

## A Comparative Study on Translators' Styles in Literary Translation

GUO Minghe<sup>[a].\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>Lecturer, School of Foreign Languages, Changchun University of Science and Technology, Changchun, China.

\* Corresponding author.

Received 3 September 2013; accepted 2 December 2013

### Abstract

This paper mainly discusses different translation styles of three translators. *Treasure Island* is the most popular production of Robert Louis Stevenson which attracts readers throughout the world for its creative and fascinating plot. In China, there are Chinese versions by many translators including Xi Shizi, Xin Ruo and Rong Rude. This paper extracts Chapter Thirteen from the work and compares the translation styles of the three translators with living examples. These comparisons are made from three aspects: translation of words, phrases and sentences.

**Key words:** *Treasure Island*; Chinese version; Translation style; Comparison

GUO Minghe (2013). A Comparative Study on Translators' Styles in Literary Translation. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 7(3), 109-112. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/j.sll.1923156320130703.2874>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.sll.1923156320130703.2874>

### INTRODUCTION

Style is the characteristic manner of expression in works; a writer's style is known from the words he chooses or the way he constructs his sentences; it's how a peculiar writer says things. It is universally acknowledged that every writer has a literary style and that his style is reflected in his writing. Writing style is the essential characteristic of every piece of writing, the outcome of the writer's personality and his emotions at the moment. There is no doubt that different literary works have

discernibly different styles. However, regarding the question of translatability of the original style, opinions differ. Some will say that a translation should reflect the style of the original and others say that a translation should possess the style of the translator. Just like that every writer has their own unique style of writing, different translators have different styles in the translation of a work. Theodore Horace Savory commented on the art of translation, and he said that styles are basic features of works, and it is the product of the author's personality and emotion. Any paragraph of the article, to some extent, reveals the author's style. Just like the writers of the literary works, translators also demonstrate their own unique style in the translation of the source text. Individual translators tend to decide on different words and patterns when interpreting other writer's text into another language. If differences can be found between such decisions, this would indicate that there are different translating styles that can be characterized through linguistic shifts. Although this difference may not be that obvious as the writing style, different translators' different choices of words while translating are under the influence of their personality and also the influence of their historical setting. According to Savory, literal translation of a literary work does not reproduce the effect of the original. Because literature allows multiple interpretations, there should be freedom in literary translations to consider a wide range of implicatures. Thus, rendering the equivalent effect of the original requires freedom to explore different interpretations. Discussed in this article is an excerpt from *Treasure Island*, masterpiece of Stevenson Robert Louis that makes him famous. This paper makes comparison of three Chinese translations by three translators, comparing the source text with the target text and thereby arriving at the translator's tendencies—which may be either conscious or non-conscious.

## 1. ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON AND TREASURE ISLAND

Robert Louis Balfour Stevenson was born at Edinburgh, Scotland, on 13 November 1850. He was a Scottish novelist, poet, essayist, and travel writer. His most famous work is *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped*, and *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. As a literary celebrity during his lifetime, Stevenson now ranks among the 26 most translated authors in the world. His works have been admired by many other writers, including Jorge Luis Borges, Bertolt Brecht, Arthur Conan Doyle, Cesare Pavese, Ernest Hemingway, Rudyard Kipling, Jack London, Vladimir Nabokov, J. M. Barrie, and G. K. Chesterton, who said of him that he “seemed to pick the right word up on the point of his pen, like a man playing spillikins.”

Stevenson's first novel *Treasure Island* was begun as an entertainment for his twelve-year-old stepson. It is an adventure novel, narrating a masterful tale of “buccaneers and buried gold”. The story is told by a boy named Jim. He participated in an expedition to find the treasure buried in a remote island. Observant and brave Jim discovered the conspiracy of the pirates. The pirates planned to rob the treasure away from the organizers of this romantic voyage. After countless thrilling and breathtaking experience, the intrepid travelers arrived at the isolated island, and found a man who had been pirate on the island. Finally these expeditors dug up the treasure under his help.

First published as a book on 23 May 1883, the novel was originally serialized in the children's magazine *Young Folks* between 1881 and 1882 under the title *Treasure Island* or, the mutiny of the *Hispaniola* with Stevenson adopting the pseudonym Captain George North. *Treasure Island* is a tale known for its atmosphere, characters and action, and also as a wry commentary on the ambiguity of morality—as seen in Long John Silver—unusual for children's literature now and then. It is one of the most frequently dramatized of all novels. The influence of *Treasure Island* on popular perceptions of pirates is enormous that can not be overestimated, including treasure maps marked with an “X”, schooners, the Black Spot, tropical islands, and one-legged seamen carrying parrots on their shoulders. For more than 100 years, this adventure story has been loved by readers from around the world, in particular young people. *Treasure Island* has been translated into many languages and widely spread throughout the world.

