A Study on Translation of Children’s Oral Literature: Taking the English Translation of Cantonese Nursery Rhymes as Examples

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Abstract. The translation of children’s oral literature, which can be regarded as a way to spread local culture and customs, has been neglected, though a number of translation theories have been applied for literature translation. To fill this gap, this paper is to build up a workable theoretical framework for the translation of children’s oral literature in an integral approach involving strategies with the consideration of linguistic, functional and cultural theories. The English translation samples of two Cantonese nursery rhymes will serve to illustrate the strategies in a comprehensive way.

1. Introduction

Since the Belt and Road Initiative, a development strategy for China’s economic growth, was proposed by China’s paramount leader Xi Jinping, the international communication of Chinese culture has been of great necessity, beneficial to build up a positive Chinese image, helping the world understand Chinese more, and thus constructing a sound international environment for China’s sustainable development. The spread of Chinese culture can be realized by a series of promotional activities, with one of the ways being literature translation. As Mo Yan, the winner of Nobel Prize in literature, once said, “Without translators’ creative efforts, national literature would not possess world significance.” A large number of studies have been conducted on the translation of adults’ literature. However, children’s literature, which is regarded as simple and educational, featuring local culture, shows special value in making Chinese culture understood by the outside world. With the consideration of the acceptance ability of the receivers, children’s oral literature takes up the main role in all the works aiming at young children. Nursery rhymes, as the typical type of children’s oral literature, demonstrate the local dominant ideology in simple languages. In other words, the translation of children’s oral literature is a special type of literature serving as the concise introduction of the local culture.

As the case in point, with the natural environment, the culture and society where they were created, Cantonese nursery rhymes are valuable in conserving the linguistic characteristics of Cantonese. Also, in the form of oral works, Cantonese nursery rhymes have their language used with conciseness, colloquialisms and musicality, the common features shared by children’s literature, and the translation of them can be regarded as a cultural carrier, giving a hand to cross-cultural communication. However, not until 1980s did the translation of children’s literature attract more scholars’ interest, and it is still a strange field in Chinese academic research. Thus, this paper is trying to fill this gap, looking at the translation of children’s oral literature from Chinese to English, trying to enrich the common translation strategies.

With Cantonese nursery rhymes as the examples, this paper will be constructed in the following sections. First, related theories in literature review, including the definition and nature of translation, the functional approach and the Skopos theory, and the loyalty rule, will be presented briefly, building up a framework for further study into the translation work. Then, the translation of two Cantonese nursery rhymes will be served as the examples to illustrate the strategies for
translating children’s oral literature, hoping to enrich the field of translating children’s literature.

2. Literature Review

The study of translation is developed with other research branches such as linguistics, philosophy, semiotics, sociology, sociolinguistics, culture and technology. According to “A Dictionary of Translation Studies” (Fang, 2004), translation is the language, cultural, conceptual activities communicating messages between different language symbolic systems in line with the social cognitive needs. Communication in translation involves multiple parties and aspects. Nida (1978) further discussed three major communication issues that exist in translation, including the one embedded in the source text, the one between the author and the receiver of the text, and the one between the translator and the receiver of the translated text. Easily to be understood, the translator will be first the receiver of the source text. Then the translator becomes the one decoding the messages in the source text and encoding the original messages in the translated text. In the process of decoding and encoding the messages, the translator is facing the ostensive and inferential meaning of the coded messages in the original text, the context of the messages, the cognitive context of the author and the context of the receiver who will interpret the translated messages. As the consequence, the success of the translation lies in the response of the receiver of the translated text, that is, the translation is hopefully to be presented in a way that can evoke the same response as the source text attempted to evoke. This is the realization of maintaining the dynamics of the source text (Larson, 1984), trying to reach the equivalence in the act of translation.

However, translation happens between at least two languages with different symbolic systems, involving at least three parties, that is, the author, the receiver including the translator of the original text, and the receiver of the translated text. They may be surrounded by different cultures with inconsistent cognitive construct. Thus it is impossible to duplicate completely the original messages in the translated text toward the target audience. It is this dilemma that leaves space to the development of functional approaches introducing Skopos theory to the field of translation.

