

## Translation of Humor for Children in Concrete Operational Stage: A Case Study on the Version of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

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### Abstract

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is a popular book for children. However, it is hard for translators to transfer it into another language because many words play. But humorous language is the favorite for children in concrete operational stage (COS) due to their cognitive development. This paper studies the classic Chinese version to research how it deals with humorous language, aiming to probe into whether the translation of humor suitable for the specific childhood and generalize some principles for future translation practice.

**Key words:** *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*; Translation of humor; Children in COS

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### INTRODUCTION

This book, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, is regarded as one of the most popular children's books in the world. Since it was published, it gained massive fancy among children and adult readers. By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it had been republished for over 300 times. The popularity is just next to the Bible and Shakespeare's works in Britain (Yang, 1989, p.91). Although this book appeals equally to the young and the old, Alice's story begins as piece of extemporaneous whimsy meant to entertain three little

girls: Lorina, 13 years old, Alice, 10 and Edith, 8. Hence the content and language of this book are obviously suitable for children in this stage. This book is filled with lots of puns, parodies, as well as other word plays, humorous exaggerations and ridiculous situations, which not only attract children, but add difficulty to the translation of the book, so that this book is ever believed untranslatable. As a matter of fact, since Zhao Yuenren rendered the first Chinese translation of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in 1922, it is not until the 1980s that other Chinese versions then appeared gradually. Zhao's translation of the book has achieved great success since it got published and until now it is still considered the best one.

China is a country of more than 300 million children readers, and translator's task of translating children's literature is fairly crucial in this circumstance. However, the translators usually regard the children's literature as a whole to differentiate from the adults' literature. In fact, childhood can be divided into several different periods. In each period, children have different cognition and psychology and may react differently to a translation. Hence, the translators should have a clear purpose toward which period of children the translation is directed. Thus, according to children's different interest-oriented in different periods, different translation strategies should be applied. The study is conducted mainly by a case study on the first Chinese version of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, to research how the classic translation deals with the humor, aiming to probe into whether the translation of humor suitable for the specific childhood and generalize some principles for future translation practice.

### 1. CHILDREN'S COMPREHENSION OF HUMOR IN COS

Humor is everything that is actually or potentially funny and humor is also the process by which this "funniest"

occurs (Palmer, 1994, p.3). In children's literature, according to Wang Quangen, a famous specialist in this field, humor is one of the most important characteristics of the Western children's literature. Hence, modern children's culture might very well be characterized as some kind of a carnivalistic culture of laughter (Oittinen, 2000, p.54). In the *Dictionary of Children's Literature*, humor is the artistic realization of the sentiments and interests of the children's language which is adaptable with the psychological characteristics of children. This kind of sentiment and interests are achieved through some language methods of words, grammar units and rhetoric. Therefore, the translators of should pay special attention to the "children-like" language in order to transmit the humor to the children readers.

### 1.1 Piaget's Cognitive Stage Theory

Over a period of six decades, Jean Piaget conducted a program of naturalistic research that has profoundly affected our understanding of child development. According to him, there are four primary cognitive structures (i.e., development stages) in child development (Laura, 1991, pp.212-242). They are respectively: sensorimotor stage (0-2 years), period of preoperations (3-7 years), period of concrete operations (8-11 years), and period of formal operations (12-15 years). The cognitive structure during COS stage is logical but depends upon concrete referents. Children are able to work through a problem so that they combine performance with a verbal explanation or an attempt to reason out the problem. Children begin to move beyond one-dimensional thinking and are able to relate one event to a system of interrelated parts. In the later part of this stage (about 9-11 years) children are very interested in examining the rules that govern their lives, including what happens when the conventional wisdom is questioned.

### 1.2 Comprehension of Humor in COS

Humor depends on the cognitive surprise, incongruity, and discrepancy from the expected. A Piagetian model of humor comprehension would suggest that joke material moderately divergent from the children's current cognitive structures is likely to be regarded as the most interesting and funnies (Brodzinsky & Rightmyer, 1980).

