

Translating Euphemisms: Analyzing Functional Equivalence Theory in Context

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Euphemism, as a linguistic and cultural phenomenon, plays a significant role in literary translation, embodying the subtleties and complexities of cultural nuances. The translation of literary works, especially those rich in cultural expressions like *A Dream of Red Mansions*, presents unique challenges and opportunities for exploring linguistic adaptation and fidelity. This study examines euphemism translation in Yang Xianyi's rendition of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, employing functional equivalence theory to assess its application and challenges in literary contexts. By analyzing the application of functional equivalence in this context, the study aims to shed light on the broader implications and challenges of translating euphemisms in literary works, providing insights into the balance between literal accuracy and functional appropriateness in translation practice. The findings indicate that within the framework of functional equivalence theory, translating euphemism requires delicately balancing the preservation of the original meaning with considerations of the linguistic and cultural context of the target language, thereby presenting certain challenges and complexities.

Keywords: euphemism, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, functional equivalence theory, translation

Introduction

Euphemism, as a widespread phenomenon in language expression, is often used to delicately and implicitly address sensitive, awkward, or private topics. Chen Wangdao (2008, p. 109) pointed out that euphemism means “when encountering sensitive or offensive areas in speech, one does not express the direct meaning, but uses indirect and subtle words to convey implications”. Such kind of rhetorical technique is widely employed in literary works, especially in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, a masterpiece of Chinese classical literature.

Given the differences between Chinese and foreign cultures, accurate expression of euphemism in translation is crucial for conveying the true essence of the original work and spreading traditional Chinese culture. This is not merely a linguistic conversion but also a bond for cultural exchange. Studying euphemisms in Yang's translation helps to understand the literary significance of euphemism in the original work, promoting communication and understanding between different cultures. Importantly, English translations of Chinese classical masterpieces contribute to the promotion of Chinese culture internationally.

Furthermore, functional equivalence theory emphasizes the preservation of the function and intention of the original text in translation, rather than simple word-for-word conversion. For the translation of euphemisms, it is

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especially important to maintain the expression of delicacy while aligning with the cultural norms and context of the target language as closely as possible to ensure the readability of the translated work. This theoretical perspective provides a paradigm for research, breaking the limitations of literal translation and offering new ideas and methods for better preserving the expression of euphemisms in translations.

In sum, utilizing Yang Xianyi's translation of *A Dream of Red Mansions* as a case study, research on euphemism translation from the perspective of functional equivalence theory possesses substantial theoretical and practical significance. Through the in-depth discussion of euphemism translation, it can promote cultural exchange, enrich translation theory, and provide guidance and reference for future translation practice, and promote the development and progress of the translation field.

Theoretical Overview

Basic Concepts of Functional Equivalence Theory Translation

Eugene A. Nida, a renowned American linguist, translator, and translation theorist, is widely acknowledged for his substantial impact on the field of Bible translation, leading to his recognition as the “father of modern translation theory”. Through his lifelong dedication to studying translation theory and his vast practical experience in Bible translation, he developed the theory of “functional equivalence”, solidifying his position as a pivotal figure in contemporary translation theory.

Nida's translation theory underwent several stages of development. Initially, in 1964, he introduced the theory of “dynamic equivalence”, emphasizing the preservation of information accuracy and natural fluency in translation to render the translation closer to the original text. However, this concept was prone to misinterpretation. Later, inspired by the ideas of linguist Noam Chomsky, Nida supplemented his theory in his work *From One Language to Another* in 1986, introducing the concept of “functional equivalence”. This concept underscores the equivalence between translations and original texts across various functional aspects of language, rather than merely linguistic forms. Nida classified language functions into nine categories, encompassing expression, cognition, interpersonal relations, information transmission, imperative, action, emotion, aesthetics, and self-explanation (C. Y. Li & Y. L. Li, 2019, p. 135). He emphasized that the translation should match the original text in these aspects, with the equivalence standards determined by the readers' responses.

According to Nida (1999), “dynamic or functional equivalence takes precedence over formal correspondence; translation should be viewed from the perspective of the reader, not the form of the translation”. Nida emphasizes the naturalness of translations, advocating that they should not be excessively bound by the linguistic structure of the original text. Instead, translations should adhere to the expression patterns of the target language while maintaining accuracy, enabling readers to perceive naturalness rather than traces of translation. This theory has also effectively guided the translation of *The Bible*.

Of course, Nida's contributions extend beyond the field of translation. His theoretical framework also encompasses cultural and societal domains. Nida (2000) emphasized the importance of culture in the translation process, arguing that achieving functional equivalence in translation requires considering the differences and modes of communication between different cultures. His views expanded the concept of translation beyond the linguistic level, making it a bridge for communication and understanding between cultures.

Professor Yang Xianyi's translation of *A Dream of Red Mansions* serves as a prime example of the significance of cultural considerations underscored by Nida in functional equivalence translation. In Yang's rendition, he not only endeavours to preserve the original stylistic nuances, but also seamlessly integrates cultural

elements into expressions more accessible and relatable to English readers. Consequently, Yang's approach to translating *A Dream of Red Mansions* epitomizes the practical application of Nida's theory in navigating euphemisms and cultural intricacies. This successful cross-cultural translation not only reinforces the principles of functional equivalence, but also imparts invaluable insights and guidance for literary translation endeavours worldwide.

