dancing in shackles. However, deconstruction challenges this concept. The French scholar Roland Barthes proposed that “the author is dead”, believing that after the author completes a text, the right to interpret it no longer belongs solely to the author but is determined by the reader<sup>[7]</sup>. This gives the translator more freedom to flexibly interpret and adapt the original text according to the characteristics of the times to meet development needs.

### **2.2.2. “Deconstruction” of the ultimate meaning of the text in deconstruction**

Derrida’s concept of “différance” is the cornerstone of deconstruction, which refers to differentiation, deferral, and dissemination. It emphasizes that language symbols may fail to convey the intended meaning, and their meaning depends on other symbols<sup>[8]</sup>. Just as “there is nothing outside the text”<sup>[9]</sup>, the translator needs to rely on the context to interpret the original text. Although vague language in classical poetry increases the difficulty of translation, the translator can accurately interpret their meanings with the help of the context.

## **3. Vague language in Tang poems**

### **3.1. Causes of vague language in Tang poems**

Ullmann believes that language is vague, and its causes can be classified into four categories:

- (1) The generic reference of words. For example, “game” generically refers to activities, sports, etc.
- (2) Words with multiple meanings that change with the context. For example, “freak” can refer to an enthusiast or a strange person.
- (3) The unfamiliarity of word meanings is caused by cultural, historical, and other factors. For example, the idiom “Mend the fold after a sheep is lost” implies taking remedial measures after a loss.
- (4) The blurred boundaries of things. For example, the difference between “lake” and “pond”<sup>[10]</sup>.

### **3.2. Definition of vague language in Tang poems**

Vague language is the manifestation of vagueness in actual language use. The vagueness of language means that the boundaries of the things referred to by words are not clear and exceed the scope of cognition<sup>[11]</sup>. In literary creation, vague language can deepen the connotations of a text, achieving an effect where expression ends, but meaning lingers on..

### **3.3. Classification of vague language in Tang poems**

Tang poems often use vague language to sublimate the artistic conception, mainly including metaphors, synecdoches, reduplicated words, color words, numeral words, and polysemous words. For example, “千山” and “万径” in River Snow are vague numeral words, and “青衫” in Song of a Pipa Player is a vague color word.

## **4. Analysis of the English translation of vague language in Song of a Pipa player based on deconstruction translation theory**

The vague language in Tang poems is difficult to translate due to its changeable semantics and rhetorical features. Traditional translation principles are hard to achieve equivalence. Deconstruction translation theory emphasizes that the translator should analyze in combination with the context, give full play to subjective initiative, and adopt the method of “retaining differences” when necessary to accurately convey the meaning of vague language and

facilitate cultural dissemination.

## 4.1. Analysis of the English translation of vague language in Song of a Pipa player from the perspective of context

### 4.1.1. English translation of vague color-expressing words

There are many vague words expressing colors in Tang poems. However, different languages have different ways of expressing colors, which poses a great challenge to the translator's translation activities. According to deconstruction translation theory, the translator should give full play to subjective initiative and infer the specific meanings of these vague color-expressing words based on the specific historical background, cultural environment, and the context at that time.

Example 1:

Original text: 座中泣下谁最多？江州司马青衫湿。

Translation: Of all the companies at table who one wept the most?

It was none other than the exiled blue-robed host<sup>[12]</sup>.

The word “青衫” in the original text is a vague word. The character “青” refers to different colors in different contexts, such as black, blue, and green. “Blue sky” is a vague expression for “blue sky.” According to the official ranking system in the Tang Dynasty, the official robes of eighth- and ninth-rank civil officials were mainly blue. In Chinese, the word “青天” is a vague expression that generally refers to a “blue sky,” though its exact shade may vary depending on context. Therefore, Mr. Xu translated it as “blue-robed host.”

### 4.1.2. English translation of vague language with multifaceted meanings

In Ullmann's view, the multifaceted nature of word meanings is one of the manifestations of language vagueness. The vague language in poetry often carry specific cultural connotations. For instance, in the poem line “烟花三月下扬州,” the term “烟花” metaphorically refers to willow catkins. Deconstruction translation theory emphasizes the artistic conception. The translator needs to combine the cultural and social context to accurately convey the deep-layer meaning of vague language.

Example 2

Original text: 浔阳地僻无音乐，终岁不闻丝竹声。

Translation: The city's too remote to know a melodious song,

So I have never heard music all year long.

Here, “丝竹” is a vague word. “丝” refers to stringed instruments, and “竹” refers to wind instruments. The term “丝竹” collectively refers to traditional Chinese stringed and wind instruments—such as the qin, se, xiao, and di—and is also used more broadly to denote music in general. The original author did not indicate which instrument it was. When translating, the translator simply replaced the hyponym “丝竹” with the hypernym “music”, using an English word with a clear concept to replace the vague Chinese word to help target-language readers understand.

Example 3

Original text: 十三学得琵琶成，名属教坊第一部。

Translation: At thirteen I learned on the pipa how to play,

And my name was among the primas of the day.

Example 4

Original text: 我闻琵琶已叹息，又闻此语重唧唧。

Translation: Listening to her sad music, I sighed with pain;

Listening to her story, I signed again and again.

