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## **Chinese Translation Errors in English/Chinese Bilingual Children's Picture Books**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The aim of this study was to review the Chinese translation errors in 31 English/Chinese bilingual children's picture books. While bilingual children's books make definite contributions to language acquisition, few studies have examined the quality of these books, and even fewer have specifically focused on English/Chinese bilingual books. (Available research on bilingual books is with English/Spanish bilingual books and refers only to general issues in those books.) In this study, Chinese translation and Pinyin errors were noted (in English/simplified-Chinese bilingual books, English/simplified-Chinese bilingual books with Pinyin, and English/traditional-Chinese bilingual books). Findings identified eight types of Chinese translation errors and five types of Pinyin errors. The authors conclude that there are numerous errors in translation, that translation skills need improvement, and that publishers need to look more closely at (and have higher standards for) translators.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The population of Chinese as second/foreign language learners is growing with surprising speed in the world. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2011), Asian/Pacific-Islander language speakers were the third largest group in the U.S. in 2009, and Chinese is a popular Asian/Pacific-Islander language among second/foreign language learners. Therefore, more attention should be given to Chinese language-learning materials.

Children's literature is a powerful language-teaching source, and it is vital that teachers use the highest quality in the classroom. Multicultural literature serves as an important part of language education, and not only enhances all children's understanding of different cultures, but also improves children's reading, writing, and thinking abilities (Norton, 1990). As one type of multicultural literature, bilingual children's picture books have shown merit (Cummins, 1981, 1991, 2001; Ernst-Slavit & Mulhern, 2003; Walker, Edwards, & Blacksell, 1996; Thomas & Collier, 2001). While bilingual children's books offer much assistance in education, these books are problematic for parents and teachers who do not know one of the languages used, and they may not be confident in using the books as they are unsure about the quality. For this reason, it is

necessary to review the quality of bilingual books. Typically the review of bilingual books includes many aspects, such as illustration, translation, cover, and content, but this study focused on only one of these qualities: Chinese translation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Children's Literature

Children's literature plays an important role in education, and according to Faltis (1998), this is true for a number of reasons. For one, storybooks develop vocabulary and concepts of other cultures by presenting them in contexts, and using pictures and other clues to aid in comprehension. Equally, the context in which children interact verbally is depicted in storybooks, capturing their interest by way of identification. Further, children's literature helps children form attitudes and behaviors needed in order to be successful in society. The work of Kearney (1969) demonstrated that picture books for children have ten values: (1) these books can tell stories in a pleasurable way; (2) children can share the same experience (identify) with the characters in realistic fiction; (3) through the stories children can discover how to solve problems of life; (4) these books can broaden their imagination and improve their self concepts; (5) they can teach them to honor beauty; (6) these books cultivate a child's sense of humanity; (7) they help children learn content-area knowledge; (8) they help children to appreciate art; (9) they provide background information for future complex adolescent literature; and, (10) children's literature builds a child's concept of a "hero."

### Multicultural Literature

As classrooms in the U.S. are composed of diverse students, the need for multicultural literature becomes more apparent, and its importance has been emphasized by a number of studies. Piper (1986) maintains that traditional folklore helps students notice different language and cultural backgrounds. Tway (1989) posits that multicultural literature helps students understand both themselves and others. Norton (1990) believes that developing an understanding of our literary heritage is one of the most important tasks for educators, whether that heritage is European, African, Native American, Hispanic, or Asian. Norton also argued that positive multicultural literature has been used effectively to help readers identify with cultural heritages, understand sociological change, respect the values of minority groups, raise aspirations, and expand imagination and creativity. Norton further listed the benefits for children when they are exposed to multicultural literature: They can learn to understand and appreciate diverse literary heritages; they can discover values and beliefs of people from folktales, fables, myths, and legends; they can learn to appreciate different beliefs and values; they can realize the co-existence of similarities and differences; they can learn to understand and respect the artistic contributions from diverse cultures; and multicultural literature can enhance skills in reading, writing, and thinking. Lowery and Sabis-Burns (2007) affirm that multicultural literature "cultivates an educated awareness to other cultural customs and values, promotes communication with people from other countries, and enhances experiences involving theirs and others' cultures. Through literature, readers explore lands and cultural mores that they would otherwise not experience" (p. 50).

