

A Comparative Study of the English Translations of “Chun Ye Xi Yu” From the Perspective of Register Theory

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Ancient poetry is an irreplaceable component of Chinese culture and an invaluable asset in China’s cultural heritage. With the rapid development of globalization and informatization, Chinese poem is attracting more and more interests and focuses as one part of China’s cultural soft power which plays an important role on spreading traditional Chinese culture. Systemic functional linguistics mainly explores the essence, entailment, system and structure of language from the perspective of social culture, especially the relationship between context and discourse. Therefore, the paper applies the register theory to Chinese poem translations of Xu Yuanchong and Yang Xianyi of “Chun Ye Xi Yu” in order to compare two translated texts from three aspects of field, tenor, and mode, and examine the expression of the connotation of the original poem between the two translations.

Keywords: register theory, field, tenor, mode, English translations of “Chun Ye Xi Yu”

Introduction

Wen Yiduo, a scholar and poet, once said, “The poet’s contribution to the poetry is secondary; the primary is to make something of the spirit”. Classical Chinese poems have been handed down for thousands of years, because they have anchored the spiritual pursuit of the Chinese people and carried their poetic feelings and inspirations. Today, new explorations on the inheritance path of classical poems continue one after another, and classical poems are integrating into our lives in many ways, continuing to blossom with charm and awakening more people’s poetic feelings and inspirations! Not only do nationals indulge in the charm of poetry, but many foreigners are also very fond of ancient Chinese poems. Referring to the experience of traveling by boat through the Three Gorges, President George W. Bush said, “...Where we relished the history of the Three Kingdoms and could almost hear the poet Li Bo’s description of ‘the monkeys who screamed from the two sides without stopping’ (两岸猿声啼不住)”. Italy’s first female astronaut, Samantha Cristoforetti, posted three of her photos taken from space on her social media to express her feelings by an ancient Chinese saying, “Looking up, I see the immensity of the cosmos; bowing my head, I look at the multitude of the world. The gaze flies, the heart expands, the joy of the senses can reach its peak, & indeed, this is true happiness (仰观宇宙之大，俯察品类之盛，所以游目骋怀，足以极视听之娱，信可乐也)”.

In sight of this, it is clear that the translation of ancient Chinese poems must be proper and right enough to represent the poems’ original meanings and feelings. Known as “the only person who translates poetry into English and French”, Mr. Xu Yuanchong believes that translating poetry is creating “beauty”, and he pursues

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“beauty of meaning, sound and form”, hoping that readers can feel the beauty in the reading. In the translation of Chairman Mao’s poems, Xu believed that faithfulness to the original poem might lose its original beauty and thus boldly recreate the translation of Mao’s poems in the way of English rhyming poems. Eventually, we witnessed one of the best translations of the whole world: “to face the powder and not to powder the face (不爱红装爱武装)”.

With the deepening of China’s reform and opening up, poetry translation has opened up many possibilities for literary and cultural exchanges between different languages: Some are criteria for selecting translation methods when translators are translating and others are criteria adopted by readers in accepting translated poetry. From this angle, the register theory provides a fresh perspective on judging good and bad translations. Thus, the paper aims to compare two translated versions of “Chun Ye Xi Yu” in terms of three aspects of field, tenor, and mode, and explores what kind of role the register theory plays on poetry translation estimation.

Register Theory

In the 1950s of the 20th century, Halliday developed the field of study of systemic functional linguistics, which has since become one of the leading linguistic streams in the world. Systemic functional linguistics is the study of the relationship between language and its functions in social settings. What social settings mean here is the background where language is used. These linguists believe that language takes place in a given context and is understood or interpreted in a certain context. From the *Functional Grammar* by Halliday (1994), language has three major metalinguistic functions: ideational function, interpersonal function, and textual function. Ideational metafunction means we can express our ideas, describe the world, and categorize concepts through the use of words, sentences, and even articles, orally or literally. Interpersonal metafunction supports the manner in which language is utilized to establish and maintain social connections, convey feelings and views, and affect the conduct of others. Textual metafunction stresses the way in which language is organized and structured to facilitate the formation of coherent and meaningful texts. These three metafunctions are very closely related to register theory and promote the development and consummation of register theory which is one of the most important theories of systematic functional grammar.

In 1964, Halliday writes it in his book that “Registers are functional variants of language use” (Halliday, McIntosh, & Stevens, 1964), i.e., changes in the form of a language due to changes in the context of a situation. For example, the language used in church is different from the language used in class, and the two types belong to different registers. The differences between registers are mainly manifested in vocabulary and grammar, with the most obvious distinctions in vocabulary. That exactly explains the reason why there are numerous classifications of Science English, Law English, Business English, and so on. Taking acronym as an instance, “FYI” and “FW” are usually used in the business emails while “i.e.” and “e.g.” are most written in academic theses. In 1978, Halliday proposes a new definition of register that it is “a meaning structure that is usually associated with a certain type of situation”. He also points out that the three types of language situations, “What happened”, “What role a particular language played”, and “Who played the role”, determine the register, that is, the domain of the choice of semantics and the form of expression of semantics. Hence, the complete register theory was developed. The linguistic features which are typically associated with a configuration of situational features—with particular values of the field, mode, and tenor—constitute a register (Halliday & Hason, 1976). Obviously, register is a language variant formed by the different topics (scopes) of the discourse, the background in which the discourse is used, the occasions in which it is used, the purpose of communication, and the way of

communication. It is clear that each variable in the register is related to a set of meanings, and these different combinations of meanings together constitute the discourse semantics of the text, i.e., the three meta-functions of language.

