

“It” and Its Corresponding Translation in Chinese —A Case Study of *The Old Man and the Sea*

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Abstract—The word “it” is one of the pronouns that are of high frequency in English. It can be literally translated into “它” in Chinese. However, it is improper to simply translate all the “it” into “它” in text translation. In fact, there are only a few cases where “it” is translated into “它”, and more often it is omitted or translated into other forms such as “这”, “那” and the noun or noun phrase it refers to. This paper, taking *The Old Man and the Sea* as an example, analyses the translation of the word “it” in different cases in order to show the different ways people express themselves between English and Chinese, which is beneficial to the improvement of translation quality, and as a result, brings readers the feeling of reading the wonderful original works.

Index Terms—“it”, text translation, English and Chinese

I. INTRODUCTION

In translation practice, we encounter the word “it” frequently. It seems to us that the word is so simple, but it is not so easy to translate it in a proper way. In traditional modern grammar, according to Quirk et al. (1985), there are three kinds of “it”: referential it, impersonal it and anticipatory it. Referential it can refer to a person, an object or something. Impersonal it has no specific meaning and it can be used to express weather, climate, season, time, distance, environment, etc. Anticipatory it usually acts as a formal subject or a formal object, while the real subject or object will appear at the end of the sentence. Meanwhile, Quirk et al. (1985) classified the “it” in patterns of emphasis as anticipatory it. Besides, in traditional grammar, Bolinger (1977) believes that the word it is a neutral definite nominal. Kaltenbock (2003) holds the view that the word it is a definite nominal with certain referential function, which helps to establish a kind of referential relation among sentence elements. However, according to Halliday (1994) and Matthiessen (1989), the functional study of the word it shouldn’t be limited to syntactic structure. This paper, taking *The Old Man and the Sea* as an example, analyses the corresponding translation of “it” in Chinese in order to show the different ways people express themselves between English and Chinese. The paper also analyses the causes that lead to the differences, aiming at improving the quality of translation.

II. AN ANALYSIS OF THE TRANSLATION OF “IT” IN CHINESE

Generally speaking, there are four main categories when the word “it” is translated into Chinese: “它”; noun, noun phrase or other related words; zero form; “这”, “这样” and “那”.

A. “它”

The word “it” can be literally translated into “它” in Chinese. In text translation, it can act as a subject, an object or an object of a preposition when it is translated into “它” in Chinese. For example:

(1) But in the morning it is painful. (Hemingway, 1989)

不过在早上它叫人感到眼痛。(Wu, 2004)

(2) He waited with the line between his thumb and his finger, watching it and the other lines at the same time for the fish might have swum up or down. (Hemingway, 1989)

他把钓索夹在大拇指和食指之间等待着,同时盯着它和其他那几根钓索,因为这鱼可能已游到了高一点或低一点的地方去了。(Wu, 2004)

(3) The old man leaned the mast with its wrapped sail against the wall and the boy put the box and the other gear beside it. (Hemingway, 1989)

老人把绕着帆的桅杆靠在墙上,男孩把木箱和其他家什搁在它的旁边。(Wu, 2004)

In example (1), the word “it” acts as the subject of the sentence and it refers to “the sun” that has been mentioned earlier in the text without other words being referred to as “it”. In (2), “it” acts as the object of the verb “watch” and it refers to “the line between his thumb and his finger” that has appeared earlier in the same sentence. In (3), the word “it” acts as the object of the preposition “beside” and it refers to “the mast” that has appeared earlier in the same sentence.

From the three examples above, we can see that we can translate “it” into “它” literally if the word “it” refers to the noun or noun phrase that has appeared earlier in the same sentence or that has been mentioned earlier in the text as long

as it doesn't cause ambiguity. However, there is one thing special in Chinese. When the word "it" acts as an object, sometimes it will be translated into "把它.....". For example:

(4) The boy did not know whether yesterday's paper was a fiction too. But the old man brought it out from under the bed. (Hemingway, 1989)

男孩不知道昨天的报纸是不是也是乌有的。但是老人把它从床下取出来了。(Wu, 2004)

In this example, "it" refers to "yesterday's paper" in the previous sentence. It would be unnatural if we translated the sentence directly without using "把". There are also some cases where "it" is translated into "它们". For example:

(5) And I do not know whether the sun will rot or dry what is left, so I had better eat it all although I am not hungry. (Hemingway, 1989)

我还不知道太阳会不会把剩下的鱼肉给晒坏或者晒干, 所以最好把它们都吃了, 尽管我并不饿。(Wu, 2004)

In this example, what is left has been regarded as a whole, so "it" is used in English. While in Chinese, we usually use "它们" to express the concept of plural.

