

“Deceptive Equivalence” in C-E Fictional Translation: A Literary Stylistic Approach

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Abstract

Literary stylistics is an intermediary discipline mediating between linguistics and literary criticism. With the precision of linguistics, it can help fend off the general impressionistic comments and intuitive analysis. Chinese and English are two vastly different languages and deceptive equivalence is not uncommon in fictional translation. Literary linguistics is an effective tool in C-E fictional translation to help identify the “artistically or thematically motivated stylistic choices” in the original and thus help avoid deceptive equivalence and reduce stylistic losses in the translation.

Key words: Deceptive equivalence; Literary stylistics; C-E fictional translation

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1. LITERARY STYLISTICS THEORY

1.1 Style

Style, being a most controversial key issue, has been defined by different scholars from different perspectives since ancient times.

The theoretically relatively uncontroversial one defines style as genre or period characteristics. In this sense, style involves a set of given conventions or rules with which a writer operating in that particular genre or period complies or is expected to comply.

From another perspective, some stylisticians see style as habitual traits of the author. As Shen Dan observes, not surprisingly, the critic in this vein is typically concerned with the association between style as such and the writer’s personality rather than the literary significance of the text (Shen, 1998, p.14). This definition attracted several critical attempts. Milic points out that if a writer’s personality determines the style, then the writer can exert no control over the style at all, all of it being determined by habits, associations, and conditioning (as cited in Shen, 1998, p.15). In such a case, even a rhetorical choice may shade into linguistic habit. Leech and Short also see the danger one should be on guard against of attributing choices that are more or less determined by subject matter or genre to the writer’s own personality (Leech & Short, 2001, p.12).

Shen Dan, who stands out in the study of literary stylistics and fictional translation, believes that investigators of style, if concerned with literary interpretation or evaluation, tend to focus on artistically or thematically motivated choices. Stylisticians in this vein, as she observes, are interested in that part of a writer’s style which displays conscious or quasi-conscious artistry or craftsmanship; a part that contains various kinds of stylistic or rhetorical devices functioning as semantic reinforcement or modification (Shen, 1998, p.18). Style is thus treated as various linguistic features, devices and patterns operating to heighten the aesthetic effect.

The present study will adopt the definition of style as artistically or thematically motivated linguistic choices.

1.2 Nature of Literary Stylistics

As Professor Shen Dan puts it, “Marked by the use of linguistic models in the interpretation of literary texts, literary stylistics is a discipline meditating between literary criticism and linguistics of different levels and in various forms” (Shen, 1998, p.2).

By the epithet “literary”, distinction is drawn between literary stylistics and approaches which treat literary texts

as mere data, objects for linguistic description. Literary stylistics is still exploring literary significance, focusing on thematically or artistically motivated linguistic choices.

The epithet “linguistic” stresses this intermediary discipline’s difference from the more traditional approaches to literary style. Unlike the latter, which are more vulnerable to impressionistic and intuitive pits, literary stylistics relies on linguistic observations and insights, on the analytic and systematic knowledge of communicative and linguistic norms (as cited in Shen, 1998, p.4). That is to say, it has the support of more concrete, “hard” evidence.

Therefore, literary stylistics can rely on the precision of the linguistic description while still operating along the lines of traditional common-sense based interpretative strategies of literary significance (Shen, 1998, pp.3-5). And analysts are very flexible in their choice of what linguistic model to be used in the analysis. They are not confined to one particular model.

2. “DECEPTIVE EQUIVALENCE” IN FICTIONAL TRANSLATION

Lefevere has long pointed out the insufficiency of the typical linguistics-oriented study of translation. As he observes, some lip service is usually (almost “ritualistically”) paid to literary translation, but this serves more often than not as an excuse to skip the problems connected with the particular type of translation and to move onto what are considered the “real” issues (as cited in Shen, 1998, p.6).

Professor Shen Dan, too, holds that linguistics-oriented general translation studies do not deal with problems intrinsic to literary text. And among literary texts, it is problems associated with the fictional translation that have been most neglected due to the fact that the writer’s artistic manipulation of language in fictional writing is much less obtrusive than that in poetry. The fact that fictional translation studies have on the whole remained impressionistic and lacking in sensitivity to subtle stylistic devices is partially responsible for the translator’s stylistic non-discrimination, the consequence of which is frequent occurrence of what Shen Dan names “deceptive equivalence.”

As she observes, “deceptive equivalence” is found in both of the two contrasting dimensions of narrative structure: the narrative discourse and the narrated story.

