Context and Chinese Translation of English Titles —A Commentary on the Chinese Title of the '09 English Text of Han Suyin Award for Young Translators[*]

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Abstract—**Context refers to various situations in which language communication takes place. Context analysis plays an indispensable role in the entire process of translation. The present paper attempts, via analyzing some English title translations, to indicate that the meaning of words should be accurately chosen, and that translations of English titles is based on adequate understanding of original context. The purpose is to heighten the awareness of translators that context can never be neglected, and that a good translation of English titles depends not only on translators' linguistic competence, their cultural and other related knowledge, but also the understanding of the context involved.**

Index Terms—**context, Chinese translation of English titles, principles of title translation**

I. THE ORIGIN OF CONTEXT

The context theory was put forward by the linguist Malinowski in 1923. He believed that an utterance was closely connected with context, which was indispensable for the comprehension of language. Firth (1950) developed the theory by dividing the context into two, one being the linguistic, the other the social. In 1964, Firth's student, Halliday, the representative of systemic functional school, created the concept of "register", with field, mode and tenor, being the three parts of a linguistic context. What register reflects is context: field falls roughly into politics, science and techniques, literature and art etc; mode is divided into spoken language and written language; and the tenor includes social status, cultural background and relationships of the communicator. To him, if any one of the three changes, a new register will appear.

The American sociolinguist Hymes (1974) further developed the theory of context. He noted that how to use the social environment of language was an important symbol of mastering a language (Hou Guojin, 2003). Crystal (1991) believes that context is related to the entire background, either language or non-language. Language refers to a discourse-specific adjacent part of the unit which becomes the center of attention, such as a word, non-verbal part of the situational context, including the scene where the unit is used, the previously mentioned content which authors and readers are jointly aware of, as well as long-lasting belief system and discourse-related beliefs and presuppositions. Context includes both linguistic factors –discourse context and non-linguistic factors involving background knowledge, situational knowledge, shared knowledge, which will be discussed below.

Malinowski (1923), Firth (1950), Halliday (1989), Fishman (1965), Hymes (1974), Crystal (1991), all these linguists have described context from different perspectives. Their research can be roughly divided into two categories: one is to explain some factors that affect language participants, such as the broader social environment, cultural context, etc. This is discussed from the perspective of social and cultural environment. The other is to explain context from the background of language which participants share, and which enables listeners to understand what speakers intend to convey. This is the analysis of semantics from the perspective of psychological cognition. Cognitive context is the results of internalization of a variety of pragmatic factors through the human brain. According to Sperber and Wilson (1986), cognitive context is gathered together by many facts or assumptions that can be displayed. People use language to communicate by merely choosing relevant content from facts or assumptions. If the choices between the two sides are the same or similar, there will be overlapping, and it is the overlapping that forms shared cognitive context of communication. Chomsky, the representative of transformational linguist, also voice his ideas on context. He emphasized the function of the non-linguistic factors in studying semantics. Despite of different versions, their essence is identical (He Zhaoxiong & Jiang Yanmei 1997).

In a word, context is the environment in which language is used and develops. The communication with language-the transmitting and receiving of information, occurs only in particular environments and are influenced by and subject to

them as well. These specific environments are the basis of human communication. People in society communicate on specific occasions, in a specific range, for specific purposes and with specific people. To put it in details, these environments include social and natural ones involving social status, sex, age of speaker and hearer as well as geographic, cultural, linguistic, ideological, social and customary background, thus these environments are termed context.

Nowadays, cultural context being highlighted attracts much attention. More and more scholars begin to study translation in a cultural perspective. They hold that translation activities should be viewed or evaluated based on the target culture and the accessibility of target readers. The reader response can be one of the criteria to judge the quality of translation.

II. CONTEXT AND TRANSLATION

Understanding a word relies on the context, because the explanatory power of the context touches any level of language communication, including pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, semantics, pragmatics, rhetoric, logic and discourse. The most basic function of context is to constraint and explain situational meaning and to remove ambiguities or vagueness (Chen Zhi'an & Wen Xu, 1997).

Pei Wen (2000) proposed the functions of context were as follows: display semantics, eliminate ambiguity, determine the referent, extend semantics, give the implication, create the opposite meaning, determine semantics, result in context ambiguity and produce associative meaning.

Newmark (2006) pointed out that the context in all translations was the most important factor, and its importance was greater than any law or theory, or basic word meaning. The understanding and expression are expanded based on the specific context. Semantics, determining the wording and phrasing, the chapter layout and stylistic form selection, is inseparable from the context. Therefore, the context forms the basis of a correct translation.