B. Noun, Noun Phrase or Other Related Words

The word "it" can be translated into the noun or noun phrase it refers to when it acts as a subject, an object or an object of a preposition. Sometimes, we translate "it" into the noun or noun phrase it refers to because the noun or noun phrase is far from the word "it". For example:

(1) "You study it and tell me when I come back." (Hemingway, 1989)

"你好好好看报, 等我回来了给我讲讲。" (Wu, 2004)

In this example, the word "it" acts as the object of the verb "study" and it refers to "yesterday's paper" that has been mentioned earlier in the text. There is a long conversation between "yesterday's paper" and the word "it", so it will be a little hard for the readers to infer what the word "it" refers to. Therefore, in cases like this, it is better to translate "it" into the noun or noun phrase it refers to. In some other cases, the word "it" is translated into the noun or noun phrase it refers to because there is more than one "it" and each refers to a different noun or noun phrase. For example:

(2) Then the sun was brighter and the glare came on the water and then, as it rose clear, the flat sea sent it back at his eyes so that it hurts sharply and he rowed without looking into it. (Hemingway, 1989)

跟着太阳越发明亮了, 耀眼的阳光射在水面上, 随后太阳从地平线上完全升起, 平坦的海面把阳光反射到他眼睛里, 使眼睛剧烈地刺痛, 因此他不朝太阳看, 顾自划着。(Wu, 2004)

In this example, both of the first and the fourth "it" refer to "the sun", while the second and the third "it" refer to "the glare". All the others are translated into the noun phrase that each of them refers to except the third one for the reason that it will be difficult for the readers to get to know what each of them refers to if we just simply translate all the "it" into "它". The reason why the third "it" is omitted is that it has the same meaning as the second one, which is close to it.

In some cases, the word "it" is translated into the noun or noun phrase it refers to only because of the fact that our translation will be more natural and fit the expression habit of Chinese better. For example:

(3) He lived along that coast now every night and in his dreams he heard the surf roar and saw the native boats come riding through it. (Hemingway, 1989)

他如今每天夜里都神游那道海岸, 在梦中听见拍岸海浪的隆隆声, 看见土人驾船穿浪而行。(Wu, 2004)

In this example, the word "it" acts as the object of the preposition "through" and it refers to "the surf" that has just appeared in the same sentence. It is more natural to translate with the common expression "穿浪而行" in Chinese rather than translate "it" into "它".

In some other cases, the word "it" is translated with the help of "把" when it acts as an object. For example:

(4) Shifting the weight of the line to his left shoulder and kneeling carefully he washed his hand in the ocean and held it there, submerged, for more than a minute watching the blood trail away and the steady movement of the water against his hand as the boat moved. (Hemingway, 1989)

他把沉甸甸的钓索挪到左肩上, 小心地跪下, 在海水里洗手, 把手在水里浸了一分多钟, 注视着血液在水中漂开去, 而那平稳地流着的海水随着船的移动在他手上拍打着。(Wu, 2004)

In this example, the word "it" refers to "his hand" that has just appeared in the same sentence. It is more natural to translate with the help of "把" rather than simply translate "it" into "它" or "手".

Sometimes, we translate "it" into other related words instead of the noun or noun phrase it refers to. For example:

(5) The sun was hot now and the old man felt it on the back of his neck and felt the sweat trickle down his back as he rowed. (Hemingway, 1989)

阳光此刻很热, 老人感到脖颈上热辣辣的, 划着划着, 觉得汗水一滴滴地从背上往下淌。(Wu, 2004)

In this example, the word "it" refers to "the sun" in the sentence. However, it is improper to translate it into "太阳" because here what is trying to express is the effect of the sun on the old man. Therefore, the expression "热辣辣" is used to show that the sun was so hot that the old man felt uncomfortable to some degree.

C. Zero Form

The word “it” can be translated into a certain form such as “它”, a noun or a noun phrase, but it is often the case that what the word “it” refers to is omitted when it is translated into Chinese. In these cases, “it” can refer to a noun, a phrase or what has been talked about earlier in the text and it acts as a subject, an object or an object of a preposition. For example:

(1) “No, I will eat at home. Do you want me to make the fire?”

“No. I will make it later on. Or I may eat the rice cold.” (Hemingway, 1989)

“不。我回家去吃。要我给你生火吗?”

