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Translation style: A systemic functional perspective

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Translation serves as an effective bridge connecting multiple cultures and provides convenience for people from different countries to understand foreign cultures. This article aims to analyze the essence of literal translation and free translation from the perspective of systemic functional linguistics. It argues that translation activities need to start from the characteristics of the source language and the requirements of the target language, and select different translation methods based on different text styles. This approach can improve the efficiency of translation work, provide strong guidance for translation practice, promote the dissemination of various cultures, and make certain contributions to the development of foreign language specialties.

Key words: Free translation, literal translation, functional perspective.

INTRODUCTION

Literal translation and free translation have been discussed hundreds of years all over the world. Even till today the dispute on this issue has not come to an end. Those who are in favor of literal translation argue that some original rhetoric and exotic style may be preserved through literal translation. They maintain that free translation expresses only the basic concept of the original, while the vibrant rhetoric of the original is lost. On the contrary, those who advocate free translation think that free translation is the only feasible translation method. They firmly believe that translation is an art.

This debate has a lengthy history, with passionate advocates on both sides. For example, early Western academics such as Erasmus, Augustine, and others advocated exact translation. Kumarajiva is regarded to be of the free school of Chinese interpreters, whereas Dao'an looks to be literal and rigid. Yan Fu supported hermeneutic translation in contemporary China, whereas Lu Xun preferred a clumsy version to one that was open but inexact.

This paper, regardless of historical dispute between the literal and free translation, will first reveal the nature of these two translation methods from functional linguistic point of view, and then put forward some suggestions for translation practice. Based on the characteristics of this article, linguistic methods, pragmatic methods, and empirical research methods were used for the study. Through the investigation of linguistic knowledge, the language phenomena and rules in translation were explored. Meanwhile, by combining the analysis of

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context and pragmatic rules, the meaning and expression methods to be conveyed in translation were studied, that is, the selection of translation methods. Finally, this article will choose translation examples for analysis, in order to study the translator's choices of translation strategies and methods during the translation process.

NATURE OF LITERAL AND FREE TRANSLATION

Matthiessen (2001:74) states a general guideline for the relationship between sensitivity and translation: the more information accessible to direct the translation, the more delicate the translation. He also claims that there is a typological principle at work: the larger the environment. Environment here alludes to the size and breadth to which the translator decides to encompass in his translation. The wider the environment, the more consistent the languages are likely to be; the smaller the environment, the more incongruent the languages are likely to be (Matthiessen, 2001:75).

According to Halliday (1994:15), a language is a complicated semiotic system made of numerous layers, or strata, and the rank scale in the English lexicogrammar is: clause-group/phrase-word-morpheme. Thus, the sentence, the most comprehensive element of grammar, has the broadest rank environment, while the morpheme has the narrowest rank environment. As a result, the sentence has the broadest rank context of translation rather than the morpheme or the word.

And, technically speaking, the broadest translation environment is that of system rather than structure; for example, there are likely to be fewer translation disparities between two languages' clause systems than between their clause structures. The most general environment is the broadest, while the most sensitive environment is the smallest. As a result, the most delicate translation setting is that of the most broad language systems-such as the general mood systems of 'indicate/imperative', 'declarative/interrogative'. It is to be anticipated that as the level of delicacy rises, so will the translation variations.

With the principle mentioned above, Matthiessen is commenting on the relationship from macroscopical point of view. He points out the ideal state of translation angle: from the maximal environment. Theoretically, it is reasonable because the larger the environment is, the more information the translation will cover. But this arouses another question: the more information for translation, the more difficult the task will be. So in practice, translators do not necessarily choose the largest environment for their translation. On the contrary, translators usually unconsciously choose the possible smallest environment. That is to say, they will automatically consider their task from the possibly highest delicacy of language. The translators usually intend to focus their attention on lexicogrammar, if not morpheme, for the first step for consideration. This again leads to a question: what is the difference embodied in translation when translation environment varies from the largest to smallest?

For a long time, translation techniques have been characterized as falling somewhere between the extremes of literal and free. It is relatively simple to characterize these translation techniques, or strategies, for a stratified linguistic theory, such as Systemic Functional Linguistics, as the retention of characteristics and patterns on various language levels (Catford, 1965). There are three clear levels at which characteristics and patterns can be preserved: lexicogrammar, semantic grammar, and register. Preservation on the first would stipulate a relatively precise translation, while preservation on the last would define a relatively free translation. The exact interpretations are based on high delicacy (specific groups of units), whereas the free versions are based on low delicacy. In terms of the rank scale within lexicogrammar, preserving characteristics and structures on lower ranks, such as the morpheme, results in relatively exact translations, whereas preserving them on higher ranks results in relatively free translations. Consider the following translations:

