On the Aesthetic Effects in Chinese-English Translation

Author Details: Xuelian Lei
Foreign Languages Department, Nanchang Normal University-
No.889 Ruixiang Road, Changbei Economic and Technological Development Zone,
Nanchang city, Jiangxi province, China

Abstract: Translation is a kind of practice that turns one language into another language. In fact, this is an interchanging course of the form and soul of the source and target texts. This paper aims to study and explore the aesthetic effects based on the aesthetics and the fundamental theory of translation, which reveals the common principles of the aesthetical activities in translation.

Key words: Aesthetics, Chinese-English, Translation

1. Introduction

This paper studies and discovers the aesthetic factors in expression on the basis of the aesthetics and the translation fundamental theory in terms of translation aesthetics, which aims to find the common principles of the aesthetical activities in translation and enhances the competence in dealing with the specifications and in appreciating a translation version.

2. Theory basis

Firstly this paper concerns what is the definition of aesthetics. In the ancient times, a lot of philosophers and men of letters demonstrated their opinions about aesthetics. Confucius held the view of “Perfect Aesthetics”. Mencius considered aesthetics as a kind of substance. And Pythagoras in ancient Greece defined aesthetics as harmony and proportion. Platon created his aesthetic view basically on reason (or idea). Further speaking, aesthetics is also a new-born science because the classical German philosopher Bomgeton used the term “aesthetics” in 18th century. Later, aesthetics gradually became an independent science. [1]

However, the translation aesthetics has a shorter history. Many scholars in China have been studying this subject for a long time and then achieved a lot. The consequence compared with other nations and cultures in the world, aesthetics has greater effect on the Chinese people, culture and translation study. Fu Lei, a famous Chinese translator, once tried out to study and create beauty in a number of translating practices. [2]

The objects of the translation aesthetics consist of the aesthetic objective elements (original and translated versions), the aesthetic subjective elements (translator and reader), the aesthetic activities in translation and the aesthetic criterion and so on.

As is known, the key to translation is to understand clearly and adequately the source language that will be translated. Translation means translating the meaning, and the focus of attention for a translator is on the texts, because these are the basic and ultimate units that carry meaning. Mistakes in translation may be readily made if a translator has not read an entire text before understanding to translate a part. For a translator trying to understand a source text the important problem is the source of information to provide an understanding of what is involved. If we really understand what a text means, the meaning can usually be rendered in other language, but this often requires both technical knowledge and sensitivity to the needs of the audience. “Translator fully understanding the meaning of a text, the process of translating it is largely automatic.” Before we begin to translate, we have to know exactly not only about the meaning of each sentence and each word in a text but also about the writer’s intention of it. So at the early stage, we’d better consider a text not as details but as a whole, otherwise, we will possibly make terrible errors in translating. In fact, more errors in translation are made because of failure to
comprehend the source text than for any other reason. Even easy source texts need to be looked at carefully before launching into the process of translating. When talking about translation units and textual analysis, Peter Newmark once remarked: “……Operatively, most translation is done at the level of the smaller units (word and clause), leaving the larger units to ‘work’ automatically, until a difficulty occurs and until revision starts”. However, I think we should attach much more importance to the whole text because the whole text has the dominant position in both practice and study of translation. This awareness of totality is necessary for a translator to conduct a source text and a target version.[3]

And the forerunner of Chinese modern translation, Yan Fu mentioned his idea on translating when he translated T.H. Huxley’s “Evolution and Ethics and Other Essays” into Chinese. He wrote, “There are three difficulties of translating: faithfulness, comprehensibility and elegance.” This idea has a deeply effect on the Chinese modern translating. From above, we can find that translating is an aesthetic activity which the aesthetic subjective element (translator) transforms one aesthetic objective element (source text) into another aesthetic objective element (target text) by the aesthetic medium (translator’s aesthetic competence /sense). In other words, the aesthetic activity of translating is a kind of mankind’s practical activity that creates the aesthetical values. The criterion of the translation aesthetics is that a translator can faithfully reproduce the content and aesthetic features of the source text. Based on this point, the famous American scholar Eugene A. Nida presented his theory of the equivalent response or effect. [1], [4]

3. Aesthetic Effect in Translating Practices

3.1 Aesthetic effect derived from elegance

At first, I take the translation versions of “My Book” written by George Robert Gissing (1857-1903) as an example.

