

A Study on Four-Character Structure Translation of Spells in *Harry Potter* from the Perspective of Skopos Theory

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the translation of spells into Chinese four-character structure in the simplified Chinese version of *Harry Potter* from the perspective of Skopos Theory. As a vital element of the magical world and one of the most distinctive linguistic features in the series, spells present significant challenges in cross-cultural translation due to their etymologies, semantic structures and magical connotations. Drawing upon the three core principles of Skopos Theory – namely the Skopos Rule, the Coherence Rule, and the Fidelity Rule – this paper analyses the translation strategies employed by the translators of Chinese mainland edition. By examining the strategies through textual analysis and case studies, this research finds that Chinese four-character structure expressions are extensively adopted because they reproduce the brevity, rhythm, imagery, and performative force of the original spells while simultaneously in accordance with Chinese linguistic conventions and aesthetic preferences. The study further reveals that spells demonstrate a notable affinity with this structure at both linguistic level, including phonology, semantics, and pragmatics, and cultural level that four-character structure has long been rooted in Chinese expression and rhetorical aesthetics. It conjectures that these compatibilities encourage translators to adopt the four-character structure into translation. The thesis not only offers fresh insights into employing the four-character structure in English-to-Chinese translation but also presents new ideas for applying Skopos Theory more broadly in literary translation studies.

KEYWORDS

Skopos Theory; Harry Potter; Spell translation; Four-character structure.

1. INTRODUCTION

Translation is widely regarded as a form of intercultural communication rather than a mere linguistic transfer between source language and target language. It serves as a bridge built between two different cultures, enabling two cultures to communicate and making target translation understandable for corresponding readers. Within contemporary translation studies, Skopos Theory has emerged as a pivotal framework that emphasizes the purpose over mere linguistic equivalence. It posits that every translation should be driven by its intended function.

Harry Potter, the world-renowned series of novels with seven books, written by British writer Joanne Kathleen Rowling, sparked the fascination with magic around the globe quickly since its release. Over the years, the series of *Harry Potter* has been translated into 80 languages, engaging more and more readers from different countries and regions into appreciating the wizarding world.

Based on Skopos Theory, this study investigates an interesting translation: spell translation in *Harry Potter* series. As a Western fantasy series, *Harry Potter* features numerous magical elements, including magical spells. A majority of those subjects are rooted in ancient Greek and Latin cultures

[1], drawing from their mythological and historical significance. Spells are particularly an important element within this magical universe. What makes the spells in *Harry Potter* unique is their configurations. Created by the author, most of the spells are derived from Latin and other languages. Due to the different language families, the meanings of the spells are easily understood by English-speaking readers but difficult for Chinese readers to comprehend. Therefore, how to retain the connotation of the spells but simultaneously make them accessible to the target language readers is of significance.

In China, two official versions exist: the simplified Chinese version published by People's Literature Publishing House in Chinese mainland, and the traditional Chinese version issued by Crown Publishing Group in Chinese Taiwan. In this thesis, the simplified Chinese version will be studied. Intelligently, four translators Cao Suling, Ma Ainong, Ma Aixin, Zheng Xumi who undertook the simplified Chinese version, utilised a distinctive Chinese linguistic expression – four-character structure – to translate the spells, making the spell translation in accordance with Chinese usage. There have been several studies delving into the strategies used in translating *Harry Potter* from different perspectives. Though the spell translation has garnered some level of attention, and the four-character structure translation was occasionally mentioned, the reasons why translated spells into that special structure are scarcely noticed. In this case, this thesis aims to analyse the spell translation strategies and conclude the hidden reasons for translating them into four-character structure.

For spell translation, the four-character structure acts as the building blocks of the bridge which strengthens Chinese reader's comprehension effectively. By analysing the methods applied in translating spells from the perspective of Skopos Theory, which prioritises the target language readers' understanding, the relationship between spells and four-character structure is worth being investigated. This analysis will not only provide insights into the rationale behind the translation strategies but also promote the recognition and application of the four-character structure in English-Chinese translation, thereby enhancing cross-cultural exchange.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Previous Research on Spell Translation in *Harry Potter*

Existing research on *Harry Potter* translations from different perspectives is abundant, but studies of spell translation are relatively marginalised. In spite of limited references, scholars had clear focuses on research.

Some scholars noticed the special four-character structure in spell translation. Several studies compared the Chinese mainland version with the Chinese Taiwan version and found that the four-character structure translation was widely applied in Chinese mainland version. Xiang Chen's paper (2014) discussed the translation of titles, names and spells in two version from Skopos Theory, suggesting four-character structure of spell was in line with Chinese culture[2]. He Ying (2016) analysed that four-character structures of "AABC" and "ABCC" were utilised in Chinese mainland version, while three-character structure of "ABB" were more common in Chinese Taiwan version[3]. Xu Jianan (2019), from the view of cross-cultural communication, affirmed that the four-character spell was more accessible to Chinese readers [4].

