

A Comparative Study of the English and German Translation Versions of *The Three-Body Problem Part I* From the Perspective of Eco-translatology

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The publication of *The Three-Body Problem* by Liu Cixin has raised Chinese science fiction literature to the world level, and to translate it better into foreign languages is to spread Chinese literature and culture abroad more effectively. Through a comparative study of the English translation version by Ken Liu and the German translation version by Martina Hasse of *The Three-Body Problem Part I*, this paper explores how translators effectively transmit the message to the target language readers and thus promote cross-cultural communication through the analysis of three levels: linguistic, cultural, and communicative levels, based on the theory of eco-translatology.

Keywords: eco-translatology, science fiction translation, *The Three-Body Problem Part I*

Introduction

The Three-Body Problem, a series of science fiction novels also known as “Earth Past Trilogy”, is written by the Chinese science fiction writer Liu Cixin from 2006 to 2010. The series consists of three parts, *The Past of the Earth*, *The Dark Forest*, and *Death Eternal Life*. The first part was translated into English by the renowned Chinese-American science fiction writer Ken Liu and published in the United States in November 2014. The book soon became a brilliant success in the USA. It also won the highly coveted Hugo Award for Best Novel of the Year in 2015. This was the first time a Chinese novel was honored with the Hugo Award.

In October 2015, the annual Frankfurt Book Fair in Germany began, and the European publishing industry showed great interest in *The Three-Body Problem* (Sun, 2020). In December 2016, the German edition was introduced and published in Germany by German publisher Wilhelm Heyne Verlag, and subsequently received both market and academic acclaim: The book hit the German bestseller list. In June 2017, it won a major German science fiction Kurd-Laßwitz-Prize with German translator Martina Hasse winning the prize for the best translation.

The English translation of Ken Liu differs in part from the original Chinese text because the English translator, himself a Chinese-American science fiction writer, made his own creative translations, even intentional mistranslations (Wu & Zhang, 2021). The German publisher chose not to use the English version as a reference, but to commission a German sinologist Martina Hasse to translate directly from Chinese into German

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in order to be faithful to the original in terms of content and language style (Sun, 2020). The two translators' different backgrounds, the differences in readership, and publication situations, among other factors, constitute the characteristics that distinguish the English version from the German version, and a comparative study of the two will bring new inspiration and a collision of ideas.

Some researchers have studied the translation of *The Three-Body Problem* from different angles. Deng Gaosheng and Tang Jing (2022) made an analysis of the subtext in the English translation of *The Three-Body Problem*. Han Shuqin (2019) discussed the English translation of the novel from the perspective of translation adaptation selection theory. However, just a few people have studied the comparisons between translated versions in different languages. So far, only the comparison between the English and Japanese versions has been discussed. Lu Dongli and Shao Bao (2021) studied the ecological adaptation of *The Three-Body Problem* in Japan from the perspective of the overlap between indirect English-Japanese translation and direct Chinese-Japanese translation. Therefore, a comparative study of the English and German translated versions is of more practical importance and can fill the gap in this field.

An Overview of Eco-translatology

The notion of “Eco-translatology” was first proposed by Professor Hu Gengshen from Tsinghua University in 2001, as he gave a lecture entitled “From the Darwinian Principle of Adaptation and Selection to Translation Studies” at an academic lecture on translation at Hong Kong Baptist University. Based on oriental wisdom and occidental concepts, Hu discusses translation “as a translator’s adaptation and selection activities in a translational eco-environment”. Such an eco-environment includes the worlds of the source text and the source and target languages, the linguistic, cultural, and social aspects of translating, as well as the author, client, and readers (Hu, 2004).

Under this background, the theory clearly embodies the concept of “translator as the center” and holds that translation is translator’s selection and adaptation activity to the eco-environment of translation (Hu, 2013). The purpose of translator-centeredness is to emphasize the translator’s central position in the process of translation and try to make a new description and explanation of translation activities from the perspective of translator as the center. As the German linguist and translator Wolfram Wilss means, the success of a translation depends on the translator’s ability to understand the original text and its expression skills, which includes translation skill, intelligence level, initiative, flexibility, patience, acceptance ability personal attitude, customary reflection, the depth and breadth of thinking (Wills, 1996).

Eco-translatology uses the three-dimensional transformation as the main strategy and methodology of translation. Translators need to adapt to three dimensions when they translate and focus on the choices and adaptive selections of language, culture, and communication under “multi-dimensional adaptation and adaptive choice” (Hu, 2008).

