

# **How should Huineng Speak?**

## **Text Complexity in Translations of the *Platform Sutra***

Hailing Yu

Macquarie University, AUSTRALIA

### ABSTRACT

The study is a comparison of four English translations (Wong 1930, Heng 1977, Cleary 1998 and Cheng 2011) of an ancient Chan Buddhist text, the *Platform Sutra*, which is a record of the public sermons and personal conversations of the Chan master Huineng. The focus of comparison is text complexity, which tends to be neglected in translation studies. Text complexity, according to Halliday, can be measured in two dimensions: grammatical intricacy (number of ranking clauses per sentence) and lexical density (number of content words per ranking clause). Analysis shows that while translations by Wong and Cleary are complex in one dimension (lexical density and grammatical intricacy respectively), Heng's translation is simple, and Cheng's translation is complex, in both dimensions. This finding is interpreted by taking the context of translation, especially the intended readership and translating strategies, into consideration.

KEYWORDS: text complexity, grammatical intricacy, lexical density, *Platform Sutra*

### 1. Introduction

This study is part of a project that investigates the images of the Chan master Huineng recreated in different translations of the *Platform Sutra*, an ancient Chan Buddhist text. Previous studies demonstrate that a different image of the same Chan master is recreated in each translation through choices of personal pronouns (Yu and Wu 2017), mood types and modality (Yu and Wu 2016) and reporting verbs (Yu and Guo 2016). The focus of the current study is on text complexity, which, as far as the author knows, has not been investigated in previous studies on the translation of the *Platform Sutra*, though the importance and popularity of the text has attracted attention from many scholars (Bielefeldt 1975; Low 2010; Song 2014; Chu 2015) in the field of translation studies.

Huineng (638-713), a Chan master who lived in the Tang dynasty in China, is venerated as the real founder of Chan Buddhism, which constitutes the spiritual source for Japanese Zen,

Korean *Sŏn* and Vietnamese *Thiền*. Paradoxically, such an influential Chan master is said to have been illiterate. The illiteracy, as one might imagine, is first and foremost reflected in the ease and simplicity of the *Platform Sutra* (Zongbao 1291; Qian 1976; Qiu 2004; Jiang 2014), a record of Huineng's public sermons and private conversations. Huineng's image as an unlettered man explains the unadorned style of the *Platform Sutra*, and this may have contributed to the popularity of the Chan master and his teachings amongst both the general public and more elite scholars jaded with esoterica (Suzuki 1972: 11).

The renown of the *Platform Sutra* in East Asia has also attracted attention from many translators who strove to make it available to Western readers. A reading of the different English translations of the *Platform Sutra*, however, makes one wonder whether they are words spoken by the same person, as the manner of speaking differs significantly from one text to another. While some difference between the source text and the translations is inevitable, as the two languages involved, classical Chinese and modern English, are typologically distinct from each other, it is of interest to see how the English translations differ from one another, the consequences and possible reasons of the variations.

Pursuing this interest, the present study has two purposes: to see how the translations of the *Platform Sutra* differ in their complexity (grammatical intricacy and lexical density), which may lead to different styles; and to investigate the reasons why a certain translation is complex or simple, that is, the contextual constraints on the process of translation.

It is proposed that in literary texts, language complexity usually serves as a reflection of the author's stylistic intentions. This is especially the case when language functions as the primary means of characterisation, where words attributed to a person constitute the sole guide not only to her/his ideas, but also to her/his persona. Readers get to know a character through her/his speech, and how to re-present the image of the person established through a specific language style therefore becomes a challenge to the translator (Miguélez Carballeira 2003). Moreover, provided that the style of the translated text should be more or less restricted by the source text, it is worthwhile to ask why "the translation has been shaped in such a way that it comes to mean what it does" (Malmkjær 2003: 39).

## **2. Text complexity as measured in SFL**

The complexity of a text has been studied by scholars from various perspectives (e.g., Merlini Barbaresi 2003) and the conclusion is usually that complexity is a complex phenomenon and

can be measured on various levels. The methodological framework of this study, however, mainly follows Halliday and his systemic functional linguistics (SFL), for it is considered that Halliday’s two measurements of complexity, ‘grammatical intricacy’ and ‘lexical density’, are complementary to each other (Halliday 1994, 2009) in that the grammar and the lexis are taken into consideration at the same time. Complexity in grammar is termed grammatical intricacy and complexity in lexis is termed lexical density. Both will be introduced in the following sections.

### *2.1 Grammatical intricacy*

Grammatical intricacy is the ratio of the number of clauses to the number of sentences in a text (Egins 1994: 61). It is closely related to another concept on the clausal level, clause complexity, which is the choice of “whether to develop one clause only (a clause simplex) or to expand it by introducing one or more additional clauses thus forming a clause complex” (Matthiessen 1995: 127). Clauses in one sentence are related to one another through choices from two systems: taxis and logico-semantic relation. Taxis describes the type of interdependency between clauses: parataxis (where clauses have equal status) and hypotaxis (where clauses have unequal status). Paratactic relations are represented by numbers and hypotactic clauses by Greek letters with  $\alpha$  reserved for the dominant clause. Logico-semantic relation between clauses is firstly classified into projection (where the secondary clause is projected by the primary clause) and expansion (where the secondary clause expands the dominant one). Projection can be further categorised into locution (”) and idea (’), and expansion is sub-divided into elaboration (=), extension (+) and enhancement (x) (further details of this categorisation can be found in literature, such as Halliday and Matthiessen 2014: 438-549). For example, in the following sentence, there are 3 ranking clauses which are linked through both paratactic extension and hypotactic enhancement, and the grammatical intricacy of the sentence is 3.