Translation strategies have always garnered considerable attention by scholars. In terms of the most suitable strategy for spell translation, different scholars have different opinions. Zheng Yuanke (2010) concluded the most applied translation skills were liberal translation, transliteration and the combination of both [5], while Meng Qingsheng and Liu Chen (2012) further concluded that liberal translation was suitable for readers, the combination of both was more appropriately applied in movie subtitle translation, and transliteration was more effective in some certain contexts [6]. Wang Miaomiao (2014) suggested that combining semantic translation to preserve the original text's form and communicative translation to ensure the translated text is accessible and culturally resonant [7].

Cai Xiaoqing and Pan Huali (2020) suggested that the combination of domestication and foreignization is conducive to good translation [8]. Qian Huilin (2020) claimed that the use of repetition in translation enhances the meaning of the same linguistic content under the guidance of theory of language iconicity [9]. Xiang Xinyu et al. (2022) proposed that recreation and rendition strategies could serve as potential solutions to the problems of spell translation [10]. Mo Xiaoxiao and Zhao Meijuan (2024) highlighted domestication strategies which make spells accessible while preserving their mystique, and foreignization strategies which maintain the originality of spells [11]. Qiu Wenjing (2024) mainly investigated three strategies – Culture Image Translation, Domestication Translation, and Foreignizing Translation, and suggested that translators should choose strategies that best suit the original text, considering both the author’s intent and the target readers’ cultural context [12].

Apart from the two aspects above, some papers also probed into the factors that influences the selection of translation strategy. Culture is an influencing factor. Zhou Wangyue and Zhuo Yue (2013) compared the Chinese mainland version and Chinese Taiwan versions, finding that the mainland version employed four-character structure more frequently which may not appeal to children, while Taiwan version was more children-oriented, applying reduplicative forms to translate spells. They attributed this discrepancy to culture differences between Chinese mainland and Chinese Taiwan [13]. Another factor has to do with lexicology. Michaela Frydrychová (2023) presented a lexicological analysis of neologisms from the *Harry Potter* films, focusing on the categories of loanwords used in translating these terms into Chinese. The scholar found that phonetic loanwords and calques are the most productive categories, suggesting a preference for maintaining the original sound and meaning of the spells [14]. Chang Yunshu (2022) explored the etymology of spell and investigated its influence on the selection of translation methods [15]. This research is rare in China, as it paid attention to the configuration of spells.

2.2. Previous Research on Four-Character Structure Translation

Research on four-character structure translation includes English-Chinese translation and Chinese-English translation.

Studies on four-character structure have evolved through two phases. The first phase, prior to 2015, focused primarily on the application and strategies of four-character structure translation. The second phase occurred after 2015, shifted towards case analysis of Chinese translation of English literary works.

Prior to the work of Feng Shujian (1985), the application of four-character structure in English-Chinese translation was seldom discussed. Feng underscored the importance of four-character structure in enhancing the readability of translations while maintaining fidelity to the original text [16]. Subsequently, a growing number of scholars embarked on the investigation of application and features of four-character structure. Several explored the aesthetics value of four-character structure in translation. Li Ning (2003) and Zhang Lei and Li Yuying (2011), they argued that four-character structure contributes to the rhythmic beauty, structural beauty and imagistic beauty [17,18]. Yuan Xiao (2004) further discussed the deep cultural foundation of four-character structure, whose utilisation lent a translation elegant and poetic quality [19]. Some scholars deeply delved into translation methods. Cheng Tongchun and Cheng Xin (2007) concluded that English single words, phrases and idioms can be translated into four-character structure, which is a search for inter-textual correspondence between languages [20]. Guo Weimin (2009) further summarised that English twin words, proverbs and sentences can be turned into four-character structure likewise [21]. Others probed into four-character structure in translation from different aspects. Yang Qingping (2007) critically noted that while four-character structure can enhance translation, it should be used judiciously to avoid distorting the original meaning [22]. Lu Junhu and Yang Kun (2008), from the

perspective of cross-cultural pragmatics, suggested that translators must know the different expressions between two cultures very well to maximise the vantages of four-character structure [23].

In the second phase, most studies analysed four-character structure across various translations of literary works. A group of scholars performed case analysis with different theories, and Translation Aesthetics Theory was the most applied. Xu Xia (2020) studied the application of four-character structure in *The Native American Renaissance: Literary Imagination and Achievement* to address that moderate application of four-character structure can mitigate the deviations brought about by domestication [24]; Fan Yuxin (2022) probed into the translation of *Animal Farm* and concluded that the loss of the aesthetic qualities of the original text could result from overusing four-character structure [25]. Apart from Translation Aesthetics Theory, He Ying (2021) studied four-character structure translation in *Bad Blood* from the aspect of Language Character Theory, pointing out that translations should also focus on conveying language, style, mood and form [26]. In addition to using kinds of theories, some scholars preferred doing comparative studies. He He (2021) compared different translators' styles in using four-character structure in translating *The Great Gatsby* and found that the socio-linguistic environment and personal life experiences of the translators can influence their translations [27]. Luo Lin (2023) compared three different translations of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by three different translators, revealing that although the translators had different attitudes towards four-character structure translation, the application of *chengyu* (one of the types of four-character structure) remained dominant in the three Chinese versions [28].