“不用。等会儿我自己来生。也许就吃冷饭算了。” (Wu, 2004)

(2) “Cramp then if you want. Make yourself into a claw. It will do you no good.” (Hemingway, 1989)

“随你去抽筋吧。变成一只鸟爪吧。对你可不会有好处。” (Wu, 2004)

(3) “Christ knows he can’t have gone. He’s making a turn. Maybe he has been hooked before and he remembers something of it.” (Hemingway, 1989)

“天知道它是不可能游走的。它正在绕弯子呐。也许它以前上过钩，还有点儿记得。” (Wu, 2004)

In example (1), the word “it” acts as the object of the verb “make” and it refers to “the fire” in the previous sentence. It is more natural to omit the word “it” in Chinese, but a transitive verb needs a word to act as its object in English. In example (2), the word “it” acts as a subject and it refers to the previous sentence that has just been uttered by the old man. In example (3), the word “it” acts as the object of the preposition “of” and it refers to “he has been hooked before”. All the “it” have been omitted because the translation is concise in this way and there will not be ambiguity.

If the word “it” acts as a subject and the sentence uses simile, the word “it” is usually omitted when it is translated into Chinese. For example:

(4) The sail was patched with flour sacks and, furred, it looked like the flag of permanent defeat. (Hemingway, 1989)

帆上用面粉袋片打了些补丁，收拢后看起来像是一面标志着永远失败的旗子。(Wu, 2004)

In this example, “it” refers to “the sail” and it is compared to “the flag”. The word “it” is omitted when the sentence is translated into Chinese.

When the word “it” acts as the object of a preposition, there are some cases where something related to location is expressed. And in some other cases, both of the preposition and the word “it” are omitted when translated into Chinese. For example:

(5) The shack was made of the tough budshields of the royal palm which are called *guano* and in it there was a bed, a table, one chair, and a place on the dirt floor to cook with charcoal. (Hemingway, 1989)

窝棚用叫做 *guano* 的王棕的坚韧的护芽棕皮做成，里面有一张床、一张桌子、一把椅子和泥地上一处用木炭烧饭的地方。(Wu, 2004)

(6) He took the bait like a male and he pulls like a male and his fight has no panic in it. (Hemingway, 1989)

它咬起饵来像条雄鱼，拉起钓索来也像条雄鱼，搏斗起来一点也不惊慌。(Wu, 2004)

In example (5), the word “it” refers to “the shack” and it is omitted when translated. The preposition “in” can be regarded as transferring into an adverb and it is translated into “里面”. In example (6), the word “it” refers to “his fight” and both of the preposition and the word “it” are omitted when the sentence is translated into Chinese. At the same time, the word “fight” has been transferred from a noun into a verb.

In some cases, if the word “it” acts as the object of a verb which has the same meaning as the word that has already appeared earlier in the sentence, both the verb and the word “it” will be omitted when translated into Chinese. For example:

(7) He took hold of one foot gently and held it until the boy woke and turned and looked at him. (Hemingway, 1989)

他轻轻握住男孩的一只脚，直到男孩醒来，转过脸来对他望着。(Wu, 2004)

In this example, the word “it” refers to the “foot” that has just been mentioned and both the verb “held” and the word “it” are omitted because the verb “held” has the same meaning as the noun “hold” that has appeared earlier in the same sentence and it would be redundant to translate it again.

Sometimes, if “it” acts as a subject and it refers to a noun, noun phrase or some other expressions, the subject can be transferred into another word when the sentence is translated into Chinese. For example:

(8) The sun was two hours higher now and it did not hurt his eyes so much to look into the east. (Hemingway, 1989)

两小时过去了，太阳如今相应地升得更高了，他朝东望时不再感到那么刺眼了。(Wu, 2004)

In this example, the word “it” refers to “the sun” and it acts as the subject, but the word “it” is omitted and the subject has transferred into “他” when the sentence is translated into Chinese.

When “it” acts as a subject, there are some cases where the word “it” does not refer to a specific word, expression or sentence etc. Sometimes, it just acts as a placeholder. In these cases, the word “it” is usually omitted when translated into Chinese. There are three types: “it” in sentences that express weather, climate, time, etc.; “it” that acts as a formal subject or a formal object; “it” in patterns of emphasis. For example:

(9) “It was noon when I hooked him,” he said. (Hemingway, 1989)

“我是中午把它钓上的，”他说。(Wu, 2004)

(10) It is better to be lucky. (Hemingway, 1989)

走运当然更好。(Wu, 2004)

(11) It was the yellow Gulf weed that had made so much phosphorescence in the night. (Hemingway, 1989)

正是这种黄色的果囊马尾藻在夜间发出那么强的磷光。(Wu, 2004)

In example (9), “it” is used to express time. In example (10), “it” acts as the formal subject while the real subject is “to be lucky”, which has been translated at the place where it ought to be. In example (11), “it” refers to nothing specific and it is just a placeholder. At the same time, “正是” is used to express the emphasis in the original sentence. All the “it” in the three examples above are omitted when they are translated into Chinese.

