THE TRANSLATION OF TABOO LANGUAGE IN FICTIONAL DIALOGUE: THE CASE OF *JIN PING MEI*

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the way in which swearing and other forms of taboo language in fictional dialogue are rendered in translations from Chinese into English. To conduct this study, two English translations of the classic novel *Jin Ping Mei* are described and analyzed. Based on the paradigm of descriptive translation studies, the paper resorts to a mixed-method design which combines quantitative data with qualitative textual analysis. It aims to identify how the translators deal with swearing in the fictive dialogue, to determine any translational patterns in the way taboo language is treated and to analyze the effect of translation strategies used on certain aspects of the novel. Through the above mentioned methodology, this paper finds that swearing at times comes across quite differently in English compared to the original, which inevitably influences the target reader's perception of characters and their verbal interactions in the novel.
KEYWORDS: Swearing; Emotion and Affect; Fictional Dialogue; Translation; Prose Fiction

1. Introduction

As a socially significant and realistic novel written anonymously in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), *Jin Ping Mei* (hereafter *JPM*) is recognized as one of the four masterworks of the Ming novel. Set in an urban context characterized by a booming mercantile economy, cultural prosperity, extravagance, and social depravity, *JPM* focuses its attention on ordinary characters and gives a realistic portrayal of their everyday life and manners. By concentrating on the daily minutiae of urban folks' lives in sixteenth-century society, *JPM* contains a splendid display of various forms of Chinese language art. A stereoscopic reading of the novel reveals an interesting language phenomenon: the liberal use of swearing and other forms of taboo language, which renders character dialogue rustic yet lively and compelling. Some characters swear in realistic, spontaneous ways as if they were living in the real world. This might be what Page calls "the closest imitation of reality" (1973, p. 3). The author of *JPM* seems to convey the novels' linguistic energy and represents reality very truthfully, irrespective of whether this means sacrificing moral norms and conventions.

The novel has an extensive repertoire of taboo language, which is used to delineate characters, advance the plot, and generate humor. Swearing in *JPM* seems to be an authorial ploy to create naturalness and vividness; for, as Norrick (2012, p. 43) points out, despite its impolite and taboo nature, swearing does add a humorous tone and bespeaks a level of emotion and involvement that may be unachievable otherwise. Hence, it would be productive to explore the extensive use of swearing in this work and its translation into another language.

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Translating swearing, and taboo language more generally, brings problems relating to register, pragmatic function, connotations, and culture-specificity. Therefore, this paper looks at how taboo expressions have been translated in two English versions of the novel *JPM*: *The Golden Lotus* (hereafter *Lotus*) by Clement Egerton, and *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (hereafter *Plum*) by David Roy. Both are complete translations, in the sense that they include all the chapters of the Chinese original, but Egerton's version, published in London, is in British English and Roy's, published by Princeton University Press, is American. There is also a significant time gap between them: Egerton's was begun in the 1920s and published in 1939, while Roy's five volumes came out between 1993 and 2013. For all these reasons, we might expect contrasting approaches to the treatment of taboo language.

2. Definition of swearing and its pragmatic function

Swearing, which is a characteristic feature of many languages and cultures, has been defined in different ways by different authors. For Allan and Burridge (2009, p. 362), it can be understood as "the strongly emotive use of taboo terms in insults, epithets, and expletives", while, for Beers Fägersten, swearing is "the use of words which have the potential to be offensive, inappropriate, objectionable, or unacceptable in any given social context" (2012, p. 3). Andersson and Trudgill (1990, p. 53) postulate swearing as a type of language use in which the expression suggests something taboo or stigmatized in the culture and should not be interpreted literally. In Swearing*:* A Cross-Cultural Linguistic Study, Ljung (2010, p. 4) theorizes that swearing is the use of utterances containing taboo words with non-literal meaning and its main function is to reflect the speaker's feelings, emotions, and attitudes. Jay and Janschewitz (2008, p. 268), for their part, also highlight swearing's primary function as conveying emotional or connotative meaning. All this tells us that swearing is a complex socio-pragmatic phenomenon and the perception of it depends on features of the context. The same applies to swearing in virtual or non-real-world environments, including literary and cinematic dialogues.

Owing to its taboo/transgressive nature, swearing reflects the values and beliefs of a given society. It can be expressed in many ways, including vocatives, expletives, curses, obscenities, profanity, scatology and the like (in this paper, I refer to swearing and expletives interchangeably to avoid terminological confusion).

Within literary and cinematic dialogue, swearing has historically fulfilled various stylistic or aesthetic functions. For instance, in the study of the multifunctionality of swear words and taboo language in television series, Bednarek (2019) demonstrates that such language in television dialogue can serve various purposes, including characterization, humor, plot development, catchphrases, the creation of realism, and the management of audience evaluation and emotions. Similar functions related to the use of swear words can also be observed in historical literary texts. In *Transgressive Language in Medieval English Drama*, Forest-Hill (2018) expounds that insults, oaths, scatological and bawdy language are widely used in medieval mystery plays and morality plays to create characterizations, define characters' moral status, and reflect social conditions. Geoffrey Chaucer's

Canterbury Tales also abounds in vulgar language to offer a masterful exploration of humanity and social reality (Azzaro, 2018, p. 284; Horton, 1998). Partridge's (2005) *Shakespeare's Bawdy* demonstrates that bawdy language is common in Shakespearean works, manifesting the sexual resonances of a significant section of Shakespeare's vocabulary. The same holds true for the sixteenth-century novel *JPM* under study, in which a great deal of 'bad language' is used with subtlety and sophistication to characterize fictional persons and to evince naturalness and realism.

