

Comparative Analysis of English Versions of *The True Story of Ah Q* From the Perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory

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As a relatively mature translation theory at present, the functional equivalence theory plays an important guiding role in the practice of literary translation. Therefore, this thesis compares and analyzes two translation versions of *The True Story of Ah Q* under the guidance of functional equivalence theory in terms of words, syntax, and discourse. This paper makes a detailed analysis of the two versions, one of which was translated by William Lyell and the other by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang. Then, the specific differences between English and Chinese languages are studied to provide guidance for translators to consider how to effectively and appropriately conduct similar translations in the future.

Keywords: comparative analysis, English versions, *The True Story of Ah Q*, functional equivalence theory

Introduction

Nowadays, Lu Xun's works have been translated into many languages all over the world, which can be said that Lu Xun's works of Chinese literature have truly entered the world. Translators play an important role in the process of international cultural communication. Facing the bottleneck of Chinese literature going abroad, it is of great value and significance to make a comparative analysis on the English translations of Lu Xun's novels.

As the core theory of American translation theorist Eugene Nida, the functional equivalence theory has been highly valued by scholars all over the world since its birth 50 years ago. It has also been continuously improved with the development of the times. As one of the relatively mature translation theories at present, this theory guides many translators to constantly improve their translation skills. Nida subdivided the theory into lexical equivalence, syntactic equivalence, textual equivalence, and stylistic equivalence. Nida (1969) believes that meaning is the most important, which is particularly critical in literary translation.

Literary works can be said to be the microscope of a nation's culture and spirit. As a carrier of culture, language is a national characteristic with its own unique cultural content. Therefore, the output of literary works is one of the important ways of cultural transmission. In the definition of dynamic equivalence and functional equivalence, Nida (1969) pointed out that differences in culture and language systems will inevitably lead to irreconcilable contradictions. In this regard, he emphasized that the sense of target language readers and

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reading experience should be taken into account, and translators should pay attention to the sense of equivalence, not subject to the constraints of language structure, and reproduce the original meaning to the maximum extent, so as to achieve the effect of functional equivalence.

Comparative Analysis of the Translation Versions

In Terms of Words

As the most basic medium of a nation's expression, language carries various cultural connotations and national spirits around the world, no matter which way it is adopted.

Words, as the most basic unit of sentence, are seemingly simple, but because of their unique national color and cultural personality, there are no corresponding expressions in the corpus of the target language, which is particularly prominent in Chinese literary works. Therefore, this paper will discuss the translation strategies adopted by Lyell as well as Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang through a concrete analysis of the characters' names, title names, puns, and some other words with Chinese characteristics in *The Real Story of Ah Q*.

For Lyell's translation of “邹七嫂”, at first glance, you may feel a little confused, but under the careful taste it is in line with the way that ancient Chinese married women are named by.

Example 1:

In regards to “赵太爷” and “邹七嫂” in the work, the processing of the two versions is different. Lyell translated them as “Old Master Zhao” and “Seventh Sister Zou” respectively, while Yang simplified them to “Mr. Zhao” and “Mrs. Zou”. Lyell's translation focused on conveying the meaning of the names. In ancient China, “太爷” refers to the squire or a powerful person. Lyell's translation more accurately expresses the status quo of China's rooted feudal consciousness of social class at the time. For Lyell's translation of “邹七嫂”, at first glance, you may feel a little confused, but under the careful taste it is in line with the way that ancient Chinese married women are named by.

