

Translation of Children's Literature From the Perspective of Functional Equivalence

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Abstract

The most popular and widely accepted aspect of Eugene Nida's theory is the theory of "Functional Equivalence", which has promoted the development of translation. In China, literary translation has made tremendous progress since 1970s. Children's literature is a branch of general literature. On the one hand, children's literature embodies the general principle guiding all types of literal works, and on the other hand, it also carries a distinctive feature. The article will analyze the translation of children's literature from the perspective of meaning equivalence, stylistic equivalence and cultural equivalence, and to make a conclusion of the basic principles of children's literature translation, hoping to arouse researchers' wide interest and attention in order to promote the development of children's literature translation.

Key words: Functional equivalence; Translation; Children's literature

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the past decades, translation study has made great progress, whereas the study of children's literature translation is deficient. Because the target readers of

children's literature have their own particularity in their reading level and receptivity, and its translation is different from other types of literary translation, so great importance should be attached to the plain content and the state of children's intelligence.

When translating children's literature, the translator should keep in mind that the target readers are children, and that translation works should accord with the characters of their psychology, their knowledge and the demands of the society, which means translations works should not only convey the meaning of the original text, but also appropriate translation methods should be applied to reproduce the style and culture of the original text so that better translation effects will be achieved. The maximal ideal of Functional Equivalence should be "The readers of a translated text should be able to understand and appreciate it in essentially the same manner as the original readers did." (Nida, 1993). Functional Equivalence has the most flexibility, and can be applied to the translation of children's literature as guideline.

In this article, the author will analyze the translation methods and principles of children's literature from the perspective of Nida's Functional Equivalence with a detailed analysis of the Chinese version of the novel in terms of meaning equivalence, stylistic equivalence and cultural equivalence.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the survey by the author of this article, there are 952 papers dealing with "Functional Equivalence", which cover the translation of advertisement, tourism, business, technology and literature. There are more than 200 papers dealing with the translation of children's literature, which is analyzed from the perspective of reception aesthetics, eco-translatology, functional approaches, ideology and so on. Meanwhile, there are 16

papers dealing with children's literature translation from the perspective of functional equivalence. Most of the papers mainly discuss the authors' thoughts and expound on the translation techniques involved seeing how the childlike style of the original is kept in the target text. Such papers provide foundation for a further study of the translation of children's literature.

3. CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND ITS TRANSLATION PRINCIPLES

3.1 Definition of Children's Literature

In general, Children's literature is considered as literature written for and largely read by children between the age of one and sixteen, ranging from the picture book to the novel.

3.2 Language Features of Children's Literature

The psychological and cognitive characteristics of children make the language of children's literature different from that of other types of literature.

Firstly, the language of children's literature is of great vividness, which is a unique feature of literature language. And children's literature demands a more specific and direct language style that presents stereo perception and aliveness. The vivid language offers a chance for children to connect their own experience to the information provided. And vividness can be achieved with the help of rhetorical devices.

Secondly, the language of children's literature is of simplicity, which makes it easier for children to understand what they read. Children's literature demands a normative and pure language style that helps children grow up healthily both physically and psychologically, which, in turn, helps children a lot with their expressive ability.

3.3 Different Stages of Children's Literature in China

Though scholars hold different opinions on the stages of children's literature, they have made agreement on the characteristics and functions of children's literature of a certain period. On the whole, the development of children's literature translation can be roughly classified into the following three stages (Zhu, 2000):

Late Qing dynasty (1840s-1912). During this period of times, translators of children's literature emphasized on learning democratic and advanced culture from foreign countries, aiming at breaking the stiff traditions and introducing a strange but new lifestyle to China. Therefore, the translation of children's literature served as a tool to revitalize the country instead of serving for children.

May 4th period (1910s-1940s). The spirit of May 4th movement broke down the stiff traditions of federal

society that had dominated China for more than 2000 years. People began to realize that children have their identities as well. Pioneers started to pay attention to children's need as readers and they were determined to give children's literature back to children. The children-oriented translation theory paved a way for the development of children's literature.

The new period (1950s-present). The translation works of children's literature emerge in the large numbers of the communication between the different nations. Works of high quality have been introduced to Chinese readers and the translation of children's literature is carried out under the direction of literature and children's favor.

3.4 Translation Principles of Children's Literature in China

Because of the distinctive features of children's literature, there are some corresponding translation principles for children's literature.

Children are the main target readers of children's literature works, and they have distinctive features from the adults in knowledge and psychology. So the translation principles of children's literature are quite different from other types of translation works. "It has its own characteristics, and basically they are concluded as the following 3 principles" (Yuan, 2006):

Vividness and childlikeness. Pursuing happiness is the nature of children. Therefore, making children happy is one of the goals set for the writing and translation of children's literature. A good translation uses vivid description and childlike ideas that draw children's attention and make them accept happily.