Paragraph 1. Dozens of my books were purchased with money ought to have been spent upon what are called necessaries of life. Mary a time I have stood before a stall, or a bookseller’s window, torn by conflict of intellectual desire and bodily need.

Translation 1: 我的成打成打的书是用了该花在生活必需品上的钱买来的。不止一次我站在书摊，或是书店的橱窗前，经受精神需要和物质需要冲突的折磨。(informal)

Translation 2: 鄙人所购的许多书籍，所用之款本应用于所谓生活必需品。我时常流连于书店的橱窗前，在心智渴念与口腹之欲的矛盾中受尽煎熬。 (formal)

From the whole passage, we can easily feel the elegance and formal style of it. So obviously, the translation 2 is better than the translation 1. “鄙人” in Chinese originally means “I” and yet shows that the passage had been written about one hundred years or more before. The word can efficiently pass an association of age and time on to readers.

Paragraph 2: At the very hour of dinner, when my stomach clamored for food, I have been stopped by sight of a volume so long covered, and marked at so advantageous a price, that I could not let it go: yet to buy it meant pangs of famine.

Translation 1: 到用晚餐的时间，当我的肚子饿得咕噜咕噜直叫的时候，我已经因为看见一本我己想要多时的书籍而站住了脚步。书上标着很合算的价格，我实在是不能错过这个大好的机会，但是如果我买下了这本书籍，即便意味着我将经受挨饿的痛苦。

Translation 2: 某日正当进餐时分,我饥肠辘辘,步履却为一书所止,此书令我心仪已久,而标价竟如此诱人,实不忍失之交臂。然而,购之便意味着忍饥挨饿。

“Clamored” is an onomatopoeic word. If this word is translated into “咕噜咕噜”, it may be far away from the true flavor of the original text. On the contrary, “饥肠辘辘” is more suitable at this occasion. Hemingway evolved his laconic but expressive style on the basis of his belief that “The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one eighth of it being above water.” In his short stories he often omitted all of the conjunctions and made full use of short and simple sentences. For example:
The sun was coming over the hills. A bass jumped, making a circle in the water. Nick trailed his hand in the water. It felt warm in the sharp chill of the morning.

太阳露出山头，一只鲈鱼跳起来，使水面泛起一圈涟漪。尼克把手伸到水里，在清晨凛冽的寒气里，水摸上去很暖和。[5]

In its Chinese version, the translator took the style of the source text into account and didn’t use any conjunctions. As a result, the version expresses the spirit and feature of the source language with high accuracy.

3.2. Aesthetic effect derived from rhyme and rhythm

The outstanding Pro. Xu Yuanchong in Beijing University put forward his set of aesthetic principles—Beauty of content, Beauty of sound, Beauty of style, Pro. Xu focuses on the beauty of content and the beauty of sound in the practices of translating, especially poetic works such as poetry, prose and essay. Rhyme is an echo of the preliminary pulsation of organisms in the universe. We can discover it in the beating of heart and in the children’s ballads. Rhyme and rhythm make us long for something while they make us happy by satisfying this kind of waiting.

In Chinese ancient poetry, rhyme and rhythm are often attached much importance to. Even in the modern poetry, poets still use regular rhymes to make poems sounded more beautiful. We can find out this point in the following example:

In this short poem, the rhyme pattern of “Zhong Dong (中、东)” through it gives readers a feeling of power and solemnness. Then we will easily be overwhelmed by its artistic conception. In English poetry, the sonnet is the typical representative of a regular rhyme. English sonnets are usually separated into three quatrains and one couplet. The rhyme is abab cdcd efef gg. This kind of rhyme can express the strong emotion and the individual thought of a poet with its brevity. For instance:

When to the Sessions of Sweat Silent Thought
(No.30)

written by William Shakespeare

When to the session of sweat silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,
And with old woes new wail my dear time’s waste:
Then can I drown an eye, unused to flow,
For precious friends hid in death’s dateless night,
And weep afresh love’s long-since cancelled woe,
And moan the expense of many a vanished sight.
Then can I grieve at grievances foregone,
And heavily from woe to woe tell o’er
The sad account of forebemoaned moan,
Which I new pay as if not paid before.
But if the while I think on thee, dear friend.
Il losses are restored, and sorrows end.

