

Limitations in “Dichotomy” of J. House’s TQA Model--on Chinese and English Translation

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Abstract: J. House’s model of Translation Quality Assessment (TQA) is commonly regarded as systemic and objective. However, based on the contrastive study of the linguistic and cultural features between English and German, the model also bears unavoidable limitations when it is applied to language pairs like Chinese and English. This paper discusses the inapplicability of House’s model caused by the dichotomy of overt and covert translation. Examples of translation in Chinese and English will be given for illustration. Two probable solutions are provided accordingly.

Keywords: Translation Quality Assessment; Text Typology; Covert Translation; Overt Translation; Cultural Filter

1. Introduction

J. House is considered the first to set a TQA model based on Hallidayan systematic-functional theories. Though the model is commonly regarded as a systemic and objective one, the work of translation itself is such a complex one that brings the process of assessing many problems. Even after the model was produced in 1977, it was criticized for many reasons, based on which House made a revisited one in 1997^[1], and later in 2014^[2]. However, since the revisited model is still built on the linguistic and cultural features between English and German, and the dichotomy has been preserved without any substantial modification, when it is applied to other language pairs, say, Chinese and English, there’s something need to be adjusted. The previous criticism mainly focuses on the complexity of the parameters, the overstatement of quality without corresponding emphasize on quantity and the identity of an evaluator, etc^[3]. This paper focuses on problems caused by the dichotomy of overt and covert translation from three aspects, namely, the unsound corresponding between source text (ST) typology and target text (TT) dichotomy, the impropriety of using the dichotomy as a evaluative parameter and the problem with the “cultural filter” in covert translation. Two probable solutions are provided accordingly.

2. An introduction to J. House’s Dichotomy

House defines the type of target text first. Then the assessment criteria are decided and at last the quality of translation will be evaluated by using the criteria. So the dichotomy of overt and covert translation is central in House’s model. According to House, “an overt translation is one in which the addressees of the translation text are quite ‘overtly’ not being directly addressed, while a covert translation is one that “enjoys the status of an original source text in the target culture”^[4]. To make it plain, the former requires that a translation must “overtly” be a translation and the latter should possess the function of an original text in the target culture. For example, a speech given by a government spokesman about its duties is tied to the particular source culture, time and social development, and thus it should be translated overtly. On the contrary, a scientific text or a letter from a company chairman, which is not restrained to the understanding of a specific group of people, should be translated covertly.

3. Limitations of House’s Dichotomy in Chinese and English Translation

House has tried to set up a translation typology on the basis of eight case studies between English and German, whereby different texts are found to have been treated in different ways in translation. Though she has concluded that there is clearly some relation between a ST type and its appropriate translation type, and suggested a basic division into two major

translation types, there are problems with the dichotomy itself as well as its relation to the ST types.

3.1 The unsound corresponding between ST typology and TT dichotomy

In House's first model, there is no procedure to analyze the ST types, which in fact require different translation methods and different norms to evaluate. In the revisited model, the term "genre" is added and defined as "a socially established category characterized in terms of occurrence of use, source and a communicative purpose or any combination of these"^[4]. For example, when applying House's model to *The Gettysburg Address* delivered by Abraham Lincoln in 1863, the genre could be stated as : This is a public speech with the primary goal to make the public understand the point of view of the speaker and influence them to accept such point of view, or to encourage the public to do something. In practice, however, the link between the ST genre and TT dichotomy is such a farfetched one. Here's an example of a short passage written by Lu Xun in 1919 and its translation produced by Zhang Peiji.^[4]

ST:

老螃蟹觉得不安了，觉得全身太硬了。自己知道要蜕壳了。他跑来跑去的寻。想寻找一个窟穴，躯了身子，将石子堵住了穴口，隐隐的蜕壳。他知道外面蜕壳是危险的。身子还软，要被别的螃蟹吃下去的。这并非空害怕，他实在亲眼见过。他慌慌张张的走。旁边的螃蟹问他说：“老兄，你何以这般慌？”他说：“我要蜕壳了。”“就在这里蜕 不是很好么？我还要帮助你呢。”“那太怕人了。”“你不怕洞穴里别的东西，却怕我们同种么？”“我不是怕同种。”“那还怕什么呢？”“就怕你要吃掉我。”

