A Comparative Study of Two Chinese Translations of *Charlotte's Web*

WANG Zhe[1]

Abstract: As a classic in children's literature, Charlotte's Web has been translated into more than 20 languages, including Chinese. As there are multi-level and multi-dimensional selections and adaptations in the translation of children's literature, this paper makes an attempt to apply the adaptation theory to study the selections and adaptations in the two Chinese versions of *Charlotte's Web* from the phonological, lexical, syntactic, discoursal and socio-cultural levels. It is suggested that the translator of children's literature should make sensible language choices that adapt to children's understandability and appreciation, so that the translation can be readily understood and accepted by the target readers and its social value realized.
Key words: *Charlotte's Web*; Children's literature; Translation; Selection; Adaptation

1. INTRODUCTION

Charlotte's Web was written by E. B. White, who was a famous modern essayist and critic in America, but gained his worldwide reputation by his children's books, namely, *Stuart Little*, *Charlotte's Web* and *The Trumpet of the Swan*, among which *Charlotte's Web* has been the most popular one universally recognized as his representative work. White describes love, growth, life and death through fairy tales with the witty, humorous but kindly ironic words, which have left a profound impression on numerous children and adults in the world. White was awarded the 1970 Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal for his children's books, *Stuart Little* and *Charlotte's Web*.

As a classic in children's literature, *Charlotte's Web* has been printed over 45 million volumes, and translated into more than 20 languages, including Chinese. At present there are four Chinese versions available, i.e., Kang Xin's version, Xiao Mao's online version, Ren Rongrong's version in the mainland of China and a 9-year-old kid's version in Taiwan of China. This paper will make a comparative study of two influential Chinese versions by Kang Xin and Ren Rongrong. Kang Xin, a diplomat's wife, published her translation of *Charlotte's Web* in 1979, which is very elegant with many four-character phrases. Relatively speaking, Kang's version is somewhat translated from an adult's perspective. In contrast, Ren Rongrong, a famous writer and translator of children's literature in China, has written and translated a lot of literary works for Chinese children. His Chinese version of *Charlotte's Web* came out in 2008.

2. THEORECTICAL FRAMEWORK

Jef Verschueren, the Secretary General of International Pragmatic Association, put forward the adaptation theory in his book *Understanding Pragmatics* in 1999, in which he described language use as selection and adaptation. The adaptation theory sheds new light on translation research and practice. Hence, this paper makes an attempt to apply the adaptation theory to the translation of children's literature, and narrow down the scope of research to the translator's selection and adaptation in *Charlotte's Web*.

The translation of children's literature is a kind of special communication, and translators are inevitably confronted with the problems of adaptation and language choices when they communicate with the author or with the presumed children readers. As the target readership of children's literature is a very special group with their own characteristics and expectations, the selections and adaptations in the translation of children's literature will have some differences from those in general translation.

There are multi-level and multi-dimensional selections and adaptations in the translation of children's literature. In the process of translating children's stories, translators' selections and adaptations are influenced by a series of factors such as children readers' age, language, acceptability, psychological characteristics and aesthetic sentiment. Only when the translator of children's literature adapts to the target context, or specifically speaking, to the target children readers' mental, social as well as physical world and to their language and style, can the translation be understood and accepted in the target culture and its social value realized.

3. SELECTION AND ADAPTATION IN TWO CHINESE VERSIONS *OF CHARLOTTE'S WEB*

3.1 At the Phonological Level

Selections and adaptations at the phonological level refer to the fact that the translator makes choices among the potential translation methods of children's literature to produce the sound properties of children's literature adapting to the target children readers and bears the original sound effect in mind. The target children readers may generally find it difficult to perceive the sound properties of the original. If translations without adaptability can hardly lighten children readers' burden during the appreciating process, or may even create more new obstacles for their understanding. The following are some examples to illustrate.

> (1) Wilbur grunted. He gulped and sucked, and sucked and gulped, making swishing and swooshing noises, anxious to get everything at once. (1952: 75)
> Kang's version: 威伯咕嚕著，大口吸著、吞著；吞著、吸著。作出各樣的貪吃聲，急於把所有的東西同時咽下。(1979：72)
> Ren's version: 威爾伯嘔嘔地叫。它大口大口地吃，大口大口地喝，大口大口地吃，大口大口地喝，發出稀裡嘩啦、呼嚕嘩啦的聲音，急著要一口氣吃個精光。(2008：217)

Ren vividly portrays an amusing picture of a hungry pig gobbling up a lot of food by choosing some onomatopoeic words such as "嘔嘔地"，"稀裡嘩啦" and "呼嚕嘩啦"，while Kang's translation would seem to be nothing remarkable.

