

There May Be the Most Beautiful Scenery in the World, but There Is No Such Thing as the Best Translation: A Suitable Translation is the Best Translation

Zhiming Gong*

Yunnan University, Kunming 650091, China

*Corresponding author: Zhiming Gong, 1405884293@qq.com

Copyright: © 2022 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: Translation is a vital activity with a lengthy history that touches every aspect of human life. Translation is a complex activity with rich connotations, and Chinese and Western scholars have long debated what is the “best translation.” This paper examines the translation theories of Lu Xun’s stiff translation, “Catford’s Translation Linguistics,” and “Qian Zhongshu’s Huajing” in order to discuss what kind of translation is acceptable in the setting of the times.

Keywords: Translation; Stiff translation; Translation linguistics; Huajing

Online publication: February 21, 2022

1. Introduction

Translation is an important activity with a lengthy history, which permeates all fields of human society. In a long period of history, people’s understanding of translation activities mainly stays at the level of experience and text, and more from the two aspects of translation: the gain and loss as well as difficulties of translation, also the translation methods and techniques. Translation is a complex activity with many connotations. For example, there are differences in the understanding of translation from the perspective of linguistics and culture, as well as in the standards of translation from the perspective of science and art and etc. For this reason, the author believes that there is no unified standard for the good and bad of the translation, and there is no absolute best translation, only a relatively suitable translation.

2. Lu Xun’s stiff translation and the discussion of suitable translation

Lu Xun is a remarkable translator as well as an original writer, literary historian, and literary theorist. In comparison to his excellent successes in the fields of literary invention and study, however, his literary translation appears to have left too many regrets and has become the “weak point” in his literary career. Especially because of his tight translating style. Even those who wish to defend Lu Xun’s translation texts find it difficult to do so, yet those who criticise Lu Xun’s translation are always upright and confident.

To be sure, there are too many unclear passages in Lu Xun’s translation, which is an inescapable truth. Liang Shiqiu used three paragraphs from Lu Xun’s translation to demonstrate his point about the stiffness of Lu Xun’s translation. One of the paragraphs is as follows:

“这意义，不仅在说，凡观念形态，是从现实社会受了那惟一可能的材料，而这现实社会的实际形态，则支配着即被组织在它里面的思想，或观念者的直观而已，在这观念者不能离去一定的社会底兴味这一层意义上，观念形态也便是现实社会的所产。”

This translation is still obscure today. Liang Shiqiu wrote an essay titled, “On Mr. Lu Xun’s Stiff Translation ^[1].” In this essay, Liang labeled Lu’s translation theory as dead translation, which was even worse than distorted translation. “Dead translation is dead from beginning to end,” he added, “and demonstrates a waste of time for all the reader’s efforts.”

Lu Xun, as a gifted language master, is able to communicate the translation concisely, beautifully, and effectively. Why can he translate such an uncomfortable text if he is fluent in Japanese and can understand the Japanese language? The author has put up various factors, combining Lu Xun’s historical background and his translation purpose:

First of all, from the beginning of the Opium War, Westerners opened China’s door with strong ships and guns, and China was caught in the whirlpool of the development of the times. The traditional Chinese culture was losing in the face of the strong Western civilization with the military failure. Because of the backwardness of culture and ideology, some people with the insight views began to introduce western technology and civilization. In the cultural exchange between China and foreign countries, Chinese traditional culture was constantly denied and abandoned. Lu Xun’s attitude towards traditional culture was very clear: “At present, our urgent task is to survive, to feed and to develop. If there are those who hinder the future, whether ancient or modern, human or ghost, from *three graves* and *five ceremonies*, they will all be overthrown ^[2].” Lu Xun, as one of them, realized that the modernization of China can only draw strength from the Western civilization, so he firmly used the stiff translation theory. Lu Xun believed that stiff translation was the best way to understand western culture and introduce it to China. For example, Zhao Jingshen, a famous scholar of Lu Xun’s time, translated Milky Way into “牛奶路.” Lu Xun criticized it and translated Milky Way into “神奶路” according to his method of stiff translation ^[3]. The reason why he did this was not to defend his stiff translation method, but to promote readers’ better understanding of western culture. Lu Xun wanted to let readers know that this sentence originated from ancient Greek mythology through the translation. This is what Zhao translated “牛奶路” can’t let readers understand. Therefore, the debate between Lu Xun and Zhao Jingshen was not only about translation methods, but also about a confrontation between new and old cultural values. In Lu Xun’s view, the fluency of Zhao’s translation at the cost of faithfulness was a deceit to the people who didn’t understand foreign languages ^[4]. Lu Xun was eager to promote western culture in China, and stiff translation was the most faithful way for him to keep introducing western culture.