Chinese version:

在宁静的沉思中忆往昔 （第三十首）

威廉·莎士比亚

在宁静的沉思中忆往昔,

如法官鞫审时一一传讯;

为无数企冀成泡影；而叹息,

旧恨生新愁，虚度好光阴;

念挚友长眠黄泉无尽期,

干涸的眼中不禁涕泗流;

纵然爱情的痛苦早忘记,

为消逝的哀怨再度惆怅,

把一桩桩沉痛往事数遍;

把波澜掷给大海,

把无限还诸苍穹。 （“Clock” by Yuan Kejia）

In the first four lines of the sonnet, there are many sibilants like /s/, /z/, /ʃ/, /θ/, etc. Especially the rhyme of /s/ is used as a series of alliteration—sessions, sweet, silent. These slow and slight sounds show a feeling of meditation so that the lines successfully express the theme of the poem: thinking and remembering. Referring to the original poem, the translation version skillfully and ingeniously utilizes the rhyme pattern of “xi”—昔．汛．息, which shows a
feeling of deeply-thinking in Chinese. The way that a translator transforms the original rhyme into the similar sounds in Chinese is a kind of important technique in translating poetry.

3.3 Aesthetic effect derived from systematicity

Reduplication is a peculiarity in Chinese. Moreover, reduplication forms a sound pattern that two or more characters are linked together with the same vowel formation. Therefore it often takes easy and slow aesthetical effect that expresses sentimentalism and sadness, such as Chinese poetess Li Qingzhao’s lines “寻寻觅觅，冷冷清清，凄凄惨惨戚戚” (“Grief Beyond Belief” Tune: slow, slow song).

When one translator translated this line into English, he just mechanically imitated the source rhyme word by word:

Search, search;
Cold, cold, bare, bare,
Grief, grief; cruel, cruel grief.

This version cannot revive the real rhyme and rhythm of Li’s poem but leads to the result that makes the meaning of it misunderstood. Compared with above, Mr Xu’s translation seems better:

I look for what I miss,
I know not what it is,
I feel so sad, so drear.
So lonely without cheer.

In Mr. Xu’s version, the translator uses the completed sentences to show the poetess’s sadness and gloom and uses a two-line-rhyme to substitute for the reduplication in the original text. These methods make the equivalence of two texts possible and natural.

More examples are quoted here.

The Wild Honey Suckle
Fair flower/ that does/ so come/ly grow,
Hid in/ this si/lent dull/ retreat,
Untouched/ thy hon/ied blos/som blow,
Unseen/ thy lit/ the branch/es greet,
No rov/ing foot/ shall crush/ thee here;
No bus/y hand/ provoke/ a tear.

(Written by Philip Freneau)

野蜜花
洁白的/花朵，
开得/多俊俏，

Hiding in green leaves,
How quiet and peaceful.
Honey flowers/breathes air,
Who/ to know? 
Thick twigs/ in your hand,
Who/ to see?
That sauntering/footsteps, 
Could you/crush? 
That忙碌/手指啊，
可别惹你/流泪。

(Translated by Wu Jiaxiang) [6]

The original poem has 6 lines in all and in each line there are 8 syllabuses in 4 feet. The fairly fast rhythm shows a feeling of amusement. But if we translate it into Chinese by 6 lines, each line will contain 10 syllabuses and be much longer than the original poem. As a result, the rhythm of the whole text will become slow and weaken the effect of the original tone. So the translator turns each line into two lines in order to match up with the original rhythm. Although the number of syllabuses in every group is not equal, the whole poem is divided into 3 groups regularly and is arranged to a neat rhythm in parallelism. This piece of translation is a good example that reproduces the original rhyme and rhythm.

