

# A Study of Polysemy and Multi-translation in Tao Te Ching

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**Abstract**—Only 5000 words in Tao Te Ching have exhausted all the phenomena in the world. A statistic has been made among these 5000 words. Many words are repetitive, which shows that a word or a phrase has more than one meaning. It has achieved such a profound and magnificent connotation of Tao Te Ching. A thorough study of polysemy is an important prerequisite for the translation of Tao Te Ching to convey its essence well. Therefore, the article screened the polysemy in Tao Te Ching and found many words and phrases have more than one meaning. The article chooses “shàng”, “xíng”, “shàn” and “qù”, which are polysemous and appear frequently, as research objects. It is of great significance to study the accurate translation of these representative words for the accuracy of the English version of Tao Te Ching.

**Keywords**—Tao Te Ching; polysemy; multi-translation

## I. INTRODUCTION

Tao Te Ching is a work of Lao Tzu, an ancient Chinese philosopher and thinker, handed down from generation to generation. Lu Xun once said, "I don't know Chinese culture and the true meaning of life without reading Tao Te Ching". It can be seen that the classics bear the profound cultural connotation of a country. "Translation is no longer a linguistic transformation between words and sentences, or even a work of art for translators to play with. Translation is a positive and far-reaching social and cultural act" (Liao Qiyi, 2014: 4). Translation activities are essentially a process of cultural transmission, so the accuracy of foreign translation of classics is not only related to the correct dissemination of Chinese culture, but also to the correct interpretation of Chinese culture by overseas scholars. Each country's classics bear their profound cultural connotations. A comparative study of the representative English versions of Tao Te Ching can give full play to its cultural dissemination function. The simplicity and conciseness of ancient Chinese is also reflected in polysemy. Although there is a phenomenon of polysemy in English, the English words will reflect this phenomenon by twists and turns. However, there are no such twists and turns in ancient Chinese. When the part of speech and the meaning of words change, the spelling of words remains unchanged. The richness of the meanings of ancient Chinese determines the uncertainty of the meanings, which makes it difficult for translators to grasp the meanings of words, and different translation results have emerged.

## II. SELECTION OF THE TRANSLATED VERSIONS OF TAO TE CHING

This study chooses the translation versions of Arthur Waley and Gu Zhengkun as the subjects of study. The reason is that they live in different times and represent two different cultures of the East and the West. Translation is essentially a process of cultural transmission, and the attributes of culture will not change with time and space. Therefore, the comparison between Chinese and Western versions can better reveal whether the cultural connotations contained in Tao Te Ching can be reproduced in the translated version. Arthur Waley (1889-1966), a famous British sinologist, had an extraordinary literary talent. His fascination with Chinese culture stems from the edification of thoughts of two professors who admire the ancient oriental civilization during his study in Cambridge. Thus, he had a desire to devote himself to the study of Oriental culture. He has translated many Chinese cultural classics, including Book of Songs, Tao Te Ching, The Analects of Confucius, The Tales of Genji and Journey to the West, which have great influence in the West. His translation is clear and easily understandable, which opens a window for Western readers. Through this window, readers can see the cultural treasures unique to China. This translation is a highly acceptable one for readers in Western translations. It has played an important role in the widespread dissemination of Lao Tzu's philosophical ideas in the western world and is considered as a good translation. Waley believes that literary translation in translation is different from text translation. Waley was well aware that the importance of the philosophical text of Tao Te Ching lies not in its literary attributes, but in the content of its words (Waley, 1934: 13-14). Therefore, in the process of translating Tao Te Ching into English, Waley adopted the historical character of text translation. This kind of translation attempt can be seen from his word-by-word translation strategy of some chapters and sentences, which also makes his translation show obvious alienation and literal translation.

Gu Zhengkun (1952- ) has many titles as a professor and a doctor in the School of Foreign Languages, Peking University. He is the director of the Institute of World Literature, an advisor to the magazine English World published by the Commercial Press and the former vice-president of the Shakespeare Institute. He has also served as a visiting professor at Tsinghua University, Nankai

