A Defense of Translationese

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Abstract: Translationese in the Chinese language emerged in the wake of translation practice during the May Fourth Movement period. Many scholars have carried out the study of it. However, most studies in this field are prescriptive which are limited to fierce arguments for or against translationese. To objectively observe this phenomenon, this essay carries out a systemic categorization and description of translationese in modern Chinese language. All these categories are exemplified with examples from People's Daily and the Chinese language textbooks for primary school, with relevant classical Chinese structures presented for comparison. Focusing on the syntactic structure, word order to be specific, the essay concludes that all the translationese examples discussed were absent in classical Chinese, and they were introduced into China during the May Fourth Movement by translation practice. Contrary to most studies on this topic, this essay argues that translationese enriches the expression of modern Chinese language and become an integral part of Chinese language culture.

1. Introduction

Translationese is born with translation practice. Gradually, scholars begin to notice its influence on the target language (herein after referred to as TL), or more specifically on the Chinese language as in English to Chinese translation (herein after referred to as E-C translation) [1].

Some scholars argue translationese should be eliminated for it is a threat to the Chinese culture and to the Chinese literary creation. Others hold that translationese can be positive, because the development of a language must be accompanied with accepting or assimilating of foreign influences.

Obviously the debate concerns whether translationese in modern Chinese should be eliminated or accepted; unfortunately no agreement has been reached so far. In order to find a new way out, a descriptive approach is adopted in this essay, which aims at describing objectively translationese and its role in modern Chinese.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Previous Studies on Translationese

In western countries, many scholars recognized the linguistic phenomenon of translationese and have carried out research on it. Translationese, in Nida's opinion, refers to "formal fidelity, with resulting unfaithfulness to the content and the impact of the message". He argues that a good translation should "studiously avoid" translationese (Nida and Taber 2004, 100) [2].

In Dictionary of Translation Studies, Shuttleworth and Cowie take translationese as an entry. It is used to refer to translated versions which are perceived as "unnatural, impenetrable or even comical" because they are obviously different from the features of TL (Shuttleworth and Cowie 2004, 187) [3].

Domestically, Fan Zhongying coins a term "translation syndrome" to describe translationese. He considers it as a common disease occurred in translation which needs curing (Fan 1994, 98) [4].

Liu Miqing also carries out research on translationese. He considers that translationese is the product of adopting the concept and methodology of mechanical translation (Liu 1999, 245) [5].

2.2. Previous Studies on the Influence of Translationese on Chinese

Almost all scholars mentioned before have noticed the influence of SL on TL in their researches on translationese. The changes that Chinese has gone through under the influence of translationese have also been noticed [6].

Yu Guangzhong says "translationese" which can be seen in Chinese newspapers is a hybrid composed of Europeanized expressions and Chinese conventional grammar (Yu 2002, 84) [15].

In 2008, Pan Wenguo published Written Chinese in Crisis. In this book, he holds translationese is gaining ground in the Chinese language since it can be seen everywhere in the translated versions as well as in the Chinese literary works (Pan 2008, 44-47). He believes the result of translationese is the distortion of Chinese and finally Chinese will lose its ability to express ideas (Pan 2008, 46) [12].

Here, it is necessary to make clear the division of pre-modern Chinese and modern Chinese for the sake of convenience for further discussion. Consulting different scholars' divisions, Pan Wenguo's is chosen by this essay: the year 1919 is the historical division of pre-modern Chinese and modern Chinese (Pan 1997, 49) [13].

2.3. Remaining Questions

As a matter of fact, Chinese scholars do not give a detailed and systematic study of translationese at the syntactic level with reliable data. Compared with lexicon, the syntax of a language is more conservative and thus more resistant to foreign influence.

Through a comprehensive descriptive research of the influences of translationese on modern Chinese from the syntactic perspective, it is argued that translationese can coexist with modern Chinese and it has become an integral part of modern Chinese.

3. Basis of Research

3.1. Understanding Translationese

What is translationese? To answer this question, we need go back to the question "What translation is". First, it should be noted that the term translation in this essay merely refers to the transfer of written texts from English to Chinese. According to Catford, translation is the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL). (Catford 1965, 20) [1]

Whatever the definition of translation is, it involves two parts: SL and TL. If a translator holds that translation must be TL-oriented, the strategy he or she adopts would be liberal translation or domestication. On the other hand, if one believes the purpose of translation is to introduce things of the SL culture to readers of TL culture, the strategy would be literal translation or foreignization. Suppose that a translator chooses the latter one and the influence of SL on TL can be seen all through the translated version, the result would be translationese [7].