## 2. ANALYSIS AND COMPARISON OF THREE TRANSLATIONS

In China, there are many translated versions of *Treasure Island*. This article analyses the three of these translations and makes comparisons. Among the three translators, Xi Shizhi is a translator who lived in the period of the

Republic of China, and he has a profound knowledge of both English and Chinese languages. Xi Shizhi has translated a lot of works, including *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Best Stories from Shakespeare Selected and Annotated with Notes*, *One Thousand and One Nights* and so on. Xin Ruo and Rong Rude are translators after the founding of our nation. Xin Rou's translation works are not many, mainly the translation of *Treasure Island* in the late 70's. Rong Rude was born in 1934, and he is a famous translator in China. Now he works in Shanghai Research Institute of Culture and History for English translation and Russian translation. He is proficient in English and Russian and has been committed to literary translation for many years. His major translation works include Skolimowski's *Idiot*, *White Nights*, Vsevolod Kochetov's *Brothers Yershov*, Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, Dicken's *Oliver Twist*, etc.

Through the comparison of the three versions, we can see there are similarities: first, on the whole, all the three versions are in accordance with the rules of translation—faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance; second, the translators of the three versions have a profound knowledge of both English and Chinese; thirdly, the translators of the three versions spare no effort in wording to make the translation more readable.

Next, the article selects Chapter Thirteenth of *Treasure Island* as an example, and makes analysis and comparison of the three translations by Xi Shizhi, Xin Rou and Rong Rude in three aspects (the translation of words, idioms and sentences) with examples, so as to have a more specific and clear understanding of their respective translation style.

### 2.1 Translation of Words

In terms of wording, Xi Shizhi is apparently different from the other two translators. He lived in the era of Republic of China, and under the influence of his social background of the times, his translation is not as simple, crisp and easy to understand as the other two.

Example 1: naked rock

Xi Shizhi translated it into “赤裸的岩石”, whereas both of the other two translators put “naked” into “光秃秃的”. Compared with “赤裸的”, “光秃秃的” sounds more straightforward and vivid. What's more, the collocation with the modified noun “rock” seems to be more in accordance with the habit of Chinese expression. In Xi Shizhi's version, other examples are: “we” is translated into “吾们”; “a good enough sailor” is translated into “极好的水手”; “in a sort of amphitheatre” is translated into “像圆形剧场相仿佛”; “a bad egg” is translated into “坏鸡蛋”; “the slightest order” is translated into “极微细的命令”; “have caught the infection” is translated into “受到感化了”; “if” is translated into “倘使”; “he's as anxious as you and I” is translated into “他的急切像你我一般的”; “fight the ship” is translated into “据船作战”, etc. From these examples we can see that Xi Shizhi's

wording is somewhat obscure, and even in some places are not appropriate, or not so active. It is decided or caused by the translator's historical background and his social environment. But the novel *Treasure Island* was written by Stevenson for his stepson as a reading material for juveniles. The original demonstrates a series of adventures on island and is famous for its popular and lively expression, which makes it enjoy great affection among the majority of young people. Literary translations must reflect all the literary features of the source text such as sound effects, morphophonemic selection of words, figures of speech ...etc. In Xi Shizhi's translation, the original style and taste of the novel has not been maintained very well. Although his wording in translation sounds more poetic, the author thinks that it is not advisable.

It is important not only to translate the idea raised by the original document in another language, but also to ensure that the translation has a writing style to facilitate reading and understanding of the idea. This knowledge is going to guide our translation. A translator cannot translate words in isolation. Words get their meaning from how they are used in each situation, which we call the context. A translator must perform a contextual translation.

## 2.2 Translation of Idioms

The 13th chapter of *Treasure Island* also involves translations of some idioms:

Example 2: **a good enough sailor**

Xi Shizhi's translation: 好极的水手

Xin Ruo's translation: 很不错的水手

Rong Rude's translation: 对船的颠簸已很习惯

In the three Chinese versions, only Rong Rude correctly understood the true meaning of "a good sailor", while Xi Shizhi and Xin Ruo just translated it according to its literal meaning. In fact, there is expression in English language as "a bad sailor", but the meaning of it is not "不好的水手" but rather "会晕船的人". Accordingly, "A good enough sailor" means "不晕船" or "对船的颠簸已很习惯".

Example 3: The slightest order was received with a **black look**.

Xi Shizhi's translation: 虽是极微细的命令, 现在他们也是眼黑凸出来接受。

Xin Ruo's translation: 任何一个小小的命令都会招来一个冷眼。

Rong Rude's translation: 命令他们做任何一点点小事情, 都会招来白眼。

As to the translation of "a black look", Xi Shizhi did not fully understand the flexible meaning of "a black look" with the combination of the context. "A black look" is an idiomatic expressions, not "眼黑凸出", but it indicates a kind of straightened face or cold expression. Xin Ruo and Rong Rude translated it into "冷眼" or "白眼" which can accurately convey the true implications of "a black look". That is what a successful translation takes. In addition, Xi Shizhi translated it into "眼黑凸出" which

will, to some extent, make people misunderstand, because in Chinese expression, "眼黑凸出" can be used to convey the emotion of surprise, anxiety or eagerness. Therefore, translated as "眼黑凸出", the phrase not only fails to express the meaning of "遭到冷遇", but also misleads the readers, causing obstacles to their understanding.