1		Good friends, deluded people may achieve physical immobility
	x $\beta$	and yet the moment they open their mouths
+2	$\alpha$	they are talking about others’ right and wrong, strengths and weaknesses, good and bad.

It has also been pointed out that in measuring grammatical intricacy, attention should be paid to the type of taxis: in sentences containing the same number of clauses, hypotactic relations tend to increase the grammatical complexity of the text more than paratactic relations (Halliday 2009: 76; Castello 2008: 97-98; Izquierdo and Borillo 2000: 67).

## 2.2 Lexical density

Lexical density, though alternatively measured as the proportion of content words to the total running words in the text (e.g. Biber 1988; Ure 1971), is calculated by Halliday as the number of content words per ranking clause. This method, as pointed out by Carsello (2008: 53), makes the result comparable to that of grammatical intricacy since both are based on the structure of the clause complex (sentence). Content words usually include nouns, verbs, adjectives and most adverbs, and non-content (functional) words include prepositions, conjunctions, auxiliary verbs and pronouns. In the same sentence as illustrated above, there are 17 lexical words (shown in bold) and 3 ranking clauses (divided by ||), and the lexical density is therefore around 5.7.

**Good friends, deluded people may achieve physical immobility || and yet the moment they open their mouths || they are talking about others' right and wrong, strengths and weaknesses, good and bad.**

Another factor that affects lexical density is the relative frequency of the lexical words in the language. That is, uncommon words tend to increase the lexical density of a text (Halliday 1989). Relative frequency of a word can be determined by referring to large corpus such as British National Corpus (BNC, containing 100 million words) and Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA, containing more than 520 million words), both of which have proved useful in translation studies (Olohan 2004; Hassani 2011). For example, the Buddhist concept '般若' (bō rě) in the source text can be rendered either as '*prajna*', or as 'wisdom'. The word '*prajna*' occurs 0 and 8 times, and the word 'wisdom' occurs 1,520 and 13,659 times in BNC and COCA respectively. Compared with 'wisdom', '*prajna*' will lead to higher lexical density of the text.

Halliday's measurement of language complexity by means of grammatical intricacy and lexical density is initially intended to establish a distinction between spoken and written texts. In most cases, spoken texts become complex through intricate grammar, whereas written texts become complex by increasing lexical density. However, as admitted by Halliday himself, these are not strict rules but only "general tendencies" (2003: 84). There are cases where spoken texts are grammatically simple and written texts are lexically sparse (Matthiessen 2002: 298).

The methodological framework of grammatical intricacy and lexical density has been applied to analysis of different types of texts, such as scientific texts (Montin 2002; Halliday 2003),

tourist information texts (Castello 2002), and texts used in reading comprehension tests (Castello 2008). Izquierdo and Borillo (2000) also drew on Halliday's idea and applied the concept of 'grammatical complexity' to translation studies. In the present study, grammatical intricacy and lexical density are adopted as two complementary measurements of the complexity of the translated texts.

As can be seen through the discussion above, both grammatical intricacy and lexical density are quantitative in nature, and can be more effectively and accurately measured by adopting some analytical tools. This is to be discussed in the following section on the data and methodology of study.

### **3. Data and methodology**

#### *3.1 Data: four translations of the Platform Sutra*

Being illiterate himself, the Chan master Huineng did not write a single word: he spent most of his life teaching and preaching. His public sermons and conversations with disciples were collected and written down in a text entitled *Platform Sutra* (壇經, tán jīng). The word 'platform' comes from the fact that Huineng was sitting on a high-raised platform while delivering public teachings. The word 'sutra' comes from Sanskrit 'सूत्र' (*sūtra*) which means 'string, thread'. "सूत्र" was used by early Buddhists to refer to texts recording the words spoken by the Buddha, as the texts were considered like threads that string the ideas together. The *Platform Sutra* is the only Buddhist text that is not spoken by the Buddha himself but bears the title 'sutra'. It is also acclaimed as "one of the best known, most beloved and most widely read of all Chan texts" (Schlüter 2007: 382).

Like many classical texts, the *Platform Sutra* is known in different versions, which evolved in the many dynasties in China. Most of the earlier versions, however, were lost in the ups and downs of history. Now the existing versions of the *Platform Sutra* include the Dunhuang version (which was discovered in 1923), the Dunbo version (which was discovered in 1986) and the Zongbao version (produced in 1291). Different from the Dunhuang and Dunbo versions which were discovered in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (and thus contain errors and omissions sometimes), the Zongbao version was included in the Ming dynasty edition of the Buddhist Canon soon after it was compiled and thus kept intact until today. For hundreds of years, the Zongbao version of the *Platform Sutra* was the only text read by monks and literati in East Asia, and this version was considered the "orthodox", or canonical version (Schlüter 2012:

18). For this reason, the Zongbao version also serves as the source text of most of the English translations of the *Platform Sutra* (Chang and Zhao 2016).

