

Feasibility of Applying Functional Equivalence Theory to Chinese Translation of English Songs

ZHANG Liyan^{[a],*}

^[a]Foreign Language Teaching Department, Inner Mongolia University for the Nationalities, Tongliao, China.

*Corresponding author.

Received 28 October 2014; accepted 19 December 2014
Published online 26 January 2015

Abstract

Song enjoys an enormous popularity among people from different countries. However, the fact is that the Chinese translation of English songs is extremely short compared with the great potential market, and accordingly practice and theory of song translation are fairly deficient. Functional Equivalence is one of the most powerful and influential theories in translation study dealing with translation problems in the aspects of meaning, style. Nida emphasizes the closest natural equivalent and the reader's response, which are song translation needed. The author hopes functional equivalence theory as theoretical guidance can be applied to the practice of translation of English songs in this thesis. The author also hopes this thesis can not only introduce a new approach to the study of translation of English songs, but also impel some translators and interested readers or professors to develop this field further in both the theoretical and practical areas.

Key words: Song translation; Functional equivalence; Feasibility

Zhang, L. Y. (2015). Feasibility of Applying Functional Equivalence Theory to Chinese Translation of English Songs. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 10(1), 75-80. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/6245> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/6245>

INTRODUCTION

Along with the global integration and development of economy, cooperation and cultural communication

among countries become more and more frequently. Since Marshall McLuhan first proposed his notion of a "Global Village", there has been a belief that the world has evolved into one massive homogeneous culture.

In the present study, the paper attempts to testify to the feasibility of the Functional Equivalence in Chinese translation of English song. Functional Equivalence is one of the most powerful and influential theories in translation study dealing with translation problems in the aspects of meaning, style, culture, so it provides a completely new horizon for translation study. Functional Equivalence, as a translation strategy, is widely accepted and popular in China, so a study on Chinese translation of English song from the perspective of Nida's Functional Equivalence is necessary and it paves the way for revealing the differences between Chinese song lyrics and English song lyrics caused by cultural differences, language characteristics and introducing some translation skills.

2. NECESSITY OF ENGLISH SONG TRANSLATION

Some people propose foreign songs should be presented in the language of their originals, since in most instances many originals to lose some of their substances and flavor in translation. From the author's point of view, foreign song translation is definitely meaningful and necessary. It is impossible that everyone is a linguist, who is quite proficient in any of language in the world. If that happens, English song translation (and any other forms of translation) would disappear in the world. But before that happens, English song translation is necessary through all ages as long as there still exists communication of language, and people still need songs.

English song translation is a necessity and the reasons lie in:

Firstly, vocal music is different from instrumental music. The audience can feel the musical spirit and musical image of instrumental music without song lyrics. While vocal music is totally different from instrumental music. Vocal music is combined by lyrics and melody. That is to say, song lyrics demonstrate social life and literary image, and melody composes musical image. Vocal music, the integration of lyrics and melody, passes aesthetic message to the audience. Song lyrics are the most important part of song, which is the key of understanding and accepting song works. If English songs are not translated into the target language, the audience in the target culture will not exactly comprehend the content and image of music. If English songs are not sung by the audience in the target language, the songs will not give free rein to integrate aesthetic power. Take a song, *Mum Taught Me a Song* for example: If there were a translated version, the audience from the target language could easily understand the message that the original song delivers. She is teaching her sons and daughters to sing a song that her mom used to teach her when she was young. The audience cannot help crying if he comprehends the meaning of the original lyrics. However, if there were not a translated version, the audience could not understand the content of the lyrics. He can only feel excited or gloomy by the melody of music, but he cannot taste much more specifically, the tender feeling conveyed by the song.

Secondly, if a person wants to learn the artistic spirit of English songs and the singer of the target language wants to perform the works vividly and exactly, English songs must be translated into the target language. It is impossible for the singers and the audiences to be acquainted with all the foreign languages around the world. Therefore, translated version of English songs is very necessary for audience of the target language to understand, express, and grasp the essence of songs.