In COS, children have found the exchanges of riddles and puns requiring an understanding of the double meanings of words, which are very interesting and funny and become common social pastimes among them (Laura, 1991, p.237). The following is an example.

"Hey, did you take a bath?" "No! Why, is one missing?"  
"Order!<sup>1</sup> Order in the court!" "Ham and cheese on rye, your honor."

<sup>1</sup> Here are two different meanings of the word "order": One means a condition in which freedom from disorder or disruption is maintained through respect for established authority; another meaning is a request made by a customer at a restaurant for a portion of food.

Preoperational children may laugh at these jokes because they are nonsensical, but they cannot explain what is funny about them. In contrast, children in COS can reverse their thinking, moving back and forth between different meanings of the same key word. This permits them to understand that a joke or riddle can have two possible interpretations, a usual one and an unusual one, the latter of which is funny because it is incongruous (Shultz & Horibe, 1984).

The appreciation of the answers is interesting because it shows a developmental trend that parallels cognitive development. Children during COS increase conceptual and linguistic skills allow them to understand and derive pleasure from the subtleties of ambiguous meanings.

## 2. THE HUMOR IN THE ORIGINAL AND TRANSLATED TEXTS

This book *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is full of puns, parodies, and witty remarks, but first and foremost, it is full of laughter. (Oittinen, 2000, p.124). The content of the text is so humorous, for example: the white-rabbit wore a watch; Alice fell into the pool of herself tears for she changed her shape in a shorter way; Alice always gave some words inappropriate etc. These plots all can make children burst to laugh. In this research, the focus is put on the humorous language. The following discuss attempts to analyze the humorous original and translated texts to see whether the version is suitable for children in COS to read.

### 2.1 Puns

Pun is the use of a word in such a way as to suggest two or more meanings or different associations, or the use of two or more words of the same or nearly the same sound with different meanings, so as to produce a humorous effect, a play on words. Hence, pun is, in nature, a word-play. In English language, there are many words that are pronounced alike or spelt alike, or both. A pun, in essence, is an ambiguity. In English, pun may fall into two types: a) homophone, in which two or more words may look or sound alike, but have different senses; b) homograph, in which a word has more than one basic meaning, or has developed a range of figurative meanings. The whole point of a pun is the user's intent to produce a humorous or witty effect from the juxtaposition of meanings. In the children's book *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, there are more than thirty puns used, and homophones take almost 20. Puns are most easily translated if both the source and target languages are based on Graeco-Latinism that and have near-equivalents, particularly if they simply contrast the material and the figurative sense of the word. (Newmark, 2001, p.217) However, as we know, English and Chinese belong to different

language families: The former belongs to the Indo-European family characterized by a set of symbols used to represent the sound, inflection, grammatical number etc.; the latter, an isolating language, is of the Sino-Tibetan family, the symbols of which represent the meaning of words and not the sounds of spoken language. The two languages are lexically different in spelling and pronunciation, and some words in one language even have no semantic equivalents in the other. Due to the phonological or lexical vacancy between a source and target language, a pun, when translated into a target language, may not necessarily result in another pun. Therefore, the rendition of puns is very hard, if not completely impossible. It poses a challenge to translators.

### 2.1.1 Transfer of Homophones

In this form of punning, words have the same or almost the same sound, but different in spelling and meaning. These words are called homophones, such as “some” and “sum”, “knew”, and “new”.

The following is to analyze an example of Zhao’s version to see how he successfully keeps the features of homophones of the original for his reader.

“You Promised to tell me your history you know” said Alice, “and why it is you hate —C and D,” she added in a whisper, half afraid that it would be offended again.

“Mine is a long and a sad tale!” said the Mouse, turning to Alice, and sighing.