At the same time, much scholarly interest was directed toward translating four-character structure expressions from Chinese into English. Extensive research primarily focused on translation strategies. Some conducted analyses with the aid of literary works. Gao Lei (2019) analysed the translation of a documentary literature and concluded four translation skills, but suggested that rich information cannot fully convey when translated [29]. However, Wang Yujun (2024), through analysing two literary works, drew the conclusion that shift technique and text reconstruction can effectively express implicit meanings [30]. Bao Dewang and Xiang Huali (2023), focusing on *Iconology of the Decorated Writing-Paper of the Ten Bamboo Studio* to discuss the application of paraphrase, omission, addition, and shift methods, which were well accepted by foreign readers [31]. Other research studied translation strategies through analysing existing four-character expressions. Yang Weidong et al. (2012) proposed various translation techniques including literal and free translation, and emphasized the need to adapt to the rhetorical and stylistic preferences of the target language [32]. The works of Kang Hongmei and Yang Yang (2022) and Tian Chuanmao (2017) both delved into the definition, classification and characteristic of four-character expression [33,34]. Tian, however, specifically summarised the structures of four-character expressions and recommended targeted translation methods for each structure, offering fresh insight into four-character phrases translation [34].

2.3. Limitations of Previous Research

A review of the research on spell translation and the translation of four-character structure reveals several limitations. Although the utilisation of four-character structure in spell translation *did* garner a certain level of attention from scholars, more concentrations were primarily put on the translation techniques within the framework of various theories, the potential connection between spells and four-character structure is rarely explored. This connection may contribute to the reasons why translating spells into four-character structure, considering the spells' brevity and rhythmic cadence are naturally align with the Chinese four-character structure, which however have often been vaguely generalised in previous research. Furthermore, in terms of the number of papers, scholars are more interested in Chinese-English translation of four-character expressions, while studies related to English-Chinese four-character structure translation were relatively less conducted. Additionally, much of the research linked four-character structure translation with Translation Aesthetics Theory, resulting in a limited range of research perspectives. Consequently, a deeper comprehension of this topic remains scarce. In this case, further effort is needed to advance research in those areas.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Three Rules of Skopos Theory

3.1.1. Skopos Rule

In Skopos Theory, the primary rule that needs to be followed is skopos rule. It is the translation purpose that plays a decisive role in the progress of translation. As the purposes vary in different situations, there are roughly three categories of purposes. First is the purpose of translators (such as making money or simply completing tasks). Second is the communicative purpose of target text (such as making interactions with target text recipients). Third is the purpose that requires special ways to achieve (such as using literal translation to illustrate the grammar structure of a language) [35]. In most cases, the “purpose” here refers to communicative purpose. Therefore, in order to make translation readable for the readers, translators have the responsibility to apply appropriate translation strategies that are acceptable in different translation environment.

3.1.2. Coherence Rule

Coherence rule suggests that the target translation ought to attain the requirement of “intra-textual coherence” [36]. That is to say, the target translation must in line with the reading habit of the target readers, making the translation readable and acceptable for them. In this context, translation can produce meaning in target language culture and communication. Therefore, translators should take into account the cultural differences between two countries, creating a meaningful text for the target readers. In this way, the information of the source text is successfully received by the target recipients and the communicative interaction is realised.

3.1.3. Fidelity Rule

For the target translation, “intra-textual coherence” needs to be attained, while “inter-textual coherence” should be established between source text and target text. Translation is the reproduction of information from the original text, so there must be a connection between them. In short, the target translation should be faithful to the original text. Translators’ understandings of the source text and the translation purpose are the independent variables for “inter-textual coherence”. In other words, it allows translators to imitate the source text faithfully to the maximum [37].

It is acknowledged that the fidelity rule is subordinate to the coherence rule, and both of them should comply with the skopos rule. If the translation purpose asks for a coherent and consistent translation, then the coherence rule is applicable, otherwise it is not applicable. Similarly, if the translation purpose requires a translation which reproduces the features of the source text, then the translators should obey the fidelity rule, otherwise this rule is not applicable. Therefore, the application of skopos rule is universal, while the utilisation of coherence rule and fidelity rule depends on situations.

4. INTRODUCTION OF SPELLS IN HARRY POTTER

Spells are the spoken words held to have magic power. When casting a spell, a piece of magic will happen. Spells are not uncommon in fantasy literature. In *Harry Potter*, spells encapsulate the essence of magic, blending linguistic creativity with symbolic power. This chapter begins by exploring the origins and etymologies of these spells, followed by a statistical analysis that unveils the features underlying these magical spells.

4.1. Etymologies of the Spells

A majority of Spells in *Harry Potter* were created by the author Rowling, so the spells can be considered as neologisms. For neologisms, or new words, there are several word formation processes to create them, such as compounding, derivation, conversion, blending, borrowing, loan words and

so on. However, considering that Rowling borrowed a large number of words of different language in creating spells, this part will mainly break down the spells from the perspective of language.

