

The Elimination of Translationese from the Perspective of Functional Equivalence

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Abstract: When reading the translation work of foreign literature, we can find many unsatisfactory translations which keep the “foreign flavor” and do not conform to Chinese expression rules, making the readers of target language hard to read and understand. The translators’ task is to build a bridge between the author of the source text and the readers of the target text. Nevertheless, some people are blindly faithful to the form but neglect the differences including vocabularies, cultural customs, and language styles between the source language and target language in translation practice, resulting in the generation of translationese. This paper gives a clear definition of translationese and brief introduction to functional equivalence and some countermeasures to avoid translationese with the guidance of functional equivalence.

1. Introduction

There are many differences between Chinese and English. English is a hypo-taxis language while Chinese is a para-taxis language; English is a static language, while Chinese is a dynamic language, which are the reasons why there is translationese in translation. Nida is the first one to define the term “translationese” in his book *The Theory and Practice of Translation*. American translator Nida defines translationese as “an artificial form of reporter language, in violation of normal grammatical and semiotic rules, caused by excessive effort toward formal correspondence”, which means transmitting the language form and sentence structure of the source language mechanically to the target language, resulting in the immaturity of the translation work which is hard for the readers of the target language to understand. Apart from western scholars, Chinese translators also pay much attention to translationese, taking Chinese scholar (Liu Miqing, 2005) for example, he holds the opinions that there are two factors causing translationese: one is the translators’ misunderstanding of the source language, and the other is the lack of good sense of the target language when a translator translates. The following are some examples.

(1) The report noted proposals that eating less fat and more food with whole grains and other fibers can protect against cancer (Fu Yonglin, 2012).

Translated version 1.

Zhè fèn bàogào tèbié tí dào le shǎoshí zhīfāng, duō chī hán miànfēn hé qítā xiānwéi sù de shíwù néng yùfáng áizhèng de nàxiē jiànyì.

Translated version 2.

Zhè fèn bàogào tèbié tí dào, yǒurén jiànyì shǎo chī zhīfāng duō chī quán liángshí shípǐn de shíwù, zhèyàng néng yùfáng áizhèng.

The translated version 1 adheres to the sentence pattern of source language, which may not so easy to understand when reading because it violates the expression rules of Chinese which are concise and clear. While the translated version 2 makes a distinction between the important part and the lesser one, which is brief, clear and natural for the target language readers to read and understand.

(2) The south China is a land flowing with milk and honey.

Translated version 1.

Zhōngguó nánfāng shì yīgè shèngchǎn niúnnǎi hé fēngmì dì dìfāng.

Translated version 2.

Zhōngguó nánfāng shì yīgè yúmǐzhīxiāng.

The translated version 1 mechanically translates the meaning of the vocabularies and follows the sentence pattern of source language, which looks normal at the first sight. However, Chinese people are not so familiar with milk and honey as western people. So when you read the sentence again and think carefully, you may feel very strange, because milk and honey are not very prevailing in south China. While translated version 2 translated “a land flowing with milk and honey” into “yúmǐzhīxiāng”, which conforms to the cultural custom of China, because fish and rice are staple food for people in south China, so translated version 2 is easier and more comfortable for readers to read and understand.

2. The origin of translationese

The origin of translationese is the differences between Chinese and English, the differences show in vocabularies, language styles, and cultural customs.

2.1 The differences of vocabularies

(1) The range of meaning of a word. Every word in a language has its range of meaning. If we use “A” and Chinese “Jiǎ” to build a relationship of the range of words, there are three conditions: first is $A = Jiǎ$, for example, apple = Píngguǒ, carbon dioxide = Èryǎnghuàtàn, in this case, Jiǎ can be replaced by A at any time, so we can translate them literally. Second is $A > Jiǎ$, for example, president > Zǒngtǒng, straight > Bǐzhí, taking “straight” as an example, it has different meanings in different sentences: a straight thinker, a straight answer, keep a room straight, keep a back straight, in this case, only part of A can be replaced by Jiǎ, so the same English word should be translated into different Chinese words. The last one is $A < Jiǎ$, for example, “Wàn” in Chinese has much more meanings than “ten thousands” in English: Wànbān (all the different kinds), Wànquánzhīcè (a completely safe plan), Wànwúyīshī (no danger of anything going wrong). In this case, the same Chinese word should be translated into different English words. The same word in different sentences may show different meanings, some are praises while some are critics. For example, “He is as mad as a hatter every day” and “All Chinese people seems to have gone mad with joy for the return of Hong Kong”. The attitude of critics or praise is deduced by the logicity of the context, so we should understand the purpose of the speaker exactly to express the correct meaning by using proper words.