“It is a long tail, certainly,” said Alice, looking down with wonder at the Mouse’s tail: “but why do you call it sad?” (Carroll, 1965, p.35)

阿丽思道，“你不是说你要告我你的历史吗？告我你为什么恨——那个——那——m和g。”她末了两个字母轻轻地说的，怕回来又得罪了它。

那老鼠对着阿丽思叹了一口气道，“唉！我的历史说来可真是又长又苦又委屈呀。”

阿丽思听了，瞧着那老鼠的尾巴说，“你这尾是曲啊！可是为什么又叫它苦呢！”(Zhao, 2002, pp.20-21)

In this example, Alice begged the Mouse to tell her why it hated cats and dogs, and the Mouse replied that its history was “a sad tale”. Since “tale” and “tail” are homophones and the Mouse had a long tail, it is very easy for Alice to confuse the two words. Naturally what the Mouse meant by “tale” is changed into “tail” in Alice’s mind, and the humorous effect is thus produced due to the mistake. In translation Zhao does not follow the original rigidly. Rather he puts “tale” and “tail” into “委屈” and “尾是曲” respectively. “尾是曲” is a colloquial form of “尾曲”，which means that the Mouse’s tail is not straight. If translated literally, “a long tail” should be “长尾巴”. In order to achieve the homophone’s effect in the translation, Zhao changes “长尾巴” into “尾是曲”. Apparently the two Chinese word “委屈” and “尾是曲” do not correspond with the original words “tale” and “tail”. However, since “委屈” and “尾是曲” are homophones in

Chinese, they may produce similar sound effects as the original words “tale” and “tail” do. Thus the humorous effects of the original are to a great extent reproduced in the translation. The new puns give target children the same humorous taste, which satisfies the need of children in COS.

### 2.1.2 Transfer of Homographs

This device involves words or word phrases having the same sound and form, but with two or more distinct meanings. Such words are called homonyms, for example: “steal” means “take something dishonestly” as well as “move quietly and secretly”.

The following example is a successful one in reproducing the homograph of the original, which shows Zhao’s attainment in translation.

“One, indeed!” said the Dormouse indignantly. However, he consented to go on. “And so these three little sisters —they were learning to draw, you know —” (Carroll, 1965, p.76)

“What did they draw?” said Alice, quite forgetting her promise.

那惰儿鼠怒道，“一回，可不是吗？”但是他仍就答应接着说下去。“所以这三个小姐妹就——你知道？他们在那儿学吸——”

“他们学习什么？”阿丽思问着又忘了答应不插嘴了。(Zhao, 1988, p.95)

In this example, the word “draw” has two meanings. One is to cause to move after or toward one by applying continuous force; drag or “拉” in Chinese. Another is to make a likeness of on a surface, using mostly lines; depict with lines or “绘画” in Chinese. Here the translator skillfully applies the homophones “学习” and “学吸” to transfer the homograph and obtain the same humorous effect. It must also be noted that the translation done by Zhao is not purely a technical change in the form of language. Zhao realizes the children’s need of target version, grasps the spirit of the original, reproduces fully and correctly the humorous spirit of the original in child readers’ understanding ability.

Through the analysis of above examples, we can get the point that Zhao’s translation in literal meaning not closely relating to the original text, but he tries his best to maintain the puns of the original text in the version. He believes it most important to produce on his readers an effect as close as possible to that obtained on the readers of the original. As is mentioned, children in COS are very interesting in wordplay, so Zhao’s version satisfied children of this stage. Zhao’s translation reaches the same effect in terms of pun.

### 2.2 Parody

Parody is a literature style characterized by the reproduction of stylistic peculiarities of an author or

work for comic effect or in ridicule<sup>2</sup>. It may humorously reveal the peculiarities and exaggerations of the original works, and it sometimes ridicules its subjects as a typical example of absurd or sentimental attitudes. It may also implicitly criticize the ideas or ideals of a given age or society.

