

A Study of Shanxing and its Three English Version from the Perspective of Systemic Functional Grammar

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Abstract: According to the present literature, most contemporary study examines poetry translation critically from a literary standpoint. However, some research gaps still exist such as the studies from single perspectives or with relatively subjective analysis methods. This paper aims to conduct a comparative analysis of Shanxing and its three different English translations based on the theoretical framework of the experiential function of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL).

Key words: systemic functional linguistics; poetry translation; Shanxing; transitivity

Introduction

Poetry translation has always been an important subject of academic research, mainly focusing on the ancient poems (Gu, 2003). However, most of studies so far are based on the translating principles of “faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance” from the perspective of literature, thus making the analyzing results subjective.

More and more scholars tend to use systemic functional linguistics (SFL) to analyze translation, whether literary translation or nonliterary translation (Chatzikoumi, 2020; Steiner et al., 2019). The English translation of classical books and ancient poems are two main research topics nowadays (Zhao & Li, 2020).

Systemic Functional Linguistics

Experiential Function

Experiential function means that the speaker can express one’s social experience and internal psychological experience, among which transitivity, the ability to detect the type of sentence and indicate the position of items, serves as the most essential part. Transitivity separates the human experience of the world into six processes (i.e., material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral, and existential) and determines the participants and circumstance (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Material, mental, and relational processes are regarded as the three most indispensable type while behavioral, verbal, and existential processes serve as less important types.

Shanxing

Shanxing depicts the scenery during the autumn mountain trip by mentioning mountain roads, dwellers, clouds, and maples. Unlike other ancient Chinese poems about autumn that is full of sorrow and pity, *Shanxing* praises the beauty of nature in autumn and shows the author’s upward spirit due to Du Mu’s pedigree. He was born in a bureaucrat family, which allowed him to grow up in a superior condition. Even in the late Tang Dynasty, he was still valued by the court. Hence, he always kept optimistic against his political future and the country.

山行

杜牧

远上寒山石径斜，
 白云生处有人家。
 停车坐爱枫林晚，
 霜叶红于二月花。

The Three Translators

Robert H. Kotewall and Norman L. Smith are two experienced lawyers in Hong Kong. Kotewall, as a hybrid of Hong Kong and British, served as a natural bridge between Chinese culture and Western culture.

Travelling in the Mountains

After I climb the chill mountain’s steep stone paths,
 Deep in the white clouds there are homes of men.
 I stop my carriage, and I sit to admire the maple grove at nightfall,
 Whose frozen leaves are redder than the flowers of early Spring.

Weng Xianliang had a brilliant achievement in Chinese poetics and Chinese translation of English poetry. He was also interested in translating Chinese poems into English, which fully demonstrated his personal style, just as he transformed *Shanxing* into a prose.

Autumn Glory

Off the main road runs a narrow stone path, winding, climbing, vanishing into the cloudy heights where

perch a few tiny cottages.

Here I pull up my carriage, entranced. For the twilight mountainside is ablaze with crimson maples
more vivid than spring flowers.

Zhuo Zhenying, a professor at College of Foreign Languages of Zhejiang Normal University, has pioneered a new discipline — Studies on translation of Chinese Classics into English to output ancient Chinese culture.

A Mountain Scene

A stony path's meandering high up the chilly mount,
Where homes are silhouetted' gainst the white clouds' very fount.
Attracted by th' maples my carriage to a halt I bring:
Th' frost-redden' d leaves at dusk are brighter than the bloom of Spring.

Experiential Meaning: What Does the Poem Say?

The Analysis of Transitivity of the Source Text

The four lines of the poem can be divided into six clauses in total, involving 4 material process, 1 existential process, and 1 relational process, thus foregrounding the latter two. Table 1 showed the analysis of transitivity of the source text.

The first clause echoed the title, showing that the story of this poem happened in a mountain with winding paths.

Whether it is sheng (生, origin) or shen (深, deep) in the second clause was still controversial though, most scholars preferred sheng (Xu, 2021). For one thing, sheng indeed contained the meaning of shen since the place that clouds origin must be in the depths of mountains. For another, sheng served as a verb, thus making the sentence more dynamic and concrete. This clause was foregrounded due to the existential process, emphasizing that it was an inhabited mountain instead of a barren one.

The third line was made up of three material processes, depicting the movement of the narrator. Hence, to a certain extent, this whole line was foregrounded. Some scholars argued that zuo (坐, sit) referred to a conjunction “because” here but this paper was prone to regard it as a verb. No matter how beautiful the scenery described in the first two sentences was, the narrator was not moved, but the maple leaves attracted him to park the carriage.