TT:

An old crab grew restless. Finding himself still all over, he knew it was time for him to moult his shell. He dashed here and there in search of a cave to hide. He was going to block up the mouth of the cave so that he could moult in secret. He knew it would be very dangerous to shed his shell in the open because, with his new shell still being soft, he might be eaten up by other crabs. This fear was not groundless for he himself had really seen it happen to other moulting crab. The old crab kept moving about in a hurry. A nearby crab asked, "Hey, brother, what's the rush?" "I'm going to moult," answered the old crab. "Wouldn't it be all right to moult right here? I could help you out with it." "How horrible that would be!" "You mean while you're not scared of other things in the cave you're scared of your own kind?" "No, I'm not scared of my own kind." "Then what are you scared of?" "Nothing but eaten up by you."

This allegory was published in 1919 when the May 4th Movement swept the country. Through the story, Lu Xun wanted to remind the danger that the new things and ideas may be nipped in the bud by deep-rooted and outdated powers. The story is closely related to the particular social development and background of China in that time, and thus requires an overt translation according to House's model. However, there is no evidence to show that the translation produced by Zhang Peiji is "overtly" being a translation. It is more like an allegory telling universal truth of its own culture. In that way, the TT type proposed by House can not match the genre introduced by her in the revisited model, and thus makes the later perform practically little expected function in the process of quality assessing. Another type of texts to show the incoherence is the translation of tourist information booklets, which, as House claims, should be translated covertly. However, this is a controversial type for that many of these texts contain certain cultural issues, costumes and even an introduction to the local life-style. How can the translation "enjoy the status of an original source text in target culture"?^[5] Obviously, the revised model doesn't solve this problem even though the text genre is proposed as one of the parameters.

3.2 The improperness of the dichotomy as an evaluative parameter

The second problem lies in the right moment of applying it. In House's model, the criteria is mainly decided by the type of the TT. That is to say, the categorization of overt and covert translation is put at the final step of evaluation. The problem here is evident. What's the significance of judging the quality of a text if the translator has chosen an improper translation type at the very beginning? This theoretical insufficiency can be proved by the translation of Chinese classical literature, among which this paper chooses the different versions to "道可道，非常道。名可名，非常名" excerpted from *Taoism* to illustrate.

ST: 道可道，非常道。名可名，非常名。

TT 1: The Tao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Tao.

The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name.

(James Legge, 1891)

TT 2. The way that can be told of is not an unvarying way;

The names that can be named are not unvarying names.

(Arthur Waley, 1934)

TT 3. Existence is beyond the power of words to define:

Terms may be used

But are none of them absolute.

(Witter Bvnnner, 1944)

TT 4. God (the great everlasting infinite First Cause from when all things in heaven and earth proceed) can neither be defined nor named.

For the God which can be defined or named is but the creator,

The Great Mother of all things of which our senses have cognizance.

(G. G. Alexander, 1895)

TT 5. The Tao that can be told of

Is not the Absolute Tao.

The Names that can be given

Are not Absolute Names.

(Lin Yutang, 1942)

Firstly, the translators have different views towards the definition of “道”, which is a controversial hotpot in China, and in translation it has something to do with “cultural filter”. Secondly, the text types vary in interesting ways in the five versions. James Legge and Arthur Waley make their translations elaborative and thus easy to be understood by the TL readers. Both of them add explanations in their translations. Lin Yutang’s version keeps the characteristic of the manner of writing with the original, and it is easy to be understood in spite of the transliterated term “Tao”. Witter Bvnnner makes modifications to the ST and is more suitable to regard this as a “Version”, which House made differently from a “translation”. The main distinction lies in the forth one, which enjoys certification of a “version” rather than a “translation”. Here G. G. Alexander adds many western concepts, such as the “god”, “the great Mothe”, etc. Back to House’s model. The original excerption “道可道, 非常道。名可名, 非常名” ties to the particular source culture of China, thus should be translated overtly. However, when the criterion is viewed from a different perspective, things will be different. If the translation is for academic or cultural diffusion use, the first, second and fifth translations are all acceptable. If readers expect to enjoy the language beauty of the original and do some investigative work all by themselves, Lin Yutang’s version is preferable. Or, when a special group of people want to learn something about Taoism, and they refuse to be bothered with culture differences, the third and fourth ones are accepted. Therefore, it is not adequate and convincing to put the TT types as the final evaluation parameter.