The original text of Alice's story abounds in parodies, all of which imitate the famous English poems as well as some idioms. The following example parodies an English idiom:

"Ah well! It means much the same thing," said the Duchess, digging her sharp little chin into Alice's shoulder as she added "and the moral of that is — 'Take care of the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves.'" (Carroll, 1965, p.92)

那公爵夫人道,“啊,是啊!这就是那一样的意思,”又把她那个尖下巴在阿丽思的嫩肩膀子上钻一下说道,于此可见—说话总要“不以字达辞,不以辞达意。” (Zhao, 2002, p.75)

"Take care of the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves" is a parody of an English idiom: "Take care of the pence, and the pounds will take care of themselves", which means in Chinese “节省便士,英镑自至”. In Carroll's works, he replaces “pence” with “sense”, and “pounds” with “sounds”, which produces a humorous effect. Zhao translates this parody as “不以字达辞,不以辞达意”, which may be regarded as a parody of the Chinese saying “不以文害辞,不以辞害志”. Thus, though the literal meanings are different from the original text, the original playful effect is to some extent retained.

From the above example, we can see that Zhao succeeds to a great extent in translating the parodies of the original in his version. He replaces the parody of English idiom of the original with that of Chinese one. The Chinese idiom is familiar to children in 1920s. During the translation of parody, Zhao does not be bound up with the original text. In spite of some differences in literal meanings, he mainly conveys the effect of the original text, which can satisfy the need of children in COS because his translation is full of amusement. Zhao, on the whole, has done a good job in the handling of the original parodies.

### 2.3 Malapropism

Nonsense in the book appears as a form of entertainment for children. Malapropism is one of Carroll's ways of building nonsense in the story. Malapropism means a blundering use of a word that sounds somewhat like the one intended but is ludicrously wrong in the context<sup>3</sup>. By virtues of malapropism, Carroll successfully achieves the

goal of depicting the characters in different situations. Children's lingual ability in some period of COS will fall back. Some of them may reverse the sentence, and even make some ungrammatical sentences (Zhu, 2003, p.311). Hence, if children meet some characters in his book who speak like that, they will feel familiar with them. Therefore, malapropism of the version can arouse much interest of children. Let's take a look at the following example:

In Chapter One, after several fantastic experiences, Alice could not even speak English correctly and she made a mistake in the comparative degree of “curious”.

"'Curiouser and curiouser!'" cried Alice (she was so much surprised, that for the moment she quite forgot how to speak good English) (Carroll, 1965, p.23)

“越变越奇罕了\,越变越希怪了!” (因为阿丽思自己诧异到那么个样子\,连话都说不好了). (Zhao, 2002, p.8)

Grammatically, the comparative degree of “curious” should be “more curious”, while Carroll deliberately has Alice speak ungrammatical language to show that she was at a loss after seeing and experiencing these strange things. If a translator renders the intentional grammatical mistakes into correct Chinese, all the humorous effects will totally get lost. Zhao ingeniously blended the Chinese word “奇怪” and “希罕”, thus resulting in the two coinages: “奇罕” and “希怪”, which are also ungrammatical and strange to Chinese readers. Consequently the picture of Alice's confusion produced in Chinese readers' mind is as vivid as that in English readers'. Children read this kind of sentences can feel so familiar with themselves. In brief, by using the malapropism in his translation, Zhao on the whole successfully realizes the writer's intention and satisfactorily reproduces the spirit of the original though the literal meaning get some lost. As a result, his version can amuse children in COS.

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## SUMMARY

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Children in COS as a special group of readers have their own psychological and cognitive characteristics. From the fore-analysis we know that Children's understanding of humor is an important feature of children's cognitive development in COS. Therefore, the translation of humor in version is crucial to satisfy children's reading need. At the same time, we find that owing to the obvious difference between Chinese and English, the transfer of humor is hard and sometimes impossible to realize in the targeted language. Mr. Zhao Yuanren endeavors to convey the humorous effect of the original text and in some difficult situation even at the cost of the semantic meaning, which, to great extent, meets the requirement of children's cognition in COS. Therefore, it can be said that when the humorous translation is made for children in COS, the primary thing is to convey the humor for

<sup>2</sup> See Webster's Third New International Dictionary. (1976, p.1643). Springfield, Massachusetts: G&C Merriam Company.

<sup>3</sup> See Webster's Third New International Dictionary. (1976, p.1365). Springfield, Massachusetts: G&C Merriam Company.

them and take their need as fundamental consideration so such as to sacrifice the literal meaning in source language.

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