Re-creation in Literary Translation from the Perspective of Functional Equivalence—A Case Study of Zhang Peiji’s Selected Modern Chinese Essays 1

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Abstract: Literary translation not only requires the translators to achieve the transformation of the literal meanings, but also faithfully reproduce the aesthetic value of the original text to create the same aesthetic feelings of the target readers with that of the source text readers. Due to the complex cultural background and sentiments of literary works, it requires translators to perform their creativity to reproduce the original context, which makes re-creation to be the core element of literary translation. Guided by Nida’s functional equivalence theory, this paper gives detailed research on the re-creation at lexical, semantic and cultural levels in Zhang Peiji’s Selected Modern Chinese Essays 1. Moreover, the influences of re-creation to Zhang Peiji’s Selected Modern Chinese Essays 1 will be discussed in the hope of providing some reference value for the research on the re-creation of literary translation.

Keywords: Functional Equivalence Theory, Literary translation, Re-creation, Zhang Peiji, Selected Modern Chinese Essays 1.

1. Introduction

Culture exchanges between countries are becoming as fervent as they are nowadays. There are a lot of classic western literary works that have been translated into Chinese while few of ours have achieved such great success. Therefore, it is necessary to research the skills and tactics in literary translation. Eugene A. Nida is a prestigious American linguist and translation theorist whose functional equivalence theory also called dynamic equivalence theory has exerted great influences on the Chinese translation field. Nida (1993) holds the view that meaning is more important than form so translators should try to create the closest equivalence to the source text. In Zhang Peiji’s works, we find that there are many translation strategies of which some are “inexplicable” but wonderfully fitted the original style—re-creation. Re-creation is a method that changes the original form and content to recreate a new expression fitted for the source (Duncan, 2021). Based on the four principles of Nida’s Functional equivalence, the paper aims to explore the application of the re-creation in Zhang Peiji’s Selected Modern Chinese Essays 1 and to research its influences in literary works.

2. An Introduction to Nida’s Functional Equivalence Theory

The functional equivalence, first mentioned in Nida’s book Language, Culture and Translating, has been a significant discussing issue in the translation field and has then greatly influenced the direction of translation researches. Nida (1993) has put forward two different types of equivalence, one of which is called formal equivalence and the other is functional equivalence, which the latter has been laid more emphasis on.

Formal equivalence focuses more on the source text in both form and content. It requires translators to follow the pattern of the original text by starting from the word level, and should not change the pattern and form casually. However, under the theory of formal equivalence, although translators can keep the original form, they can hardly convey the meanings accurately to readers, and it also causes misunderstandings among readers.

Functional equivalence, also named as dynamic equivalence, was first put forward in 1964. It is in contrast to formal equivalence which focuses more on meaning rather than form. It cares about the receptor’s response, and in order to make the source text acceptable for readers, translators can change the form and pattern of the source text and adopt re-creation whenever it is necessary. There are four equivalences in functional equivalence: lexical equivalence, syntactic equivalence, textual equivalence and stylistic equivalence (Nida&Charles, 1982).

3. Re-creation in Literary Translation

The development of translation studies shows that the conversion between two languages is proved to be unable to achieve a complete equivalence, and the re-creation in translation turns to be inevitable (Newmark&Peter, 2006). In other words, if creation is required for authors to produce excellent literary works, then re-creation should be indispensable for translators to reproduce the charisma of the source text. Attention should be paid to the fact that re-creation is not freelance writing, it happens under specific conditions. For example, when rhetoric devices are used and there are connotative meanings in one sentence, then translators need to re-create to reproduce its meaning. The other is that when there are cultural factors involved. In Chinese, the word “狗” is often related to something disgusting or abominate such as “狗眼看人低” and “走狗”, but “dog” is respected and treated like family members in Western countries, so in order to avoid cultural conflicts, translators shouldn’t use dogs but translation like “act like a...
After a few steps, he looked back at me and said, “Go back to your seat. Don’t leave your things alone.” (Zhang, 2007: 52)

In the original sentence, the literal meaning of “进去吧，里面没人” is to inform the author to go back in and there is nobody there in the carriage. If translated directly, it will definitely cause misunderstandings because the train is crowded with people. The sentence like this which only gives half of the meaning requires translators to read into it, figure out the connotative meaning. “里面没人” actually refers that the luggage is left alone and the father worries it may be lost. The translation “Go back to your seat. Don’t leave your things alone.” has appropriately explained the implication.

4. Analysis of Re-creation in Selected Modern Chinese Essays 1

4.1 Re-creation at Lexical Level

As what we have mentioned above, functional equivalence requires four aspects of equivalence and word equivalence is one of the principles. Translation of verbs and four-character idioms are classic ones to figure out how to solve the language differences while conveying the original meaning at the same time.


The angel in white was smiling on me with a bunch of flowers in his arms, his wings flapping (Zhang, 2007: 96).

The example above is a good one to compare the language differences between Chinese and English. The original text has four verbs “抱着” “扬着” “向着” “笑” in one sentence while being reduced to two verbs “smiling” and “flapping” in the translation, and the other two verbs “抱着” “向着” are translated into prepositions as “with” and “on”, which fully demonstrates the “static” of English. The reduction of verbs helps foreigners quickly find the point of the sentence.


