

# Activity versus Descriptivity: A Stylometric Analysis of Two English Translations of Honglouloumeng

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the translation style of David Hawkes and the Yangs (Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang) in their English translations of Honglouloumeng, a Chinese Great Classic, by considering the hybrid register nature of fiction. The activity index, a measure from quantitative linguistics that calculates the ratio of verb occurrences to the sum of verb and adjective occurrences, was used to analyze the active-descriptive equilibrium patterns across the two Honglouloumeng translations and the two sub-registers of fiction. Our analysis is based on a corpus that separates fictional narration and dialogues from the first 80 chapters of the two Honglouloumeng translations. The study found that, overall, dialogues tend to be more active than narration and Hawkes' translation was characterized by a greater level of activity compared to the Yangs' version. Subsequent analysis revealed that Hawkes' translation displayed a higher level of activity in fictional dialogues while demonstrating a more descriptive approach in fictional narration. The results suggest that Hawkes' translation adheres more closely to the typical stylistic conventions of fiction writing in English. The stylistic differences between the two translations of Honglouloumeng are believed to be a result of a combination of factors, including the translators' language and cultural backgrounds and their choice of translation strategies and approaches, which may have contributed to the variations in the final translated products.

**Keywords:** translation style, activity index, Honglouloumeng, hybrid register, translators' background.

## 1 Background and Motivation

This study aims to investigate the translation style of two English translation versions of the Chinese classic *Honglouloumeng*, by considering the hybrid register nature of fiction. *Honglouloumeng*, also known as *Dream of the Red Chamber*, is considered a masterpiece of Chinese literature that has captured the imagination of readers for centuries and continues to be widely read and studied both in China and around the world. As of 2017, *Honglouloumeng* has been translated into over 20 languages, resulting in at

least 20 full-length translations of the entire chronicle (Fan and Minford 2017, p. 374). Two English translations of the Chinese classic *Honglouloumeng* have had a significant impact on the international literary world. The first is *The Story of the Stone*, translated by David Hawkes and John Minford from the late 1970s to early 1980s, with Hawkes translating the first 80 chapters and Minford completing the remaining 40. The second is *A Dream of Red Mansions*, translated by Xianyi Yang and his wife Gladys Yang in the late 1970s. While Hawkes and Minford are both sinologists with a deep interest in Chinese culture, the Yangs are renowned translators who were commissioned by the government to work on various translations of Chinese classics. The two English translations of *Honglouloumeng* by David Hawkes and John Minford, and by Xianyi Yang and Gladys Yang have received significant attention in Translation Studies. Prior studies on the English translations of *Honglouloumeng* have primarily focused on comparing the versions translated by David Hawkes and the Yang couple (Ran and Yang 2013), with the majority of these studies revealing substantial stylistic variations between the two versions (e.g., Fang and Liu 2015; Liu and Afzaal 2021; Liu and Cheung 2020; Liu et al. 2022a, 2022b). In this study, we employed the activity index, a metric derived from quantitative linguistics, to examine the stylistic differences by focusing on the first 80 chapters of the two English translations of *Honglouloumeng* by Hawkes (Cao 1973, 1977, 1980) and the Yang couple (Cao 1978).

The goal of this study is to investigate how translators of the two *Honglouloumeng* translations approach the task of translating this classic Chinese novel and how this may affect the resulting translated text. The activity index is a measure from quantitative linguistics that calculates the ratio of verb occurrences to the sum of verb and adjective occurrences (Altmann and Köhler 2015). It is used to analyze the active-descriptive equilibrium patterns in language, which can reveal insights into the stylistic choices made by authors or translators. We believe that the activity index is particularly useful in the study of fiction, where the balance between active and descriptive language can significantly impact the reader's engagement and understanding of the story. As recent evidence suggests, narration-dialogue distinction is observed along the 'informational vs. involved' continuum in which narration features information provision using attributive adjectives etc. while dialogues signify interaction and involvement using verbs etc. (Egbert and Mahlberg 2020). By analyzing the activity index of the two *Honglouloumeng* translations, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of how the translators approached the task of conveying the style and tone of the original text in their translations. In addition, by comparing the activity index across different sub-registers of fiction, i.e., dialogues and narration, researchers can identify specific areas where the translators' choices may have had the greatest impact on the final product.

In light of these, this study hopes to provide insights into the various factors that may influence the style of a translation and contribute to the understanding of how these factors interact to shape the final translated product. This can be beneficial for translators and teachers, but also for literary critics, linguists and those interested in understanding how literature is translated across cultures.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Style Research in Translation

The concept of style in translation refers to the unique manner in which a translator expresses themselves through their work. According to Short (1996, p. 327), authorial writing is defined as a ‘way of writing’ that distinguishes one author’s work from others and is recognizable across a range of texts written by the same author. Similarly, translator style can be understood as a ‘way of translating’ that sets one translator’s work apart from others and is recognizable across a range of translations by the same translator (Saldanha 2011, p. 28). The study of style in translation has long been a central focus in Translation Studies. In previous times, the notion was that in order to produce a competent translation, it was imperative to not only retain the linguistic style of the source text, but also to transfer its rhetorical elements, with the objective of creating an equivalent emotional and aesthetic impact on the target audience as was experienced by the source audience upon reading the original text (Newmark 1988). However, this approach has been met with criticism for its perpetuation of the stereotypical view of translation as a subservient and secondary activity, thereby reinforcing the superiority of the source text.

