A Contrastive Appreciation of Poetry Translation under the Theory of Functional Equivalence--A Case Study of Three English Versions of Yong Liu

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Abstract: Literary translation has always been an important and difficult point in translation, in which the translation of poems with more refined language and more beautiful artistic conception is more difficult. Chinese classical poetry is quite different from English poetry in content, format and the way of expressing emotion. Among them, the differences in image, rhythm and form in poetry are the most obvious. So whether translating classical Chinese poetry into English or translating English poetry into Chinese will reduce the charm of the original poetry. The translation theory of "dynamic equivalence" put forward by Eugene Nida shows that translation is not only lexical equivalence, but also semantic and stylistic equivalence. [1]In some ways, the theory of functional equivalence can guide the translation of poetry and provide some criteria. According to the theory of functional equivalence and the characteristics of Chinese and English poetry, the author makes an appreciation and comparison of the three English versions of Yong Liu.

Keywords: Functional Equivalence; Poem Translation; Yong Liu

1. Introduction

Chinese classical poetry has strict requirements on its structure, but English poetry has more relaxed requirements. The translator should try his best to meet the equivalence of the meaning and style of the poem. This is undoubtedly an arduous task. Therefore, in poetry translation, some guiding theories are needed to reduce the differences between the source language and the target language.

Translation conveys both surface lexical information and deep cultural information. This coincides with the translation requirements of poetry. Therefore, Nida's theory can be used as a translation criterion to reproduce the cultural connotation of the source language in the target language so as to achieve the maximum effect of equivalence.

2. Functional equivalence and poem translation

Nida uses linguistic theory to study translation, which makes translation practice more scientific and builds a more solid foundation for translation.[2] The theory of functional equivalence mainly includes three aspects: meaning, style and reader response.[3] Among them, on the basis of meaning and stylistic equivalence, it is emphasized that the response of the target readers to the translation is basically the same as that of the original readers to the source text.

In Chinese classical poetry, the so-called rhyme is to put the words of the same rhyme in the prescribed position. Rhyming can make the tone more harmonious to read. At the same time, Chinese classical poetry also pays more attention to the antithesis of structure, which requires the number of sentences and words in each line.

Even if English poetry is in fixed form, there is no rigid requirement for the number of words. Different from Chinese classical poetry, the rhythm of English poetry is shown by stressed syllables. The main ways of rhyming in English poetry are alliteration, assonance and end rhyme, which is similar to the level and oblique tone of Chinese classical poetry, but it is not very regular.

It can be seen that there are distinct differences in the expression of rhythm and structure between Chinese and English poetry. Then in order to convey the original feeling of poetry, translators can use the theory of functional equivalence to narrow the differences. The author will make an comparison of the equivalence of meaning, sound and form in the three English versions of Yong Liu.

3. Contrastive appreciation of the three English versions of Yong Liu

咏柳 （贺知章）

碧玉妆成一树高，万条垂下绿丝绦。

不知细叶谁裁出，二月春风似剪刀。

Version 1.　　　　　The Willow （许渊冲 译）

The slender beauty's dressed in emerald all about;

A thousand branches droop like fringes made of jade.

But do you know by whom these slim leaves are cut out?

The wind of early spring is sharp as scissor blade.

Version 2.　　　　　Ode to the Willow （沈菲 译）

Emerald decks out a tall tree,

Hung with myriad silk braids of green.

Who tailored the dainty leaves?

Oh, the February wind acts as scissors cutting.

Version 3.　　　　　Ode to the Willow （赵彦春 译）

The tree's dressed with emerald, high to low;

Ten thousand twigs sway down their silky sheen.

Who's tailored the leaves so thin, I don't know;

The second moon wind cuts like scissors keen.

He Zhizhang's Yong Liu is a four-line poem with seven characters per line about praising things. The first sentence uses metaphor and personification to depict the tall willow tree covered with green new leaves as if it was dressed up with jade. At the same time, the poet regarded the willow tree as a graceful beauty. The second sentence also uses metaphor to describe the countless wickers hanging down from the willow trees like green ribbons. The third sentence uses the way of setting questions to bring out the theme of spring. In the last sentence, the answer to this question is that it is the spring wind. There are 13 English versions of the poem Yong Liu. This paper selects the versions of Xu Yuanchong, Shen Fei and Zhao Yanchun, and makes a comparative analysis from the perspective of functional equivalence theory.

