

A Symmetry Theory Approach to Rhythm Fidelity in Translating Free Verse

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This study proposes a Symmetry Theory-based framework to address rhythm fidelity in bidirectional English-Chinese free verse translation. Recognizing that existing research predominantly focuses on metrical poetry, single translation directions, or isolated poetic elements, the paper argues that rhythm constitutes the core carrier of theme, emotion, and aesthetics in free verse (FV) and should therefore be prioritized as the primary criterion for translation evaluation. Drawing on four interrelated dimensions of Symmetry Theory—structural, functional, dynamic, and relative symmetry—the framework establishes a systematic hierarchy in which rhythm fidelity precedes imagery correspondence and conditional rhyme equivalence. Structural symmetry governs the matching of rhythmic units between source and target texts, mapping English stress groups to Chinese two-character units and vice versa. Functional symmetry ensures equivalent emotional and thematic transmission rather than rigid formal imitation. Dynamic symmetry preserves the evolving rhythmic vitality across the poetic text, while relative symmetry reconciles fundamental prosodic differences between the stress-timed English and tone-timed Chinese systems. Through bidirectional case analyses spanning lyrical, narrative, imagist, and philosophical free verse genres—including works by Whitman, Eliot, Xu Zhimo, and Hai ai—the study demonstrates that the weight of each symmetry dimension should be dynamically adjusted according to poetic genre. The framework offers operable criteria for translation practice and fills a critical gap in systematic theoretical guidance for free verse translation.

Keywords: free verse translation, rhythm fidelity, Symmetry Theory, English-Chinese poetry, prosodic symmetry, functional equivalence

Introduction

With the deepening of economic globalization, cultural exchanges between China and the global community have transcended regional and temporal boundaries, ushering in an era of in-depth interactions between Eastern and Western cultures, literature, and art. As a quintessential carrier of ethnic cultural genes and aesthetic spiritual

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pursuits, poetry translation serves as a fundamental bridge for cross-national and cross-civilization mutual understanding, as well as an indispensable component in enriching the diversity of the global cultural ecology. Among various poetic genres, free verse (FV), characterized by flexible forms, unrestricted metrical constraints, and direct emotional expression, has become a vital medium for cross-cultural literary communication and emotional exchange.

Free verse translation confronts distinctive and complicated challenges. The core dilemma in bidirectional English-Chinese (E-C) free verse translation lies in accurately conveying the emotional essence embedded in rhythmic structures. Profound inherent disparities between English and Chinese in linguistic systems, phonological rules, and cultural conventions make it extremely difficult to reproduce the original rhythm faithfully in target texts. Unlike metrical poetry with fixed rhyme schemes and strict meter, free verse delivers themes, emotions, and aesthetic appeal through flexible linguistic elements, including speech pauses, stress distribution, and semantic rhythm. For this reason, rhythm fidelity emerges as a complex, inevitable, and pivotal issue in free verse translation practice.

Existing studies on English-Chinese poetry translation have mainly explored imagery reproduction, rhyme correspondence, and basic rhythm transmission (Zhao, 1968, p. 47). Nevertheless, most researches are confined to a single translation direction, focus predominantly on metrical poetry rather than free verse, or discuss poetic elements in isolation without considering their internal connections. They fail to recognize rhythm's core role in conveying the emotional, spiritual, and aesthetic essence of free verse, and lack a systematic theoretical framework to clarify the hierarchical priority of rhythm fidelity in bidirectional free verse translation. This fragmented research paradigm leads to inconsistent evaluation criteria and insufficient practical guidance for translators. Consequently, it weakens emotional resonance and spiritual communication between Chinese and Western free verse traditions, and further impedes in-depth cross-civilization exchange.

Symmetry Theory, centered on balance, correspondence, and harmony, holds that the internal structure and inter-element relationships of a system must maintain symmetrical relations to secure functional stability and integrity (Weyl, 1952, p. 33). Though free verse abandons rigid metrical rules, it retains inherent symmetrical features in textual composition, with rhythm acting as the core axis coordinating imagery, form, and sound across the whole poem. Such inherent compatibility makes Symmetry Theory well-suited for in-depth research on free verse translation. The core goal of free verse translation—preserving the emotional essence carried by the source text's rhythm—essentially equals maintaining the symmetrical balance of rhythmic features between the source text (ST) and target text (TT).

Against this backdrop, this paper adopts Symmetry Theory as the guiding framework, selects representative bidirectional English-Chinese free verse translation cases, and explores effective approaches to prioritize rhythm fidelity so as to construct a targeted and operable translation framework. This study argues that rhythm fidelity, as the core carrier of theme, emotion, and aesthetics in free verse, is the primary criterion for retaining the original essence, followed by imagery correspondence and conditional rhyme equivalence. These three key elements interact and restrict one another, jointly sustaining the multi-dimensional symmetrical balance between source and target texts.

The theoretical value of this research lies in filling the research gap in systematic guidance for free verse translation and expanding the application scope of Symmetry Theory in poetic translation studies. Practically, it provides explicit translation criteria and operational paths for professional translators and translation researchers, facilitating cross-cultural communication of free verse. More importantly, it enables authentic transmission of

the aesthetic and cultural connotations of Chinese free verse, promotes global dissemination of outstanding Chinese poetic works, and enhances mutual understanding and artistic dialogue between Eastern and Western free verse traditions.

Literature Review

Rhythm is the core essence distinguishing poetry from other literary genres. It functions across imagistic, semantic, rhetorical, sonic, and structural dimensions, and exerts a decisive influence on thematic expression, aesthetic presentation, and emotional resonance. For free verse, rhythm is featured by flexibility, spontaneity, and close integration with semantics and emotions, thus playing a pivotal role in shaping artistic styles and emotional appeal. In English-Chinese free verse translation, rhythm fidelity directly determines whether the artistic charm and cultural connotations of the source text can be effectively transmitted to target readers. Current studies on poetic rhythm and its translation have yielded fruitful outcomes, but they lack in-depth integration of cross-cultural theories and a unified analytical framework for rhythm fidelity in free verse translation. On this account, this chapter takes Symmetry Theory as the core analytical tool, systematically reviews domestic and international studies focusing on free verse, clarifies theoretical evolution, identifies academic controversies and research limitations, and lays a solid foundation for constructing the framework of rhythmic functional symmetry for free verse translation.

Rhythm as the Essence of Poetry: A Cross-Cultural Consensus

Scholars at home and abroad have reached a universal consensus that rhythm is the essence of poetry. The academic understanding of rhythm has evolved from regarding it as superficial formal ornament to recognizing it as a meaning-generating core, and this view also fully applies to free verse research (Zhu, 1987b, p. 62).

In Western poetics, the theoretical exploration of poetic rhythm has a long-standing history. Aristotle first defined rhythm as “the order of movement” in *Poetics* (Aristotle, 1996, p. 89), establishing its unique and irreplaceable status in poetry. Following the emergence of free verse in modern literature, scholars began to associate rhythmic fluctuation with human emotional rhythm. Contemporary scholars further enriched relevant theories of poetic rhythm: Tsur (2008, p. 17) held that rhythm is the primary source of poetic aesthetic experience from the perspective of cognitive poetics; Attridge (1995, p. 22) viewed rhythm as a “literary event” that guides readers’ perceptual experience of poems; Hartman (1996, p. 41) centered free verse rhythm on readers’ temporal experience constructed by pauses, stress, and semantic rhythm. With the cognitive and cultural turns in modern poetic research, the academic community has further consolidated the core status of rhythm in poetic creation and appreciation. Jakobson (1960, p. 34) pointed out that rhythm carries the poetic function of language; Meschonnic (1982, p. 55) proposed that “rhythm is a meaning-generating mechanism”; Abraham (1995, p. 19) expanded the connotation of rhythm and argued that rhythm is the externalized carrier of textual unconsciousness.

In parallel with Western research, Chinese poetics has also formed mature and systematic interpretations of poetic rhythm. Wang (1982, p. 78) defined Chinese poetic rhythm as “the regular combination of tones and syllables” and deemed it “the soul of Chinese poetry”, a viewpoint equally applicable to modern free verse. Zhao (1968, p. 53) put forward the theory of “sound-meaning isomorphism”, which connects the rhythm of Chinese poetry with semantics and cultural spirit, echoing Meschonnic’s viewpoints on rhythm. Li (2021, p. 21) pointed out that modern Chinese free verse abandons rigid classical meter, and its rhythm is closely intertwined with individual emotion and textual expression. Zhu (1987, p. 71) stressed that rhythm is the direct carrier of emotion

and takes precedence over pure semantic expression. Combined efforts of Chinese and Western scholars have fully verified that rhythm is the aesthetic and essential core of free verse.

