

# Euphemism Translation from the Perspective of Skopostheorie

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**Abstract**—Each country has own taboos, so the study of euphemism is indispensable for a person who wants to communicate with foreigners successfully. With the intercultural communication increasing, euphemism translation has become more and more important. The paper studies euphemism translation from Skopostheorie and shows some methods and techniques for translating euphemism, including literal translation, free translation, addition, omission and replacement.

**Index Terms**—taboo, euphemism translation, Skopostheorie

## I. INTRODUCTION

People always meet some topics which are hard to speak out and may bring fear, embarrassment or other negative associations in daily communication, so people need to express their ideas about these topics in other ways—that is euphemism. Euphemism is a common phenomenon in human language, which can reflect nation cultures and social psychologies. With the increasing of intercultural communication, euphemism translation will become more and more essential, so it is necessary for a translator to study euphemism translation.

First of all, it helps readers to realize the source language culture. People can know ways of thinking and customs of source language speakers through translating euphemism, because euphemism is the carrier of culture. For example, people like to use “han she” to describe their house in China. If English speakers get the meaning of the word, he will realize that self-deprecating is a traditional virtue of China (Feng Ruizhen, 2000, p.38).

Secondly, it helps readers to enrich the target language culture. Euphemism translation greatly enriches the target language and people can know new expressions about euphemism. For example, Chinese introduce a lot of euphemisms through translating English word. “Ding ke zu” comes from the translation of English word “dinkies” and “yang guang fa” comes from the translation of English word “sunshine law”. In addition, some English words come from Chinese in the same way. For instance, English word “yen” comes from Chinese word “yin”. If people want to express the meaning that someone is addicted to something, they can use the expression that a person has a yen for something.

Thirdly, it helps people to communicate with foreigners. People from different cultural backgrounds may face problems when they talk to each other. And it is more difficult when there is a euphemism in their conversation. So mastering the translation of euphemism helps people to avoid some embarrassing situations. For example, an American visitor asked “May I know the geography of your house?” and the Chinese householder answered that “Sure, let me show you around my house”. The situation is awkward because the American says these words for asking about the place of washroom. However, the Chinese misunderstands the meaning.

All in all, euphemism translation is an important project in translation field. Nowadays, a lot of scholars have carried out detailed studies about euphemism translation from different perspectives. In this paper, the author studies euphemism translation from the perspective of Skopostheorie and puts forward an idea that Skopostheorie has the role of guiding translating euphemism.

## II. GENERAL INTRODUCTION OF EUPHEMISM

### A. Definition of Euphemism

The English word “euphemism” comes from the Greek word “emphemismos”. “Eu” means good and “pheme” means saying, so “euphemism” is a collection of good words. A lot of scholars have given different definitions from different angles.

George Blount, the first person to create “euphemism”, defined euphemism as a good or favorable interpretation of bad words. Another definition is put forward by Neaman and Silver. They said “Euphemism is generally defined as substituting an inoffensive or pleasant term for a more explicit, offensive one, thereby veneering the truth by using kind words” (Neaman & Silver, 1983, p.1).

People can find two definitions from the Internet: An inoffensive word or phrase substituted for one considered offensive or hurtful, especially one concerned with religion, sex, death, or excrete; the deliberate or polite use of a pleasant or neutral word or expression to avoid the emotional implications of a plain term, as passed over for died.

According to the above statements, I give a conclusive definition of euphemism: the information sender expresses their ideas by indirect expressions in a special context in order to avoid some topics which are hard to speak out and

may bring fear, self-abased, embarrassment or other negative associations.

### B. Features of Euphemism

From the above definition we can find euphemisms are some indirect words and people use them to avoid offending others. The following are four features of euphemism, which are acquired by analyzing definitions and applications of euphemism.

#### 1. Universality

Almost any culture has special taboos because of different social customs. Generally speaking, people try to avoid mentioning these taboos. However, sometimes they have to mention these taboos in communication or writing process, then they would like to use some good words to replace them. Then euphemism appears. For example, Canadians avoid “thirteen” and “Friday” while people in Singapore avoid “seven”. From the above examples, we find every nation has own special taboos, so euphemism is universality.

#### 2. Indirectness

People do not want to mention taboos directly. On the one hand, people use euphemism to avoid offending ghosts and spirits or to avoid bringing misfortune. They believed that the name of things is a part or an essential feature of the referent. And the name is magical, which is able to become the referent. So mentioning the name may bring misfortune. For example, Chinese called malaria as “da bai zi” because they considered that diseases were caused by evil spirits. On the other hand, people use euphemism to avoid making people awkward. For example, people use the expression “giving the sack to his employee” to convey someone lost his job.