The seminal contribution made by Baker (2000) in the study of translation style, through the utilization of corpus-based methodologies, has been a game-changer in the academic arena of translation studies. The conventional perspective that portrays translation as a mechanical reiteration of the semantic content and stylistic aspects of the source text has been challenged by Baker’s proposal, which posits that translation is a unique and imaginative form of linguistic expression in its own right. The study of translator style has been approached in two main ways: ‘translator style’ and ‘translation style’. The ‘translator style’ paradigm, as articulated by Saldanha (2011), encompasses a comparative approach to the examination of the works of various translators with the objective of recognizing linguistic patterns that are distinctive to each translator. This approach is favored by scholars such as Baker (2000) and Saldanha (2011) as it allows for the isolation and analysis of each translator’s unique style. On the other hand, ‘translation style’ approach involves the comparison of translations of the same original text by different translators to show how one translation differs from another in terms of language features. It is worth mentioning that the study of translator style can pose a complex methodological challenge due to the multitude of factors that contribute to stylistic variations. These factors may include the diverse writing styles of source text authors, disparities in the stylistic characteristics of the original texts, and the influence of the source languages (Mastropierro 2018, p. 242).

Overall, the study of style in translation is a valuable area of research that offers insight into the choices and strategies of individual translators and the translation process itself. While both the ‘translator style’ and ‘translation style’ approaches have their own strengths and limitations, they both contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the role of the translator in the translation process.

## 2.2 Previous Research on *Honglouloumeng* Translation Styles

As a classic of Chinese literature, *Honglouloumeng* has attracted many scholars to study the translation style of its English translations, particularly the version translated by David Hawkes and John Minford, and the one by the Yangs (Xianyi Yang and Gladys Yang). These two translations have been widely studied in the field of Translation Studies, with many focusing on the linguistic features that distinguish the style of the two versions.

Linguistic features such as lexical density, lexical bundles, type-token ratio, word length, and sentence length are common indicators used in these studies (e.g., Fang and Liu 2015; Li et al. 2011; Liu and Afzaal 2021; Liu and Cheung 2020; Liu et al. 2011; Liu et al. 2022a). Some studies have found stylistic variations between the two translations. For example, previous research has found that Hawkes' translation had a lower type-token ratio and longer sentence length, and a greater number and variety of lexical bundles than the Yangs' translation (Li et al. 2011; Liu and Afzaal 2021). However, other studies failed to find significant differences between the two translations using indicators like lexical density and word length (Liu et al. 2011). In previous research on *Honglouloumeng* translations, most studies considered the novel as a single register. However, Liu and Cheung (2020) and Liu et al. (2022a, 2022b) attempted to consider internal register variations of fiction and focused on fictional dialogues of the two HLM translations in their investigation. Liu and Cheung (2020) and Liu et al. (2022a) discovered that, on the whole, the fictional dialogues featured a higher level of activity when utilizing lexical bundles as a metric, and that Hawkes' translation specifically exhibited a greater degree of activity within these dialogues, conforming more closely to the established literary conventions of English fiction. Overall, research on the translation style of *Honglouloumeng* has primarily focused on isolated linguistic features such as lexical density, lexical bundles, and sentence length. Other markers that have been explored within the realm of *Honglouloumeng* translation style research include the use of nominalization (Hou 2013), vocabulary richness (Fang and Liu 2015), and metaphorical expressions (Su 2021).

As has been mentioned earlier, previous studies on the English translations of *Honglouloumeng* have primarily focused on comparing the distinct styles of the two most recognized translations, those by David Hawkes and the Yang couple. These studies have generally found that Hawkes and Minford's version is favored for its readability and elegance, while the Yangs' version is valued for its linguistic faithfulness (Wang 2016). However, there has been a lack of research utilizing tools from quantitative linguistics to analyze the distribution of lexical categories between the two translations. To address this gap, this study will employ the activity index to examine potential stylistic differences in lexical category distribution, taking into account variations in internal registers, between the Hawkes and Minford and Yangs' translations of *Honglouloumeng*.

### 2.3 Activity Index

The concept of activity index is a useful tool for studying the stylistic differences between texts. It is a measure from quantitative linguistics that depicts a text along an active-descriptive equilibrium based on the number of verbs and adjectives in a text (Altmann and Köhler 2015, p. 19). It is generally agreed that this concept was pioneered by Busemann (1925), and hence it is sometimes named Busemann's indicator. Later, it was modified by Altmann and Köhler (2015). The formula for the activity index is:

$$Q = \frac{V}{A + V}$$

Where: Q is the activity index, V is the number of verbs, A is the number of adjectives.

This formula calculates the ratio of verb occurrence to the sum of verb and adjective occurrence in a text. A higher value of the activity index indicates that the text is more active, whereas a lower value indicates that the text is more descriptive. In this study, we use the measure to analyze the activity of narration and dialogue in the English translations of *Honglouloumeng* by David Hawkes and the Yangs (Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang).

Verbs and adjectives play different syntactic roles in a sentence. Verbs express activity, accomplishment, achievement, or state (Vendler 1957) and are considered the nucleus of sentence structure (Baker 2003). Adjectives, on the other hand, have a descriptive function as modifiers of nouns (Langacker 1987). A higher ratio of verbs to verbs and adjectives in a text indicates that the text is more active, whereas a higher ratio of adjectives signifies the descriptiveness of the text (Altmann and Köhler 2015).