As colloquial, non-standard or low register language, swearing performs rhetorical and stylistic functions as a form of marked speech (Díaz-Cintas and Remael, 2007, p. 187). Through the lens of literary stylistics, swearing serves as a stylistic marker. Azzaro contends that strong/vulgar language "reflects personal character and social standing, so that swearwords uniquely identify the personality of [fictional characters]" (2018, p. 284). In a nutshell, incorporating taboo language, especially swearing expressions, in literary texts can serve the purpose of character development, enhance stylistic effects, and contribute to the advancement of fictional plots. This, in turn, can enhance the reader's experience and entertainment.

3. On the translation of swearing

In literary contexts, the translation of swearing raises challenges as it can create 'culture bumps'. However, simply omitting it can cause "a loss in communicative effect and social implicature" (Leppihalme, 1997; Greenall, 2011a, p. 60).

In recent years, a growing number of studies have focused on the treatment of taboo language, including swear words, in interlingual translation (e.g. Fernández Fernández, 2009; Soler Pardo, 2013; Ávila Cabrera, 2014; Ávila Cabrera, 2015; Ávila Cabrera, 2016; Valdeón, 2015; Valdeón, 2020; Formentelli and Ghia, 2021; Formentelli and Monti, 2014; Pavesi and Zamora, 2021; Pavesi and Formentelli, 2023; Lung, 2000; Gomez, 2016). However, they have mostly been conducted in the context of audiovisual translation (AVT), and a significant gap still exists when it comes to research on the translation of swearing in literary works. Only a handful of studies can be found examining the translation of swearing in literary prose, and they almost all report an attenuation of the offensive language. For example, Conde-Parrilla (1996) and Sanz Gallego (2013), discussing *Ulysses* in Spanish translations, conclude, independently, that much of the swearing is simplified, normalized, and mitigated, resulting in a dramatic change in the aesthetic qualities of the original. In his comparison of two translations into Portuguese of J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Schmitz (1998) concludes that the suppression of the invectives and obscenities in the protagonist's speech alters the reader's perception of the hero's disillusionment with life. Similarly, Maher's (2012) examination of the Italian novel *Ti prendo e ti porto via* in English concludes that the attenuation of the linguistic taboos affects the stylistic value of the novel in many ways. As for the translation of swearing in Roddy Doyle's novel, *The Commitments*, Greenall (2011b) claims that it flouts pragmatic principles and hence creates for the target reader a rather different context for interpreting the novel.

However, if we consider translation to be more of a purpose-driven transcultural activity, then extratextual considerations demand our critical attention. Given that no academic attempt has thus far been made to the study of the cross-cultural transfer of swearing in the novel *JPM*, the present paper seeks to address the lacuna in the literature. However, the paper does not intend to pass any value judgement on any translations, but simply to contribute to understanding of how swearing is dealt with by translators in the cross-cultural communication process.

4. Research methods

Methodologically, the present study is positioned within the paradigm of descriptive translation studies (DTS) (Toury, 2012). It thus aims to compare source and target texts, identify translational shifts and describe translational phenomena, relying on empirical evidence. Specifically, the paper attempts to pursue the following objectives with regard to two English translations of *JPM*:

1. To identify how certain taboo expressions in passages of fictive dialogue have been treated by the two different translators;
2. To determine if there are any patterns or tendencies in the two translators' approaches to swearing;
3. To analyze the potential consequences of translators' solutions on certain aspects of the novel, such as register, tone, and characterization.

To achieve the above aims, the study uses a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analyses. The quantitative data consists of a corpus of textual samples collected at random from the source and target texts, which are then subjected to statistical analysis to determine the frequencies of translators' use of certain strategies for rendering swearing. As for the qualitative analysis, this involves the close comparison of several key passages containing swearing expressions in the source and target texts.

Textual segments containing swearing were first collected from the Chinese novel *JPM* and their counterparts located in the English translations. To structure this analysis, I formulated a taxonomy of swearing based on Wajnryb (2005) and Pinker (2008), given in Table 1.

Table 1. Taxonomy of Swearing

Subcategory	Description
Cathartic swearing	the use of expletives to express frustration or to release pain, tension or regret, when no hearers are present, e.g. fuck!
Abusive swearing	swearing used by the speaker to insult others/hearers; higher degree of offensiveness than cathartic swearing, e.g. you fucker, fuck you!

Social swearing	speakers are in-group members in relaxed settings using swearwords to create an easygoing atmosphere in informal or casual conversations, e.g. fucking fantastic!
Idiomatic swearing	using set phrases and fixed expressions to express strong emotions; usually conventionalized and socially recognized forms of swearwords, e.g. *it's fucked up.*

All the selected instances of swearing in the novel were classified according to the taxonomy given in Table 1. I then classified the translation strategies used, as proposed in previous studies (Díaz Cintas and Remael, 2007; Valdeón, 2020). The categorization of translation strategies is illustrated in Table 2:

Table 2. Categorization of translation strategies

Strategies	Explanation
Literal translation	Translating verbatim, regardless of connotative meaning and pragmatic (un)equivalence
Functional equivalent	Using a functional equivalent to translate partial meaning but maintain a similar pragmatic function
Mitigation	Softening the offensive tone or force of swearing
Omission	Deleting or removing swearing from the target text
Intensification	Using stronger swearing to express the source text meaning

These strategies will be exemplified in the quantitative and qualitative analysis that ensue.