3.1 The equivalence of meaning

On the whole, each translation can convey the general meaning of the original poem, but there are differences in the use of some words. Next, the author will start with some details to compare the equivalent effect of meaning in each version.

First of all, the three masters show differences in the translation of the title. The word "咏" in the title means praise. Professor Xu Yuanchong translated the title into The Willow, which means only willow trees, but doesn't reflect the praise of willow, which is not equivalent in meaning. Ode to the Willow is used in the other two translations, in which the word "ode" means "praise", which is equivalent to the word "咏". At the same time, the word "ode" is often used in English poetry to praise something, such as Shelley's Ode to the West. Thus the translation 2 and 3 are not only equivalent in meaning to the title, but also in line with the habits of the target language readers in the use of vocabulary. Therefore, according to the theory of functional equivalence, version 2 and 3 are better than version 1 in terms of the title.

The first sentence of version 1 translates "树" into "The slender beauty", although it is not equivalent to the image in the original poem, but He Zhizhang personifies the willow into a graceful beauty dressed in emerald. Therefore, although the image in translation 1 are not equivalent, their deeper rhetorical devices are equivalent. This effect can better enable the target language readers to understand the beauty of the willow tree. The first sentence of version 2 translates "一树高" into "a tall tree". In fact, the word "一" in the original poem means all, while the corresponding "a" usually means singular in English. When the target language readers read here, it is easy to be misunderstood as "a tree that is tall". And version 2 doesn't reflect the personification, and the effect of equivalence is slightly inferior to that of version 1. The image translation of version 3 is still consistent with the original poem "树", using tree. Through the use of the phrase "be dressed with", the expression of "tree wearing clothes" is reflected, and the effect of personifying the tree is realized. Therefore, compared with the first sentence translation of the three versions, translation 3 has the best effect of equivalence in terms of meaning and deeper rhetorical devices.

In the original poem, "万条" uses quantity to refer to the noun "many willow branches". The second sentence of version 1 translates "万条" into "A thousand branches", so this directly weakens the prosperity of willows in spring and doesn't reach the meaning

equivalence. Version 2 translates "万条" into "myriad silk braids", the translator uses the word "myriad" to express many willow branches, and translates "绿丝绦" into "silk braids of green". Countless wickers are directly likened to green ribbons, which not only achieve equivalence in meaning, but also achieve equivalence in figurative rhetoric. Version 3 translates "垂下绿丝绦" into "sway down their silky sheen", sway means swinging. The original poem described the drooping branches of the willow, which doesn't reflect the wickers swing. Here, the translator may want to express the graceful posture of the wicker, but the target language reader may think that the wicker expressed in the original poem is swinging. Moreover, the original poem expresses that countless wickers hang like green ribbons, but the translator translates "绿丝绦" into "their silky sheen" for rhyme, which doesn't achieve equivalence in meaning. But it gives readers more room for imaging. In the translation of this sentence, version 2 achieves the best effect in terms of meaning equivalence.

The third sentence of version 1 translates "不知" into "But do you know". The word "不" means negative, by adding a subject "you", the translation is in line with the syntactic habits of the English readers. Version 2 translates "不知" into a special question led by Who, which asks who cut it. Did not achieve the meaning equivalence. Although version 3 also translates "不知" as version 2, in order to rhyme with the previous sentence, the translator puts "I don't know" after the special question. "不知" and "I don't know" are equivalent. Therefore, in the translation of this sentence, the meaning equivalence effect of translation 3 is slightly better than that of translation 1 and 2.

Version 1 translates "似剪刀" into "is sharp as scissors blade", which change "like scissors" into "as sharp as a scissors blade". Although "as" achieve rhetorical equivalence, the translator doesn't achieve the equivalence of meaning. The translation of "似剪刀" in version 2 is "as scissors", also shows figurative rhetoric through the use of "as". It not only achieves equivalence in meaning, but also achieves equivalence in rhetoric. Version 3 added the word "sharp". Although the literal equivalence has not been achieved, the imagination given to the reader is plump. Only in the effect of meaning equivalence, version 2 is slightly better than version 1 and 3.