## **Semi-Bilingual Books**

Agosto (1997) stated that it is important to have English/Spanish bilingual books that have occasional Spanish words or phrases, called *semi-bilingual books*. Children are likely to learn English or Spanish when hearing and reading English/Spanish bilingual texts, and the Spanish words and illustrations in English/Spanish semi-bilingual books give children guidance in understanding English scripts that are often confusing to them. Agosto concluded that English/Spanish semi-bilingual books can help ELLs feel comfortable, and children who are unsure about their English skills can gain confidence in working with the English language when they see familiar Spanish words and phrases in these books. Agosto also stated that English/Spanish semi-bilingual books can emphasize cultural issues, and having these books in classrooms and libraries help Spanish speakers feel a sense of importance and place in the culture. The well-written English/Spanish semi-bilingual book, showing the beauty of the Spanish language, can also help non-Spanish speakers experience Hispanic language and culture.

## **Translation Issues in Bilingual Books**

As one component of bilingual books, the quality of translation is critical to the success of a book (Edwards & Walker, 1996). Translated texts display the relationship between “the target culture (to which the translation is aimed)” and “the source culture (where the texts come from)” (Yamazaki, 2002, p. 53). Translation can influence a bilingual book’s meaning, thus influencing comprehension. Poor translation disrupts comprehension (Barrera & Quiroa, 2003) and lessens the educational value of the literature (Whiteside, 2007). In Barrera and Quiroa’s (2003) study of Spanish texts, it was noted that awkward dialogue, misuse of words, and an overgeneralization of the Spanish language “disrupt[s] the unfolding of the stories overall and create[s] highly redundant texts for the bilingual reader” (p. 263). Naidoo and Lopez-Robertson (2007) suggest that there are numerous words in the Spanish language that do not have an English equivalent; therefore, it is the responsibility of the translator to find appropriate words or phrases. Literal translations have a tendency to lose the nuances of the original text, resulting in stilted or wooden language (Naidoo & Lopez-Robertson). Word-for-word translations (translating word for word from one language to another language, i.e., converting each word to Chinese but in English word order without attending to the whole sentence’s meaning) will aid in learning specific vocabulary in the second language, but the meaning of the text may be obscured (Whiteside, 2007). Word-for-word translations must be avoided; the exact wording of a text may be altered in order to ensure that the spirit of the text is being conveyed (Whiteside). The misuse, overuse, or underuse of words in bilingual books may hinder a reader’s comprehension, and cause a breakdown in communication (Saeed & Fareh, 2006). Finally, the formality of the texts should match (Whiteside, 2007). If the text is translated into a more formal language, it may become too advanced and confusing compared to the colloquial language to which children are accustomed (Walker, Edwards, & Blacksell, 1996).

## METHOD

### Procedure

The books for this study were identified through an online search of available English/Chinese bilingual books in the U.S. market. By definition, the English/Chinese bilingual books had to be (1) designated for children, (2) picture books, (3) published within ten years (from 1998 to 2008), (4) English/simplified-Chinese bilingual books, (5) English/simplified-Chinese bilingual including Pinyin, and, (6) English/traditional-Chinese bilingual books (not including Zhuyin Fuhao).

There were 31 English/Chinese bilingual picture books available for this study: 19 English/simplified-Chinese books, two English/simplified-Chinese with Pinyin books, and ten English/traditional-Chinese books. All the books were selected from two publishing houses: Mantra Lingua and Milet. All books were read aloud, and Chinese translation errors were marked during readings. This process of identifying Chinese translation errors was conducted twice.