Four translations based on the Zongbao versions of the *Platform Sutra* constitute the data of this study. They are: the translation produced by the Chinese translator Wong Mou-lam in 1930, which is the first English translation of the *Platform Sutra* in history; the translation produced by Heng Yin, the first ordained Western Buddhist to translate the book, in 1977 (second edition); the translation by Thomas Cleary, an American professional translator, in 1998; and the translation by Cheng Kuan, a Taiwanese Buddhist master presiding over a temple in the U.S., in 2011. The criterion of selection is heterogeneity in the translators' identity, intended readership, translating strategy and publishing time.

The focus of analysis will be Huineng's spoken words in Chapter Two, Four, Five and Seven in each translation. Chapter Two, Four and Five are Huineng's public sermons which cover the most important concepts of Chan Buddhism, and Chapter Seven contains Huineng's conversations with many students.

### *3.2 Methodology*

The grammatical intricacy of each text is obtained by using SysFan, a computational tool to conduct systemic functional analysis (Wu 2000). A total number of 1,653 sentences (3,307 clauses) from the four translations are analysed in the CLAUSE COMPLEX system of SysFan (see Figure 1).

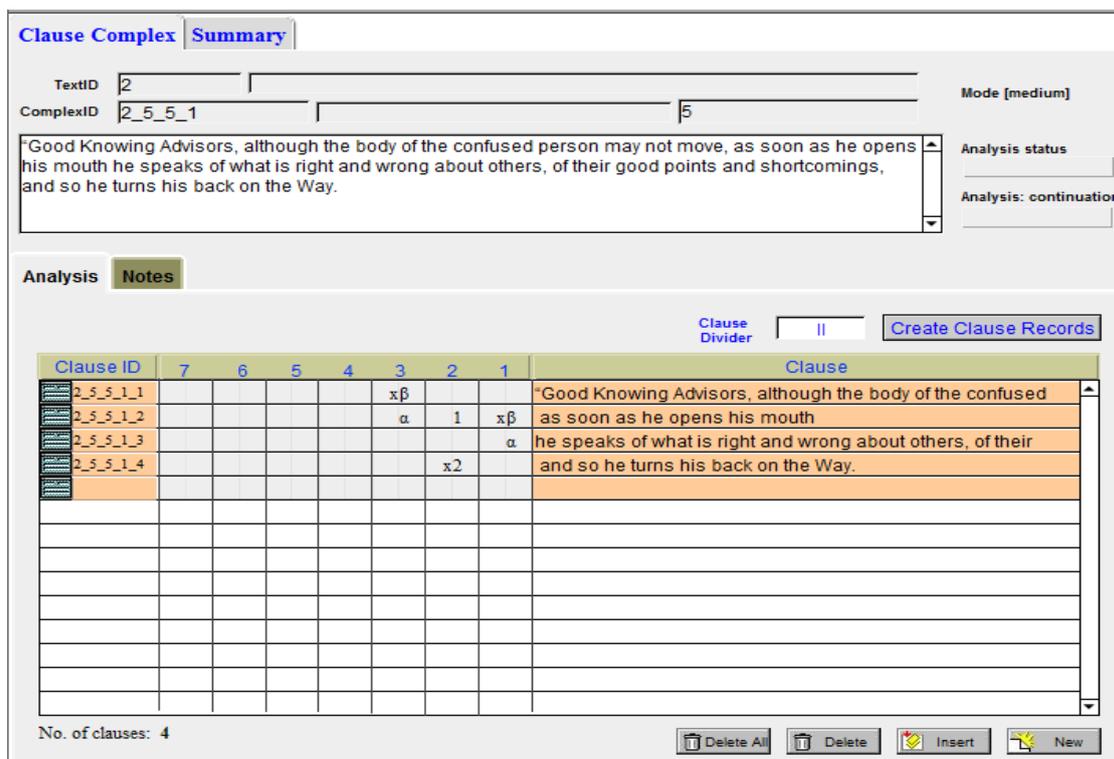


Figure 1. CLAUSE COMPLEX system in SysFan

Before the analysis, a text has to be divided into sentences and clauses. SysFan then takes the sentence (recognised as the clause complex) as a unit of analysis where the constituting clauses are analysed according to taxis (parataxis and hypotaxis) and logio-semantic relations (projection and expansion). Once the whole text has been analysed, numbers of words, clauses and sentences can be summarised automatically in the system. The obtained figures are further calculated according to the following formula:

Degree of grammatical intricacy= number of ranking clauses<sup>1</sup>/number of sentences.

As the analysis process is conducted manually in SysFan, accuracy can be ensured through careful checking of the clause division and analysis.

