

The Translation Strategies of Chinese Reduplicated Words From a Skopos Theory Perspective

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This paper explores the translation strategies for Chinese reduplication to English from the perspective of Skopos theory. Drawing on previous research on the semantic functions of reduplication, the paper analyzes the three main types of semantic changes in Chinese reduplicated words: intensification of meaning, moderation of meaning, and addition of meaning. The paper then proposes different translation strategies for Chinese reduplication, including same-word repetition, near-synonym repetition, “have a try” form, “noun(pl.) + of” form, and “all”, “each”, and “every” pattern. Finally, the paper emphasizes the importance of understanding the intended communicative function of the reduplicated words and the need for flexible handling in order to achieve a natural translation with better readability.

Keywords: reduplicated words, Skopos theory, C-E translation

Introduction

Since the end of the 20th century, Chinese scholars have conducted research on word reduplication, from the definition of reduplication in English and Chinese, to typological analysis and cognitive grammar analysis. The theoretical research on Chinese reduplication has been continuously refined and improved. Despite numerous studies citing examples of reduplication translation between English and Chinese, there is still a dearth of research on actual reduplication translation. Translation strategies for Chinese reduplication to English typically rely on formal correspondence. However, such cases are infrequent and challenging to locate. The translation of most Chinese reduplication is accomplished through a meaning-based approach. Skopos theory is an essential and practical translation theory that has been valued by the academic community since the 1970s. Regrettably, few scholars have applied it to the study of Chinese reduplication translation. Drawing on previous research on the semantic functions of reduplication, this paper analyzes the translation strategies for Chinese reduplication to English from the perspective of Skopos theory. Its goal is to demonstrate the guiding significance of Skopos theory for reduplication translation.

Reduplicated Words and Skopos Theory

The functional translation theory originated in the late 1970s guided by Skopos theory, it advocates for the centrality of text and translation function. Skopos theory gives focus on the function of translated text in target situation and culture. It attempts to coordinate the cultural function of translation and the influence of target

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culture on translation (Duan, 2000). This perspective shifted the focus of translation research from linguistics and form-based theories to those that placed greater emphasis on function and sociocultural factors. At the heart of the functional translation theory is the belief that translators should base their translations on the responses of both the target text and its intended audience, rather than on the reactions of the source text and its readers, as prescribed by traditional theories.

In Chinese, the use of reduplication is pervasive and purposeful (Long, 2007). However, most Chinese reduplicated words lack corresponding counterparts in English, especially in the current highly digitalized age, where the translation of new words on the Internet requires a greater focus on target audiences. Therefore, the translation of reduplicated words should not be solely based on their surface forms, but rather should consider their intended communicative functions to achieve more natural and lively translations with better readability.

The Function of Chinese Reduplicated Words

Chinese reduplicated words are commonly used and in vast numbers. The function of Chinese reduplicated words lies in emphasizing certain ideas, emotions, adding rhythm, and enhancing phonetic beauty by repeating words (Chen, 1998, p. 107). The English language, however, has fewer reduplicated words, which are “formed mainly through the substitution of vowels or consonants” (Yang, 1998, p. 151). Zhou Dubao (1999) summarized three types of semantic changes in Chinese reduplicated words: intensification of meaning, moderation of meaning, and addition of meaning. Later, scholars further classified the semantic evolution of reduplicated words in more detail, such as Lei Lei (2008), who divided the semantic changes into five categories: semantic weakening, strengthening, elevation, devaluation, and addition. However, elevation and devaluation can both be considered as intensification of meaning. Additionally, forms such as “AABC (津津有味)”, “ABCC (衣冠楚楚)”, “ABAC (难舍难分)”, “ABCB (一动不动)”, “ABCA (为所欲为)”, and “ABBC (自欺欺人)” are more focused on the grammatical level of word formation, and their semantic functions are not particularly apparent. In light of Skopos theory, achieving the semantic function of reduplicated words in translation is paramount, and their grammatical function is of secondary importance. This paper focuses on the following three semantic functions of reduplicated words for research:

Intensification of meaning: Reduplication is commonly used to strengthen the degree of adjectives, adverbs, and verbs, with various forms, such as “AA”, “ABB”, “AABB”, “ABAB”, and “A里AB”, such as “匆匆”, “亮堂堂”, “完完全全”, “黝黑黝黑”, and “啰里啰唆”.