University and Wasita University in the United States. In addition, he is also very accomplished in painting. He has the title of a first-class calligrapher and painter in the Oriental Shenzhou Institute of Calligraphy and Painting in Beijing. His research directions include poetry appreciation and translatology, Shakespeare studies, and cultural comparison between the East and the West. Professor Gu Zhengkun is a prolific scholar. He has translated, edited, and proofread more than 47 kinds of works and published more than 150 papers. His representative translations are English version of Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching, I Ching, Mao Zedong's Poems, 150 Yuan Operas and the Chinese version of Shakespeare's Sonnets. The representative theoretical monographs include Introduction to the Comparison of Chinese and Western Cultures, Theories of Comparative Appreciation and Translation of Chinese and Western Poems, Shakespeare Studies, Principles of Intertextual Linguistics and Culture, and Jinyuan of Translation Studies. Gu Zhengkun's English translation of Tao Te Ching was first published in November 1995. This translation is representative among contemporary domestic translation versions. In the preface part of the translation, Mr. Gu introduced Lao Tzu's ideological system in detail from four aspects, Taoist Style Theory, Taoist Law Theory, Taoist Knowledge Theory and Taoist Utility Theory, which laid a good foundation for a better understanding of the original text of Tao Te Ching. This translation is not based on a specific edition of Tao Te Ching, but refers to different editions and annotations, compares them carefully, collects the strengths of various families, chooses the good and follows them. From the many references attached at the end of the book, it can be seen the translator's conscience and diligence. In addition, the translator added Chinese Pinyin to the original text in order to "enable readers who cannot speak Chinese to read Lao Tzu" (Gu Zhengkun, 2008: 21-22). In the selection of translation strategies, Gu's translation adopts the hybrid of foreignization and domestication, and when necessary, annotations are also used to explain culture-loaded words that are not easily understood by foreign readers. The translation is easy to understand and the sentence structure is neat.

### III. POLYSEMY AND MULTI-TRANSLATION

Polysemy means that the word has many extended meanings besides its original meaning. There are many polysemous words in ancient Chinese, which is also a feature of refinement of ancient Chinese. When translating, the translator shall pay attention to the phenomenon of polysemy; otherwise the content of the translation will be inaccurate.

#### A. "上" (Shàng)

Example 1: Original text: "强大处下, 柔弱处上。"(qí áng dà chù xià à rǎo ruò chù shàng) (Chapter 76)

Gu's translation: "Thus the strong and big is inferior to the weak and supple." (Gu Zhengkun, 1995: 291)

Waley's translation: "The hard and mighty are cast down; the soft and weak set on high." (Waley, 1999: 161)

This sentence reflects Lao Tzu's thought of admiring weakness and despising forcefulness. The meaning of this

sentence: the stronger will finally be cast down, while the weakness will occupy the upper position (Zhang Yuchun, Jin Guotai, 1991: 189). "上" refers to is the high position.

Example 2: Original text: "其上不皎, 其下不昧。"(qí shàng bù jiǎo , qí xià bù mǐ.) (Chapter XIV)

Gu's translation: "Above it there is no light; below it there is no darkness." (Gu Zhengkun, 1995: 95)

Waley's translation: "Its rising brings no light; its sinking, no darkness." (Waley, 1999: 29)

This sentence expresses the endless existence of Tao. "上" here is a location word, meaning "above and upward". Gu's translated it into "above", a static orientational reference, while Waley translated it into "rising", reflecting a dynamic process of rising.

Example 3: Original text: "上德若谷" (shàng dé ruò gǔ) (Chapter 41)

Gu's translation: "The great virtue resembles the valley." (Gu Zhengkun, 1995: 183)

Waley's translation: "The power that is really loftiest looks like an abyss." (Waley, 1999: 89)

Here "上" means "noble". Gu translates it into "great" and Waley translated it into "loftiest".

Example 4: Original text: "民之饥, 以其上食税之多, 是以饥。" (mín zhī jī, yǐ qí shàng shí shuì zhī duō, shì yǐ jī) (Chapter 75)

Gu's translation: "The hunger on the part of the people is the result of exorbitant taxes on the part of the ruler." (Gu Zhengkun, 1995: 289)

Waley's translation: "The people starve because those above them eat too much tax-grain. That is the only reason why they starve." (Waley, 1999: 159)

Here "上" means "governor" (Qian Daqun, Qin Zhipai, 1987: 303). Gu translated it into the equivalent of "ruler", while Waley adopted literal translation and translated it into "those above them".

Example 5: Original text: "知不知, 上;" (zhī bù zhī, shàng) (Chapter 71)

Gu's translation: "Knowing one's ignorance of certain knowledge is the best attitude." (Gu Zhengkun, 1995: 279)

Waley's translation: "To know when one does not know is best." (Waley, 1999: 151)

"上" means "good" here. Both translators translated it into the equivalent "best".