In the current translation studies, functional approaches are widely applied to solve problems. According to the functionalists, equivalence is built on the communication functions of the text (Munday, 2001), and translation is an act of communication or interaction which is determined by defined purposes and functions (Nord, 1997). From this point of view, the choices of translation strategies should be based only on the target text culture and the purpose of the translation. Translation is the creation of the text for the target audience in the target language context with a certain purpose (Vermeer, 1987). However, Vermeer’s Skopos theory is regarded too radical. In 1997, Nord introduced the loyalty principle to functionalism in order to supplement the functional approaches. Loyalty, as Nord proposed, should exist in the relationship between the author of the original text, the translator, the receiver of the translated text and the initiator of the translation, and the translator should be responsible for the original text and its context, the sender of the text and the target audience of the translated text.

For literature translation, the precondition is one’s understanding of the source culture and the target culture, which constitute sociocultural background. As mentioned previously, target audience’s response to the translated text should be consistent to that of the original text in the successful act of translation. However, literature translation, especially the translation of children’s literature, following the general principle of translation, is limited by target audience’s knowledge, judgement and perception of the translated text which may be intelligible in the target culture. Due to the lack of the research in the translation of children’s oral literature, this paper is to work out an approach to fill in this gap.

3. Theoretical Framework

As a special field of literature, children’s literature translation possesses its own features, especially for children’s oral literature. The characteristics of children’s oral literature are determined by their
receivers, whose acceptance, cognitive context, language, social mentality are different from adults. The translator should give full attention to the specific target audience by using a series of translation strategies at the linguistic, cultural and functional level.

The language used in children’s oral literature features conciseness, colloquialisms and musicality. In terms of traditional translation strategies, direct translation serves to reserve the ostensive content and sentence patterns in the source text. However, due to the non-duplication of some language forms such as some colloquialisms, the paraphrasing translation strategy, which helps to express the original meaning by changing the linguistic form, shall serve at this point. Translators may also use onomatopoeia and rhymes to reproduce the rhythms that form the musicality in the original text.

At the linguistic level, communicative translation and semantic translation, proposed by Newmark (1981), deal with the dilemma of being loyal to the audience or to the source text. Semantic translation focuses primarily on the original semantic content while the communicative translation strategy is to bring up the same comprehension and response from the translation receivers as those of the source text. In other words, with communicative translation, translators have the freedom to go upon the linguistic form reaching the convergent communication functions with proper paraphrase. On the other hand, being loyal to the meaning of the original text, translators are not allowed to change the concepts which reflect the national culture in the source text when using the semantic translation strategy. That means, with semantic translation, the content, the linguistic features and the unique expressing forms will be well reserved in the translated text.

Going further in translation, translators will be in face of the cultural aspect. It is at this point that the concept of foreignization and domestication, which have been fully illustrated by Venuti (1995), should be introduced. According to Venuti, foreignization can be regarded as a source-culture-oriented translation strategy, which is applied to reserve the culture of the original language and transfer it to the target one with the purpose to get the target audience of the translation to know more about the foreign culture and customs. However, for domestication, it is to make the foreign context more familiar to the target receivers of the translation, and thus it is called target-culture-oriented translation strategy, trying to bring the two cultures closer. The choice of the translation strategies at this level depends on the translator’s preconception of the target audience and their comprehensive consideration of the source text.

Similar to the strategies at the cultural level, but from the perspective of the text functions and purposes, overt translation and covert translation, which were proposed by House (1977), mainly concern the functional equivalence and the relevance between the translated text and its target receivers. With the overt translation strategy, the translation is working for the original culture, adopting the direct transformation of language forms. Oppositely, covert translation, also similar to communicative translation strategy, helps the target culture serve to evoke the similar response from the target audience, reaching the functional equivalence.

With the development of translation studies, an integral approach was brought in by Snell-Hornby (2001), fully considering all the aspects in translation, including the language norms, language dimensions, cultures and other external perspectives. Belonging to no schools, but practically, the interpretive translation strategy, which Duan (1990) advocated based on his experience of English translation and which is adopted to infuse extra explanation in the translated text, is especially suitable for promoting culture.

All the strategies discussed here can reflect the nature of children’s literature translation. Ritta Oittinen in 2000 proposed the idea of translating for children. Translators should use children’s ears to listen, use children’s eyes to see the world and use children’s mind to think. The birth of children’s literature has “children’s discovery” as the precondition as well as the motivation; the translation of children’s literature will become the trend in today’s China, bridging the gap between Chinese culture and foreign cultures (Li and Zhu, 2015).
4. Case analysis of the translation strategies

With the theoretical framework built up in the previous section, this part of the paper will choose some examples from the English translation of Cantonese nursery rhymes to further illustrate the translation strategies.