> (2) "I never do those things if I can avoid them," replied the rat sourly, "I prefer to spend my time eating, gnawing, spying and hiding." (1952: 29)
> Kang's version: "要是能夠避免，我絕對不作這種傻事，"老鼠沒好氣地說。"我情願把時間花在吃、咬、巡邏、躲藏上。"(1979：26)
> Ren's version: "這種事我從來能不幹就不幹，"老鼠尖刻地回答說，"我情願把時間花在吃啊，啃啊，窺探啊，躲藏啊這些上頭。"(2008：181)

If a speech is impromptu, it often means that the speakers need time to regulate their language. To fill in the pause, they naturally use words like um, uh, well and so on. Chinese children readers are inclined to add interjections such as "啊", "哦", "嗯", etc. Thus the expressions "吃啊，啃啊，窺探啊，躲藏啊" in Ren's version obviously adapt to children's normal way of thinking and speaking.

At the phonological level, onomatopoeic, reduplicated words, repetitions, and interjections are suggested to be chosen in translating children's literature. In this way, children would find the stories full of sound effects more readily acceptable when reading books. As for the translation of *Charlotte's Web*, Ren Rongrong took full advantage of onomatopoeia, repetition and the like to make his translation strongly appealing to children readers.

3.2 At the Lexical Level

When it comes to selections and adaptations at the lexical level in children's literature translation, there are often two situations. Firstly, translators cannot simply resort to looking for lexical matches, as in most case there is no word equivalence between two different languages. Hence, the translator has to use adaptable translation methods to bridge the lexical gaps or differences. Secondly, translators should choose suitable words that adapt to children's understandability and appreciation so as to attract children readers. For example,

> (1) Rain fell in the barnyard and ran in crooked courses down into the lane where thistle and pigweed grew. (1952: 25)
> Kang's version: 雨落在倉房的院子裡，順著崎嶇的凹處流到長滿紫薊和蔟藜的小路上。
> (1979: 23)
> Ren's version: 雨水落到穀倉院子裡，彎彎曲曲地一道一道流進長著薊草和藜草的小路。
> (2008: 177)

In Kang's version, there are several formal words such as "崎嶇", "凹處", "紫薊" and "蔟藜" which rarely appear in children's daily life. Due to the limitation of the educational level, children readers would not be able to figure out the meaning of these words, let alone appreciation. Ren's version vividly depicts the way of the rain's running by using such phases as "彎彎曲曲地", "一道一道地". Although he also chooses two rarely-used characters "薊" and "藜", they are the modificatory parts of the words and their central part "草" is easy for children to understand, which seems to be more adaptable to them.

> (2) "Who wants to live for ever?" sneered the rat. "I am naturally a heavy eater and I get untold satisfaction from the pleasures of the feast." He patted his stomach, grinned at the sheep, and crept upstairs to lie down. (1952: 175)
> Kang's version: "誰要永遠活下去?"老鼠輕蔑地說。"我是個天生貪吃的，從盛饌中得到無窮樂趣。"他拍著肚子，朝老羊笑著，爬上樓去休息。(1979: 161)
> Ren's version: "誰需要長生不老嗎?"老鼠譏諷說，"我天生是個大食鬼，從大吃大喝的樂趣中得到說不出的滿足感。"它拍拍肚子，對老羊齜著牙齒笑笑，爬到上面糧倉去躺下來。(2008: 295)

Kang uses a very formal word "盛饌" to translate "the pleasure of the feast". Most children probably have never heard of the word or know its pronunciation like "盛饌", whose aesthetic distance is far beyond children readers' appreciation. Ren chose "大吃大喝" to translate the phrase, and his translation sounds natural as well as intelligible.

As children are yet to be fully developed both physically and mentally, their experience is based upon a concrete concept of the world around them. Limited by children readers' literary and daily life experience, too much effort is required for them to understand formal and abstract words. Therefore, easy words rather than complicated ones, colloquial and concrete words rather than formal and abstract ones, vivid and humorous expressions rather than plain ones are suggested to be chosen in the translation of children's literature.