### Data Collection

The data from the 31 books was evaluated based on quantitative and qualitative methods. Each English/Chinese bilingual book was closely examined using the following criteria: (1) *Chinese character*, including overuse, omission, and wrong character (which often meant that a homophone of the appropriate character was used); (2) *Chinese translation*, including inappropriate expressions, wrong translation, word-for-word translation, classical-Chinese translation (vocabulary of ancient Chinese which is not appropriate for modern Chinese), and *zeugma*, which refers to the fitness between Chinese characters; in Chinese, for example, a noun can only be matched to certain adjectives (in this study, *zeugma* meant that the Chinese adjective character should not have been used to describe other Chinese characters, or that a character did not fit grammatically or idiomatically); and (3) *Pinyin errors*, including tone omission, tone mistake (using the wrong tone), alphabet omission, word omission, and incorrect Pinyin. As background information, Pinyin is the pronunciation system in the Chinese language which uses the same 26 English letters to represent initials (i.e., 声母) and finals or compound finals (i.e., 韵母). In addition, Pinyin also adopts the tone system, which includes five different tones. The first four are the commonly used tones, indicating the ups and downs of the voice, and the fifth one appears to have no tone. Two characters that are marked by the same Pinyin letters yet different tones are often strikingly different in meaning.

## FINDINGS

The data was collected into three categories: overall Chinese translation errors, translation errors in the English/*simplified*-Chinese books (with Pinyin), and translation errors in the English/*traditional*-Chinese bilingual children's picture books. The frequency and types of translation errors were noted. A detailed description of the analysis of these errors follows.

## Overall Translation Errors

Some of the English/Chinese bilingual books had high-quality Chinese translation, but the majority of the books reviewed were problematic. Eight types of Chinese translation errors were identified: inappropriate expression, wrong Chinese translation, word-for-word translation, classical-Chinese translation, overuse of Chinese characters, omission, wrong Chinese character, and zeugma.

Over three-fifths of the bilingual books used inappropriate Chinese expressions (see Table 1). A little more than half of the reviewed English/Chinese bilingual books used wrong Chinese characters. Nearly half of the books had errors in zeugma, and 41.94% of the books overused Chinese characters. Classical-Chinese translation could be found in 38.7% of the bilingual books, nearly 26% of the books reviewed omitted Chinese characters, and 16% of the books reviewed had wrong Chinese translations. In addition, over 6% of the books reviewed employed word-for-word translations.

**Table 1.** Percentage of Overall Chinese Translation Errors

Chinese Character			Chinese Translation				
Overuse	Omission	Wrong Character	Inappropriate Expressions	Wrong Translation	Word-for-Word Translation	Classical-Chinese Translation	Zeugma
13/31 41.94%	8/31 25.8%	16/31 51.61%	19/31 61.29%	5/31 16.13%	2/31 6.45%	12/31 38.7%	14/31 45.16%

The number of Chinese translation errors is displayed in Table 2. Regarding Chinese character errors, 120 occurrences were noted, including 59 episodes of overused Chinese characters, 22 incidences of omitted Chinese characters, and 39 places where the wrong Chinese characters were used. Errors in Chinese translation occurred in 344 places: 196 incidences of inappropriately expressed Chinese meaning, 5 places where English was translated into Chinese inaccurately, 4 places in which word-for-word translations occurred, 56 incidences where English was translated into classical-Chinese translations, and 83 episodes of zeugma.

**Table 2.** Number of Overall Chinese Translation Errors

Chinese Character			Chinese Translation				
Overuse	Omission	Wrong Character	Inappropriate Expressions	Wrong Translation	Word-for-Word Translation	Classical-Chinese Translation	Zeugma
59	22	39	196	5	4	56	83
Total: 120			Total: 344				

## Chinese Translation Errors in the English/Simplified-Chinese Books

At the time of this study, Mantra Lingua was the only publisher that published English/simplified-Chinese and English/simplified-Chinese with Pinyin bilingual children's picture books. In this section, findings refer to the Chinese translation errors found in those books.