In analysing the lexical density of each text, this study adopts the part of speech (POS) analytical framework of Wmatrix (Rayson 2003), a corpus analysis and comparison tool. Wmatrix is able to tag words of a text according to the UCREL CLAWST tagset, which consists of 137 tags for various parts of speech. After the text has been cleaned up and

<sup>1</sup>A ranking clause is a clause that is not 'embedded', i.e., not down-ranked and functioning as a constituent of another clause. For example, in the sentence 'He is the person who wrote the book', there is only one ranking clause, and the clause [[who wrote the book]] is 'embedded' and functions as part of the nominal group 'the person'.

imported, Wmatrix will start tagging, and the frequency, concordance and list of each part of speech can be obtained automatically (see Figure 2).

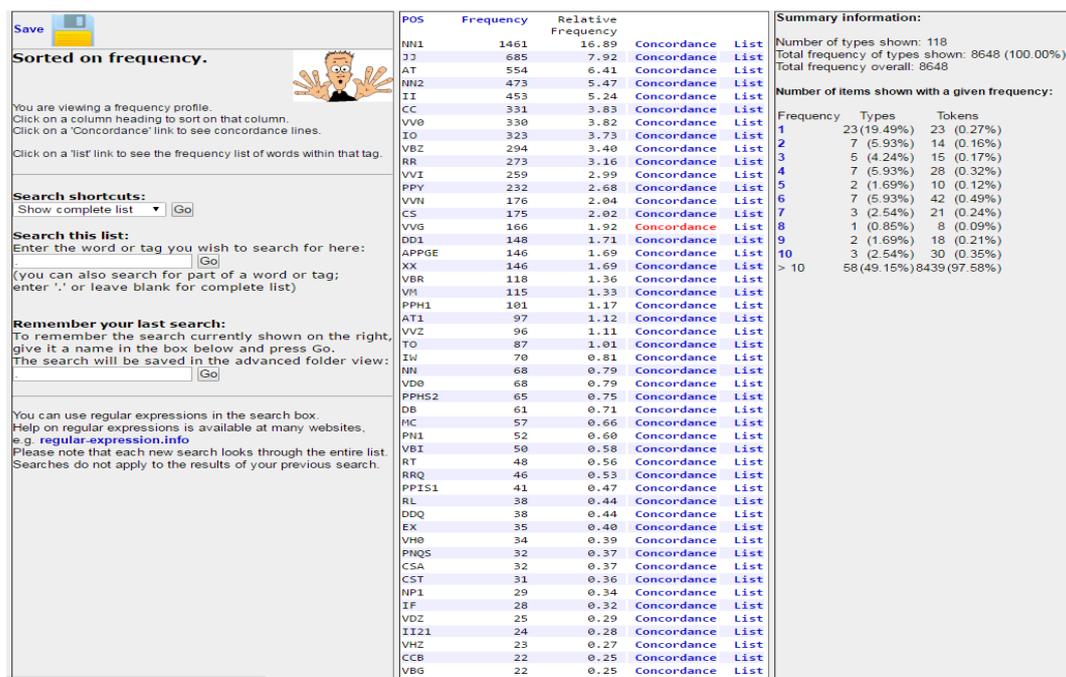


Figure 2. Analysis result generated in Wmatrix

In the present study, words tagged as nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs are considered content words and included in the result. The lexical density of each text is calculated according to the following formula:

$$\text{Degree of lexical density} = \frac{\text{number of content words}}{\text{number of ranking clauses}}$$

List of words recognised as content words are manually checked to ensure accuracy, but no effort has been made to deliberately alter the result. As is stated by Halliday, “it does not matter exactly where we draw the line [between content words and non-content words] provided we do it consistently” (Halliday 1989: 63). Keeping human interference to the least is considered a way to obtain consistency in the analysis results across the texts.

#### 4. Analysis and discussion: how does Huineng speak?

##### 4.1 Analysis of grammatical intricacy

The grammatical intricacy (GI) of Chapter Two, Four, Five and Seven in each translation, which is obtained by calculating the number of ranking clauses per sentence, is presented in Table 1.

	<b>Wong</b>	<b>Heng</b>	<b>Cleary</b>	<b>Cheng</b>
chapter 2	2.1	1.9	2.1	2.3
chapter 4	1.8	1.8	1.9	2.1
chapter 5	1.9	1.9	2.4	2.3
chapter 7	1.8	1.7	2.3	2.0
<b>average GI</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>2.2</b>	<b>2.2</b>

Table 1. Grammatical intricacy in each translation

As can be seen in Table 1, the average number of clauses per sentence in the translations by Wong and Heng is 1.9 and 1.8 respectively, while that in the translations by Cleary and Cheng is 2.2 (an increase of nearly 20%). This indicates that greater grammatical intricacy is exhibited in the translations by Cleary and Cheng in comparison with the translations by Wong and Heng (the difference between these two groups is significant at  $p < .001$  according to an independent samples t-test). Moreover, the difference between these two groups is very consistent, as shown in the grammatical intricacy of different chapters. It can then be said that compared with Wong and Heng, Cleary and Cheng tend to use more clauses in one sentence.