Example 6: Original text: "是以圣人欲上民, 必以言下之;" (shì yǐ shèng rén yù shàng mín, bì yǐ yán xià zhī) (Chapter 66)

Gu's translation: "Therefore, if one wants to be the ruler of the people, one must put oneself behind the people." (Gu Zhengkun, 1995: 265)

Waley's translation: "Therefore the sage in order to be above the people must speak as though he were lower than the people." (Waley, 1999: 141)

This sentence means that if saints want to dominate people, they must be willing to stay down and show humility to them verbally. "上" here means "rule", a verb. Gu adopted free translation and translated it into "ruler". Waley adopted literal translation, showing great respect for the original text of the classic.

#### B. "行" (Xíng)

Example 7: Original text: "千里之行，始于足下。" (qiān lǐ zhī xíng, shǐ yú zú xià) (Chapter 64)

Gu's translation: "A journey of a thousand li starts from beneath one's feet." (Gu Zhengkun, 1995: 257)

Waley's translation: "The journey of a thousand leagues began with what was under the feet." (Waley, 1999: 135)

Both translators used the correct English equivalent "journey" to translate "行" in "行程".

Example 8: Original text: "美言可以市尊，美行可以加人。" (měi yán kě yǐ shì zūn, měi xíng kě yǐ jiā rén) (Chapter 62)

Gu's translation: "With Tao, beautiful words can buy respect; beautiful deeds can be highly regarded." (Gu Zhengkun, 1995: 249)

Waley's translation: "There is a traffic in speakers of fine words; persons of grave demeanor are accepted as gifts." (Waley, 1999: 131)

The meaning of this sentence is that beautiful words can win the respect of others; good behavior can influence others (Zhang Yuchun, Jin Guotai, 1991: 155). The two translators translated "行" in "行为" into "deeds" and "demeanor" respectively. Waley's choice of words is more accurate, because it here refers to a person's behavior, conduct, attitude towards people and things, demeanor and so on; while "deeds" emphasizes more an action than words, which is not appropriate enough for translation.

Example 9: Original text: "弱之胜强，柔之胜刚，天下莫不知，莫能行。" (ruò zhī shèng qiáng, róu zhī shèng gāng, tiān xià mò bù zhī, mò néng xíng) (Chapter 78)

Gu's translation: "Yet no one so far can put the knowledge into practice." (Gu Zhengkun, 1995: 279)

Waley's translation: "That the yielding conquers the resistant and the soft conquers the hard is a fact known by all men, yet utilized by none." (Waley, 1999: 165)

In this chapter, Lao Tzu used water as an example to illustrate the idea that weakness prevails over strength and softness prevails over rigidity. This principle is well known all over the world, but no one can make good use of it. Gu's English translation is to apply knowledge to practice; Waley's English translation is to say that the fact that everyone knows is not used well. "Fact" seems to be more appropriate than "knowledge".

Example 10: Original text: "是谓行无行，攘无臂，执无兵，扔无敌。" (shì wèi xíng wú xíng, rǎng wú bì, zhí wú bīng, rēng wú dí) (Chapter 69)

Gu's translation: "This means to deploy battle array by showing no battle array; to wield one's arm to attack by showing no arm to lift; to face the enemy by showing no enemy to attack; to hold weapons by showing no weapons to hold." (Gu Zhengkun, 1995: 275)

Waley's translation: "This latter is what we call to march without moving, to roll the sleeve, but present no bare arm, the hand that seems to hold, yet has no weapon in it, a host that can confront, yet presents no battle-front." (Waley, 1999: 147)

The first "行" is a verb, which means "march". The second "行" is a noun, which means "road". In this chapter, Lao Tzu talks about the application of Tao in military affairs. This sentence reflects Lao Tzu's anti-war thought and takes forbearance as a means of defensive warfare. The modern Chinese translation is that "出兵行进好似没有行军之路；奋臂高扬好似没有手臂一般；操起兵器好似没有兵器；迎击敌人好似没有来敌一般" (chū bīng xíng jìn hǎo sì méi yǒu xíng jūn zhī lù; fèn bì gāo yáng hǎo sì méi yǒu shǒu bì yī bān; cāo qǐ bīng qì hǎo sì méi yǒu bīng qì; yíng jī dí rén hǎo sì méi yǒu lái dí yī bān) (Zhang Yuchun, Jin Guotai, 1991: 174-175). The two translators adopted different translation strategies, and they both accurately translated the two different meanings of "行" here. Gu adopted free translation and Waley adopted literal translation. The wording of Waley was more concise and accorded with the concise features of the original sentence pattern.

