

On Cultural Differences and Translation Methods

Hongmei Sun

College of Foreign Languages, Qufu Normal University, Shandong Province, China

Email: tom3164@126.com

Abstract—Nowadays translation is regarded essentially as a cross-cultural communication, and cultural differences pose major barriers in translating. After a brief overview of cultural differences in translation, this paper mainly explores foreignizing and domesticating methods in dealing with cultural differences and those possible factors affecting the choice of them.

Index Terms—cultural differences, foreignizing and domesticating method, factor affecting the choice of translation methods

I. INTRODUCTION

In the field of translation studies, scholars' understanding of translation in traditional sense has shifted along with the popularity and prosperous development of cultural studies in the past decades. Translation is no longer regarded as merely a cross-linguistic activity but essentially cross-cultural communication. Most people assume that if a person speaks two or more languages well, he or she should be able to translate with ease, but this is not always the case. Actually, proper understanding and rendering of a text is more likely to be a problem of cultural diversity than that of linguistic differences. Nida (1981) argues that difficulties arising out of differences of cultures constitute the most serious problems for translators and have produced the most far-reaching misunderstandings among readers. To explore cultural differences and then decide how to deal with them most appropriately has become one of the essential issues that current translation studies should deal with.

II. AN OVERVIEW OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND TRANSLATION

Though one cannot face fairly the problems of translation without reckoning with the many and often striking differences between any two cultures involved, it would be quite wrong to exaggerate the diversity. Without cultural similarities and universals there is no way for people of different cultures to communicate with each other and translation would be impossible. However, there are no absolute cultural universals or cultural similarities.

Generally speaking, for two sentences from different languages to be translationally equivalent they must convey the same referential, pragmatic and intralingual meanings. However, due to differences between two cultures semantic equivalence are limited to some degree. For those cultural-specific terms and expressions, we cannot find their referents in the target culture. For example, *hippies* are well-known products of American society. Neither 希比士 nor 希比派 in Chinese convey anything about the young people of the 1960's. 嬉皮士 might be a better word, but still might be misleading, because some hippies were serious-minded, even though their lifestyle appeared unusual to most people. Sometimes the cultural differences are striking and obvious. They may involve conflicting values attached to the same objects. For example, in the Orient the *dragon* suggests good luck and fortune while in the western world, it is a threatening animal, symbolic of overwhelming evil power. Obviously the pragmatic meanings of *dragon* differ in two cultures. *Dog*, on the contrary, which has a positive connotation in the west, usually carries a negative meaning in Chinese culture. Non-equivalence in intralingual meaning can often be found due to cultural differences. The intralingual meaning is mainly determined by the resources of language. Sound, rhythm, unique patterns of phrase order, techniques for linking clauses into sentences may all carry semantic values. If the form in which a message is expressed is an essential element of its significance, then there is a very distinct limitation in communicating this significance from one language to another. For example, “一个人躺在地上, 伸展四肢, 仰面朝天, 像个‘大’字”。From the character “大”, Chinese readers can easily image what kind of posture the man has. But the English version “A man is lying on his back with arms and legs wide spread, facing the vast universe” can hardly give readers the vivid picture as “大” conveys.

III. CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND TRANSLATION METHODS

A. Foreignizing and Domesticating Methods

Traditionally, when translation methods are concerned, the central problem of translating has always been whether to translate literally or freely. Since translation is mostly interlingual communication in its translational sense, the main points under dispute between literal and free translation are actually the linguistic differences in the way of expression. Nowadays, it is generally agreed that translation is inevitably influenced by the source language culture and the target

language culture, then how to comply with cultural norms involved becomes one of the major problems in actual translating. A translator must decide which of the norms take priority--whether the cultural norms of the source language community, the cultural norms of the target language community, or perhaps a combination of the two. Correspondingly, foreignizing method and domesticating methods are put forward. The choice of foreignizing method will result in a SL Culture-oriented translation while the choice of domesticating method will result in a TL Culture-oriented translation. Both of them are termed from the cultural perspective and differences between them indicate different views on the transferences of cultural elements in translation.