Thirdly, the foreign songs can only be widely spread among the target culture when they are translated into the target language. It has been proved that it is a truth by innumerable examples. For example: the Chinese pop song *Rose, Rose, I Love You* (《玫瑰, 玫瑰, 我爱你》), the Italian folk song *My Sun & Come Back to Sorrento*, the Italian song in sports *To Be Number One*, the Mexican song *Green Eyes*, the Spanish song *The Dove & The Cup of Life*, the Russian song *Moscow Nights* are the translated version in English; 《樱花》(the Japanese song さくら), 《友谊地久天长》(the Scotland song *Auld Lang Syne*), 《红河谷》(the Canadian song *The Red valley*) are the translated version in Chinese. Those translated versions are well received and widely sung by the audience of the target language.

Fourthly, if different countries want to communicate and interact with each other, translation can be the best instrument to break through the barriers of languages and help the native to acquaint themselves with foreign

cultures. The translated version of English song is sung by the native, it will help to promote the comprehension, the understanding and the respect, enhance the friendship and the communication between different countries and different nations.

Last but not least, the translated version of English song can deepen understanding to the original music and enhance appreciation of literature and musical image and musical perception.

3. E. A. NIDA'S TRANSLATION THEORY: FUNCTIONAL EQUIVALENCE

3.1 Functional Equivalence

Functional Equivalence, according to the *Dictionary of Translation Studies*, is "a term referring to the type of equivalence reflected in a target text which seeks to adapt the function of the original to suit the specific context in and for which seeks to produced" (Shuttleworth & Cowie, 2004, p.64).

Functional equivalence theory, put forward by Eugene Nida, well embodies the spirit of functionalism. The reason for his substitution dynamic equivalence with functional equivalence is partly due to "stress on the concept of function". In general it is best to speak off "functional equivalence" in terms of a range of adequacy, since no translation is ever completely equivalent. A number of different translations can in fact represent varying degrees of equivalence. This means that "equivalence" cannot be understood in its mathematical meaning of identity, but only in terms of proximity, i.e. on the basis of degrees of closeness to functional identity (Nida, 1993, p.117).

3.2 Principles of Functional Equivalence

3.2.1 Semantic Equivalence

Semantic equivalence can prove to be quite effective in cross-cultural communication, because it can provide a vivid rendition of the source language semantics turn or cultural image into the target language. When it comes to the meaning of a sentence, the sentence is more than the meanings of the single words put together. In the combination of single words into a sentence, the meaning of an individual word is dependent upon the meaning of the rest of the words of the same lexical or conceptual field (Bussmann, 1996/2000, p.275). So when translating a text of the source language into the target language, the translator must try his best to make sure that his understanding of the text is as close as possible to what writer of the source language intends to communicate to his reader. Semantic equivalence requires the song translation that is faithful to the text of the source language; therefore, literal translation is firstly taken into consideration. When literal translation fails to convey the

meaning of the source language, transliteration is also a good way to achieve semantic equivalence.

3.2.2 Stylistic Equivalence

Style is the essential characteristic of every piece of writing; the outcome of the writer's personality and his emotions at the moment, and no single paragraph can be put together without revealing in some degree the nature of its author (Theodore Savory, 1968, p.145).

Stylistic equivalence means achieve equivalent effects in the target language in terms of the stylistic features of the source language text. Stylistic equivalence is one of the principles guiding translation practice. The translator should try his best to maintain the style of the source language text and translate it into the same style. Translating a song into a song is what the translator needs to do. In an English song translation, whether the style of the original song is elegant and forceful, sharp and sarcastic or brief and pithy, the translated version must render it. The audiences of the target language need to know what the style of the original song is.