Evolution of Poetic Rhythm Translation: From Formal Imitation to Functional Equivalence

On the basis of the above consensus on rhythm, research on poetic rhythm translation has experienced a clear evolutionary process. Generally speaking, relevant studies have shifted from rigid formal imitation to functional equivalence, with research focus transferring from superficial formal features to in-depth semantic and cultural transmission. This trend is particularly prominent in the field of free verse translation. This section divides relevant research into international and domestic perspectives for detailed discussion.

In the early stage, Western researches prioritized reproducing metrical, prosodic, and rhyming forms of original poems. This research paradigm is workable for traditional metrical poetry but inapplicable to free verse with flexible and diversified rhythms. Sidney (1973, p. 44) advocated imitating the metrical structure of source texts strictly in translation; Pound (1913, p. 27) emphasized retaining original tonal patterns and rhymes in poetic translation. Both scholars focused excessively on formal reproduction and ignored the internal emotional and semantic logic of free verse.

Alongside the cognitive turn in translation studies, scholars began to pursue the integration of poetic form and textual meaning. Meschonnic (1982, p. 61) advocated functional equivalence and opposed rigid formal imitation; Abraham (1995, p. 24) put forward the concept of “rhythmic tension” and encouraged reasonable creative transformation in translation. Both theories fit well with the stylistic features of free verse. In the subsequent cultural turn of research, Benjamin (1968) believed that rhythm acts as the core medium to awaken spiritual connotations hidden in poems; Bassnett (2015) pointed out that rhythm carries unique cultural identity of a nation; Nida (1964) proposed the theory of dynamic equivalence, highlighting equivalent emotional responses among target readers. Even so, most Western studies focus on rhythmic translation between Indo-European language families, and systematic researches on English-Chinese free verse translation remain insufficient.

Different from Western academic paths, China’s research on poetic rhythm translation is developed on the basis of traditional Chinese prosody and has formed a localized theoretical system and practical paradigms. Specifically, the research on free verse rhythm translation can be divided into three progressive stages.

The first stage is grounded in traditional Chinese prosody. Wang (1982) systematically explored rhythmic elements such as tonal alternation, rhyme schemes, and rhythmic unit division, and proposed the “two-character rhythmic unit” theory, which provides an effective analytical tool for studying the rhythmic logic of modern free verse. Zhao’s (1968) sound-meaning isomorphism theory revealed the internal connection between rhythm and meaning, laying a solid theoretical foundation for meaning-oriented rhythm translation.

The second stage witnessed the formation of classic translation theories in China. Xu’s (2000) Three Beauties Theory regards beauty of sound (mainly embodied in rhythm and meter) as a core criterion for poetic translation, but relevant translation practices have also aroused academic debates for over-adjusting semantics to pursue regular rhythm and rhyme. Fu’s (2005) Spirit Similarity Theory holds that the core of poetic translation is transmitting the spiritual essence of original works, and rhythm translation should break the shackles of blind formal reproduction. Gu (2003) constructed the theory of pluralistic complementary translation criteria and stressed that the essence of rhythm translation lies in cultural functional equivalence.

The third stage features contemporary innovative exploration and interdisciplinary integration. Wang (2022) criticized the defects of the early “pause-for-foot” method and proposed the “caesura-for-foot” strategy and the strategy of using Chinese ping-ze alternation to simulate English iambic rhythm. He further supplemented his research by discussing prosodic adaptation strategies in cross-linguistic poetic conversion (Wang, 2021, p. 33), and pointed out that translators can adopt appropriate rule-breaking strategies within reasonable boundaries in free verse rhythm translation. Domestic scholars have gradually formed the idea of matching rhythmic units between English and Chinese poems, focusing on functional correspondence between Chinese semantic pause units and English stress foot units, and put forward a three-step logic of unit recombination, density matching, and semantic coherence. In recent years, some scholars have combined cognitive linguistics to analyze the cognitive mechanism of rhythm perception, while others have explored the cultural communication function of rhythm translation.

Nevertheless, domestic research still has prominent limitations: First, the integration of cutting-edge Western rhythmic theories is not in-depth enough; second, most studies rely on scattered case analysis, and systematic theoretical frameworks targeting free verse rhythm translation are inadequate; third, researches on different types of free verse are not comprehensive enough.

Research Gaps and Focus

To summarize the above literature review, scholars at home and abroad have reached a consensus that rhythm is the essence of poetry, and rhythm translation research has evolved from formal imitation to functional equivalence. These achievements have laid a solid foundation for English-Chinese free verse translation research. Even so, three prominent research gaps still exist in current studies.

First, cross-cultural integration between domestic and international research is inadequate. Western studies mainly focus on Indo-European language pairs, lacking systematic exploration of rhythmic translation between English and Chinese, two completely heterogeneous languages. Domestic localized theories have not conducted in-depth academic dialogue with Western cutting-edge theories.

Second, a systematic interdisciplinary theoretical framework for free verse rhythm translation is absent. Most researches adopt a case-based paradigm and fail to integrate theories from linguistics, cultural studies, and cognitive science to clarify the hierarchical logic between rhythm, imagery, meaning, emotion, and culture in translation.

Third, researches on the internal logic of rhythmic transformation are insufficient. Existing studies have recognized the importance of rhythm, but have not fully explored how to balance source rhythmic essence and target language prosodic habits during cross-linguistic conversion.

In view of the above gaps, this study takes Symmetry Theory as the core analytical framework, integrates Western rhythmic theories and domestic localized research achievements, and focuses on rhythm fidelity in bidirectional English-Chinese free verse translation. This research mainly focuses on three aspects: defining the connotation and evaluation criteria of rhythmic functional symmetry based on Symmetry Theory; exploring the implementation paths of rhythmic functional symmetry in bidirectional translation according to the stress-based feature of English and tone-based feature of Chinese; verifying the feasibility of the proposed framework through typical translation cases and summarizing operable translation strategies. This research aims to fill existing research gaps, realize cross-cultural integration of free verse translation theories, and provide theoretical and practical references for English-Chinese free verse translation.

Symmetry Theory: Theoretical Basis for Rhythm Fidelity in Translating FV

After sorting out relevant literature and identifying research deficiencies, this chapter elaborates the core connotation of Symmetry Theory, which serves as the fundamental theoretical support for the follow-up research. Symmetry Theory originated from natural science. Pierre Curie pioneered the research on symmetry in physical phenomena and established the basic rules of symmetry in natural science (Curie, 1894). Later scholars systematically refined its core concept of “transformational invariance” in mathematics and physics. In mathematics, Symmetry Theory focuses on rules that maintain the core properties of geometric figures during transformation operations such as translation, rotation, reflection, and scaling (Weyl, 1952). In physics, the symmetry-conservation correlation reveals the inherent order of natural laws. With the rapid development of interdisciplinary research in modern academia, Symmetry Theory has expanded its research scope to humanities and social sciences, and its connotation has been enriched into four interrelated and mutually supportive dimensions widely applied to literary research.

Four Core Dimensions of Symmetry Theory

The extended Symmetry Theory applied in humanities includes four mutually complementary dimensions, each with distinct connotations and applicable research scenarios.

First, structural symmetry refers to regular corresponding relationships in form and organizational pattern, featuring formal equivalence independent of functions and dynamic processes (Jakobson, 1975). It focuses on the external organizational structure of a system and requires corresponding formal layouts between different parts. Second, functional symmetry emphasizes the equivalence of roles and utilities among system components, focusing on consistent functional output rather than absolute formal uniformity (L. R. Gleitman, H. Gleitman, Miller, & Ostrin, 1996). This dimension is highly applicable to literary translation, as it prioritizes the realization of textual function over rigid formal copying. Third, dynamic symmetry breaks static analysis and concentrates on balanced relationships in the temporal dimension and movement process, with its core being maintaining fundamental rules amid changes. It suits the dynamic conversion between source language and target language in translation activities. Fourth, relative symmetry rejects absolute uniformity and advocates balance amid differences, allowing local variations on the premise of equivalent core properties, which fits the characteristics of cross-cultural literary research. Considering the huge differences between English and Chinese linguistic systems and poetic prosody, relative symmetry becomes the dominant principle guiding free verse translation.

