

# Comparing AI and Human Translation of O. Henry's Short Stories under the Guidance of Functional Equivalence Theory

Thwe Nu San<sup>1</sup>, Qingzheng Song<sup>2</sup>, Changhui Bao<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Foreign Languages, Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, China

<sup>2</sup>School of Journalism and Communication, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China

<sup>3</sup>Wuluolu Middle School, Wuhan, China

## Abstract

Existing research has primarily focused on human translation, while analyses of AI translation remain relatively limited. To address this gap, this study employed Nida's functional equivalence theory to compare the performance of AI translation and human translation in O. Henry's short stories, analyzing their strengths and limitations. The study selected cases from the two translated versions of three O. Henry short stories. After conducting a qualitative comparison across three dimensions—linguistic, style, and readability—to assess the degree of functional equivalence, the study finds that AI translation is not a literal translation, but rather a flexibly-adjusted translation based on context and style. However, when translating complex texts, the translation can be stiff, and sometimes the style is too strong. In contrast, the human translation is overall logical, coherent and natural with more stable translation quality. However, human translation may cost more time and thus is not as efficient as AI translation. This study validates the applicability of functional equivalence theory in literary translation and provides implications for optimizing AI translation, contributing to further explorations of effective human-machine collaborative translation models.

## Keywords

Functional Equivalence Theory; AI translation; human translation; O. Henry's short stories.

## 1. Introduction

As one of the most famous short story writers, O. Henry (1862-1910) has left a profound impression on readers around the world, particularly with his unexpected and twist endings [1]. His works present the life of the American underclass in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, blending humor with satire and laughter with tears. Nevertheless, due to the complexity of his language, translating his stories is quite challenging[2]. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt effective translation strategies to ensure that target language readers can have a similar experience to original language readers [3].

In recent years, the highly-developing AI has been bringing profound changes to the field of translation. Despite its progressive development, AI translation is still an area that needs to be further explored[4][5]. The application of AI in the translation of O. Henry's short stories has received little attention from researchers.

This study aimed to fill this research gap by analyzing AI translation and human translation of O. Henry's short stories under the guidance of Nida's[6] functional equivalence theory. The study mainly focused on how AI and human translators achieve functional equivalence in three levels. Taking representative short stories like *The Gift of the Magi* and *The Last Leaf* as

examples, this study analyzed specific translation cases, measuring the degree of functional equivalence. In doing so, it sought to explore the advantages and disadvantages of AI translation and human translation as well as the potential reasons behind the differences in AI and human performance.

The AI used in this study was DeepSeek, one of the most popular AI tool in China. Designed by a Chinese company, DeepSeek is good at natural language processing, deep learning, and data analysis. Due to these powerful capabilities, it has drawn significant attention since its launch on January 15, 2025.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Functional Equivalence Theory

The functional equivalence theory evolved from the earlier concept of equivalent effect, Nida further developed the idea in his 1964 work *Toward a Science of Translating*[6], where he posed two concepts, respectively, dynamic equivalence and formal equivalence. Dynamic equivalence means that readers of the translated version react similarly to how readers reacted to the source text. It aims to use words and sentences similar to the original language to express the author's meaning as more faithfully as possible.

As Nida's research progressed, he recognized that dynamic equivalence risked overemphasizing content equivalence, causing the misunderstanding that formal equivalence and content equivalence is contradictory. To address this, he refined his theory in *From One Language to Another*[7] in 1986, introducing the functional equivalence theory to balance content and form. Content equivalence prioritizes clarity and cultural adaptability, ensuring the translated version aligns with target language readers' linguistic and cultural contexts. Meanwhile, formal equivalence maintains structural and grammatical fidelity, preserving the original's semantic and syntactic features. Although Nida prioritized content over form, he also emphasized that translators should also strive to achieve form equivalence as much as possible. Nida further elaborated two levels of equivalence: minimal equivalence and maximal equivalence in *Language, Culture, and Translating*[8] in 1993. The minimal level ensures target language readers can understand the text and image its original intent, while maximal equivalence aims for identical reader experiences. However, Nida acknowledged that achieving maximal equivalence is highly improbable in translation practice.