The introduction of register theory provides us with a whole new perspective on how to estimate the quality of a translated text. Correctly identifying the register is an important prerequisite for ensuring the translation's “loyalty and fluency”. Once, translators grasp the basic rules of register theory in language learning, they can predict the context according to the discourse, and then translate the source text accurately according to the context (Sun, 2006). Field decides the scope of the communication, influencing the choice and use of vocabulary. The translator must grab the right communicative field and familiarize the related proper lexis in order to make an accurate target text from which readers can know about the original information. Tenor emerges and changes with the communicator's feelings, intentions, features, and social status. In the social activity of communication, different participants play different roles through using their preferred and habitual words that match with their roles. Mode is mainly divided into written language and spoken language. The original text of the formal written language cannot be translated into informal spoken language, and vice versa. In the process of translation, it is of the utmost importance for the translator to conduct a register analysis. This will help the translator avoid any subjective choices that may be made during the interpretation of the source text and the subsequent formation of the translated text. This will ensure that the translated text is as faithful as possible to the original text.

Registers are variants of language with specific purpose and features. Contextual factors determine language features. Halliday summarizes these contextual factors into three components: field, tenor, and mode. Field refers to what actually happens in the communication and the activities of the participants, of which language activities are an important part, including the topic of conversation. Macroscopically, it is a kind of subject matter (Li, 2006). According to this, fields of translation involve literary, political, scientific, legal, religious, journalistic, and advertising discourses, all of which have their own distinctive features in their scope. Taking “man” as an instance, it will be translated into “人” in the normal situation, but in the background of war, it should be translated into “士兵” or “战士”, from which readers can feel the dangerous and crucial atmosphere of war. Tenor focuses on the role relationships of participants in communicational activities, involving social roles and conversational roles. The former could be teacher/student, parents/children, salesman/customer, etc., and the latter could be speaker/listener, writer/reader, and questioner/answerer, etc. The language that one role uses should match with his role in identities, characters, and social status. In the kindergarten and primary school, teachers usually call these kids “sweetie” and “little bear”, while in the college, professors usually call their students names directly. Mode refers to the channel or medium of communication, such as speaking or writing, extemporaneous or prepared, including rhetorical modes. If the original text is a formal written language, it cannot be translated orally and vice versa. In the situation of “a customer is buy something at a street stall”, the field is goods trading in a store, talking about the price, quantity, type of goods, etc. The tenor is the salesperson and the customer and their relationship. The mode of conversation is impromptu, face-to-face.

Field, tenor, and mode together constitute the discourse's register. Recognizing the register is one of the most important prerequisites when translating, especially in the process of comprehension and expression. All the choices of sound, vocabulary, grammar, and structure made by translators are based on the needs of various linguistic registers. Therefore, register analysis plays an indispensable role in guiding translation.

Comparative Analysis of the Translations of “Chun Ye Xi Yu”

“Chun Ye Xi Yu” is one of the most famous poems written by Du Fu, a great poet of the Tang Dynasty. It is a typical quatrain of total eight stanzas. The employment of words in this poem is simple and ordinary, but it is very vivid, and it can build a series of lively pictures in people’s minds when reading. The scene switchover is very silky like a movie in the order of time. With great joy, the poem meticulously depicts the characteristics of spring rain and the scene of rain at night in Chengdu, and warmly eulogizes the spring rain that comes in time and nourishes everything. The poet uses anthropomorphic techniques to describe the spring rain, drawing the sound and shape, which is subtle, delicate, and vivid. Uniting the literal poem and the visual painting of rainy night, it is great anthem of rain with high individuality and charm, conveying a kind of light and elegant mood. This poem expresses the poet’s noble character and love of life through the warm praise of spring rain. Considering about the accuracy, authority, recognition of the translation, the study takes Xu’s and Yang’s translations as analysis materials. The following part presents a comparative analysis of the English translations of “Chun Ye Xi Yu” from the respect of field, tenor, and mode.

Field-Based Comparison

Field refers to a specific communicative situation, such as the topic or scene of communication. The original is a lyrical poem by Du Fu, a famous poet of the Tang Dynasty, which uses anthropomorphism to praise the timely spring rain that nourishes everything with great joy. The scope of the discourse determines the choice and use of words, so the choosing of vocabulary must be based on the theme. The whole poem is mainly describing the scenery and feelings, and the overall tone is positive and lively, containing and expressing enormous delight.

(1a) 江船火独明

(1b) In boat a lantern looms (Xu).

(1c) A lone boat on the river sheds a glimmer of light (Yang).