Second, Lu Xun’s stress on stiff translation theory had a significant impact on the Chinese language revolution. Many individuals in China believed that the Chinese language was the major reason of the country’s inferiority since the late Qing Dynasty, therefore there were calls for language reform, including the demand to abolish Chinese characters and Latinize Chinese. This language change endeavor included Lu Xun’s stiff translation. The difficult-to-understand sentences he translated were used to learn new Chinese grammar and idioms. The inadequacy of the Chinese language, according to Lu Xun, was the cause for his employment of stiff translation theory. Only a stiff translation could prevent the loss and deformation of western culture throughout the translation process, allowing the original western culture and language form to be introduced, promoting and reforming Chinese culture and language. Of course, this approach of changing Chinese language through stiff translation appears to be a method that is no longer acknowledged by the translation and language circles, but it was nonetheless significant in China toward the end of the Qing Dynasty and the beginning of the Republic of China.

To summarize, while Lu Xun’s stiff translation theory has been critiqued in current translation circles, his stiff translation theory does have numerous flaws and issues from a modern translation perspective. But

returning to Lu Xun's background of times and cultural needs, stiff translation theory reflects Lu Xun's exploration of the reform and update of traditional Chinese culture as a patriot, as well as his attempts to reform Chinese language. Thus, in the historical background at that time, stiff translation is undoubtedly an appropriate way of translation.

3. Catford's translation linguistics: Is scientific translation theory the best translation theory?

Catford pays attention to the study of translation from the perspective of linguistics. His main theoretical point is the theory of equivalence transformation. Catford expounds the definition, classification, equivalence and transformation of translation, and systematically analyzes translation from the perspective of linguistics. In the translation linguistics, translation belongs to the category of comparative linguistics. He believes that as long as two languages have spatial, temporal, social or other relations, they can establish the equivalence relationship of translation. Catford defined translation as follows: the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL) ^[5]. Besides, Catford divided translation into three types or categories in terms of the extent, levels and ranks of translation: full translation and partial translation; total translation and restricted translation; rank-bound translation and unbounded translation.

Full translation is to translate every part of the text. Also, the partial translation means that some words in the original text can be moved into the target text without translation. Transliteration is a kind of partial translation, the most common one is in people's names and place names. Such as "Shakespeare (莎士比亚), Washington (华盛顿)." Overall, translation means replacement of SL grammar and lexis by equivalent TL grammar and lexis with consequential replacement of SL phonology by TL phonology. Restricted translation means replacement of SL textual material but at only one level. Restricted translation at the grammatical level or lexical level only is "difficult if not impossible" because of the interdependence of grammar and lexis. But Catford does give examples of some types: grammatical translation. For instance, the source language grammar is replaced by equivalent target language grammar without replacing source language lexis by target language lexis. Catford gives the example of "This is the man I saw," which can be translated grammatically into Chinese as "这就是我看到的那个人." Lexical translation, the source language lexis is replaced by equivalent target language lexis without replacing source language grammar by target language grammar. For example: "This is the man I saw" – translated into French as "这就是我说的那个男人." Rank bound translation and unbounded translation. Rank-bound translation refers to those special cases where equivalence is deliberately limited to non-texts smaller than the sentence. Word-for-word translation is one of the rank-bound translation. While unbounded translation means "normal" or "free" translation in which SL-TL equivalence are set up at whatever rank is appropriate. Free translation belongs to the unbounded translation. For example, a sentence "That's all Greek to me." The word-for-word translation is "那对我来说全是希腊语." And the free translation is "我对那个可一窍不通 ^[6]."

Catford believes that the central problem of translation is to find the equivalent components of translation. The central task of translation theory is to define the center and conditions of the equivalent components of translation. Catford combines translation studies with linguistic theories, systematically and objectively studies relevant knowledge of translation, and makes translation studies more scientific. But can we say that scientific translation is the best translation? The author himself thinks the answer is no. Catford's theory isn't without limitations as well. To begin with, it dismisses the significant impact of the environment on translation in the communication process and views translation as a mechanical language system. Second, Catford considers translation to be an empirical part of applied linguistics rather than a separate science, which exaggerates the link between translation and linguistics while ignoring translation's independence.

4. Qian Zhongshu's huajing: The ultimate of translation?

Qian Zhongshu is a master of connecting old and current knowledge from both the East and the West. For the first time, Qian Zhongshu presented his own translation perspective: hua, or the transformation of a work from one language to another, is the greatest quality in literary translation. If this can be done without revealing any signs of deception due to differences in language and speaking patterns, but yet maintaining the taste of the original, we may conclude that the performance has achieved the ultimate of translation.