Overall Value of the Theoretical Framework

The four dimensions jointly form an integrated analytical framework centered on constructing balance and internal order for research objects. This complete theoretical system enables Symmetry Theory to adapt to diverse research objects in humanities, and provides a unified, logical perspective for analyzing complex literary phenomena (Weyl, 1952). By clarifying the definition and characteristics of each dimension of Symmetry Theory, this chapter lays a solid theoretical foundation for the subsequent exploration of free verse translation rules based on Symmetry Theory.

Adaptation of Symmetry Theory to E-C FV Translation

On the basis of interpreting Symmetry Theory, this chapter further explores its practical adaptation to English-Chinese free verse translation. Its four core dimensions address different layers of poetic translation: Structural symmetry governs the matching of basic rhythmic units; functional symmetry ensures rhythm conveys

identical emotions and themes; dynamic symmetry maintains the evolving pace of verses; relative symmetry allows reasonable formal adjustments to adapt to bilingual features. These perspectives naturally respond to the major dilemmas in E-C free verse translation. Combined with the linguistic differences between English and Chinese, the following sections analyze the application of structural, functional, dynamic, and relative symmetry in free verse translation one by one, and then summarize the synergistic effect of all dimensions.

Structural Symmetry: Matching Flexible Rhythm Units

As the most intuitive dimension, structural symmetry is mainly reflected in the matching of rhythmic units between source text and target text. English free verse is organized by metrical feet, stress groups, and flexible syntactic pauses, while modern Chinese free verse takes pause segments, two-character rhythmic units, and tonal alternations as basic components. In this research context, structural symmetry in free verse translation refers to regular correspondence of rhythmic units between source and target texts, rather than rigid duplication of identical forms. In English-to-Chinese translation, English stress groups and metrical feet can be mapped to Chinese two-character units and semantic pauses; in Chinese-to-English translation, Chinese pause patterns and tonal rhythm can be aligned with English stress groups and metrical feet. This matching mode conforms to the prosodic norms of both languages and retains original rhythmic flow and density (Wang, 2014, p. 931).

Rhythmic units serve as the minimal carrier of prosody in free verse. Within the stress-timed system of English, metrical feet and stress groups determine the tempo of poetic lines. In contrast, the tone-timed system of modern Chinese regards two-character units as the most stable basic prosodic components. Isolated single characters often result in fragmented rhythm, while multi-character combinations beyond two characters tend to break rhythmic balance. Therefore, the bidirectional correspondence between English stress groups/metrical feet and Chinese two-character units/semantic pauses stands as the optimal solution that accommodates the prosodic conventions of both languages, laying a solid foundation for the implementation of structural symmetry (Feng, 2009).

Two typical examples are adopted to verify the practical effect. The excerpt from T. S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (Eliot, 1915, p. 17) is divided into three rhythmic units in each line based on stress and semantics. The Chinese translation adopts corresponding semantic pauses to form a three-part structure, realizing structural symmetry of rhythmic units without end rhyme, and maintaining the rhythmic fidelity of free verse. Another example is selected from Guo Moruo's *Phoenix Nirvana* (1920, p. 29). The original Chinese lines consist of parallel two-character rhythmic groups, presenting steady and powerful rhythm. The English translation uses disyllabic adjectives as independent stress groups, forming a stable two-beat rhythm in recitation. The disyllable-to-disyllable alignment also realizes structural symmetry and high rhythm fidelity.

Functional Symmetry: Prioritizing Emotional/Thematic Transmission

Beyond formal matching, rhythm undertakes multiple pragmatic functions in poetry. Accordingly, functional symmetry becomes another core requirement in translation. Rhythm undertakes the functions of emotional expression, cognitive reflection, and thematic communication in poetry. Functional symmetry requires that the rhythm of target texts achieves equivalent functional effects as source texts: Rhythmic forms can be adjusted appropriately, but the emotional tone and thematic connotation carried by rhythm must be completely retained, avoiding the defect of "formal fidelity but essential distortion".

Free verse abandons the rigid metrical rules of formal poetry, which amplifies the expressive functions of rhythm. Readers perceive the emotions and ideas conveyed by rhythm prior to its formal patterns. Centered

on equivalent meaning transmission, functional symmetry breaks the formal-oriented misconception prevalent in traditional poetic translation theories. It distinguishes Symmetry Theory from conventional metrical translation frameworks. Minor adjustments to rhythmic forms are permissible as long as the core emotional and thematic functions remain intact, which fully complies with the essence of functional symmetry (Nida, 2001).

Two representative cases are presented for illustration. The excerpt from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (Whitman, 1855, p. 63) is divided into two semantic clusters in each line, with slow and lingering rhythm expressing the speaker's reluctance to depart. The Chinese translation adopts corresponding pause division to reproduce the same emotional effect. Though semantic scopes of rhythmic clusters are not fully identical, the adjustment adapts to Chinese prosodic norms and realizes functional symmetry of rhythm (author's translation). In addition, Hu Shi's *Orchid Grass* (1921, p. 11) features light and flowing rhythm conveying anticipation. The English translation forms natural stress groups, creating a steady and advancing pace that echoes the original emotional tone and thematic focus, and also fulfills the requirement of functional symmetry (author's translation).

Dynamic Symmetry: Preserving Rhythmic Vitality

Different from static form and function, poetic rhythm is always in a changing state, which puts forward the demand for dynamic symmetry. The rhythm of free verse is a dynamic process evolving with emotion, theme, and aesthetic perception. Dynamic symmetry focuses on the consistency of the evolutionary rules of rhythm in the temporal dimension. Target texts should follow the emotional-semantic-aesthetic arc of source texts: If the original rhythm accelerates to express rising passion or slows down to deliver melancholy, the translated rhythm shall make corresponding changes to retain rhythmic vitality.

Dynamic symmetry emphasizes the procedural nature of rhythm, and it is particularly applicable to free verse with dramatic emotional shifts and intertwined narration and lyricism. While structural symmetry guarantees rhythmic matching for individual lines and segments, dynamic symmetry governs the overall rhythmic trajectory of an entire poem. The two dimensions complement each other, transforming discrete rhythmic fragments into a coherent, fluctuating prosodic flow throughout the text.

Two classic poems are taken as examples. Dylan Thomas's *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night* (1951, p. 8) presents an emotional arc from restraint to passion and final outburst, with rhythm turning from steady to urgent. The Chinese translation adjusts the length of rhythmic units and pause positions to reproduce this dynamic change. Combined with rhyming and metaphor transformation, it retains the original thematic and emotional tension and rhythmic vitality (author's translation). Ai Qing's *Dayanhe—My Nanny* (1979, p. 15) presents gradually intensified emotion through progressive imagery, and its rhythm becomes more compact accordingly. The English translation retains parallel structure and compact rhythmic units to follow the original emotional and semantic progression. Despite formal differences caused by linguistic features, it preserves the melancholic tone and dynamic rhythm of the source text (author's translation).

Relative Symmetry: Reconciling Linguistic and Cultural Heterogeneity

English and Chinese belong to different prosodic systems, which determines that absolute symmetry cannot be achieved in translation. For this reason, relative symmetry plays a role in reconciling bilingual differences. English is a stress-timed language while Chinese is a tone-timed language. The fundamental differences between the two prosodic systems make absolute symmetry impossible in translation. Relative symmetry advocates balance amid differences: Translators are allowed to make local formal adjustments such as merging or splitting

non-core rhythmic units, on the premise of retaining core rhythmic density, functional effects, and dynamic trajectory. It uses functional equivalents to replace language-specific prosodic features and resolves conflicts caused by linguistic and cultural heterogeneity (Wang, 1982, p. 78).

As the fundamental guarantee of Symmetry Theory, relative symmetry addresses the inherent gaps between English and Chinese prosodic systems. The ultimate goal of poetic translation lies in cross-linguistic prosodic communication rather than mechanical imitation of formal features. Directly copying language-specific prosodic devices—including Chinese tonal patterns, reduplicated phrases, and fixed syllable combinations, or English stress cycles and metrical feet—will only result in awkward and unreadable translations. Relative symmetry permits reasonable concessions in form while adhering to core prosodic connotations, making it a pragmatic and feasible guideline for free verse translation (Feng, 2019).

Two typical cases further explain this dimension. Sylvia Plath's *Daddy* (1962, p. 22) accumulates emotional tension through repeated stress and a “long-long-short-long” mirror rhythmic structure. The Chinese translation uses parallel four-syllable phrases to reproduce rhythmic accumulation, and adopts tonal changes of Chinese phrases to replace English stress patterns. Local formal adjustments conform to Chinese linguistic habits, while the core rhythmic structure and resistant emotion are completely retained (author's translation). Dai Wangshu's *A Lane in the Rain* (1928, p. 34) relies on syllabic regularity, tonal flow, and repeated phrases to create lingering melancholy, which cannot be directly reproduced in English. The English translation abandons formal imitation and uses English stress patterns and collocations to create an equivalent sense of temporal extension and depressed mood. It adapts to English poetic conventions while retaining the original theme, emotion, and aesthetic conception. Both cases are typical practices of relative symmetry.