Like many classical texts (such as ancient texts in Latin and Greek), ancient Chinese texts do not have punctuation, and few conjunctions indicating relations between clauses in one sentence are used. This makes it possible for the translator to make different sentential segmentations and to present the original sentence as either a clause simplex (containing one clause only) or a clause complex (containing more than one clause), which is illustrated in the following Figure 3.



Figure 3. Clause complex vs. simplex in each translation

As can be seen in Figure 3, sentences containing one clause only (clause simplex) take up nearly 45% and 43% in the translations by Heng and Wong, while the proportions reduce to about 37% and 34% in the translations by Cheng and Cleary. That is, the same sentence in the source text may be re-presented in the form of a one-clause sentence by Wong and Heng, but as a sentence containing more than one clause (and therefore more complex grammatically) by Cleary and Cheng. This is illustrated through the following example.

Example 1

ST			有燈即光。無燈即闇 (T2008_.48.0352c22) <sup>2</sup>
Wong			With the lamp, there is light.
			Without it, it would be dark (1930: 23).
Heng			With the lamp, there is light.
			Without the lamp, there is darkness (1977: 204).
Cleary	1	x β	If there is a lamp,
		α	there is light;
	+2		Without the lamp, there is darkness (1998: 31).
Cheng	1	x β	If there is a lamp,
		α	there would be light;
	+2	x β	If there is no lamp at all,
		α	it would be only pitch-dark (2011: 61).

In this example, both Wong and Heng interpret each four-character segment in the source text as a sentence, and render them as two independent simple sentences in the target language. Cleary goes one step further by combining three clauses in one sentence, and the degree of grammatical complexity becomes even higher in Cheng's translation, where four clauses are interwoven into one sentence through parataxis and hypotaxis.

A close examination demonstrates that the two patterns of clause complexing, one using simple sentences and the other favouring complex sentences, are recurrent in these translations. This can be shown through another example in the following.

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<sup>2</sup> The small circle ° is used in the source text only to indicate pause in the process of reading and does not indicate clause/sentence division. Source text sentences in all the examples are referred to by identifying their line numbers in the on-line database of Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō <http://21dzk.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/SAT/ddb-bdk-sat2.php?lang=en>.

Example 2

ST		善知識。於諸境上心不染。曰無念 (T2008_48.0353a19-20)
Wong		Learned Audience, to keep our mind free from defilement under all circumstance is called 'idea-lessness' (1930: 25).
Heng		Good Knowing Advisors, the non-defilement of the mind in all states is called 'no-thought' (1977: 210).
Cleary	$x \beta$	Good friends, when the mind is not influenced by objects,
	$\alpha$	this is called freedom from thought (1998: 33).
Cheng	$x \beta$	Good Mentors, when one can stay uncontaminated in the mind
	$\alpha$	while confronting all the sundry <i>Phenomena</i> ,
	$x \beta$	such is called <i>Nondeliberation</i> (2011: 65).

In Example 2, Cleary and Cheng again use more clauses than Wong and Heng in translating the same piece of the source text. Two clauses are used in Cleary's translation and three are used in Cheng's translation, whereas a simple sentence containing one clause only is used in Wong's and Heng's translations.

A further investigation into the way clauses are combined in a sentence, i.e., whether the clauses are in an equal relationship (paratactic) or unequal relationship (hypotactic), reveals a preference for hypotactic over paratactic relations in Cheng's translation (Table 2).

	Wong	Heng	Cleary	Cheng
hypotactic	191 (53%)	176 (48%)	217 (49%)	286 (60%)
paratactic	171 (47%)	193 (52%)	230 (51%)	190 (40%)
total	362	369	447	476

Table 2. Hypotactic vs. paratactic relation in each translation

Table 2 shows that in contrast to the translations by Heng, Cleary and Wong where hypotactic and paratactic relations are nearly equally distributed, Cheng's translation is dominated by hypotactic relations. As clauses in a paratactic relation are of the same type, but those in a hypotactic relation are necessarily of different types, higher degree of hypotaxis means having more types of clauses and consequently higher degree of grammatical intricacy of a text. Therefore, it can be said that Cheng's translation is grammatically the most intricate among the four translations, though grammatical intricacy does not necessarily mean difficulty in reading.

The complexity of Cheng’s translation and the comparative simplicity of Heng’s translation can be better illustrated through the following example.

Example 3

ST				若言常坐不動是。只如舍利弗宴坐林中。却被維摩詰訶 (T2008_48.0353a04-5)
Heng				To say that sitting unmoving is correct is to be like Shariputra who sat quietly in the forest but was scolded by Vimalakirti (1977: 206).
Cheng	x β	1	α	If you still asseverate
			“β	that to sit motionlessly is the Truthful Way,
	α	‘2	x β	then consider this:
			α	when Sariputra sat composedly in the woods, he was reprehended by Vimalakirti (2011: 63).

In this example, there is only one ranking clause in Heng’ translation, but five ranking clauses related to one other through hypotaxis and parataxis in Cheng’s translation.