The activity index has been used in various research fields, including literary analysis (Popescu et al. 2013, 2014), political speeches (Kubát et al. 2021; Zörnig and Altmann 2016), Queen's Christmas messages (Jiang et al. 2020), ancient sacred classics (Zhou et al. 2022), interpreting (Jia and Liang 2020), and translation (Xu and Jiang 2021). These studies have found that the activity index can provide valuable insights into the stylistic differences between texts. In the field of translation studies, it has been used to analyze the activity of different interpreting types (Jia and Liang 2020) and the activity of translational Chinese in comparison to original Chinese and English in 15 genres (Xu and Jiang 2021). However, to the best of our knowledge, it has not been applied to translation style research using fictional narration and dialogues as variables. This current study is unique in its examination of the activity of narration and dialogue in the translations of *Honglouloumeng* by David Hawkes and the Yangs, specifically focusing on the internal register variations of fiction.

### 2.4 Research Objectives and Questions

In this study, we aim to address the research gap in the literature of examining the translation styles of *Honglouloumeng* by considering internal register variations and using the activity index as an indicator. Our main objectives are to analyze the active-descriptive equilibrium patterns across the two English translations of *Honglouloumeng* by David Hawkes and the Yangs, compare the activity index in fictional

dialogues and fictional narration between the two translations, and identify the factors that contribute to variations in the activity index. We also aim to provide insights into the impact of translator background, translation strategies, and cultural differences on the translation style of *Honglouloumeng*. By addressing these objectives, we hope to deepen our understanding of how different translations of *Honglouloumeng* are stylistically represented and how these representations may be influenced by various factors. To achieve these objectives, we will address the following research questions:

RQ1: How do the English translation versions of *Honglouloumeng* by David Hawkes and the Yangs differ in the style of the two sub-registers, fictional narration and dialogues as measured by the activity index?

RQ2: What are the possible factors contributing to such differences?

### 3 Methods and Procedures

#### 3.1 Corpus Compilation

In order to analyze the active-descriptive equilibrium patterns across the two English translations of *Honglouloumeng*, this study employed a comparable corpus design (e.g., Fang and Liu 2015; Olohan 2004, for using comparable corpus in stylistic research in translation). The corpus that served as the basis for this research comprised two of the most highly regarded and authoritative translations of the Chinese classic *Honglouloumeng*, namely *A Dream of Red Mansions* by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang (1978-1980) (hereafter referred to as YT), and *The Story of the Stone* by David Hawkes and John Minford (1973-1986) (hereafter referred to as HT). It is important to note that while the Yangs worked collaboratively on the translation of *Honglouloumeng*, Hawkes and Minford translated the first 80 and the remaining 40 chapters, respectively. To mitigate the inconsistencies arising from the use of multiple translators, only the first 80 chapters of each translation version were employed in the present study.

To further refine the corpus, the translated texts were imported into a custom Python program that automatically distinguished fictional dialogues from narration by identifying quotation marks. Subsequently, the dialogue data underwent manual proofreading to ensure inclusion of only self-conversations and conversations between characters (see Chou and Liu, forthcoming, for a detailed explanation of the corpus compilation). After this process, the final corpus was divided into four English sub-corpora: the Hawkes Narration corpus (abbreviated as HN), the Hawkes Dialogue corpus (abbreviated as HD), the Yangs Narration corpus (abbreviated as YN), and the Yangs Dialogue corpus (abbreviated as YD). HN comprises 279,361 tokens (total number of words) and 14,683 types (number of distinct words); HD comprises 280,716 tokens and 10,734 types; YN comprises 193,903 tokens and 11,082 types; and YD comprises 219,478 tokens and 9,801 types (refer to Table 1).

**Table 1:** Descriptive statistics of the Honglouloumeng Corpus.

Corpora	Chapters	Translator(s)	Register	Files	Types	Tokens	TTR	STTR
HN	1-80	Hawkes	Narration	80	14,683	279,361	5.26	43.66
HD	1-80	Hawkes	Dialogue	80	10,734	280,716	3.82	39.28
YN	1-80	The Yangs	Narration	80	11,082	193,903	5.72	43.73
YD	1-80	The Yangs	Dialogue	80	9,801	219,478	4.47	42.14

### 3.2 Analysis and Procedures

In order to quantify the active-descriptive equilibrium patterns in the two translations of *Honglouloumeng*, the four sub-corpora were subjected to part-of-speech (POS) tagging using Stanford CoreNLP (Manning et al. 2014). The number of verbs was determined by counting only those words tagged as VB (verb, base form), VBD (verb, past tense), VBG (verb, gerund or present participle), VBN (verb, past participle), VBP (verb, present tense, other than third person singular), and VBZ (verb, present tense, third person singular). Similarly, the number of adjectives was determined by counting only those words tagged as JJ (adjective), JJR (adjective, comparative), and JJS (adjective, superlative).