3.3 At the Syntactic Level

As Chinese is quite different from English in terms of syntax, the translator should carefully select sentence structures as well as appropriate words in the translation of children's literature. Adaptation at the syntactic level can be defined as the translator's flexible adjustment in the translation. It is mainly triggered by the differences in syntactic features between Chinese and English: parataxis vs. hypotaxis, personal subject vs. impersonal subject, and diffusiveness vs. compactness. For example,

> (1) Wilbur was merely suffering the doubts and fears that often go with finding a new friend.(1952: 42)
> Kang's version: 威伯被初交新友的懷疑和恐懼折磨著。(1979: 38)
> Ren's version: 找到一個新朋友，在喜悅之外，常常會同時有一些疑惑和恐懼，可威爾伯卻只感受到了疑惑和恐懼。(2008: 190)

In Kang's version, the original sentence structure is maintained by using the sentence structure "被…折磨" which requires logical analysis for children readers to understand the sentence. While Ren's version sounds more natural, for the translator has cut the sentence into several simple clauses. As a result, Ren's version is more comprehensible and closer to the way children speak.

> (2) She just sat and stared out of the window, thinking what a blissful world it was and how lucky she was to have entire charge of a pig. (1952: 7)
> Kang's version: 她光是坐著，呆呆地望著窗外，想像世界多美，她竟有照管一頭豬的全部權力。(1979: 6)
> Ren's version: 她只是坐在那裡看著車窗外，一個勁兒地想，這是一個多麼快樂的世界啊，她一個人擁有一隻小豬，又是多麼福氣啊。(2008: 165)

In Ren's translation, "thinking" was translated into "一個勁兒地想" which properly adapts to children's language. Furthermore, the sentence structure "這是…又是…" appropriately represents a little girl's mental world with the interjections "啊" and the adverbs "多麼". In comparison, Kang's literal translation is not as good as Ren's version.

Belonging to two different language families, English and Chinese differ a lot from each other in sentence structure. The translator should be able to discard the source language sentence structure so that his translation will conform to the habit of the target children readers. A good translation should use natural and correct target language grammar, not source language structure disguised in target language words. Due to the limitation of children's educational level and literary experiences, the sentence structures in the translation should be simple. In other words, the translator should avoid complex syntactical structures so as to be concise in the translation.

3.4 At the Discoursal Level

Translator's adaptability can also be demonstrated in the translation of the discourse level. "Since discourse itself forms a dimension into which linguistic choices are anchored" (Verschueren 1999: 104), this section will focus on discourse as a whole rather than any single word or expression, or syntactic structuring of a sentence. Discoursal adaptability refers to the translator's ability to flexibly use the potential translation methods of children's literature in order to tackle the differences between Chinese and English at the discoursal level. Chinese text is loosely connected with some degree of repetition and tardiness, while English takes on the picture of precision and orderliness. In the organization of the discourse, Chinese usually leave the focal point till the end while the English put it forward as the topic sentence at the beginning of a paragraph. The translator has to adapt to the target linguistic reality at the discoursal level so that the translation may be more easily perceived and deeply felt by children readers.

> (1) "What do you mean, less than nothing?" replied Wilbur. "I don't think there is any such thing as less than nothing. Nothing is absolutely the limit of nothingness. It's the lowest you can go. It's the end of the line. How can something be less than nothing? If there were something that was less than nothing, then nothing would notbe nothing, it would be something-even though it's just a very little bit of something. But if nothing is nothing, then nothing has nothing that is less than it is." (1952: 28)

Kang's version: "次於無物是什麼意思?"威伯說。"我以為沒有一樣東西比無物更次。無物是絕對沒有，是最次的等級，是事物的盡頭。怎麼會有東西比無物更次? 要是有，無物就不成無物，而是有物——儘管只有一丁點兒。可是如果無物確是啥也沒有，那麼就沒比無物更次的了!" (1979: 26)

Ren's version: "比零還要少，你這話是什麼意思?"威爾伯應道，"我不認為有什麼東西會比零還要少。零就是零，什麼也沒有，這已經到了極限，少到了極限，怎麼能有東西比零還要少呢? 如果有什麼東西比零還要少，那麼這零就不能是零，一定要有些東西 —— 哪怕只是一丁點東西。如果零就是零，那就沒有什麼東西比它還要少。" (2008: 180)

This speech happened after the lamb told Wilbur that pigs mean less than nothing. Looking at this passage as a whole, the style of the original passage is casual with a little humor involved. But in Kang's version, it seems to have some implied meaning of religion, because "nothing" and "something" have been respectively translated into the abstract and abstruse words like "無物" and "有物" which seems to have something to do with Buddhism. Ren translates "less than nothing" into "比零還要少" which is more colloquial and readable than "次於無物". On the whole, Ren's version is more adaptable to children's comprehension.