#### 4.2 Analysis of lexical density

The lexical density (LD) of chapter Two, Four, Five and Seven in each translation is presented in Table 3 by calculating the number of content words per clause.

	Wong	Heng	Cleary	Cheng
chapter 2	4.1	3.6	3.4	3.8
chapter 4	4.1	3.5	3.8	4.0
chapter 5	4.0	3.5	3.8	4.6
chapter 7	4.1	3.0	2.9	3.3
average LD	4.1	3.4	3.5	3.9

Table 3. Lexical density in each translation

Two points can be observed in Table 3. Firstly, the translations by Wong and Cheng are lexically denser than the translations by Cleary and Heng. Secondly, the difference between these two groups is consistent across chapters. While the number of content words per clause averages 4.1 and 3.9 in Wong’s and Cheng’s translations, the number decreases to 3.5 and 3.4 in Cleary’s and Heng’s translations respectively (the difference between the two groups, Wong and Cheng vs. Heng and Cleary, is significant at  $p < .01$  according to the independent samples t-test).

A close reading of the translated texts reveals that the high lexical density in Wong’s translation is due to its relatively fewer ranking clauses (756). In comparison, Heng’s translation, though also grammatically simple, has nearly the same number of ranking clauses (827) as the translation of Cleary (833). However, it is interesting to note that Cheng’s translation, despite having the largest number of ranking clauses and highest degree of grammatical intricacy, still demonstrates high lexical density. This can be illustrated through Example 4, where content words are in bold and ranking clauses divided by ||.

Example 4

ST	迷人不會。便執成顛 (T2008_.48.0353a06-7)
Wong	<b>Ignorant persons</b> who <b>understand</b> not <b>become insane</b>    for <b>having</b> too <b>much confidence</b> on <b>such instruction</b> (1930: 24).
Heng	<b>Confused men</b> , <<not understanding>> <sup>3</sup> , <b>easily become attached</b>    and <b>go insane</b> (1977: 207).
Cleary	<b>Confused people</b> do not <b>understand</b> ,    so they <b>grab</b> onto this    and <b>become delusional</b> (1998: 32).
Cheng	Since <b>general aberrant people</b> are not <b>endowed</b> with <b>Correct comprehension</b>    to <b>perceive</b> the <b>fault</b> of <b>such erroneous methodology</b> ,    they are <b>prone</b> to be <b>attached</b> to <b>such error</b> to the <b>extent</b> of <b>perversity</b> (2011: 63).

In this example, there are 2 ranking clauses in Wong’s translation and the number of lexical items is 10. So the lexical density is 5. While the translations by Heng, Cleary and Cheng all have 3 ranking clauses, they differ in that the numbers of content words are similar in the translations by Heng (8) and Cleary (7), but the figure reaches 17 in Cheng’s translation. Therefore, the lexical density of Heng’s and Cleary’s translations is 2.7 and 2.3 respectively, but that of Cheng’s translation is the highest at 5.7.

One possible explanation for this is that the translations by Wong and Cheng have longer sentences and clauses than those by Heng and Cleary (Table 4).

	<b>Wong</b>	<b>Heng</b>	<b>Cleary</b>	<b>Cheng</b>
no. of words	7998	6797	6417	8721
no. of sentences	397	456	387	413
no. of ranking clauses	756	827	833	891
average sentence length	20.1	14.9	16.6	21.2
average clause length	10.6	8.2	7.7	9.8

Table 4. Average sentence/clause length in each translation

<sup>3</sup> The symbol ‘<<>>’ indicates that a clause is inserted between two parts of another clause.

Longer sentences and clauses, as can be seen in Example 4, are likely to lead to higher lexical density. As using longer sentences is contrary to the popular notion that short sentences help to improve readability (Bisiada 2016), it can be said that the translations by Wong and Cheng exhibit a desire to write in a formal register on the part of the translators.

The lexical density of a text, according to Halliday (1989: 64-65), is not only manifested through the mean number of content words per ranking clause, but can also be measured from another perspective: the relative frequency of the selected content words in the language system. That is, the more uncommon lexical items in a text, the lexically denser it becomes. As the source text is a Buddhist text, an appropriate way to investigate the frequency of lexical words in each translation is to examine its proportion of ‘proper nouns’, which include names of people, places and more importantly, abstract concepts that are not recognised as ‘common’ in English, such as Sanskrit-originated Buddhist terms. Frequency and proportion of each type of content words used in the translations are provided in Table 5, with the focus on ‘proper nouns’, which are recognised in Wmatrix mainly through capitalisation of the first letter.