5. Quantitative analysis

This section gives a quantitative analysis of the translation strategies employed by Egerton (1939) and Roy (2013) for the treatment of taboo language. A total of 266 samples were selected at random to form a corpus for statistical analysis. The corpus is big enough to allow the detection of patterns or tendencies followed by each translator. The following figures and tables offer a visual representation of the strategies used by each translator for translating swearing.

As can be seen in Figure 1 and Table 3, as many as 236 instances of swearing in the corpus (88.72%) were maintained and rendered into English in Egerton's version, while only 30 instances (12%) were omitted. Literal translation is the most frequently used strategy, accounting for 167 occurrences (62.78% of the corpus). Other strategies such as mitigation and functional equivalent are used less frequently, 41 times (15.41%) in the first case and 28 times (10.52%) in the second.

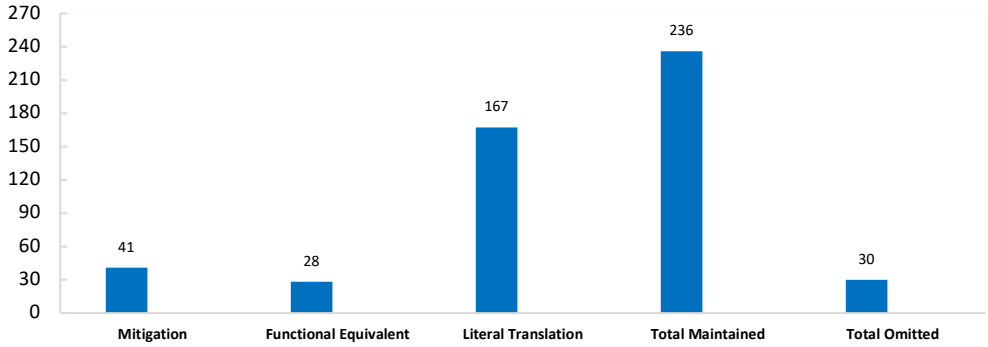

Figure 1. Frequencies of strategies used for dealing with swearing in *Lotus* by Egerton (1939)

Table 3. Percentages of strategies used by Egerton (1939)

Strategies	Mitigation	Functional Equivalence	Literal Translation	Total Maintained	Total Omitted
Percentages	15.41%	10.52%	62.78%	88.72%	11.27%

As far as Roy's version is concerned, Figure 2 and Table 4 below show that all the 266 instances of swearing in the corpus are maintained. Of all the strategies used, literal translation is the most favored since 231 examples are literally rendered, making up 86.84% of the total. Significantly, about nine percent of the total number of instances are rendered by using intensification strategy whilst fewer than five percent are mitigated or softened in vulgar or offensive tone. None of the instances in this dataset were omitted from the translation.

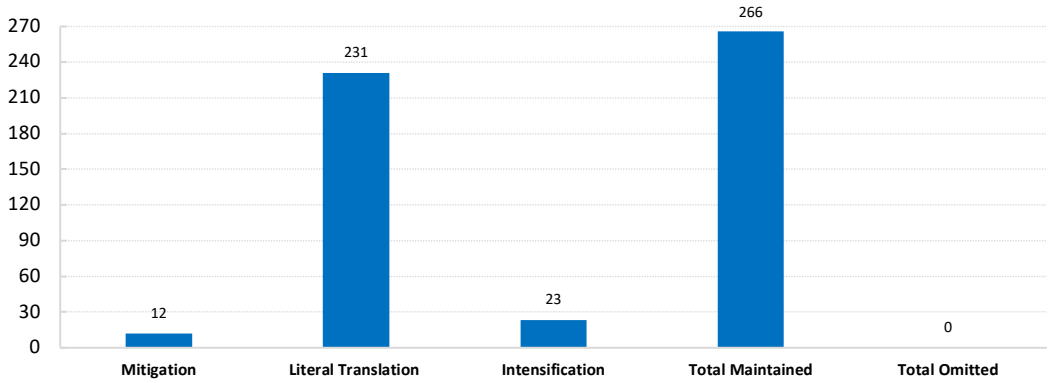

Figure 2. Frequencies of strategies used for dealing with swearing in *Plum* by Roy

Table 4. Percentages of strategies used by Roy

Strategies	Mitigation	Literal translation	Intensification	Total maintained	Total omitted
Percentages	4.51%	86.84%	8.64%	100%	0

The statistical analysis reveals that there is a significant retention in the number of swearwords in the two translations. The analysis also shows that both translators follow a similar tendency of finding solutions (e.g. literal translation) for dealing with swearing in

fictive dialogue. The tendency is not to shy away from offensive or bawdy language but to maintain as many swearwords as possible in the target texts, and there are only a few instances omitted in Egerton's version.