Synthesized Fit: A Unified Framework for Translating FV

The above four dimensions do not operate independently; instead, they form a coordinated whole to guide translation practice. The four dimensions of Symmetry Theory work synergistically to realize rhythm fidelity in English-Chinese free verse translation. Specifically, structural symmetry provides the formal basis for rhythmic unit matching; functional symmetry guarantees the transmission of emotion and theme; dynamic symmetry maintains the temporal vitality of rhythm; relative symmetry solves contradictions arising from linguistic and cultural differences.

Integrated with the stylistic features of free verse, this multi-dimensional framework transforms subjective translation experience into operable evaluation criteria and practical rules, effectively coping with the core difficulties in cross-linguistic rhythmic transfer. On this basis, the next chapter will further extract targeted translation principles and specific operational methods for rhythm fidelity.

Principles and Dimensions for Rhythm Fidelity

Based on the application rules of Symmetry Theory in free verse translation, this chapter summarizes practical translation principles and specific operational dimensions for rhythm fidelity, completing the transition from theoretical analysis to practical guidance. Combined with the four-dimensional connotation of Symmetry Theory and the non-metrical yet inherently rhythmic characteristics of English and Chinese free verse, this part refines practical translation principles and practical dimensions for rhythm fidelity.

Four Principles for Rhythm Fidelity

We hold that four core principles are concluded to standardize FV translation thinking and behavioral norms.

First, rhythmic functional symmetry principle. Taking essential rhythmic fidelity as the core goal, this principle requires translators to follow the logic of four-dimensional symmetry in overall translation. It rejects rigid formal imitation and focuses on equivalent transmission of emotion, theme, and aesthetic function carried by rhythm.

Second, hierarchical priority principle. Rhythm fidelity ranks first among all translation requirements for free verse, followed by imagery correspondence and conditional rhyme adaptation. This principle avoids sacrificing core rhythmic and emotional connotations for the sake of imagery or forced rhymes.

Third, differentiated bidirectional adaptation principle. In view of the prosodic differences between English (stress-oriented) and Chinese (tone-oriented), differentiated strategies are adopted for bidirectional translation. English-to-Chinese translation focuses on mapping English stress groups and metrical feet to Chinese two-character units and semantic pauses; Chinese-to-English translation emphasizes converting Chinese two-character units and tonal alternation to English stress groups and metrical feet (Bian, 2009).

Fourth, flexibility-with-boundaries principle. Following the connotation of relative symmetry, local adjustment of non-core rhythmic forms is permitted, but three bottom lines must be observed: no damage to semantic integrity, no distortion of emotional tone, and no deviation from thematic orientation. Moderate rule-breaking is allowed to adapt to the flexible style of free verse.

Structural Symmetry in Rhythm Unit Conversion

Guided by the above-listed principles, this section elaborates the bidirectional conversion rules of core rhythmic units between English and Chinese. Based on the prosodic research of Chinese rhythm units (Feng, 2009) and traditional Chinese prosody theories (Wang, 1982), this part discusses conversion rules in two translation directions respectively.

In English-to-Chinese translation, English polysyllabic stress groups need to be split and recombined into combinations of Chinese two-character units and semantic pauses according to semantic integrity and Chinese prosodic conventions, to keep consistent rhythmic density. For emotionally intense text with dense stresses, consecutive two-character units are adopted to reproduce compact rhythm and avoid loose segmentation. Yet, C-English conversion includes two key parts: the transformation of disyllabic units and the conversion of tonal alternation.

On the one hand, modern Mandarin features a prominent disyllabic tendency in daily expression and literary creation. Disyllabic prosodic units naturally become the fundamental rhythmic segments for sentence division and phonological pauses in modern Chinese poetry. Different from unstable monosyllabic characters, disyllabic units form balanced rhythmic modules, while English takes metrical feet composed of alternating stressed and unstressed syllables as core prosodic units. The two types of units share identical binary rhythmic logic, so functional mapping can be realized in translation. A typical disyllabic unit in modern Chinese free verse can be rendered as the English iambic foot. The unstressed-stressed pattern of the English foot matches the binary structure of the Chinese disyllabic unit perfectly. This conversion reproduces the natural and relaxed cadence of free verse without rigid metrical constraints, proving the validity of disyllable-to-foot functional conversion.

On the other hand, tonal alternation is the core sonic rhythm of Chinese poetry. The four Mandarin tones and their alternation create undulating pitch changes and rhythmic hierarchy (Feng, 2019). English has no lexical tones, and relies on cyclic alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables to construct prosodic rhythm. The two mechanisms share similar operational logic: Both break flat sound, form binary rhythmic contrast, and unify

textual musicality. It is impossible to copy Chinese tonal pitches in English, so converting tonal alternation to stress alternation becomes the core strategy for prosodic fidelity. The rhythm formed by Chinese tonal alternation can be transformed into alternating stress patterns in English translation. The dynamic contrast between stressed and unstressed syllables fully reproduces the original tranquil and delicate rhythm. This equivalence is functional rather than formal. Translators need to match the density of tonal alternation with stress frequency to avoid flat or over-intensified rhythm, bridging the prosodic gap between tone-based Chinese and stress-based English.

Adaptation of Semantic Pauses and Rhythm Density

Apart from rhythmic unit conversion, the processing of semantic pauses and the control of rhythm density are also key links in rhythm fidelity. Long inter-clausal pauses in English, usually used for emotional relaxation and semantic transition, correspond to long semantic pauses in Chinese marked by commas or line breaks. Short inter-word pauses for enhancing rhythmic tension correspond to brief breath pauses between Chinese two-character units. Reasonable matching of pauses ensures the equivalent transmission of rhythmic density between English and Chinese, which conforms to the rule that Chinese semantic pauses are synchronized with rhythmic units (Wang, 2022).

Case Verification of the Symmetry Theory-Based Translation Framework

After putting forward theoretical frameworks, translation principles, and operational rules, this part conducts empirical case verification to test the practicability and explanatory power of the above achievements. This part focuses on the operationalization of symmetric strategies, the adaptation of symmetric dimensions to diverse poetic genres, and the explanatory power of the framework in bilingual free verse translation. Through bidirectional English-Chinese case analysis, this section summarizes applicable rules, identifies the advantages and limitations of the framework, and completes the logical closed loop from theoretical construction to practical application. As Jakobson (1960, p. 356) argued, poetic translation is essentially the conversion of linguistic form and artistic rhythm across languages, which makes empirical case analysis an indispensable link to examine translation theories.

Case Selection Criteria

To guarantee the representativeness, comparability, and validity of empirical research, the corpus is selected strictly following three core principles. First is genre diversification: The corpus covers lyrical poetry, narrative poetry, philosophical imagist poetry, and experimental free verse, which are the mainstream forms of modern poetry, to test the compatibility of source text (ST) across poetic styles. Modern free verse abandons rigid traditional meter and presents diversified stylistic features (Hartman, 1996, p. 22), so selecting multiple genres can fully verify the adaptability of the Symmetry Theory framework. Second is chronological balance: It integrates canonical classic poems and modern experimental works, examining whether the framework fits both traditional poetic aesthetics and innovative modern poetic expressions. Third is bilingual comparability: Six translation samples are adopted, including three English-to-Chinese and three Chinese-to-English versions. The original poems are matched in rhythmic pattern, emotional tone, and cultural connotation load, so as to eliminate interfering variables and ensure the credibility of comparative analysis. As Nida (1964, p. 128) pointed out, controlled variable selection is the basic guarantee for valid translation empirical research.

The selected corpus is specified as follows. English-to-Chinese cases include Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself* (lyrical free verse), T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (fragmented experimental narrative poetry), Ezra

Pound's *In a Station of the Metro* (compact philosophical imagist poetry), Dylan Thomas's *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night*, and Sylvia Plath's *Daddy*. Chinese-to-English cases include Xu Zhimo's *Farewell to Cambridge* (lyrical poetry), Dai Wangshu's *A Lane in the Rain* (symbolic narrative poetry), Haizi's *Facing the Sea, Spring Blossoms* (philosophical free verse), Ai Qing's *Dayanhe—My Nanny*, and Hu Shi's *Orchid Grass*. All selected works are classic masterpieces of modern Chinese and Western poetry with abundant authoritative translations, which provides sufficient research materials for subsequent multi-dimensional comparison.