3.4 Four-character sentence

When we read a lot of good translation works, we find that the skillful Chinese translators are almost expert in using the four-character phrases in their translating. Linguists tell us that English is hypotaxis language of a kind but Chinese is a parataxis language. The definitions of them from dictionaries are quoted below:

Hypotaxis: The dependent or subordinate construction or relationship of clauses with connectives; for example, I will despair if you don’t come. ②

Parataxis: The arranging of clauses one after the other without connectives showing the relation between them. Example: The rain fell; the river flooded; the house was washed away. ③

The American translator Eugene A. Nida presents his mind in the book “Translating Meaning”, which is the idea that as far as the differences between two languages (English and Chinese) are concerned, the most important problem in linguistics is the contrast between hypotaxis and parataxis. The Chinese language has been recognized by some western scholars as the most mature
language in the world. An old western saying tells: “Brevity is the soul of wit.” And brevity is a typical advantage of Chinese, which is shown by four-character phrases. For example:

Why, at the height of desire and human pleasure worldly, social, amorous, ambitious, or even avaricious—does there mingle a certain sense of doubt and sorrow?

入世务俗，交游酬应，男女爱悦，图营世俗，乃至贪婪财货。人生百为，于兴最高，心最欢时，辄微觉乐趣中杂以疑虑与忧伤，其故何耶。（Written by George Barron, and translated by Qian Zhongshu)

Mr. Qian translated the five points of “desire and human pleasure” or worldly, social, amorous, ambitious, avaricious into five four-character Chinese phrases:

入世务俗,交游酬应,男女爱悦,图营世俗,乃至贪婪财货。

All of these phrases sound so rhythmic and appropriately mingle the meaning with the special style and rhythm. One more example:

In summer I’m disposed to shirk, /as summer is no time for work. /In winter inspiration dies/ for of outdoor exercise. /In spring, I’m seldom in the mood, /because of vernal lassitude. /The fall remains. But such a fall! /We’ve really had no fall at all.

炎夏非劬之时; 严冬不宜出户游散, 无可即景生情, 遂尔文思枯涸; 春气困人,自振不得; 秋高身爽,而吾国之秋有名乏实,奈何！ [7]

Because the source text is a piece of poem, Mr Qian used several four-character phrases to maintain the original rhythm.

3.5 Aesthetic effect derived from the understanding of idioms

Idiom is a wide concept, including four-character Chinese phrases, enigmatic folk similes, proverb, slang and so on. A translator must be able to sense what is purposely left implicit in the source text and what can and should be made implicit in the translated text. In addition to an excellent command of both source and target languages translators usually should be familiar to the different cultural backgrounds of these two languages and specialize in one or more areas of knowledge in which their competence is needed and the pay is better,

As all of Chinese know, “The Dream of Red Mansion” created by Cao Xueqing is a brilliant pearl in the history of Chinese literature. But up to now, there are only two completed English translation versions. One of them was written by Mr. Yan Xianyi and his wife, and the other was written by Pro. David Hawkes in Oxford University. Pro. Hawkes devoted himself to the English translation of the Dream of Red Mansion in the late years of his life. When the version was published, it became a classic translation of Chinese great works. One paragraph of it is quoted:

如今我们家赫赫扬扬,已将百载,一日倘或乐极生悲,若应了那句树倒猢猕散的俗说,岂不虚称了一世诗书旧族了？

“诗书旧族” in Chinese means a big family with an educated and cultured tradition. Pro. Hawkes translated it into “great, cultured households” so as to show the typical Chinese cultural connotation.

Besides the English translation of the Dream of Red Mansion, Mr. and Mrs. Yang Xianyi contributed a lot to the English translation of Lu Xun’s works. Here is a sentence quoted from “The True Story of Ah Q”:

这断子绝孙的阿 Q!”远远的听到小尼姑的带哭的声音。

“Ah Q, may you die sonless!” sounded the little nun’s voice tearfully in the distance.