The above two examples both contain the word “琵琶”. However, when translating, the translator combined different contexts and translated “琵琶” in the two examples as “pipa” and “sad music” respectively, striving to make “the translated poem touch the readers’ hearts just like the original poem”, to achieve “ideational beauty”<sup>[13]</sup>. “十三学得琵琶成” means that the Pipa Lady learned to play the pipa at the age of thirteen. The translator translated the original text as “pipa,” which reflects the translation technique of transliteration<sup>[14]</sup>. “Listening to her sad music, I sighed with pain” means that “the poet was so sad that he sighed when he heard the tune played by the Pipa Lady”<sup>[15]</sup>. The translator gave full play to subjective initiative, combined with the context, and translated the original “琵琶” as “sad music”, grasping the true meaning hidden behind the vague word.

## **4.2 Analysis of the English translation of vague language in Song of a Pipa player based on the “deconstruction” of the original author**

### **4.2.1. English translation of reduplicated vague language**

Classical poems often use reduplicated words to enhance rhythmic beauty and express rich emotions, but they are difficult to translate. The translator needs to understand the emotions contained in the reduplicated words, first look for corresponding words to maintain rhythmic beauty. If there is no corresponding expression, then focus on conveying their emotional connotations.

#### **Example 5**

Original text: 大弦嘈嘈如急雨，小弦切切如私语。

Translation: The thick strings loudly thrummed like the pattering rain;

The fine strings softly tinkled in a murmuring strain.

The thickest strings sound like a sudden rainstorm, with a heavy and cadenced sound. The reduplicated word “嘈嘈” is used to imitate the sound and is made more vivid with “如急雨”. The thinnest strings are soft, delicate, and urgent, like whispers between lovers. The author uses reduplicated words to describe the music, with the two melodies alternating, and also uses vivid metaphors to strengthen its vividness. When translating the reduplicated words “嘈嘈” and “切切”, the translator fully understood the hidden meanings behind them, got rid of the constraints of the original author, and approached the ideal shore of translation to the greatest extent.

#### **Example 6**

Original text: 凄凄不似向前声，满座重闻皆掩泣。

Translation: So sad, so drear, so different, it moved us deep;

Those who heard it hid their face and began to weep.

The reduplicated word “凄凄” in the original text vividly depicts the desolate feeling of the pipa music and also deeply expresses the sadness and pity in the hearts of the Pipa Lady and the poet. The translator translated “凄凄不似” in the original text as “so sad, so drear, so different.” The tone of “so different” is stronger than that of “so drear”, and the tone of “so drear” is stronger than that of “so sad,” gradually escalating to express the state of increasing excitement, making the sentence catchy and touching. Xu Yuanchong’s translation not only fully conveys the desolate feeling of the original text but is even better in some aspects. At the same time, it also shows a beautiful sense of rhythm and rhyme, making the listeners sad and the onlookers shed tears.

### **4.2.2. English translation of vague numeral words**

The thinking patterns of the East and the West are quite different. The West values concreteness, while the East

values abstraction. Classical poems often use numerical words to embody vagueness, which can be divided into virtual reference and fixed expressions. Virtual reference means that the expressed number is not a specific quantity but an approximate number. The fixed expression of numeral words means that once it is used to express a certain thing and is widely recognized, it will always be used in this way. For example, “百尺” is used to describe a tall building, which has become a conventional usage. Whether the numeral words are virtual references or fixed expressions, they pose difficulties for the translator’s translation work. Therefore, in most cases, the translator has to give full play to subjective initiative and abandon the traditional view of fidelity.

#### Example 7

Original text: 千呼万唤始出来，犹抱琵琶半遮面。

Translation: Repeatedly we called for the fair player still.

She came, her face half hidden behind a pipa still.

In Mr. Xu Yuanchong’s translation, there is no translation like “we called for the fair player thousands of times” because “千呼万唤” is just a hyperbolic expression method. In fact, the author and his friends did not call thousands of times. Therefore, the author should not be limited by the traditional “fidelity” view of translation, but keep an open mind and give full play to personal subjective initiative.

#### Example 8

Original text: 五陵年少争缠头，一曲红绡不知数。

Translation: The gallant young men vied to shower gifts on me;

One tune played, and countless silk rolls were given with glee.

The numeral words “五陵” and “不知数” in the original text are translated as “the gallant young men” and “countless” respectively. “五陵” refers to the place where the wealthy live. Here, the translator fully combined the social environment at that time to translate the connotation of the original text, removing the reading obstacles for target-language readers. “不知数” uses the rhetorical device of hyperbole to show from the side that the Pipa Lady was highly sought after. The picture of bountiful rewards pouring in is vivid. Although the translator omitted the translation of “五陵”, the translation did not affect the transmission of the original author’s thoughts at all. It can be seen that the deconstruction view of translation emphasizes that the translator has the right to freely interpret the original text. This not only gives full play to the translator’s subjective initiative but also can more efficiently transmit the information of the original text.

## 5. Conclusion

To sum up, the deconstruction view of translation plays a guiding role in the English translation of vague language in Tang poems. It enables the translator to break away from the traditional view of translation, give full play to subjective initiative, analyze the meaning of the original text in combination with the specific context, and present the cultural connotations hidden behind the original text to target-language readers to the greatest extent. However, this paper has limitations. When analyzing specific translations, the evaluation may be somewhat subjectively one-sided, which requires further exploration by other researchers.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.



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