Comparative Analysis of the English and German Translation Versions

Adaptive Selection in Linguistic Dimension

Adaptive selection in linguistic dimension refers to the translator’s adaptive transformation of language from a linguistic perspective, in order to untie the bondage of semantics of the original text and make appropriate adjustments according to the expression habits of the target language without destroying the original meaning.

Example 1: 三体 (title of the novel)

English translation: *The Three-Body Problem*

German translation: *Die Drei Sonnen*

The title of the novel is “*The Three-Body Problem*” in the English translation. When the English version was published, there were such doubts why the English title was not exactly the same as the Chinese title, such as adding an extra “Problem” and replacing “Body” with “Star”. In fact, the English translation of the novel’s title used a physics-specific term, namely the “three-body problem”, which refers to the mechanical relationship between three masses and their mutual gravitational effects. The English translation actually avoids spoilers, so that readers will not guess the story too early through the novel title. The German translation of the novel’s title is much more direct: *Die Drei Sonnen*. “Die” is the definite article of the plural noun in German, “Drei” is the number three, and “Sonnen” in German is the plural of sun or star, which corresponds to “The Three Suns” in English.

It is well known that the German version came out two years after the English version. By the time the novel was translated into German, it had already gained international popularity, won numerous book awards, and gained many celebrity fans, such as the U.S. President Barack Obama. A book review program hosted by the famous critic Dennis Schack on German TV1 also recommended the book, so it is unlikely that German readers of this science fiction will not know anything about it before they read it. It is not surprising that the title of the German version used the phrase “The Three Suns” directly, rather than using the physical terminology in the English translation. While the German title may hint at the content of the book in advance, it also has an impressive and impactful effect.

Example 2: 我办过一个杀人案，一个娘们儿把她丈夫的那玩意儿割下来了。(Chapter 1)

English translation: I handled a murder case once. Some bitch cut off her husband’s family jewels.

German translation: Ich habe mal in einem Mordfall ermittelt, bei dem eine Frau ihrem Mann seinen kleinen Freund abgeschnitten hat.

The above passage is excerpted from a dialogue between the two main characters in *The Three-Body Problem*, scientist Wang Miao and police officer Shi Qiang. In Liu Cixin’s writing, Shi Qiang is portrayed as a police officer who is vulgar in speech and behavior, but extremely observant. Therefore, in order to fit Shi Qiang’s character, the Chinese expressions also use some vulgar and colloquial expressions, such as “娘们儿” and “那玩意儿”.

The English translation inherited this colloquial expression in Chinese, using slang words like “bitch” and “family jewels”, which have some kind of internal correspondence with the Chinese. The German translation is more plain and written. The German expression “eine Frau ihrem Mann seinen kleinen Freund abgeschnitten hat” means “a woman has cut off her husband’s little friend” in English. Martina Hasse, as a female sinologist in Germany, who has translated literary works from Chinese into German, chose a more neutral and implicit translation of the sentence, using “woman” instead of “bitch”, “little friend” instead of “family jewels”, which may lose some of its humor, but for some female readers, it may be more friendly as well.

Adaptive Selection in Cultural Dimension

Adaptive selection in cultural dimension means that translator should focus on the transfer and interpretation of bilingual cultural connotation in the translation process. Besides, the differences between the source culture and cultural expectations of target readers must be taken into consideration to avoid misinterpreting or misunderstanding.

Example 3: “不了，谁都可以考，连村里‘黑五类’的娃都行呢！” (Chapter 27)

English translation: “No. Anyone can take the exam. Even the children of the Five Black Categories (*35) in the village can take it.”

[Translator’s note (*35): The Five Black Categories, the targets of the Cultural Revolution, were five political identities used during the revolution: landlords, rich farmers, counter-revolutionaries, “bad elements”, and right-wingers.]

German translation: Nein. Jeder darf die Prüfung machen. Sogar die Kinder der Fünf Schwarzen Klassen dürfen sich prüfen lassen!

Example 3 is a dialogue between the novel’s protagonist, Ye Wenjie, and rural children at the moment when China came to the end of the Cultural Revolution. The plot of *The Three-Body Problem* is based on Ye Wenjie’s extreme disappointment with human civilization because of what happened during the Cultural Revolution, and pressing the button to announce the location of the Earth to the Aliens. So the description of that period of history in the original text carries some vocabulary specific to the Cultural Revolution. For example, in Chinese, the term “黑五类” refers to the five categories of people who were particularly targeted during the Cultural Revolution, and the English translator Ken Liu added an explanation to the English expression in the form of an in-text note to facilitate the reader’s understanding of such terms with historical background.