6. Qualitative analysis

The qualitative analysis aimed to confirm the statistical results generated by the quantitative analysis and to analyze the results or ramifications of the translators' decisions. All the 'coupled pairs' (i.e. the source- and target-text segments) were juxtaposed and categorized according to the taxonomy of swearing given in Table 1. To facilitate analysis, the taboo expressions are highlighted in bold in the excerpts, which are identified as ST (source text) and TT (target text), with the letter 'a' referring to Egerton's translation and 'b' to Roy's version. All the examples are numbered sequentially.

6.1. Cathartic swearing

Cathartic swearing is used by the speaker to communicate strong emotions. It is often used instinctively by the speaker when something unpleasant or unexpected happens (Wajnryb, 2005, p. 25), and is not intended to offend others but is used simply to vent personal emotions. Swearing tends to be cathartic when it is uttered when there are no audiences present. It can be targeted at inanimate objects to vent feelings and frustration. The following examples show how this type of swearing fares in the two translations.

(1) ST: 金蓮道:"不是這等說,***賊三寸強盜***,那鼠腹雞腸的心兒,只好有三寸大一般……

a: "You don't know that ***cheap bandit***," Jinlian cried. "His mind is like a rat's belly, and his guts like a chicken's, not more than three inches long…

b: "That's not it at all," said Chin-lien. "It's just that ***that lousy three-inch good-for-nothing of a ruffian*** has a: Rat-stomach chicken-gut, heart with a capacity of no more than three inches…

In example (1), the character, Jinlian, is uttering the expletive *賊三寸強盜* to vent her frustration behind her husband who often treats her unfairly. In (1a), the expletive is rendered as "cheap bandit", a functional equivalent which can express in English a similar feeling or emotion. In (1b), a literal translation of *賊三寸強盜* as "that lousy three-inch good-for-nothing of a ruffian" keeps the wording of the ST. Yet, this solution reduces idiomaticity of the swearing and lacks a colloquial dimension.

(2) ST: 待西門慶出了門,口裡喃喃吶吶罵道:"***賊作死的強盜***,把人妝出去殺了才是好漢！…… ***賊不逢好死變心的強盜***！"

a: When Jinlian saw her cat destroyed, she sat on her bed and did not move. "***You thief***," she muttered as Ximen Qing went away, "taking people's property and killing it. … ***You treacherous villain***! ***You changeable creature***! ***You will come to a bad end***."

b: … and waited until he had vacated her quarters, muttering to herself, as she cursed him, saying, "***You lousy death-defying ruffian***! If you had only dragged me out and killed me, it would have been more heroic of you. …***you lousy fickle ruffian***!"

In example (2), the utterance *賊作死的強盜* in the ST is rustic and colloquial, signaling outrage and disgust on the part of the speaker, Jinlian. It is simplified as "You thief" in (2a), an epithet which has a clear, concise meaning for the target reader. As for "*賊不逢好死變心的強盜*", it is preserved in (1a) by using three separate sentences, which conveys the pragmatic effect of the original. By contrast, the English renderings in (2b) keeps close to the ST in semantic meaning and syntax. Both "You lousy death-defying ruffian" and "you lousy fickle ruffian" sound prudish and unnatural, although they fulfil the function of expressing anger and frustration. In sum, both translations fail to reflect a cathartic outburst as they sound like abusive swearing. Yet, (1a) appears fluent and more accessible to the target audience in terms of colloquial coloring.

6.2 Abusive swearing

Unlike cathartic swearing, abusive swearing is intended to offend others and inflict harm, particularly when a hearer is present. This category of swearing is derogatory in tone and entails metaphorical curses (Wajnryb, 2005, p. 17). In *JPM*, there are many instances of abusive swearing occurring in characters' verbal exchanges. The main function of abusive swearing is to insult others out of anger and jealousy. Abusive swearing in *JPM* is highly flexible and involves complexity, as evidenced by the characters' use of various terms and phrases. Consider the following prime examples:

(3) ST: 姐姐還嗔我罵他,乾淨一家子都養漢,是個***明王八***！把個***王八花子***也裁派將來,早晚好做***勾使鬼***。

a: It looks as though, in this household, almost everybody has a lover in secret. They are ***turtles openly*** and even send their ***young turtles*** here so that those young turtles can ***help them in their evil games***.

b: The fact is that their whole household collaborates in affairs like this. Her mate is ***an open cuckold***, and yet our husband continues to support ***that beggar of a cuckold***. In the future he may well prove to be as fatal as ***a ghost-snatching demon***."

Here in this example, Jinlian is verbally insulting her love rival using very strong expletive terms *明王八*, *王八花子*, and *勾使鬼* to express her hatred and resentment. The swearword *王八* in the ST indicates a man whose wife has an affair with other men whereas the term *勾使鬼* refers to seductive men or women in the context of the exchange. In (3a), *明王八* and *王八花子* are rendered verbatim as "turtles openly" and "young turtles", which are literal translations, expressing the denotative sense of the ST. However, *勾使鬼*

is mitigated by paraphrasing it as "help them in their evil games". The lexical choices used in (3a) fulfil the same function as the original in terms of emotive or offensive force, although they fail to reveal the cultural connotations of the ST. Unlike (3a), the translated swearwords, "an open cuckold" and "that beggar of a cuckold" in (3b) are functional equivalents, manifesting the connotative sense or pragmatic function of the swearword *王八*. Yet, the term *勾使鬼* is translated verbatim as "a ghost-snatching demon", which, while offensive, lacks colloquial tone in English.