Nida's theory of functional equivalence presents a fresh perspective and method for translation research, with profound influence, becoming one of the important milestones in modern translation theory. His ideas continue to inspire researchers to ponder over language and cultural exchange, offering valuable experience and guidance for translation theory and practice, and exerting a significant impact on advancing translation work globally.

Basic Concepts of Euphemism

Euphemism, also known as “euphony” and “taboo avoidance” (Lu, 2011, p. 138), is commonly employed in everyday communication with gentle, refined, and non-stimulating language to help alleviate tension in conversation and avoid triggering unpleasant emotions (Zhai, 2020, p. 110).

Euphemism permeates various aspects of life, including behavioural norms, social culture, moral standards, and values. More importantly, it serves as a vital means of maintaining social and interpersonal relationships in language communication (Cai, 2005, p. 74). There are several reasons for its prevalence. Firstly, euphemism serves to avoid taboo topics. Across cultures and throughout history, people have instinctively shied away from discussing unpleasant subjects, such as life, death, and illness. Secondly, the pursuit of refinement and the avoidance of vulgarity have long been entrenched in human behaviour. Euphemisms, therefore, play a pivotal role in delicately addressing topics considered indecent or private. Additionally, the use of euphemism reflects respect. China has long been known as a “nation of etiquette”, and the promotion of etiquette has been a traditional virtue. The use of euphemisms can achieve the purposes of politeness and discretion. Finally, when it comes to sensitive issues such as politics, the modifying function of euphemisms can effectively embellish the facts and reduce conflict (Zhai, 2020, p. 110).

When translating euphemisms, translators need to adhere to the principle of functional equivalence to ensure that readers of the translated text can understand the original meaning and perceive the euphemistic and implicit nature conveyed in the original text.

Case Analysis

A Dream of Red Mansions, also known as *The Story of the Stone*, is hailed as the “encyclopedia of feudal Chinese society” (Zhang, 2023, p. 14). From this perspective, it covers various aspects, such as society, human nature, ethics, kinship, court politics, and cultural traditions. Euphemism, as a prominent feature in this literary masterpiece, permeates across these domains. Below are a few classic examples for analysis.

Death

Example 1

Original text: 莫谓缟仙能羽化。（第37回）

Yang's translation: Do not fly from me, chaste goddess.

Analysis: The quote is from a seven-character poem titled “In Praise of White Crabapple Blossoms” by Jia Tanchun. In the original text, the term “羽化” carries strong Taoist connotations, referring to Taoist believers

achieving transcendence from the cycle of life and death through cultivation and attaining the realm of immortality. This concept is deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture and differs significantly from the beliefs of Western Christianity. Yang Xianyi translates “羽化” as “goddess”, transforming this Taoist concept into the concept of a goddess in Western culture, which is more familiar to Western readers. Although not a literal translation, it retains the original term’s meaning in Taoism while satisfying the principle of lexical equivalence in functional equivalence theory. This translation method cleverly preserves the original poem’s imagery and effectively helps Western readers better understand the cultural connotations embedded within it.

Example 2

Original text: 尤氏道: “我也暗暗叫人预备了。就是那件东西不得好木头, 且慢慢地办着呢。” (第11回)

Yang’s translation: “I’ve had them secretly prepared. But I can’t get any good wood for you know what, so I’ve let that go for the time being,” said Madam You.

Analysis: In the original text, Mrs. Qin was already at death’s door, and Mrs. You’s reference to “那件东西” (that thing) actually alluded to a coffin. This euphemistic expression was employed to avoid discussing taboo topics, such as death or burial. Yang’s translation also reflects the characteristics of euphemistic language. In the translation, “You know what” is used to refer to “那件东西” (that thing), obscuring the specific object and deliberately avoiding the direct mention of a “coffin”, which is understood implicitly by both parties. While this translation might seem somewhat ambiguous on the surface, within the English context, it aptly retains the delicacy of the original text, steering clear of directly addressing taboo subjects like death.

Therefore, this lexical substitution, while not a direct textual correspondence, aligns with the emphasis on equivalence of meaning and function in the theory of functional equivalence. At the same time, this ambiguity allows for readers to engage in endless imagination, sparking their contemplation and speculation, thus serving an implicit suggestive function.

Disease

Example 3

Original text: 贾芸笑道: “总是我没福, 偏偏又遇着叔叔身上欠安。叔叔如今可大安了?” (第26回)

Yang’s translation: “That was my misfortune,” replied Jia Yun with a smile. “And then you fell ill, uncle. Have you recovered completely?”