At the level of narrative discourse, “deceptive equivalence” takes the shape of conveying approximately the same fictional “facts” but failing to capture the aesthetic effects generated by stylistic or rhetorical devices in the original (as cited in Shen, 1998, p.8). The equivalence established in this case is by nature equivalence at the level of what Bassnett-McGuire calls “paraphrasable material content”, focusing on the fictional reality and overlooking the novelist’s formal operations.

At the level of the narrated story, “deceptive equivalence” takes the shape of distortion of fictional “facts”, which is resulting from, among other things, translators’ failure to take account of the structural or thematic functions of the fictional “facts” involved.

In Shen Dan’s opinion, “deceptive equivalence” can be effectively dealt with by stylistic analysis. Stylistics sharpens one’s sensitivity to the workings of linguistic forms, and enhances one’s awareness of how literary conventions and the writer’s creative acts combine to make linguistic forms take on aesthetic significance. Therefore, stylistics effectively helps translators to stay away from stylistic losses or distortion and to achieve functional equivalence instead of “deceptive equivalence.”

3. “DECEPTIVE EQUIVALENCE” AT THE LEVEL OF NARRATIVE DISCOURSE

Here we look at the rendition of renarration technique in two English versions of Shen Congwen’s novel *Biancheng*. One translator gives attention to the literary significance of the technique while one doesn’t. “Deceptive equivalence” occurs.

3.1 Re-narration: G. Genette’s Term

Liu Hongtao in his *New Insights into Shen Congwen’s Novels* (Shen congwen xiaoshuo xinlun) makes a brief introduction of G. Genette’s “re-narration”, which I shall with gratitude base the present section on due to my lack of access to the English version of Genette’s works.

Re-narration is a term related to narrative frequency. Liu Hongtao provides examples to illustrate the two kinds of relations between the number of times an event occurs and the number of times it is narrated (Liu, 2005, pp.161-162).

Relation I Equal

A1 The event occurs for **one** time, and is narrated for **one** time.

Eg: I rose at 6 yesterday.

A2 The event occurs for **N** times, and is narrated for **N** times.

Eg: I rose at 6 on Monday.

I rose at 6 on Tuesday.

I rose at 6 on Wednesday.

Relation II: Unequal

B1 The event occurs for **one** time, and is narrated for **N** times.

Eg: I rose at 6 yesterday.

I rose at 6 yesterday.

B2 The event occurs for **N** times, and is narrated for **one** time.

I rose at 6 on every day.

The commonplace in fictional narration is Relation I. In B2, one single narrating action with the capacity of multi-occurrence of the same event is termed “re-narration.” In traditional fiction, re-narration manifests itself in sentences like “Mrs. Reed, when there was no company, dined early” (*Jane Eyre*). These sentences are usually used at the beginning of works or when characters make their first appearance. The main function of re-narration in this situation is to provide introductions to characters,

to present settings and background of the story and thus make preparations for the start of the plot. This kind of re-narration, of little poetic value, will be dismissed from our discussion. We shall only concentrate on those artistically or thematically motivated re-narrations.

G. Genette points out that the first book in which re-narration is the dominant mode of narration and performs unprecedented artistic and thematic functions is Prust's *Time Regained*. According to Genette's analysis, what accounts for Prust's pervasive use of re-narration is his infatuation for the timeless feeling and his deep meditation on eternity (Liu, 2005, p.168).

Shen Congwen is the one who equals Prust in re-narration, claims Liu. In the next section the artistic and thematic value of re-narration in Shen Congwen's writing will be illustrated.

3.2 Poetically Motivated Re-narration in *Biancheng*

Let's start with examples.

Buju shuige yuanyi huadianqian, zheren jiukeyi pangle menqian
changan zuoxialai,
Anyone who is willing to pay a few cents, can sit down at the
table
chouchu yishuang kuaizi niedao shoushang, nabian yige meimao
chedejixi,
and pull out a pair of chopsticks, then a woman with very thin
plucked eyebrows
lianshang cale baifen de furen jiu zouguolai wen, "dage, fuye,
and powdered face will come over and ask: "brother, deputy
officer,
yao shaojiu, yao tianjiu?" nanzi huoyan gaoyidiande, xiequde,
would you like rice wine or sweet wine? A spirited, funny man,
dui neizhanggui youdianyiside, bi guyi zhuangcheng
shengqishide shuo:
who finds the proprietress sort of attractive, will fake anger
and retort:
"chitianjiu?youbushi xiaohaizi, hai wenren chitianjiu!"
"Sweet wine? I am not a child. Why asked me about the sweet
wine!" (Shen, 2001, p.241)