1.   中国是个社会主义国家，也是个发展中国家。 (Translated by Wang Fuxiang)
China is a socialist country, and a developing country, too.
2. I'm getting chilled to the bone. What can Freddy be doing all this time?
冻死我了。弗莱蒂这半天是干什么去了？ (Translated   by Yang Xianyi)
3. The days are in the yellow leaf,
The flowers and fruits of love are gone,
The worm, the canker, and the grief
Are mine alone.
年华黄叶秋，花实落悠悠。
多情徒自苦，残泪带愁流。(By an anonymous translator)

The literal degree decreases from 1 to 3. Translation 1 preserves the features of words of the source language. Translation 2 pursues equivalence on the level of clause. It adapts to Chinese in lexicogrammar scale so as to get an interpersonal equivalence. Translation 3 only preserves the image of the original poem. It abandons the corresponding elements and pursues equivalence neither in level of lexicogrammar or in the semantic, but in environment of register.

Table 1 illustrates the nature of free and literal translation in a systemic point of view:

Environment and nature of literal and free translation

The conventional distinction between "free" and "literal" translation is defined by levels of stratification, position, and axis. The more "literal" the translation—for example,

Table 1. Illustrates the nature of free and literal translation.

Stratification	Rank	Axis	
Context	clause	System	Free
Semantics	group/phrase		
Lexicogrammar	word	↕	↕
Phonology	morpheme	Structure	Literal

Source: Author

word for word translation (rather than clause-based translation)—the smaller the environment; the bigger the environment, the more "free" the translation.

In theory, "free" translation is arguably the most efficient type of translation. However, independence varies in degree. As a result, we must consider how liberated we are in our rendering.

AUTOMATIZATION AND DE-AUTOMATIZATION

If the translation is "free," the translation environment is as broad as possible, such as semantics within context or even just context, as when the source material to be translated instantiates a register not found in the target language and it becomes necessary to try to find the nearest culturally equivalent context. This is not to say that there is no translation in smaller areas. Rather, it implies that translation within more limited contexts is automated. Halliday (1982:135) describes automatization as follows in relation to his study of dramatic dialogue: "language is likely to be fully automatized, with the words and structures and sounds being there in their automatic function of realizing the semantic selections in an unmarked way –getting on with expressing meanings without parading themselves in pattern of their own". Thus, words are translated as realizations of meanings, and sounds are translated as interpretations of words. In other words, the unmarked method of choices typically occur among the greater sensitivity or lower rank in the language system---within relatively marrow environment, which results in relatively literal translation.

However, there are some translation situations where the translation must be de-autamatized. Halliday (1982: 135) adopts the term:

> The term "de-automatization", though cumbersome, is more apt than "foregrounding", since what is question is not simply prominence but rather the partial freeing of the lower level systems from the control of semantics so that they become domains of choice in their own right. The de-automatization of the grammar means that grammatical choices are not simply determined from above: there is selection as well as pre-selection. Hence the wording becomes a quasi-independent semiotic mode through which

the meanings of the work can be projected.

The meaning produced by de-automatization must be brought out in translation. The bind to the wordings must be "liberated" to some degree, and particular attention must be given to a broader environment in order to carry out some more meaning potential. The more the translator's focus shifts from a smaller to a broader world, the more free the translation may be. This is most likely to occur in literary translation; even the level of sound may be de-automatized in poem translation. That is, poetry translation sometimes contains more 'free' elements (Qinghua, 2002:421):

登鹳雀楼
王焕之
白日依山尽，黄河入海流。
欲穷千里目，更上一层楼。

An ascent to stork hall

The setting sun behind the mountains glows,
The muddy Yellow River seawards flows.
If more distant views are what you desire,
You simply climb up a story higher.
(Translated by Yu Zhongjie)

On the stork tower

The sun beyond the mountains glows;
The Yellow River seawards flows.
You can enjoy a grander sight
By climbing to a greater height.
(Translated by Xu Yuanchong)

Upward!

Westward the sun, ending the day's journey in a slow descent behind the mountains.
Eastward the Yellow River, emptying into the sea.
To look beyond, unto the farthest horizon, upward! up another storey!
(Translated by Weng Xianliang)

Obviously, the three editions of the same poem's translation have different environments for their translation. And strictly speaking, none of them can be labeled as "literal translation", because all of them have built their own poetic features by de-automatization. But the extents to which they "de-automatized" are not same. Compared with the other two, translation (1) bases more on the original lexical and clausal structures and thus is the most 'literal' one of the three(though it still cannot be entitled as a 'literal translation'); translation (3) adopts the largest environment and bases more on the image itself, so it is the 'freest' translation; and translation (2) is in between (1) and (3) in terms of the 'freeness' in its de-automatization.