4.1.1. Latin

Latin is the most frequent used language that Rowling utilised to create spells. Some spells directly borrow the original Latin words. For example, the spell “Confringo” is a curse that produces fiery explosions. In Latin, “confringo” means “to break into pieces, to destroy” [38] (The Latin etymologies appearing below are all from the same source). The function of this spell is totally in accordance with its etymological meaning. Some spells are derived from Latin words by changing the letters. For instance, “Obliviate” is the spell to modify one’s memories, which is derived from the Latin word “oblivisci”, meaning “to forget”. By changing “sci” into “ate”, the spell emphasises more on the control of the spellcaster. Some spells are the combinations of Latin words. “Sectumsempra” is used to lacerate the target. It consists of “sectum”, “cut”, and “semper”, “always”. Though “sempra” is the variant of its original word, the meanings of the two Latin words are well-represented in the spell.

4.1.2. Other Languages

Apart from Latin, other languages are also the sources of spells. English is one of the sources. The spell “Muffliato” can fill one’s ears with buzzing in order to prevent from eavesdropping. Its original word is “muffle” which means “to quiet or less clear” [39]. Another source can be French. The spell whose function is making the target become bigger in size is called “Engorgio”. It is a variant of a Middle French word “engorgier”, meaning “to devour” [40]. Or Greek. A healing spell “Episkey” comes from Greek “episkeui”, meaning “repair” [41]. Or even Aramaic. The famous killing curse in *Harry Potter* “Avada Kedavra” is derived from an Aramaic word “abracadabra”, which owns the meaning of “to destroy things” [42].

4.2. The Statistical Analysis of Spells

To make it clear, spells are the spoken words with magic power and the verbal tool of performing magic. Given the fact that the spells in *Harry Potter* are various, in this part some statistical analysis charts will be given in order to present a systematic overall situation of spells and spell translation.

4.2.1. Numbers

There are a wide variety of spells in *Harry Potter*. According to the statistics from the book *Harry Potter Encyclopaedia* [43], there are 132 spells that are mentioned in the series. However, not all the spells have specific spoken words. Some just have a name illustrating function but don’t show the readers their spoken words. Through the author’s calculation, it shows that in the whole series of *Harry Potter*, 85 spells are with spoken words, while the rest only have the name of spells.

Table 1. Spell Statistics

Spells	Number	Percentage
With Spoken Words	85	64.39%
Without Spoken Words	47	35.61%
Total	132	100%

For those spells with written magic words, their Chinese translation presents with different number of Chinese characters. 71 of them are translated into four-character structure spell. It is quite obvious that four-character structure are generally preferred by Chinese readers.

Table 2. The Number of Characters of Spells in Chinese Translation

Number of Characters	Number	Percentage
Three Characters	4	4.71%
Four Characters	70	82.35%
Five Characters	7	8.23%

4.2.2. Functions

As the media for wizards and witches to perform magic, spells have various functions, such as to transform something into something else, to make objects vanish and so on. In general, spells can be categorised into five: practical spells, offensive spells, defensive spells, dark magic and others. Among these, practical spells account for the largest proportion.

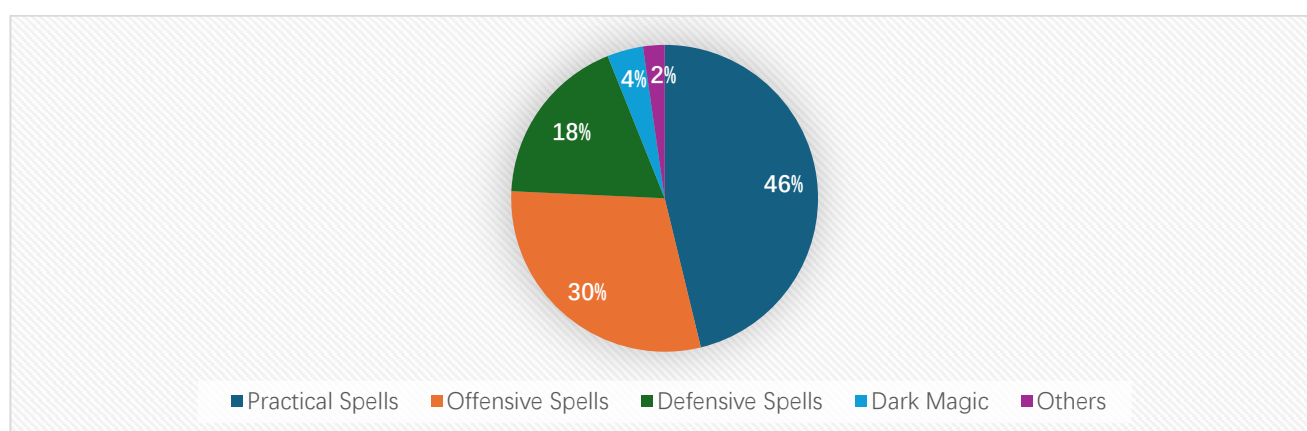


Figure 1. Different Functions of Spells

5. THE ANALYSIS OF FOUR-CHARACTER STRUCTURE TRANSLATION OF SPELLS UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF SKOPOS THEORY

5.1. Strategies Guided by the Skopos Rule

In the previous chapter, it is explained that skopos rule requires translation purpose playing a decisive role in the progress of translation. In most situations, the “purpose” refers to communicative purpose, aiming to fulfil the demands and expectations from target readers. Translators adhere to skopos rule so as to make target text “appropriate”: whether the translation achieves the intended function in target language context. Therefore, it is viable to analyse translation strategies within context.