In China, the beginning of translationese may be traced back to the New Culture Movement when many progressives were eager to abolish classical Chinese and to establish vernacular Chinese as the standard language. They resorted to was translation to give up classical Chinese expressions. Lu Xun was the first one who valued the importance of translation (Ji 2007, 5) [8]. When translating, he argues, one should introduce foreign syntax to enrich the Chinese language (Lu 1931, 225). Likewise, Fu Sinian, Zheng Zhenduo, Zhou Zuoren and Ai Siqi were earnest advocates of literal translation. Since foreign expressions and syntax were strongly recommended, translationese began to appear in the literary works at that time.

Based on what has discussed above, translationese is defined in this essay as translation versions that adopt the syntax of SL. Since the research of this essay is only carried out with regard to E-C translation, the definition can be specified as translation versions that adopt the syntax of English. Accordingly, this essay discusses the influence of translationese on modern Chinese at the syntactic level [9].

3.2. Methodology and Data Collection

In this essay, examples which fall into the category of translationese are collected and analyzed. Data in this research are collected from People's Daily and the Chinese language textbooks for primary school students in the fifth and sixth grades. These two sources are chosen as a frame of reference for the following reasons [10].

First, they are the most authoritative and influential. The Chinese language textbooks are guidance for students to learn Chinese. As the major organ of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, the language adopted for the newspaper has to be correct, appropriate and standard.

Second, the language of the two sources is the most conservative in terms of change.

Besides, the reason for choosing textbooks for pupils in the fifth and sixth grades lies in that they are the crucial phases for students to learn how to make sentences. Furthermore, data selected from People's Daily covers a relatively comprehensive content including news, opinions, essays as well as newsletters. And the time range is more than 70 years from 1948 till now [11].

Comparison is applied through the study in this essay. Therefore, when a translationese is introduced, a classical Chinese structure is presented for comparison in the following part. The following part will focus on translationese at the syntactic level, word order to be specific [14].

4. Word Order

Wikipedia has an entry for word order and gives the definition as follows:

In linguistics, word order typology is the study of the order of the syntactic constituents of a language, and how different languages can employ different orders. (Wikipedia)

Chinese and English are generally described as subject, verb and object (SVO) languages. But this order is not as strictly adhered to in Chinese as it is in English. The grammatical subject and object in Chinese are not as strictly fixed as they are in English. For example, "Women shai taiyang (We are bathing in the sun)". Although Women (We) is in the position of subject, the real subject of this sentence is taiyang (the sun) which appears to be the object of this sentence. This liberty enables the Chinese language to adopt the English word order system without appearing to be deviant [16]. The influence of translationese on modern Chinese in terms of word order is addressed from the following aspects.

4.1. Predisposition of Personal Pronoun

A personal pronoun is used to refer to the speaker or the person spoken to, or to a person or thing whose identity is clear,. Accordingly, "pro + noun" means substituting for a noun. Therefore, the noun a personal pronoun substitutes for shall be the antecedent of the pronoun. This is also the case of classical Chinese. In classical Chinese, a personal pronoun should come after the noun that it stands for. For example,

My son-in-law came yesterday. He must have stolen it.

(from The History of the Three Kingdoms) (Tang 1992, 160)

However, in modern Chinese, it is found that the violation of this rule brings something new to our language. Take the following:

1) He sat in a wheelchair for 40 years, with only three fingers to move, giving speeches and asking questions through a voice synthesizer.

He is Stephen Hawking, the "king of the universe". (from Xiaoxue yuwen keben liunianji shangce (Chinese Textbook for the Sixth Grade Pupils in Primary School, vol. 1) (herein and after referred to as Liushang) 53)

2) He has traveled more than 70,000 kilometers in 15 years, but he has done only one thing: to find water and dig wells for people in poor areas. He is Xu Yongfu, squad leader of the drilling company of a reserve water supply engineering regiment in the Liaoning Province Military Region. (from People's Daily, December 31, 2011)

The first example is extracted from a text which is about Stephen Hawking, the eminent scientist.

The first paragraph of this text is composed of the first sentence above while the second sentence alone forms the second paragraph. When reading the first paragraph of this text which begins with he, a personal pronoun, readers cannot figure out who this he refers to. This is also the case with the second example which is selected from People's Daily. As the identity showed by a personal pronoun is not clear, this usage of translationese can arouse the reader's curiosity to continue his or her reading to find out the answer.

4.2. Flexible Placement of Quotations

In classical Chinese, a quotation usually comes after the speaker, for example:

A man named Mao Sui came up to Lord Pingyuan and recommended himself to him, saying, "I heard that your Excellency is going to the state of Chu to sign a covenant with twenty of your followers. But there is still one man short. I hope master will add me to them." (from Records of the Grand Historian) (Tang 1992, 105)

However, in modern Chinese, it can be seen that the placement of quotations in a sentence is flexible. There are two other ways to place a quotation: separate placement and pre-placement.