Early Chinese studies on this theory remained in its infancy, focusing mainly on introductions and theoretical interpretations. For example, Zhao[9] and Huang[10] explicated the theory's core principles, and applicability, telling translators about how to use this theory correctly. Later, more and more scholars combine the theory with translation practice, covering various fields such as news, business, movies and travel[11].

In recent years, research on this topic has expanded in both quantity and scope. Meanwhile, many scholars applied this theory to literary translation. For instance, under the guidance of functional equivalence theory, Ye[12] analyzed translation strategies in *Doll's Plague* from lexical, syntactic, and cultural compensation aspects. Feng[13] explored the Chinese translation of *Everything I Never Told You* across lexical, syntactic, and textual dimensions. Beyond single-text analyses, a number of scholars use the functional equivalence theory as a criterion to compare the quality of different versions of translation. Liu[14] evaluated two Chinese versions of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* based on meaning, style, and readability. Wang and Chen[15] analyzed the strategies of domestication and foreignization in the translated versions of *The Lord of the Rings* through case studies.

Despite its popularity, the applicability of functional equivalence theory to literary texts is controversial. Critics argue that it is impossible to make full equivalence due to cultural and

linguistic differences. However, O. Henry's works are known for their unexpected endings as well as the humorous and ironic language. These features can be directly reflected in readers' responses – the core of the functional equivalence theory. As Nida noted, the better the translation, the more similar the target readers' feelings are to the source readers. Therefore, the functional equivalence theory can be used to evaluate the translation quality of O. Henry's short stories. Moreover, some studies have already proven the feasibility of applying the functional equivalence theory in literary research. For example, Lin[16] demonstrated this theory's utility in translating humorous story through a comparative analysis of two Chinese versions of *The Cop and the Anthem*.

## 2.2. O. Henry's short stories and translated versions

O. Henry's short stories are famous for a humorous language style, which is reflected in diverse aspects like plot arrangement, word choice and rhetorical devices. These humorous elements not only entertain readers but also satirize social phenomena. Furthermore, his works are also known for the twist endings, which has become a symbol of O. Henry. The ending leaves readers with a sense of the unexpected while remaining reasonable, adding both entertainment value and philosophical depth.

O. Henry's short stories have been translated into many languages and are popular among readers all over the world. In China, there are many translated versions of his works. Among them, the versions of Wang Yongnian[17], Zhang Jinghao[18], and Li Wenjun[19] are particularly well-known. Furthermore, Wang Yongnian's[17] translated version has been widely known as the most authoritative and classic one, which retains the style of the original works, making it easy to understand and widely accessible to a broad reader. Therefore, Yongnian's[17] translated version was chosen by this study.

Existing studies have mainly focused on the themes of stories, narrative techniques, and the aesthetic value of the "O. Henry twist". For example, Barzani[2], analyzed lexical choices and cohesion strategies in *After Twenty Years* by applying a stylistic framework, demonstrating how his linguistic features enhance thematic expression and narrative effects. Additionally, scholars worldwide have also studied translation strategies of O. Henry's short stories in various languages. Shamsiddinovna[20] analyzed Uzbek translation strategies for English phrasal verbs in *The Ransom of Red Chief*, arguing that literary translation should balance linguistic accuracy with cultural adaptability. Janavičienė[1] analyzed Lithuanian translation of O. Henry's stories, identifying target-culture-oriented approaches to culture-specific items.

Chinese scholars often integrate translation theories (e.g., Nida's functional equivalence, Verschueren's adaptability theory, Bassnett's cultural perspective) to explore the reproduction of satire, exaggeration, and humor. For example, Huang[21] analyzed Zhang Jinghao's[18] translation through three humor dimensions (universal, culture-specific, and linguistic) to show humor retention strategies. Zhu[11] proposed "image substitution" as a solution to pun translation in *A Service of Love* using Xu Yuanchong's[22] the Three Beauties Theory.

In recent years, scholars have also conducted translation comparisons. Chen[23] compared Zhang Jinghao[18] and Wang Yongnian's[17] handling of rhetorical devices, exploring the balance between aesthetic reproduction and reader reception in literary translation. Zhang[24] and Liu[25] applied Nida's functional equivalence to contrast multiple Chinese versions of *The Cop and the Anthem*.