He brought the notion of “realm,” which originated in Chinese classical aesthetics, to the area of translation, emphasizing that “realm” is a trait shared by all disciplines^[7]. Poetry, literature, and translation are all connected in some way. People celebrated this sort of effective translation as “transmigration of souls” in the 17th century, implying that the body changes but the spirit remains the same. To put it another way, the translated text should be true to the original so that it does not read like a translation, because the original material will never read like a translation. The following are some examples of Qian's huajing: “Men are good in one aspect, but horrible in many others” (人之善者同出一辙, 人之恶者殊途多方). “Get a livelihood, and then practice virtue” (先谋生而后修身).

Is Qian Zhongshu's huajing the best translation available? He also stated that owing to the variances between the two languages, the translation would always include distortions in meaning or tone that are inconsistent or incompatible with the original. This statement contradicts his prior argument huajing. It is pointless to discuss the greatest standards since there is an insurmountable difference between the two languages. Despite the fact that the translated text bears no resemblance to the original text, it cannot stand up to scrutiny. Many translations cannot bring out the original charm of the original text due to a language gap in everyday translation. Such as the translation of Chinese dish names, the naming of Chinese dishes involves Chinese traditional culture: “三丝烩鱼肚” (fish soup); “白云凤爪” (chicken leg). It can be seen from the translation that some characteristics of the dishes have been deleted. “Fish soup” did not fully display the ingredients used in the dishes, and “chicken leg” did not reflect the charm with Chinese culture at all. It can be seen that the cultural untranslatability of the two languages—the contextual characteristics of the original language do not exist in the culture of the target language, and the long-term cultural and psychological consciousness have caused great difficulties in translating contexts to huajing. Although huajing is a profound translation standard, in fact, a complete huajing is impossible to achieve.

5. Conclusion

“Literal translation or free translation?” is a popular topic in today's translation circles. Is it better to be foreign or domestic? “Should the market / reader come first, or should the text / author come first?” and etc. We can see from these considerations that defining a certain translation theory or a specific translation job as the best theory or work is problematic. The reason for this is that the aim of translation and the target group of translation dictate the type of translation theory, translation tactics, and translation methodologies used by the translator. Take Qu Qiubai's translation of *The Internationale* as an example, The beginning of the popular edition of *The Internationale* is “起来, 饥寒交迫的奴隶! 起来, 全世界受苦的人。” – this is domestication; the ending of *The Internationale* is “英特纳雄耐尔就一定要实现!” – this is foreignization. Both methods make sense and are the right choice. Since the French original says “Get up!”, the former uses the domestication approach. “One who has been sent to the depths of hell.” It's a Christian viewpoint. It is also directed against the Christians. In the case of Chinese workers and peasants, misery is preferable than damnation. The latter uses a foreignization approach to ensure that the translation has the same number of syllables as the original and is easy to sing. Meanwhile, it has no effect on the readers' interpretation of the term “international.” “It's like Avalokitesvara shaking hands with two thousand hands.” Complete equivalency between words is difficult to accomplish.” Translation, in the authors opinion, is a very creative endeavour. Everyone has their own idea of the finest translation theory or work, just as everyone has their

own idea of the most beautiful landscape, but there is no overarching ultimate “best” [8]. This is “the best” translation because it chooses the appropriate translation theory and translation procedures based on the aim of the translation, the content of the document, and the target group.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Liang S, 2002, *The Collected Writings of Liang Shiqiu*. Lujiang Publishing House, Xiamen, 348.
- [2] Lei Y, Zhang F, 2000, Cultural Transformation: The Significance and Value of Lu Xun’s Translation Activities in the Process of Chinese Society. *Lu Xun Studies Monthly*, 2000(12): 35-37.
- [3] Yang XY, Dai N, 1991, *The Complete Works of Lu Xun (Book IV)*, People’s Literature Publishing House, Beijing, 346-347.
- [4] Lu X, 1981, Memorial Committee. *The Complete Works of Lu Xun*, People’s Literature Publishing House, Beijing, 4.
- [5] Baker M, 2019, *Corpus Linguistics and Translation Studies: Implications and Applications, in Researching Translation in the Age of Technology and Global Conflict*, Routledge, 9-24.
- [6] Zhang Z, Peng F, 2015, *A Concise Course on Chinese and Western Translation Theory (English Version)*, Tsinghua University Press, Beijing, 179-180.
- [7] Qian Z, 2004, *The Translation of Lin Shu*, in Chan CT, *Twentieth-Century Chinese Translation Theory*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 104.
- [8] Wang L, 2015, There Are the Best Girls in the World, Not the Best Translators. *College Student*, 2015(5): 64-65.

Publisher’s note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.