#### 3. Vagueness

The production of euphemism causes its vagueness because people create euphemism through blurring the concept of words. In other words, people use vague words to express some words which have clear meanings. For example, people use “bottom” to express “hip”. In this example, the meaning of “hip” is specific. It means the area at either side of the body between the top of the leg and the waist. However, the meaning of “bottom” is vague. It can mean not only the hip but also other things, such as the lowest position of a class. What is more, vagueness gives people more options to make communication flexible. For example, people can use “melons” or “teacups” to replace “breast” and use “blue days” or “the flowers” to replace “menstruation”.

#### 4. Pleasure

Pleasure is an obvious and important feature of euphemism, because the purpose of using euphemism is to make listeners or speakers do not feel bad. The pleasure is reflected in making people have a better association. For example, “a sanitation engineer” brings a good association, while “a rag collector” gives people a dirty impression. As a result, people would like to use the former expression in their daily life.

### C. Functions of Euphemism

Euphemism plays an important role in communication, because it has various functions in different occasions, such as for avoidance of taboos, for politeness, for elegance. I will state the three functions in the following part.

#### 1. For avoidance of taboos

Fromkin said that the existence of taboo words or taboo ideas stimulated the creation of euphemism (Fromkin & Rodman, 1983). In other words, euphemism is the substitution of taboo words. For example, “death” is a taboo topic in human society. So they are unwilling to say something about death and replace it with “to have fallen asleep”, “to say the last goodbye” and so on. Another example is that “lord” is a taboo word for Christianity, so they substitute “land” for it. In conclusion, avoiding taboos is an essential function of euphemism.

#### 2. For politeness

People use euphemism for politeness. That is to say people use tactful words to avoid offending others, which is an important rule of social activities. When people talk about the following sensitive topics which have no real taboo counterparts, they need to use euphemism for politeness: age, figure, occupation, race and so on. For example, people use “bellman” to call “waiters” and use “domestic engineer” to call “housewife” for politeness. There is another example: people use “mature” or “queen-sized” to describe a fat lady, because using “fat” directly is impolite.

#### 3. For elegance

In people’s life, they may meet some embarrassing topics which people do not want to speak directly in some formal occasions. For example, when people speak some words about physiological phenomena, they will use euphemism for elegance. People use “to break wind”, “to pass air”, “to drop a rose”, “to cut one’s finger”, “to let one fly”, “to sneeze” to replace “farting”. And they use “number one” to mean pee and “number two” to mean shit and “visitor” to mean menstruation. The above expressions make these shy topics become elegance. So elegance is a function of euphemism.

## III. A REVIEW OF SKOPOSTHEORIE

### A. A Brief Introduction of Skopostheorie

Skopostheorie is the core concept of Germany functional theories, which was presented by Hans Josef Vermeer in the book *General Foundations of Translation Theory* co-authored by his teacher Reiss and himself in 1984.

The establishment of Skopostheorie went through a long time. There are three stages:

The first stage is the research by Katharina Reiss. She believed text function is an objective approach of translation criticism. And she insisted equivalence theory which regards the source text as the center. In addition, she believed the ideal translation would be one “in which the aim in the target language is equivalence as regards the conceptual content, linguistic form and communicative function of a source language text” (Nord, 2001, p.9). She called the translation as integral communicative performance. However, Reiss found that sometimes equivalence cannot be achieved. Then translators do not have to follow the principle of equivalence. She said that functions of the translation should be taken into consideration first rather than principle of equivalence. Thus, Reiss’s research lays a root for Skopostheorie.

The second stage is setting up Skopostheorie by Hans Josef Vermeer. He inherited some ideas of his teacher, Reiss, and broke through the theory of equivalence. He set up Skopostheorie based on action theory and thought Skopos is the first rule in translation process. He thought translation is a kind of human action and a type of transfer. And communicative verbal and nonverbal signs are transferred from one language into another language in the process of translation. Compared with the traditional theory, Skopostheorie pays attention to the target language.

The third stage is developing Skopostheorie by Justa Holz Manttari and Christiana Nord. The former focused on the research about the actions of translating, the role of participants and the context. The latter put forward loyalty principle. It pays attention to translators’ loyalty for the source writer and the target reader. As the second generation representative of Skopostheorie, Nord inherited and developed theories of the first generation.

### *B. Three Rules of Skopostheorie*

Skopostheorie has been developed continually by several scholars. The author will select three main rules for euphemism translation, namely, Skopos rule, coherence rule and fidelity rule.

#### 1. Skopos rule

Vermeer believed that the Skopos is the prime principle to determine the overall action of translating. The receiver has own cultural background, the expectation for translation and communicative needs, so each translation aims at the certain audience. Any action has an aim and purpose. And there are three possible purposes in translation: the first one is general purpose (the translator’s purpose). He may translate texts for a living or understanding the meaning. The second purpose is the purpose of communication, namely the purpose of the source writer. For example, some educational books are designed to guide readers. The third is the purpose of specific translation strategies. For example, the news translation is to show the new information (Nord, 1991, pp.27-28).

