

Research on Zhang Peiji's Chinese-English Translation Style Based on Consciousness of Limitation

JIAO Ziwei

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

Zhang Peiji is an outstanding translator in China and enjoys a significant position in the domestic translation field. His works cover a wide range of fields and show rich linguistic skills and unique translation style. This paper will firstly introduce Zhang Peiji's translation characteristics and the theory of limitation consciousness, which has attracted much attention in recent years, and then summarize the commentaries on his translations in the domestic academia. In addition, the paper elaborates cases selected based on limitation consciousness. Finally, the paper states the personal insights into Zhang Peiji's translation style, pointing out its influence on the translation academy and future research direction. The study of Zhang Peiji's translation style will help us better understand and appreciate his translations, and meanwhile provide useful reference for translation practice and theoretical research.

Keywords: Zhang Peiji, Chinese-English translation, translation practice, translation style, consciousness of limitation

Introduction

Zhang Peiji's translations comfortably integrate the advanced ideas derived from the May 4th Movement into the English translation of modern Chinese prose and promote it to the Western world, widely recognized by academia, marking an important milestone in the history of Chinese translation (Zhu, 2000). Most of the domestic scholars' criticism and appreciation of Zhang Peiji's translation style focus on vocabulary selection, syntactic structure, cultural transmission, etc. However, the exploration of limitation consciousness perspective is underestimated. In the process of Chinese-English translation, the comparison of limitation perspectives is ubiquitous. Most of Zhang's works are one-way Chinese-English translations, asking translators to follow more rigid rules than English-Chinese translators. This paper will focus on limitation consciousness to provide a novel viewpoint for the exploration of Zhang Peiji's English translation style.

Literature Review

Zhou (2008) pointed out three major reasons for the formation of Zhang's unique English translation style: first, accurate understanding: He pursued the thorough study of the connotative meaning of each sentence; second, fluent expression: His language gave people a strong sense of life, achieving unity of form and spirit; third, far-reaching aesthetic conception, i.e., the use of abstract nouns, which are highly generalized and transformed from adjectives in English, to express the general senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch, without being far-fetched.

JIAO Ziwei, Master in candidate, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

Wei (2006) argued for the static and dynamic transformation of Chinese and Western mindset in Zhang Peiji's translations: firstly, the transformation of object and human, i.e., the transformation of Chinese figurative thinking and English abstract thinking; secondly, the transformation of the traditional Chinese "subjective consciousness" and the Western "objective consciousness"; thirdly, it is the conversion of nouns, i.e., the conversion of static and dynamic narratives or part of components. He pointed out that the various translation techniques are all a matter of the ability to use language, determined by deeper factors of thinking patterns.

Zhang Peiji's English translation realizes main kinds of correlation methods (Zhang & Bao, 2009). Specifically, the translator firstly translates the surface language information directly to ensure that the target language readers can find the best contextual effect and the best correlation in the first time; secondly, when encountering the image and style of the original words and phrases that cannot be preserved, he or she appropriately gives up the surface word-form information and prioritizes the translation of communicative intent; finally, he or she considers the cognitive context and ability of the target readers and tries to find the functionally equivalent linguistic transmission expression as much as possible.

An Analysis Under the Perspective of Limitation Theory

English and its speakers have a stronger sense of boundedness or limitation than Chinese, while Chinese and its speakers have the opposite (Wang, 2023). Limitation consciousness is mainly reflected in the translator's professional awareness, ethical awareness, active research and lifelong learning of Chinese-English linguistic and cultural differences, and knowledge on the macro level, etc. On the micro level, limitation consciousness emphasizes the precise grasp of the meaning of words and phrases and their expression. It can be said that the consciousness of boundaries in the process of mutual conversion of two languages puts forward numerous requirements for translators.

Overall Consciousness and Individual Consciousness

Individual consciousness and overall consciousness exist as a set of relative concepts in both English and Chinese: The individual consciousness of Chinese, due to the unclear boundaries between various linguistic structures, does not show a strong sense of categorization and exclusivity as in English; the overall consciousness of Chinese, such as the unique primary and secondary awareness and hierarchical awareness in English, is relatively vague, because the more distinct subordinative construction of English is lacking in the Chinese language structure characterized by run-on sentences. The overall consciousness in Chinese is more inclined to the change of person.

Example 1:

父亲接下去说：“所以你们要像花生一样，它虽然不好看，可是很有用。”（许地山《落花生》）

“So you must take after peanuts,” Father continued, “because they're useful though not great and nice-looking.”