A translation that applies children-featured and humorous language style is more likely to resonate with young readers and create a close feeling among them. Thus, it requires a translator be familiar with children's language style, know what children like and make his translated version accepted by young readers. (Xu, 2004)

Simple language. The translation of children's literature is also a work of dealing with language. A translator has to make choices on words that make the translated version easy for children to understand. Given the limited level of children's understanding and psychological development, translators have to do a lot of work before translating.

Flexibility and proper shifting. The basic principle for translating children's literature works is coherence with the original text. Either free translation or literal translation serves for this principle. In some cases, a translator should be flexible during his translation, which means he should not be a stickler for the original version. What a qualified translator should do be to create a similar feeling of the original version of the readers with a translated version.

4. FUNCTIONAL EQUIVALENCE AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE TO CHILDREN'S LITERATURE TRANSLATION

4.1 A Brief Introduction to Functional Equivalence

Among the many theories of translation that have emerged both in the Eastern and Western world, Eugene Nida's theory of functional equivalence is one of the most widely accepted. Functional equivalence is the key concept of Eugene A. Nida's translation theory, which is constructed on the basis of sociolinguistics and communicative function of language and consists of aspects: meaning equivalence, stylistic equivalence and cultural equivalence.

4.1.1 Meaning Equivalence

In most cases, the main mission of translation is to pass the information in the original text. Therefore, passing the language information or the semantic information goes first in translation. As Nida has put in *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, translation should be coherent with the original text in meaning in the first place (Nida, 1982). And coherence with the original text in style should be set in the second place. Therefore, the first mission of translation is to pass information. Meaning equivalence is what a qualified translator should try to achieve. A good translation is not only a version that is grammatically and lexically coherent with the original text, but also one that is correspondent to what the author intends to express. Misunderstandings could have been avoided if a translator realizes the importance of grasping the meaning of the original text correctly. Thus, the level of a translator's interpretation of the original text decides whether target language readers are able to get the same feeling with the readers of the source language readers. For example, look at the original and the translated version of some examples in *The Trumpet of the Swan*:

"I will just wait," he thought. "When in love, one must take risks. But I'm not going to risk everything with a bird who is too tired to see straight, I won't hurry, and I won't worry." (White, 1995)

"See straight", meaning to see in a straight or direct way in most cases, is used in a figurative way in the specific context, which means to act in the usual, normal, or correct way. Based on the correct interpretation, the translator employs "疲惫得头脑不清" to express "too tired to see straight" to achieve meaning equivalence. This version is easy to understand, and it also shows Louis' love for Serena, and he is confident about himself because he can trumpet now, he can use his own way to impress this lady swan.

4.1.2 Stylistic Equivalence

Functional equivalence surely includes the correspondence in style. "A stylistically equivalent translation should be

one that has the same stylistic value. Plainly it should be if the original is plain, and elegant if the original is elegant" (Song, 2010). Any elevation or degradation of the original style will be considered as an illegal affection and a serious violation of the principles of functional equivalence. For example:

"The sky," he wrote on his slate, "is my living room, the woods are my parlour. The lonely lake is my bath. I can't remain behind a fence all my life. Neither Serena—she's not build that way." (White, 1995)

In this part, Louis tells his dream of freedom. He uses three metaphors to indicate that he and Serena all wants to live a free life, and his living place should be a wild nature—the sky, the woods and the lake. The translator also remains the three images and we can fully understand what Louis's dream is.

Other examples are the following:

"In a flash, he reached the scene and drove his strong bill straight into the seat of the man's pants." (White, 1995)

In the original text, "in a flash" means immediately, but in the translated version, the translator uses a simile "像一道闪电那样" to show the speed and braveness of Louis when he is saving Serena. It is more vivid than the original text.

"Under one arm was a sleeping bag, neatly rolled."

In this example, "arm" is translated into a very colloquial Chinese word "胳肢窝", which is frequently used in children's conversations. Children are able to understand the meaning without any difficulty and feel close to the translation.

"Oh, just something I made up myself," write Louis on his slate.

In this sentence, the translator uses "小玩意儿" to refer to the song that Louis has made up. It is a childlike tone, and also it can show us Louis is very modest and he loves the music very much. As for the readers, this translation is very interesting.

4.1.3 Cultural Equivalence

Culture refers to the entire way of life of a society, which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, moral standards, traditions, customs, language and any other habits acquired by members of a particular society. In *Language, Culture and Translating*, Nida put forward that "for truly successful translating, biculturalism is even more important than bilingualism, since words only have meaning in terms of the cultures in which they function" (Nida, 1993. p.110).

The predecessor of "functional equivalence" is "dynamic equivalence". Later, in another book *From One language to Another*, he changed the term "dynamic equivalence" into "functional equivalence". As for the reason of the change, Nida explains in his *Language, Culture and Translating*.