However, existing research has a limitation: most studies focus on the classic human translation, neglecting AI-generated translation. This study seeks to fill the research gap by elaborately analyzing the AI translation version of O. Henry's short stories.

## 2.3. AI translation

The application of AI to translation has drawn heated discussion in recent years. Some scholars focused on the characteristics of AI translation and the opportunities and challenges it presents to the translation field. Wang and Wang[26] systematically analyzed the application scenarios, existing problems, and future trends of AI translation, emphasizing the balance between efficiency and ethical risks. Luo et al.[27] evaluated the advancements and limitations of AI translation systems, highlighting the irreplaceable role of human expertise in complex tasks. Some others explored how AI and translation studies benefit each other, and highlighted the need for ethical rules and interdisciplinary cooperation to combine tech tools with human-centric translation[28].

To have a further understanding of the quality of AI translation, scholars at home and abroad have conducted many comparative studies. These mainly involve three key comparisons: between AI tools and traditional machine translation, between different AI tools, and between AI and human translation. For example, Zeng[29] analyzed the translation of Tao Yuanming's poetry and found that while AI tools such as Google Translate is excellent in lexical accuracy, they cannot perform well in contextualizing metaphors like “心远地自偏”. However, human translators can effectively combine semantic precision with creative stylistic adaptations. Manapbayeva et al.[30] revealed that ChatGPT-4 maintained denotative equivalence in Kazakh poetry but faced challenges in reproducing emotional depth. Alowedi and Al-Ahdal[31] showed that AI often fails to combine historical context in Arabic poetry translation, while human translators can reconstruct cultural symbols through contextual understanding.

Moreover, AI-generated literary translation is a research hotspot. Xiong[32] categorized translation into literary translation and non-literary translation. Literary texts include poems, novels, articles and so on. Some scholars believe that AI has an excellent performance in non-literary translation, and can even surpass human translation in some aspects. However, in the field of literary translation, most scholars believe that AI is not intelligent enough to replace human translator now[33]. But the quality of its literary translation effectiveness is continuously improving.

## 3. Case Analysis

### 3.1. Functional equivalence at linguistic level

#### 3.1.1. At the lexical level

Words are the most basic and smallest units of language. Translators should first realize the lexical equivalence by choosing the most suitable words to express the lexical meanings of the source language. However, this equivalence doesn't mean literal word-for-word translation. Instead, translators should adapt the translation flexibly according to the context. The most important thing is to convey the meaning and the author's intention of the source text.

Example 1

ST: Because he wanted to fall into their clutches, they seemed to regard him as a king who could do no wrong.

DeepSeek: 当他渴求镣铐加身时，他们偏把他当无懈可击的君王。

Wang: 他一心渴望他们来逮捕他，他们却把他当做一贯正确的帝王。

Analysis: The expression “could do no wrong” was translated by DeepSeek as “无懈可击”. However, in Chinese, this idiom usually refers to impenetrable defense or perfect plans. It is not very appropriate to use it here to describe the situation where Soapy was never arrested. Therefore, DeepSeek made a mistake in word usage, failing to achieve functional equivalence.

In contrast, Mr. Wang used “一贯正确”, which can better reproduce the original meaning. It can be seen from this example that DeepSeek may make mistakes in the use of Chinese words.

Example 2:

ST: He danced, howled, raved and otherwise disturbed the welkin.

DeepSeek: 他手舞足蹈, 鬼哭狼嚎, 将整条街搅得鸡犬不宁。

Wang: 他手舞足蹈, 吆喝胡闹, 想尽办法搅得天翻地覆。

Analysis: The four verbs “danced, howled, raved and disturbed the welkin” depict Soapy’s wild behavior on the street, aiming to be arrested. For each single verb, both DeepSeek and Mr. Wang used four-character Chinese idioms in their translation, which aligns well with the Chinese expression habits. In addition, the usage of these words enhances the literary quality and connects readers to the text. However, there’s a subtle difference: “welkin” means “sky”, so the Chinese idiom “天翻地覆” is closer to the original expression. Generally speaking, both versions are able to achieve a basic level of functional equivalence.