(2) Parts of speech. English and Chinese also differ in parts of speech. First, there are articles (a, an, the) in English while none in Chinese. Such as a pair of shoes, an orange, the south China and so on. Conjunctions are used more frequently in English than those in Chinese, because English gives much attention to the language form while Chinese attach greater importance to the internal relations between sentences, many conjunctions in English needn’t be translated. For example, “Army men and civilians are united as one”. Nouns and verbs are playing vital roles in both Chinese and English, however, in English, verbs vary with the tense, and nouns change with the number, such as walked, finished, apples, chairs, and so on, while the changes of verbs and nouns cannot be found in Chinese. So we ought to give consideration to these changes in translating.

(3) The word order. The positions of subject, verb and object are similar in English and Chinese, while the positions of attribute and adverbial modifiers are relatively different (Quan Xunlian, 2009). Generally speaking, attribute can stand after a central word while they must be before the modified in Chinese. For example, “people from all over the world, a book borrowed from the library.” The position of adverbial word is very flexible in English, for example, “He looks at her with freezing eyes.”, the adverbial word is placed before the modified verb when translated into Chinese. “He remained there, reading.”, the position of the adverbial modifiers does not change after translating.

2.2 The differences of cultural customs

(1) Religious belief. With the further development and spreading of Buddhism in China, Buddhism plays an increasingly important part in Chinese culture. The trace of Buddhism can be found in many Chinese idioms, such as “Jièhuāxiànfó”, and so on. While in western countries, Christianity is the prevailing religion, many idioms and literary quotations are related to Christianity

and Bible, such as “God, Devil, Hell, as poor as the church mouse, a Judas kiss (means a sinister renegade) and so on”. Friday is an unlucky day for English people, because Adam and Eve stole the forbidden fruit on Friday and were evicted out of the Garden of Eden.

(2) Appellations. Influenced heavily by the traditional culture of feudalism for 2000 years, the appellations in Chinese give particular care to modesty, respect, and morality, such as “Quǎnzǐ, xiǎonǚ, gāo rén, gāojiàn, guìrén, guībīn”, which are difficult to find the equivalent words in English. While Britain is a country with constitutional monarchy, the hierarchy can be reflected on vocabularies, such as dukes, marquis, baron, earl, which can’t be found in China. Respecting the old and cherishing the young are the traditional virtue in China. “Lǎo” in Chinese is an appellation to show respect and courtesy, such as “Lǎoshī, lǎo yéyē, lǎo qiánbèi”, while in western countries, it’s a taboo to talk about people’s age, for example, in Chinese, we can express compliment by saying “Nín niánjì zhème dàle, shēntǐ hái zhème jiànkāng”, while this sentence can’t be directly translated into “You are so old but look so healthy”, because it will make English people uncomfortable or even offend them.

(3) Aesthetic standards and value orientation. The differences of aesthetic standards and value orientation make Chinese and western people have different evaluations for the same thing. For example, dog is human’s best friend in the eyes of western people, and many idioms about dog show praised meanings, such as “a lucky dog, love me love my dog, every dog has his day”, while in Chinese, dog is used to express derogative meanings, such as “Gǒutuǐzi, zǒugǒu, gǒuzhàng rénshì” etc.

2.3 The differences of language styles

(1) Dynamic and static. Nouns are frequently used in English sentences. English tends to be static, characterized by nominalization and weakening of verbs (in the form of adjectives, adverbs). For example, “He is in full conviction that real knowledge is the end product of thorough study of history”. On the contrary, Chinese tends to be dynamic, marked with the prevailing use of verbs. The phenomenon that several verbs are successively used is easily found in Chinese sentences and the verbs will be weakened in English during translating.

(2) Hypo-tactic and para-tactic. English sentences are hypo-tactic, which means each sentence needs to show their logical relations with connectives. There are apparent means of connection between sentences. English sentence is just like a big tree or pearl. For example, “All was cleared up some time later when news came from a distant place where an earthquake was felt in the morning”. While Chinese sentences are para-tactic, which means clauses can show their relations without connectives, making Chinese sentences very concise. Chinese sentences are made by the interior logicity, which just like great waves.

(3) Flexible and stable. In order to make a balance between sentences and show the effect of figure speech, the location of sentence constituents in English is very flexible, such as the subject-verb inversion. What’s more, passive voice is frequently used in English, which can hardly be found in Chinese. Chinese sentences usually follow the normal sentence order and use positive voice, which can follow the habitual expression rules of Chinese and be more natural for people to accept.