Analysis: The theory of functional equivalence aims to ensure that the translated text functions equivalently to the original. When dealing with euphemisms, translators may face challenges arising from cultural differences and linguistic expressions. In the original text, the term “欠安” implies the uncle’s illness without explicitly stating the specific ailment, demonstrating respect for the patient. However, the translation “fell ill” explicitly names the illness. This discrepancy stems from profound cultural differences between the East and the West, leading to starkly different reactions towards the topic of illness. Historically, Eastern cultures seem to have held a taboo against discussing illness or seeking medical treatment, while Western cultures do not share this view. Therefore, although the translation may seem too direct and lacking in respect, it actually aligns more closely with the thought patterns of the target readers. Within the framework of the principle of functional equivalence, translators need to skillfully adjust the expression to convey a meaning and emotion equivalent to that of the original text.

Sex

Example 4

Original text: 宝玉亦素喜袭人柔媚娇俏，遂强袭人同领警幻所训云雨之事。（第6回）

Yang's translation: Since Baoyu had long been attracted by his-jen's gentle, coquettish ways, he urged her to carry out the instructions with him.

Analysis: The term “云雨” originates from the poem “Gao Tang Fu” and is often used in later literature to metaphorically refer to “sexual intercourse” (Yang, 2014, p. 12). This phrase has its roots in Chinese cultural allusions, which may not be well-known to foreign readers. The original text employs a euphemistic and subtle expression to avoid directly stating specific emotions and behaviours. In Yang's translation, the phrase “urged her to carry out the instructions with him” obscures the true meaning of “云雨之事” in the original text. While this ambiguous approach preserves the subtlety and discretion of the original text, it may lead to varying degrees of misinterpretation among the target readers regarding its underlying implications. Given the varying levels of understanding and acceptance of sexuality and intimacy across different cultures, translators may opt for more ambiguous or neutral wording to ensure the acceptability and adaptability of the translated text.

Emotions

Example 5

Original text: 丫鬟回说：“南院马棚里走了水，不相干，已经救下去了。”

Yang's translation: A maid explained that a fire had broken out in the stables in the south court, but there was no danger as it was under control.

Analysis: In this example, the maid describes “马棚里走了水”, which actually refers to “The stables were on fire”. This euphemistic expression deliberately downplays the severity of the situation to avoid directly mentioning the danger and urgency of the fire. Disaster is a topic that everyone avoids discussing. In Yang's translation, the phrase “a fire had broken out” indicates the occurrence of a fire in the stables, while the subsequent statement “but there was no danger as it was under control” emphasizes that the situation is under control, thus avoiding evoking excessive panic or worry. This translation retains the euphemistic and taboo nature of the original while presenting the occurrence of the fire. It adheres to the principle of functional equivalence theory in terms of semantics and cultural connotations, demonstrating the translator's effort to achieve a similar effect to the original text.

Example 6

Original text: 夫妻无子，……，不过假充养子之意，聊解膝下荒凉之叹。（第2回）

Yang's translation: ..., ... to make up for their lack of a son and help them forget their loss.

Analysis: Although Lin Ruhai and his wife have a daughter, Lin Daiyu, in traditional Chinese beliefs at that time, daughters, while valued, were not considered as heirs to continue the family line. This preference for sons over daughters led to anxiety over “the husband and wife having no son”, particularly the sense of loss for not being able to continue the family bloodline. Yang employs a method of dynamic equivalence, translating it as “lack of a son and help them forget their loss”, expressing this sense of loss and regret. In contrast to the original text, the translated version may lack a bit of tactfulness, yet the intended readers can still readily understand its essence at a glance.

Conclusion

This study takes the perspective of functional equivalence theory to delve into the translation of euphemistic language in Yang's translation of *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Through analysis, it is observed that the peculiarity of euphemism complicates the process of achieving functional equivalence translation across different cultures. Additionally, a coexistence of deficient euphemistic coloring and a phenomenon of restoration is identified within the target language.

Literary translation has always served as a significant means of transcending linguistic and cultural barriers as it appeals to the human psyche, containing rich emotional elements (Liu, 2024, p. 7). Language is a symbol of culture. Similarly, euphemism, as a special language, also reflects specific cultures (Fang & Zhang, 2002, p. 62). Due to the differences between Eastern and Western cultures, there are variations in people's understanding and acceptance of euphemism, as well as differences in sensitive aspects and the degree of sensitivity. This may result in cross-cultural barriers, making the achievement of complete functional equivalence in translation a highly challenging task (Shao, 1997). However, Yang's translation largely reproduces the original's connotations and closely matches the target language's stylistic nuances. Yang, in pursuit of functional equivalence, adeptly handles literary features such as euphemism, making the translated works more readable and literary.

This study offers a detailed exploration into the translation of euphemisms from a functional equivalence perspective, as demonstrated through Yang Xianyi's approach to *A Dream of Red Mansions*. The findings underscore the complexity of translating cultural nuances and the critical role of translator choices in maintaining the integrity of the original text. The findings underscore the complexity of translating cultural nuances and the critical role of translator choices in maintaining the integrity of the original text. Future research should focus on developing more systematic methodologies for translating euphemisms. Such studies are essential for enhancing our understanding of cultural transmission and for refining techniques that ensure both the accuracy and the cultural resonance of translated texts.

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