

A Comparative Study of the English version of Qinyuan Spring·Changsha from the Figure-Ground Theory

Ting Gan, Bin Guo

College of Humanities and Foreign Languages, Hunan Agricultural University, Hunan, Changsha 410125

Abstract: Figure-ground theory originated in psychology and subsequently developed into an important theory of cognitive linguistics, playing an important role in the study of English version of poetry. Based on the figure-ground theory, this paper makes a comparative analysis of the two English versions of *Qinyuan Spring·Changsha* which is separately translated by Xu Yuanchong and Willis Barnstone, and then concludes the similarities and differences in the choices of figure and ground and try exploring the difference in thinking patterns between Chinese and Western translators. By comparison, we can conclude than Xu's version is more faithful to the expression of the original poem.

Keywords: Figure-ground theory; *Qinyuan Spring·Changsha*; Comparison of English versions

1. Introduction

Qinyuan Spring·Changsha was written in 1925 and first published in the January 1957 issue of *Poetry Magazine*. This is a magnificent chapter of visiting the old place to enjoy the autumn scenery, reminiscing about the past friends and thinking about the past, and the whole poem flashes with the shimmering light of the noble heart of a generation of young revolutionaries. As a well-known poem by Chinese students, the original poem of *Qinyuan Spring·Changsha* and its English version have always attracted people's attention. So far, there are more than 20 English versions of the poem, and each version has competed for popularity. In this paper, the author will take the figure background theory as the theoretical guide, select the Xu Yuanchong version and the Willis Barnstone version, and study them by comparison.

2. Figure-Ground Theory

In 1915, Danish psychologist Edgar Rubin first proposed the concept of figure-ground, using the most famous vase face diagram to explain the concept of figure and background. Subsequently, at the push of Gestalt psychologists, figure-ground was used for perceptual research. Linguist Leonard Talmy then introduced figure-ground into cognitive linguistics, which in turn developed into figure-ground theory. Talmy (1978, 2000) pointed out that when a semantic event is used to represent position or movement, it must involve two objects. In this process, two objects are closely related to this event and the movement of one object is referenced to the other, which he locates as a figure and the latter as a background^[1]. Jiang Ping (2009) defines the most prominent entity in a particular structural framework as a figure, and the second most prominent entity as the background^[2]. With the continuous development of this theory, it has been increasingly used in the analysis of literary works in recent years.

3. Comparison of English Translations of Qinyuan Spring·Changsha

Qinyuan Spring·Changsha was written in 1925, when the background of the domestic revolution was extremely complicated. On the one hand, revolutionary movements flourished; on the other hand, the struggle of various contradictions has become more acute and prominent, and the focus of the struggle is the question of the ownership of the revolutionary leadership. Against this background, the magnificent poem *Qinyuan Spring·Changsha* was quietly born, which skillfully answered the question of revolutionary leadership. The poem *Qinyuan Spring·Changsha* is precise and precise and it reads with a heroic atmosphere. As we all know, translating such a classic poem into English is a huge challenge, but Xu Yuanchong and Willis Barnstone, as well-known scholars of Chinese and Western studies and well-known veterans of translation poetry, have translated it into English with their strong language skills and are widely recognized by the translation community. For ease of reference, the author will appreciate it in batches according to Shangque (original poem 1-4 sentences) and Xiaque (original poem 5-9 sentences).

3.1. Appreciation of the First Half

【Example 1】

【Original poem】独立寒秋，湘江北去，橘子洲头。

【Xu's version】

In autumn cold alone stand I,
Of Orange Isle at the head,
Where River Xiang northward goes by.

【Willis's version】

I stand alone in cold autumn.
The River Xiang goes north
around the promontory of Orange Island.

【Analysis】 In this example, Xu and Willis chose different figures and backgrounds. When translating, Xu used an inverted sentence form, choosing “I” as a figure and “Orange Isle at the head” as the background, highlighting the loneliness of “I” standing alone at the head of Orange Isle in the cold autumn in the original poem. In contrast, Willis uses a simpler literal translation method, that is, a simple subject-verb-object structure. Willis chose “the River Xiang” as the figure and “Orange Island” as the background when translating, and did not overemphasize the main character “I” in his translation, but chose to weaken the existence of “I”, his main purpose is to highlight the slow passing state of the “the River Xiang”, presenting the reader with a majestic and spectacular scene of the River Xiang flowing through Orange Island and heading north.

However, after deeply understanding the background of the original poem, we clearly know that the author, as a great man of a generation, is good at pinning his emotions on the colorful scenery of the world, and the center of the poem should be the author himself. The meaning of the original poem is that on a sunny day in late autumn with a pleasant wind and cool climate, the author stood alone at the head of Orange Continent, watching the Xiang River flow all the way north. In this way, the whole poem renders an atmosphere of loneliness. Therefore, although Willis's version depicts the literal meaning of the original poem, it does not go deep and does not deeply understand the central meaning of the original text. Xu's translation does a good job of using the inverted technique to describe the mood of the viewer at that time, and sets the loneliness of the viewer with a broad scene, as well as the blood boiling and the tide of thought when enjoying the scenery.