3. Functional equivalence theory

Nida establishes his personal translation theory on the basis of practice. The core aspect of his theory is function equivalence. The word “function” means the role which language plays in spoken language. Different languages must have different expression forms, they may be different from each other in pronunciation, grammar or expression rules, however, they share the same or similar function (Nida, 2003). That is to say, the purpose of translation is to seek for the equivalence of language functions but not the language forms. A qualified translation should aim to make the readers of the target language and readers of the source language have the same response. In order to introduce the theory of functional equivalence in details, Nida divides language functions into nine categories: expressive function, cognitive function, interpersonal function, informative function, imperative

function, per-formative function, emotive function, aesthetic function, meta-lingual function (Nida, 1993). Traditional translation theories estimate the translation by discourse, while Nida holds the opinions that translators should judge the translation according to the readers' reaction.

The translation procedures that Nida advocates need the following steps:

(1) Analysis. To analyze the superficial meaning of the source language in grammatical and semantic ways.

(2) Interpretation. To interpret the analyzed information of source language into target language in translators' mind.

(3) Reorganization. To reorganize the transformed information to make it conform to the expression rules of the target language.

The purpose of translation is to reproduce the information of the source language in the most natural way. In the procession of translation, translators are supposed to seek for the equivalence but not the identity. In other words, translators should try to reproduce the information of the source language but not the same expression forms with source language. Translators should make a lot of adjustments on both grammar and vocabularies, because with a perfect translation, there is no translationese. To achieve the goal, they must get rid of the restriction of the language structure of source language. In short, no matter in content or in language style, translators should seek for the equivalence in function (Xu Le, 2009).

Nida also puts forward four standards to estimate whether a translation is qualified (Nida, 2003).

(1) To convey the information of source language exactly.

(2) To express naturally and smoothly.

(3) To convey the language style and spirit of the source language.

(4) The source language and target language have the same impact on readers.

4. Countermeasures based on functional equivalence theory

4.1 On lexical level

(1) Not stop at the surface, but delve into the depth of the connotation in context. An English word may have several meanings in general. Translators shouldn't consider only the superficial meaning of a word, but to explore the deeper meaning.

(2) Not confine the understanding to the given definition in a dictionary. A stiff explanation in dictionary may make the translation illogical and unnatural or not so enjoyable at least. Furthermore, translators ought to keep a good dictionary at hand, because an authoritative dictionary can provide more meanings of a word for them to choose in translating.

(3) Analyze the context carefully. A word in different contexts may have different meanings. For example, a word in a context shows the emotion of praise, while in other context, it may be used for critics. It's indispensable for translators to know the author's attitude and purpose, so they ought to understand the contextual meaning of the word.

(4) Find a substitute. In some cases, it may be hard for translators to find an equivalent meaning for a word, then they can use a substitute word whose meaning is closed to the original word so that they can make readers better understand the context.

4.2 On cultural custom level

(1) Enhance the comprehension of the native culture and western culture by comparison. The difference of cultural custom between Chinese and English can be easily found. Language is the vehicle of culture, so that the deviation or discrepancies caused by culture is inevitable. The art of translation is to limit those deviation and discrepancies to the least. It's imperative for translators to broaden their horizon of cultural knowledge.

(2) Know the readers' psychology of source language. In order to make a translation more acceptable for readers of source language to understand, translators ought to take the readers' psychology into consideration.

(3) Literal translation with annotation. Because of the difference of cultural custom between

Chinese and English, sometimes translators have to translate a word literally, but the translation may be difficult for the readers of source language to understand. In this case, translators can translate the word with annotation so that they can make readers understand the word by explaining the background information of it (Ma Qiaozheng, 2007).

4.3 On Language Style Level

(1) Fully consider language styles between Chinese and English. It's imperative for translators to do more reading about Chinese and English article written by famous writers so that translators can get familiar with the language styles between the two languages and make a flexible transition of language styles in translating.

(2) Improve learning skills. On the one hand, translators ought to try their best to improve English ability so that they can better understand the language style of source language and make solid foundation for expression. On the other hand, Chinese ability is also very important, because the expression of Chinese is the key to decide whether a translation is qualified or not. So a good translator should have a perfect command of his own native language (Huang Lini, 2013).

5. Conclusion

It's very valuable to research translationese. As translators, it's their obligation to build a bridge between the author of source language and the readers of target language, while translationese will damage the beauty of translation, even worse, it can make the readers of target language misunderstand the author's writing intention and general idea, which makes the bridge broken. So it's indispensable for translators to have a clear definition of translationese and strategies to avoid it to make better translation. The author hopes that more studies can be done in this topic.

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