

Cultural Default and Compensatory Translation Strategies in Luo Jingguo's English Translation of *Guwenguanzhi* from the Perspective of Relevance Theory

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Abstract

Translation is not only a process of transferring from one language to another but also a process of cross-cultural communication. Because of the different cultural backgrounds of the two languages and other factors, it is inevitable, in many cases, for the targeted language (TL) to lose certain information, function, and effect of the source language (SL). Such information, however, can be compensated in some aspects to make it as close as possible to the original effect or even achieve the same effect. This paper deals with the cultural default and compensatory translation strategies of Luo Jingguo's English translation of *A Selection of classical Chinese Essays from Guwenguanzhi* and analyzes the application of such strategies as "literal translation". literal translation with annotation, contextual amplification, adaptation, and free translation by comparing the original text and the translation. We find that the translation strategy that enables the TL readers to make the best correlation with the original text is the most appropriate. Our research aims to provide some references for learners of classical Chinese literature translation and promote cross-cultural communication of classical Chinese literature.

Keywords

Guwenguanzhi; Cultural Default; Compensation Strategies; Relevance Theory.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

In recent years, China put forward the strategy of "going global" of Chinese culture, to promote the awakening, rejuvenation, and integration of Chinese culture. As a result, translating Chinese classics has become one of the hot topics in the field of translation studies. Many excellent Chinese translators have tried their best to introduce classical Chinese literature to foreign countries through translation. Relevant works, however, are far from enough, and the translation of *Guwenguanzhi* has almost been neglected.

Guwenguanzhi was written by Wu Chucai and Wu Diaohou during the reign of Emperor Kangxi of the Qing Dynasty. It is a collection of 222 short prose writings from the Eastern Zhou Dynasty to the Ming Dynasty, consisting of 12 volumes. In the past 300 years, *Guwenguanzhi* has been widely spread and has great influence. It has developed a school of its own in many selected ancient Chinese texts.

In light of the literary and academic position of this work, Professor Luo Jingguo at Peking University translated *A Selection of Classical Chinese Essays from Guwenguanzhi*, thus bridging the gap between the work and its translations. These essays are the representative works of famous ancient Chinese writers and one of the important references for us to study the English translation of Chinese cultural classics.

1.2. Significance

First, it is vitally important to study Chinese classics. The research of classical Chinese prose in Europe and America is later than that of ancient Chinese drama and novels (Chen, 2017). The research objects are mainly concentrated on *the Classic of Poetry*, *Chuci*, *19 ancient poems*, and *Zhaoming Wenxuan*. It is noteworthy that *Guwenguanzhi* has the same literary influence as *Zhaoming Wenxuan* and should therefore be given prominence to (Shen, 2015). After the Yuan Dynasty, the researches into classical Chinese literary works mainly focused on drama and novels, while classical prose was rarely touched upon.

Second, in terms of the influence, the prose is as influential as, if not more than, the novel and the drama; in Germany, it even has a greater influence on literary creation than the novel and drama.

Third, Luo Jingguo's translation of *Guwenguanzhi* is an important work in the edifice of the English translation of classical prose. So far, however, the lack of English versions of *Guwenguanzhi* has resulted in a limited number of relevant researches.

Fourth, there are many culture-loaded words and allusions in Chinese classics, which, though not brain-racking for the SL readers, may confuse the TL readers if not properly translated.

Based on the above considerations, we take Luo Jingguo's translation of *Guwenguanzhi* as our research subject. By analyzing this work, we aim to enrich the research on the English versions of *Guwenguanzhi*, on the translation strategies in Luo's translation, and on classical prose translation in Western Sinology. We also attempt to provide some references for learners of classical Chinese literature and translation and to promote the cross-cultural communication of classical Chinese literature.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Relevance Theory and its Advantages

In 1986, the Relevance Theory, systematically put forward in *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* by Dan Sperber and Deired Wilson, has aroused wide interest in western linguistic circles. Sperber and Wilson analyzed the mechanism of discourse production and understanding based on cognitive theory. They believed the process of linguistic communication is an ostensive inferential process of finding relevance, generally effective for all discourse types. People will make a variety of cognitive assumptions and reasoning when they comprehend new information, and this process is relevance-oriented.