Bidirectional Case Analysis

This section takes the four dimensions of Symmetry Theory as the unified analytical tool to dissect how translators adjust symmetric strategies according to poetic features, and evaluates the translation quality from the dual perspectives of formal rhythm and poetic aesthetics. The analysis is divided into English-to-Chinese and Chinese-to-English two parts. The four core dimensions of Symmetry Theory, namely structural symmetry, dynamic symmetry, functional symmetry, and relative symmetry, interact organically and jointly form a complete evaluation and operation system for poetic translation.

First of all, the three English free verse works and their Chinese translations are analyzed one by one.

For Walt Whitman's lyrical free verse collected in *Leaves of Grass* (Whitman, 1855), its works feature regular sentence structures, repetitive rhythmic motifs, and gentle emotional fluctuation, which lays a foundation for the simultaneous realization of structural, dynamic, and functional symmetry. In translation, the four-dimensional symmetric framework is fully implemented: Structural symmetry reproduces the original parallel sentence patterns; dynamic symmetry maintains the steady flow of rhythm; functional symmetry delivers the unrestrained lyric mood of the original; relative symmetry properly accommodates Chinese phonetic habits without rigid formal imitation. The analysis proves that integrated four-dimensional symmetry is the optimal strategy for lyrical free verse. Lyrical free verse relies on neat formal rhythm to render emotions (Gross, 1964, p. 79), so the coordination of multiple symmetry dimensions can maximize the reproduction of its artistic effect.

As for T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (Eliot, 1922), it belongs to fragmented experimental narrative poetry, with fragmented discourse, abrupt scene shifts, and discontinuous rhythm, which makes rigid structural symmetry infeasible. Translators prioritize relative symmetry as the core principle: They abandon strict formal parallelism, retain the logical association between fragmented lines at the structural level, adjust rhythmic pace dynamically to match the original jumpy narrative rhythm, and guarantee the consistency of bleak poetic mood at the functional level. This case verifies that relative symmetry can effectively resolve the conflict between fragmented poetic form and bilingual prosodic differences. Experimental poetry breaks conventional rhythmic norms (Finch, 1993, p. 41), and mechanical formal imitation will destroy the artistic tension of the original text, while relative symmetry just balances form and artistic expression.

As a representative condensed imagist free verse, Ezra Pound's *In a Station of the Metro* (1913) pursues concise language, compact imagery, and implicit philosophy, with an extremely simplified formal structure and no redundant rhythmic components. Imagist poetry advocates "direct presentation of imagery and concise language" (Pound, 1913, p. 18), which determines that its translation should focus on imagery and rhythm rather than superficial form.

Case 1: *In a Station of the Metro*:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Gu Zhengkun's translation (2003, p. 112):

人丛中这些幽灵似的面庞，
潮湿的黑色树枝上的花瓣。

This classic two-line imagist poem consists of compact rhythmic groups with subtle rhythmic tension between lines, which serves as the core artistic feature. Given its highly concise form, dynamic symmetry and functional symmetry become the dominant evaluation dimensions, while rigid structural imitation is unnecessary. In terms of dynamic symmetry, the Chinese translation retains the original short rhythmic units and steady, restrained tempo, reproducing the faint rhythmic tension between the two lines. Functionally, it fully restores the core imagery and the fleeting, hazy artistic conception of the original poem, realizing equivalent emotional and aesthetic transmission. Meanwhile, the translator makes minor adjustments to word order and syllable distribution to adapt to Chinese prosodic habits, which conforms to the requirements of relative symmetry. This case fully reflects that for ultra-concise imagist free verse, translators should prioritize dynamic rhythm and imagery function, and adopt flexible formal processing under the guidance of relative symmetry.

Next, combining with the cases quoted in Chapter IV, we further analyze typical English poems and their Chinese translations.

Case 2: *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* by T. S. Eliot (1915):

Let us go / then, / you and I, /
When the evening / is spread out / against the sky. /

Author's translation:

那么， / 放我们走吧， / 你和我， /
当黄昏 / 铺开 / 在天际。 /

The English original divides each line into three rhythmic units based on stress and semantics. The Chinese translation adopts corresponding semantic pauses to form a three-part structure, realizing structural symmetry of rhythmic units and maintaining the core rhythm of free verse. English is a stress-timed language, while Chinese is a tone-timed language. The two languages adopt different rules to divide rhythmic units, and reasonable conversion is the basic requirement for poetic translation.

Case 3: *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman (1855):

I linger'd /over my loved ones, /
Now / departure is upon me. /

Author's translation:

我反复徘徊， / 在爱人的身旁， /
此时此刻， / 离别已在身上！ /

Each line of the original consists of two semantic clusters with slow and lingering rhythm expressing reluctance to part. The Chinese translation follows the pause rules of the original. Though the semantic scope of rhythmic clusters is slightly adjusted to adapt to Chinese prosody, it perfectly realizes functional symmetry in emotion and rhythm. Rhythm and emotion are highly integrated in lyrical poetry, so functional symmetry is the key to retaining the artistic charm of the original work.

Case 4: *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night* (Thomas, 1951) by Dylan Thomas:

Do not go gentle / into that good night, /
Old age should burn / and rave / at close of day; /
Rage, rage / against the dying of the light. /

Author's translation:

不要温顺地走进 / 那美好的夜乡， /
 虽然已经日暮 / 老人也要 / 纵情 / 高唱； /
 吼吧，吼吧， / 反抗这正在消逝的时光。 /

The original poem presents an emotional arc from restraint to outburst, with rhythm gradually becoming urgent. The Chinese translation adjusts the length of rhythmic units and pause positions to reproduce the dynamic changes of rhythm and emotion, embodying the requirement of dynamic symmetry. Dynamic symmetry focuses on the overall flow and changing trend of rhythm, which is particularly critical for poems with fluctuating emotions.

Case 5: *Daddy* by Sylvia Plath (1962):

You do not do, / you do not do /
 Any more, / black shoe. /

Author's translation:

你不要做， / 你不要做，
 别再做 / 黑色鞋子。

The original uses repeated stress to accumulate emotional tension and presents a unique mirror rhythm. The Chinese translation adopts parallel four-syllable phrases to replace English stress patterns. Local formal adjustments conform to Chinese linguistic habits, while the core rhythm and resistant emotion are retained, which is a typical application of relative symmetry. Relative symmetry allows proper formal transformation on the premise of preserving core connotation, effectively resolving the prosodic conflicts between Chinese and English poetry.

Then, this part analyzes three representative Chinese free verse works and their English translations, together with the classic cases in the previous chapters. Modern Chinese free verse inherits the rhythmic characteristics of traditional Chinese poetry while absorbing Western free verse creation techniques, so its English translation requires targeted symmetric strategies.

Case 6: *Phoenix Nirvana* by Guo Moruo (1920):

我们 / 新鲜， /
 我们 / 净朗， /
 我们 / 华美， /
 我们 / 芬芳！ /

Author's translation:

We're / vibrant, /
 We're / vivid, /
 We're / gorgeous, /
 We're / fragrant. /

The original Chinese adopts standard two-character rhythmic groups with steady and powerful rhythm. The English translation uses independent disyllabic stress groups to form a consistent two-beat rhythm. The disyllable-to-disyllable alignment achieves high structural symmetry and rhythm fidelity. The two-character prosodic foot is the basic rhythmic unit of modern Chinese poetry, and converting it into English stress groups is an effective way to realize cross-lingual rhythmic symmetry.

Case 7: *Orchid Grass* by Hu Shi (1921):

我从山中来， / 带着兰花草， /
种在小园中， / 希望花开早！ /

Author's translation:

From the mountains / I'm back, / with orchid in hand, /
Plant it / in my garden, / and hope / it blooms soon. /

The original features light and flowing rhythm filled with anticipation. The English translation forms natural stress groups to echo the original emotional tone and rhythmic pace, fulfilling the standard of functional symmetry. Functional symmetry takes the transmission of emotion and poetic function as the core, which is the ultimate goal of poetic translation.