Example 1 is the lullaby, which is supposed to be used by the mother to comfort her baby. In the original verses, the rhyme is “in” pronounced in Cantonese, forming the rhythm. The rhyming together with the syntactical patterns is of greater importance and necessity than the implicative meaning in this mother-and-child context. With the consideration of the linguistic, cultural and functional aspect in an integral approach, the paraphrasing translation strategy and the communicative translation strategy will be applied.

Example 1

儿安眠， (ji on min)
儿安眠， (ji on min)
长夜安眠，到晓天。 (coeng je on min, dou hiu tin)
妈妈只要儿入梦， (maa maa ji u jyun)
儿要妈妈看月圆。 (ji jiu maa maa hon jyun)
云盖月光难望见呀， (wan goi jyun gwong naan mong gin)
乖乖呀，快快眠。 (gwaai gwaai aa, faai faai min)
(excerpt from Peng, 2014)

Sleep tight,
sleep tight,
throughout the night, till the morning light.
Mum would like you to sleep;
you would like mum to see the moon bright.
Cloud yet has come, the moon, to hide.
Darling, darling, sleep quickly, and sleep tight.
(Translation from myself)

It is not difficult to find that the translation here keeps consistent in the sentence conciseness with the original rhyme. The rhyming in the translated verses is /ai/. To reach this rhyming effect and try to get the same response from the target audience, the orders of words have been changed, especially for the verse “云盖月光难望见呀”， which, if direct translation is adopted, will be put as “the cloud covers the moon so that it is difficult to see”. As a whole, this rhyme is to lull the baby to sleep with the spiritual meaning in common among different cultures, showing the dynamics of the
text. With the obvious communication purpose, the translated rhyme does not need to input extra words to interpret the implicative meaning.

Example 2 is the nursery in a neat structure, with three characters in every short verse in the original text. Making it rhymical and easy to remember, this rhyme also applies the rhetorical device, anadiplosis, which refers to the repetition of the words in successive verses, that is the second verse begins with the same words that are at the end of the previous verse.

Example 2

月光光，照地堂，
年卅晚，摘槟郎，
槟郎香，摘子姜，
子姜辣，买菩荙，
菩荙苦，买猪肚，
猪肚肥，买牛皮，
牛皮薄，买菱角，
菱角尖，买马鞭，
马鞭长，起屋梁，
屋梁高，买张刀，
刀切菜，买箩盖，
箩盖圆，买只船。
船浸底，
浸亲两个番鬼仔，
一个摸慈姑，
一个摸马蹄。

The moon is bright, shining on the yard.
On Chinese New Year’s eve, pick some betel nuts from trees.
The betel nuts are appetizing, and pick the tender gingers.
The tender gingers are hot, and buy some squashes.
The squashes are bitter, and buy the pig's belly.
The pig's belly is fatty, and buy some cow hide.
The hide is thin, and buy some water chestnuts;
The chestnuts are spiky, and buy a horsewhip.
The whip is long, and build a beam on the roof.
The beam is high, and buy a knife.
The knife cuts, and buy a lid for a bamboo basket.
The lid is round, and buy a boat.
The boat sinks to the bottom, drowning two foreign kids.
One is floating on the surface, looking for arrowheads.
The other is sinking to the bottom, looking for water chestnuts.

Noticeably, the translation here does not keep the implicative sentence patterns, but reserves the rhetorical device, helping to build up the rhythm of the rhyme. Instead of showing the obvious communicative purpose, this rhyme is to introduce the local customs and the common food and tools in Guangzhou. When translated in English, contents with the conventional meaning should be kept consistent. Thus, the direct translation strategy, the semantic translation strategy and foreignization have been adopted to accomplish the English translation of this Cantonese nursery rhyme.
5. Summary

Taking into consideration all the aspects of translation, the integral approach with the translation theoretical framework involving the linguistic, cultural and functional level is able to help translators “translate for children” in children’s oral literature translation. With China further opening up to the outside world, children’s oral literature containing rich local culture and values can be of great use in spreading Chinese culture. The translation of this type may help entrench the root of Chinese culture among kids overseas, bridging the gap across cultures and wipe out the existent misunderstanding.

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