Relevance Theory is an inclusive and explanatory theory. Because of this, it has been adopted in a range of fields. The translation is one of the most influential fields of Relevance Theory. In 1991, Gutt applied Relevance Theory to translation studies in his Ph.D. thesis, *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context*. The Relevance Theory leads to translation studies is of guiding significance to both translation theory and practice.

“By combining communication and cognition, the Relevance Theory can reflect people's language ability more truly, explain the discourse understanding in language communication better, and is especially suitable for deducing the discourse meaning of literary characters” (Wang & Wang, 2005).

2.2. Cultural Default in the Frame of Relevance Theory

2.2.1. Concept of Cultural Default

The birth of a language is related to the specific thinking and culture of native people. When people from the same language background communicate, therefore, they will omit the contents that they think are self-evident to improve communicative efficiency, because both speakers have the same cultural background and cognitive environment.

“This kind of content, which exists in the two sides' memory, is omitted by the two sides as a share in the communication process. It is called “default” (Huang 91). Accordingly, the omission of content related to the cultural background outside the text, including national culture, religious belief, values, ethics, and thinking mode, is called cultural default.

From this concept, it can be concluded that cultural default occurs in the process of communication with common cultural background knowledge, namely, the omission of known content.

2.2.2. Translation Problems Caused by Cultural Default

“The essence of translation is to reproduce the meaning and connotation of a language in a particular social and cultural background into one in another background. This has become the consensus of the translation community” (Huang, 2004). From this consensus, we can sum up a keyword — inter-culture. “Christian Nord replaced the term ‘translation’ with ‘intercultural communication’, Holz - Manttari even use intercultural cooperation to replace “translation” (Liao, 2002). Language and culture are inseparable and translation beyond cross-cultural language differences is much more difficult. E. A. Nida (1993) pointed out that “the most serious mistakes in translation are often not caused by the improper expression of words, but by the wrong cultural assumptions”. Wang Zuoliang (1997) echoed a similar view that “The biggest difficulty of translation lies in the difference of two cultures. Self-evident things in culture may need to be explained with great efforts in another culture. Things which are self-evident to the native speakers may need to be explained to foreign readers”.

For instance, most translators have translated Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* into Chinese *xifengsong* (西风颂). From the perspective of literal translation, the source language is equivalent to the target language, though we believe it is a *maladroit* translation. This is because people in the East and the West understand the west wind differently. In the eyes of the westerners, the west wind is warm and a symbol of hope and beauty; to the Chinese, the west wind is cold, giving a sense of depression and ruin. Westerners deem *Ode to the West Wind* as a hopeful poem, but Chinese people will not understand why the west wind is praised when they see *xifengsong*.

The above analysis indicates that translators must adopt appropriate compensatory strategies for the omitted cultural elements in the source language and help the TL readers to transcend cultural differences and enjoy the aesthetic value of the original text This requires.

2.3. Previous Studies on the C-E Translation of *Guwenguanzhi*

Since its publication, the selected translations of Luo's classics have captured the attention of scholars in related fields and lovers of classical Chinese translation. In the aesthetic study of translation, Xuan Zhifeng (2012) compared the beauty of classical Chinese prose and that of English classical prose and took Luo Jingguo's translation as an example to explore the ways to reproduce the beauty of classical Chinese prose in translation and its shortcoming.