Therefore the relationship between context and translation is inseparable. People first of all understand the meaning of a word or a sentence in discourse. Thus, the discourse itself constitutes the environment of language components, which is called discourse context. Whether it is systemic functional linguistics focusing on broad cultural context and situational context, or cognitive context in pragmatics, both emphasize the role of context in understanding the meaning. Meaning in the context should come before translation. No context, no translation. Any translation should be contemplated in a certain context. Words do not possess meaning without context. Context provides the background for translators to understand the original, to choose translation strategies and diction.

III. TITLE TRANSLATION IN CONTEXT

In recent years, a large number of literary foreign works have been translated into Chinese. The title of a work is not an embellishment or a decoration; but something that can directly affect the body of the work, render the theme and heighten emotions. Titles and works should be on cooperative and dialogic terms, complementing each other, echoing each other to achieve the full meaning in mutual reference (Yu Jianhua, 2008).

A. Principles of Title Translation

The title, the "eye" of the article, is a summary or condenses on the content of work. It expresses the theme and the author's evaluation and judgment, such as being affirmative, negative, or critical. Good translations of titles can catch the eye quickly, thus achieving the purpose of communication. Whether titles can be accurately translated or not really counts. Generally speaking, good translation of a title should be in line with the following standards: (1) informative, revealing the themes and content of the work; (2) aesthetic, simple and neat, innovative and eye-catching; (3) imperative, stimulating a desire to read. Chinese translation of English titles not only involves the comprehensive ability of the translator's language, culture, art, creativity and imagination, but also concerns reader's aesthetic taste and capacity (Tang Jianduan, 2005). Good title translation should not only be faithful, fluent, but it should also represent the original ideas, style or spirit.

As for title translation, literal or free translation, which is better is not yet known. In fact, the two translation approaches have their own strengths, depending on specific situations. But no matter whether it is literal or free translation, translation should be faithful to the original in style or spirit. The title, like a flying kite, seemingly independent, is actually constrained. What restrains the title is context (Yu Jianhua, 2008). So the Chinese translation of title is not necessarily equivalent to the literal meaning of title. According to different contexts or different purposes, title translation can vary. What really matters is context, social or situational.

B. A Case Study: Translating the Title of an English Text

The title of English text of the '09 Han Suyin Award for Young Translators is "Beyond Life". It is the title of a literary work published by the American writer James Branch Cabell in 1919. (The old translation is *sheng huo zhi wa* (生活之外). The original of this contest is adapted from one of his essays.

Here is the introduction to the American writer James Branch Cabell.

James Branch Cabell was one of the great ironists of twentieth-century fantastic literature. His works were considered escapist and fit well in the culture of the 1920s, when his works were most popular. Interest in Cabell

declined in the 1930s, a decline that has been attributed in part to his failure to move out of his fantasy niche. Cabell saw art as an escape from life, but once the artist created his ideal world, he found that it is made up of the same elements that made the real one. He wrote fruitfully of the tensions between impossible dreams and the real world of economics.

He is good at writing satiric fictions. His works are considered as an escape from the reality, His novel *Jurgen* written in 1919 was a bestseller. The story took place in a fictional kingdom named Poictesme. The fictional kingdom is also taken as the story background in his other novels, including *The Crown of the Jest* written in 1920, *The High Place* in 1923, *The Silver Stallion* in 1926. Most of Cabell's works are moral fables. This is also in line with the American culture atmosphere in 1920s. 1920s is a special age in American history. The first World War ended in 1918. America benefited a lot from the war by which it won a precious opportunity for economic development. The cruelty of the war, made many people suspicious of traditional values, such as national honor, democracy, freedom of western ideology, thus lose faith in everything, indulging in seeking pleasures. The traditional Puritan Ethics crumbled and hedonism was beginning to flourish. As the writer Fitzgerald said, "this is a an era of miracle, an era of art, an era of spending money like water, is also an age of satire." Fitzgerald called this era the "Jazz Age". Hidden behind the surface of the luxury is emptiness and helplessness.

His works make up a situational context. All his stories appear in an unrealistic world-a fictional kingdom. Judging from his works, it can be seen fantasy fills his heart and he has long been isolated from the world, the reality by himself and by the world around him. The statements such as "one of the great ironists of twentieth-century fantastic literature", "escapist, " his failure to move out of his fantasy niche, "and" as an escape from life " reveal the social environment and emotional struggle that Cabell was confronted with and Cabell's maverick. His works began to lose attraction in 1930s, partly because of his negative attitude towards life or of sentiment haunting people as a result of Great Depression. Great Depression upset people, for which there was a great need for refreshing and encouraging works that can give people a way out or comfort. Whereas his works can not provide support to cheer them up. Social events such as the First World War and Great Depression constitute social context. All these help to understand translation.