(4) ST: 婦人道:"我不好罵出來的,甚麼瓶姨,***鳥姨***,題那***淫婦***做甚,奴好心不得好報……

a: "I can't tell you what I think of you," Jinlian said. "And what do I care for ***that woman***? Why do you bring ***her*** into it? I had to wait for what I wanted …."

b: "I'd only be wasting my breath on you!" said the woman. "My sister P'ing-erh! ***Sister my prick***! What are you dragging ***that whore*** into it for? As far as I'm concerned: Even the best intentions go quite unrequited....

Swearwords like *鳥姨* and *淫婦* in example (4) are omitted in (4a). Certainly, (1a) is mollified in terms of the offensive and aggressive nature reflected in the ST. In (4b), however, the two terms are rendered with strong taboo words in English, such as "prick" and "whore". Hence, unlike (4a), which is a much milder version, (4b) manages to reflect the vulgar, taboo quality of the character's speech in the verbal exchange.

(5) ST: 又說:"你本***蝦鱔***,腰裡無力,平白買將這行貨子來戲弄老娘！把你當塊肉兒,原來是個中看不中吃***臘槍頭***,***死王八***!"

a: "There is no strength in your loins," she cried. "You are ***no better than an eel***. What is the use of buying things like these? You have deceived me. I thought you a piece of good meat, but I find you are only good to look at, not to eat. You are like ***a waxen spearhead***, ***a dead turtle***."

b: "You're just ***like a shrimp or an eel***," she railed at him, "with no real strength in your loins. What's the point of your buying all this junk to titillate your old lady with? I thought I was getting a real hunk of meat, but it turns out you're: Good enough to look at, but not fit to eat. You're about as much use as a '***pewter spearhead***, or a '***dead turtle***'!"

Unlike previous cases, example (5) shows that similar lexical choices, namely swearwords with the animal theme, are used by the translators to render *蝦鱔*, *臘槍頭*, and *死王八*, in the ST. In this sense, both (5a) and (5b) contribute to conveying similar level of offensiveness. The same is true of the next two examples.

(6) ST: 被婦人啐在臉上道:"呸！***濁東西***！你是個男子漢,自不做主,卻聽別人調遣 ……

a: "Pah, ***you vile creature***!" his wife shouted, and spat in his face. "You, a grown-up man, have no will of your own, but have to do whatever anybody tells you."

b: "Phooey!" the woman said, spitting right in his face, "***you stupid clod***! You call yourself a man, yet you can't make up your mind about anything, but let yourself be manipulated by others."

In example (6), the swearing term *濁東西* is directed at unsavory people who are simple and not intelligent. In (6a), the term is rendered as "you vile creature", which is very similar to "you stupid clod" in (6b). Both translations therefore maintain the swearing of the ST using functional equivalents that sound rude and offensive in English.

(7) ST: 姑娘道:"張四,你這***老花根,老奴才,老粉嘴***,你恁騙口張舌的好淡扯,到明日死了時, 不使了繩子扛子。"

a: "Zhang the Fourth, ***you offshoot of generations of beggars***, ***you miserable old slave***, ***you old mealy mouth***, how dare you be such a humbug and talk like this? What utter nonsense! There will be no cords to tie your coffin when you die."

b: "Chang the Fourth!" Aunt Yang retorted. "***You old beggar***! ***You old slave***! ***You old mealy mouth***! If you keep on talking such rot with your: Deceitful mouth and duplicitous tongue, you'll die so poor your family won't be able to afford the rope to hoist your coffin with!"

In example (7), swearing phrases like *老花根*, *老奴才*, and *老粉嘴* in the ST are derogatory and aggressive in their intent. They are not toned down, but instead faithfully rendered in (7a) and (7b). While the target reader may get bewildered by, for instance, the name-calling "You old mealy mouth", both English texts fulfil the same function of name-calling by reflecting the vulgar, offensive tone of the original. Thus, readers of either translation may find it easy to access the force of the utterance. It is also interesting that translators introduce greater lexical variety as they seldom resort to English archetypal swearwords, such as the four-letter word, fuck.

6.3 Social swearing

Social swearing differs significantly from cathartic swearing and abusive swearing. As noted by Wajnryb (2005, p. 34), social swearing is used by people in relaxed settings to create an easygoing atmosphere in casual conversations. It is not intended to offend others or to register strong or negative emotions. Also, social swearing is used by the speaker when listeners or addressees are present, who are comfortable with each other. Therefore, social swearing is highly context-dependent. Below is a detailed analysis of instances of social swearing and their English renderings.

(8) ST: 月娘看不上,說道:"你真個***恁涎臉涎皮***的！我叫丫頭進來。"……月娘忍不住笑道:"***沒羞的貨***,頭跟前也調個謊兒。"

a: "You are ***an utterly shameless fellow***. I shall call the maid," she cried. … Yueniang could not help laughing. "***You worthless rascal***," she said. "Now you're trying to play tricks with my maid."

b: Yueh-niang could abide it no longer and said, "If you're really going to carry on that **shamelessly**, I'll call the maid." …Yueh-niang couldn't help laughing. "***What a shameless character***," she said. "Even the maids have to put up with your barefaced effrontery."