【Example 2】

【Original poem】鹰击长空，鱼翔浅底，万类霜天竞自由。

【Xu's version】

Far and wide eagles cleave the blue;
Up and down fish in shallows glide;
All creatures strive for freedom under frosty skies.

【Willis's version】

Eagle flash over clouds
and fish float near the clear bottom.
In the freezing air a million creatures compete for freedom.

【Analysis】 In this example, the figures chosen by Xu and Willis are both “eagles” and “fish”, but the backgrounds chosen are different. Xu chose “the blue” and “shallows” as the background, while Willis chose “clouds” and “the bottom” as the background. The difference between the two versions is whether or not they are supplemented. When Xu described “鹰击长空”, he not only translated the scene of “eagle flying in the sky”, but also added “far and wide”, depicting a dynamic picture of an eagle flying fast and agile, flying freely in the vast sky; Similarly, he used the same method when describing “鱼翔浅底”, not only translating the scene of “fish swimming in the water”, but also adding “up and down”, vividly depicting the state of fish jumping up and down with the water waves. In contrast, Willis's description of “鹰击长空” and “鱼翔浅底” only translates the scenes of “eagle flying in the sky” and “fish swimming in the water”, without further detail.

Combined with the whole sentence, the original poem refers to the vast sky in which eagles are flying vigorously and fish are swimming briskly. Xu's two additions reflect the state of freedom and ease of all things in the world, echoing the original word “万类霜

天竞自由”，which is very beautiful. Willis translation is biased towards a literal translation, which is not very related to the latter sentence of the original poem, and sometimes it's not easy for the readers to get the core meaning and artistic conception of these three sentences. Therefore, there must be a misconception that the readers only understand the literal meaning of the original poem and ignore its artistic conception.

3.2. Appreciation of the Latter Half

【Example 3】

【Original poem】曾记否，到中流击水，浪遏飞舟？

【Xu's version】

Do you remember still, Swimming mid-stream,
we struck waves to impede
That boats which passed at flying speed?

【Willis's version】

Do you remember
how in the middle of the river
we hit the water, splashed, and how our waves
slowed down the swift junks?

【Analysis】In this example, the figures and backgrounds chosen by Xu and Willis are also different. Xu chose “we” as the figure and “flying boat” as the background; while Willis chose “wave” as the figure and “flying boat” as the background. The meaning of the original poem is that we are swimming in the deep part of the river, and the waves almost block the speeding boat. Xu broke through the literal shackles and translated the subject of the action “we”, highlighting the role of the subject “we”. And in this way, it can more evoke “our” memories and feelings at that time, so as to achieve a better emotional resonance. Willis' version is more faithful to the literal transmission of the original poem, highlighting the local action subject “waves”. Therefore, Xu's version better conveys the artistic conception of the original poem.

4. Conclusion

In general, choosing appropriate figures and backgrounds will help readers understand the deep meaning of the original poem and better grasp the core feelings of the original poem. Different choices of figures and backgrounds may have a greater impact on the central idea of the translation. Willis's translation reads smoothly and without any grammatical errors, but he does not translate the thoughts and feelings contained in the original poem well, which is what he lacks. Xu's translation circumvents this shortcoming and it is more faithful to the expression of the original poem. For this reason, we must note a common rule in Chinese-English translation: English is a language that concentrates on its hypotaxis and focuses on using its form to express its meanings; Chinese is a language that emphasizes the parataxis with using meanings to display its form. Therefore, when translating verses, we cannot focus only on the literal meaning of the original poem. What we have to do is to fully understand the meaning of the original poetry, so as to deliberately highlight the artistic conception and content that the poem wants to express. It's of great importance for us to learn how to select, which means a clear idea of whether vocabularies should be increased or decreased and the content should be detailed and skimmed, and strive to achieve the beauty in sense, sound and form. In the future translation of poetry, we still need to savor it carefully in order to translate the true connotation and artistic conception of the Chinese poem.

References

- [1] Talmy, L. *Towards A Cognitive Semantics*[M]. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2000: 315-316.
- [2] Jiang Ping, Zhang Zhidong, Qin Huanhua. *Schools and Development of Linguistics*[M]. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2009.
- [3] Chen Wei, Du Xiaohong. Research on the subjectivity of translators of *Qinyuan·Spring Changsha* based on cognitive grammar[J]. *Journal of Changji University*, 2022, (02): 74-79.
- [4] Xu Yuanhong. The Art of Beautification[J]. *China Translation*, 1998(4): 46-49.