Three scores, namely the activity index, verb rate and adjective rate, were then computed from these numbers by using the respective mathematical formulas. The activity index was calculated as the ratio of the number of verbs to the sum of the number of verbs and adjectives (Altmann and Köhler 2015, p. 19). In addition, following Jia and Liang (2020), we also calculated the verb and adjective rates. These additional scores provide further interpretative value as they help to distinguish whether high activity index is driven by high verb occurrence, low adjective occurrence or both. Specifically, verb rate and adjective rate were computed as the ratio of the number of verbs and adjectives to the total number of tokens in the text, respectively (Jia and Liang 2020, p. 7).

$$\text{Activity index } (Q) = \frac{\text{no. of verbs } (V)}{\text{no. of verbs } (V) + \text{no. of adjectives } (A)}$$

$$\text{Verb rate} = \frac{\text{no. of verbs } (V)}{\text{Token}}$$

$$\text{Adjective rate} = \frac{\text{no. of adjective } (A)}{\text{Token}}$$

Considering the non-normal distribution observed in the majority of the data, the statistical analysis in this study employs non-parametric Mann-Whitney U tests to determine if there are significant differences in the activity index, verb rate, and adjective rate between the two fictional sub-registers of the two *Honglouloumeng* translations. Mann-Whitney U tests are appropriate for this study as they are

commonly used to compare the means of two groups and determine if there is a statistically significant difference between them. In this case, the two groups being compared are the fictional sub-registers of the two *Honglouloumeng* translations. Wilcoxon signed rank tests were also used to investigate any significant differences in the activity index, verb rate, and adjective rate between the two translators' work. Additionally, to supplement the quantitative results, a selection of examples was extracted to provide a qualitative understanding of the differences identified by the statistical analysis.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Fictional Narration vs. Dialogues

This study conducted comparisons between two fictional sub-registers, namely fictional narration and dialogues. The results, presented in Table 2, revealed that fictional dialogues (Mean = 0.780, SD = 0.034) were significantly more active than fictional narration (Mean = 0.742, SD = 0.035), with a *W* value of 20438 and a *p*-value of < .001. Additionally, the verb rate in dialogues (Mean = 0.221, SD = 0.015) was found to be higher than that in narration (Mean = 0.186, SD = 0.014), with a *W* value of 24242 and a *p*-value of < .001. On the other hand, the adjective rate in dialogues (Mean = 0.062, SD = 0.009) was lower than that in narration (Mean = 0.064, SD = 0.008), with a *W* value of 10262 and a *p*-value of .002. These findings suggest that the difference in activity level between fictional narration and dialogues is attributed to the higher verb frequency and lower adjective frequency in dialogues than in narration.

**Table 2:** Mann-Whitney U tests for activity index, verb rate, and adjective rate across the two registers.

	Narration (HN + YN) ( <i>n</i> = 160)		Dialogues (HD + YD) ( <i>n</i> = 160)		Mann-Whitney U tests	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	<i>W</i>	<i>p</i>
Activity index (Q)	0.742	0.035	0.780	0.034	20438	< .001***
Verb rate	0.186	0.014	0.221	0.015	24242	< .001***
Adjective rate	0.064	0.008	0.062	0.009	10262	.002**

\*\**p* values are significant at < .01; \*\*\**p* values are significant at < .001.

### 4.2 Hawkes vs. the Yangs

An analysis was conducted to evaluate the stylistic differences between two *Honglouloumeng* translations. The results, presented in Table 3, showed no significant difference between the two translations in terms of verb rate. However, significant differences were identified in the activity index and adjective rate, with the Hawkes' translation (Mean = 0.763, SD = 0.042) displaying a higher overall activity index compared to the Yangs' translation (Mean = 0.759, SD = 0.037), as evident from the results of the Wilcoxon signed rank test (*V* = 7679, *p* = .035). Such difference is likely attributed to a higher overall



adjective rate in the Yangs' translation (Mean = 0.064, SD = 0.009) than Hawkes' (Mean = 0.062, SD = 0.009), as confirmed by the Wilcoxon signed rank test results ( $V = 4820$ ,  $p = .006$ ). These findings provide valuable insight into the stylistic choices and strategies employed by the two translators in their respective versions of *Honglouloumeng*.

**Table 3:** Wilcoxon signed rank tests for activity index, verb rate, and adjective rate across the two *Honglouloumeng* translations.

	Hawkes (HN + HD) ( $n = 160$ )		The Yangs (YN + YD) ( $n = 160$ )		Wilcoxon signed rank tests	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	$V$	$p$
Activity index (Q)	0.763	0.042	0.759	0.037	7679	.035*
Verb rate	0.203	0.024	0.203	0.022	6395	> .05
Adjective rate	0.062	0.009	0.064	0.009	4820	.006**

\* $p$  values are significant at  $< .05$ ; \*\* $p$  values are significant at  $< .01$ .

#### 4.2.1 HN vs. YN.

In analyzing the two versions of *Honglouloumeng*, comparisons were made between Hawkes and the Yangs' translations in terms of specific sub-registers within fiction, specifically narration and dialogues. The results, as presented in Table 4 and Figure 1, revealed the narration in Yangs' version (YN) was found to have a higher activity index (Mean = 0.746, SD = 0.036) compared to the narration in Hawkes' version (HN) (Mean = 0.738, SD = 0.035), as evidenced by the results of the Wilcoxon signed rank test ( $V = 1044$ ,  $p = .006$ ). Additionally, the Yangs' version had a higher verb rate (Mean = 0.187, SD = 0.015) compared to Hawkes' version (Mean = 0.184, SD = 0.013), as per the Wilcoxon signed rank test results ( $V = 1141$ ,  $p = .022$ ). However, the Yangs' version had a lower adjective rate (Mean = 0.063, SD = 0.008) compared to Hawkes' version (Mean = 0.065, SD = 0.008), as per the Wilcoxon signed rank test results ( $V = 2151$ ,  $p = .011$ ). These findings suggest that the discrepancy in activity between the two versions in narration is due to a higher verb frequency and a lower adjective frequency in the Yangs' version compared to the Hawkes' version.