### *Errors in Simplified-Chinese Characters*

Overusing, omitting, and using wrong simplified-Chinese characters were the three types of errors in the English/simplified-Chinese bilingual books. Overuse of simplified-Chinese characters involved using an additional simplified-Chinese character in one sentence or phrase which resulted in the duplication of meaning. For instance, in *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (Attard, 2005), the Chinese characters 显 and 露 have the same meaning, and in the Chinese sentence “显露出一个黑暗的山洞” (reveal a dark cave), it is superfluous to have both simplified-Chinese characters 显露 in the same sentence.

Omission occurred when the simplified-Chinese character was neglected. For example, in *Fox Fables* (Casey, 2006a), another simplified-Chinese character, 子, should have been put between “感到肚” and “饿” to appropriately express *feel hungry* (感到肚子饿). Wrong simplified-Chinese characters were used, occurring often when a homophone of the appropriate character was used. For instance, in *Farmer Duck* (Waddell, 2006), 着 should have been used instead of 著, even though they share the same beginning sound. Forty-five percent of the 31 English/simplified-Chinese bilingual books employed wrong simplified-Chinese characters (see Table 3), while 35.48% overused, and 25.8% omitted, simplified-Chinese characters.

**Table 3.** Percentage of English/Simplified-Chinese Translation Errors

Simplified-Chinese Character			Simplified-Chinese Translation				
Overuse	Omission	Wrong Character	Inappropriate Expressions	Wrong Translation	Word-for-Word Translation	Classical-Chinese Translation	Zeugma
11/31 35.48%	8/31 25.8%	14/31 45.16%	16/31 51.61%	4/31 12.90%	2/31 6.45%	11/31 35.48%	13/31 41.94%

Regarding the numbers, there were 112 errors in using simplified-Chinese characters in 22 English/simplified-Chinese bilingual books (see Table 4). Among the 112 errors, 53 places overused, 22 places omitted, and 37 places employed wrong simplified-Chinese characters.

**Table 4.** Number of English/Simplified-Chinese Translation Errors

Simplified-Chinese Character			Simplified-Chinese Translation				
Overuse	Omission	Wrong Character	Inappropriate Expressions	Wrong Translation	Word-for-Word Translation	Classical-Chinese Translation	Zeugma
53	22	37	185	5	4	55	81
Total: 112			Total: 330				

### *Errors in Simplified-Chinese Translations*

A major translation error was the word *dream*; the translator rendered it “produce dream” which is a nonsensical expression in Chinese. A second major error involved the wrong use of a Chinese character. The Chinese characters 着 and 著 have the same beginning sounds (*zh*), but the translators confused these two characters and used 著 where they should have used 着.

Inappropriate expressions, wrong Chinese translations, word-for-word translations, classical-Chinese translations and zeugma are the five types of errors that were found. Inappropriate expression occurred when the Chinese translation did not fit the context. For example, in *Fox Fables* (Casey, 2006b), the phrase “抵□” (arrived) is a very formal Chinese expression, and is out of place when used in that sentence’s context. Inaccurate translation occurred when the Chinese translation did not reflect the original meaning. For example, in *Grandma’s Saturday Soup* (Fraser, 2005), *dumpling* was translated into “汤团” (which is a kind of snack or light refreshment made out of sticky rice powder and sweet fillings—not a dumpling). A classical-Chinese translation error example is in *Hansel and Gretel* (Gregory, 2005): *three days* was translated into “三日,” and 日 is a classical-Chinese character and not appropriate for modern Chinese. An example of word-for-word translation was in *Ellie’s Secret Diary* (Barkow, 2004), where the Chinese sentence “我抱着弗骡在臂弯中”(I held Flo in my arms) was translated according to English word order: 我 is *I*, 抱着 is *held*, 弗骡 is *Flo*, 在 is *in*, 臂弯中 is *my arms*, and it did not make sense in Chinese. A good example of zeugma was in *The Dragon’s Tears* (Gregory, 2001): the Chinese adjective characters, 华丽的, cannot describe the noun, 珍珠, but they are used together in this book.