At night when it is not too gloomy, the poem found that the path is easier to see than the fields in the distance, and the river is easier to make out than the shore. Now, as far as the eye can see, only the lights on the ships are bright. Apparently, two translators do not take into account the singular and plural issues when translating. It is impossible to have only one ship on the vast river, so the “boat” should be “boats”. In (1a), “独” is used to emphasize that only the candle flame on the boats was glowing when the sky was full of dark clouds, and the ground was as black as clouds. But in (1c), “lone” is used to describe “boat”.

(2a) 花重锦官城

(2b) The town’s heavy with blooms (Xu).

(2c) Drenched, heavy blooms in the City of Brocade (Yang).

“锦官城” is Chengdu nowadays. During the Shu Han period of the Three Kingdoms, because Chengdu produced the gorgeous “brocade”, local dignitaries and nobles rushed to buy it, which became an important financial revenue of the Shu Han regime. As a result, the Shu Han Dynasty set up Jinguan to manage the production and marketing of Shu Jin, and added the reputation of “Jinguan City” (also called “Jincheng”) to Chengdu. Shu Jin developed in the Warring States and flourished in the Han and Tang Dynasties. Most foreign readers do not understand “锦官城” because of the lack of understanding of Chinese history, so Yang uses the expression “the City of Brocade” to explain the Chinese historical term and indicate the city’s features in (2c). But the explanation of this term is omitted and it just uses a general word in (2b).

Tenor-Based Comparison

Tenor is the tone of the discourse, reflecting the social relations and social roles of participants. Although the personification of the poem is very obviously, it is all about the poet's senses—what he saw, what he heard, and what he felt in the particular night. The second sentence is pointing that the poet heard the rain's coming then listened to the rain intently. The third sentence is presenting that the poet came out to see the rain and caught sight of the paths on the ground, the black clouds in the sky, and the fishing boats with lights in the distance. The last sentence is describing the poet's imagination of scene the next day that citizens could see these wet but bright flowers at dawn and they are everywhere in the whole city like a sea of reds.

(3a) 好雨知时节

(3b) Good rain knows its time right (Xu).

(3c) A good rain knows its season (Yang).

At the beginning, the poet praises the rain with the word “good”. In life, “good” is often associated with wonderful and beneficial things. The praise of rain with “good” is going to evoke imaginations about bringing good things. Next, the rain is impersonated. “Knows the season” points that the rain is aware of doing right thing at right time. Spring is the season when everything sprouts and grows, and just when it needs to rain, it starts to rain. Thus, the rain is “good” because it knows the importance of its duty and happens to nourish all things in appropriate time.

(4a) 随风潜入夜

(4b) With wind it steals in night (Xu).

(4c) On the heels of the wind it slips secretly into the night (Yang).

Rain is the most important character in this poem and it is turned into a human being. In (3b), “steal” means “to come or go secretly” which has no emotional feelings. But, in (3c), “slip” means “to move quietly and cautiously”, which reflects not only the rain is happening in silence, but also the rain's thought to want to be quiet and secret. It is emphasized that it is characteristic as a human because it has its own intentions and actions. And the phrase of “on the heels of the wind” is interesting and imaginable, which expresses the spring rain's vitality and delight, further highlighting its characteristics of human being. It chooses a time that does not hinder people's work and labor, and comes quietly, silently, and delicately in the night when people are asleep, which emphasizes it's “good” again.

Mode-Based Comparison

Mode refers to the way of communication, which is an expression of the communicator's way of communicating and communicative style. In terms of writing style, both the poem and the two translations are in written form. In terms of narrative style, the poem follows the poet's path moving and time order to describe the scenery and feelings. In this regard, the English translations all follow the progress of the original poem line by line, preserving the narrative style of the original poem. From the point of the formality of the vocabulary, both two translations of Xu and Yang take use of general and familiar lexis. One of the most notable things about the poem is personification. The poet depicts the spring rain as a person and employs a number of verbs, which are used to describe human, such as “steal” and “slip”. These two words lay stress on that the spring rain is so naughty and tricky as a child that it decides to come at night slinkingly when everyone is asleep. The English language focuses on analysis and logic and is characterized by morphosyntax, and both versions use organized sentences and precise grammar. Yang focuses more on complete long lines, while Xu emphasizes more on restoring the

rhyme of the poem. Through “right” and “night”, “spring” and “everything”, “spreads” and “reds”, “looms” and “blooms”, Xu retains the rhyming style of the original poem, maximizing the beauty of the translation.

Conclusion

Based on the register theory of systematic functional grammar, this paper discusses the problem of register correspondence in Chinese poem translation from three different levels of register. In fact, these three different aspects do not exist in isolation, but are interdependent. The paper compares two translated versions of “Chun Ye Xi Yu” in terms of three aspects of field, tenor, and mode, and explores what kind of role the register theory plays on poetry translation estimation. Ultimately, the study has found a fresh perspective on estimating the effect and faithfulness of translations. It is clear that the register theory indeed further broadens the horizon of translation studies and also proves the feasibility of register theory in poetry research. The translator should integrate these three aspects into his translation, so as to ensure that the translated text is consistent with the original text. Furthermore, it is visible in essence that the theory of register is highly practical in application for language teaching and translation, as well as for language testing and discourse analysis.

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