Case 8: *Dayanhe—My Nanny* (Ai, 1979) by Ai Qing:

大堰河，今天我看到雪使我想起了你： /
你的被雪压着的草盖的坟墓， /
你的关闭了的故居檐头的枯死的瓦菲， /
你的被典押了的一丈平方的园地！ /

Author's translation:

Dayanhe, today the snow calls you to mind: /
Your grassy grave bowed low beneath the snow, /
The dead moss clinging to your silent roof, /
Your tiny mortgaged garden plot! /

The emotion of the original intensifies gradually with progressive imagery, and the rhythm becomes more compact accordingly. The English translation retains parallel structure and compact rhythmic units, following the emotional and semantic progression of the original. It maintains the melancholic tone and dynamic rhythm of the source text. The progressive imagery drives rhythmic changes, and dynamic symmetry ensures the consistency of such changes between the original and translation.

Case 9: *A Lane in the Rain* by Dai Wangshu (1981):

撑着油纸伞，
独自 / 彷徨在悠长、悠长 /
又寂寥的雨巷，
我希望逢着
一个丁香一样的
结着愁怨的姑娘！

Yang Xianyi & Gladys Yang's English translation (X. Y. Yang & G. Yang, 2010, p. 89):

Alone holding an oilpaper umbrella,
I wander along a long, solitary lane in the rain,
Hoping to encounter
A girl like a bouquet of lilacs
Gnawed by anxiety and resentment.

Chinese poetry relies on syllable rhythm and tonal changes to create lingering melancholy, which cannot be fully copied in English (Zhao, 1968). The translator abandons rigid formal imitation and uses English stress and collocation to recreate the equivalent mood, which is a classic practice of relative symmetry. Absolute formal

symmetry cannot be realized between tone-timed Chinese and stress-timed English, so relative symmetry becomes the inevitable choice for symbolic narrative poetry translation.

Multi-version Comparative Analysis on Xu Zhimo's Farewell to Cambridge

This section focuses on the opening four lines of Xu Zhimo's famous lyrical free verse Farewell to Cambridge (Xu, 2006), collecting six influential English translations for comparison. Combined with the four dimensions of Symmetry Theory, this part verifies the explanatory power and practical guiding value of the theoretical framework. Multi-version comparative analysis can avoid the one-sidedness of single-case research and fully test the applicability of theoretical models (Attridge, 1995, p. 103).

Original text by Xu Zhimo:

轻轻的我走了，
正如我轻轻的来；
我轻轻的招手，
作别西天的云彩。

The original poem takes the disyllabic reduplication 轻轻的 (gently) as the core rhythmic motif, appearing three times throughout four lines, forming a repeated rhythmic cycle. Each line contains 6-7 syllables, with uniform syllable length, even pauses, and smooth rhythm. The overall tempo is slow and soft, carrying the poet's tender, reluctant and sentimental mood of departure. Rhythm, emotion, and poetic imagery are highly integrated, which is a typical representative of Chinese lyrical free verse with prominent rhythmic characteristics. We adopt six authoritative English translations & syllable statistics.

Version 1 by Yang Xianyi & Gladys Yang (X. Y. Yang & G. Yang, 2010, p. 72):

Very quietly I take my leave /
As quietly as I came here; /
Quietly I wave good-bye /
To the rosy clouds in the western sky.

Syllables in per line are 10/10/8/11 respectively.

Version 2 by Xu Yuanchong (Xu, 2007, p. 45):

Softly I am leaving, /
As softly as I came; /
I softly wave, /
Saying goodbye to the western sky's clouds.

Syllables in per line are 7/7/5/9 respectively.

Version 3 by Yuan K'o-chia (Yuan, 1995, p. 31):

Lightly I go, /
As lightly I came; /
I lightly wave /
To the western clouds.

Syllables of per line are 5/5/6/6 respectively.

Version 4 by Cyril Birch (Birch, 1992, p. 156):

Quietly I depart, /
As quietly as I arrived; /

I quietly wave /
 Goodbye to the western clouds.

Syllables of per line are 6/8/6/7 respectively.

Version 5 by Hsu Kai-yu (Hsu, 1989, p. 27):

Gently I walk away, /
 As gently as I came; /
 I gently wave my hand, /
 Bidding farewell to the western clouds.

Syllables in per line are 8/7/7/8 respectively.

Version 6 by Edward Connynham (Connynham, 2000, p. 63):

Softly I leave, /
 Even as I softly came; /
 I softly wave /
 To the clouds of the western sky.

Syllables in per line are 5/8/5/8 respectively.

Then, the studies will conduct a comprehensive analysis based on Symmetry Theory with the above-given corpus.

First, structural symmetry. Structural symmetry in this case refers to the correspondence of repetitive rhythmic units, syllable quantity, and pause distribution between the source text and target text. The repeated adverb quietly/softly/lightly in all six translations responds to the original core rhythmic unit “轻轻的”, so all versions basically realize basic structural symmetry in terms of recurring rhythm motifs.

In terms of syllable and pause matching, the six versions of translation have the following characteristics.

Version 3 pursues extreme formal consistency, with only 5-6 syllables per line. It achieves the highest degree of structural symmetry in syllable number and pause rhythm, but excessively compresses linguistic content.

Version 1 and Version 6 show large fluctuations in syllable quantity, with obvious gaps between lines. The uniform pause structure of the original poem is broken, leading to insufficient structural symmetry.

Version 4 and Version 5 maintain a narrow syllable range (6-8 syllables). The overall line length is balanced, and the pause positions are regular, reaching a moderate and reasonable level of structural symmetry.

Version 2 keeps the first two lines fully consistent, while the latter two lines change drastically, resulting in partial structural asymmetry.

Second, dynamic symmetry. Dynamic symmetry emphasizes the consistency of rhythmic flow, tempo and emotional evolution throughout the poem. The original maintains a steady, slow tempo from start to finish.

Version 4 and Version 5 have balanced syllable distribution and smooth rhythm progression. The tempo remains soft and stable all the way, which is highly consistent with the original dynamic rhythm and realizes excellent dynamic symmetry.

Version 3 has neat syllables but an overly compact rhythm. The slow lingering feeling of the original is lost, so dynamic symmetry is defective.

Version 1 has alternating long and short lines, and the rhythm fluctuates obviously, destroying the continuous dynamic rhythm of the original.

Version 6 presents an alternating pattern of short-long lines, forming a jumping rhythm that deviates from the original gentle tempo, with poor dynamic symmetry.

Third, functional symmetry. Functional symmetry focuses on the equivalent transmission of emotion, mood and poetic conception behind rhythm, which is the core goal of rhythm fidelity.

Version 4 accurately reproduces the poet's reluctant and tender farewell mood under the premise of balanced rhythm. The poetic conception and emotional tone are completely consistent with the original, achieving perfect functional symmetry.

Version 5 properly adjusts line length on the basis of retaining rhythmic characteristics, and the emotional expression is natural and vivid, also reaching a high level of functional symmetry.

Version 3 blindly pursues formal neatness and simplifies expression, weakening the lingering sentimental emotion of the original, so functional symmetry is insufficient.

Version 1 has complete semantic expression but disordered rhythm, and the emotional appeal is weakened.

Version 2 and Version 6 have distorted rhythmic flow, and the emotional atmosphere cannot be fully presented.

Fourth, relative symmetry. English is a stress-timed language while Chinese is a tone-timed language. Absolute formal symmetry is impossible, so relative symmetry becomes the universal principle for this translation task, which allows appropriate local adjustments on the premise of retaining core rhythm and emotion.

Version 4 is the optimal practice of relative symmetry: It does not rigidly copy the original syllable number, nor arbitrarily rewrite the rhythm. It makes reasonable concessions in partial formal details, while firmly retaining the core rhythmic characteristics and emotional connotation, striking a perfect balance between bilingual prosodic differences.

Version 5 also follows the logic of relative symmetry. It makes minor adjustments to syllables and pauses to adapt to English prosodic habits, without damaging the core artistic effect.

Version 3 rigidly chases absolute formal symmetry and violates the connotation of relative symmetry.

Versions 1, 2, and 6 either neglect formal rules or abandon core rhythm, failing to grasp the boundary of flexible adjustment defined by relative symmetry.

The four-dimensional Symmetry Theory can effectively explain the differences in translation quality among the six versions. Excellent translations always coordinate structural, dynamic, and functional symmetry under the guidance of relative symmetry; inferior translations either overemphasize formal imitation or ignore rhythmic and emotional transmission. This fully proves that Symmetry Theory has strong explanatory power, evaluation function, and practical guiding significance for rhythm fidelity in Chinese-English free verse translation.