	<b>Wong</b>		<b>Heng</b>		<b>Cleary</b>		<b>Cheng</b>	
common nouns	1448	(47%)	1256	(45%)	1342	(49%)	1298	(39%)
<b>proper nouns</b>	<b>322</b>	<b>(10%)</b>	<b>198</b>	<b>(7%)</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>(4%)</b>	<b>356</b>	<b>(11%)</b>
adjectives	572	(19%)	617	(22%)	479	(18%)	716	(21%)
adverbs	230	(7%)	196	(7%)	227	(8%)	415	(12%)
verbs	514	(17%)	532	(19%)	572	(21%)	548	(17%)
total	3086		2799		2743		3333	

Table 5. Different types of content words in each translation

It can be seen that the translations by Cheng and Wong have far more proper nouns than those by Heng and Cleary, which is the result of the translators’ lexical choices. For the same content words in the source text, Cheng and Wong tend to use uncommon words, whereas Heng and Cleary are more likely to use common words in English. This is more evident in the translation of Buddhist terms. For instance, in the following example, the term ‘空’ (kōng), which occurs many times in the source text, is translated as ‘*Sunyata*’ and ‘Vacuity’ by Wong and Cheng, but simply as ‘emptiness’ by Heng and Cleary. It is apparent that compared with ‘emptiness’, both ‘*Sunyata*’ and ‘Vacuity’ are less frequent in the target language.

Example 5

- ST 口但說空 (T2008\_48.0350a18)  
 Wong We might talk on *Sunyata* (voidness)...(1930: 11)  
 Heng ...if you only speak of *emptiness*...(1977: 116)  
 Cleary If they only talk about *emptiness*...(1998: 16)  
 Cheng ...if a person simply talks about *Vacuity*...(2011: 30)

The tendency to use exoteric expressions on the part of Cleary is demonstrated in his recurrent use of everyday words to render the religious terms in the source text. A case in point is the term ‘法’ (fǎ), which is rendered as ‘*Dharma*’ by Wong, Cheng and Heng, but as ‘teaching’ throughout the whole text by Cleary (actually, the word ‘*Dharma*’ is not found in Cleary’s text). In contrast, Cheng’s preference for esoteric terms are so strong that he has even coined many expressions that do not exist in the target language (Low 2010: 42-58), such as ‘*Dhyanaic Stasis*’ for ‘禪定’ (chán dìng) (compare with ‘sitting meditation’ used by Cleary), ‘Great Good Guru’ for ‘大善知识’ (dà shàn zhī shì) (compare with ‘teacher’ used by Cleary), and so on.

From the above discussion, it can be seen that there are significant differences in text complexity as defined here between the translations, which is now summarised in Table 6.

	Wong	Heng	Cleary	Cheng
grammatical intricacy	low	low	high	high
lexical density	high	low	low	high

Table 6. Text complexity in each translation

While translations by Wong and Cleary are complex in one dimension (grammatical intricacy or lexical density) only, it is worthwhile to note that Heng’s translation is relatively simple, and Cheng’s translation is relatively complex, in both dimensions.

Consequently, it can be said that a different language style of Huineng is exhibited in each translation through different degrees of grammatical intricacy and lexical density. When communicating with others, Huineng uses relatively complex sentences, but common words in Cleary’s translation; and he uses simple sentences, but uncommon words in the translation by Wong. Both Huineng’s sentences and words are simple in Heng’s translation and both are complex in Cheng’s translation.

As language style can be seen, in qualitative terms, as a reflection of the personality of the speaker, it follows that different images of Huineng are recreated in the translations.

Simplicity in lexical choices creates a less formal situation where Huineng seems to be more

accessible, and simplicity in grammar can be seen as an effort on the part of Huineng to present his idea in a way that is easier for his audience to follow. The image of Huineng who uses complex sentences full of un-heard-of words is conversely authoritative, only meant to be revered, but not approached by the hearer/reader.

### **5. Interpretation: why does Huineng speak in this way**

It should be admitted that variations among the English translations are inevitable due to the unique linguistic features of the source text. For instance, there is no punctuation, though a certain sign (in the shape of a small circle) is used to signal pauses in the process of reciting. Therefore in many cases it is up to the reader to decide where a sentence starts and ends. Moreover, the language of the source text is highly concise. Few functional words are used and the relationship between clauses in a sentence is usually left implicit. This may result in several possible interpretations of the same sentence.

But the fact that a consistent pattern is observed in each translation indicates that the translators' choices may not have been made randomly. To answer the question why a certain style is exhibited in one translation but not the other(s), we need to take the context of translation into consideration.

Though both Wong Mou-lam and Thomas Cleary are lay Buddhists and translated the text mainly for the general public, they differ in their translating purposes and strategies. Wong's translation, being the first English version of the *Platform Sutra* in history, was to introduce Chan Buddhism, which was almost unknown in the 1930s, to the West. The *Platform Sutra* was translated as a literary as well as religious text, with the translator's effort to render the text with a literary flavour manifested in many aspects (Bielefeldt and Lancaster 1975: 205). Moreover, there was a fluctuation between acceptability and adequacy in terms of translating strategy. On the one hand, the translator took freedom on the textual and syntactical level, such as changing much of the original direct speech into indirect speech to avoid monotony, and adjusting the sequence of clauses within a sentence to make the text more logical and comprehensible for the target readers. On the other hand, however, the translator relied on both Sanskrit and English words to render the Buddhist terms in the source text. The purpose of this, as speculated by Humphreys (1973: 6), was to familiarize the target readers with those terms.