(2) "...First she threw a left around the tail. The fish lashed back. Then a left to the tail and a right to the mid-section. Then a left to the tail and a right to the mid-section. The fish lashed back. Then she dodged to one side and threw a right; and another right to the fin. Then a hard left to the head, while the web swayed and stretched."(1952: 103)

Kang's version: "她先從左面往尾巴周圍扔了根絲，那魚立刻回擊。隨後她從左面往尾巴上扔了根絲，又從右邊往腹部扔了根絲，那魚立刻回擊。她躲到一邊，從右邊往鰭上扔了根絲，接著又是一根。隨後她從左邊狠狠地往魚頭上扔了根絲，震得整個網搖曳不止，繃得象要斷了似的。" (1979: 96)

Ren's version: "它先在魚尾巴上一個左手拳，魚打回來。接著它在魚尾巴上又一個左手拳，在魚身上一個右手拳。魚又打回來，接著它閃到一邊，在魚鰭上一個右手拳，又一個右手拳。接著在魚頭上狠狠一個左手拳，這時網晃來晃去，墜得很低了。" (2008: 239)

This passage describes how Charlotte's cousin beat down a fish caught by the net. On the surface, Kang's version appears more faithful to the original. However, as the translator of children's literature ought to choose accurate and vivid expressions to make the translation readable and fluent, Ren's version seems to be a more suitable one for children readers. The style of Ren's version is funny and amusing with lively "左手拳" and "右手拳" attracting to children.

3.5 At the Socio-cultural Level

Adaptation at the socio-cultural level often refers to adaptation to the cultural context such as historical background, social and value system, conventions, religion, etc. As culture is a rather complicated and comprehensive concept, some cultural elements in *Charlotte's Web* are analyzed so as to show how translator adapts to the cultural context of the target language.

(1) "And now, Fern, it's time to get ready for Sunday School and tell Avery to get ready."(1952: 54)

Kang's version: "芬，主日學校的時間快到了，去告訴阿漢準備好。" (1979: 51)

Ren's version: "不過現在，弗恩，該上主日學校①去了。叫艾弗裡快準備好。" (頁下註: 主日學校是星期日對兒童進行宗教教育的學校，大多設在教堂裡) (2008: 200)

Most of Chinese children readers may not understand what a "Sunday School'' is in Kang's version, but Ren offers the note for "Sunday School", which can be better understood by children.

(2) "...I will let you have your choice of everything in the trough and I won't touch a thing until you're through."
The rat sat up. "You mean that?" he said.
"I promise. I cross my heart."(1952: 168-69)

Kang's version: "我讓你先選擇食槽中的一切。你不吃夠，我絕不碰一下。"
……老鼠坐了起來。"你說話當真嗎?" 他說。

……"當真。我發誓。"(1979: 156)

Ren's version:"我讓你食槽裡愛吃什麼挑什麼吃，在你吃夠之前，我絕不碰食物。"

……老鼠一聽就坐起來了。"你這話當真?"它說。

……" 我保證，我在心口畫十字。"(2008: 289)

Kang makes some adaptation to translate "I cross my heart" into "我發誓", which can be clearly understood by children readers. In comparison, Ren literally translates it into "我在心口畫十字", of which some Chinese children readers might not be able to understand the meaning.

As is known to all, Christianity in western countries has great influence on English, while the leading religion in China is Buddhism and Taoism. Under the circumstance, most of Chinese children cannot understand those religious expressions. It is suggested that if the translator comes across some religious elements in the translation of children's literature, he or she can have choices to provide with simple notes or to make some adaptations.

4. CONCLUSION

Charlotte's Web tells the story of a pig named Wilbur and his friendship with a barn spider named Charlotte. It is a fairy tale about life and love. *Charlotte's Web* can be read by children and adults alike. As for children, *Charlotte's Web* is a fairy tale, while it is a fable for adults. For adult readers, Kang Xin's version may seem to be more suitable, since it is elegant and noble. For children readers, Ren Rongrong's version may be more acceptable, since it is humorous and easy to understand. Although *Charlotte's Web* may be suitable for all ages and adults may have a deeper perception on it, yet it is, first of all, a story for children.

In *Charlotte's Web,* White tells a beautiful story in plain and clear words totally from a child's perspective. Hence, its translation should be beautiful and plain as well, and can in no case be translated into a too formal and serious text. As children's books should first be understood by children, conciseness, colloquialism, musicality and children's delight are very essential elements for a successful translated children's story. After an analysis of the selection and adaptation in the translation of *Charlotte's Web* from the phonological, lexical, syntactic, discoursal and socio-cultural levels, we concluded that Ren Rongrong's version is more preferable than Kang Xin's one, for the target readers of *Charlotte's Web* are children rather than adults.

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