Analysis on Dai Wangshu's *A Lane in the Rain*

A second case to verify Symmetry Theory is Dai Wangshu's *A Lane in the Rain* (Dai, 1981), a representative symbolic narrative poetry with fluctuating rhythm and layered symbolism. In translation, translators abandon absolute structural symmetry and take relative symmetry as the guideline. They retain progressive narrative rhythm and unified gloomy mood, and make flexible adjustments on sentence structure to adapt to English prosodic norms. This case proves that relative symmetry can effectively coordinate narrative logic, rhythm, and symbolic meaning. Symbolic narrative poetry combines narrative plot and implicit symbolism, and its rhythm changes with plot and emotion, which puts forward higher requirements for the flexible application of translation strategies.

Excerpt of *A Lane in the Rain* by Dai Wangshu:

撑着油纸伞，
独自 / 彷徨在悠长、悠长

又寂寥的雨巷，
我希望逢着
一个丁香一样的
结着愁怨的姑娘。

Yang Xianyi & Gladys Yang's English translation (X. Y. Yang & G. Yang, 2010, p. 89):

Alone holding an oilpaper umbrella,
I wander along a long, solitary lane in the rain,
Hoping to encounter
A girl like a bouquet of lilacs
Gnawed by anxiety and resentment.

The following analysis centers on why relative symmetry is adopted here instead of absolute structural symmetry, and how it unifies narrative rhythm, emotional tone, and symbolic connotation, which echoes the above argument. Compared with rigid absolute structural symmetry, the flexible relative symmetry strikes a delicate balance between formal adaptation and core content reproduction.

The adoption of this translation strategy is first and foremost based on the essential prosodic differences between Chinese and English poetry, which makes blind pursuit of absolute formal symmetry infeasible. Chinese is a tone-timed language, while English is a stress-timed language, forming fundamental divergence in the rhythmic construction of poetic works. The original *A Lane in the Rain* relies on repetitive phrases such as “悠长、悠长”, fragmented short lines and flexible linguistic pauses to create a winding, undulating poetic rhythm. Its unfixed line length and variable syllable density fit perfectly with the poet's fluctuating sentimental emotions, constituting the unique prosodic characteristics of modern Chinese free verse. However, rigidly copying the original line breaks, syllable distribution, and fragmented sentence structure to achieve absolute structural symmetry will make the English translation stiff and unnatural, seriously conflicting with the aesthetic and prosodic norms of English free verse (Attridge, 1995, p. 87). For this reason, the translator rationally abandons mechanical formal imitation of the original text, which serves as the basic prerequisite for the implementation of relative symmetry translation.

While abandoning rigid formal equivalence, the translation takes retaining the original's progressive narrative rhythm as the core of dynamic relative symmetry, ensuring the logical consistency of the poetic text. As a typical symbolic narrative poem, *A Lane in the Rain* follows a complete and orderly narrative clue: the poet's solitary wandering in the rainy lane, the unexpected encounter with the ethereal lilac girl, the girl's gentle approach and gradual departure, and the poet's final immersion in lingering melancholy. The poem's overall rhythm advances synchronously with the development of the narrative plot, presenting subtle and gentle emotional fluctuations. In the translation process, the translator does not rigidly adhere to the original formal frame, but flexibly adjusts sentence combinations and line division methods on the premise of completely preserving the progressive narrative logic. The slow, wandering rhythm of the poet's walking, the faint, tender cadence when the lilac girl draws near, and the fading, desolate rhythm as she disappears are all fully and accurately reproduced in the English version. This maintains the dynamic rhythmic consistency between the source text and the target text, laying a solid foundation for the smooth presentation of the poem's narrative and emotional logic.

On the basis of consistent dynamic rhythm, the translation further realizes functional relative symmetry by fully inheriting the original work's unified gloomy emotional tone and core symbolic connotation, which

constitutes the spiritual core of the relative symmetry strategy. The enduring artistic charm of *A Lane in the Rain* stems from its pervasive hazy melancholy and the unique symbolic implication of the lilac girl, who embodies the poet's inner depression, helplessness and unfulfilled yearning. In translation creation, the translator faithfully restores all core poetic images including the oil-paper umbrella, the drizzling rainy lane, and the delicate lilac flower. By adopting expressive words to shape mood, the translation completely reproduces the depressed, hazy, and sentimental atmosphere that runs through the whole poem. Meanwhile, the classic symbolic meaning of "lilac representing sorrow" in Chinese culture is accurately and completely conveyed without missing or distorting the original artistic connotation. Ultimately, the translated text undertakes the same emotional shaping and symbolic expressing functions as the original poem, achieving high-level functional symmetry in artistic effect and spiritual connotation.

To unify dynamic rhythmic symmetry and functional emotional symmetry, the translator implements targeted and flexible sentence structure adaptation at the linguistic level, which is the specific embodiment and essential guarantee of relative symmetry translation. Restricted by the inherent differences between Chinese and English grammatical systems and poetic expression habits, mechanical formal correspondence can never achieve real translational equivalence (Bassnett, 2015, p. 162). Therefore, all formal adjustments in the translation are centered on protecting the original core artistic elements. The scattered and fragmented short clauses unique to Chinese poetic expression are reasonably integrated into complete, fluent English sentences that conform to English linguistic norms; the original repetitive rhetorical devices for rhythm building and emotional rendering are retained in essence, with appropriate expression adjustments to adapt to English readers' aesthetic habits. Notably, all modifications are limited to non-core formal levels and never invade the original poem's core narrative rhythm, emotional tone, and symbolic connotation. This fully interprets the core essence of relative symmetry in poetry translation: pursuing substantive artistic equivalence and rhythmic-emotional balance on the premise of tolerating reasonable formal differences between two languages.

The translation of *A Lane in the Rain* fully proves the rationality and effectiveness of relative symmetry. For symbolic narrative free verse with fluctuating rhythm and rich implied meanings, absolute structural symmetry is unrealistic. Taking relative symmetry as the guiding principle can well coordinate narrative logic, rhythmic changes, and symbolic connotations, and achieve true rhythm fidelity and artistic equivalence in cross-linguistic translation.

Analysis on Haizi's *Facing the Sea, Spring Blossoms*

A third case is Haizi's *Facing the Sea, Spring Blossoms* (Haizi, 2009), a typical philosophical free verse with loose structure and profound thoughts. The translation does not pursue strict dynamic rhythm consistency, but combines structural symmetry and functional symmetry. Appropriate formal adjustments are allowed on the premise of retaining core ideas, forming targeted strategies for philosophical poetry. Philosophical free verse takes the expression of thoughts and philosophy as the primary goal, and rhythm serves the presentation of ideas (Tsur, 2008, p. 69), which distinguishes its translation strategies from lyrical and narrative poetry.

Original text by Haizi:

面朝大海，春暖花开
 从明天起，做一个幸福的人
 喂马，劈柴，周游世界
 从明天起，关心粮食和蔬菜

我有一所房子，面朝大海，春暖花开
 从明天起，和每一个亲人通信
 告诉他们我的幸福
 那幸福的闪电告诉我的
 我将告诉每一个人
 给每一条河每一座山取一个温暖的名字
 陌生人，我也为你祝福
 愿你有一个灿烂的前程
 愿你有情人终成眷属
 愿你在尘世获得幸福
 我只愿面朝大海，春暖花开

English translation by Dan Murphy (2019, p. 465):

Facing the Ocean, Spring Warms Flowers Open
 From tomorrow on, I will be a happy man;
 Grooming, chopping, and traveling all over the world.
 From tomorrow on, I will care foodstuff and vegetables,
 I have a house, facing the sea, with spring blossoms.
 From tomorrow on, I will write to each of my dear ones,
 Telling them of my happiness.
 What the flash of bliss has told me,
 I will share it with everyone.
 I'll give a tender name to every river and every mountain.
 Strangers, I will also offer you my blessings:
 May you have a brilliant future!
 May your lovers eventually become spouses!
 May you gain happiness in the mortal world!
 I only wish to face the sea, with spring blossoms.

Next, we turn to the symmetrical features embodied in the English translation. The recurring phrase “From tomorrow on” and the refrain “Facing the sea”, with spring blossoms act as core rhythmic markers in the original poem. The translation preserves these repetitive sentence patterns and line divisions intact. Instead of mechanically imitating the number of Chinese characters, it adapts to the layout conventions of English poetry and thus achieves well-balanced structural symmetry. Repeated sentence patterns are not only the formal feature of the poem, but also the carrier of ideological expression, so retaining them is the basic requirement of structural symmetry for philosophical poetry.

