

Application of Register Theory to English Translation of *Fortress Besieged*

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Recently, register theory, one of the most important theories of systemic functional grammar, has been received scholars' more and more attention and widely applied into translation, which brings a new perspective for translation research and provides a reasonable and scientific way of evaluating. *Fortress Besieged*, written by Qian Zhongshu, contains rich content, uses special language, and adopts unique writing technique skills, which can be called the literary classic. The paper combines register theory with translated literary work and explores the equivalence of *Fortress Besieged* in the process of translating from field, tenor, and mode of discourse to achieve translation equivalence as much as possible, which can improve translation quality and promote the spread of Chinese culture.

Keywords: register theory, *Fortress Besieged*, English translation

Introduction

At the present stage, under the background of China's "going global" strategy, Chinese literature translation plays an essential role in spreading Chinese culture. Chinese itself has rich connotations; thus it has a certain degree of complexity and difficulty in choosing appropriate words and expressing proper meaning in the process of translating. Different people have various understanding of source text, which obviously shows people's subjectivity in the process of translating. Therefore, it is difficult to evaluate quality of translations objectively and fairly. Register theory, one of the most major theories of functional linguistics, involves in three dimensions: field, tenor, and mode of discourse. Through analyzing register of source text, it is of great benefit to translators to grasp and convey the meaning and spirit of the source text. Besides, application of register theory to the evaluation of translation can make the evaluation more accurate and objective. The literary masterpiece *Fortress Besieged* and its English translation are chosen in this paper. Through analysis of the field, tenor, and mode of *Fortress Besieged*, it can be found whether the translation reaches the equivalence in register, which can objectively evaluate the translation and improve translation quality.

Overview of Register Theory

Register Theory

There are many definitions of register, but the definition proposed by Halliday is the most widely accepted. Halliday firstly defined register as the functional variety of language. The language form changes as the context

of situation changes (Zhao, 2010, p. 120). Then he renewed this definition and pointed out three dimensions of register: field, tenor, and mode of discourse. The field of discourse refers to the context in communication, including the theme of conversation consisting of technical theme and non-technical theme. The tenor of discourse refers to the relationship between participants, which includes personal tenor and functional tenor. The personal tenor is the social role relationship between communicative participants. The functional tenor is the intention of communication, which is instructive, illustrative, descriptive, and persuasive. The mode of discourse refers to the medium or methods used in the language activity, which may be spoken such as interview, or written such as blog.

These three dimensions are not independent of each other but are interdependent of each other. If any of these three dimensions of register changes, meaning of communication will also change, resulting in language variety and generating different types of register (Zhao, 2010, p. 120).

Register Theory and Translation

Since the 1990s, register theory has been increasingly applied into translation research. Some scholars point out that target text is regenerated under the guidance and restriction of contexts based on source text. It is inevitable to take context into account when translating. Guo (1989) believed that the understanding and expression of translation are inseparable from register analysis. To correctly understand meaning and grasp style of the source text, translators must carefully analyze register of the source text. Therefore, it can be said that the process of translating is a process of analyzing register, searching for the equivalent register in the target language and finally expressing this register appropriately.

Literary translation, as an indispensable part of translation, carries a profound national culture. Therefore, when translating literary works, translators should not only achieve the equivalence in form, but also pay more attention to the equivalence in its content and context. Halliday (2001) emphasized that realization of semantic equivalence is more valuable than that of equivalence in vocabulary and syntax in translation, but realization of equivalence in register is more meaningful compared with semantic equivalence. Hence, in order to produce high-quality literary translation, it is required that translators should have a comprehensive understanding of the context of culture and situation of the source text, think about the actual situation of the source text, and carefully analyze its textual characteristics. To analyze the source text and target text from field, tenor and mode of discourse can contribute to equivalence in register, improving the translation quality.

Analysis of *Fortress Besieged* English Translation From Field, Tenor, and Mode of Discourse

***Fortress Besieged* and Translators**

The *Fortress Besieged*, the only novel of Qian Zhongshu, has a huge influence. Qian Zhongshu, a master knowing both the west and the east, exerts the novel's artistic feature to the perfection with his extraordinary imagination and rich knowledge. Since its publication, it has attracted the attention of many scholars and has been assumed to be the classical work in Chinese contemporary novels no matter from the perspective of language or cultural connotation. The sharp and humorous language is used in the novel and a variety of rhetoric such as metaphor are adopted to portray vivid characters, revealing profound thoughts.

The English translation of *Fortress Besieged* was finished by two translators in cooperation, Jeanne Kelly and N. K. Mao. The first translation draft was completed by Kelly and then it was perfected by

Chinese-American scholar N. K. Mao. Since the English version was published, it has received people's attention. And it once was named one of the outstanding academic books.

Analysis of *Fortress Besieged* English Translation From Field

E.g. 1: 他只等机会向她声明并不爱她，恨自己心肠太软，没有快刀斩乱丝的勇气。(Qian, 2003, p. 164)

Translation: He, on the other hand, was waiting for a chance to explain that he did not love her, and wished he weren't so tender hearted and could be courageous enough to cut the Gordian Knot. (Qian, 2003, p. 165)

"He" in this sentence refers to "Hung-chien" and "she" refers to "Miss Su". Miss Su thought that Hung-chien loved her and was waiting for his courtship, but Hung-chien loved Miss Tang, Miss Su's cousin. Hung-chien did not make up his mind to tell Miss Su who he loved. "快刀斩乱丝" is the idiom in Chinese, which means to identify the key and solve the problem quickly. "A Gordian Knot" usually refers to complicated problem. What "cut the Gordian Knot" means is to deal with a difficult problem quickly and decisively. The source text and translation realize equivalence in field, which show the attitude of people dealing with difficult problems.