This is re-narration. The narrating action happens only once, but the narrated event occurs countless times. Shen Congwen extracts from repeated conversations at the little restaurants their general characteristics and distills them on the page. The most important effect of this generalizing treatment is that neither the customer nor the proprietor's wife has a clear face. "bujushuige (anyone)" and "zheren (one)" are very vague subjects. As for the proprietor's wife, although there are modifiers like "meimao chedejixi" (with plucked eyebrows) and "lianshang cale baifen" (a powdered face), these by no means distinguish her from other women, for "plucked eyebrows and a powdered face" is a stereotyped image of Shen Congwen's West Hunanese women characters. What's more, in such a very short restaurant conversation, subjects keep shifting. "bujushuige (anyone)" is already vague enough, but still its possible referents get divided by the woman's "dage, fuye" (big brother, deputy officer) which are obviously for two different groups of customers. "Dage"

(big brother) is used to address merchants or boatmen, while "fuye" (deputy officer) to soldiers. So the customer changes from a single "anyone" to a confused group. The next sentence further messes up this potential group of customers. "nanzi huoyan gaoyidiande, xiequde, dui neizhanggui youdianyiside" (A spirited, funny man, who finds the proprietress sort of attractive), seem to set three qualifications for this customer, however, who he is does not get any clearer.

However, this vagueness of characters' individuality is Shen Congwen's very artistic pursuit. What he strives to depict is not ONE single person, but this GROUP of people. He erases the individuality of his characters, puts the general characteristics on the page, **so these experiences are less vulnerable to the flowing of time and become part of a timeless picture.**

This effect of the indifference to individuality and this timelessness is to a great degree attributed to re-narration.

Look at Gladys Yang's translation:

a. For a few cents anyone can sit down at the table and pull out a pair of chopsticks. Then a woman with plucked eyebrows and a powdered face will come to ask: "Would you care for sweet wine or rice wine, master?" **A spirited man who likes to tease** will retort: "Sweet wine? What do you take me for—a child?"

Gladys Yang's treatment sort of weakens the indefiniteness of the subject and thus reduces its generalizing power of depicting a whole group.

My version for consideration for the boldfaced part is as follows:

A man who is spirited, or likes to tease, or has a little fancy for the woman...

Two "or" are used to preserve the constant shifting of the subject. Look at Ching's version for comparison:

b. Nearby there were some vermilion chopsticks in a bamboo holder, and **you** could sit down at the long table just outside the door and take up the chopsticks in **your** hands. As **you** did so, a heavily powdered woman with plucked eyebrows would ask: "Sweet wine? Spirits?" and if you were high-tempered or humorous, or if **you** care for the woman, **you** would probably answer... (Ching, 1982, p.198).

Five "you" pins down the fickle subject as a fixed one. As if a tourist brochure were giving instructions to a tourist on how to dine in the local restaurant. The feelings of a static picture are totally ruined. This is "deceptive equivalence" only at the "paraphrasable material content" level.

There is another example in which re-narration contributes to the timelessness of the setting.

dongtian de bairi li, dao chengliqiu, bianzhijian gechurenjia
During the daylight in winter, if you go into town, before every
door
menqian geliangshaiyou yifu tong qingcai; hongshu duo daiteng
you will see clothing and vegetables drying there, sweet potatoes
hanging
xuanzai yanxia...
with trailed vines under the eaves...

jianhuo you shenme nanzi...
sometimes you see some men...
youhuo jiandao jige zhongnianfuren...
overtime you see some middle-aged women...
yiqie zong name jingji, suoyouderen meigerizi douzai zehzhong
Eternal peace reigns. Everyone spends all their days
Bukexingrong de danchunjimo li guoqu.
in an unspoiled solitude hard to describe. (Shen, 2001, 240)

a If you go into town during the day in winter, you see clothes and vegetables drying before every door, sweet potatoes hanging with trailing vines from the eaves, as well as sacks full of chestnuts, hazelnuts or the like. Poultry cluck cheerfully. Men saw wood in front of their doors or chop firewood to stack in the yard, while middle-aged women in starched blue cotton clothes and flowered aprons chat to each other in the sunlight as they bend over their work. Peace reigns supreme and the townsfolk spend all their days in an unspoiled solitude hard to imagine. (Yang, 1981, p.12)

“Duo (tend to)”, “jianhuo (sometimes)”, “youhuo” (other times) all indicate that these impressions of the village in winter are not gotten from one trip. It is an abstract one based on many times’ experiences. This excerpt is like a serene picture in that people and scenes seem unaffected by time, as if they were so 20,000 years ago. Here the stylistic value of the re-narration lies in the creation of rather **static** setting, which in turn forms an important aspect of style of Shen Congwen, known as “prose-style fiction.”