In general, we can concentrate on the original material as phrasing and particularly attempt to interpret wording patterns at the lexical grammar level. The more 'literal' the lexicogrammatical rendering, the lower its position. Translation in relation to the stratification order is thus primarily a question of what we strive to maintain consistent and what we allow to change. The higher the rank goes upward, the 'freer' the translation will be.

TRANSFERRING META FUNCTIONS VS LITERAL TRANSLATION AND FREE TRANSLATION

The following definitions of literal translation and free translation may be derived from the preceding discussion: In terms of Systemic Functional Linguistics, literal translation is one that maintains lexicogrammatical qualities and structure to the greatest extent feasible within the limits of the target language system. The term "free translation" refers to translation that is not constrained by lexicogrammatical elements and structures. It retains certain characteristics of the original texts in the greater context. Both free translation and literal translation, in particular, are dynamic notions that should not be approached in a static manner.

Translation, from a systemic standpoint, is the preservation of the source texts' ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings. An ideal translation is the one that holds all of the three metafuntions of the source texts. However, in translation practice, we usually automatically set out from the ideational function for consideration. This is coincident with the 'automatization principle' discussed above. Ideational function is mainly realized by the concrete lexical items, from which we often unconsciously initiate our translation. The formal equivalence of lexical items in translation leads to the extreme form of literal translation which is always labeled as 'word for word translation'. Theoretically, it is impossible to get an absolute 'word for word' translation because there do not exist two languages that have exactly same typological structure. Thus, the expression of 'word for word translation' is usually used as a name of 'awkward translation'.

As stated in Section 2 and 3, literal translation closely related to higher delicacy of linguistic items. And since ideational elements contain the most delicate ones from morphemes and wordings to phrases and clauses, literal translation is essentially realized through the preservation of ideational elements, namely: Process, Participants and Circumstances. For example:

The mantle of your high office has been placed on your shoulder at a time when the world at large and this organization are going through an exceptionally critical phase.

(1) 全世界和本组织正处于一个异常危急的时期，这个崇高职务的重担落到了你的肩上。
(2) 整个世界和本组织处于一个异常危急的时期。在这样一个时期中这个崇高的任务就落到了你的肩上。
(Taken from Qinghua, 2002:38)

Both translations have preserved the main ideational elements of the source sentence, and in some sense both could be titled as literal translation. But strictly speaking, (1) holds more functional components of the source language than (2) does, for (1) is consistent with the original sentence at levels of wording, phrases and clauses. It has retained all the functional elements of the source sentence, as well as the logical relations among the functional components. On the other hand, (2) consists of two independents clauses. The Circumstance component of original sentence---when the world at large and this organization are going through an exceptionally critical phrase is turned into an independent clause, which makes translation structurally a little looser than the original sentence. In other word, translation (1) has transferred all the three mate functions of the original while translation (2) is not satisfying in perspective of transferring textual function. Hence, if we are asked to differentiate the two translations in terms of literal or free degree, we can get a conclusion that translation (1) is more literal than translation (2). And this shows a fact that literal translation and free translation are viable concepts and there is not an absolute criterion to define them. In normal conditions, a more literal translation preserves more structural features of the source language and thus a formal equivalence may be expected. In some sense, formal equivalence tends to holds functional equivalence, which is the very aim of the translation. That is why we put literal translation in priority. However, this does not mean that literal translation should always be adopted in translation. On the contrary, we sometimes have to abandon the original ideational components so as to get an interpersonal or textual equivalence in the translation. For example, due to different cultures, greetings in different languages may differ a lot from each other. In translation, we have to first of all consider the most important function the greeting plays---interpersonal function, and we'd better take this function in priority in

Table 2. The middle way between literal translation and free translation.

Source	Transferring	Target	Literal or Free
Ideational function		Ideational equivalence	Literal
Interpersonal function	⟶	Interpersonal equivalence	↓
Textual function		Textual equivalence	Free

Source: Author

translation. If it is literally translated, that is, based on ideational components, it will be probably misunderstood by the target language readers. In this condition, the translation should be target culture oriented so as to be comprehensible in target cultural background. Compare the following translation:

(Background: Two Chinese friends meet each other at the sidewalk in the afternoon. They are exchanging greetings.)
A: 老张，吃了吗？
B: 还没有。你吃了吗？
A: 吃了。你上哪儿去？
B: 去超市买点东西。
A: 那你去吧。
①
A: Hi, Lao Zhang, have you had your dinner?
B: Not yet. Have you had your dinner?
A: Yes. Where are you going?
A: To supermarket to buy something.
B: Then you can go now.
②
A: Hello, Mr. Zhang, how are you?
B: Fine. And you?
A: Fine, too. You look very busy.
B: I'm hurrying to the supermarket.
A: See you later, then.
B: See you.