Let us look at the following examples first.

1) "Comrade Niu Yuru is one of the most passionate cadres in the whole autonomous region!" The party secretary of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, Chu Bo, said of Niu yuru. "No matter what he does, he is full of confidence and passion. There is no word 'difficulty' in his dictionary of life." (from Newsletters of People's Daily, 403)

2) "You wicked little fool!" As soon as Fabre got home, his father scolded him angrily. "I told you to take care of the ducks. You play with these useless things. Throw them away!" (from Xiaoxue yuwen keben wunianji shangce (Chinese Textbook for the Fifth Grade Pupils in Primary School, vol. 1)(herein and after referred to as Wushang) 29)

The quotation in each example above consists of more than one sentence. And the speaker in each example is put after the first sentence which is a brief summary of the quotation. Such a structure is invisible in classical Chinese. The second quotations are detailed explanations in the context of the first quotations. Therefore, the sequence of sentences in the above examples is organized in this way: brief summary, the speaker and the rest sentences. Readers can have a clear picture of the meaning in this way.

Placing quotations before the speaker can present the urgency or the importance of what is said.

1) "Save Clement!" cried the captain. (from Liushang, 37)

2) "Not good, must be the water inrush in the coal mine!" Zhang Changxing immediately reported to operator on duty at Mianchi aluminum mine of Coal Mining Brach Company. (from Newsletters of People's Daily, 476)

The structure of the above examples is like this: all of the sentences said by the speaker are put before the speaker. Such distribution does not exist in classical Chinese. The above examples suggest that pre-placement of quotations can be used to show the urgency.

4.3. Attributive Preceding Personal Pronouns

In classical Chinese, personal pronouns reject any pre-modifiers (Wang 1943, 327). However, this is no longer the case in modern Chinese.

1) The here-and-now we are completely intoxicated. (from Wushang, 96)

2) Rarely tearful he, burst into tears only once. It's because of cervical clearance beyond the standard of less than 1 mm, and he failed to be chosen astronaut trainer. (from Newsletters of People's Daily, 452).

In the above instances, personal pronouns we and he are preceded by the underlined modifiers. Let's take the second sentence as an example. If we rewrite this sentence like this, "He rarely shed tears, except once. It's because of cervical clearance ….", then compare this sentence with the original one, we can see that the subject is highlighted in the original one as it is modified by something similar to the main clause. That is to say, the meaning of "rarely tearful" is very similar to "burst into tears only once". Therefore, attributives before personal pronouns can give emphasis to the quality or the state of the subject.

4.4. Use of Long Attributive

Classical Chinese tends to have short sentences. In modern written Chinese, however, lengthy sentences are highly common. Most of them involve long and complicated modifiers. The structure is the use of pre-modifying adjective clauses marked by the subordinating particle *de* to modify a noun.

1) After a winter when there was nothing to look for and nothing to eat, the days of spring and the revival of all trees come again! (from Essays of People's Daily, 122).

2) I was afraid to see her sad eyes, which had been deprived of light by the torture of poverty. (from Essays of People's Daily, 122).

In the first example above, the noun *a winter* is modified by a clause of causality. This is also the case with the second one. It can be seen from the above examples that the long modifiers make the sentence structure tight. It certainly enhances the explicitness and precision of the text, making modern Chinese a better tool in a modern society.

5. Confronting the Reality

As has mentioned in the introduction of this paper, there are many scholars hold that translationese should be eliminated to keep to the purity of modern Chinese. However, it is a pity that translationese can also be seen in their writings.

Pan Wenguo, the author of Written Chinese in Crisis, calls upon people throughout his book to notice that the Chinese language is in a crisis caused by translationese. Ironically, this advocate for wiping out translationese serves as a good example in spreading translationese because in his own writing what he condemns turns out to be what he favors. Take the following example:

In addition to popular songs and popular books, there is an even more popular thing that is changing our social life. This is the mobile phone SMS that has entered people's life with the rapid development of the Internet. (Pan 2008, 51)

In the example, long attributive "that has entered people's life …" is used to modify "the mobile phone SMS". Pan's explanation of translationese is long sentences which do not conform to the rhythmic breathing of human beings. Therefore, the above example is a typical one according to his explanation. However, he does not realize that it is translationese that enables him to express such a complicated message in one sentence.

Research of this essay demonstrates that translationese can be found in Chinese textbooks for primary school students, in People's Daily and even in the writings of people who strongly condemns it. All these facts justify that translationese is gaining its ground in modern Chinese. Through objective description of translationese in modern Chinese, it has also been proved in this essay that translationese can coexist with modern Chinese and it has become an integral part of modern Chinese. Translationese is already a fact of existence in modern Chinese whether admitting it or not.

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