3.2.3 Cultural Equivalence

Everyone knows that translation involves language as well as culture. So many translators, experts make their statements about the relationships between language and culture: Lotman's theory states, "no language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture; and no culture can exist which does not have at its centre, the structure of natural language" (Lotman, 1978, pp.211-32). Nida's functional equivalence theory puts emphasis on cultural factors in translation. In Nida's (1998) view, "the most serious mistakes in translating are usually made not because of verbal inadequacy, but wrong cultural assumption". Nida (1964) argues, translation shall aim at "complete naturalness of expression, and tries to relate the receptor to modes of behavior relevant within the content of his own culture" and "For truly successful translating, biculturalism is even more important than bilingualism". Therefore, achieving cultural equivalence, that is to say, achieving equivalence in cultural response between the original audiences and the audiences in the target culture is one of the most prominent principles of functional equivalence.

4. SEEKING FUNCTIONAL EQUIVALENCE IN TRANSLATING ENGLISH SONG LYRICS

4.1 Functional Equivalence in Rhyme

Rhyme refers to the regular correspondence of sounds, especially at the ends of lines, which are very important element in Chinese translation of English song. The English and the Chinese have great distinguished in rhyme and rhyme scheme. In English original song, it is easy to notice that these rhymed words appear at the end of the

line, which means the end of the line they belong to, but not end of a sentence. However, in corresponding Chinese translation, these rhymed words appear at the end of the sentence, which usually means the end of the semantic sentence.

Whether rhyme is arranged in song lyrics or not can be one of the important criterions of being a good song because the length of song is usually short and song relies on hearing. If a song translator fails to reproduce well-organized rhyme structures in his translation, then he will not be able to fully demonstrate the charm of the original song. The function of rhyme is to bind lines together into larger units of composition (Brook & Warren, 2004). However, it does not mean that the more rhyme in song is needed, the better. How to adopt different rhymes in translated lyrics is crucial for the completion of a successful song translation. Commonly, rhyme in Chinese song is required in the even lines but not necessary in odd lines, and always starts at the first line. The adoption of rhyme does not work in the same way due to the different features of each song. Take *Jingle Bells* for examples:

Jingle Bells

Dashing through the snow	[əu]
In a one-horse open sleigh	[ei]
All the fields we go	[əu]
Laughing all the way.	[ei]
Bells on bobtail ring	[ŋ]
Making spirits bright	[ait]
What fun it is to ride and sing	[ŋ]
A sleighing songtonight.	[ait]

The Chinese version of *Jingle Bells*

冲破大风雪,	e
我们坐在雪橇上,	ang
快奔驰过田野,	e
我们欢笑又歌唱,	ang
马儿铃声响叮当,	ang
令人精神多欢畅,	ang
我们今晚滑雪真快乐,	e
把滑雪歌儿唱.	ang

(Deng, 2001, p.192)

The rhyme structure of *Jingle Bells* is ababcdcd. In order to enhance the singability of the translated version and increase the combined effectiveness of the artistic appeal for Chinese audience, the translator, Ms. Deng Yingyi, organizes a series of words, which rhyme in "ang" to make the translated words rhymed and to match the original melody. Final vowel "ang" illustrates the rhyme here, which is often used for songs that aim to convey enthusiasm and excitement. This translated version is called 《铃儿响叮当》, which is still popular in China by the characteristics of having the catchy sound of a simple, repetitious rhyme.

To sum up, seeking rhyme equivalence in Chinese translation of English song does not mean that the translated Chinese lyrics have the same rhyme scheme as the original English lyrics. Depending on their customs in song, different countries will choose different rhyme scheme, which has the same function and express the same emotion as the original.

4.2 Functional Equivalence in Rhythm

Rhythm is often defined as the orderly movement of music in time which controls all the relationships within a musical work down to the minutest detail (Turek, 1988, p.12). “Artists must make the thoughts and feelings blend in pitches and rhythms from which the audience can feel such thoughts and feelings and ultimately they get touched” (Zhu, 1987, p.229). The rhythm in song translation work will definitely influence the singability of the translated song.