In the ST, both *恁涎臉涎皮* and *沒羞的貨* are swearing expressions that are not intended to offend the hearer. Here the character, Yueniang, uses swearing simply to express her joy in the presence of her husband. In (8a) and (8b), however, both expletives are turned into abusive swearing and the character's tone of voice is altered in the context of this dialogue. This may mislead the reader to believe that the two characters are hostile to each other.

(9) ST: 西門慶尋到那裡,說道:"***好小油嘴兒***！你輸了棋子,卻躲在這裡"。那婦人見西門慶來,昵笑不止,說道:"***怪行貨子***！孟三兒輸了,你不敢禁他,卻來纏我！" (p. 89)

a: "Here, ***little oily mouth***," Ximen Qing cried, and ran after her, "you lose, and then you run away." Jinlian laughed at him. "***You wonderful creature***," she cried, "it was Yulou you beat, go and bother her instead of coming and plaguing me."

b: When His-meng Ch'ing located her, he said, "All right, ***little oily mouth***! It was you who lost the game, and now you're trying to hide over here, are you?" When the woman saw His-men Ch'ing coming, she broke into giggles, saying, "***You crazy good-for-nothing***! It was Meng the Third who lost, but you didn't dare enforce the rules on her, but have come to bother me instead."

In example (9), *好小油嘴兒* refers to someone who has a glib tongue while 怪行貨子 indicates someone who is a bad egg. The two expletives used here in the dialogue are not intended to show negative emotions but are used to exchange banter with each other. However, in (9a) and (9b), both translators render the social swearing into abusive insults, which changes the emphatic or euphonic tone of the original. Similar situation can be observed in the next three examples.

(10) ST: 李瓶兒道:"你這***老貨***,偏有這些胡枝扯葉的。你明日不來,我和你答話！"(p. 338)

a: "Oh, ***you old rogue***," Li Ping'er said, "you always find some excuse. If you do not turn up tomorrow, you shall see what happens."

b: "***You old baggage***!" exclaimed Li P'ing-erh. "You're never content unless you can: Fool with the branches and tug at the leaves."

In example (10), Li Ping'er does not use *老貨* to insult her addressee but she uses it jokingly as she has close relationship with the latter. In (10a), the translator renders this swearing with the very strong insult "you old rogue", thereby turning the social or phatic use of the swearword into an abusive insult. In (10b), *老貨* is directly rendered as "You old baggage", which detracts from the ST meaning and may cause confusion for the target reader.

Likewise, in examples (11) and (12), the swearing *小淫婦兒* in the ST is used in an affectionate manner to create ambience. It shows affection rather than offence. It is in effect a diminutive habitually used by the character Ximen Qing throughout the novel.

(11) ST: 西門慶笑道:"***小淫婦兒***,你過來。你若有本事,把他咂過了,我輸一兩銀子與你。"

a: Ximen Qing laughed. "Come here, ***you little strumpet***, he said, "and see if your mouth can make this smaller; if you can, I'll give you a tael of silver."

b: "***You little whore***," Hsi-men Ch'ing exclaimed with a laugh, "come over here. If you have the talent to suck it to ejaculation, I'll forfeit a tael of silver to you."

(12) ST: 西門慶口中呼叫道:"***小淫婦兒***,你怕我不怕？再敢無禮不敢？"

a: "Now, ***little strumpet***," Ximen Qing cried, "are you afraid of me or not? Will you ever treat me disrespectfully again?"

b: "***You little whore***!" Hsi-men Ch'ing blurted out at her. "Are you afraid of me, or not? Will you ever dare to treat me so disrespectfully again?"

Both translators, however, express *小淫婦兒* in their translations through name-calling. In (11a) and (12a), "little strumpet" is a derogatory and strongly abusive term woman in English. In (11b) and (12b), "you little whore" refers to a lewd or unchaste woman in the target culture. Thus, both translations become abusive swearing by a mere change in the character's tone of voice.

6.4 Idiomatic swearing

Swearing of this kind uses idioms or colloquialisms whose meaning cannot be easily deduced from the meanings of the individual words. According to Pinker (2008, p. 350), idiomatic swearing indicates the use of set phrases and fixed expressions to express strong emotions. Often, the literal meaning of idiomatic swearing gives way to its figurative meaning which works in specific context. As Fernández Dobao (2006, p. 240) puts it, what matters is the emotional charge of swearwords for it evinces the speaker's emotion and attitude. This suggests that idiomatic swearing in certain contexts cannot be rendered literally into the target language. The following five examples reveal how idiomatic swearing is treated by the translators.

(13) ST: 反吃婦人整罵了四五日,罵道:"呸！***蜜麵混沌***,你成日放著正事兒不理……

a: "***You idiot***," she cried, "you have never paid the slightest attention to your own affairs; you have spent all your time chasing after women ...
b: "Phooey! ***You muddleheaded troll!***" she railed at him. "Day after day you neglected your proper concerns…"

In example (13), the archaic expression *魍魎混沌* refers to silly or stupid people. In (13a), the English swearing "You idiot" well reflects the natural informality of the ST. In (13b), the translator selects a dictionary equivalent to render *魍魎混沌* as "You muddleheaded troll", which sounds offensive but less colloquial compared to the ST.

