

# Effect of Social Changes on Chinese Language Change in Translation

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**Abstract**—Under the Social linguistic theories about the interactions of language changes and social changes, the author compares two Chinese versions of an English text *Gone With the Wind*, which were finished in different time periods, trying to trace the change of Chinese language since the 20<sup>th</sup> century and find out the deep rooted factors affecting this change.

**Index Terms**—language change, social effect, coincidence

## I. INTRODUCTION

The language change has been the subject of much research over the past years. Social linguistics pays more attention to this field. Chen Yuan (1998) believes that it is the change of social life that resulted in the change of language, including change of sound, vocabulary and grammar. And vice versa, social changes can also be found in the change of language. Language change produces all kinds of language varieties. R.A.Hudson defines a variety of language as a set of linguistic items with similar social distribution. (R.A.Hudson, 2000), which includes diachronic variety (difference on time) and synchronic variety (difference on regions). Most social linguists focus only on the way language changes and the social reasons that cause its changes, like Social Linguistics: An Introduction (Zhu Wanjin, 1992), and Sociolinguistics (R.A.Hudson, 2000). Many researches have been down in the field of the comparison between ancient Chinese and modern Chinese, such as the Chinese Stylistic (Li Yunhan, 2000, 2). But very little research has been done in the period of modern Chinese.

The period from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the end of this century is of great importance for Chinese society. It saw too many revolutions and reforms. Chinese society changed from a feudal society to a semi-feudal semi-colonial society, and then to a socialist society. The attitude of the main stream towards foreign culture changed from being exclusive to blindly assimilatory and then retrograded to an exclusive one. All these changes are faithfully reflected in the change of Chinese language. It changed sharply from the ancient Chinese to semi-ancient semi-modern Chinese after the vernacular Chinese reformation in 1910s, and then to modern Chinese. The change of Chinese language, including the varieties in grammar, vocabulary and phonetics, just reflects the change of Chinese society. Any changes in human society, no matter how subtle they would be, will be reflected more or less in the languages, especially in vocabulary. And some vocabularies even evidently and deeply reflect the characteristics in a certain period of society.

To compare the varieties of Chinese language within the 20<sup>th</sup> century should be of great value, although the differences between the semi-ancient semi-modern Chinese and the modern Chinese are not as obvious as the differences between the ancient Chinese and the modern Chinese. The varieties vividly reveal pictures of our social life.

Just because of the sharp changes in Chinese, big problems appear in translation. Many valuable foreign literatures need to be retranslated once after some time in order to adapt to the language change. But viewed from another aspect, language change also reveal itself in these different versions of translation, that is to say, we may explore the varieties of Chinese through the comparison of some different translated versions of a certain foreign works. This certain foreign works chosen here is American popular novel *Gone With the Wind*, and the translated versions are 《飘》, (Fu Donghua, Zhejiang Literature & Art Press, 1940) and 《飘》 (Li Meihua, Yilin Press, 2002). The reason for choosing *Gone with the Wind* mainly is because of its popularity, wide influence and closeness to readers' daily life, and of course, there is another very important reason: the many different Chinese versions in different times. As for these two versions, one most important advantage is their clear time features, they were produced in two representative ages; the other advantage for these versions is that the translators use quite different translation skills and styles. The two versions were produced in quite different times: 1940 and 2002. These times can represent quite different political and social era in China. Such a difference can fully satisfy the author's intention to show the change of modern Chinese and also to reveal the change of Chinese society through the change of Chinese language. And these three versions were produced in different places, inevitably influenced by the dialects there when translated.

## II. COMPARISON

In comparison of the three versions (original versions included), I picked the first sentences of some chapters, and one common feature can be made out in this part: the influence of English language on Chinese making traces of synchronic varieties in different versions. In these sentences all the translation versions split the complicated structures

or compound clauses into independent parts but for different reasons. Take the sentences in Chapter 54 and 58, as an example, the change is about the position of subject in the compound sentence. Look at the sentence in Chapter 54:

a: Safe in her room again, Scarlett fell on the bed, careless of her *moiré* dress, bustle and roses. (Mitchell, P909)

思嘉回到了自己房里，便不顾身上的新衣服，一骨碌倒在床中。(Fu, P1137)

再次安全地呆在自己的房间里以后，思嘉扑倒在床上，根本顾不了波纹绸裙子、撑架和玫瑰花。(Li, 872)

In Chinese when the subject of main clause are the same with that of the subordinate clause, usually nouns are put in the clause put at the beginning of the whole sentence, and the corresponding pronouns are put in the second clause. That is because the Chinese language lays much emphasis on semantics and function, and the most important information, like the subject of the whole sentence, are used to being put at the very beginning, no matter in the main clause or the subordinate clause. While the English language lays much emphasis on structure, the nouns can only stay with the main clause and corresponding pronouns with the subordinate clause. But with the globalization of economy, comes also the globalization of languages. The popularization of English language has made its grammar gradually filtering into other languages like Chinese, so comes Li's translation in the above example. In the Chinese of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such usage has not been considered as wrong any more.

