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From Formal Irreproducibility to Relational Translatability: A Semiotic Account of Language Variety Translation

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Abstract

Literary language variety is a difficult case for translatability because the phonological, lexical, grammatical, or graphic forms that distinguish a variety may themselves contribute to meaning while resisting direct reproduction in another language. This paper approaches the problem from a semiotic perspective. It argues that failure to reproduce a particular form does not necessarily entail failure to reconstruct the relation through which that form becomes significant. Drawing on the distinction between foreground variety and background variety, the paper treats markedness as emerging through textual contrast rather than as an inherent property of isolated markers. A brief illustration from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and selected Chinese renderings shows that materially different linguistic resources can occupy comparable marked positions within their respective textual environments. On this basis, relational translatability is proposed to describe the possibility of reconstructing a perceptible, source-motivated foreground-background relation in the target text despite formal irreproducibility. The proposal is deliberately limited: reconstruction may be transformed or fail altogether, and formal irreproducibility alone is therefore insufficient evidence of untranslatability.

Keywords

Translatability; language variety; markedness; relational translatability; semiotics

1. Introduction

Recent discussions of translatability extend beyond strict formal correspondence. Li (2025) reviews the debate as reaching beyond purely linguistic criteria. Venuti (2019) treats translation as interpretation rather than mechanical substitution, while Cozma (2022) argues that translatability can be maintained through an equivalence relation suited to the translation situation and target context. These positions make it difficult to equate formal non-identity with untranslatability. A narrower question remains: when linguistic form is itself foregrounded and meaning-bearing, what remains reconstructable if it has no direct target-language counterpart?

Literary language variety brings this question into sharp focus. Its deviations may be phonological, lexical, grammatical, or graphic, and such deviations can contribute to characterization and social positioning (Yu, 2015; Yu, 2021). Yet source-language markers often lack direct formal counterparts in the target language. As developed below, their textual force also depends partly on contrast with surrounding language. Formal salience, cross-linguistic mismatch, and textual contrast therefore converge in language variety, making it a useful case for examining formal irreproducibility.

Rather than asking whether every feature of a literary variety can be preserved, this paper asks whether formal irreproducibility by itself warrants a judgment of untranslatability. It argues that it does not. Where the marked significance of a variety is produced through a foreground-background relation, that relation may remain reconstructable even when the forms that realize it do not. The following discussion develops this argument from form-sensitive meaning to markedness and, finally, to relational translatability.

2. Language Variety as a Critical Case of Formal Irreproducibility

Language variety makes formal irreproducibility concrete because form can itself be part of the literary effect. This section first asks when form becomes meaning-bearing and then how a variety acquires significance through contrast with other textual voices.

2.1 When Linguistic Form Becomes Meaning-Bearing

Not every formal difference between languages creates a problem of translatability. Ke (1999) identifies a particular difficulty when a linguistic peculiarity is communicatively foregrounded. In such cases, formal features are no longer incidental to communication but participate in what has to be interpreted.

Literary language variety is one such case. Krapp (1926/1971) notes that literary dialect may draw on actual speech while remaining an artistic construction. Its spellings, lexical choices, or grammatical patterns may therefore be selected as part of literary representation. Yu (2015) addresses this problem in translation by proposing differentiation as a strategy for literary dialect. What appears as an irregular spelling, lexical choice, or grammatical form may therefore be doing textual work rather than functioning as an incidental irregularity.

The difficulty is more specific than ordinary cross-linguistic difference. When a salient source form has no direct target-language counterpart, reproducing that form and reconstructing the textual work it performs become separate questions. The second question is the concern of this paper.

2.2 Language Variety as a Voice of Difference

The significance of a literary variety does not arise from isolated non-standard forms alone. It becomes perceptible as different because it is read against other linguistic voices in the same text. Yu (2021) shows that dialect used alongside standard language can form a distinctive textual voice and that such a voice may contain sub-voices differentiated by dialect features and their frequency. In three Chinese translations of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, frequency patterns are sometimes altered or reversed, with consequences for characterization and the organization of dialectal voices.

Yu's findings show why a marker-by-marker account is incomplete. Translation can change not only which dialect features appear but also the pattern of difference among textual voices. The textual significance of dialect is therefore partly organized by contrast with what surrounds it.

Meaning-bearing form, weak cross-linguistic correspondence, and dependence on a textual background make literary language variety a useful critical case for formal irreproducibility.

3. Markedness and the Relational Production of Meaning

The preceding section locates part of the literary effect of language variety in patterned difference. This section specifies that difference through foregrounding and markedness.