Many scholars use Luo's translation and ancient Chinese text for comparative analysis. Wang Yunyan (2011) analyzed the treatment of cultural-loaded words in the English translation of *Guwenguanzhi* based on the five cultural factors proposed by Nida. Liu Ang (2012) delved into the C-E Translation of *Guwenguanzhi* by using the dynamic construal of micro meaning, discussed the power of the dynamic construction theory to reason and explain the micro meaning of Chinese classics. Li Guowen (2015) discussed the concrete manifestation of the translator's subjectivity in translation and its translation strategies. Cao Wanzhong (2020) carefully studied Luo's translation from the perspective of the multi-dimensional transformation of ecological translation studies, cited the inadequacies of translation found in characters, words, sentences, and articles, and put forward his suggestions for translation.

On the translation strategies of Luo's translation of *Guwenguanzhi*, He Mengli and Wu Fei (2020) sorted out the deep translation strategies adopted in the translation and explored the interaction between deep contextualization and the text. Zhou Hu (2008) also used the contrastive method of English and Chinese to analyze the translation strategies of *Guwenguanzhi* from the perspective of Relevance Theory.

3. Cultural Default and Corresponding Compensatory Strategies in Translation

The challenge posed by cultural default lies in the translator's need to correctly analyze the cultural differences between SL and TL and select appropriate translation techniques. In the Relevance Theory, there are many operational techniques. Which technique to use depends on the specific context. "Literal translation can be used to reflect the original culture directly and authentically without any translation strategies of compensation and interpretation of the condition of cultural default" (Liu, 2012). No matter which translation technique is chosen, "the target text must conform to the principle of optimal relevance, which means that the target text reader can obtain sufficient contextual effect without too much effort" (Gutt, 1991).

In Luo's English translation of *Guwenguanzhi*, there are many culture-loaded words and allusions that the TL readers are unfamiliar with. In this section, under the framework of the Relevance Theory, we will compare Luo's translation with the original, and analyze its cultural default and corresponding compensatory strategy.

3.1. Literal Translation

"Literal translation means basically following the original wording and structures without a rigid word-for-word rendering" (Ye & Shi, 2011). Luo used literal translation in the following examples, though there are cultural defaults. This may be because the default will cause little confusion.

Example 1:

SL: 生不用封万户侯，但愿一识韩荆州。

TL: I would rather see Han Jingzhou in person than become a nobleman with a fief of ten thousand households.

Analysis: "万户侯" is a kind of marquis in ancient China. More precisely, it was the Marquis who enjoyed the taxes of ten thousand households in the Han dynasty; afterwards, it generally referred to high officials and nobles. A complete translation will be "the Marquis who enjoyed the taxes of ten thousand peasants", which is a bit long-winded and clumsy. Luo therefore rendered the superficial meaning as a nobleman with a fief of ten thousand households. It suffices, indeed, to help comprehend what "万户侯" means.

3.2. Literal Translation with Annotation

The literal translation is the basic translation method, which can not only retain the content of the original text but also maintain the form of the original text, though it does have some limitations. As Newmark (2001) put it, "literal translation is correct and must not be avoided if it secures referential and pragmatic equivalence to the original".

In cross-cultural translation, ignorance of the differences between the two cultures and blind pursuit of the literal translation will lead to unreadability or incomprehension for the TL readers.

Based on preserving the content and form of the original text, the annotation takes into account the reader's understanding. The annotation compensates for the cultural default to avoid comprehension obstacles; at the same time, readers can not only retain the cultural concept of

the source language but also more profoundly understand the SL culture by reading the literal text and annotations.

Example 2:

SL: 侍中，尚书，长史，参军，此悉贞亮死节之臣，愿陛下亲之信之。

TL: Shizhong, Shangshu, Zhangshi, and Canjun are faithful upright, and ready to lay down their lives for honor and fidelity. As your humble servant, I hope that your Majesty will retain close ties to them and trust them.

Analysis: This is a typical example of the historical-cultural default. Official ranks Shizhong, Shangshu, Zhangshi, and Canjun existed in ancient China, but not in the West. Luo therefore explained these ranks in the endnote: Shizhong was an official at court, serving as the king's consultant. Shangshu was a high-ranking official who helped the king in administrative work. Zhangshi was a high-ranking official who helped the Prime Minister in administrative work. Canjun was an important official in the Prime Minister's Office.