Domestication and foreignization are often regarded as contradictory to each other and have evoked endless debates. Quite often one favors one and negates the other, but as a matter of fact, each of them has its unique features and advantages and the contrast between them has been primarily a matter of focus.

Foreignizing translation is based on the assumption that literacy is not universal, that communication is complicated by cultural differences between and within linguistic communities. As translation serves as an important means of cultural exchange, it's the translator's responsibility to introduce other cultures to the target language community and this is usually most of the target language readers' purpose of reading. Therefore in actual translating, the translator aims to preserve the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text and a maximum number of source-language culture structure and words are usually borrowed and introduced into the target-language culture. Lefevere Venuti is a firm advocator of foreignizing method both in theory and in practice. For him, "a translated text should be the site where a different culture emerges, where a reader gets a glimpse of a culture other, and resistancy, a translation strategy based on an aesthetic of discontinuity, can best preserve that difference, that otherness." (Venuti, 1995, p. 306) But what should be mentioned is that by disrupting the cultural codes that prevail in the target language, foreignizing translation usually shows features that somehow seem "strange" or "foreign" for the receiving culture. These features, however, are not the result of a lack of translational competence or examples of translationese, but they are evidence of conscious decisions by the translator.

By contrast, for those who are in favor of domestication translation, the aim of translation is to bring back cultural others as the same, the recognizable, even the familiar. The greatest possible effort is made for the reader, who must not be put off by a text perceived in any way as foreign; the result is a greater or lesser degree of "normalization", where all the source language culture-specific traces are made to disappear. In this way, *shed crocodile tears* should be translated into "猫哭老鼠" instead of "鳄鱼眼泪". Nida is a representative of those who firmly advocate domesticating translation. "A translation of dynamic equivalence aims at complete naturalness of expression," states Nida, "and tries to relate the receptor to modes of behavior relevant within the context of his own culture" (Nida, 1964, p.159). For Nida, "the receptors of a translation should comprehend the translated text to such an extent that they can understand how the original receptors must have understood the original text" (Nida, 1964, p.36)

B. Factor Affecting the Choice of Translation Methods

Both of these two methods have their merits and defects and both are valid in their own way. In actual translation practice, some people may prefer the foreignizing method while others may like the domesticating one. Newmark (1988) once compared a text to be translated to a particle in an electric field attracted by the opposing forces of the two cultures and the norms of two languages, the idiosyncrasies of one writer (who may infringe all the norms of his own language), and the different requirements of its readers, the prejudice of the translator and possibly of its publisher. Therefore, we can see that there are many factors that a translator has to take into consideration before he finally decides which method or methods he will use in actual translating. Guo Jianzhong(1999) once points out that four factors which are likely to influence the choice of cultural method. They are the purpose of translation, the type of text, the intention of the author and the readership. But there are still some other factors which should be taken into account, such the economic and political situation, the translator's attitude towards the target and the source language cultures or even some deep-rooted cultural presuppositions of the translator, to name just a few. The fact is that the series of choices that one translator makes will be an interconnected one and most of the time a version is a result influence by a combination of many factors.

Let's take some examples from *The Dream of Red Mansion*. As a Chinese classical novel, it is surly full of highly culture-loaded phrases and expressions. Lets compare two versions, one is translated by two famous translator Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang (version 1), the other is by and American translator David Hawkes (version 2). From the examples in the following, you can see the manner in which two different translators have rendered the Chinese novel in significantly different ways.

(1)真是“天有不测风云，人有旦夕祸福”。

Version 1: Truly, "storms gather without warning in nature, and bad luck befalls men overnight".

Version 2: I know "the weather and human life are both unpredictable".