3.1 Foreground and Background Varieties

The familiar pair "standard/non-standard" is not always adequate for this purpose. A variety's sociolinguistic status outside a literary work need not coincide with its textual position inside that work: a socially non-standard variety, for example, may supply the dominant linguistic background of a particular text (Wang, 2020). The present analysis therefore focuses on how varieties are positioned in relation to one another within the work rather than assigning them a fixed hierarchy in advance.

Yu (2015) proposes differentiation as a strategy for translating literary dialect. To describe the textual relation on which such differentiation depends, Wang (2020), drawing on Mukařovský's (1932/1964) account of foregrounding, uses the terms foreground variety (FV) and background variety (BV). Foregrounding, in Mukařovský's account,

depends on deviation perceived against a background norm. In Wang's use, the BV is the relatively stable linguistic environment established within the literary work, whereas the FV becomes salient through its departure from that environment.

Differentiation, foregrounding, and markedness are related but not synonymous. Differentiation, following Yu (2015), names a translation strategy directed at recreating contrast. Foregrounding describes the textual process by which one variety becomes salient against another. Markedness refers to the semiotic status that may arise from such contrast. FV/BV and marked/unmarked are therefore not interchangeable labels: the former describe textual organization, whereas the latter describe a marked/unmarked distinction.

3.2 Markedness as Relational Signification

Literary varieties do not become foregrounded in isolation. Markedness is conventionally formulated through a distinction between marked and unmarked values (Andersen, 1989). Applied cautiously here, the foreground-background arrangement provides a textual condition in which markedness may emerge: linguistic features can acquire a marked position when they become perceptibly salient against the relatively stable patterns of the BV. This does not make every FV intrinsically marked or every BV intrinsically unmarked outside the particular textual relation.

That marked position may also participate in social, regional, interpersonal, or stylistic signification. Ke's (1999) sociosemiotic account is useful here because it distinguishes intralingual meaning from pragmatic meaning, including associative and social or interpersonal meanings, and notes that different dimensions of meaning may carry different weight in different contexts. A marked linguistic feature should therefore not be assumed to contain a fixed social meaning by itself. Rather, formal salience and sociocultural significance may interact within a particular textual context. In this restricted sense, the meaningfulness of linguistic form can be relational.

3.3 An Illustrative Case: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

An example analyzed by Wang (2020, pp. 28-29) makes this relation visible. Jim says, "Oh, she was plumb deef en dumb, Huck, plumb deef en dumb—en I'd ben a-treat'n her so!" Forms such as deef, en, and treat'n depart from conventional written English and represent features of Jim's non-standard speech. Their literary force does not lie in the forms alone; they become salient through contrast with the surrounding linguistic environment and, in context, contribute to Jim's characterization.

The Chinese renderings discussed by Wang (2020) show the same point from another angle. Zhang Wanli's largely normalized version reduces the linguistic contrast around Jim's speech. Cheng Shi and Xu Ruzhi, by contrast, introduce nonconventional Chinese forms such as "过" for "个", "荣" for "聋", "科" for "可", "隆" for "聋", and "亚" for "哑". These forms are not one-to-one equivalents of particular English markers. They can nevertheless become salient against more conventional Chinese usage and establish a foreground-background contrast in the target text.

The example supports a limited claim. Materially different forms can occupy comparable marked positions relative to their textual backgrounds. It does not show that the source and target relations are identical, or that every aspect of either translation is successful. It identifies a level of comparison beyond one-to-one marker correspondence. Section 4 asks whether that level can also serve as an object of reconstruction.

4. From Reproducibility to Relational Translatability

If markedness emerges through a foreground-background relation, the translatability question can be reformulated. The issue is not only whether a source form is reproduced, but also whether the relation that makes it salient can be rebuilt with target-language resources.

4.1 From Sign Correspondence to Relational Reconstruction

Cozma (2022) argues that the impossibility of absolute identity between source and target texts does not prevent an equivalence relation from being established; the relevant type of equivalence depends on the translation situation and target context. Torop (2020) approaches translatability through comparability at different structural levels of text and through the interplay of intratextual and extratextual relations. Rędzioch-Korkuz (2025), from a broader semiotic perspective, places translation within interacting sign spaces and a context-dependent dialogue of constraints. These approaches differ considerably in scope, but each provides a reason for looking beyond direct formal correspondence.

For the present problem, this broader perspective can be narrowed to one intratextual relation: the contrast between an FV and the BV against which it becomes salient. Source and target texts may use different phonological, lexical, grammatical, or graphic resources to establish such a contrast. The relevant comparison is therefore not between isolated markers as matched items, but between the relative positions through which a variety becomes perceptibly salient within each textual environment.

Relational reconstruction shifts the locus of comparison accordingly. The question is whether the target text can establish a perceptible pattern of differentiation comparable to the one that gives the source variety its marked position.