Example 1

Source text:

“Right,” said Lupin, suddenly businesslike. “Ron, I can’t mend bones nearly as well as Madam Pomfrey, so I think it’s best if we just strap your leg up until we can get you to the hospital wing.”

He hurried over to Ron, bent down, tapped Ron’s leg with his wand, and muttered, “Ferula.” Bandages spun up Ron’s leg, strapping it tightly to a splint. [44]

Target text:

“好，”卢平说，突然好像办理公务一样，“罗恩，我接骨头没有庞弗雷女士接得好，所以我想最好先把你的腿扎起来，待会儿送你去校医院。”

他快步走过去，弯腰用魔杖敲了敲罗恩的腿，念道：“夹板紧扎。”绷带一圈圈地绕着，把罗恩的腿紧紧绑到一根薄木条上[45]。

This scene shows how Lupin used magic to bind up Ron's broken leg. The spell "Ferula" is a Latin word meaning "walking-stick" or "a splint for broken bones". According to the description of the following sentence, the function of the spell is explicit. In order to show its function, translators use liberal translation to transform the spell into four-character structure to conform to target language culture. At the same time, "夹板" is the literal meaning of "splint", "紧扎" concretizes "tightly". "夹板紧扎" appropriately depicts the function and outcome of the spell within the context, not only correctly conveys its meaning, but also makes readers understandable and satisfy their reading demands.

There is a spell "Impervius" which is translated to two different Chinese version according to its different functions in different contexts.

Example 2

Source text:

"I've had an idea, Harry! Give me your glasses, quick!"

He handed them to her, and as the team watched in amazement, Hermione tapped them with her wand and said, "Impervius!"

"There!" she said, handing them back to Harry. "They'll repel water!"[46]

Target text:

“我有一个主意，哈利！把眼镜给我，快！”

哈利把眼镜递给赫敏。在队员们惊异的注视下，赫敏用魔杖轻轻敲了敲眼镜，说了声：“防水防湿！”

“给！”说着，她把眼镜还给了哈利，“现在不怕水了！”[47]

The spell "Impervius" is Latin which means "impassable, impervious". In this context, Hermione helped to make Harry's glasses repelling water, so the spell's meaning is more adopted from "impervious". In this case, it is translated into "防水防湿" whose literal meaning is "waterproof and moisture-proof", which appropriates the context. In addition, the "ABAC" form of four-character structure gives the spell the rhythm and a catchy sense.

However, in another situation, the spell is translated to a totally different one:

Example 3

Source text:

"Impervius!" screeched Hermione in an attempt to protect herself, Ron, and the goblins from the burning metal. [48]

Target text:

“水火不侵！”赫敏尖叫着，试图保护自己、罗恩和妖精们不被炽热的金属烫伤。[49]

While the protagonist group and the goblins were drowned by burning treasure in an enclosed vault, Hermione cast that spell, trying to prevent them from getting burned. It's clear that the “impervious” meaning doesn't fit this context as well as spell's function here. As the word “impervius” contains the meaning of “to block, to protect”, translators skilfully translate it as “水火不侵” – water and fire will not invade – to meet the readers' demands of having a thorough understanding of the scene.

5.2. Strategies Guided by the Coherence Rule

Coherence rule requests that the translation must be understandable for target recipients and align with the expression conventions of the target language in order to make the translation meaningful in the culture of target language [50]. Actually, translators choosing to translate the spells into four-character structure has already adhered to the coherence rule. Based on that, to make the translation subtler, two skilful methods are utilised.

5.2.1. Borrowing or Adapting the Existing Chinese Four-character Idioms

For instance, “Silencio” is a spell to make something silent, and its Chinese translation “无声无息” which is a Chinese idiom describes the absence of sound. Both original spell and translation express the state of quiet. Another example is the translation of “Reducto” – “粉身碎骨”. The spell is used to break or disintegrate objects, while the idiom “粉身碎骨” literally means “body crushed and dead”. The translation vividly conveys the function of the spell, giving the target readers a strong sense of immersion, as if an object is exploding in front of the faces.

Meanwhile, adapting the existing Chinese four-character idioms is a method worth mentioning. For example, in the book, Hermione once used “Oppugno”, which is a Latin word meaning “to attack”, to summon a flock of birds to attack Ron. Its translation “万弹齐发” is derived from “万箭齐发”, an idiom depicting the scene of thousands of arrows firing at the same time. To make it in line with the original description of the birds “speeding like a hail of fat golden bullets”, translators smartly replace “箭”, “arrow”, with “弹”, “bullets”. A slightly modification of the idiom makes the translation fitter to the context.