Check the original of "Beyond Life", which is selected from two parts of a complete chapter in the original book, has 11 paragraphs. The English text of the 2009 Han Suyin Award consists of the middle parts, namely, 3 to 8. Here the first sentence of each paragraph is picked out for analysis.

The first sentence of Paragraph 3: *I want my life the only life of which I am assured to have symmetry or, in default of that, at least to acquire some clarity.*

The first sentence of Paragraph 4: *I have attempted to make the best of my material circumstances always; nor do I see today how any widely varying course could have been wiser or even feasible: but material things have nothing to do with that life which moves in me.*

The first sentence of Paragraph 5: *And I want beauty in my life. I have seen beauty in a sunset and in the woods of the spring and in the eyes of diverse women, but now these happy accidents of light and color no longer thrill me.*

The first sentence of Paragraph 6: *And tenderness, too-but does that appear a mawkish thing to desiderate in life?*

The first sentence of Paragraph 7: *And I very often wish that I could know the truth about just any one circumstance connected with my life.*

The first sentence of Paragraph 8: *Then, last of all, I desiderate urbanity. I believe this is the rarest quality in the world. Indeed, it probably does not exist anywhere.*

The word "life" has appeared in the first sentence of each paragraph. From these sentences, we deduce that the author has been seeking truth, tenderness and beauty in his life even though he knows the process of pursuit is full of ups and downs. The author has a strong desire to live in harmony. This can be inferred based on the discourse context –statement of the author *longing to live a life of balance, full of tenderness* and a life where beauty shines everywhere. However, all these that he desires seem to be beyond his reach. He is not so sure those he pursues do exist in reality that he can not go out of his own fantasy. That's the problem haunting him long.

The old translation of title，*Sheng huo zhi wai* (生活之外) is slightly dull and stiff, which appears not consistent with the style and the writing purpose. First of all, it is not striking. Second, it can not embody the theme and spirit of his work. Another translation, *Chao yue ren sheng* (超越人生), indicates the theme and interpretation of transcendence of life meaning, and how to achieve transcendence of life. This is what the title translation reminds us of. This version seems faithful to the original. But it does not indicate the content and sentiment of the original. The author is found to reveal no more than surpassing via thorough comprehension of the text. The author intends to not only embody his pursuit of life but show his hesitation, loss and pain during the process of pursuit. His social status and his pursuit of ideal life are in contradiction. The author can see the essence of life and the pursuit of the goal, but can not face or bridge the social gap, which is his source of pain. As a result, he indulges himself in his own fantasy. Based on the linguistic context, social and cultural context, the title can be translated into *Li xiang ren sheng* (理想人生 *An Ideal Life*) and *Mei li ren sheng* (美丽人生 *A Beautiful Life*), which seem not to comply with the literal meaning of title, but more in line with the original theme and conform to author's state of mind. As Andre Lefevere asserts, translation is a rewriting of an original text instead of involving only the research for the best linguistic equivalence. These two versions can achieve the functional or dynamic equivalence to the original, for it takes many factors into account, the author, the era, the culture and society involved. These factors are what we call contexts.

C. Chinese Translation of Title

In accordance with the principles of title translation, specific standards of title translation are cited as follows: (1) to meet the needs of contents of the original, reflect the original theme, highlight the original style; (2) to be concise, easy to remember; (3) to conform to Chinese language norms, and to suit Chinese taste. Lin Shu achieved success by adopting the approach of liberal translation for Western novels, thus has had a profound influence on the translation of foreign works in China (Zhou Ye & Sun Zhili, 2009).

Liberal translation has been valued in translation, especially in the translation of titles. Whether the strategy of literal translation or liberal translation should be adopted is not the focus in this paper. What follows is an analysis of examples on how translators go for or against the standards above, thus resulting in good or poor translations.

The American writer Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby has* many translations such as *Liao bu qi de gai ci bi* (了不起的盖茨比 *An Unrivaled Gatsby*), *Da ren wu, gai ci bi* (大人物盖茨比 *A VIP, Gatsby*), *Yong heng de ai* (永恒的爱 *Eternal Love*) and *Da heng xiao zhuan* (大亨小传 *A Brief Biography of the Great Gatsby*), *Liao bu qi de gai ci bi* (*An Unrivaled Gatsby*)reminds people of matchless King and the like, far from real image of Gatsby. *Yong heng de ai* (*An Eternal Love*) is too romantic and vague, which does not help to convey the theme. *Da ren wu, gai ci bi* (*A VIP, Gatsby*) seems to be slightly dull; *Da heng xiao zhuan* (*A Brief Biography of the Great Gatsby*) can express the intention of the original, and employs the rhetoric device of antithesis, which can be called a good example of translation in accordance with the context.