As is known to all, three principles and five virtues in China's Confucian thinking are so deeply rooted in the hearts of the people that, for a long time, the status of Chinese women was in a low position. The wife's name should be covered with her husband's surname. Gender constrains women from having their own surnames, even if they had a title or first name, which clearly indicates that their dependence on male society at that time. Names such as “邹七嫂” are made up of the husband's family name and rank and age-related figures (Li, 2004). In the former times, the woman obeyed her father when she was young, then obeyed her husband after she married, and if her husband died, she had to obey her son. Therefore, her whole life was in a subordinate position, having no independent personality and dignity, which depicts vividly the gender difference of the feudal hierarchy. For this reason, Lu Xun chose to write the articles as a wake-up call for numb and ignorant people. Compared with the brief treatment in Yang's translation, Lyell's translation reflects more deeply the class consciousness in the terms of the names in the feudal society of China at that time. And this translation also meets Nida's requirements for the cultural meaning transmission in lexical equivalence.

Example 2:

Original text: 只有假洋鬼子能够叉“麻酱”，城里却连小乌龟子都叉得精熟的。

Yang's version: Only the Bogus Foreign Devil could play mahjong, but in town even the street urchins excelled at mahjong.

Lyell's version: Here only the Fake Foreign Devil knew how to play Ma John, but in town every little shitkicker on the block knew it up one side and down the other.

“叉” above is an example of using the dialect of Shaoxing. What’s more, the term “麻酱” in this case is actually the misuse of rhetoric, aiming to show that, although Ah Q had seen a novelty in the city, he could not correctly write the word “mahjong”, because of the low degree of education, which is highly ironic and humorous. The common collocation is “play mahjong”. However, “叉麻酱” seems to be somewhat puzzling, but actually a phrase in the local dialect, and “叉” and “搓” are homophones. Therefore, this is a very reasonable writing.

This phenomenon is not unique. In literary works, writers often use dialects to make the plots realistic and characters full of vitality, which also plays a very important role in Lu Xun’s realistic novels. Ke (2005) mentioned in her article that one of the literary functions of dialects is the restoration of the context. The development of any literature is realized in a certain context, especially for the cultural context. The real context is the prerequisite for the real literature. Furthermore, using dialects can achieve the purpose of exposing cultural and social problems in a particular context. As a native of Shaoxing, Lu Xun also used the local dialect in his works.

Analyzing the translation, it can be seen that Yang translated into “play mahjong”, making the pun become non-pun and only translating the hidden meaning of “mahjong” but losing the surface meaning of “麻酱”. Because there is no annotation, readers do not know that this part is a pun, which greatly weakens the ingenuity of choosing words and using rhetoric. On the other hand, Lyell’s translation is “play Ma John”. Although readers of original texts can understand the author’s intention, the translation readers may not have the same perception. For such classical Chinese pun, Wang (2010) suggested that translators should consult relevant experts of the dialects used in the works to ensure the quality of dialect translation.

In Terms of Syntax

The three basic elements of a novel are character, plot, and environment, and most characters are shaped through dialogues. Characters’ dialogues are important parts of a novel, which reflects the personality, status, and behaviors of characters. Additionally, dialogues also contribute to the promotion of the plot of the story.

Example 3:

Original text:

老尼姑：“阿弥陀佛，阿Q，你怎么跳进园里来偷萝卜！”

阿Q：“我什么时候跳进你的园里来偷萝卜？”

Yang’s version:

Old nun: “May Buddha preserve us, Ah Q! How dare you climb into our garden to steal turnips!”

Ah Q: “When did I ever climb into your garden and steal turnips?”

Lyell’s version:

Old nun: “Buddha preserve us, what do you think you’re doing climbing into our garden to steal turnips, Ah Q?”

Ah Q: “When did I ever climb into your garden to steal turnips?”

The background of the dialogue in Example 3 is that Ah Q, who was very poor and hungry, jumped into a nunnery to steal turnips to eat, and was discovered by an old nun. In Yang’s translation version, he uses “How dare you” when translating the old nun’s questioning of Ah Q, which can dimly express the anger of the old nun at that time. The exclamatory sentence can better highlight the blunt tone of her questioning of Ah Q.

However, the long expression sentence used in Lyell's translation version is not so suitable to the mood of the character at that time.