House noticed this problem, In the chapter of *Rethinking the Notion of “Translation Evaluation”*, she states that “the choice of an overt or covert translation depends not just on the translator himself, or on the text or the translator’s personal interpretation of the text, but also, and to a considerable extent, on the reasons for the translation, on the implied readers, on publishing and marketing policies.^[5]” She also defines that “A particular ST does not necessarily require once and for all either a covert or an overt translation, given the different, dynamic ways of viewing a text and different purposes for which a translation way, in the course of time, be required.^[5]” For one thing, though she claims that the model is located on the linguistic-oriented approach, by stating so many social factors, the TQA model goes to be closer to the response-oriented approaches she criticized. For the other thing, her relative position weakens the credibility of the model. As Sergio Bolaños Cuéllar^[6] puts it, “there are different, dynamic ways of viewing a text, but it does not mean that there are ‘n’ possibilities for

translating, not if what we attempt to produce is a translation, which we consider to be semantically and pragmatically equivalent". That is to say, there must be something "invariant" to guarantee that a translation of a source text is different from an adaption, a summary, or even a paraphrase.

Therefore, the method to put TT types as the final evaluation parameter is not always adequate and convincing.

3.3 The problem with the "cultural filter" in covert translation

In House's model, the existing and verified differences of the socio-cultural norms and presuppositions of cultural knowledge are to be taken care of in covert translation through the application of a cultural filter, which is defined as a set of cross-cultural dimensions along which members of the two cultures differ in socio-cultural predispositions and communicative preferences. The application of this term is doubted for two reasons.

Firstly, House discusses the meaning of "cultural filter" in the context of German-English comparative pragmatic studies which she has conducted and gives examples of different practices in the two cultures reflected in translation. She finds that German tends to prefer a more direct content focus, whereas English is more interpersonal. German is more direct and explicit in expression, which English, on the contrary, more indirect and implicit. Such contrastive study is of great significance for it provides the base for further comparison between the ST and TT, and also gives reason for the applying of cultural filters. When the model is applied into Chinese and English translation, a similar contrastive research is necessary. For lack of such research, it is hard to carry out the evaluation of translation quality because there's no evidence to judge the relationship between these mismatches and cultural filter, which loses its place in Chinese and English translation.

Secondly, the cultural filter, which House treated as the dividing line of overt and covert translation, loses its distinctive value in practice. As aforementioned, a cultural filter is necessary and allowed only in covert translation. But when the model is applied to Chinese and English translation, the linguistic and culture differences are greater and certain concepts in one cultural do not even exist in another. It is difficult to get an absolute overt translation without cultural filter between them. So it can be concluded that when there are culture related language phenomena which do not have equivalences in the target language, the translator has no other choice but to apply a cultural filter. It is reasonable to judge the necessity of it according to different criteria in Chinese and English translations.

4. Probable Solutions

4.1 Introducing Reiss's Text Typology to "Genre"

As aforementioned, House provides a dichotomy of the TT, but it is far from enough. In practice, an evaluator must put the study of ST type into consideration. This paper recommends the functional typology of Reiss's [7] as the following chart shows:

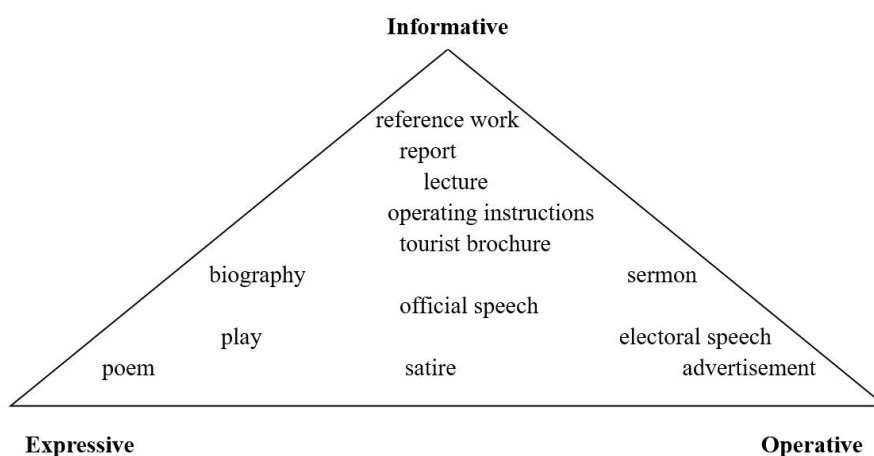


Figure1 Text Types and Text Varieties

The reference work is the most fully informative type; the poem is a highly expressive, form-focused type and an advertisement is the clearest operative text type. Between these poles are positioned a host of hybrid of types. This typology provides a referential value for House's TQA model. On one hand, it is more elaborative and systematic because frequent

used types of writings are all concerned including “poem” which House takes no account for. On the other hand, the two share the same foundation of functional approach.

Take the example of *crab* which bears a contradiction in its matching between the ST and the TT in House’s model. According to Reiss, a fable or an allegory can be regarded as a “satire”, which might be somewhere between the experiences and operative types, since it provides expression about the subject while also partly performing the operative function by attempting to persuade or warn people. In that way, the translation of *crab* should express the sender’s attitude and produce the same function of the ST. This functional equivalence is what to House, the basic require of a covert one. So here it is clear that the ST type and the TT dichotomy are well-matched by applying Reiss’s ST typology.

4.2 Expanding the application Sphere of “Cultural filter”

In practice, cultural differences appear almost in any type of text. It is not suitable to limit the application of cultural filter to covert translation only, or even taken this term as the “dividing crest” of overt and covert translation. Thus a translation may be, on the whole, an overt translation while partially with a cultural filter being applied. For example:

ST: (杜十娘生得) 浑身雅艳, 遍体娇香, 两弯眉画远山青, 一对眼明秋水润。脸如莲萼, 分明卓氏文君; 唇似樱桃, 何减白家樊素。

TT: She was sweetness and loveliness incarnate;
Her fine eyebrows were arched like distant hills;
Her eyes were as clear as autumn water;
Her face was as fresh as dew washed lotus;
Her lips were as crimson as ripe cherries.

(杨宪益 & 戴乃迭, 2001:200-201)

As for translation of this example, according to House, overt interpretation should be adopted. In the whole, this translation achieved equivalence for that the traditional descriptions are preserved, for example: “浑身雅艳” (sweetness and loveliness incarnate), “远山青”(arched like distant hills) and “脸如莲萼” (as fresh as dew washed lotus). However, when we examining the translation closely, it will be easy to discover that at the level of language, a direct match is failed. The two names (卓文君&白樊素) of ancient beauties which bear profound cultural connotations are missing in the translation. In fact, a “cultural filter” is applied here for the reason that: if the two terms are translated literally, they will certainly affect the smoothness of the translation text; and supplemented with annotations, they might not be fitful for the style of a light literature. Thereby, to improve its readability, the translators’ choice of omitting is but rational one.

5. Conclusion

This paper discusses the limitations with the dichotomy of overt and covert translation. Two probable solutions are provided here, hoping to solve these problems to make House’s model more applicable for Chinese and English translation evaluation. Since translation quality assessment is such a complex term, whether a common criterion which is suitable for all text types, or can be applied to every language pairs exist or not, is still doubtful to many researchers. Anyway, House’s model is of great significance for it takes account of both translation and translation process into consideration. By certain modifications it will be better applied to different language pairs.

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