Dynamic Equivalence has been treated in terms of the "closest natural equivalence", but the term—dynamic has

been misunderstood by some people as referring only to something that has impact. Accordingly, many individuals have been led to think that if a translation has considerable impact then it must be a correct example of dynamic equivalence (Nida, 1993, p.25).

Because of this misunderstanding and in order to emphasize the concept of function, it has seemed to be much more satisfactory to use the expression "functional equivalence" in describing degrees of adequacy of translation. In his book *language, Culture and Translating*, Nida has distinguished degrees of "functional equivalence" from the aspect of cognitive and experiential factors, namely, the minimal, realistic functional equivalence and the maximal, ideal functional equivalence. The former degree of functional equivalence could be stated as, "The reader of a translated text should be able to comprehend and appreciate it" (Nida, 1993, p.118). Nida stresses that anything less than this degree of equivalence is unacceptable. The maximal, ideal functional equivalence should be—"The readers of a translated text should be able to understand and appreciate it in essentially the same manner as the original readers did" (Nida, 1993, p.118). For example:

Play well, sweat swan! You will be the finest thing that has happened to Philadelphia since 1787. (White, 1995)

In this example, the year of 1787 in Philadelphia carries culture information. It was in 1787 that the Constitutional Convention was held in Philadelphia. The translator uses annotation to explain this event and remains the cultural information. And readers may understand why the author said so.

4.2 Ways to Achieve Functional Equivalence

Firstly, content is prior to form. In terms of Nida's functional equivalence, in order to achieve the functional equivalence between the source text and the target text, the translator can use some methods to remedy and adjust the way of translation. Functional Equivalence theory is quite an objective effect equivalence which lays stress on the effect of translation works and the response of the target renders. And the response of the target readers should be the same with the source text readers, which have become a criterion to evaluate the translation works. Thus in the process of translating, translators should pay attention to the meaning and style of the original text instead of the formal equivalence. But this does not mean we can abandon the form of the original text. When content equivalence is achieved, translators should try to achieve formal equivalence as possible as he can. When both of them cannot be achieved, content equivalence is prior to form.

Secondly, Nida believes that a translator should take 3 factors into consideration if he intends to work out a smooth and natural translation. These 3 factors are the target language and receiving culture, the given language

circumstance and the audiences of the target language. The 3 factors are what a translator must take into account if he wants his translation to achieve functional equivalence. The target language and receiving culture are considered as an entirety and a translator has to take them into consideration. From this perspective, a translator should make adjustment in ways of grammar and vocabulary to work out a qualified translation. It is easier for translators to make adjustment in grammar. While vocabulary covers some different levels, one of which is the vocabulary that is specific to the culture. The given language circumstance is another difficult issue for translators. Language loses its meaning without context. At last, the most important fact is the audience of the target language. Because translation is a purposeful activity, the audience is the reader of translation works, and the audience's response is very important to evaluate the quality of translation works. Therefore, in order to create good translation works, different translation should be applied according to the different audience. If these 3 factors are taken into consideration, the translator can work out a relatively good translation version.

4.3 Significance of Functional Equivalence to Children's Literature Translation

Compared with the traditional view of translation, which judges the translated text in terms of the correspondence in lexicon and grammar between the source and target languages, Nida's concept of functional equivalence provides a completely new criterion for the evaluation of the translation, which shifts the form of the message to the response of the receptor. Therefore, an effective translation should be the one that can produce in the receptor a response very close to what the original reader has experienced. In other words, when producing a dynamically or functionally equivalent translation, one must be constantly aware of the capacity and motivation of the receptor.

"Since the translation of children's literature serves the younger people instead of professional critics and aesthetic experts, a translator should bear in mind the spiritual and physical characteristics of children in the process of translating" (Yan, 1998, p.25). The purpose of children's literature translation is to share the information in the original text and let children to gain happiness from the literature works. But because of their expectation, capacity of receptivity and knowledge structure is different from the adult, they need experienced translators to give them right guidance. The translator should express what they have understood in a way which children are easy to get. And translators should always consider the response of children's response of the translation. Meanwhile, as Nida's functional equivalence attaches great importance to reader's response, it will have a guide function

to children's literature translation. And it will help translators to work out a better version of translation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can safely say that translation of children's literature seems to be easy, but actually it is not an easy task at all. It requires translators be equipped with sharp language senses and rich imagination to achieve functional equivalence. When translating children's literature works, the translator should take children's knowledge and psychological features into consideration. They should not only know the meaning of the original text, but also try to reproduce the style and culture of the original text by using different translation methods. Practically, an analysis of the unique characteristics of children's literature can help to achieve functional equivalence in the translation of children's literature and offer some suggestion in the translation work of children's literature in the future.

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