If these positions are explained directly in the translation, the translation will be complicated and verbose. Luo chose to explain these positions by adding notes at the bottom, which helps the TL readers to better appreciate the original text.

Example 3:

SL: 庆历四年春，滕子京谪守巴陵郡。

TL: In the spring of the fourth year of Qingli, Teng Zijing was exiled to Baling Prefecture to be the governor there.

Analysis: This example also belongs to the historical-cultural default. In this example, Luo also employed the note to explain the meaning of “庆历”: Qingli was the title of Emperor Renzong's reign of the Song Dynasty. A direct translation would be “the spring of the fourth year in the reign of Emperor Renzong”, which would lose some cultural elements. It should be noted that the title of the “period” is a significant element of Chinese history; therefore, exercising relevant strategy to compensate for the loss brought about by history-cultural default is of great importance to adequate translation.

The above two examples of compensation are also known as the “cultural annotation strategy”. This strategy is “to explain in detail the default cultural information with footnotes or endnotes, the rendition, by enlarging the cognitive environment, can help the TL reader fill in the slots left by cultural default and gain a coherent understanding” (Zhou, 2008).

3.3. Contextual Amplification

Xia Tingde (2006) proposed that “contextual amplification is a way of translating the source language literally with an addition of some appropriate words in the target language to better explain the original schema”. It refers to the interpretation of the content that the SL readers take for granted while the TL readers are confused. This compensatory strategy helps to retain the original cultural image but also helps to make up for the loss caused by cultural default. If the TL readers need some cultural information, then contextual amplification is the optimal choice to ensure the coherence and clarity of the translation.

Example 4:

SL: 李氏子蟠，年十七，好古文，六艺经传皆通习之。

TL: Pan, the son of Li's family, who is only seventeen years old, but loves to study Chinese classics of the Qin and Han dynasties, and masters the *Six Classics* and their annotations.

Analysis: A literal translation of “古文” will be “ancient prose”. When translating “古文”, however, Luo did not mechanically do so, but translated it into “Chinese classics of the Qin and Han dynasties” by adding the specific dynasty. The reason is that Han Yu is a well-known writer in the Tang Dynasty, so the ancient prose he mentioned should be the literature before the Tang

Dynasty. If it is translated directly into the “ancient prose”, the TL readers may misinterpret it as the entire ancient Chinese literature. In this case, through the amplification of context, the content of the original text can be correctly interpreted, and the cultural default can be fully compensated.

Example 5:

SL: 越三月，乙卯乃雨，甲子又雨。

TL: It was not until another three months had passed that it rained on the second day of the fourth month of the lunar calendar and again on the eleventh day.

Analysis: In the original text, the pronunciation of “乙卯” and “甲子” is “yimao” and “jiazi”, representing two dates. Such names are the method of calculating the days by the Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches which originated in the Shang Dynasty. This can be called the “Chinese era” in English. This is the blind spot of Chinese culture for the TL readers because the BC/AD chronology is widely used at present, which is disparate from the system and cycle of the Chinese era.

The translator further explained the unique Chinese term through amplification as an effort to assist the readers to form a better understanding of the text. In translating these two dates, therefore, Luo did not resort to the Chinese era but adopts the lunar calendar — the second day of the fourth month of the lunar calendar and the eleventh day — which is more familiar to the TL readers. This case could be categorized into traditional cultural default. It is vital, in literary translation, to employ a relevant strategy to compensate for the loss resulting from traditional culture default.