Unlike Wong, Cleary is a professional translator who translated the *Platform Sutra* as a historical-cultural text that was valued for its embodiment of East Asian wisdom. As the intended readership were people who might not know much about Chan Buddhism, Cleary seems to have adhered to the principle of acceptability throughout the translating process. The words used are simple, everyday English words. The sentences are short, with clauses related to each other through both parataxis and hypotaxis. The relative high grammatical intricacy, together with simplicity in lexis, contributes to creating an inner spoken context, establishing an informal atmosphere where Huineng talks to his audience.

It is of interest to note that translations by Heng Yin and Cheng Kuan, though both produced for religious purposes, contrast with each other in terms of text complexity as defined and discussed here. This again can be interpreted by considering the translating goals, strategies and the translators' background. Heng's translation of the *Platform Sutra* is accompanied by Master Hsuan Hua's paragraph-by-paragraph commentary. According to Heng, Master Hsuan Hua used to give lectures on the *Platform Sutra* in the form of reading one paragraph of the sutra and then giving his comments. Heng listened to the recording of these lectures and translated both the original text and Hsuan Hua's commentary at one time (Baur 1998). In this way the orality of the source text, characterised by short sentences with simple grammatical structures, was preserved in the translation. Moreover, the purpose of Heng's translation, as well as Hsuan Hua's lectures, was to propagate Buddhist ideas and attract converts. Therefore most of the words used are simple.

Cheng Kuan's translation of the *Platform Sutra*, by contrast, was mainly motivated by his dissatisfaction with the 'informality' and 'vulgarity' of the existing translations (Low 2010: 86-87). He considered it important to show one's respect to Huineng, the highly revered Sixth Patriarch, and to present him as divine and authoritative. Therefore, both the grammar and the vocabulary used in Cheng's translation are highly complex, which aims to maintain a distance between the speaker Huineng and his audience. Another factor contributing to the difference between the translations by Heng and Cheng may be the background of the two translators. Cheng studied English at college, and is now a Buddhist master and abbot of two temples, one in Taiwan and the other in the U.S. In contrast, Heng studied Chinese and Buddhism with Hsuan Hua, the first Chinese Buddhist master coming to the U.S. with the aim of spreading Buddhism. Cheng might have aimed at developing a kind of elite Buddhism, but Heng's translation was clearly targeting the ordinary people.

Therefore, under different contextual constraints, the translators made different choices on the level of both grammar and lexis, which result in different language styles and images of the same Chan master Huineng.

## **6. Conclusion**

Adopting the theoretical framework of systemic functional linguistics, this study compares the text complexity of four English translations of the *Platform Sutra* in terms of grammatical intricacy and lexical density. It has been found that while translations by Wong and Cleary are complex in only one dimension (lexical density and grammatical intricacy, respectively), the translation by Heng is simple in both dimensions, and the translation by Cheng is complex in both dimensions. The differences can be seen as a reflection of each translator's assumption of how the Chan master Huineng should speak in a new language, in accordance with their translating purposes and strategies. Translating the text for English readers who might have little idea of Chan Buddhism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Wong presents Huineng as speaking in an elegant way, using sentences with simple grammar but uncommon words. Aiming at acceptability for the general public, Cleary's translation creates an informal conversational atmosphere in the text by rendering Huineng's words as typically spoken, in terms of both grammar and lexis. In the translation by Heng, which was produced with awareness of the oral origin of the text and aimed to spread Buddhism among ordinary people, Huineng speaks in a simple way, using simple, short sentences containing mostly simple words. By contrast, in the translation by Cheng, who aims to maintain the 'formality' of the text and the authoritative and respectable image of the Sixth Patriarch, Huineng is presented as speaking in a scholarly way, using complicated sentences full of arcane words.

The finding in this study is consistent with the analysis results of previous studies (Yu and Guo 2016; Yu and Wu 2016, 2017), where investigation into choices of personal pronouns, mood types and modality, and reporting verbs demonstrates that the Chan master Huineng is represented as polite and friendly in Wong's translation, simple and direct in Heng's translation, accessible in Cleary's translation and authoritative in Cheng's translation. Therefore it can be said that for a specific translation, choice-making, which characterises the process of translating (Levý 2012: 72), is more likely to be consistent in various aspects and closely related to contextual constraints. This is true in the creation of meaning, and also true in the creation of style.

A final point that needs to be made here concerns another possible way to explore text complexity in future studies: the influence of conversation mode, topic and addressee (and many other factors) on the variation of language complexity of the same character. As a composite text that consists of monologues and dialogues focusing on different topics, the *Platform Sutra*, and many other similar texts as well, can also be investigated on a chapter-by-chapter basis to see whether the same Chan master speaks differently under different circumstances within the same translation. This, however, can only be left for future studies due to the space limitation of the current study.

Hailing Yu,

Department of Linguistics,

Macquarie University, Sydney, New South Wales 2109, Australia

Phone: (61)452 220 273

[hailingyu13@gmail.com](mailto:hailingyu13@gmail.com); [hailing.yu@hdr.mq.edu.au](mailto:hailing.yu@hdr.mq.edu.au)

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