5.2.2. Creating New Four-character Phrases

A special way that translators prefer to apply is to create “AABC” or “ABCC” form of four-character structure, for its rhythmicity is well-accepted by target readers. “Rennervate”, a spell to awaken unconscious victims, is translated into “快快复苏”; “Stupefy”, a stunning spell, is translated into “昏昏倒地”. These are the examples of “AABC” form of spells. For “ABCC” form, there are also a few: “飞鸟成群” is the translation for “Avis”, “障碍重重” is the translation for “Impedimenta”, and “火焰熊熊” is for “Incendio”.

To stress the creativity, translators can even coin new four-character structure spell translation without applying certain forms above. The spell “Levicorpus” is cast to hoist someone up into the air by ankle. It is translated to “倒挂金钟”: “倒挂” expresses the state of someone being hoisted upside down, and “金钟”, “golden bell”, is a metaphor of a person. Its counter spell “Liberacorpus” which functions as putting the dangling person down, is translated into “金钟落地”, while “落地” shows the scene of someone dropping to the ground. Translators utilise metaphor in translation, intelligently showing the subtlety feature of Chinese.

5.3. Strategies Guided by the Coherence Rule

Fidelity rule refers to a link which has to exist between the source text and the target text [51]. In other words, the target text should be faithful to the source text instead of contradicting it. In this case, some translation strategies are applied to follow the fidelity rule.

Though transliteration is rarely utilised in the process of translating spells as four-character structure, there is one exception:

Example 4

Source text:

He raised the wand to shoulder height, said, “Waddiwasi!” and pointed it at Peeves.

With the force of a bullet, the wad of chewing gum shot out of the keyhole and straight down Peeves’s left nostril; he whirled upright and zoomed away, cursing. [52]

Target text:

他把魔杖举到肩膀那么高，指着皮皮鬼，说了句“瓦迪瓦西”。

嗖的一下，那块口香糖像子弹一样从钥匙孔里飞出来，钻进了皮皮鬼的左鼻孔。皮皮鬼一个跟头腾空而起，嘴里骂骂咧咧的，很快飞走了。[53]

The spell “Waddiwasi” is used to shoot small masses at the target, and “瓦迪瓦西” is the transliteration of the spell. Meanwhile, “Waddiwasi” has four syllables and “瓦迪瓦西” has four characters, the syllables corresponding exactly to the characters. Therefore, it can be seen that the translation of “Waddiwasi” is faithful to the original spell which appropriately follows the fidelity rule. However, if without the context, target readers may feel puzzled about this spell due to the lacking presentation of its function, which is one of the drawbacks of transliteration.

Another example is the translation of “Riddikulus” – a spell to fight the Boggart, a kind of magic creature which can transform to whatever we fear the most. “Riddikulus” is derived from the Latin word “ridiculus”, meaning “laughable”. At the same time, the pronunciation of “Riddikulus” is almost the same as the word “ridiculous”, whose Chinese meaning is “滑稽”. Translators use the strategy of combining sound and meaning, and render the spell as “滑稽滑稽”, emphasising the effect of the spell through repetition. It not only adheres to the fidelity rule, but also points out the essential of casting this spell: humour and laughter can defeat fear.

6. REASONS FOR SPELLS TRANSLATED INTO FOUR-CHARACTER STRUCTURE

According to the previous statistics, more than 80% of the spells with spoken words are translated into four-character structure. It is obvious that four-character structure is especially favoured by the translators. To find out the reasons of this phenomenon, the features of four-character structure and spells and the connections between them are worth discussing.

6.1. Linguistic Level

By analysing the spells in *Harry Potter* and their Chinese four-character structure translation, some potential linguistic connections can be found between them, which might contribute to the hidden reasons of translating spells into four-character structure.

6.1.1. Connection in Phonology

Phonology studies the sound systems of language [54]. The phonological structure of Chinese four-character structure and the spells in the *Harry Potter* series share several noteworthy similarities, particularly in terms of brevity and rhythmic structure.

Spells usually consist of three to four syllables such as “Confringo” and “Muffliato”, and have a rhythmic quality that lends itself to rapid enunciation by the caster. Four-character structure, obviously, are composed of four Chinese characters, contributing to a neat structure and a strong sense of rhythm. In terms of their articulation duration, no spell lasts for more than three seconds [55] and the four-character structure lasts for no more than two seconds. Therefore, their brevity contributes to the quickness of the spell, meeting the skopos rule.

As most of spells deriving from Latin, their articulatory features are largely a continuation of the Latin phonological features. In Latin, syllables can be categorised as light or heavy depending on whether the syllable contains a short or long vowel and whether it is open or closed. For instance, the spell “Sectumsempra” consists of “sectum” and the variant of “semper”. The syllable “Sec-” is light, while the syllables “-tum”, “sem-”, and “-pra” are heavy. The predominance of heavy syllables gives the spell a weighty, serious phonetic quality, aligning with its aggressive nature in the magical context. Meanwhile, each character in four-character structure follows a balanced prosodic pattern. The tonal pattern of the translation of “Imperio” – “魂魄出窍” follows a level-oblique-level-oblique structure. This alternating pattern between level and oblique tones gives the phrase a rhythmic flow. It contributes to a solemn, mysterious auditory effect, making it particularly suitable for translating spells. To conclude, both spells and four-character structure have common in a deliberate phonological design to create expressions.

