

Writing in Translation: A Cross-Dialectal Comparison of Chinese Translations of *The Little Prince*

Paul Cockrum, Xuan Ye, Ka Fai Law, and Marjorie K.M. Chan
The Ohio State University

cockrum.5@osu.edu • ye.914@osu.edu • law.246@osu.edu • chan.9@osu.edu

Linguistics has, for the past century, focused squarely on the spoken language and neglected the intriguing linguistic challenges of studying the written language. One such challenge involves the creation of a translation. That task is difficult, as translating materials requires intimate knowledge of both the source language as well as the target language. Translating into a language whose writing system is still debated by its speakers presents even more challenges, as the act of translation into a specific orthographic system serves to valorize the choice of said system. One such example is the controversy surrounding the translation of *Le Petit Prince* [The Little Prince] into Andalucian Spanish, which triggered reactions for and against such written representation (Del Rey and Méndez, 2022). The present project analyzes six different translations of *Le Petit Prince* into three dialects: Cantonese, Taiwanese Southern Min, and Mandarin. Utilizing *AntConc* and *AntPConc* (Anthony, 2022), a comparison of the translations highlights different linguistic and orthographic strategies both intra- and interlanguage. The data reveal several points of interest for Cantonese linguists in the realm of lexical choice, preferred writing register, as well as special usage cases of perceived equivalent lexical items across the languages. All the factors combined contribute to the construction of a translation and perceived valor of a specific orthographic system.

The analysis showed that all translations used between a total of 2,000 to 2,400 tokens divided into 465 to 539 unique types in the translation of the first three chapters. Despite a similar number of types, there were several differences in lexical choices between Cantonese, Mandarin, and Taiwanese. The Cantonese translation, in particular, displayed significantly less usage of the possessive and relative marker *ge3* 嘅 than Mandarin *de* 的 or Taiwanese *ê* 个/的. This was in part due to Cantonese not requiring the possessive marker in cases where a measure word was present or by the use of alternate syntactic constructions where the Mandarin translation utilized the *shì* 是... *de* 的 construction.

In addition to the lexical choices, there was a perceived gap in register taken for writing the studied translations. Both Mandarin and Taiwanese took a more formal literary style in translation, whereas the Cantonese version maintained a colloquial approach to the text. This was evidenced by the disparate use of sentence final particles (SFPs) throughout the text. Cantonese makes extensive use of these particles with 61 occurrences of a SFP compared to 11 in one Mandarin text and 12 in one Taiwanese text. Orthographically, the Cantonese fondness for using the ‘mouth’ radical in SFPs also shows up in the corpus, with unique graphic forms for such Cantonese SFPs as 咩, 咋, 啫, 喇, 嘅, 喎, etc. The text also revealed differences in what have been perceived as equivalents across the three dialects. For example, the conjunction ‘but’ was in nearly complementary distribution. The Mandarin text used *kěshì* 可是 almost exclusively, and Cantonese and Taiwanese exclusively used *daan6 hai6* 但係 and *m̄-koh* 毋閣 respectively. Elsewhere, greater polysemy may occur in one dialect, such as the broader usages of *hou2* 好 in Cantonese (e.g., 好耐 ‘a long time’, 好得人驚 ‘very scary’, 唔好唔記得 ‘don't forget’).

The results provide a cross-dialectal perspective on translation studies in Chinese linguistics, calling attention to the translation choices made by the authors. As such, the necessity of familiarity with the local language to provide a compelling translation of any work is reinforced. Once such a compelling translation is achieved, it can be used to promote one’s own ideals about the language and writing system.

References

- Anthony, Laurence. 2022. *AntConc* (Version 4.0.9) [Computer Software]. Tokyo: Waseda University.
<https://www.laurenceanthony.net/software/antconc/>
- Del Rey Quesada, Santiago and Elena Méndez García de Paredes. 2022. Translation and linguistic standardization or the accomplishment of divergence by force. *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica* 70(1),53-94.