**Table 4:** Wilcoxon signed rank tests for activity index, verb rate, and adjective rate across HN and YN.

	HN ( $n = 80$ )		YN ( $n = 80$ )		Wilcoxon signed rank tests	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	$V$	$p$
Activity index (Q)	0.738	0.035	0.746	0.036	1044	.006**
Verb rate	0.184	0.013	0.187	0.015	1141	.022*
Adjective rate	0.065	0.008	0.063	0.008	2151	.011*

\* $p$  values are significant at  $< .05$ ; \*\* $p$  values are significant at  $< .01$ .



Figure 1: Activity index of HN vs. YN.

### Example 1

(1a) Source text: 誰知上回所表的那位老太妃已薨，凡誥命等皆入朝，隨班按爵守制。

(Cao 1791/1993, Chapter 58, page 638)

(1b) HN: The Dowager Consort of the **late** Emperor whose illness we referred to in an **earlier** chapter had now passed away and all noblewomen and wives of officials **resident** in the capital had to put on the mourning **appropriate** to their rank and present themselves at the Palace.

(Chapter 58, page 116, translated by Hawkes)

(1c) YN: Now the demise of the Grand Imperial Concubine<sup>1</sup> mentioned **earlier** was announced, and all **titled** ladies were required to go to court to mourn according to their rank.

(Chapter 58, page 289, translated by the Yangs)

### Example 2

(2a) Source text: 紫鵲雪雁素日知道林黛玉的情性：無事悶坐，不是愁眉，便是長歎，且好端端的不知為了什麼，常常的便自淚道不乾的。

(Cao 1791/1993, Chapter 27, page 274)

(2b) HN: Nightingale and Snowgoose had long since become **habituated** to Dai-yu's **moody** temperament; they were used to her **unaccountable** fits of depression, when she would sit, the picture of misery, in **gloomy** silence broken only by an **occasional gusty** sigh, and to her **mysterious, perpetual** weeping, that was occasioned by no **observable** cause.

(Chapter 27, page 23, translated by Hawkes)

(2c) YN: Tzu-chuan and Hsueh-yen knew their **young** mistress' ways. She would often sit moodily frowning or sighing over nothing or, for no **apparent** reason, would give way to **long** spells of weeping.

(Chapter 27, page 388, translated by the Yangs)

Examples 1 and 2 offer a comparison of the stylistic choices employed by Hawkes and the Yangs in their respective translations of the narration in *Honglouloumeng*. Moreover, they demonstrate that YN tends to adopt a more active voice in the active-descriptive equilibrium, while HN leans towards a descriptive style. When considering the use of verbs in a sentence, a finite verb is typically deemed essential to its completeness and rarely omitted. However, non-finite verbs in the form of to-infinitives or participles are commonly employed as complements in subordinate clauses. The frequent use of non-finite verb phrases can result in an elevated verb density in a sentence. Examples (1c) and (2c) illustrate that YN employs a comparatively greater proportion of infinitive phrases (e.g., 'to go to court to mourn') and participial phrases (e.g., 'frowning or sighing over nothing') in contrast to HN's translations. The greater usage of non-finite verb phrases in the Yangs' translations leads to a higher verb density.

On the one hand, adjectives serve the dual functions of description and clarification. In Example 1, the source text (1a) from Chapter 58 of the novel describes the passing of a Dowager Consort and the ensuing mourning rituals. Hawkes' use of the adjective "late" in (1b) to specify which emperor the Dowager Consort was the consort of adds another layer of clarity to the story. Additionally, the modifier "resident in the capital" added by Hawkes to "noblewomen and wives of officials" provides further context and clarity for English readers. However, these pieces of information are absent in YN. Example 2 further exemplifies the descriptive nature of HN compared to that of YN. HN's translation (2b) is 21 words longer than YN's (2c) and contains three times as many adjectives. Hawkes' strategic use of adjectives to modify nouns creates a more descriptive narration, enhancing the reading experience for English readers with additional information not present in the source text. This stylistic approach is effective as it aligns with the conventions of fictional narration writing in English, where descriptive information is crucial in facilitating reader understanding and engagement with the story. This finding corroborates Egbert and Mahlberg's (2020) research, which indicates that English narration tends to be more descriptive and informative compared to fictional dialogues.