The swearing *黃貓兒黑尾* in example (14) is a colloquial fixed expression, indicating someone who commits evil deeds secretly, while the colloquial term *焦尾靶* is used to curse those who have no offspring. In (14a) and (14b), both idiomatic phrases are literally rendered into English. The result is that the pungent tone of the ST swearing is lost and the earthy, colloquial effect also fades away.

(14) ST: 張四道:"……不似你這老殺才,搬著大引著小,***黃貓兒黑尾***。"…… 張四道: "你這嚼舌頭老淫婦,掙將錢來***焦尾靶***,怪不得你無兒無女。"
a: Zhang the fourth retorted, "… I am not your sort, ripe for the slaughter, one who takes up with the rich and deceives the humble. ***You are like a yellow cat with a black tail***." … "You garrulous old whore, you want the money yourself to ***put a little warmth under your tail***. No wonder you never had any children!"
b: "I'm not out for anybody's money," said Chang the Fourth. "…You old gallows bird! You're out to: Snatch the big, and Snitch the little. ***You may be a brown cat, but you've got a black tail***." …You waggle-tongued old whore!" replied Chang the Fourth. "You've had to work so hard for your money ***you've burnt out your tail***. No wonder you don't have any children."

(15) ST: 晚夕,西門大姐在房內又罵經濟:"賊囚根子,……***毛司裡磚兒一又臭又硬***……"
a: Ximen Dajie said to him: "You villain! … ***She is like a tile out of the privy, hard and stinking***. She always thinks she is better than anybody else. …
b: Hsi-men Ta-chieh also took Ch'en Ching-chi to task, saying, "You lousy jailbird! ... ***Like the bricks in the privy: She is both hard and smelly*** ...

In example (15), the idiomatic expression *毛司裡磚兒一又臭又硬* carries a strong emotional force but is also used as source of humor. In (15a), a simile is used to reproduce the humorous effect. Similarly, in (15b), a vulgar, aggressive tone is manifested by using a simile. In example (16) below, the colloquial expression *三寸丁谷樹皮* is quite a strong insult to show contempt for others in the source culture.

(16) ST: 西門慶聽,跌腳笑道:"莫不是人叫他***三寸丁谷樹皮***的武大麼?"

a: When Ximen Qing heard this, he nearly jumped out of his chair. “You can’t mean that Wu Da whom people call ***Tom Thumb or Old Scraggy Bark***.”

b: When Hsi-men Ch’ing heard this he stamped his feet and laughed.“You don’t mean to say he’s the Wu the Elder, whom everyone calls the ***Three-inch Mulberry-bark Manikin***, do you?”

In (16a), 三寸丁 is replaced with “Tom Thumb”, an English euphemism, while 谷樹皮 is rendered verbatim as “Old Scraggy Bark”, which diminishes the satiric tone and reduces emotional intensity of the ST swearing. In (16b), “Three-inch Mulberry-bark Manikin”, a word-for-word transfer of the original, does weaken the character’s tone of voice in terms of vulgarity and offensiveness.

(17) ST: 那旁邊多口的,認的他有名叫做***陶扒灰***,一連娶三個媳婦,都吃他扒了……

a: Unfortunately, the garrulous fellow knew all about the old man’s reputation. He had three daughters-in-law, and his relations with all of them had been such that he had been given a rude nickname in consequence.

b: The busybody by his side recognized the oldster to be the notorious ***Crudcrawler Tao***, who was known to have "crawled in the crud" successively with all three of his daughters-in-law.

In example (17), the idiomatic swearing *扒灰* suggests a man who has illicit sexual relations with his daughter(s)-in-law in the source culture. In (17a), the term 扒灰 is simply omitted and hence the satirical tone disappears from the English text. It is nevertheless rendered literally as “Crudcrawler Tao” in (17b), which can be called a neologism. Moreover, an endnote is also provided to explain this freshly minted term.

(18) ST: 月娘便道: “莫不孟三姐也**腊月里萝卜——动个心**，忽剌八要往前进嫁人？

a: “That is Sister Meng,” Yueniang said. “I shall never remarry.”

b: “It must be Sister Meng the Third that he’s referring to,” said Yueh-niang. “It would seem

that: Even during the twelfth month the frozen heart of the turnip is capable of being moved.

All of a sudden, she wants to better her condition by marrying someone, does she?

In the source text (ST), the idiomatic expression *腊月里萝卜—动个心* is used to describe Sister Meng as unfaithful and unchaste. This swearing expression, when translated literally, refers to a radish in the twelfth lunar month, implying a sense of coldness or lack of warmth, and *动个心* suggests a change of heart or fickleness. Thus, the swearing portrays Sister Meng as someone who has a changeable nature and lacks loyalty, deciding

to marry another man after her husband's death. In (18a), the swearing is omitted, resulting in a simplification of the entire Chinese passage. This omission removes the layers of meaning embedded in the idiomatic swearing, particularly the intended satirical or abusive tone. Consequently, the translation loses the nuance of the original text, failing to convey the critical and disapproving attitude towards Sister Meng's actions. In contrast, in (18b), the idiomatic expletive is maintained through a detailed explanation of the Chinese swearword. By doing so, the translation preserves the original tone, connotation, and its pragmatic meaning. It effectively communicates the idea that Sister Meng is viewed as an unchaste woman who seeks to improve her circumstances by marrying another man. It ensures that the reader understands the depth of the critique aimed at Sister Meng, maintaining the integrity and intent of the source text.