Example 11: Original text: "跨者不行" (kuà zhě bù xíng) (Chapter 24)

Gu's translation: "He who walks with great strides cannot walk well." (Gu Zhengkun, 1995: 129)

Waley's translation: "He who takes the longest strides, does not walk the fastest." (Waley, 1999: 51)

Both translators translated the verb "行" into "walk" (Qian Daqun, Qin Zhipai, 1987: 152), choosing an appropriate equivalent word to translate. This sentence means that people who are in a hurry can't go far (Zhang Yuchun, Jin Guotai, 1991: 62). From the aspect of faithfulness to the original work, Waley has better restored the original work.

Example 12: Original text: "难得之货令人行妨。" (nán dé zhī huò lìng rén xíng fāng) (Chapter 12)

Gu's translation: "Rare goods goad man into stealing." (Gu Zhengkun, 1995: 89)

Waley's translation: "Products that are hard to get impede their owner's movements." (Waley, 1999: 25)

In this chapter, Lao Tzu advocates the idea of "for the abdomen, not for the eyes", eliminating the temptation of all external things, and maintaining the true heart. "行" here is a noun, which means "moral character" (Qian Daqun, Qin Zhipai, 1987: 152). The meaning of this sentence is that rare

property causes moral damage (Zhang Yuchun, Jin Guotai, 1991: 29). The understanding of Gu's translation is close to that of the original text, while Waley's translation interprets "行妨" into "get impede", which is far from the original meaning and deviates from the original understanding.

Example 13: Original text: "周行而不殆" (zhōu xíng ér bú dǎi) (Chapter 25)

Gu's translation: "Moving around forever." (Gu Zhengkun, 1995: 131)

Waley's translation: "All pervading, unfailing." (Waley, 1999: 53)

"行" is used here as the verb "move or pervade" (Qian Daqun, Qin Zhipei, 1987: 152). In this chapter, Lao Tzu summarized the basic definition of "Tao", namely its cyclical operation and endless characteristics. Gu adopted literal translation, while Waley adopted free translation and used two participle forms to form a rhyme. Both translators have got the essence of Tao which is cyclical and endless.

### C. "善" (Shàn)

Example 14: Original text: "居善地，心善渊，与善仁，言善信，正善治，事善能，动善时。" (jū shàn dì, xīn shàn yuān, yǔ shàn rén, yán shàn xìn, zhòng shàn zhì shì shàn néng, dòng shàn shí) (Chapter 8)

Gu's translation: "A man of perfect goodness chooses a low place to dwell as water. He has a heart as deep as water. He offers friendship as tender as water. He speaks as sincerely as water. He rules a state as orderly as water." (Gu Zhengkun, 1995: 77)

Waley's translation: "And if men think the ground the best place for building a house upon, if among thoughts they value those that are profound, if in friendship they gentleness; in words, truth; in government, good order; in deeds, effectiveness; in actions, timeliness." (Waley, 1999: 17)

Lao Tzu used characteristics of water to praise the sage's character. The seven words "善" here mean "be good at" (Qian Daqun, Qin Zhipei, 1987: 301). Both translators adopt the method of free translation. Gu translated the noumenon "sage" and the vehicle "water", and the sentences between the noumenon and the vehicle adopted the same English sentence structure, focusing on the translation of the water characteristics; Waley's translation method did not translate the vehicle "water", but focused on the translation of the sage's character. Structurally, although Waley also adopted the parallelism, it was inferior to Gu's translation in terms of neatness and order.

Example 15: Original text: "善者吾善之，不善者吾亦善之。" (shàn zhě wú shàn zhī, bù shàn zhě wú yì shàn zhī) (Chapter 49)

Gu's translation: "What is good I treat with goodness; what is not good I also treat with goodness." (Gu Zhengkun, 1995: 203)

Waley's translation: "Of the good man I approve, but of the bad I also approve." (Waley, 1999: 105)

There are two parts of speech in "善". One is the adjective "good and kind". The other is the verb "treat with goodness" (Qian Daqun, Qin Zhipei, 1987: 302). The reason why Gu's translation is better than that of Waley's is that Gu's use of two different forms of "good" to reflect the two parts of speech and meanings of "善". Waley's translation "approve" does not seem to embody the meaning of "treat with goodness".