#### 4.2.2 HD vs. YD.

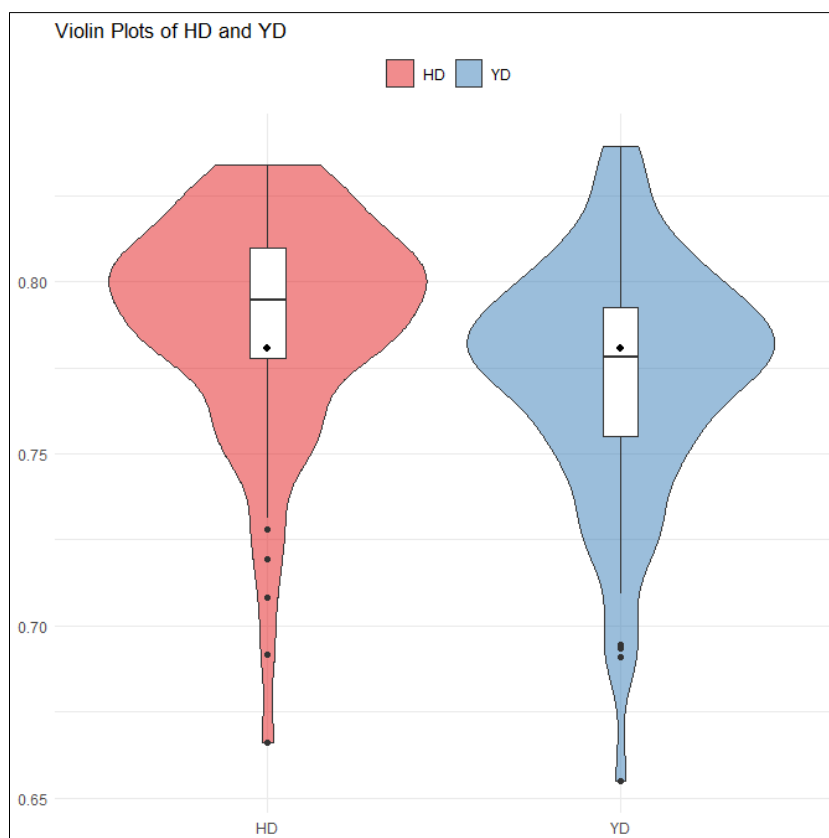
The investigation of dialogues in the two translations of *Honglouloumeng* has brought to light notable dissimilarities. The results presented in Table 5 and Figure 2 demonstrate that HD exhibits a higher activity index (Mean = 0.788, SD = 0.032) in comparison to YD (Mean = 0.773, SD = 0.034), as shown by the Wilcoxon signed rank test findings ( $V = 2837$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Furthermore, the verb rate in HD (Mean = 0.222, SD = 0.016) is higher than in YD (Mean = 0.220, SD = 0.015), with  $V = 2120$ ,  $p = .017$ . Additionally, the adjective rate in HD (Mean = 0.059, SD = 0.008) was found to be lower than in YD

(Mean = 0.065, SD = 0.009), as indicated by the results ( $V = 331$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These findings suggest that the divergence in dialogue activity between the two translations can be attributed to the lower occurrence of verbs and greater incidence of adjectives in YD relative to HD.

**Table 5:** Wilcoxon signed rank tests for activity index, verb rate, and adjective rate across HD and YD.

	HD ( $n = 80$ )		YD ( $n = 80$ )		Wilcoxon signed rank tests	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	$V$	$p$
Activity index (Q)	0.788	0.032	0.773	0.034	2837	< .001***
Verb rate	0.222	0.016	0.220	0.015	2120	.017*
Adjective rate	0.059	0.008	0.065	0.009	331	< .001***

\* $p$  values are significant at < .05; \*\*\* $p$  values are significant at < .001.



**Figure 2:** Activity index of HD vs. YD.

### Example 3

(3a) Source text: 雖說「賢妻美妾」，然也要性情和順，舉止沉重的更好些。

(Cao 1791/1993, Chapter 78, page 885-886)

(3b) HD: I know they say 'a wife for virtue and a concubine for beauty', but even in choosing a concubine I think the girl with a **considerate** nature and a sense of responsibility is to be preferred.

(Chapter 78, page 555, translated by Hawkes)

(3c) YD: Though what's wanted in a wife is virtue, they say, and in a concubine beauty, still it's **better** to choose a girl with a **sweet** disposition and **steady** character.

(Chapter 78, page 653, translated by the Yangs)

#### Example 4

(4a) Source text: 我來了這麼幾年，留神看起來，鳳丫頭憑他怎麼巧，再巧不過老太太去。

(Cao 1791/1993, Chapter 35, page 365)

(4b) HD: Cousin Feng may be very **artful**, [...] but I don't believe that in all the years I've been here I have ever seen her get the **better** of Lady Jia.

(Chapter 35, page 180, translated by Hawkes)

(4c) YD: In the **few** years I've been here, **careful** observation has led me to the conclusion that, however **clever** Cousin Hsi-feng may be, she's no match for the **old** lady.

(Chapter 35, page 507, translated by the Yangs)

Examples 3 and 4 illustrate clear differences in the stylistic choices made by Hawkes and the Yangs in their translations of dialogues. They further indicate that HD has a greater tendency towards an “active” polarity in the active-descriptive equilibrium, while YD is characterized by a more descriptive style. The Yangs’ translations exhibit a preference for a more literal rendering of the source text, as evidenced by their frequent use of attributive adjectives that closely mirror the syntactic structure of the original speech. This linguistic choice has a notable impact on the activity within the translation. Specifically, the extensive use of attributive adjectives which aligns closely with the structure of the original text can lead to a relatively low activity value. In contrast, Hawkes often avoids the use of adjectival modifiers in his translations of dialogues. For example, the phrase ‘舉止沉重’ (literally: modest manner) is translated as ‘steady character’ in (3c) by the Yangs, while Hawkes simply employs the noun phrase ‘a sense of responsibility’ in (3b). Another instance of this stylistic divergence can be seen in the translation of the phrase ‘這麼幾年’ (literally: these several years), which the Yangs translate as ‘few years’ (4c) while Hawkes chooses ‘all the years’ (4b). These divergences indicate that the Yangs’ translations tend towards a more literal approach, while Hawkes’ translations exhibit a tendency to employ more concise and evocative language. Furthermore, it is evident that Hawkes’ preference for verb phrases in dialogue translations is another point of difference between his approach and that of the Yangs. For instance, in (3b), he translated the phrase ‘更好些’ (literally: better) into the verb phrase ‘is to be preferred’, whereas the Yangs opted for the adjective ‘better’ in (3c). Similarly, in (4b), Hawkes translated ‘留神看起來’ (literally: look attentively) into the verb phrase ‘have ever seen’, while omitting the modifier ‘attentively’ (or ‘careful’, used in the Yangs’ translation). In contrast, the Yangs tended to use attributive adjectives and retain modifiers more frequently, thereby remaining faithful to the syntactic structure of the source text.