Gladys Yang’s translation successfully conveys the timeless atmosphere of the original by adopting simple present tense (VS simple past tense in Ching’s), a tense she sticks to throughout the novel except for narrations about past episodes such as the tragic love story of Cuicui’s parents. The rendition creates a scene as tranquil and static as the original.

4. “DECEPTIVE EQUIVALENCE” AT THE NARRATED STORY LEVEL

According to ShenDan, “a most crucial function of the syntactic hierarchy is to represent different degrees of importance attached to different parts of the message.” (Shen, 1998, p.173) That Chinese is a paratactic language while English being a hypotactic one poses more difficulties for translators. While reading Chinese literature, readers don’t rely much on the syntax to gain information about the different degrees of importance of each part; on the contrary, they naturally get the information by their “contextual feelings.” In English, the syntactic hierarchy is crucial. Therefore, translators have a heavier load on their shoulders, namely, to pay special attention to the difference in syntax and cater to the need of a syntax-dependent readership. Otherwise, the narrated story, fictional “facts” may be distorted after translation.

A case in point is the following passage taken from Cao’s *A Dream of Red Mansions*. The case is faithfully conveyed by translation (A) but is regrettably damaged by version (B).

(Cao)...Liu laolao bugan guoqu, dandan yifu, you jiaole

...Granny Liu did not dare to go over, [she] dusted down her clothes, and taught

Ban’er jijuhua

Ban’er again a few appropriate words,
ranhou liudao jiaomen qian...

after that [she] sidled up to the side entrance...(chapter 6)

(A) There, at each side of the stone lions which flanked the gates of the Rong Mansion, she saw a clutter of horses and palanquins. Not daring to go straight up, she first dusted down her clothes and rehearsed Ban-er’s little repertoire of phrases before sidling up to one of the side entrances...(Trans. Hawkes)

(B) But Granny Liu was too overawed by the crowd of sedan chairs and horses there to venture near the stone lions which flanked the Jung Mansion’s main gate. Having dusted off her clothes and given Pan-erh fresh instructions, she timidly approached the side entrance where some arrogant, corpulent servants were sunning themselves on long benches, engaged in a lively discussion. (Trans. Yang and Yang)

This is a description of Granny Liu, an impoverished old countrywoman risking a snub to pay a visit to the Rong Mansion in hope of getting some silver to get through the winter. As she is a humble nobody, even the servants at the gate look formidable to her. However, Granny Liu is better than merely being overawed. She bears in mind her mission—getting provisions for the family and she musters up her courage. Cao successfully brings out her timidity and courage by two verb phrases “dust down her clothes” and “give Pan-erh fresh instructions.” These two phrases are very expressive in the characterization of Granny Lou as a tough old countrywoman who can endure humiliation for the benefits of her children. Therefore, it is these two phrases not the following “approaches the gate” that are in the prominence.

In translation (A), “dust down her clothes” and “rehearse Ban-er’s little repertoire of phrases” are put in the position of main clauses, thus gaining the prominence they deserve while “sidling up to one of the side entrances”, which is less important, is put in a subordinate clause. The syntax choice here faithfully conveys the different degrees of prominence in the original.

Translation (B), however, falls short with regard to syntax choice. The two present participles “having dusted off her clothes and given Pan-erh fresh instructions” reduce these two crucial actions to a subordinate position while in contrast, what is foregrounded becomes “She timidly approached the side entrance.” The syntax choice leads to two consequences. First, a reversal of descriptive

focus happens because whether Granny Liu approached the side entrance doesn't matter. What matters is Granny Liu's two previous actions which so vividly manifest her timidity as well as her personality and social status. Second, a distortion of fictional "facts" occurs. Granny Liu's "dusting off her clothes" and "giving Pan-erh fresh instructions" are not her intended actions but involuntary behaviors suggesting her efforts to muster up all her courage to approach the formidable Rong Mansion servants. However, "Having dusted off her clothes and given Pan-erh fresh instructions, she timidly approached the side entrance..." gives the impression that she plans to make sure her clothes is dust free before she strikes the conversation. The fictional "facts" is distorted.

CONCLUSION

From the above analysis, we can conclude that a light shed from the literary stylistics can effectively help fend off the impressionistic and subjective tendency that literary criticism is susceptible to. Applying literary stylistics to fictional translation benefits translators in that an enhanced stylistic awareness enables them to be more sensitive to the aesthetic function and stylistic value of linguistic forms and to avoid deceptive equivalence and stylistic losses in translation.

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