Clearly, translation ① is more literal than translation ②, but in a certain context, ② is more acceptable than ① to the target language readers.

Furthermore, a freer translation sometimes cannot only successfully transfer the ideational and interpersonal function, but also maximally preserve the original style:

天色渐昏，大雨欲来，车夫加紧赶路，说天要变了(Qian, 1991:153)
1. The sky was becoming darker and darker. The storm was coming. The carriage puller ran faster, and said that the weather was going to change.
2. The sky gradually darkened at the approach of a storm. The rickshaw pullers quickened their pace, saying the weather was about to get worse.
The original language is coherent in the absence of any cohesive links. This is a distinct Chinese trait. As we can

see, ① translation produces a lexically and grammatically valid text, but it breaches several register and genre requirements of its target language. The text's lexical grammatical choices are often noted and read "foreign" in the target culture. As its translational environment, it chooses the clausal level. Though it has transferred all the constituents ideationally, it hasn't successfully transferred the coherent relationship contained in the source text form a point of view of textual function. Because Chinese tends to take covert cohesive devices to realize the coherence while English employs overt ones, we have to take use of English cohesive devices in order to transfer the textual function of the source text. The prepositional phrase and participle phrase in ② have not only carried the ideational meanings of the source texts but also expressed the logical relationships among the original clauses. That is to say, translation ② is a more appropriate than translation ①.

To summarize, literal translation and free translation are two dynamic concepts. Theoretically, literal translation requires formal correspondence of ideational components; free translation usually aims for contextual equivalence; and transferring interpersonal function often needs the middle way between literal translation and free translation. It can be illustrated by Table 2:

Meta functions and extent of literal or free translation

Neither the extreme of literal translation nor the extreme of free one is advisable in practice, for they will go too far from the main line in above figure. The following examples illustrate the two kinds of extremes in practice:

1. To kill two birds with one stone.
   杀死两只鸟用一个石头。（Compare: 一石二鸟）
2. It may be safely assumed that, two thousand years ago, before Caesar (100 B.C.--44B.C.) set foot in southern Britain, the whole countryside visible from the windows of the room in which I write, was in what is called "the state of nature."
   赫胥黎独处一室之中，在英伦之南，背山而面野，槛外诸境，历历如在几下。乃悬想两千年前，当罗马大将恺撒来到时，此间有何景物。计惟有天造草昧，人功未施。（Translated by Yan Fu）

This article provides a detailed study and analysis of the

translation methods of literal translation and free translation using the perspective of systemic functional grammar. By exploring the origins of these two methods, their universality in translation work is revealed. Through explanations of automation and de-automation, it is shown that language is to some extent "free", and translation work liberates words from their constraints while conveying the meaning of the source language, especially in poetry translation, where translators have more freedom of expression. From the perspective of systemic function analysis, the appropriate translation method is chosen by combining the "explicit" and "implicit" translation characteristics and based on the three elements and three "meta functions" of systemic function.

SUMMARY

Literal translation and free translation are two translation methodologies or tactics. They are the expressive forms of language. Simply speaking, language is the form that people take and meaning is the content that people want to convey. As for the relationship between form and content, Li (2000:24) states that one form can convey numerous contents while one content can be expressed with numerous forms. The translator's goal in translating is to express the meaning of the source language in the target language. That is, we may translate one meaning into several forms.

Both literal translation and free translation can convey the same meaning from different angles. Without adequate context, it is often difficult for us to decide which form is better. Thus a good translator can never label him/herself as a literalist or freeist. Translation in fact is an encoding process with target language, swaying between literal translation and free translation.

The essence of the literal or free translation lies in the delicacy of the translation basis. The higher delicacy the translation bases on, the more literal the translation will become, and vice versa. Technically, a translator should always first of all consider literal translation---to focus his attention on transferring ideational function, for the same form is likely to convey the similar meaning. If literal translation fails to successfully convey the other two functions simultaneously, the translator should try to shift his focus to the other meta functions and take a freer translation. An excellent translation of a text is always the proper mingling of literal translation and free translation.

Literal translation and free translation also have some shortcomings, if literal translation transition will cause the target language readers difficult to understand; a free translation transition leads away from the original text. Therefore, we should consider carefully when analyzing the original text, and strive to translate a translation that is both faithful and suitable for readers.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflicts of interests.

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