The present study's findings offer empirical support for Hawkes' translation strategy for dialogues, characterized by the use of fewer modifiers that imbue a more active tone compared to his narration translations. In contrast, the Yangs' translations tend to adhere more closely to the literal meaning of the source text, often utilizing attributive adjectives in dialogues. These findings resonate with earlier research on this subject, including Chou and Liu's (forthcoming) observation that Hawkes' dialogue translations had lower informational density, characterized by fewer attributive adjectives, and showed a more "involved" style, characterized by affective and interactive contents through more frequent use of private verbs. Likewise, Liu et al.'s (2022a) examination of fictional dialogues concurred that the Yangs' translation approach was more literal than Hawkes'.

The results of the quantitative analysis, along with the illustrated examples, reveal clear differences in the translators' tendencies with respect to the usage of verbs and adjectives in their translations of narration and dialogue. These tendencies result in discernible variations in the activity level of their respective translations.

## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 Descriptive vs. Active Divergences

The descriptive and active divergences in the sub-registers of the two translation versions can be related to conventions of fiction writing in the English language, specifically in terms of how narration and fictional dialogues are represented. As noted by Egbert and Mahlberg (2020) in their study on the hybrid nature of fictional registers, it is important to consider the different stylistic conventions and expectations for narration and dialogues. Such a methodology can avoid the danger of generating an 'average' representation of various register features (Egbert and Mahlberg 2020, p. 76). The current study, which separates *Honglouloumeng* translation into fictional narration and dialogues, is crucial in understanding the substantial differences between the two sub-registers in terms of activity index.

In summary, this study affirms a notable discrepancy in activity levels between fictional narration and dialogues. The observed difference is primarily attributed to a higher verb frequency and lower adjective frequency in dialogues compared to narration, aligning with the findings of Egbert and Mahlberg (2020). Moreover, a discernible contrast in overall activity levels is apparent between Hawkes' and the Yangs' translations. Specifically, Hawkes' translations tend to embrace an active style, in contrast to the Yangs' translations. A meticulous examination of the two fictional sub-registers, narration and dialogues, reveals distinct tendencies in how the Yangs and Hawkes represent these sub-registers. This observation strongly suggests that the respective translators adopt unique styles or approaches when dealing with the sub-registers of fiction.

Specifically, in terms of narration, Hawkes' translation is found to contain more descriptive language, providing more detailed information and a greater level of specificity. This is evident in his use of

adjectives to modify nouns, which helps to create a more vivid and immersive reading experience for the audience. This stylistic choice aligns with conventions of fiction writing in the English language, which typically prioritize creating a rich and detailed world for the reader (Egbert and Mahlberg 2020). On the other hand, the Yangs' translation is found to have a lower adjective rate in narration, providing less descriptive information and adhering more closely to the literal meaning of the source text. In terms of fictional dialogue, Hawkes' translation is found to contain more active language, with a greater emphasis on verbs and a more dynamic style. This is evident in his use of verb phrases and active voice, which helps to create a more engaging and lively reading experience for the audience. This stylistic choice also aligns with conventions of fiction writing in the English language, which typically prioritize creating a sense of realism and immediacy in dialogue. On the other hand, the Yangs' translation of dialogues is found to have a lower activity index, providing less dynamic dialogue and adhering more closely to the literal meaning of the source text.

The results of this study reveal a distinct stylistic preference in the way the two English translations of *Honglouloumeng* handle fictional dialogues and narration. Specifically, it appears that Hawkes' translations exhibit a greater inclination towards descriptive language in narration and active language in dialogue, while the Yangs' translations do not show the similar tendencies. The variations in activity levels between fictional narration and dialogues appeared to be normalized in the Yangs' version. These divergences can be attributed to stylistic choices made by the translators in handling the sub-registers of fiction. Hawkes values the different conventions of fiction writing in the English language, where a balance between descriptive and active language is crucial for creating a vivid and immersive reading experience for the audience. Conversely, the Yangs' translations seem to prioritize faithfulness over the conventions of fiction writing. Overall, Hawkes' approach is more effective in achieving this balance, as it provides more descriptive information in narration and more active language in dialogue.

## 5.2 Examining the Influence of Translator's Background and Beliefs

It is believed that the backgrounds of the translators play a significant role in their respective translations of *Honglouloumeng*. Xianyi Yang and Gladys Yang were both born into well-educated and affluent families, and they met while studying at Oxford University. Following their marriage, they returned to China in 1940 and began their decades-long collaboration of introducing Chinese classics to the English-speaking world (Fan and Minford 2017, p. 384). As chief translators for the Foreign Languages Press, a government-funded publisher in Beijing, they produced a number of high-quality translations, including the seminal work of Chinese literature, *Honglouloumeng*. It is important to note that most of their translations were commissioned by the Chinese government. In contrast, David Hawkes, a British sinologist, translator, and literary critic, translated *Honglouloumeng* out of his own interest and deep appreciation for the classic novel (Hawkes 1973, p. 46). He is widely considered to be one of the foremost experts on Chinese literature in the English-speaking world, and his translations are highly respected for their accuracy and nuance (Feng 2008).