Example 4:

Original text:

小尼姑: “你怎么动手动脚……”

阿Q: “和尚动得, 我动不得?”

小尼姑: “这断子绝孙的阿Q!”

Yang's version:

Little nun: “Who are you pawing?”

Ah Q: “If the monk paws you, why can't I?”

Little nun: “Ah Q, may you die sonless!”

Lyell's version:

Little nun: “What's gotten into you?”

Ah Q: “If the monk can fondle you, then why can't I?”

Little nun: “May you never have a son, Ah Q!”

This dialogue happened when Ah Q tried to find a job to make a living. But he failed many times and felt very unhappy. Later he encountered a little nun, and flirted with her out of hatred and mischief. The comparison between Yang's version and Lyell's version shows that the former is shorter and more direct than the latter in terms of sentence structure. Yang uses a rhetorical question “Who are you pawing” to show little nun's anger and grievance when flirted. Then the harsh curse “die sonless” makes readers feel her great discontentment for Ah Q's such bullying behavior, and highlights Ah Q's imperiousness. Through such plots and dialogues, it is understandable for readers to feel his misery.

Through the above two examples, we can find that the style of Yang's version corresponds to the conversational features of the original text, which is basically colloquial. Therefore, translators should appropriately adopt a type of short, small words, and a style of strong rhythm, in line with the requirements of the functional equivalence theory.

In Terms of Discourse

In the translation of literary works, the most important thing is to grasp and unify the style and meaning of the full text, which requires the translator to first read through the original text, understand the style of the text and the outline of its content, and properly reflect the meaning and function of the language. This paper examines the textual equivalence of the two versions by using some examples.

Example 5:

Original text: 他付过地保二百文酒钱, 愤愤的躺下了。

Yang's version: After paying the bailiff two hundred cash he lay down angrily.

Lyell's version: That day, after he had greased the sheriffs palm to the tune of two hundred coppers, Ah Q went home and lay down fuming with anger.

As is shown in the above example, Lyell uses two idioms “greased the sheriffs palm” and “to the tune of”, which are appropriate expressions for readers of the target language. “Grease sb's palm” is an old western idiom, meaning “to commit bribery”, and “to the tune of” is often used to emphasize that the total amount is huge. In the context, this money was paid by Ah Q to bailiff for his claim for having a kinship with Old Master

Zhao, but for poor Ah Q, this amount of money is indeed a large sum. Lyell uses these idioms, suggesting that the author's implicit meaning in the discourse. Compared with Yang's version, Lyell's version can enable more western readers to accept and understand.

Example 6:

Original text: 阿Q从此不准踏进赵府的门槛。

Yang's version: Ah Q must never again set foot in the Zhao household.

Lyell's version: Henceforth Ah Q was never to darken the Zhao family's door again.

In Example 6, "never darken one's door again" is also an old western idiom, which conforms to the historical background of the story—Chinese Old Times. It can be said that the translator kills two birds with one stone, and such an expression is more familiar to western readers.

To sum up, the process of translation is not simply the conversion of the surface meaning, but the cross-cultural language communication, which also puts forward higher requirements for translators. They should pay more attention to the accumulation of knowledge of different cultural backgrounds and avoid divorcing themselves from reality and acting blindly.

Conclusions

From the perspective of Nida's theory of functional equivalence, this paper analyzes specific examples of two English translation versions of *The True Story of Ah Q* from three levels: words, syntax, and discourse. Through the above analyses, it can be seen that it is not easy for translators to do a good job in the field of translation. The author is the originator of the work, but translators endow the work with a second new life through their own understandings of the work, and make more people feel the cultural charm of it. However, there is a long way ahead to go for translators. Just as Zhu and Tang (2015) said, it is not easy for Chinese literature to go global, nor is it possible to eliminate western readers' prejudice against Chinese literature and culture in a short period of time. Admittedly, people need to objectively realize that the present reality is not very optimistic, but this does not prevent them from looking to the future.

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