#### 2. Coherence rule

The coherence rule means that translation must conform to the standard of intertextual coherence. Intertextual coherence refers to that the translation should be understood by target readers based on their educational culture and makes sense in the target language culture and communicative environment.

#### 3. Fidelity rule

Although Skopos rule is the primary principle of Skopostheorie, it does not mean translators can amend source texts arbitrarily and wantonly. The information of translation comes from the source text, so fidelity rule is important. The realization of fidelity rule depends on translators’ understanding of the source language and translation purpose.

The three rules of Skopostheorie have a close relationship: fidelity rule subjects to coherence rule; fidelity rule and coherence rule subject to Skopos rule. That is to say if the skopos of translation needs to change the function of source text, then the translation standard is conforming to Skopos rule rather than coherence rule. The extent and form of fidelity depends on the translation purpose. If the purpose is to reappear characteristics and styles of the source text, Skopos rule needs to correspond with fidelity rule.

### *C. The Application of Skopostheorie in Euphemism Translation*

Skopostheorie plays an important role for analyzing euphemism translation. And people can feel more easily if they study euphemism translation from the perspective of Skopostheorie, because Skopostheorie has the role of guiding translating euphemism.

First of all, the use of euphemism has strong purposes and clear functions, so translators need to select suitable expressions to reappear communicative functions and purposes in translation. And the use of euphemism is a kind of purpose rather than a method. For example, it can show the user’s willingness to continue their communication for some specific purposes. That coincides with Skopos rule of Skopostheorie. As we have described above, Skopos rule means that the purpose of translation determines the whole process of translation. In other words, results determine methods. For achieving the purpose of euphemism translation effectively, translators should choose translation strategies flexibly according to different expectations. And translators need to consider what euphemism information can be retained and what euphemism information must be adjusted in specific contexts.

Secondly, euphemism translation is a communicative activity from the perspective of cross-culture, which achieves the transformation from source cultures to target cultures. When translators translate euphemism, they must think over how to deal with the relationship between source language culture and target language culture. As mentioned earlier, coherence rule of Skopostheorie believes that translations must be accepted by readers who have different culture backgrounds. For example, there are different attitudes towards “old” in China and West, and translators take different strategies in the process of translating. In China, the old man is regarded as a life teacher with rich experiences. On the contrary, in West, people think that the old man means useless. So translators use “senior citizen” to replace “old man”

to avoid offending old people.

Finally, Skopostheorie pays attention to not only Skopos but also coherence. If translators deviate from the source text to translating euphemism, they will cause missing translation. In addition, being faithful to source text is more important than being faithful to form, otherwise the intention and meaning of source text will be changed.

The following are some examples of euphemism translation from the perspective of Skopostheorie. People can understand the close relationship between euphemism translation and Skopostheorie easily through mastering these examples.

Example 1:

He did a number on me in saying that he would help me. All along he never intended to help (Wang Jiayi, 2003, p.116).

他说他要帮我，真是嘲弄我——他从来没这样打算过。

Skopos rule and coherence rule embody in the above example. In this example, the translator translates “to do a number on somebody” into “嘲弄某人”. This euphemism expression is popular in America. The “number” in the example refers to the number of short sketches. Each well-trained actor is familiar with these short sketches and these short sketches are numbered. Audiences expect actors to show their best performance, but they just show the numbered short sketch. It means actors regard audiences as laymen, so the expression means to mock others. In order to make the listener understand this sentence easily, the translator shows its meaning. In addition, the purpose of the speaker is to show the meaning that he laughed at me. The translator knows the purpose and shows the same purpose in translation.

Example 2:

一见他们来了，都笑迎上来，道：“刚才老太太还诵呢？可巧就来了” (A Dream in Red Mansions, 2004, p.22).

“The Old Lady was just talking about you”, they cried. “And here you are”.

Fidelity rule and coherence rule embody in the above example. The translator translates “老太太” into “The Old Lady”, which shows the source language culture loyally. “The Old Lady” shows the prestigious position of Jia Baoyu’s grandma. In addition, the first letter of each word is capitalized, which means the meaning of the word is different from what is understood commonly in west readers’ minds. Readers can understand it in context, so the translation also conforms with coherence rule.

Example 3:

We will have to oil the mayor to get the permit.

我们必须向市长烧香，以便获得准许。

In this example, “to oil the mayor” is the euphemism expression of “to bribe to the mayor”. In China, the expression means a kind of ritual of worshiping Buddha. However, it has another meaning that people bribe others for gaining benefits. Therefore, “oil” in source text can translate into “烧香” in order to achieve the same function as the original sentence. The translation is a good embodiment of fidelity rule.