The above qualitative analysis shows that different categories of swearing in *JPM* are mostly maintained in the two English translations. More precisely, Egerton opts to render swearing in a fluent, readable manner, making them more accessible to the target reader, whereas Roy tends to translate swearing in a word-for-word fashion, preserving all of them in the translation. It is noticeable that some instances of cathartic swearing and social swearing are changed into abusive, offensive utterances. Furthermore, idiomatic swearing tends to lose the offensive tone or colloquial color because of the strategies used by the two translators. All this inevitably changes the stylistic or pragmatic implications of swearing used by characters. As changes to the way the characters express themselves may "result in changes in the characters themselves" (Maher, 2012, p. 374), these micro-level lexical choices end up influencing the target reader's perception of the fictional events and of characters' idiolects, feelings, emotions, and their mutual relations in the story.

7. Conclusion

This paper, based on the DTS paradigm, has sought to explore the way swearing in the dialogue of the novel *JPM* is translated into English. It has achieved three main objectives stated in Section 4.

First, the study shows that there is no significant reduction in swearwords in either of the English translations. This finding seems to contradict the results reported in previous studies which suggest that translators have a general tendency to delete or neutralize offensive and taboo language in their translations (Horton, 1998; Linder, 2000; Greenall, 2011a; Maher, 2012; Sanz Gallego, 2013).

The results of this study demonstrate that the translational patterns in the treatment of swearing are similar for the two translators. Rather than balking at taboo terms, both translators adopt literal translation as their dominant strategy to maintain the majority of swearing instances in the corpus. The main difference is that Egerton omits a few instances while Roy does not delete any. This may be for technical reasons, such as the translator's bilingual competence, and the incommensurable differences between the source and target languages and cultures in terms of using swearing and taboo language in literature. Additionally, this may also be attributable to the specified *skopos* of the two translations

since both translators claim to offer a complete English version of the novel for their intended readers (Egerton, 1939, vol.1, p. vi; Roy, 1993, p. xlviii, my emphasis). Indeed, given that the Chinese work had been banned for many years, the inclusion of various forms of taboo language in the translated versions could serve as a titillating factor and function as a selling point for Western readers. By incorporating the allure of the transgressive or the forbidden, this strategy serves to infuse the narrative with a sense of authenticity and realism, pushing the boundaries of artistic expression, and enhancing its appeal. Since the two English translations of *JPM* were produced at different historical periods, it should be noted that the offensive intensity of translated swear words and expressions may vary for readers across these different timeframes. In Egerton's version, some of the expressions were likely to produce a strong emotional impact on readers of the translator's era, namely the 1920s and 1930s. This is because swearwords or taboo language in general were commonly found in literary works during that time, such as *Ulysses* and many other modernist texts. These modernist works created a sensation due to their experimental and transgressive nature in literary language and aesthetic innovation. Significantly, taboo language often undergoes transformation in terms of offensive nature over the course of time. In the case of Egerton's translation, some of the words and expressions that carried abusive and insulting meanings at the time, as exemplified in (3), (11) and (16), no longer come across as offensive or dysphemistic. As Allan and Burridge (2009) postulate, swearing patterns are subject to ongoing evolution, and what is considered offensive can change with time. For example, outside of Islam, blasphemous and religiously prophane language is no longer perceived as offensive by the majority of speakers; instead, it has been supplanted by expressions of a more explicit and sexually oriented nature (Allan and Burridge, 2009, p. 379). This shift reflects a natural process of linguistic desensitization, the well-recognized fact of lexical life that words (and particularly swearwords) wear out over time. Thus, it is essential to take into account the evolving historical context when interpreting and evaluating the pragmatic function of swear words and taboo language in literary works, including in different translations of the same source text produced at different historical moments.

While this case study confirms that instances of swearing and taboo language are mostly maintained in each of the two target texts, shifts in tone, register, and pragmatic function are still evident. This is because the perception of swearing is context-dependent, and the offensiveness, colloquial color, and emotional evocations vary across languages and cultures (Stapleton, 2020, p. 381). Thus, some of the implicatures (e.g., characters' tone of voice, identity, social relations, etc.) that can be perceived by the source text's readers would not be easily accessible to the target audiences. This aligns with Fernández Fernández's observation that "swearing has traditionally been a problem and many solutions tend to be too bland or too close to the original" (2009, p. 225). In this sense, swearing offers a privileged space for understanding the cultures we translate from and into, because it is a site where linguistic and cultural heterogeneities need to be identified,

mediated, and negotiated so as to avoid evoking the wrong kind of connotations and tones of voice.

This paper represents a modest contribution to the study of taboo language in translation. It should be noted, however, that the findings generated in it are not generalizable to literary translation more broadly, since the analysis relies on a small-scale corpus for both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Further research could involve establishing a larger corpus or utilizing specialized computer software tools to comprehensively study all instances of taboo language present in the Chinese novel and their English counterparts in the two translations, in order to obtain more generalizable results.

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