4.2 Relational Translatability

The move from reproduction to reconstruction has precedents in sociosemiotic and semiotic approaches to translation. Ke (1999) distinguishes the message from its linguistic carrier and argues that translators may need to give priority to meanings that are most prominent in a particular context. Kourdis and Petrilli (2020), working with the semiotic notion of modeling, describe texts as created, interpreted, and re-created in dialogic relations and connect translation with processes of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction. These approaches do not supply the concept proposed here, but they allow the problem of translatability to be posed in terms of reconstructable meaning-making organization rather than reproduced linguistic material alone.

Relational translatability refers here to the possibility of reconstructing in the target text a comparable signifying relation through which a foreground variety becomes marked against its linguistic background, even when the source-language forms that establish that relation cannot be reproduced. The formulation develops an existing line of thought. Yu (2015) proposes differentiation as a translation strategy, while Wang (2020) explains such differentiation through the contrast between foreground and background varieties. The present proposal treats the reconstructability of that contrast as a restricted basis on which translatability may be considered.

This claim does not present relationality as a new property of translation in general. Semiotic approaches already describe translation in relational, dialogic, or processual terms (Kourdis & Petrilli, 2020; Rędzioch-Korkuz, 2025; Torop, 2020). Nor is the FV-BV relation another name for source-target equivalence. It is intratextual and system-relative: one relation is established within the source text, while a comparable relation must be established within the target text. Differentiation names the contrast to be recreated; relational translatability names the possibility of recreating it despite formal non-equivalence.

4.3 The Limits of Relational Reconstruction

Relational reconstructability does not imply invariance. The FV-BV relation may change in salience, linguistic realization, and sociocultural association. Yu (2021), for example, shows that dialect-frequency patterns may be altered or reversed in translated texts, with consequences for characterization and the organization of dialectal voices. Such changes should not automatically be treated as successful reconstruction. For the purposes of the present account, a weakened or displaced contrast may still count as transformed reconstruction if a perceptible, source-motivated relation remains. Complete neutralization, or a reversal that removes the relevant source differentiation, is better treated as failure of relational reconstruction. Loss of individual features is therefore not automatically untranslatability, but neither is every transformation successful reconstruction.

Relational reconstruction is also constrained rather than arbitrary. Yu (2024) shows that departures from standard Chinese in dialect translation arise through translators' negotiation among multiple, sometimes conflicting norms. Rędzioch-Korkuz (2025) similarly argues that translation takes place within a dialogue of constraints whose relative importance depends on the particular context and which restricts the range of possible meanings and solutions. On this basis, two minimal conditions are proposed here. First, the target-text contrast must remain perceptible within its own linguistic environment. Second, that contrast must be motivated by the source text's pattern of differentiation rather than by an unrelated target-language deviation. These are conceptual conditions rather than a quantitative evaluation scale.

Relational translatability is therefore a claim about possibility, not identity or completeness. It neither requires reproduction of the same linguistic signs nor guarantees preservation of the source text's degree of salience or sociocultural associations. Nor does it establish universal translatability. The claim is narrower: in literary language variety translation, formal irreproducibility alone is insufficient to establish untranslatability if the source-motivated foreground-background relation remains reconstructable.

5. Conclusion

Literary language variety exposes a particular weakness in treating formal reproduction as the decisive test of translatability. Its linguistic forms can matter precisely because they become salient against a textual background, yet the resources that create this effect in one language may have no direct counterparts in another. The discussion has therefore separated three related notions that can otherwise be easily conflated: differentiation as a translation strategy, foregrounding as a process of textual salience, and markedness as a semiotic status arising through contrast.

The *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* illustration suggests that materially different linguistic resources can occupy comparable marked positions within their respective textual environments. This observation does not establish identity between source and target relations. It does, however, identify a level of comparison that is not reducible to one-to-one correspondence between individual markers.

Relational translatability has been proposed to describe the possibility opened by that distinction. Rather than locating translatability solely in the reproducibility of source-language forms, the concept asks whether the foreground-background relation through which those forms become salient remains reconstructable in the target text. In this sense, the proposal extends differentiation from a translation strategy and an object of analysis to a restricted account of why translation may remain possible under formal non-equivalence. It neither replaces equivalence theory nor claims that relationality itself is new to translation studies.

The limits of the proposal are equally important. Reconstruction may alter the degree of salience, linguistic realization, and sociocultural associations of a variety, and it remains subject to target-language norms and other semiotic constraints. Where a perceptible and source-motivated contrast survives, transformation need not amount to untranslatability; where that contrast is neutralized or replaced by an unrelated deviation, relational reconstruction fails. The conclusion is therefore deliberately limited: formal irreproducibility does not necessarily entail semiotic non-reconstructability, and formal non-equivalence alone is insufficient evidence of untranslatability in literary language variety translation.

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