#### IV. TRANSLATION STRATEGIES OF EUPHEMISM

It is necessary for a translator who wants to translate language successfully to master translation methods and techniques of euphemism, because these methods and techniques can enhance the effectiveness of intercultural communication. There are two translation methods and three techniques of euphemism: literal translation, free translation, addition, omission and replacement.

##### A. *Literal Translation*

Language is a reflection of culture. The uniqueness and universality of culture is reflected in the language. Human beings live in the same world, so sometimes ways of thinking, emotional standards and world views are roughly same. As a result, literal translation is the most common translation method of euphemism. In other words, people may think of literal translation firstly when translating euphemism. Literal translation pays attention to the source language. Translators are as consistent as possible with forms and contents of the source language. Generally speaking, translators can find corresponding expressions in the target language.

Example 1:

Mark wants to go to number one.

马克想去一号了。

In this example, the translator translates “number one” into “一号”. It means Mark wants to pee. Because both Chinese and English have the same expression, translators can use literal translation.

Example 2:

People slip into comas all the time and never come out.

一个人如果长期处于昏迷状态的话，就永远也醒不过来了。

In the above example, the translator translates “never come out” into “永远也醒不过来” for keeping the original mood of the source text. The expression means someone died. So translators can keep the feelings of the source language by literal translation.

#### B. Free Translation

Free translation is an indispensable method of translating euphemism. On the one hand, because of the differences of language culture, translating some euphemisms directly will cause the translation meaningless. On the other hand, some euphemisms have no corresponding expressions in target language. On the above occasion, people should use free translation to translate euphemism. Free translation emphasizes readers’ response. It means translators pay attention to express the meaning of source language and make readers understand the translation more easily.

Example 1:

He knew that he came into the world with nothing and that he would go to meet his Marker with empty hands.

他知道他一无所有的来，也将两手空空的去。

In this example, the translator translates “go to meet his marker” into “去”. The sentence means the person died with nothing. However, there is no such expression “Marker” in China. And if the translator translates it directly, readers will not understand the sentence. So the translator needs to use free translation to translate the sentence.

Example 2:

The little Match Girl dreamed she lived happily in Abraham’s bosom.

卖火柴的小女孩梦见她与亲爱的奶奶幸福地生活在天国里。

In this example, the literal meaning of Abraham’s bosom is “亚伯拉罕的怀里”. However, most of Chinese do not know who he is. So the translator uses free translation to translate it into “天堂” so that Chinese can understand the meaning of this sentence.

#### C. Addition

Addition is the first technique of euphemism translation. It means that translators add some contents properly so as to express the meaning contained in source language. We have learned vagueness of euphemism in chapter two, so vague expressions are inevitable in translation texts. If translators want to introduce these expressions to target readers authentically and do not confuse target readers, they can add some explanatory information.

Example:

OPEC is still skating on thin ice. (OPEC Goes Figure Skating)

欧佩克现在仍如履薄冰，尚未走出险境。

This example from a paper entitled “OPEC Goes Figure Skating” told that OPEC is in financial difficulties because of the continuous decline of oil prices. “On thin ice” means “be in danger”. There are two purposes for the author to use the idiom. On the one hand, he wants to convey POEC in a dilemma. On the other hand, the expression works in concert with the title. The translator adds “not out of danger” to its translation in order to make target readers understand more easily.

#### D. Omission

Omission is another technique of euphemism translation. It means that translators delete some inessential words, because these words may confuse target readers. Sometimes the essential elements of English are not necessarily required in Chinese because of differences of language. And the translation of these words may cause lengthiness on sentences.

Example:

今天下三分，益州疲弊，此诚危急存亡之秋也。

The world is still divided into three, and our base in Shu is beleaguered. At this time our very survival hangs in the balance (Ayto, 1993, p.227).

In the above example, “存亡” is a compound word. In the process of translation, the translator deletes “亡” and translates the word into “survival”. He grasps the key point of the word.

#### E. Replacement

Replacement is also an important technique of euphemism translation. It is a method that translators substitute the target language euphemism for the source language euphemism. The figures of source language euphemism and target language euphemism are different, but the connotations are same. The technique helps readers better understand the feelings of the source writer.

Example:

We were staying in the busiest knocking stop in the whole of Central America.

我们当时正呆在整个中美洲最忙碌的窑子里。

The sentence is selected from a readme article, which told a busy life of a foreigner journalist. The whole article is full of self-mockery and humor. The translator uses “窑子” to show noisy and dirty environment. And readers can have a good understanding of the environment through replacement.

#### V. CONCLUSION

As a common language phenomenon, euphemism is widely used in daily life. Both Chinese and foreigners use it to avoid some taboos or sensitive topics which may bring some bad feelings, such as fear, embarrassment, etc. Nowadays, more and more euphemisms have appeared with the increasing of intercultural communication. As a result, translators will face more and more problems about euphemism. So people cannot ignore the study of euphemism translation.

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