Moderation of meaning: Reduplication of verbs is commonly used to soften the tone and convey a sense of politeness. It usually takes the forms of “AA”, “A—A”, “AAB”, and “ABAB”, such as “谈谈”, “聊一聊”, “洗洗手”, “沟通沟通”, and “考虑考虑”.

Addition of meaning: Reduplication of nouns, numerals, and quantifiers often indicates universal reference, with forms such as “AA” and “—AA”, such as “人人”, “日日”, and “一个个”.

An Analysis of Reduplication Translation Strategies From the Perspective of Skopos Theory

Compared to Chinese, the number of reduplicated words in English is significantly fewer, and the corresponding reduplicated words between the two languages are even scarcer. Therefore, blindly pursuing the

repetition of form in English translation of reduplicated words is not a feasible option. In most cases, it is necessary to abandon the form of repetition and use a more closely related translation that is natural to convey the original meaning and reflect the semantic changes of the reduplicated words (Zhou, 1999). The functional translation theory can provide a solid guiding foundation for the translation of reduplicated words. Zhou proposed nine methods for translating reduplicated words early on, which analyzed the common translation situations of reduplicated words from the perspective of their functions, but his analysis was not comprehensive. Long Jianghua was one of the first scholars to study the translation of reduplicated words from a purpose-oriented approach. Using Zhang Peiji's book *Selected Modern Chinese Essays 1* as an example, Long (2007) first demonstrated the purposeful nature of using reduplicated words in the essay *Transient Days* and then analyzed the functions of the reduplicated words based on different contexts to make appropriate translations. Long also summarized and explored the characteristics of translating reduplicated words in Chinese and emphasized the need for flexibility in reduplicated word translation. Furthermore, he proposed that some reduplicated words in Chinese can be translated with the strategy of non-translation.

Based on Skopos theory, the following strategies for translating reduplicated words in English are proposed and discussed:

Same-Word Repetition

Same-word repetition refers to translating Chinese reduplicated words using multiple repetitions of the same English word. This technique is primarily used in the translation of poetry to reflect the phonetic beauty of the original text. For example:

ST: 庭院深深深几许，杨柳堆烟，帘幕无重数。（欧阳修《蝶恋花》）

TT: Deep, deep, the courtyard where he is, so deep. It's veiled by smoke like willows heap on heap, by curtain on curtain and screen on screen. (Translated by Xu Yuanchong)

If the reduplicated word “深深” is removed and replaced with “庭院深，深几许”，the original meaning would not change. In this context, the reduplication of “深深” serves to strengthen the intended meaning and fulfill the aesthetic requirements of poetry. When translating, the translator must first understand the intended meaning of the original text, which emphasizes the depth of the courtyard, and then consider the structural issues. The translator achieves the desired emphasis by repeating the word “deep” twice, reminiscent of Dylan Thomas's poem “Rage, rage against the dying of the light”, which conforms to the language habits of English readers and effectively conveys the meaning of “deep”. Although there are no reduplicated words in the last two sentences of the original text, the translated version repeats the word “heap” in “heap on heap”, “curtain” in “curtain on curtain”, and “screen” in “screen on screen”. This not only expresses the meaning of “堆” and “重” in the original text but also echoes the previous repetition of “deep”, thereby accentuating the depth of the courtyard and providing a perfect interpretation of the grammatical function. The repetition of the same word in this example is not only limited to reduplication, but also extends to the repetition of the entire sentence, which maintains the semantic function of reduplication while also expressing the grammatical function, demonstrating how the translator closely follows the intended meaning of the original text to achieve the desired effect of intensifying the meaning.