3.2 The equivalence of sound

Because poetry has the characteristics of rhythm and musicality, both Chinese and English poems pay more attention to rhythm. Both of them are very knowledgeable in reflecting the requirements of rhythm. This paper only elaborates on the way of rhyming. The common ways of rhyming in English poetry are alliteration, assonance and end rhyme. The rhyming pattern between lines in English poetry is also called rhyming scheme. The common rhymes are AABB, ABCB, ABAB and ABBA. If there is a word that doesn't agree with others on the level and oblique tones in Chinese classical poetry, it will become a awkward-sounding sentence. Chinese classical poetry puts the same rhyme words in the same position in different sentences, usually at the end of the sentence, so it is also called end rhyme. The word in Yong Liu "高", "绦" and "刀" is a end rhyme, which makes this poem with only four sentences easy to read and full of rhythm.

When translating poetry, the most difficult thing is to achieve sound equivalence on the basis of conveying poetic meaning in concise sentences. Because this is a great test of the translator's accurate understanding of vocabulary, not only to be able to convey the meaning of the poem, but also to achieve sound equivalence.

The first sentence of translation 1 ends with "about" and rhymes with "out" of the third sentence; so does the last word "jade" of the second sentence and "blade" of the last sentence. However, translation 2 doesn't rhyme and loses the harmony of the original tone of the poem. The first sentence in translation 3 ends with "low" and rhymes with "know" in the third sentence; the second sentence and the fourth sentence are also rhymed by using "sheen" and "keen". The translator can clearly express the meaning of the original poem and realize the equivalence of end rhyme, which makes the translation of this poem more outstanding. However, it can be observed that 1, 2 and 4 sentences are rhymed in the original poem, while when translated into English, both translators rhyme 1 and 3, 2 and 4. Although it isn't equivalent to the original poem, it is in line with the habits of English readers, which belongs to the interline interactive rhyme in English poetry, that is, ABAB style. This method of translation will make it easier for English readers to experience the harmonious beauty of the original poem in terms of rhythm. Therefore, in terms of the equivalent effect of sound, version 1 and version 3 are better than version 2.

3.3 The equivalence of form

The modern-style poems and quatrains that appeared after the Tang Dynasty in China not only pay attention to the level and oblique tones and rhyme, but also consider the number of sentences and words, while English poetry is more free and unrestrained, more like prose style. Generally speaking, in order to express the meaning more clearly, the translator will use more words to explain, so the target language usually has more words than the original text.

Yong Liu is a four-line poem with seven characters per line, the whole poem has only four sentences, the so-called seven characters means that each sentence has only seven words. The three versions all translate the original poem into four sentences, which is equivalent in the number of sentences. The number of words per line of version 1 is 8, 9, 12 and 10 respectively, that of version 2 is 6, 7, 5 and 8, and that of version 3 is 8, 8, 9 and 8 respectively. According to the above results, it is observed that none of the three translations are equivalent to the original poem in "Seven characters", but they are all close to the word number of the original poem. It is not easy to use such concise sentences to express the original meaning of poetry. After all, it is very difficult to achieve the equivalence of the number of words.

The last two couplets of the original poem use the rhetorical device of setting questions. Translation 1, translation 2 and translation 3 also use Wh-question in the third sentence and answer them in the fourth sentence. The equivalence of sentence structure is realized.

From the above analysis, we can see that there are great differences in structural forms between Chinese and English poetry, it is very difficult to achieve complete equivalence, and the charm of the original poetry will be more or less lost in the process of translation.

3.4 Conclusion

Through the comparative analysis of "meaning", "sound" and "form" of the three versions, we can see that it is very difficult to achieve these three equivalents at the same time. The translators of Yong Liu are all outstanding translators in China, and their respective translations have their own unique views and special features. In order to better spread the poetic culture, more efforts need to be made in translation. The closer the translation of the poem is to the post-reading effect of the original text, the more it will enable the target language readers to understand the artistic conception and the thought of the poem. There are so many excellent works of Chinese classical poetry. The translators can work under the guidance of the theory of functional equivalence, so as to achieve the maximum equivalence of "meaning", "sound" and "form" as far as possible, so as to give the target language readers a better reading experience.

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