Clearly, the translators' backgrounds and life experiences have a direct impact on their understanding of the purpose and intended audience of their translations. As government-employed translators, the Yang couple were commissioned to translate *Honglouloumeng* by the Chinese government with the purpose of promoting Chinese culture and literature to the English-speaking world (Li et al. 2011, p. 159). This purpose may have constrained their choices, limiting their ability to adopt suitable translation strategies or methods that would make the text more palatable to the target English audience. In fact, they have been more focused on staying true to the source text and maintaining its cultural and literary integrity, rather than considering how best to convey the meaning and context to the target audience. Gladys Yang commented on their constraints as follow, 'We have been so conditioned by the circumstances in which we used to work that we are rather literal and pedestrian translators' (Henderson 1980, p. 34, cited in Fan and Minford 2017). As a result, the translation is not as accessible to English readers who lack the necessary cultural background knowledge to fully understand and appreciate the novel. In comparison to the Yang couple, who were commissioned by the Chinese government to work on the translation, David Hawkes translated the novel out of his own interest and love for the novel. He had a deep understanding of Chinese culture and literature, and his translations are widely considered to be among the best available in English (Feng 2008; Jiang 2022, p. 116). He believed that the purpose of translation is to share with the readers the joy of reading this great novel, which he had made clear in the preface. He also believed that too many notes would hinder the readers from reading the novel (Hawkes 1977, p. 18). Instead, when he translated the cultural terms and allusions in the novel, he used paraphrase and explanation and even, to use his own words: 'having occasionally amplified the text a little in order to make such passages intelligible' (Hawkes 1977, p. 17). Clearly, Hawkes did not feel the constraint and pressure that the Yangs felt, and he accorded himself sufficient freedom in translation and even in making changes about the original text, under the belief that it was important to make the translation accessible to English-speaking readers who lack the cultural background knowledge necessary for proper comprehension of the novel (Li et al. 2011, p. 161). To achieve this, he adopted a number of strategies, such as using more descriptive language in the narration and more active language in the dialogue, in order to create a more vivid and immersive reading experience for the audience. This approach is reflected in the higher proportion of verbs and adjectives in the narration and dialogue respectively, in comparison to the translations by the Yangs. Such an approach also aligns with the writing conventions of English fiction and shows Hawkes' understanding of the importance of catering to the target audience and the norms of the target language in his translations.

In addition to their different career backgrounds and life experiences, the translators' language backgrounds may have influenced their respective translation styles. Hawkes, being a native English speaker, possesses a thorough understanding of the English language and culture. On the contrary, in the case of the Yangs' translation, Xianyi Yang played a pivotal role as the main translator. He employed rapid translation by orally rendering the text, while his wife, Gladys Yang, supported him by typing and



refining the translation (Li et al. 2011, p. 163). Despite Xianyi Yang's solid education, it is important to acknowledge that translating out of his mother tongue of Chinese can sometimes result in unnatural and non-native target texts (Samuelsson-Brown 2010, p. 27). Xianyi Yang also admitted that his English was not as proficient as that of a native English speaker (Li et al. 2011, p. 163). Given such a language background, it can be postulated that the Yangs may not have placed significant emphasis on the nuanced differences between fictional narration and dialogues, which could have influenced their approach to translation.

## 6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has delved into the stylistic variations between the English translations of *Honglouloumeng* by David Hawkes and the Yang couple by utilizing the activity index as a measure of fictional hybrid registers. The results of the analysis indicate that Hawkes' translation presents a higher level of activity in fictional dialogues in comparison to that of the Yangs. In addition, the descriptive nature of the fictional narration in Hawkes' translation surpasses that of the Yangs'. As a result, Hawkes' translation demonstrates a more pronounced internal variation between narration and dialogue, aligning more closely with English literary conventions. The influence of language and cultural background on these variations in translation style has also been examined. Overall, this study has contributed to a deeper understanding of the translation style of *Honglouloumeng* by highlighting the intra-fictional variations and the activity index as novel perspectives. The findings of this study have also underscored the importance of considering sub-registers of fiction in future translation studies.

However, the study is not without limitations. Firstly, by adopting a comparable corpus design, the source text was not the focus of the investigation. Further studies could calculate the activity index of the source text and compare it with that of the translated texts. This would provide valuable information about how the source text affects translation. Secondly, the study did not consider the different types of verbs and how they may impact the activity index. As mentioned in the introduction, verbs can be divided into four types: activity, accomplishment, achievement, and state. Future studies could further investigate the impact of verb types on the activity index in translations. Future research can also examine other parameters, such as the impact of various lexical categories, as a means of studying style in *Honglouloumeng* translations.

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The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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## Notes

1. In the Yangs' translation, the first letter of "Grand Imperial Concubine" is capitalized because it is the English translation of the title 太妃, which was bestowed upon a former emperor's concubine. Consequently, "Grand" and "Imperial" are treated as proper nouns rather than adjectives.

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