Another example:

ST: 无边落木萧萧下，不尽长江滚滚来。（杜甫《登高》）

TT: The boundless forest sheds its leaves shower by shower, the endless river rolls its waves hour after hour.

(Translated by Xu Yuanchong)

In this example, the reduplicated word “萧萧” is used to emphasize the scene of the falling leaves fluttering down. The translation achieves the same effect by using the same-word repetition of “shower”, vividly depicting the scene and emphasizing the abundance of fallen leaves. In the second half of the sentence, “滚滚” corresponds to “roll”, and the phrase “hour after hour” is more in line with the meaning of “不尽” in the original text. This reflects the translator’s approach of not pursuing word-for-word correspondence, but aiming to accurately convey the image.

This example shows us that the English translation of reduplicated words does not necessarily have to correspond to Chinese reduplicated words, but rather the function of the reduplicated word should be analyzed first, and then expressed in English. This is also the result of a functional approach.

In addition, same-word repetition can also be used to add meaning, such as translating “一天天” as “day by day” or “day after day”. The same-word repetition strategy is common and effective in poetry translation, while in many other types of text, there may be more suitable expressions to choose from.

Near-Synonym Repetition

Near-synonym repetition refers to the use of multiple English words with similar meanings to translate Chinese reduplication, which serves to intensify the semantic function of the reduplicated word. For example:

ST: 房间干干净净。

TT: The room is clean and neat.

ST: 他确确实实天赋异禀。

TT: He surely and certainly has a talent.

In these examples, the use of “clean and neat” and “surely and certainly” intensifies the meaning of the sentences and achieves a certain degree of formal correspondence. This form of synonymous repetition conforms to the reading habits of English readers. In addition to the examples presented in the sample sentences, English also employs reduplication of pronouns, such as “each and every” and “everybody and anybody”; prepositions, such as “over and above” and “round and about”; and nouns, such as “pairs and couples”. Near-synonym repetition can also create a more expressive effect through head or tail rhyme, but this poses a significant challenge to the translator’s wording ability. When translating reduplication, the translator can use creative synonymous repetition appropriately based on the context to achieve the goal of intensifying meaning.

“Have a Try” Form

This method involves the use of the structure “verb + ‘a’ + noun”, which is frequently used in English. In the context of translating Chinese reduplicated words, the “have a try” form is primarily employed to soften the tone of the sentence. For example:

ST: 你应该考虑考虑。

TT: You should give it a thought.

ST: 吃饭前先洗洗手。

TT: Give your hands a wash before the meal.

The reduplicated words in the original sentences serve to soften the tone and reduce the urgency of the message. To achieve this effect in translation, the “have a try” form is used to mitigate the command and express the suggestion more tactfully. Other similar phrases include “take a rest” and “have a taste”. This approach focuses on conveying the meaning of the original text while disregarding the reduplicated form, which reflects the translator’s decision to prioritize the meaning over form.

“Noun(pl.) + of” Form

This method is commonly employed in the translation of Chinese reduplicated words with classifiers, whereby the translator utilizes the plural form of the noun followed by “of” to convey the addition of meaning. For example:

ST: 一阵阵风刮过我的脸颊。

TT: Gusts of wind blew against my cheek.

ST: 一群群的人涌进医院。

TT: Crowds of people poured into the hospital.

In these examples, the reduplicated words in Chinese are used to express a repeated action or state. To convey the same meaning in English, the translator uses the plural form of the noun followed by “of” to convey the sense of multiple instances or entities. This approach is particularly useful when translating reduplicated words that involve a quantifier or classifier, as it ensures accuracy and clarity in conveying the intended meaning. Also, no repetition form is reflected in the translation, for the function of the original text is realized by a regular English expression but not rigid formal corresponding.

“All”, “Each”, and “Every” Pattern

In order to express the concept of universality conveyed by Chinese reduplication, translators often use words such as “all”, “each”, and “every” in English. For example:

ST: 保护环境，人人有责。

TT: It’s everyone’s duty to protect the environment.