There are other cases where “it” refers to nothing specific and it acts as an object. In these cases, the translation will depend on the context. For example:

(12) I can do it as long as he can, he thought. (Hemingway, 1989)

它能熬多久,我也能熬多久,他想。(Wu, 2004)

(13) “You’re feeling it now, fish,” he said. (Hemingway, 1989)

“你现在觉得痛了吧,鱼,”他说。(Wu, 2004)

In both of the examples above, the word “it” refers to nothing specific and it is translated according to the context.

The word “it” in the interrogative can also be omitted when translated into Chinese. For example:

(14) “Why do old men wake so early? Is it to have one longer day?” (Hemingway, 1989)

“为什么老头儿醒得那么早?难道是要让白天长些吗?”(Wu, 2004)

In this example, the word “it” refers to the fact that old men wake so early and it is omitted in the translation.

D. “这”, “这样” and “那”

The word “it” can be translated into “这”, “这样” and “那” and it refers to a noun, a noun phrase or what has just been said earlier in the text. In most of these cases, it acts as a subject. For example:

(1) “He is almost blind.”

“It is strange,” the old man said. (Hemingway, 1989)

“差不多瞎了。”

“这可怪了,”老人说。(Wu, 2004)

(2) He was happy feeling the gentle pulling and then he felt something hard and unbelievably heavy. It was the weight of the fish and he let the line slip down, down, down, unrolling off the first of the two reserve coils. (Hemingway, 1989)

感到这轻微的一拉,他很高兴,接着感到有些猛拉的感觉,很有分量,叫人难以相信。这是鱼本身的重量造成的,他就松手让钓索朝下、朝下、朝下溜,从那两卷备用钓索中的一卷上放出钓索。(Wu, 2004)

(3) It was only a line burn that had cut his flesh. But it was in the working part of his hand. (Hemingway, 1989)

只不过被钓索勒了一下,割破了皮肉而已。然而这正是手上最得用的地方。(Wu, 2004)

(4) “I do not like for him to waken me. It is as though I were inferior.” (Hemingway, 1989)

“我不愿让船主人来叫醒我。这样似乎我比他差劲了。”(Wu, 2004)

(5) But the old man always thought of her as feminine and as something that gave or withheld great favors, and if she did wild or wicked things it was because she could not help them. (Hemingway, 1989)

可是这老人总是拿海洋当做女性,她给人或者不愿给人莫大的恩惠,如果她干出了任性或缺德的事儿来,那是因为她由不得自己。(Wu, 2004)

In example (1), the word “it” refers to the previous sentence and it is translated into “这” in Chinese. In example (2), “it” refers to “he felt something hard and unbelievably heavy” and it is translated into “这” with the help of the structure “……造成的” to show the relationship between the two sentences. In example (3), the underlined “it” refers to the “line burn” that has been mentioned in the previous sentence and it is translated into “这” with the expression “正是” to show that it is of great importance for the old man. In example (4), “it” refers to what has been said in the previous sentence and it is translated into “这样” in Chinese. In example (5), “it” refers to “she did wild or wicked things” and it is translated into “那” in Chinese.

In some cases, a noun or noun phrase is added when the word “it” is translated into Chinese. For example:

(6) “It’s steady,” the old man told him. (Hemingway, 1989)

“这钓索很稳当,”老人对它说。(Wu, 2004)

(7) It would be wonderful to do this with a radio. Then he thought, think of it always. Think what you are doing. You must do nothing stupid. (Hemingway, 1989)

干这行当有台收音机才美哪。接着他想,老是惦记着这玩意儿。想想你正在干的事情吧。你哪能干蠢事啊。(Wu, 2004)

In example (6), the word “it” refers to “the line” in the previous paragraph and it is translated into “这钓索” rather than “这”. In example (7), the underlined word “it”, which acts as the object of the preposition “of”, refers to the “radio” in the previous sentence and it is translated into “这玩意儿” in Chinese.

III. CONCLUSION

From the analysis above, we can see that the word “it” is not always literally translated into “它” in Chinese. It is often omitted or translated into other forms because Chinese pays more attention to parataxis while English attaches more importance to hypotaxis. Moreover, sometimes the subject “it” is transferred into another one such as a personal pronoun for the reason that Chinese focuses more on the person. In summary, we should translate according to the habit of the target language to make our translation more natural, which will help the readers appreciate the original works better.

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