In terms of rhythmic flow, the original work presents a slow and tranquil cadence, alongside an emotional shift that develops from personal yearning to universal blessing, and eventually settles into inner perseverance. The translated text keeps an evenly distributed stress pattern and steady tempo, faithfully recreating the poem's coherent progression of emotion and rhythm, whereby desirable dynamic symmetry is accomplished. The gentle and stable rhythm echoes the poet's peaceful and sincere state of mind, and dynamic symmetry guarantees the coordination between rhythm and mental changes.

Beyond form and rhythm, the translation also attains satisfactory functional symmetry. It accurately conveys all core imagery, sincere sentiments, and profound philosophical connotations of the source text. Just as the original rhythm serves to express emotions and deliver thoughts, the rhythm of the translation performs the same artistic function, with neither semantic deviation nor loss of artistic appeal. For philosophical poetry, functional symmetry is reflected in the complete transmission of poetic philosophy and spiritual connotation, which is the highest evaluation standard.

Given the inherent distinctions between the tone-based rhythm of Chinese and the stress-based rhythm of English, the translator further implements flexible processing in line with the principle of relative symmetry. Appropriate supplements to sentence elements and revisions to word collocations are made merely on the non-essential formal level. All such adjustments cater to the linguistic norms of both languages while leaving the core artistic value of the poem untouched, which perfectly interprets the essence of relative symmetry in poetic translation.

To conclude this case analysis on philosophical free verse, structural and functional symmetry lay the fundamental guarantee for qualified translation, while dynamic symmetry sustains the overall rhythmic effect. Meanwhile, relative symmetry directs reasonable formal modifications across the translation process. This example further validates the differentiated application principles of Symmetry Theory in light of poetic genres.

Intra-case Comparison & Rule Summary

On the basis of the above bidirectional cases of different genres and styles, this section conducts cross-case induction, summarizes the differentiated application rules of Symmetry Theory, and evaluates the practical effectiveness and applicable scope of the proposed translation framework. Inductive summary of multiple cases can refine universal operational rules and make the theoretical framework more guiding (Aristotle, 1996, p. 88).

The priority of four symmetric dimensions is not fixed, but dynamically adjusted according to poetic genres, which is the core rule summarized from empirical analysis.

Lyrical free verse emphasizes structural symmetry and functional symmetry, for regular rhythmic units and repetitive structures are the formal carrier of lyricism, while functional symmetry ensures the accurate transmission of emotion and aesthetic mood.

Narrative & symbolic free verse attaches importance to dynamic symmetry, because such poems carry progressive plots and fluctuating emotions, so dynamic rhythm that matches narrative pace and emotional changes becomes the key to translation.

Experimental & imagist free verse, relative symmetry is taken as the core. Fragmented forms, personalized rhythm, and compact imagery determine that rigid formal symmetry is impractical, and relative symmetry allows reasonable formal deformation to adapt to the unique artistic characteristics of experimental poetry.

The above differentiation originates from the inherent artistic attributes of different poetic genres. Combining $E \rightarrow C$ and $C \rightarrow E$ cases, three universal rules for translating free verse guided by Symmetry Theory are concluded.

Rhythm priority principle: Rhythm is the soul of free verse. All symmetric strategies take the reproduction of original rhythmic characteristics as the primary goal. Formal adjustments cannot deviate from the overall rhythmic tone of the source text (Jakobson, 1960, p. 362).

Function-oriented flexibility principle: On the premise of retaining the core emotion, imagery and philosophical connotation of the original poem, local formal structure, syllable number and sentence pattern can be adjusted appropriately, for form is subordinate to poetic function.

Relative symmetry is a universal solution: English and Chinese belong to different phonetic and prosodic systems, and absolute formal symmetry is impossible to achieve in bilingual poetry translation. Thus relative symmetry is the most feasible strategy to bridge prosodic gaps.

Verified by canonical classic poems and modern works in both directions, the Symmetry Theory-based translation framework has strong universality and operability. It covers multiple mainstream genres of modern free verse, and can formulate targeted symmetric strategies according to poetic styles, breaking the limitation of generalized translation theories that ignore poetic genres. It clarifies the priority order of different symmetric dimensions, provides clear operational guidance for translators to balance form, rhythm, and poetic connotation, and effectively solves the difficulty of rhythm conversion in English-Chinese free verse translation. The framework takes relative symmetry as the bottom-line principle, fully respects the prosodic differences between English and Chinese, and avoids the two extremes of rigid literal translation and arbitrary free translation. In general, this framework can serve as a systematic guiding tool for bilingual free verse translation.

Beyond the practical rules and genre-based strategies summarized above, this multi-dimensional symmetry framework also resolves a long-standing controversy in free verse translation: the conflict between artistic creation and translation norms. Many translators tend to either overemphasize literal rhythm imitation and sacrifice poetic expressiveness, or pursue creative rewriting and abandon the original rhythmic features entirely. The four-dimensional Symmetry Theory sets a clear boundary for translation flexibility, requiring all creative adjustments to revolve around core rhythmic, emotional, and thematic symmetry rather than subjective arbitrary modification. In this sense, the framework not only standardizes translation behaviors, but also protects the artistic individuality of both source and target poems, striking a rational balance between norm and creativity.

Furthermore, the bidirectional case analysis also proves that the application of Symmetry Theory is not limited to individual poetic lines or local rhythmic segments, but runs through the whole textual rhythm layout. A complete free verse work possesses an overall rhythmic trajectory formed by the combination of countless small rhythmic units. When conducting translation practice, translators should first grasp the global rhythmic trend of the full text, and then implement localized symmetric matching. This holistic thinking makes up for the defect of traditional case studies that only focus on partial sentence analysis and ignore the overall rhythmic aesthetics of poetry.

From the perspective of cross-cultural communication, this framework also enhances the readability and acceptability of translated free verse among target readers. English readers are accustomed to stress-based prosody, while Chinese readers are sensitive to tonal changes and semantic pauses. By converting heterogeneous prosodic features through functional symmetry and relative symmetry, translations can conform to the aesthetic habits of the target language community while retaining the original poetic temperament. This means the framework is not merely a technical tool for rhythm conversion, but also a useful medium to promote the cultural dissemination of free verse between China and Western countries (Benjamin, 1968, p. 79).

Admittedly, the framework also reveals some practical limitations in the verification process. For highly experimental free verse with extremely personalized and irregular rhythm, even relative symmetry can hardly fully restore the original rhythmic texture, because such works break almost all conventional prosodic rules and rely heavily on the unique writing style of individual poets. In addition, for free verse loaded with strong regional cultural allusions and folk prosodic features, rhythm fidelity will be restricted by cultural barriers to a certain extent. These findings also point out the direction for further optimization of the framework in subsequent

research, and remind translators to combine specific text characteristics and cultural backgrounds when applying Symmetry Theory.

Conclusion

After theoretical deduction and empirical verification, five core conclusions are drawn in this research. First, rhythm is the essential carrier of emotion, theme, and aesthetics in free verse, and rhythm fidelity should be taken as the primary criterion in English-Chinese free verse translation. Second, Symmetry Theory, including structural, functional, dynamic, and relative symmetry, is highly compatible with free verse translation, and the four dimensions form an organic whole to guide rhythmic conversion. Third, differentiated strategies should be adopted for bidirectional translation: converting English stress groups to Chinese two-character units and pauses in English-to-Chinese translation, and transforming Chinese disyllabic units and tonal alternation to English metrical feet and stress in Chinese-to-English translation. Fourth, four practical principles—rhythmic functional symmetry, hierarchical priority, differentiated bidirectional adaptation, and flexibility-with-boundaries—can effectively standardize translation operations. Fifth, in specific practice, translators need to adjust the weight of each symmetry dimension according to poetic genres to realize comprehensive rhythm fidelity.

This research has two major innovations in theory and practice. On the theoretical level, it innovatively takes Symmetry Theory as a unified theoretical framework for English-Chinese free verse rhythm translation, making up for the lack of systematic theoretical guidance in previous studies. It also integrates Western and Chinese rhythmic theories and translation viewpoints to realize in-depth cross-cultural theoretical dialogue. On the practical level, it refines quantifiable and operable rhythmic conversion rules and multi-dimensional evaluation criteria, providing practical guidance for translators.

However, the research also has certain limitations that need to be improved in follow-up studies. Firstly, the corpus selected in this paper is limited, and follow-up studies can expand the corpus covering more styles and themes of free verse. Secondly, this research mainly discusses rhythm conversion from the perspective of macroscopic prosody, and subsequent researches can combine phonetic experiments and cognitive linguistics to conduct micro-level analysis of rhythm perception.

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