ST: 过街老鼠，人人喊打。

TT: A rat crossing the street is chased by all.

In these two examples, the repetition of words in the original Chinese sentences adds the meaning and implies everyone or each individual. The first sentence is a common slogan aimed at raising environmental awareness among citizens. Therefore, the translator used “everyone” to emphasize the original text’s appeal to individuals. In the second sentence, “人人” is translated as “all” to highlight the collective meaning. Therefore, when translating similar repetitions, the translator needs to consider whether the sentence emphasizes the concept of the whole or individual, and then choose the appropriate word for comprehensive or individual reference.

Flexible Handling

The strategies for translating Chinese reduplicated words into English mentioned above cover many cases, but more often than not, a specific analysis is required to flexibly handle the translation in a purpose-driven manner. A comparison of the following translations illustrates this point:

ST: 寻寻觅觅，冷冷清清，凄凄惨惨戚戚。(李清照《声声慢》)

TT1: So dim, so dark, so dense, so dull, so damp, so dank, so dead. (Translated by Lin Yutang)

TT2: I look for what I miss, I know not what it is. I feel so sad, so drear, so lonely, without cheer. (Translated by Xu Yuanchong)

Lin Yutang's translation skillfully employs seven alliterative adjectives, which correspond well to the original's repetition and convey a sense of desolation, sadness, and loneliness. However, the translation falls short in not rendering the motion of “寻寻觅觅” and only describes the atmosphere, creating a vague sense that may hinder English readers' comprehension. In contrast, Xu Yuanchong's translation, while not bound by the constraints of the original's reduplication, conveys the emotion and imagery of the original through a first-person perspective, taking into account the reading habits of the English-speaking audience. From the perspective of Skopos theory, Xu's version considers the English audience's understanding of the text, while Lin's version is more aesthetically appealing to Chinese scholars of English language.

Another manifestation of flexible translation is the flexible use of corresponding expressions or grammatical structures in English based on the context. As reduplicated words in Chinese often serve to intensify meaning, certain structures in English that express emphasis are suitable for translating them. For instance, “这完完全全不可能” can be translated as “It's **not possible at all**”, “It's **out of the question**”, “It's **absolutely impossible**”, and so on. “大街上空空荡荡” can be translated as “**Not a single** person could be seen on the street”, while “The street is empty” lacks the emphasis and fails to convey the intensifying effect of reduplication. “我真真切切希望你能回来” can be translated using the emphatic “do” construction as “**I do** wish you could come back”, which is more vivid than using words like “genuinely” or “sincerely”. “房间里暖暖的” can be translated using the “nice/good and” emphasis construction as “The room is **nice and** warm”. “他把酒喝得干干净净” can be translated as “He drank the wine **to the very last drop**”. Similar words that express emphasis include “only”, “even”, “too”, “just”, and so on. If the translator can think of corresponding emphatic expressions while translating reduplicated words for intensification, the expressiveness of the translation will be greatly enhanced.

Some reduplicated words may not need to be translated, as in the sentence “就是如今，上上下下的还有许多人那里坐木船，如果统计起来，人数该比坐轮船飞机的多”，which can be translated as “Even today, many continue to do so, and statistics will invariably show a higher percentage of people traveling by wooden boat than by steamer or aircraft”. If the reduplicated phrase “上上下下” is removed, the overall meaning of the sentence remains largely unchanged. In this case, “上上下下” serves more to provide a rhythmic effect, and non-translation can be applied to omit it.

Conclusion

Skopos theory advocates that the translator should prioritize the purpose of the target text over the form of the source text. This paper has discussed the translation of Chinese reduplicated words into English from the perspective of Skopos theory, analyzing common strategies of translating Chinese reduplicated words. When translating reduplicated words, the translator must accurately identify the semantic functions of the reduplication and analyze the context to select an appropriate translation strategy and flexibly handle the translation. At the same time, the translator should pay attention to the target audience's reading habits and make necessary adaptations to ensure a smooth and natural translation.

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