The relational process in the fourth line focused readers' attention on this clause. Although the description of the environment in the former three was impressive, it could not support the poem as a masterpiece without the last clause. The narrator used yu (如, more) rather than ru (如, as) here because, in his view, the maple leaves he saw were much more charming than the flowers in February which were red but not outstanding. The maple leaves that have experienced adversity were not as delicate as the spring flowers and have a powerful vitality. From narrator's perspective, the tenacity of maple leaves cheered him up. The last clause made the previous description of the environment a foil of maple leaves.

Table 1 The process analysis of *Shanxing*

Line no.	Clause no.	Clause	Process type
A	1	远上寒山石径斜	Material
B	2	白云生处有人家	Existential
C	1	停车	Material
	2	坐	Material
	3	爱枫林晚	Material
D	1	霜叶红于二月花	Relational
Material: 4			
Existential: 1			
Relational: 1			

The Analysis of Transitivity of Kotewall's Translation

Among the three translations, Kotewall's version follows the source text most. He translated the title into Travelling in the Mountains, which restored the title structure of the source text. Moreover, all the sentences retained the process and even the third line was divided into three clauses just as the source text. The analysis of transitivity of Kotewall's translation was shown in detail in Table 2.

Table 2 The process analysis of translation by R. Kotewall & N. Smith.

Line no.	Clause no.	Clause	Process type
A	1	After I climb the chill mountain's steep stone paths	Material

B	2	Deep in the white clouds there are homes of men	Existential
C	1	I stop my carriage	Material
	2	and I sit	Material
	3	to admire the maple grove at nightfall	Material
D	1	Whose frozen leaves are redder than the flowers of early Spring	Relational
Material: 4 Existential: 1 Relational: 1			

The Analysis of Transitivity of Weng Xianliang's Translation

Weng Xianliang thought that the key point of poetry translation lay in demonstrating the images, and form did not need to be rigidly sustained. Therefore, his translation completely changed the structure of the source text, and even the genre was translated from poetry into prose. It is more appropriate to regard it as rewriting instead of translating. The analysis of transitivity of Weng Xianliang's translation was demonstrated in Table 3.

Weng's translation turned the original four lines into two paragraphs. The first paragraph was composed of four material processes, representing the first two lines of the source text. The material process in the first line of the original poem was transformed into four material processes, thus making the existential process in the second line become a definite attributive clause.

The second paragraph also contains four processes. The first two material processes were the third line of the source text while the latter two relational processes corresponded to the last line. The three consecutive material processes in the third line of the original text were simplified into two, because *zuo* (坐) was understood by Weng as the meaning of "because", expressed by "for" in the initial of the third clause. This essay will not dispute this understanding. The last clause has omitted "is" but it could help readers better comprehend this clause to add it. The last two relational processes made these two clauses foregrounded, which followed the source text.

Table 3 The process analysis of translation by Weng Xianliang.

Paraphrase no.	Clause no.	Clause	Process type
A	1	Off the main road runs a narrow stone path	Material
	2	Winding	Material
	3	Climbing	Material
	4	Vanishing into the cloudy heights where perch a few tiny cottages	Material
B	1	Here I pull up my carriage	Material
	2	Entranced	Material
	3	For the twilight mountainside is ablaze with crimson maples	Relational
	4	(is) more vivid than spring flowers	Relational
Material: 6 Relational: 2			

The Analysis of Transitivity of Zhuo Zhenying's Translation

The feature of Zhuo Zhenying's translation was that the four clauses corresponded to the four lines of the source text. The full analysis of transitivity of Zhuo's translation can be seen in Table 4.

In Zhuo's translation, the second and the fourth clauses were both relational processes, thus being foregrounded, though the second clause in the source text was an existential process.

The third clause condensed the three material processes of the source text into one, resulting in the tidy of the target text but the loss of the dynamics of *ting* (停), *zuo* (坐), and *ai* (爱).

Table 4 The process analysis translation by Zhuo Zhenying.

Line no.	Clause no.	Clause	Process type
A	1	A stony path's meandering high up the chilly mount	Material

B	1	Where homes are silhouetted' gainst the white clouds' very fount	Relational
C	1	Attracted by th' maples my carriage to a halt I bring	Material
D	1	Th' frost-redden' d leaves at dusk are brighter than the bloom of Spring	Relational
Material: 2			
Relational: 2			

Conclusion

From the perspective of systemic functional linguistics (SFL), the translation of Kotewall should be the most consistent one with the source text. The most disobedient one is the version of Weng Xianliang, which has been revised personally to restore the artistic conception of the source text. Zhuo Zhenying's version is relatively consistent with the original poem in form, and in some clauses such as the third one, grammatical rules are also ignored in order to set off artistic conception. Therefore, according to the standard of faith with the function of the source text, the best translation is from Robert H. Kotewall and Norman L. Smith, followed by Zhuo Zhenying and finally Weng Xianliang.

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