A little more than half of the English/simplified-Chinese bilingual books contained inappropriate expressions, and about two-fifths of the English books contained wrong zeugma. Over one-third of the books (35.48%) translated Chinese into classical Chinese. Approximately 13% contained incorrect English-to-Chinese translations, and more than three-fifths employed word-for-word translations.

Table 4 above presents the number of Chinese translation errors in the 22 English/simplified-Chinese bilingual books. A total of 330 errors in simplified-Chinese translations were recorded: 185 occurrences of inappropriate Chinese, 5 occurrences in which English was translated into the wrong Chinese meaning, 4 occurrences of word-for-word translation, 55 occurrences of English translations into classical Chinese, and 81 instances of zeugma.

### *Pinyin Errors*

Only one of the two English/simplified-Chinese (with Pinyin) books had errors in Pinyin, and five types of Pinyin errors were found in that book: tone mistake, tone omission, letter omission, incorrect Pinyin, and Pinyin omission (lacked essential Pinyin letters). For instance, in *My Daddy is a Giant* (Norac, 2004), the tone of the Chinese character, 当, was wrong; the tone of this character should have been the first tone instead of the fourth tone. The Pinyin of the Chinese character, 来, was sometimes marked as Pinyin without a tone. The Pinyin of the Chinese character 都 should be *dōu* rather than *dū*, which indicates the confusion of the compound finals in Pinyin. Similarly, the Pinyin *and* tone of the Chinese character, 了, were incorrect.

### **Chinese Translation Errors in the English/Traditional-Chinese Books**

English/traditional-Chinese bilingual children's picture books are the main products of the bilingual books published by Milet. Nine English/traditional-Chinese bilingual children's picture books were reviewed in this study.

#### *Errors in Traditional-Chinese Characters*

Among the nine books reviewed, traditional-Chinese characters were overused and wrong traditional-Chinese characters appeared. An example of overuse was in *Eating* (Swain, 2000), where the Chinese character, 子, in “在鍋子里煮,” was an extra character. An example of wrong traditional-Chinese character was in *Frog and the Wide World* (Velthuijs, 2000) where 望 should have been 往 in the sentence “望這兒看 (look here).”

The percentage of the books that contained traditional-Chinese character errors is displayed in Table 5. Six percent of the books overused traditional-Chinese characters and used wrong traditional characters. None of the books omitted traditional-Chinese characters.

**Table 5.** Percentage of English/Traditional-Chinese Translation Errors

Traditional-Chinese Character			Traditional-Chinese Translation				
Overuse	Omission	Wrong Character	Inappropriate Expressions	Wrong Translation	Word-for-Word Translation	Classical-Chinese Translation	Zeugma
2/31 6.45%	0/31 0%	2/31 6.45%	3/31 9.68%	1/31 3.23%	0/31 0%	1/31 3.23%	1/31 3.23%

There were a total of eight episodes of errors in Chinese character in the reviewed English/traditional-Chinese books (see Table 6). Traditional-Chinese characters were overused in six places, and in two places wrong Chinese characters were employed.

*Errors in Traditional-Chinese Translations*

Inappropriate expression, classical-Chinese translations, and zeugma were the three types errors found in the reviewed English/traditional-Chinese bilingual books. An example of inappropriate expression is in *The Lucky Grain of Corn* (Tadjo, 2000c), where the sentence, “把動人的故事對他講,” does not sound right due to its syntactical structure. An example of classical-Chinese translation was in *Frog and the Wide World* (Velthuijs, 2000); 未曾 in “未曾見過的地方” is classical Chinese, and is not used in modern Chinese. An example of zeugma was in *Mamy Wata and the Monster* (Tadjo, 2000a); the Chinese adjective characters, 安寧的, cannot describe 河里, but were used together in this book. As presented in Table 5 above, 9.68% of the English/traditional-Chinese bilingual books contained inappropriate expressions. Three percent of these books contained incorrect Chinese, used classical-Chinese characters, and did not maintain the fitness between Chinese characters.