The German version differs in that the German translator has added a 24-page note at the end of the whole book, annotating such terms and detailing which are her own opinions, which is more reflective of the German translator’s background as a literary scholar and translator.

Example 4: 那是由三百万名文化程度较高的人构成，您上次坑儒时把他们留下是对的。(Chapter 18)

English translation: It’s formed by three million soldiers with more education than most. When you buried all those scholars alive after you unified China, it’s a good thing you saved these ones!

German translation: Er besteht aus drei Millionen Soldaten mit etwas besserer Schulbildung. Dass Eure Majestät sie damals verschont hat, als du Gelehrte bei lebendigem Leibe begraben lie ßest, war klug.

Another feature of this science fiction novel is that the alien civilization is presented to the readers through a series of VR game scenes. The description of the games occupies a considerable length in the original text and plays an important role in the development of the story. When designing the games, Liu Cixin used some ancient Chinese emperors and western scientists as the game’s protagonists, so many historical stories from ancient China also appear in the novel, such as the story of the first Chinese emperor Qin Shi-Huang, who buried a large number of Confucian scholars alive, which appears in Example 4 above.

As a Chinese American, the translator of the English version Ken Liu, was born in mainland China. He immigrated to the United States with his parents at the age of eight. He used his familiarity with Chinese history to translate the historical event of “burying scholars alive” by cleverly adding a temporal clause “after you unified China”. In fact, this information does not exist in the original text. However, this clarification can help foreign readers who are not familiar with Chinese history understand the background of the historical event of “burying scholars alive”. The German translator, however, kept the translation as literal as possible, without adding other information.

Adaptive Selection in Communicative Dimension

Adaptive selection in communicative dimension requires the translator to transmit the author’s intentions to readers when translating. The focus of the translator’s conversion is on the communicative level, namely whether

the communicative intentions of the original text have been reached in the translated text.

Example 5: “大史，你把烟熄了，这儿的烟味够浓了。”常伟思说，低头翻着文件。(Chapter 1)

English translation: “Da Shi, put out your cigarette. There’s enough smoke here,” General Chang said as he flipped through some documents. He called Shi Qiang by a nickname, “Big Shi.”

German translation: “Shih Qiang, stell das Rauchen jetzt ein. Hier ist es schon verqualmt genug”, sagte Generalmajor Chang, während er mit gesenktem Kopf in seinen Unterlagen blätterte.

Appellations are an important part of communication and conversation. In Chinese, there are different address forms for the same person, depending on how close the other person in the conversation is to him. For example, a stranger may be called by his full name, while an acquaintance may be called by his nickname. In Example 5, Ken Liu added a sentence “He called Shi Qiang by a nickname” when he translated it into English. The purpose is to explain why General Chang calls Shi Qiang by a different name than others in the previous sentence. This also prepares for the information that follows, because the paragraphs immediately afterwards tell the readers that Shi Qiang is an old subordinate of General Chang, and General Chang trusts his ability so much that he is specially transferred to the team. The use of the nickname shows that the two are very familiar with each other.

Only a translator who is extremely familiar with Chinese communication styles can capture the subtle differences between the nickname “Da Shi” and the full name “Shi Qiang”. This is also Ken Liu’s strength as a Chinese-American translator. But in order to achieve this effect, he added some explanatory information that does not exist in the original text.

Other than Ken Liu’s translation, the German translator stayed to the original text and did not add any explanatory words. In the translation of this address form, the full name “Shih Qiang” continues to be used, partly because of the concern that the sudden appearance of another name may confuse readers. In addition, when translating the name “史强”, the German translator did not use Chinese Pinyin completely, but used a different way “Shih” to accommodate the German pronunciation habits.

Conclusions

As a successful science fiction novel, *The Three-Body Problem* has been translated into many languages by different translators. It is difficult to draw a conclusion as to which translation is better or worse. Each language is different, with its own readership, linguistic style, and national characteristics. And each translator is different, with his or her own differences in gender identity, upbringing, and academic background. A successful translation must be adaptive to its target language’s eco-environment, so as to be better accepted and understood by the people from the target language with their cultural and communicative habits. From this point of view, different translators can use their own ways to complete the translation with a higher degree of adaptation.

This paper analyzes some examples of the differences in translation methods between the German and English translation versions. But the same is that both translators try to achieve consistency with the original text and make a flexible use of the transformation in linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimension.

A comparative study of different translated versions based on eco-translatology can strengthen not only the understanding of translator-centeredness, but also the spread and exchange of science fiction literature to the outside world, and provide some reference for future scholars when translating science fiction literature.

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