### 3.1.2. At the syntactic level

Sentences are essential for constructing texts. Syntactic equivalence is to adapt sentences to align with the target language’s norms while conveying the original meaning and style. English and Chinese are very different in syntax. For example, English often uses long and complex sentences, whereas Chinese prefer shorter ones. Thus, to replicate the original reading experience, translators should adjust the sentence structures according to Chinese preferences.

Example 3:

ST: With a whirl of skirts and with the brilliant sparkle still in her eyes, she fluttered out the door and down the stairs to the street.

DeepSeek: 她裙摆一旋, 眼中仍闪烁着明亮的光芒, 轻盈地飘出门去, 翩然下楼, 来到街上。

Wang: 她眼睛里还留着晶莹的泪光, 裙子一摆, 就翩然走出房门, 下楼跑到街上。

Analysis: English is a hypotactic language, which emphasizes logical connections between sentences. However, Chinese is a paratactic language, which usually connects sentence through semantics. Therefore, the Chinese sentences are usually short with looser structures. The phrase “With a whirl of ... in her eyes” is a parallel “with” structure adverbial. Both translators simplified it into several verb-centered short sentences, which can better align with Chinese readers’ preferences. In addition, Mr. Wang adjusted the word order of the sentence to improve the fluency. Overall, Mr. Wang’s translation is smoother and more reader-friendly.

Example 4:

ST: Men who smash windows do not remain to parley with the law’s minions. They take to their heels.

DeepSeek: 砸橱窗的歹徒岂会留在现场与执法者寒暄? 早该溜之大吉。

Wang: 砸橱窗的人总是拔腿就跑, 不会傻站在那而跟法律走卒打交道的。

Analysis: Both Wang and DeepSeek have adjusted the structure of this sentence according to the reading habits of Chinese. DeepSeek has turned the declarative sentence into an interrogative one, carrying an emphatic effect. Moreover, the Chinese colloquial saying “早该溜之大吉” well reflects the conciseness of original text. On the other hand, Mr. Wang has changed the order of the two parts of this sentence to make it more fluent. Although he didn’t use a rhetorical question, he clearly conveys the logical relationship of the text. The two translated versions adopt different approaches to achieve syntactic equivalence, creating slightly different impressions in terms of tone and style.

## 3.2. Functional equivalence at stylistic level

### 3.2.1. In a humorous and satiric style

Translators should not only render the meaning the text but also convey the original work's style. O. Henry's short stories are characterized by their distinct humor and satirical tone, making this aspect a key focus in translation. Translators should strive to achieve stylistic equivalence to maintain the essence of O. Henry's voice.

Example 5:

ST: "Sure, Mike," she said, joyfully. "If you'll buy me a beer. I'd have spoken to you sooner, but the cop was watching."

DeepSeek: "当然啊, 迈克," 她欢快地说, "只要你请我喝杯啤酒。早想搭话, 碍着条子呢。"

Wang: "当然啦, 朋友," 她高兴地说, "只要你肯请我喝啤酒。不是警察望着的话, 我早就招呼你了"。

Analysis: This is a young woman's reply when Soapy went to accost her. As in the previous example, the style of DeepSeek's translation is excessively strong. For instance, the phrase "碍着条子呢" is vulgar and colloquial. Actually, the original text does not convey such a tone. In contrast, Mr. Wang's translation, is plain and natural, avoiding adding stylistic elements absent in the source text, thus better achieving stylistic equivalence. Additionally, Mr. Wang adjusted the sentence structure to follow Chinese's cause-effect order (stating the reason before the consequence), which enhances the readability of the translation. In summary, Mr. Wang's translation achieves a more comprehensive equivalence.

Example 6:

ST: ... to believe that he would soon feel the pleasant official clutch upon his arm that would ensure his winter quarters on the right little, tight little isle.

DeepSeek: .....让他确信即将迎来温暖的手铐, 以及通向安乐岛的直通车。

Wang: 他有理由相信, 马上就能痛痛快快地给逮住, 保证可以在岛上的小安乐窝里逍遥过冬。

Analysis: This is Soapy's mental activity as he fantasizes about being arrested. The word "pleasant" makes the whole sentence humorous. While other people would avoid prison, Soapy thinks the police's clutch is pleasant, which is quite ironic. DeepSeek's translation tends to be more direct. Although the word "温暖的" also carries some irony, it is not so strong. Thus, DeepSeek's translation lacks stylistic equivalence. On the other hand, Mr. Wang translated pleasant into the adverb "痛痛快快地". Although it did not achieve the equivalence in form, this sentence clearly expressed Soapy's idea, achieving both meaning and stylistic equivalence.