6.1.2. Connection in Semantics

Semantics is defined as the study of meaning [56], such as the meaning of words, phrases and sentences. In the expression of meaning, some commonalities can be found between spells and four-character structure.

First, the connection between four-character structure and spells can be explored in terms of semantic conciseness. Both forms are designed to convey complex meanings efficiently through minimal wording. In *Harry Potter*, spells often consist of a single word with explicit meanings and effects, which contains three or four syllables, much like how four-character structure encapsulates broad ideas or actions in just four characters. For example, the spell “Incendio” whose Latin etymology “incendere” refers to “to set fire”, is translated as “火焰熊熊” which vividly conveys the function of the spell with imagery of burning fire. The semantic clarity ensures that the intended meaning is reinforced.

Second, spells and four-character structure are logically and functionally consistent when conveying meanings. Spells are usually used with a clear logic and function, and four-character structure pays equal attention to the logical relationship between words. The disarming spell “Expelliarmus” is a combination of “expello”, meaning “expel”, and “arma”, meaning “weapon”. Its function of disarming weapons is explicitly showed by the verb-object structure, so it rendered as “除你武器” is accurate: the verb “除” initiates the removal, “你” identifies the target, and “武器” defines what is being removed. Both spell and four-character structure create a coherent and logical structure, with a precise connection between action, target, and object.

6.1.3. Connection in Pragmatics

Pragmatics is a study of speaker meaning which involves the interpretation of what people mean in a particular context [57]. Based on the definition, its effects can refer to extra layers of meaning elicited by an utterance. To deconstruct these additional meanings, imagery is a useful tool. When looking

into the spells and their four-character structure translation, it is found that both of them offer a compelling study in the use of imagery.

Both are symbolic and metaphorical in nature. Spells often express some kind of symbolic or metaphorical power directly through single word, while Chinese four-character structure also usually expresses abstract concepts in concise and condensed phrases. For example, the excruciating physical pain has already symbolised through the spell “Crucio”, which is borrowed from Latin meaning “to put to death on the cross, to torture”. The insufferable effect caused by this spell is even strengthened by the translation “钻心剜骨”, comparing the extreme pain as “to drill into the heart and gouge out the bones”. Either the spell or the four-character structure translation pictures the image of a person going through agony, enabling the readers to perceive the severity of the magical effect.

Meanwhile, both forms rely on concise language to evoke vivid visual and emotional representations. The spell “Petrificus Totalus” is the combination of the Latin “petra” – “stone”, “fieri” – “to become” and “totus” – “complete”. It suggests the conversion of vibrant life into a static, lifeless state, as vivid as its Chinese translation “统统石化”, where “统统” emphasises the all-around effect of the spell, “石化” is the image of “like turning into hard stones” to convey the effect of freezing or immobilisation. With minimal wording, both spells and the four-character structure concrete the overwhelming force of the magical act.

6.2. Cultural Level

6.2.1. Long History and Widespread Adoption of Four-Character Structure

The application of four-character structure can be traced as far back as the Western Zhou Dynasty, which is above 3000 years ago. In the earliest collection of Chinese poetry The Book of Songs, the use of four-character structure was quite sophisticated. Most of the poems were in four-character lines and two characters were one beat, giving a strong sense of rhythm, such as “关关雎鸠，在河之洲，窈窕淑女，君子好逑” (By riverside a pair of turtledoves are cooing; There is a maiden fair whom a young man is wooing [58]). In the Han Dynasty, the development of Han Fu – a style of writing – advanced the development of four-character structure whose artistic significance hence was basically stabilised. In the Ming and Qing Dynasty, novel was the most popular genre, within which a large number of four-character phrases were used for descriptions. At the time of the Republic of China, vernacular movement facilitated the expanded use of four-character idioms, making them indispensable part of modern literature.

Interestingly, apart from being employed in literary works, four-character structure has long been a frequently-used form of Chinese spells. In religion, especially in Chinese Taoism, four-character spells can often be seen. For instance, a spell that functions as purifying body and soul is “灵宝天尊，安慰身形。弟子魂魄，五脏玄冥。青龙白虎，对仗纷纭。朱雀玄武，侍卫我真” [59] (Lord of Lingbao, soothe my form. My soul and spirit, my five viscera shrouded in mystery. The Azure Dragon and the White Tiger stand in harmonious opposition. The Vermilion Bird and the Black Tortoise stand guard over my true self); a spell used to kill demons and vanquish evil spirits is “有邪必斩，有怪必摧，敷祐福祥，启悟希夷” [60] (May all evil be vanquished, all monsters be destroyed; may blessings and good fortune be bestowed, and may enlightenment be attained). From this, the use of rhythmic four-character structure has long been embedded in Chinese incantatory traditions. Therefore, it may be the inspiration for translators to translate spells in Harry Potter into four-character structure.