The sun has feet too, edging away softly and stealthily. And, without knowing it, I am already caught in its revolution (Zhang, 2007: 57).

The reduplicated words are commonly seen in Chinese literary works which makes the article harmonious and catchy to read. In the sentence, the author personifies the sun to make it vivid and lively. The translation could have been “quietly” or “silently”, but Zhang Peiji uses alliteration to well demonstrate the beauty of reduplicated words.

4.2 Re-creation at Semantic Level

Semantics consists of both referential meaning and connotative meaning. Referential meaning serves to define the range of referents, and the fail of it will cause communication conflicts. Connotative meaning is more complex, changeable and unsystematic. It can be influenced by many factors such as the tone of the text, the context, cultural background and values, etc. Generally, to translate the connotative meaning of a word, one must figure out its implication. Needless to say, the equivalence of meaning is the most important thing translators should pursue.


The expression “不好” has many different meanings: a way of refusal, a bad comment, a kind of description, etc. The translation can go as “it won’t do to let one of the hotel boys go with you”. However, if analyzing carefully, it can be found that the reason author’s father ignored his refusal and insisted to go with him is that he didn’t trust those guys. Therefore, considering that the low-context country shall put things on the surface as much as possible, Zhang Peiji’s translation “It won’t do to trust guys like those hotel boys!” is in line with this principle.

4.3 Re-creation at Cultural Level

Culture is to language what water is to fish. We shall realize the fact that when it comes to the interaction of two different languages, it stands for the collision of two different cultures. In the process of translating, translators will come across lots of cultural-loaded words such as idioms and specific addresses. So when different cultures collide, what kind of wonderful re-creations will take place then? Let’s look at the following examples.


I can simply go around fishing for help or personal connections, or just buy a “black” ticket (Zhang, 2007: 42).

“请托”，“找关系” are common Chinese idioms used to describe “to ask someone for help”. With the increasing importance of the word usage “关系” in China, the translation “guanxi” is also known by some westerners. However, Zhang uses “personal connections” rather than “guanxi” to make sure the basic meaning can be accepted by most people. Additionally, “黑” in Chinese is sometimes related to fraud or illegal activities, and in English, there are similar meaning like “blackmail”. Therefore, Zhang adds quotation marks here and doesn’t make an extra explanation.

[6] 于是大家给他取个死后的法号，叫他做圆通大师。 (张
So they called him a virtuous man and honored him with the posthumous reverent title Master of Easy-Going. (Zhang, 2007: 19)

Some Chinese addresses require explanations rather than keeping the original spelling. But according to Baidu Translation, “圆通大师” is translated into “Master Yuantong”. However, Zhang’s translation renders it as “Master of Easy-Going” which gives the actual meaning of the word. Comparing the two translations, the latter seems to be more comprehensible for readers and better fitted in the context.

5. The Influences of Re-creation in Selected Modern Chinese Essays I

5.1 Keeping the Original Style

Nida (1993) points out that, “Although style is secondary to content, nevertheless it is important. One should not translate poetry as though it were prose, nor expository material as though it were straight narrative.” (Catford, 2004: 13) From what he said, we can see that the reservation of the original style is also crucial for translation, and the presence of re-creation makes it possible to keep the original style. It is the re-creation from word to sentence and from sentence to passage that has kept the original style. Words like “softly and stealthily” have reproduced the original rhyme, style and meaning successfully which has proved this truth.

5.2 Improving the Translatability

Nida (2004) holds the view that languages are interchangeable as long as we can find the equivalence. However, the different social environment, expressing habits and cultural background sometimes make translators can hardly find them. Under this circumstance, the creativity of translators is expected to solve the problem. Translations like “blackmail” and “Master of Easy-Going” have testified that most of the equivalences can be found as long as translators make some re-creations.

5.3 Promoting the Readability

It has been mentioned that language and culture are closely related to each other which is the reason why translators cannot do literal translation most of the time. By making full sense of the source text and turning it in the way that can adapt to the target language and readers, translators are able to convey the original meaning which in other words, can promote the readability. For instance, when coming across the Chinese idioms “野孩子”, a translation like “wild child” cannot be understood by readers, but with a little creation into “naughty child”, it can be accepted by most readers.

6. Conclusion

Based on Nida’s functional equivalence, it can be found that re-creation happens in no matter word, meaning or cultural level in order to reproduce the meaning of source language as much as possible, and it is indispensable in achieving the functional equivalence between the two different languages under different cultural backgrounds. Besides, the influences of re-creation in Selected Modern Chinese Essay I can be concluded as keeping the original style, improving the translatability and promoting the readability, and the lack of any one of them cannot become a good translation. By researching into the guidance of functional equivalence to re-creation, the writer hopes to provide some values and research directions for literary translation.

References


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Na Wang, a postgraduate from Shanghai University of International Business and Economics, majors in Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics. Her research interests include literary translation, Second Language Acquisition, and Foreign Language Teaching.