First of all, the singular form of the second person pronoun “它” in the original text is translated into the plural form of they, which is related to the stronger sense of the whole family of the native Chinese. Using English to express the overall consciousness in Chinese is a reflection of the translator's subjectivity, i.e., subjective initiative and cultural awareness, which makes the translation livelier.

Example 2:

到徐州见着父亲，看见满院狼藉的东西，又想起祖母，不禁簌簌地流下眼泪。（朱自清《背影》）

When I met father in Xuzhou, the sight of the disorderly mess in his courtyard and the thought of grandma started tears trickling down my cheeks.

This sentence is a typical Chinese run-on sentence, with small clause after clause, without correlatives or significant grammatical markers, making it difficult to distinguish between subject and subordinate. Firstly, “父亲” and “狼藉” are the two objects of “见” in the original sentence, which is the focal action, and then the writer touches the scene and “想” of “祖母”. The translation treats the run-on narrative sentence as a temporal clause “when”, which reflects the fact that English often takes the theme structure as the main body and the subordinate structure as the trunk when constructing a sentence, and the two rise one by one and finally merge together to obtain the potential energy; the use of conjunctions, pronouns (including the relational pronouns and relational adverbs), and other functional words with the function of dividing the syntactic structure is to mark the boundaries of the syntactic structure, which is helpful for the shaping of the analytical individual consciousness. Then, the Chinese verbs “看见” and “又想起” in the original text are treated as English nouns “sight” and “thought” because nouns can show strong limitation compared with verbs, which is the characteristic of English individual consciousness.

Plane Scattered Focus Consciousness and Stereo Focus Consciousness

There are great differences between Chinese and English in terms of aesthetic characteristics. Wang (2017) pointed out that Chinese people prefer a concise, clear, and regular aesthetic approach, and are accustomed to using a large number of short-form, run-on sentences constructed from multiple clauses and topic chains, i.e., a sense of flatness and a sense of scattered focus. It is advantageous to express rich content while maintaining formal regularity and reducing resistance during aesthetic movement. On the contrary, the English language has a clear sense of priority and gives every sentence a chance to form a focal point, which in turn creates a strong sense of three-dimensionality and focus.

Example 3:

我们过了江，进了车站。我买票，他忙着照看行李。（朱自清《背影》）

We entered the railway station after crossing the River. While I was at the booking office buying a ticket, father saw to my luggage.

The translation uses the conjunctions after and while to combine the clauses closely, enhancing the sense of three-dimensional space. In the first sentence, the two consecutive actions are “过了江” and “进了车站”, which are carried out in a logical order. The translation focuses on “entered the railway station” in the first sentence, followed by “after crossing the River”, which emphasizes the action “entered the station”. In the second sentence, the action emphasized is “他忙着照看行李”, so the translation is father saw to my luggage, highlighting my father's action.

Example 4:

早上我起来的时候，小屋里射进两三方斜斜的太阳。（朱自清《匆匆》）

When I get up in the morning, the slanting sun casts two or three squarish patches of light into my small room.

This translation first establishes a hierarchical structure by using when to lead a temporal clause. Subsequently, it replaces the subject and chooses “太阳” as the focal point, translating it as the slanting sun and placing it in front of it, presenting the object in a straightforward way, which reflects English's sense of three-dimensional focus. In addition, the word “小屋” does not explicitly refer to whose hut it is, but the translation adds the first-person possessive pronoun my in the context.

The above two translations fully demonstrate the stereo focus consciousness in English as well as the plane scattered consciousness in Chinese as interpreted in English, which is revealed through the subjective initiative of the translator. The flatness of the Chinese language makes the imagery in a literary work dynamically display the beauty of scattering like a scroll, with each element appearing flatly and continuously, giving people a unique aesthetic experience. The three-dimensionality of the English translation allows the imagery in the literary work to present the beauty of focus in a more hierarchical way. There is a clear limitation between the scene and the focal thing, which makes the dynamic beauty of the English language show through the three-dimensional set.