### 3.2.2. With rhetorical devices

In order to achieve humor and irony, O. Henry employed various rhetorical devices such as metaphors, personification, hyperbole, and synecdoche. A qualified translation of rhetorical expressions is necessary to achieve functional equivalence of his works. Translator must convey the author's meaning while striving to preserve the rhetorical effect.

Example 7:

ST: So now Della's beautiful hair fell about her rippling and shining like a cascade of brown waters.

DeepSeek: 此刻, 黛拉浓密的长发如褐色瀑布般波光粼粼地垂落。

Wang: 这当儿, 德拉美丽的长发披散在身上, 像一股褐色的小瀑布, 奔泄闪亮。

Analysis: This sentence compares Della's hair to a cascade of brown waters. DeepSeek and Mr. Wang adopt different translation strategies. Instead of sticking to the original form, Mr. Wang puts the adjectives "rippling and shining" at the end of the sentence. His translation includes several short sentences, which align well with Chinese expression habits. The highlight of

DeepSeek's translation is “波光粼粼”. It not only vividly depicts Della's shiny hair but also echoes the “cascade” metaphor. However, compared to Wang's version, DeepSeek's translation is less readable due to the inappropriate management of modifiers.

Example 8:

ST: Now, when the income was shrunk to \$20, the letter “Dillingham” looked blurred, as though they were thinking seriously of contracting to a modest and unassuming D.

DeepSeek: 如今收入缩水到20美元，那几个字母仿佛在门牌上洒了墨——活像在认真考虑要把气派的姓氏谦卑地缩写成“迪”。

Wang: 现在收入缩减到20块钱，“迪林汉”几个字看来就有些模糊，仿佛它们正在郑重考虑，是不是缩写成一个质朴而谦逊的“迪”字为好。

Analysis: The personification in this sentence is reflected in “they were thinking seriously,” which gives the letters of “Dillingham” human thinking. Compared to DeepSeek's translation, Mr. Wang's translation better conveys the original style by emphasizing the personification with “它们”. What's more, the interrogative phrase “是不是” adds emphasis and improves readability. Thus, in this case, Mr. Wang's translation better achieves equivalence in form and content.

### 3.3. Functional equivalence at readability level

Readability is the ease with which a written text can be understood by a reader. The readability of a particular text depends both on its content (for example, the complexity of its vocabulary and syntax) and on its typography (for example, its font size, line height, and line length). The readability of translation affects whether target-language readers can understand the meaning of the original text. A stiff and unsmooth translation may cause confusion or even misunderstandings, and naturally fails to achieve functional equivalence.

Example 9:

ST: Mr. Pneumonia was not what you would call a chivalric old gentleman.

DeepSeek: 肺炎先生算不上有骑士精神的老绅士。

Wang: “肺炎先生”并不是你们所谓的扶弱济困的老绅士。

Analysis: Chivalric is an adjective relating to or characteristic of chivalry, knights, or the ideals of medieval knighthood (such as honor, courtesy, bravery, and protection of the weak). DeepSeek translates it literally into “骑士精神”, but since many Chinese readers are not familiar with the word “骑士”, this might cause some confusion. In contrast, Mr. Wang used expressions like “扶弱济困” to convey the essence of chivalry, making the meaning clearer to Chinese readers. This explanation makes Mr. Wang's version a better translation.

Example 10:

ST: With the young woman playing the clinging ivy to his oak Soapy walked past the policeman overcome with gloom.

DeepSeek: 淑女如常春藤缠着橡树般挽住索比，两人从警察眼前飘过。

Wang: 少妇像常春藤攀住橡树般地偎依在苏贝身旁。苏贝心情阴郁，走过警察身边。

Analysis: In DeepSeek's translation, the word “飘过” is used inappropriately. People usually do not use “飘” to describe a person's walking. This word has an unrealistic and even ghastly feeling, which can make readers feel confused. Moreover, DeepSeek's translation hasn't conveyed Soapy's upset feeling (as expressed by “overcome with gloom” in the original text), lacking equivalence in both feeling and meaning. On the contrary, Wang's translation is expressed naturally and smoothly with high readability. Therefore, in this case, Mr. Wang's translation is more capable of achieving functional equivalence.