3.4. Cultural Adaptation

Cultural adaptation means to sacrifice the linguistic form in the source language but to express the cultural images in the source language in a way that the TL readers are accustomed to (Sinani, et al.). This strategy, suitable for the translation of cultural images with similar meanings in the source language and the target language, has two advantages. First, replacing unfamiliar concepts in the SL culture with images familiar to TL readers allows for better understanding; second, replacing cultural images can leave a certain space for readers to imagine, reflecting consideration for semantic emptiness.

Example 6:

SL: 太守谓谁庐陵欧阳修也。

TL: And who is the Prefect? He is Ouyang Xiu of Luling.

Analysis: “太守” in the original text refers to the chief executive of an administrative division in ancient China. In the English culture, there is also the concept of the chief executive of an administrative division. According to Collins English Dictionary, in some countries, a prefect is the head of the local government administration or a local government department. “太守” and “Prefect” have similar social statuses. Luo here translated “太守” into “Prefect”, which not only takes into account the TL readers’ understanding of the cultural information of the source language but also leaves some leeway for the TL readers to understand the social status of “太守” in ancient China through imagination.

Example 7:

SL: 或命巾车，或棹孤舟。

TL: I would either ride on a cart, or row a small boat.

Analysis: In Chinese, “巾车” means a horse-drawn cart with an awning on its top. No word has a similar cultural connotation to “巾车” in English culture. Luo here translated “巾车” into “cart”. His purpose might be to associate the TL readers with a two-or-four-wheel vehicle pulled by a

horse. From the perspective of cultural communication, however, this translation strategy deprived of the original cultural connotation of “巾车”.

For this kind of culture-loaded words, perhaps literal translation with annotation can keep the original cultural image and provides a chance for the target reader to fully enjoy the flavor of a foreign country.

3.5. Free Translation

“Free translation”, or “paraphrase” means that the translator abandons the original structure of the SL or expresses the meaning in a totally different way, because of no equivalents in the TL; it represents the main idea only (Li, 2015). To ensure accuracy and appropriateness, translators are supposed to employ proper paraphrasing.

Example 8:

SL: 臣不胜犬马怖惧之情，谨拜表以闻。

TL: I am trembling all over as I present to Your Majesty this petition.

Analysis: This is a linguistic default. A literal translation will be “I have a mind like a dog and a horse that cannot bear fear”, which may perplex the TL readers. In ancient China, officials often compared themselves to dogs and horses to convey their loyalty to the emperor. Aware of the different connotations of the “dog” in Chinese and English, Luo paraphrased the sentence to establish relevance. In this way, Luo correctly conveyed the feeling of horror in dogs and horses as “trembling all over”. It not only allows TL readers to understand the mind expressed in the original text, but also avoids misunderstanding of “dog”.

4. Conclusion

Cultural default is a great obstacle to cross-cultural translation. If the translator does not consider the cultural background and cognitive environment of the TL readers in the process of translation, the TL readers may be confused. If the translator translates thoroughly, the cultural value and aesthetic feeling of the article will lose. Nida (2001) put forward that “for truly successful translating, biculturalism is even more important than bilingualism since words are only meaningful in the context of cultures in which they function.

The Relevance Theory is based on cognitive theory, which regards verbal communication as an explicit and inferential process of seeking relevance. “The essential claim of this theory is that human communication crucially creates an expectation of optimal relevance, that is, an expectation from the hearer that his attempt at interpretation will yield adequate contextual effects at minimal processing cost” (Zhou, 2008). This theory can therefore be explanatory for cultural default and its compensation in translation.

Under the guidance of the Relevance Theory, we have analyzed Luo Jingguo’s English translation of *A Selection of Classical Chinese Essays from Guwenguanzhi* regarding the compensatory translation strategies such as literal translation with annotation, cultural adaptation, contextual amplification, and paraphrasing. We have demonstrated how these strategies can retain the information and connotation of the source language with the best relevance, thus transmitting the content and artistic conception of the source language to the TL readers to the greatest extent. We hope that our research can contribute to the “going global” of Chinese culture by providing some insights for future Chinese-English translation, in particular literary translation.

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