Subjective Consciousness and Objective Consciousness

Chinese pays more attention to subjective consciousness, while English pays more attention to objective consciousness. From the perspective of culture, subjective consciousness and objective consciousness in translation are closely related to traditional philosophy. Chinese people have always emphasized the spiritual dimension of “heart”. In terms of language expression, native Chinese speakers are highly involved in and integrate their subjective feelings and speculations, showing a strong subjective consciousness, and reducing precise descriptions consciously or unconsciously. Meanwhile, their thinking pattern does not distinguish between subject and object, and some words with subjective meanings are often used to articulate structures inside and outside the sentence. In contrast, Westerners place more emphasis on the “brain”, especially the part related to wisdom, which leads them to be more inclined to show a stronger sense of objectivity and pursue more precise and clear expressions in their language. In short, the core of traditional Chinese philosophy lies in thinking from the individual's own viewpoint, humanizing natural things or naturalizing human beings, and the limitation between subject and object is not clearly defined; while the Western tradition regards nature as the main object of cognition, i.e., it constructs an ontology and distinguishes between subject and object by exploring and conquering nature.

Example 5:

它的果实不像那好看的苹果、桃子、石榴，把它们的果实悬在枝上，鲜红嫩绿的颜色，令人一望而发生羡慕的心。（许地山《落花生》）

Unlike nice-looking apples, peaches and pomegranates, which hang their fruit on branches and win people's instant admiration with their brilliant colors.

This sentence is comparing peanuts with other nice-looking fruits, showing the peanuts' quality of not being vain and pursuing the ordinary. First of all, the phrase “令人一望而发生羡慕的心” shows a strong sense of subject matter in the original text, but it is not clear what the subject matter is. The translation adds people to explain the meaning of the original text, effectively avoiding “人” as the subject, shifting the perspective and reflecting the subject's consciousness. Secondly, the word “鲜红嫩绿” in the Chinese text is mixed with the sensory experience from a human perspective, emphasizing the subjective visual experience and vividness. Here, Zhang uses the adjective nice-looking to deal with this four-word phrase, omitting the subjective human experience and replacing it with an objective description, achieving the effect of strong object consciousness in English. However, the drawback is that this translation employs a longer non-finite qualifying clause beginning with which seems too formal and written.

Expansion Consciousness and Compression Consciousness

Expansion consciousness and compression consciousness refer to the conscious redundancy or refinement

of words according to the language in translation, and they are relative. In the process of Chinese-English translation, it is often difficult to find corresponding expressions for the superlatives, noun repetitions, and exaggerated rhetoric found everywhere in Chinese, which are redundant when compared with the realistic and objective style of language description in English. However, some scholars believe that this phenomenon also exists in English; for example, although words in the past tense are already used in a sentence, it is still necessary to add a temporal noun indicating the past, and one of them can be deleted. It follows that the so-called redundant elements are useful in the respective contexts of Chinese or English: Native English speakers' strong sense of syntactic rules and boundaries prompts them to use tense markers in their discourse; native Chinese speakers also employ superlatives, noun repetition, and hyperbolic rhetoric in order to articulate their chapters, and so on.

As for the concept of refinement, in Chinese, especially in Old Chinese, it is embodied in the economizing of false words, to a certain extent giving up precision. Comparatively, refinement in English is embodied in a great variety of derivatives, intransitive verbs, and words that can express both process and result.

Example 6:

我再三劝他不必去；他只说：“不要紧，他们去不好！”（朱自清《背影》）

I repeatedly tried to talk him out of it, but he only said, “Never mind! It won't do to trust guys like those hotel boys!”

The translation of this sentence adopts a deeper strategy of free translation. The word “他们” in the original sentence refers to the workers who do odd jobs in the hotel. Father had originally planned to ask “他们” to take “我” to the station, but on second thought he felt uneasy and preferred to go himself. The translation digs out the deeper reason: Father did not trust those people, which explains clearly the specific reasons for “去不好”. The redundancy of English is a way of clarifying the logic of the preceding and following sentences.

Example 7:

回家变卖典质，父亲还了亏空；借钱办了丧事。（朱自清《背影》）

After arriving home in Yangzhou, father paid off debts by selling of pawning things. He also borrowed money to meet the funeral expenses.

First of all, there are several consecutive actions in this sentence, in the following order: going home, selling, paying off debts, borrowing money, and organizing the funeral expenses. Among them, “回家” is the first to happen and is used as a gerund; “还钱” is paid back with the money gained from “变卖”, so the two actions are treated together, i.e., first by “变卖” the money, which is treated as a modal clause; the purpose of “借钱” is to “办丧事”, which is treated as a purpose clause. The use of pronominal markers can differentiate structures in discourse movement without generating extra weight-gaining potential energy, and it can also increase the adhesion between sentences, ensuring that various structures form a whole and gain potential energy as a whole. Additionally, the translation generally retains the process orientation of Chinese: On the one hand, the translator restores the process of “回”. On the other hand, the verb meet is used to reflect the process of paying the funeral expenses.