Through thousands of years of development, four-character structure is still glowing with life in nowadays. It is being used in an even wider range of applications. For advertisements and banners, four-character structure enhances memorability and publicity. For example, the advertising slogan of Maxwell coffee “Good to the last drop” was translated into two four-character phrases – “滴滴香浓，

意犹未尽”, keeping the language simple and powerful. In political speeches, government reports and other formal occasions, four-character structure is often used to make the language more authoritative and dignified. For example, in government work reports, four-character structure such as “高瞻远瞩” (stand tall and see far), “与时俱进” (keeping pace with the times) are commonly used to convey the core ideas and concepts of policies.

Skopos Theory has always emphasised that translation is not a literal conversion between two languages, but a conversion between two cultures. Given the background that the use of four-character structure has engraved in Chinese history and everyday life, applying four-character structure to translate English is consistent with the context and culture of Chinese.

6.2.2. Traditional Aesthetic of Four-Character Structure

The reason why the application of four-character structure is enduring in China is its intrinsic traditional beauty, as well it can be discussed from two aspects.

One is the beauty of symmetry. Four characters are divided into two groups, usually the first two characters form a group and the last two characters form another, creating a neat and symmetrical structural aesthetic. In addition, the characters in different groups presents balance and echoes in meaning. For example, the translation of spell “Deprimo” is “房塌地陷”. “房” and “地” refer to “house” and “floor”, “塌” and “陷” both mean “collapse”, and “房塌” and “地陷” both are subject-predicate structure phrases. This four-character structure not only depicts the result of the spell, but also strengthens overall semantic balance and structural symmetry.

Another is the beauty of simplicity. Four-character structure is short and concise and only four Chinese characters can express complex descriptions. Take spell “Aguamenti” as example. It’s a spell to produce clean water from wand tip. Its translation “清水如泉” vividly and concisely describe the image of clean water pouring from the wand tip, giving a condensed aesthetic. At the same time, compared to long sentences, four-character structure has a compact rhythm that gives power and focus to expression. In *Harry Potter*, a wizard needs to cast the spells quickly and accurately during an intense fight, so the simplicity of four-character spell translation is a perfect match for such a tense scene.

7. CONCLUSION

In this study, the translation of spells in the *Harry Potter* series into four-character Chinese structure has been examined from the perspective of Skopos Theory. Guided by the three core principles of Skopos Theory – the Skopos Rule, the Coherence Rule, and the Fidelity Rule – this study analyses the major translation strategies employed in spell translation and explores the linguistic and cultural motivations behind the widespread application of four-character structure in Chinese translation.

The analysis demonstrates that different translation strategies are exerted to fulfil different translational purposes. In accordance with the Skopos Rule, liberal translation is utilised to make the translation conform to different contexts and convey their magical functions. Under the guidance of the Coherence Rule, the direct application, adaptation, and creative reconstruction of four-character structure expressions strengthen target readers’ comprehension to the spells. To adhere to the Fidelity Rule, transliteration is used to preserve faith to the original texts, and the combination of sound and meaning make the translation faithful to spells’ original functions.

More importantly, the study reveals the suitability of Chinese four-character structure for spell translation. At the linguistic level, notable connections can be identified between the phonological, semantic and pragmatic qualities of the spells and their Chinese translations. In terms of phonology, both the spells and four-character structure are characterised by brevity, rhythmic balance, and strong oral performativity, which align closely with the rapid pronunciation and incantatory nature of

magical spells. In terms of semantics, spells and four-character structure not only create a coherent and logical structure, but also possess a high degree of semantic condensation, conveying complex meanings in a concise form. In terms of pragmatics, from the perspective of imagery, both rely on metaphorical associations and symbolic implications, thereby facilitating readers to visualise the magical effects of the spells.

At the cultural level, four-character structure, deeply rooted in Chinese linguistic traditions and rhetorical aesthetics, offers conciseness and symmetry beauty that not only enhance the reading experience but also correspond to Chinese readers' aesthetic preference and cognitive habits. Consequently, the translators effectively reproduce the mystical essence of the original spells while simultaneously localising them within the Chinese cultural context. Moreover, the extensive adoption of Chinese four-character structure in spell translation reinforces its suitability in spell translation.

This study not only highlights the practicality of Skopos Theory in guiding the translation of spells but also underscore the importance of cultural and linguistic compatibility in literary translation. Most importantly, this study suggests that the use of Chinese four-character structure offers an insight into preserving both the magical atmosphere and cultural essence of *Harry Potter* in translation, enriching the reading experience for Chinese audiences.

However, due to the author's limited translation skills and practical experience, several limitations remain in the present study. First, not all the spells are discussed due to space constraints, therefore the analyses of translation strategies and methods are not very comprehensive. In addition, the study mainly relies on the framework of Skopos Theory, which may overlook other translation theories that could also offer valuable perspectives on the strategies used in spell translation. Furthermore, the study relies primarily on textual analysis and lack of empirical data from Chinese readers regarding their perception of the four-character spell translations, which inevitably introduces a certain amount of subjectivity in the analysis. All in all, further research such as corpus-based methods, reader-response studies, or comparative translation studies need to be conducted in the studies of four-character spell translation in *Harry Potter*.

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