## 4. Conclusion

### 4.1. Major findings

Mr. Wang has a profound understanding of context, culture, and style. In so doing, he can convey the original meaning flexibly and accurately. Moreover, his translation is logically coherent and naturally expressed, especially in complex texts, showing high readability and fluency.

Compared with human translation, AI can also translate most words with clear literal meanings and explicit emotions, and can use four-character idioms to enhance the literary quality of the translation. Based on the syntactic rules of Chinese and English, it can also achieve basic syntactic equivalence. Rather than literal translation, AI adjusts the translation style based on the context and characteristics of the short stories. For obvious rhetorical devices, it can quickly convey their effects. Some of its translation of fixed expressions and short sentences can achieve as good readability as human translation.

However, AI translation has limitations in using Chinese words in context and understanding literary texts, which may lead to word choice errors. When faced with complex rhetorical devices, it cannot convey their deeper meanings or the author's intentions. AI tends to be stiff when translating long sentences and lacks appropriate control over style reproduction, thus its overall readability falls short of human translation.

### 4.2. Implications

This study verifies the applicability of functional equivalence theory in literary translation. Specifically, it shows that the theory can be used as a valid criterion for assessing the quality of literary translation. In addition, by analyzing typical examples, the study reveals that AI can also translate some parts of literary works. However, compared with human translation, the study finds that although AI translation can help translate some basic expressions in literary works and thus help improve proficiency for the translator, there still exist limitations in AI translation, particularly at linguistic, stylistic, and readability levels. This study helps respond to the current hot topic of academic discussion: whether the AI translation can replace human in literary work translation? The answer is not yet.

The analysis of human and AI translation characteristics in this study is conducive to exploring a better model of human-computer collaboration. By combining the advantages of human and AI tools, translators will be able to improve both the efficiency and quality of translation. Moreover, this study provides a basis for AI developers to improve AI algorithms. For example, AI developers should improve the AI's ability to understand cultural contexts in literary works. By solving these problems, AI may become a more competitive translation assistant than human translators.

### 4.3. Limitations

Although this study conducted a detailed comparison between human and AI translation of O. Henry's works, it is important to recognize that this research has several limitations. Firstly, the research subjects are limited, which may reduce the generalizability of the conclusions. Only one human translator and one AI tool were selected for this study, and there was no comparative study of other human translation (e.g., Li Wenjun's translation) as well as the translation generated by other AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT and Doubao). Additionally, the study only covered three short stories of O. Henry. Moreover, the cases analyses may not accurately reflect the overall quality of the translation. Due to space limitations, the selected examples for case analysis are mainly words and sentences, which makes it difficult to analyze the quality of long passages and the whole translation. In addition, this study is conducted using qualitative case analysis, which may be influenced by the subjectivity of the researchers.

#### 4.4. Suggestions for future research

Firstly, future research is suggested to analyze more O. Henry's works as well as the translation by other human translators and AI models. This will help to analyze the performance of different translators and AIs when dealing with different texts and get more general conclusions. Secondly, a systematic evaluation framework can be designed and used to assess the quality of the whole translated text. Based on the theory of functional equivalence, scholars can design a systematic assessment system with clear indexes, which helps to conduct more objective and comprehensive research. Thirdly, quantitative studies should be integrated in the future to enhance the objectivity of the conclusions, such as reader questionnaire surveys and corpus studies. Combining data with qualitative analysis can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the differences between AI and human translators. By addressing these limitations, future research can yield more accurate and generalizable findings, deepening our understanding of the application of AI tools in the translation field.

In conclusion, AI can be seen as a tool to assist rather than replace human translators. As Wang (2023) stated, currently, generative AI still needs to work alongside human translators, particularly in translation tasks requiring cultural representation and high precision, where human intervention is indispensable. By combining the efficiency of AI with the creativity and deep understanding of human translators, it is possible to explore a better human-AI coordination model and unlock the full potential of AI for the development of translation.

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