E.g. 2: 辛楣一肚皮的酒，几乎全成酸醋…… (Qian, 2003, p. 192)

Translation: The wine in Hsin-mei's stomach turned to sour vinegar in his jealousy. (Qian, 2003, p. 193)

This scene happened when Chao invited Hung-chien to dinner and wanted to embarrass Hung-chien, but later Miss Su began to take care of Hung-chien who was unwell because of drinking too much alcohol, which made Chao very uncomfortable. Although "醋" and "vinegar" have the same literal meaning, they have different cultural connotations. "醋" in Chinese means jealousy, but "vinegar" in English means acrimony. It is obvious that Chao was jealous of Hung-chien. If "醋" is translated into "vinegar", jealousy of Chao cannot be showed. When "vinegar" is followed by "in his jealousy", the connotation of "醋" is showed and Chinese specific culture can also be spread. The translation realizes equivalence in field.

Analysis of *Fortress Besieged* English Translation From Tenor

E.g. 3: 张先生道：“德国货总比不上美国货呀，什么博士！” (Qian, 2003, p. 92)

Translation: Mr. Zhang said, "German goods don't measure up to American ones. Some doctor!" (Qian, 2003, p. 93)

The background of this scene is that Mr. Zhang wanted to make sure whether Hung-chien was suitable for marrying his daughter and then invited him to home. Mr. Zhang chatted with Hung-chien in a mix of non-standard English and Chinese, but Hung-chien did not understand what he meant, which resulted in Mr. Zhang's dissatisfaction with Hung-chien. Mr. Zhang is wealthy and his social status is higher compared with Hung-chien. He once used to work in a bank founded by Americans in China, so he always likes mixing non-standard English with Chinese when talking to others. The connotation of "什么博士" includes contempt of Mr. Zhang for Hung-chien and Mr. Zhang's superiority. "Some" in English is used to express a negative opinion about someone or something with irony. Obviously, the source text and translation realize equivalence in tenor.

E.g. 4: 母亲铁青脸说：“你这位奶奶真是贵人不踏贱地，下帖子请都不来了。” (Qian, 2003, p. 678)

Translation: His mother, her face livid, said, "That wife of yours certainly is 'too noble to set foot on lowly turf'. She won't even come when invited." (Qian, 2003, p. 679)

The background of this scene is that Hung-chien's mother was dissatisfied with Sun Jou-chia, Hung-chien's wife, because she seldom returned to Mrs. Fang's house with Hung-chien. Hung-chien's mother found that Sun Jou-chia did not return again; she was very angry. The words she said to his son show her dissatisfaction with the daughter-in-law and satirize her noble. The relationship between Hung-chien's mother and wife was alienated. “你这位奶奶” obviously expresses Hung-chien's mother's implied meaning, but “that wife of yours” in the translation did not show that connotation. The source text and translation do not realize equivalence in tenor. If “she” in last sentence is replaced by “her ladyship”, the meaning may be more accurate.

Analysis of *Fortress Besieged* English Translation From Mode

E.g. 5: 辛楣笑道: “……同在一个学校的叫‘同学’, 同有一个情人的该叫‘同情。’ ” (Qian, 2003, p. 250)

Translation: Hsin-mei said with a grin, “... and people who go to the same school are called schoolmates, so people who are in love with the same girl should be called ‘lovemates.’ ” (Qian, 2003, p. 251)

The background of this scene is that Hsin-mei always thought that Hung-chien liked Miss Su and regarded Hung-chien as his rival because he himself loved Miss Su for many years. But in the end Miss Su did not marry any of them. Therefore, Hsin-mei called Hung-chien lovemates. “同情” in Chinese generally means emotional resonance with others' experiences or actions, but meaning of it here is different. “Lovemates” is created according to “schoolmates”, which can realize equivalence in mode and make the translation close to the source text in terms of language and style.

E.g. 6: 她手上生的五根香肠, 灵敏得很, 在头发里抓一下就捉到个虱, 掐死了, 叫孩子摊开手掌受着, 陈尸累累。 (Qian, 2003, p. 312)

Translation: The five sausage-like fingers were quite nimble. With one pluck she seized a louse, squeezed it, and telling the girl to spread out her palm, laid out the louse corpses one after another. (Qian, 2003, p. 313)

The background of this scene is that Hung-chien and his friends in the carriage met a fat woman hugging her child and tickling her on the way to San lv University. “Sausage” is used to compare “finger” and “the dead louse” refers to “corpses”, which reveals the bad condition that Hung-chien and his friends suffered. The effect of figurative rhetoric shows the humorous style of the novel, which also reflects in the translation. Obviously, the source text and translation realize equivalence in mode.

Conclusion

Register equivalence is just one aspect to explore equivalence in translation, which is one of many levels of translation equivalence. Application of register theory to translation not only enriches translation theory, but also provides a new objective standard for translation. Through analyzing some examples of *Fortress Besieged* English translation, it can be seen that register theory can help us to translate literary works and evaluate them objectively and effectively, which also shows the feasibility of application of register theory to literary translation. Translators should take register into account, analyze the field and mode, and strive to reproduce the register features of the source text in the translation to achieve the ideal translation.

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