Xue Fan summarizes two principles that produce appropriate rhythm which helps translated lyrics match with the melody and it will achieve functional equivalence in rhythm with the original:

Firstly, the numbers of translated words should be identical with the numbers of syllables in the original lines, that is to say, one Chinese word must equal with one English syllable. Take *Edelweiss* for examples:

Edelweiss
E - del - weiss,
雪 绒 花,
E - del - weiss,
雪 绒 花
Ev - 'ry morn - ing you greet me.
清 晨 迎 着 我 开 放
Small and white,
小 而 白,
Clean and bright,
洁 而 亮,
You look hap - py to meet me.
向 我 快 乐 地 摇 晃。
Blos - som of snow,
白 雪 般 的 花
May you bloom and grow,
儿, 愿 你 芬 芳,
Bloom and grow for - ev - er.
永 远 开 花 成 长。
E - del - weiss,
雪 绒 花,
E - del - weiss,
雪 绒 花,
Bless my home - land for - ev - er.
永 远 祝 福 我 家 乡。

(Xue, 2005, pp.142-143)

The numbers of Chinese words in the above lyrics are strictly under the restriction of the numbers of foreign language syllables, that is to say, one Chinese word occurs

on a note or notes in the same way just as the original syllable does. An additional word can be acceptable on the basis of keeping the original rhythmic features. “白雪般的” in the fourth line of the Chinese translation of *Edelweiss* are words should not be stressed in the translation unless they have special functions in the original song.

Secondly, the position of pause and transition in the translated lyric should be coherent with the places where singers take a breath, which ensures that the song has the right breathing position and reflects the musical sentence of the original.

In brief, not only the numbers of Chinese characters in the translated version should be the same as the numbers of English syllables in the original song, but also positions of the Chinese characters in the translated version should be the same as the positions of English syllables in the original song. Words can be added and deleted in the translation, but it makes a condition that it should not violate, change, and damage the rhythm of the original.

4.3 Functional Equivalence in Style

Style is nominally a vital factor in translation. Both Nida and Wilss put style on par with meaning and content. When Nida proposes that translating consists of reproducing in the receptor language the closest equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style, and summarizes the actual procedures in translating, that is, the first step is a relatively fast translation with emphasis on style. More and more Chinese translators pay attention to this. Liu (1991) maintains, “Style represents the essential characteristics of each writer’s writing. Various writers have various styles...the translator must strive to reproduce their respective characteristics in writing...” Other literary forms require the translators keep the stylistic characteristics of the original, let alone song translation. One of the main purposes of English song translation is to reproduce the stylistic features of the original song. People need to sing a song whose style is the same as the original one. Take an episode of *Green sleeves* for an example:

*Green sleeves*¹
Alas my love, you do me wrong
To cast me off discourteously
I have loved you all so long
Delighting in your company

Green sleeves was all my joy
Green sleeves was my delight
Green sleeves was my heart of gold
And who but my Lady Green sleeves

1 <http://zhidao.baidu.com/question/88721342.html?si=5>

Green sleeves are an England folk song, which spreads among the gold miners. Typy of folk song is the oral transmission and the continuous recreation. The style of this song is elegant simplicity. Lyrics are clear and easy to understand. Here is a translated version of *Green sleeves* prevailing on the Internet.

我思断肠, 伊人不减。
弃我远去, 抑郁难当。
我心相属, 日久月长。
与卿相依, 地老天荒。

绿袖招兮, 我心欢朗。
绿袖飘兮, 我心痴狂。
绿袖摇兮, 我心流光。
绿袖永兮, 非我新娘。

Obviously, it is ancient Chinese version. Nida proposes that translating consists of reproducing in the receptor language the closest equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style. The receptors may understand what the ancient Chinese language means, but it is still not a success translated version. Equivalence in meaning is achieved in some degree, but translation in style is far away from equivalence. Look at another translated version of *Green sleeves*:

我亲爱的绿袖姑娘,
竟忍心把我抛弃,
我爱你如此久长,
梦想着和你永相依。

绿袖姑娘, 我的欢乐,
绿袖姑娘, 我的曙光,
绿袖姑娘, 我心中的珍宝,
我亲爱的绿袖姑娘。

(Xue, 2005, p.189)

This translated version is from Xue Fan. Basic rhymes, rhythms and main ideas are equivalent to the original. Translating means communicating, and this process depends on what is received by persons hearing or reading a translation. What is important is the extent to which receptors correctly understand and appreciated the translated text (Nida, 1993, p.116). The style of the translated version is clear and easy to understand, which the same as the original is. It achieves stylistic equivalence.

4.4 Functional Equivalence in Culture

It is clear that language is embedded in culture, and culture is embodied by language, and culture is an indispensable element to be considered in the translation. Culture plays a very important role in Nida' translation theory. Especially,

English and Chinese, two languages have a long cultural distance. Cultural elements must be considered so as to produce functional equivalence between two languages. Most people of English-speaking countries are Christian; there must be some religious elements in English songs. Take *Hallelujah* for an example:

*Hallelujah*²

I heard there was a secret chord
That David played and it pleased the Lord
But you don't really care for music, do you?
Well it goes like this:
The fourth, the fifth, the minor fall and the major lift
The baffled king composing Hallelujah
Hallelujah Hallelujah Hallelujah Hallelujah...

Hallelujah comes from Hebrew, reads as Hal-le-lu-jah. Its English meaning is "Praise the Lord". It is used in religious songs and worship as an exclamation of praise and thanks to God. People sometimes say "Hallelujah!" when they are pleased that something they have been waiting a long time for has finally happened. *Hallelujah* implies profound religious background. *Hallelujah* (Hal-le-lu-jah) should be translated into "哈利路亚". In this way, the original number of characters can be kept without destroying the matching for the notes; what's more, most of the Chinese audiences are very familiar to those words such as God, Jesus, etc., so there is no need to give additional explanations.

CONCLUSION

Song translation is an integration of linguistics, literature and music. In Xue Fan's *Exploration and Practice in Translation of Songs*, he emphasizes that song translators need to put the elements of music in the very first place in the process of translating foreign songs. Every form of art has a soul and it is important for song translators to concentrate on the combination between the original words and the translated words. Song is an integration of melody and song lyrics. Because melody is pre-existing and cannot be changed, English song lyrics are vital element in English song translation. The Chinese translation of English songs encounters a number of difficulties, so it is impossible for English song translators to create a translated version completely equivalent to the originals both in the form and content. Moreover, Nida (1993) states that translation means translating the meaning, and he also points out that equivalence can not be understand in its mathematical meaning of identity, but only in terms of proximity, i.e. on the basis of degrees of closeness to function identity. From this point, functional equivalence can be applied in the Chinese translation of

² <http://zhidao.baidu.com/question/117710818.html?si=1>

English songs. The author hopes this thesis arouse the translator's more attention to the filed. The author also hopes that this thesis can lay a foundation for the further study and pave a way for the future translators who are willing to dedicate themselves to the research and development in this subject.

REFERENCES

- Brooks, C., & Warren, R. P. (2004). *Understanding poetry* (p.183). Beijing, China: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Deng, Y. Y. (2001). *101 classical English songs* (p.45, 259). Beijing, China: the People's Music Publishing Press.
- Nida, E.A. (1993). *Language, culture, and translating* (pp.116-117). China: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Shuttleworth & Cowie. (2004). *Dictionary of translation studies*. (p.64). China: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Turek, R. (1988). *The elements of music: Concepts and applications* (volume 1, p.12). United Stated: McGraw-Hill, INC.
- Xue, F. (2002). *Exploration and practice in translation of songs* (p.84). Hubei, China: Hubei Education Press.
- Xue, F. (2005). *World popular choral works collection (volume 1): Music drama selections and foreign folk songs* (pp.142-143, 189). Beijing, China: the People's Music Publishing Press.