Therefore, redundancy and refinement are not absolute concepts, but are closely related to the characteristics of the language itself and the context. This requires the translator to make good use of the compression strategy in the process of Chinese-English translation to conceal or eliminate the “redundancy” in Chinese.

Conclusions

Through the analysis of Zhang's English translation of prose, it can be seen that as a good translator, the most important thing is to set up a cognitive method of translation:

First, deep understanding and respect for the original work. The task of a translator is not only the conversion of language, but also the transmission of culture. Zhang's translator's subjectivity is also interpreted between the lines, i.e., his reading and interpretation of any text is a creative activity with the translator's subjective initiative, so as to reshape and create the text, and deliver the spiritual connotation of the original text to readers at home and abroad in a complete way.

Second, he emphasizes on language refinement and expression. He is able to flexibly utilize various language translation techniques, such as direct translation, free translation, phonetic translation, etc., and is able to handle the differences between the Chinese and English boundaries properly, so that the translations are both accurate and fluent. At the same time, he pursues the accuracy and beauty of translations, and pays attention to the rhythm and rhyme of translations, making them more musical and vivid.

Third, unique translation style and aesthetic level. His translations have a strong personal style. He attaches importance to appropriate innovation in translation, which is faithful to the original text but also has his own unique insights, making the translation more in line with the reading habits and aesthetic needs of different readers. In addition, he pays much attention to the aesthetic effect of the translation, and seeks to convey the beauty of the original text to the readers completely.

To summarize, Zhang's translation style embodies the unique charm of the translator's subjectivity. The reason why his literary English translations can have a profound impact on the Chinese translation academy is precisely because of his full understanding of literary imagery and excellent analytical and expressive ability, as well as the strong sense of boundaries he has shown in his practice. A systematic understanding of the differences between multiple languages and cultures can lead to a specific approach to translation practice.

References

- Bai, H. (2016). Explore the aesthetic presentation of the two English versions of "Falling Peanuts". *Language Planning*, 61(6), 67-68.
- Han, Z. S., & Wang, J. (2004). Aesthetic quality and aesthetic experience in literary translation—A comment on the artistic achievement of the English translation of Zhang Peiji's *Back*. *Foreign Language Education*, 26(3), 61-64.
- Tan, L. X. (2003). Appreciation of Zhang Peiji's English version of "Transient Days". *Journal of Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics (Social Sciences Edition)*, 16(3), 58-61.
- Wang, J. G. (2016). Explaining Chinese and English thinking pattern differences based on the linguistic characteristics of modern Chinese and English. *Language Education*, 4(2), 37-43.
- Wang, J. G. (2017). A descriptive study of Chinese discourse featuring subjectivity with reference to Chinese-into-English translation. *Journal of Beijing International Studies University*, 39(1), 105-115+136.
- Wang, J. G. (2023). *C-E and E-C translation analyses: A perspective of contrastive language studies*. Beijing: China Translation & Publishing House.
- Wang, J. G., & He, Z. R. (2014). Process-oriented or result-oriented approach?—Influence of the translator's native language on his translated text of English. *Shanghai Journal of Translators*, 29(2), 7-12.
- Wei, Z. J. (2006). The switch from static to dynamic translation: The perspective from the way of thought patterns between east and west. *Shandong Foreign Language Teaching*, 27(6), 92-96.
- Wu, B. Y., & Wang, J. G. (2017). Differences between Chinese and English from the aesthetic perspective. *Journal of East China University of Science and Technology (Social Science Edition)*, 32(2), 98-106+116.

- Zhang, W. F., & Bao, G. (2009). A study on the English translation of Chinese idioms from the perspective of relevance theory: A case study of Zhang Peiji's *Selected Chinese modern prose in English translation*. *Journal of Nanjing Tech University (Social Science Edition)*, 8(4), 82-86.
- Zhou, X. L. (2008). Sad mood and meaningful charm—Appreciation of the translation of *Autumn in the old capital*. *Movie Literature*, 51(14), 100-101.
- Zhu, M. H. (2000). The new harvest of Chinese prose translation—Happy reading professor Zhang Peiji's *Selected modern Chinese prose in English translation*. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 22(3), 62-64.