White Fang by Jack London in 1906, deals with the story of how a small pup is brought into the civilized world. There are 6 translations, including such three translations as *Bai ya* (白牙 *White Teeth*), *Xue hu* (雪虎 *Snow Tiger*) and *Ye xing nan xun* (野性难驯 *Wild and Difficult to Tame*). *Fang* refer to the fangs of an animal. *Bai ya* (*White Teeth*) is the literal translation. Taking into account the fact that *White Fang* is the name of the dog, this translation can hardly be substantiated. The translation *Xue hu* (*Snow Tiger*) is very creative, for "*Xue hu*" as the dog's name, complies with the Chinese way of naming the dog. Besides, *xue* means snow in Chinese. This reminds us of Arctic Wolf with white coat. The Chinese character *hu* retains a little dignity and power of fangs. While *Ye xing nan xun* (*Wild and Difficult to Tame*) is out of line with the pup in the novel, who eventually became a loyal dog and became very ferocious just at the end of the novel in order to save the benefactor. But the author intends to present the pup's courage and justice by describing this part, instead of indicating that the pup is difficult to tame. In addition, Jack London wanted to prove that the wild can be domesticated. This translation is self-defeating and contrary to the original idea. The translator does not thoroughly understand the central meaning of the original, or did not really understand the context. In a cartoon series based on the novel, the title was arbitrarily translated into *Bai Fang*（白芳）, which sounds like a girl's name in Chinese, completely ignoring the context of the novel, and is a typical example of mistranslation (Yu Jianhua, 2008).

Mary Porter wrote *When the Moon Follows Me* which is a poetic prose. The author, who initially thought that only adults can comprehend the charm and romance of moonlight, did not expect her ten-year old son to sense that. For her, this is an amazing discovery. How to translate the title when translators realize this poetic theme? Should it be rendered into *Dang yue liang gen sui wo de shi hou* (当月亮跟随我的时候)? This version seems to be wordy, losing the flavor of poem, despite of being faithful. Taking into account the habits of the Chinese, this word-by-word translation is not favored, instead, we might as well render it into *Yue er ban wo xing* (月儿伴我行) via omitting the word "when", which is simple and poetic (Zhou Ye & Sun Zhili, 2009). The translation of this title takes into consideration the original style, situational context and the broad cultural context in which the target readers are in, thus it can be listed as one of the best title translation.

Dusty was translated into *Hui meng meng* (灰蒙蒙 *Gray*). In fact, its subtitle is *A Dog of Sheep Country*. The book is about a story of a dog named *Dusty*. The title *Dusty* should be translated into *Xiao gou da si ti* (小狗达斯提 *A Little Dog Named Dusty*). This translation based on the content of the book may be more appropriate compared with the previous translations. The *Hui meng meng* (*Gray*) is based only on the literal meaning of the title, which is obviously a mistranslation. Therefore, only by being familiar with the book, namely, by knowing the linguistic context and social context can we come up with translation which can be closely linked to central idea of the original and can vividly reveal the original content and spirit. The readers will not be confused by the former translation, which is superficially faithful but actually not equivalent.

There is an American film named *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex But Afraid to Ask*. If translated literally, it may be lengthy and hard to remember. The film screened in Taiwan was translated into *Xing ai bao dian* (性爱宝典 *Instructions on Sex*), which sounds subtle and elegant in Chinese, concise and easy to remember, and this version takes Chinese culture into account and pay attention to target readers' response and acceptance, for Chinese tend to discuss sex implicitly. This translation may well be a good example. The translation of films *Ghost* and *Gone with the Wind* are also cases to the point. To achieve specific purposes, the translation is the rewriting of the original.

In a word, to take discourse context, social context, situational context and cultural context into consideration are essential in translation. Only in that way a satisfactory translation can be produced.

IV. CONCLUSION

Chinese translation of English titles is a subject that is expected to be studied further. When it comes to relevant translation principles, no matter what strategies, literal translation or free translation, domestication or foreignization are adopted, the language of a text and the whole non-verbal background should be taken into account. The title of movies, books, and literary works, the finishing touch, if translated inappropriately, it would fail to convey the main idea to readers to attract audience or to achieve purposes. In conclusion, it is essential to think comprehensively. Only if translators take context into account can they produce proper translations.

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