The idea of offspring is the one of the nuclear views in our Chinese people traditionally. Especially in the past times, Chinese people could not bear that they have no future generations. So swearword “断子绝孙” is always considered by Chinese people as the most insulting word. However, maybe the western people don’t know about this point. If a translator wants to explain the particular cultural phenomenon, he would use a lot of words, sentences and even paragraphs. But, “断子绝孙” in the source text only expresses the complaint and abuse of the speaker. It’s unnecessary for a translator to use many words to explain. So Mr. Yang translated it into “die sonless” finally. The translation not only is faithful to the source text but also avoids skillfully the cultural gap between the east and the west so that the western readers will not misunderstand the
true meaning of the original works.

A paragraph in Dickens’ Hard Times:

“(I double if you ever will see him now.) It’s plain to me, he’s off.”

“Do you mean that he has deserted his daughter?”

“Ay! I mean,” said Mr. Childers, with a nod, “that he has cut. He was goosed last night, he was goosed the night before last, he was goosed today, …”

“…在我看来事情很清楚,他已经溜了。”

“你是说他已经把女儿抛弃了吗?”


In the original text, many slangs are used. Those slangs clearly show the speaker’s character and attitude. So when the translator turned it into Chinese, he also skillfully used Chinese slangs to match with the original.

3.6 Aesthetic effect derived from connotation

“鸳鸯” in Chinese is a symbol of love and passion. But in English mandarin duck merely means “a bright-colored, created Asian duck, sometimes domesticated.” It is so clear that “mandarin duck” has no connotation of love and passion. Pro. Hawkes solved this problem when he translated the Dream of Red Mansion.

近日宝玉弄来的外传野史,多半才子佳人,都因小巧玩物上撮合,或有鸳鸯,或有凤凰。

English version:----in the romance which Baoyu smuggled in to her and of which she was nowadays an avid consumer it was always some trinket or small object of clothing or jewelry — a pair of lovebirds, a male and female phoenix ----that brought the heroes and heroines together.

Pro. Hawkes translated “鸳鸯” into “lovebirds”, I can’t help praising and admiring Pro. Hawke’s skill and level. “Lovebirds” naturally makes us Chinese associate with “鸳鸯” which makes the source text understood correctly and accurately by western people. This translation has a dense aesthetical connotation.

Here is an interesting paragraph quoted from “David Copperfield”:

I love my love with an E, because she's enticing; I hate her with an E, because she's engaged; I took her to the sign of the exquisite, and treated her with an elopement; her name’s Emily, and she lives in the east.

Chinese version: 我爱我的爱,因为她长得招人爱。我恨我的爱,因为她不回报我的爱。我带着她到挂着浮荡子招牌的一家,和她谈情说爱。我请她看一出潜逃私奔,为的是我和她能长久你亲我爱。她的名字叫爱弥丽,她的家住在爱仁里。(Translated by Zhang Guruo) [7]

Except the place name “爱仁里”, the whole translation text sounds fluent and powerful. The letter “e” in the source text is adapted to “ai” in Chinese. That proves Mr. Zhang generalized the whole of the source text and understood the deeper meaning beyond the literal meaning. Using the transforming of sounds in the language breaks the barrier of different cultures and smoothies the way to the perfect effect.

4. Conclusion

Beauty exists everywhere. Every time readers appreciate the great works of those translating masters, beauty is transmitted into their hearts by words and sentences. All of these images are the unity of forms and contents. In translation, translators show the minds, feelings and sense of values held by both authors and translators. Translation is a peculiar activity that shows the aesthetic features and that reproduces the aesthetic values in other languages. So for a qualified translator, referring to the aesthetic effects discussed above, he must draw out or generalize the aesthetic factors and features from the whole source text and then expresses them faithfully and skillfully in the target text so that he makes his translation more vivid and realizes the equivalent translating.

References


Translation and Publishing Corporation,
1987.


Acknowledgements

This paper is funded by Nanchang Normal University Research project: About the Influence of Thinking in Native Language on English Reading. (Project number: 15RWYB35)

The author wants to express sincere gratitude for the support of the university and the Science Publishing Group.

Author Profile

Xuelian Lei received postgraduate degree in English Curriculum and Teaching Theory from Hangzhou Normal University of China in 2009. From 2009 to now, she has been teaching languages in foreign languages department of Nanchang Normal University, Jiangxi Province, China.