Obviously, version 1 is a literal translation for the purpose of maintaining the source cultural elements and the style, while in version 2, the original figurative meaning is transferred to the target language culture, but the image in Chinese culture has to be sacrificed.

(2)巧媳妇做不出没米的饭来，叫我怎么办？

Version 1: Even the cleverest housewife can't cook a meal with rice. What do you expect me to do?

Version 2: and I don't see what I am supposed to do without any capital. Even the cleverest housewife can't make bread without flour.

Rice in China is just like bread in English-speaking country; both of them are traditional food in their respective culture. Therefore, the image of "rice" in Chinese culture is changed into "bread" by Hawkes in order to ease the foreign readers' understanding.

(3)至于才子佳人等书，.....

Version 1: As for books of the beauty-and-talented type,

Version 2: And the "boudoir romances"

Chinese four-character words are a unique feature of Chinese language. Mr Yang insists on literal translation so that this linguistic feature can be maintained. Hawkes, however, neglects this feature and translates them much more freely.

After the analysis of the above examples, we may come to the following conclusions about the factors affecting the choice of translation methods.

1. The Purpose of Translation

From the examples we know that generally speaking, Yang Xianyi adopts the foreignizing method while Hawkes uses the domesticating method. The underlying reason may be firstly due to the different purposes deep in the translator's mind. As Nida once said, "the particular purpose of the translator are important factors in dictating the types of translation" (Nida, 1964, p.157). If a translator aims to introduce to his readers foreign customs, exotic culture or different expressions in another language culture, he will use foreignizing method to keep the original expressions largely. Readers of such a version can get vivid pictures of the foreign expressions and a better understanding about how the people with the original language think. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang are Chinese translators. It's their desire to introduce Chinese cultural heritage to foreign readers and that's why they adopted foreignizing method. By contrast, Hawkes, being an American translator, intends to entertain his readers, so he uses the traditional expressions of English to "explain" the original ones. Because once the readers get the message from the version and, thus, are pleased, the translator gets the achievement of his object.

2. Readership of the Translation

As Newmark (1981) points out, "A translation is normally written and intended for a target language reader even if the source language text was written for no reader at all, for nothing but it's author's pleasure." (p.128) When a translator starts to work, readers should always be kept in his mind, for a translation without readers seems meaningless. Firstly, the characteristics of readers are important, as they may differ both in decoding ability and in potential interests. Obviously, a translation designed for children can not be the same as one prepared for specialists, nor can a translation for children be the same as one for a newly literate adult. Secondly, prospective readers differ not only in decoding ability, but perhaps even more in their interests of purpose of reading. For example, a translation designed to stimulate reading for pleasure will be quite different from one intended for a person anxious to learn how to assemble a complicated machine. Moreover, a translator of African myths for persons who simply want to satisfy their curiosity about strange peoples and places will produce a different piece of work from one who is more interested in the linguistic structure underlying the translation than in cultural novelty. Generally speaking, if the version is made for general kinds of readers, domestication is acceptable, because their interests are in the plot, but not in the source language culture. Such is the case with Hawkes' version. It is even easier for the Chinese students of English who do not have a solid foundation in ancient Chinese to understand the text. But as for those academics, for example, college professors or writers of literary comparison, domestication will not be considered as equivalence between the target language and the source language. For these readers, the translator is highly responsible to act as a go-between to transmit two cultures. So Yang's version will be of great help for those who want to have a deep study of Chinese or those who intend to make a comparison between Chinese and Western cultures.

3. The Text Type to Be Translated

The text type can also be a determining factor in choosing translation method. Usually the text type is associated with the main functions of language, namely expressive function, informative function, and vocative function. Newmark claims that "before deciding on the translation method, the translator may assign his text to the three general categories, each of which is dominated by a particular function of language" (Newmark, 1988, p.35). Generally cultural components tend to be transferred intact in expressive texts, transferred and explained with culturally neutral terms in informative texts, and replaced by cultural equivalence in vocative texts. When a professional text is to be translated, such as a medical book, usually the name of some medicine such as NYQuil should be transliterated or the translator just borrows the form from the original. But if this medicine appears in a novel and is of little importance for the meaning of the text, domestication is much more proper. Quite often some translators just render it as a common word, for example:

I want to watch TV with her, and go to the supermarket with her, and give her *NyQuil on a spoon when she has a cold*.