Example 4: ...but I'll **stake my wig** there's fever here.

As to the translation of "stake my wig", the three translators turned out different versions.

Xi Shizhi's translation: 我可以赌咒.....

Xin Ruo's translation: 我可以用我的假发打赌.....

Rong Rude's translation: 我敢拿我的脑袋打赌.....

Among the three translations of the expression, Xin Ruo's translation is too literal and not fully interprets the original tone that one is absolutely sure about something. While Xi Shizhi's translation indicates the practical meaning of "stake my wig", but not as popular and vivid as Rong Rude's translation, which manifests the practical meaning of the phrase while keeping the language lively in accordance with the bright and straightforward style of the original text. Therefore, the author believes that in the three translations of this sentence, Rong Rude's translation is undoubtedly the most successful.

The first thing to remember is that translation is the transfer of meaning from one language to another. It is not the transfer of words from language to language. A good translator must translate the meaning of what is being said, rather than do it word-for-word. He should translate meaning, not words. This is because languages are not just different words.

## 2.3 Translation of Sentences

On the translation of sentences, Xi Shizhi, compared with the other two, seems a bit punctilious about the sentence structure and word order of the original text, slightly lack of flexibility. So in some cases the versions by the other two are more flexible and smooth. When translating, the translators should translate the meaning of sentences, not the individual words. Examples are as follows:

Example 5: The appearance of the island **when I came on deck next morning** was altogether changed.

Xi Shizhi's translation: 那个岛的状态, 已经完全改变了, 当我次日的早晨, 走到甲板上的时候。

Xin Ruo's translation: 次日清晨, 当我走上甲板时, 那个岛的外貌完全变了。

Rong Rude's translation: 第二天早晨, 我走上甲板一看, 那个岛完全变了样。

Example 6: I had to cling tight to the backstay and **world turned giddily before my eyes**.

Xi Shizhi's translation: 我只得紧紧的握住桅缆, 一切在我眼前都成晕花起来了。

Xin Ruo's translation: 我不得不抓紧系在桅杆上的缆索。我感到天旋地转。

Rong Rude's translation: 我不得牢牢抓住后牵索。只觉得天旋地转。

As to the sentence translation of Example 6, Xi Shizhi was trying to maintain the original sentence, wording and word order, while Xin Ruo and Rong Rude coincidentally translated it into “天旋地转”. Although the translation is not too consistent with the literal meaning of the original text, it more vividly describes the feeling when people get seasick. Therefore, the translation can be regarded to be more flexible, appropriate and consistent with the habit of expression.

**Example 7: If some go, you mark my words, sir, silver'll bring'em aboard again as mild as lambs.**

Xi Shizhi's translation: 倘使有几个人去了, 你注意我的话, 先生, 雪而浮带他们回船之时, 一定使他们柔顺得和小羊一般了。

Xin Ruo's translation: 如果他们只去一部分人, 你可以记住我的话, 阁下, 西尔维就会把他们像温顺的小羔羊一样地带回到船上来。

Rong Rude's translation: 如果几个人去, 先生, 我敢担保: 西尔夫带他们回到船上来的时候, 这些人一个个都像绵羊一样听话。

Example 7 shows that, Rong Rude's is abstemious in wording in the translation of “you mark my words”, and the subject “you” in the original text is changed to “我”. The four words “我敢担保” are simple, appropriate and accurately demonstrate the speaker's assuredness in his words. While the other two translators adopted literal translation that is not as flexible as the former to a certain extent.

## SUMMARY

Through the comparison of the typical examples in the three translations by Xi Shizhi, Xin Ruo and Rong Rude, different translation styles of the three translators are expounded. But it needs to be noted that the examples selected in this article are limited, and the analysis is far from exhaustive. Therefore, the translation skills of them cannot be judged arbitrarily through this article alone. In fact, each of the three versions has its own merits, and is a model for us to learn from. The views in this paper represents only personal point of view, and there will be some improprieties. Any comment or different ideas concerning the above article is heartily welcome.

## REFERENCES

- Li, Q. (2004). Creativity of translator—Translation subject. *Academic Journal of Tonghua Normal University*, 7, 33-37.
- Savory, T. (1957). *The Art of Translation*. J. Cape.
- Wikipedia. *Robert Louis Stevenson*. Retrieved from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert\\_Louis\\_Stevenson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Louis_Stevenson)
- Wikipedia. *Treasure island*. Retrieved from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treasure\\_Island](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treasure_Island)
- Yang, S. C. (2007). *English-Chinese translation*. Beijing: Beijing University Press.
- Yang, S. C. (2002). Developing the advantages of the translation. *Shanghai Technological Translation*, 1, 23-26.
- Zhao, Y. (2007). On the translating style of the literary works. *Examination Weekly*, 25, 45-48.