Then sentences in Chapter 12 and 46 represent the new usages of Chinese under the influence of English.

b: Few families in the north end of town slept that night, for the news of the disaster to the Klan, and Rhett's stratagem, spread swiftly on silent feet as the shadowy form of India Wilkes slipped through back yards, whispered urgently through kitchen doors and slipped away into the windy darkness. (Mitchell, P794)

当天晚上，英弟就到那些有关系的人家去把瑞德这个计划挨户通知了。那些人家知道了这个消息，一则是喜，一则是惧，总之，那天晚上饿狼陀北头是没有几家人家安稳睡觉的。(Fu, P999)

那天晚上，城北角没几家人能睡上一夜安稳觉，因为有关三 K 党的灾难性的消息和瑞德的战略，迅速经由一双悄悄前进的脚步传了开去。那是英蒂的身影从一家后院转到另一家后院，急切地在厨房门口低声说着，然后又消失在风声呼呼的黑夜当中。(Li, P760)

This passage contains a causal compound sentence signaled by the conjunctive "for". According to English grammar, the main clause usually is put before the subordinate clause. When confronted with this structure, Fu cannot deal with it in accordance with traditional Chinese grammar since in Chinese hypotactic sentence the subordinate clause usually is put before the main clause (Qian Nairong, P224). But in this sentence, since the consequential clause is too long and too complicated to be put in the very beginning, Fu cannot switch the structure into the traditional subordinate coming before main clause structure. So he can only changed the structure of causal hypotactic sentence into a coherent paratactic structure which may be much easily accepted by Chinese readers at that time. While in the second translation version, the translator made the subordinate clause very naturally before the main clause, in accordance with the original text. And also, these structures can be seen everywhere today and accepted by almost everyone in China. Such sentences may often come into our eyes:

战争爆发后，伊拉克规定记者发稿只许用英文和阿拉伯文，因为新闻审查官只会这两种文字。(Tang Shizeng, 《我从战场归来》，P268)

我想父母还是爱我的，虽然表达方式单调而实际，都在饭菜里面。(Zhang Minzhi, 《有一种爱永不断电》，P41)

But anyway such anastrophe is not common in Chinese until now. Sometimes it is because the author wants to emphasize some particular part of the sentence, as that in example (b), and sometimes it is because the structure of the subordinate clause is so complicated and so long that if put at the beginning, the whole sentence would lose its balance.

The common difference between the translation versions is that the second and third versions take use of some new usages that are not allowed to be used in the first version. The main reason is the opening up of our country and the globalization of economy. Yes, economy is the foundation for every phenomenon in social field, language changes included. And the dominating position of major English-speaking countries, America and the United Kingdom, in the economic field has decided the dominating position of English language in the languages field. This dominating position has made translation an unequal activity in which English is put in a central place while the target language is put in an unimportant and marginal place. And the worse thing is that this unequal exchange of languages also causes an unequal exchange of culture. According to Robert Phillipson, this is called linguistic imperialism and according to Venuti, this is harmful both to the translating and to the translated language since the both languages lose their opportunity to get diversified.

But this fact does have some positive effects on the target language, Chinese here. Language should be considered as a dynamic system which is open to other languages, and the range of vocabularies in one language is decided by the scope of social life of the people who uses it. So when Chinese people's social life has been greatly changed, of course the vocabularies and usages in Chinese will change accordingly. This change then decentralizes the dominating position of the main stream Chinese and makes Chinese language more diversified, which will thereby add some new energy to the Chinese language and extend its life-span. And also, the change of Chinese society is a kind of improvement. With China's development in the fields like culture, economy and science, the corresponding change of Chinese language of course should be in accordance with the advanced trend of human society. While since to some degree, the English language does represent some aspects of the trend of future development of human society, no matter in fields of culture, economy or science, to adopt the new expressions and usages in English is, in this sense, to conform to the advanced

aspects of human society. This adoption removes the barriers people may meet in the activities of intercommunion with foreign cultures, economy and sciences. So viewed from this point, the change has some positive effects on Chinese.

But this adoption, of course not only happened in Chinese, when diversifies some particular language, simplifies human languages on the whole. It makes all the human languages, when dealing with some particular aspects, adopt the same structures of expression, which will then influence peoples' thoughts and strengthen the main stream not only in language, but also in peoples' ideas and thoughts. In this aspect, English then becomes a carrier of the ideas and thoughts of English-speaking country. When filtering into other languages, the ideas, concepts and thoughts are also input into people's mind who speak that language.

### III. CONCLUSION

This kind of language varieties translation also proposes another point for people: the same original text reveals itself quite differently to different people's eyes, and also because meaning is not invariable, the existence of original text should owe to the various translations. So a valuable original work should be translated regularly in different periods, only in this way can readers appreciate the work precisely and deeply. Heidegger has a famous thought that is coincident with Marxism pointing out that no human can look out upon the world he lives in. Since he lives in the world, all his ideas are determined by the world and he can never break loose the control of it. This point can also be viewed as an advantage of the translators. One cannot view his world in a distance, but his offspring can. The original author's ideas are restrained by his age, the translators can meet this limitation because they have left the age of the original author and can overlook it to find the demerits of his works. And the same situation happens between different translators in different times. From this point of view, a retranslation may be regarded and a revised or more perfect version or explanation of the original version. So there is every necessity to retranslate those valuable works. Generally speaking, in the time when the society is stable without so many gigantic reforms, the period may be longer since both languages and people's thoughts and value will not have many sharp changes under such a circumstance. While in the time like the 20<sup>th</sup> century in China, which is quite special, the period should be much shortened. And other parts are still inviting more future research.

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