### D. "信" (Xìn)

Example 16: Original text: "信者吾信之，不信者吾亦信之。" (xìn zhě wú xìn zhī, bù xìn zhě wú yì xìn zhī) (Chapter 49)

Gu's translation: "Those who are of faith, I put faith in; those who are of no faith, I also put faith in." (Gu Zhengkun, 1995: 203)

Waley's translation: "The truthful man I believe, but the liar I also believe." (Waley, 1999: 105)

There are two parts of speech in "信". One is the adjective "honest and trustworthy". The other is the verb "trust" (Qian Daqun, Qin Zhipei, 1987: 373-374). The same word "信" has two meanings, and Gu's translation only uses different expressions of "信" to reflect the polysemy of the word. It should be pointed out that the two parts of speech here do not necessarily correspond to parts of speech when they are translated into English. This is a common phenomenon in the conversion between Chinese and English, and it will not be discussed in detail later. Waley's translation does not use the same word as Gu's, but achieves the equivalence of parts of speech in the original text. If the choice of vocabulary and part of speech in the translated version can be equal to the original text, the phenomenon of polysemy in Chinese can be truly conveyed.

Example 17: Original text: "信言不美，美言不信。" (xìn yán bù měi, měi yán bù xìn) (Chapter 81)

Gu's translation: "True words are not embellished; the embellished words are not true." (Gu Zhengkun, 1995: 307)

Waley's translation: "True words are not fine-sounding; fine-sounding words are not true." (Waley, 1999: 171)

"信" is an adjective, which means "true" (Qian Daqun, Qin Zhipei, 1987: 373). Both translations restore the original sentence in content, form and rhetoric.

### E. "去" (Qù)

Example 18: Original text: "夫唯弗居，是以不去。" (fū wéi fū jū, shì yǐ bù qù) (Chapter 2)

Gu's translation: "Because he does not claim credit, his credit is never lost." (Gu Zhengkun, 1995: 61)

Waley's translation: "And for the reason that he does not call attention to what he does. He is not ejected from fruition of what he has done." (Waley, 1999: 5)

The meaning of this sentence is that "It is precisely because he does not claim merit that merit will not leave him" (Zhang Yuchun, Jin Guotai, 1991: 6). "去" here means



"leave" (Qian Daqun, Qin Zhipei, 1987: 287), Gu translated it into "lost"; Waley translated it into "eject".

Example 19: Original text: "是以圣人去甚，去奢，去泰。" (shì yǐ shèng rén qù shèn, qù shē, qù tài) (Chapter 29)

Gu's translation: "Hence the sage does away with extremity, extravagance and excess." (Gu Zhengkun, 1995: 145)

Waley's translation: "Therefore the sage discards the absolute, the all-inclusive, the extreme." (Waley, 1999: 61)

The general meaning of this sentence is that "Therefore, saints should get rid of extreme, extravagant and excessive things" (Zhang Yuchun, Jin Guotai, 1991: 75). Here the verb "去" means "remove" and "eliminate" (Qian Daqun, Qin Zhipei, 1987: 287). Gu translated it into "do away" and Waley translated it into "discard".

Example 20: Original text: "善之与恶，相去几何？" (shàn zhī yǔ è, xiāng qù jǐ hé?) (Chapter 20)

Gu's translation: "How much disparity is shown between good and evil?" (Gu Zhengkun, 1995: 113)

Waley's translation: "Can it be compared to the difference between good and bad?" (Waley, 1999: 41)

It means "What is the distance between beauty and ugliness?" (Zhang Yuchun, Jin Guotai, 1991: 53). Here "去" is a noun, which means "distance" (Qian Daqun, Qin Zhipei, 1987: 287). Gu translated it into "disparity" and Waley translated it into "difference".

#### IV. CONCLUSION

To sum up, polysemy is not a unique linguistic phenomenon in Chinese, but also exists in English. Polysemy is a manifestation of economic use of language. Several representative words mentioned above have obvious different meanings in many chapters of Tao Te Ching. How to judge their specific meanings from the numerous meanings of these words depends on the translator's grasp of the context in which the word appears. Context determines the multi-translation of a word. The three translators' translations reflect the cultural differences behind them. The translators' bilingual knowledge background is as important as their bilingual competence. Bassnett (1996) once said that translators "change the world as well as the text". On the one hand, the study of foreign translation of Chinese classics can promote Sinological studies and promote Chinese classics. On the other hand, the translation and introduction of Chinese classics can enhance China's discourse power in the world and enhance the international influence of Chinese culture.

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