In numbers, 14 translation errors were found in these books (see Table 6). Eleven episodes of inappropriate traditional-Chinese expressions occurred; classical-Chinese translation was found in one place, and two occurrences of zeugma were noted. Wrong translation and word-for-word translations were not observed in the reviewed English/traditional-Chinese bilingual books.

**Table 6.** Number of Translation Errors in the English/Traditional-Chinese Books

Traditional-Chinese Character			Traditional-Chinese Translation				
Overuse	Omission	Wrong Character	Inappropriate Expressions	Wrong Translation	Word-for-Word Translation	Classical-Chinese Translation	Zeugma
6	0	2	11	0	0	1	2
Total: 8			Total: 14				

## DISCUSSION

The 31 English/Chinese bilingual books in this study contained eight types of errors in Chinese translation. Among these types of errors, using incorrect Chinese characters and inappropriate expressions occurred frequently. The use of classical Chinese, zeugma, and the overuse of Chinese characters occurred at low frequencies. In the 22 English/simplified-Chinese books, the errors that occurred frequently were using inappropriate expression, incorrect Chinese characters, and zeugma. Word-for-word translations and incorrect translations were noted at low occurrences. In the nine English/traditional-Chinese books, high levels of errors were found in using inappropriate expressions, wrong Chinese characters, and the overuse of Chinese characters, whereas, fewer errors of classical Chinese and zeugma were found. No errors were identified for omission of Chinese characters and word-for word translations in this category. We

can conclude with confidence that translators for the English/traditional-Chinese bilingual books exhibited skill in avoiding word-for-word translations and in not missing Chinese characters.

However, based on the findings, it is apparent that the translators were not highly skilled in using correct Chinese characters and expressing Chinese in appropriate ways. Their other translation skills, such as using modern Chinese, correct zeugma, and utilizing succinct Chinese characters, also needed improvement. These Chinese language errors could mislead or have a negative influence on students who are learning English, Chinese, or both languages. When selecting English/Chinese bilingual books for children, it is best for both teachers and parents to find a person who is proficient in both languages and have them check the translation. As a translator's skills greatly influence the quality in bilingual books, publishers need to set higher standards for translators; they need to set criteria for measuring the translation quality of bilingual books, and need to find professional book reviewers for bilingual books. When checking the Chinese translation, incorrect Chinese characters and inappropriate expressions should receive more attention because these errors occurred frequently.

The research on bilingual books is an ongoing project. Future researchers could study further the Chinese translation errors (for example, study the lexical category of the Chinese translation errors), and could focus on other qualities in bilingual books, such as topic, illustration style, authors, illustrators, translators, and publishers.

## CONCLUSION

In consideration of the increasing diversity in today's classrooms, it is important for educators to enhance students' understanding of diversity and tap into appropriate resources to optimize their language learning. Bilingual books are open windows to multicultural understanding and language/literacy development in classrooms. This study identified the Chinese translation errors in 31 English/Chinese bilingual books, and discussed how errors may interfere with exposure to and comprehension of authentic languages, and hinder students' language-learning and biliteracy skills. These findings contribute to educators' awareness of the quality of bilingual books. As researchers strongly believe in the benefits of high-quality bilingual books in promoting bilingual and bi-literacy development, this project serves as a first step to raise awareness for educators and publishers to strive for better translations in bilingual books.

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## APPENDIX

### English/Chinese Bilingual Children's Picture Books Reviewed

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