Version: 在她感冒时，我要亲手用汤匙给她喂药。

4. The Translator's Attitude towards Source and Target Cultures

According to Christina Schaffner (1995), the receiving culture may adopt a defective attitude (to enrich its own culture with foreign elements) or a defensive attitude (rejecting the "otherness" and doing everything to stop it) towards

the source language culture. Usually there is a hidden political, economic or ideological agenda governing the acceptance of the foreign language culture and eventually affects translators' decisions.

Comparatively speaking, some language culture (called strong culture) may have political or economic superiority over some other language culture (called weak culture). Translators of strong culture will more likely adopt the domesticating method in their translating of weak cultural texts. For example, Venuti, after a careful investigation of the translation history of both the US and the Great Britain, points out that ever since the 17th century, fluency, an important feature of domesticating translation, has been gaining a dominance in English-language translation (Venuti, 1995). But if the translation is from a strong language culture into a weak one, the choice will be much more complicated and most of the time the purpose of the translation becomes a more influential factor. Usually the foreignizing method is adopted in weak cultures with the purpose of learning from others and forging their national constructions. Special reference should be made here is that final decision is usually made in accordance with concrete situations and contexts.

IV. CONCLUSION

The intimate relations between language and culture have long been the hot point of discussions by scholars and experts in many fields and disciplines, especially during recent years when talking a lot about intercultural communication or exchange has become a fashion. Any language can be seen as a sign system representing a particular culture as well as a part of it; therefore, one is inevitably introducing the culture it embodies while he/she translates a source language text. Whether to take foreignization or domestication for cultural elements in translation is a complicated problem. But we can convincingly summarize that both of the two methods may be justified in their own right if we take into consideration the differences in the purpose of translation, the type of texts, the intention of the author, the readership, the translator's attitude towards the source and target language cultures. Foreignization and domestication are indispensable and supplementary to each other and the idea that truly successful translation will depend on the unity of the two methods should be kept as a golden mean in every translator's mind. Keeping a good balance between the two extremes might be an ideal for dealing with the cultural elements.

REFERENCES

- [1] Guo Jianzhong. (1999). The ten-year (1987-1997) Development of Translation in China. *Journal of Foreign Languages* 2, 247-265.
- [2] Hawkes, David. (1980). *The Story of the Stone*. Vols.1-3, Penguin Books.
- [3] Newmark, Peter. (1981). *Approaches to Translation*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- [4] Newmark, Peter. (1988). *A Textbook of Translation*. London: Prentice Hall.
- [5] Nida, Eugene A and C.R. Ward. (1981). *From One Language to Another: Functional Equivalence in Bible Translation*. Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers.
- [6] Nida, Eugene A. (1993). *Language, Culture and Translating*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- [7] Nida, Eugene A. (1964). *Toward a Science of Translating: With Special Reference to Principles and Procedures Involved in Bible Translating*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- [8] Schaffner, C & Kelley-Holmes. (1995). *Cultural Function of Translation*. Clevedon Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- [9] Venuti, Lawrence. (1995). *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London: Routledge.
- [10] Yang Xianyi & Yang, Gladys. (1994). *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Beijing: Foreign Language Press.

Hongmei Sun was born in Zoucheng, China in 1975. She received her M.A. degree in foreign linguistics and applied linguistics from Qufu Normal University in 2001.

She is currently a lecturer in the College of Foreign Languages, Qufu Normal University, Qufu, China. Her research interests include applied linguistics, vocabulary teaching, translation theories and practice.