

The View on Language in Lu Xun's "Stiff Translation" Strategy

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ABSTRACT

Lu Xun creatively adopted the strategy of 'hard translation' in his literary translation work. Central to this strategy was, as he claimed, the preservation of the grammatical features and pragmatic conventions of the source language to the greatest extent possible. This article applied Wilhelm von Humboldt's theory of linguistic worldview and the Sapir-Wolff hypothesis for the analytical study and discussion of Lu Xun's view of language, including Lu Xun's worldview embedded in language, his awareness that patterns of thought reflected in language use and his tendency to transform the minds of users through language transformation. The research indicated that the 'hard translation' strategy stems primarily from Lu Xun's perception of the consistency of language and thought, and his tendency to promote the transformation of the language users' mind through Chinese language reform.

Keywords: Lu Xun, stiff translation, language-view, Humboldt.

1. INTRODUCTION

Lu Xun is known primarily as a literary scholar, but in fact his translations are also of great interest. After 1930, Lu Xun pioneered the strategy of 'hard translation', a strategy of using the original grammatical and pragmatic forms of the source language. From the practice of this translation strategy, Lu Xun developed a Europeanised linguistic style. The Europeanised linguistic style eventually extended to his literary works and played an important role in the reform of the Chinese language.

Most researches of Lu Xun's translated works have focused on the connection between Lu Xun's strategy of 'hard translation' and the anti-traditional social factors of the late Qing and early Republican periods. While these studies explain the historical and social reasons for Lu Xun's 'hard translation' strategy, the influence of Lu Xun's conception of language on his translation strategy has been ignored. Abstracting Lu Xun's 'hard translation' strategy and literary works from his conception of language is therefore an important starting point for research. Based on Wilhelm von Humboldt's theory of linguistic worldview and the Sapir-Hoff hypothesis, this paper will attempt to analyse how Lu Xun's 'hard translation' strategy reflects his

linguistic perceptions, namely, the consistency of language and thought.

The paper will be divided into three parts. The first part will abstract the worldview embedded in language in Lu Xun's mind through the reasons why he adopted the 'hard translation' strategy. The second part will discuss Lu Xun's understanding of the reflection of modes of thought in language use through his attitude towards readers' acceptance of raw translations of his works. The final section will present Lu Xun's tendency to transform the minds of users through language transformation.

2. LU XUN'S AWARENESS OF THE NATION WORLD-VIEW EMBEDDED IN LANGUAGE

The practice of "stiff translation" illustrates that Lu Xun realized the nation world-view of language except from the instrumentality. Because the main point of "stiff translation" strategy is to bring in the syntax of the source language. And in his statements about why he insists on adopting "stiff translation" strategy, he argues that only by introducing new language form could the masses get rid of the influence of traditional Chinese ideas and truly get in touch with western Enlightenment thoughts [1]. On the relationship between language and

nation, German linguist Humboldt put forward a similar view with Lu Xun in 1830. By comparing their viewpoints, it can be seen that Lu Xun's practice of "stiff translation" strategy is based on the recognition of the impact of language on the world-view.

Through Lu Xun's work *Correspondence Concerning Translation*, it can be seen that Lu Xun recognizes the deep link between the target language and its national cultural worldview, and the barriers in transmission of concept across language caused by it. In this work, Lu Xun set forth his reasons and intentions for insisting on "stiff translation". He clearly presents his worry about that the deep link between Classical Chinese and patriarchal culture in people's consciousness would finally hinder their acceptance of the western culture and ideas of the source text [1].

This idea of linking language to cultural context and identity is very close to Humboldt's theory of linguistic worldview. Humboldt analyzes culture from the perspective of structuralist linguistics and holds that language reflects the characteristics of a nation's understanding of the world. He argues that language steps in between human and nature [2]. On this basis, every language draws about the people that possesses it a circle whence it is possible to exit only by stepping over at once into the circle of another one. Therefore, the contact with a foreign language should be a acquiring of a new standpoint in the world-view hitherto possessed. However, this outcome cannot be completely experienced because of the interruption of our own world-view and language-view [2].

In terms of the analysis of language structure, the link between grammatical features and the national characteristics can also be seen in both Lu Xun and Humboldt's works. In contrast, Humboldt focuses on how the national thinking structure shape the grammatical features of a language, while Lu Xun cares more about how grammatical weaknesses limit the thinking patterns of individuals. Although their analyses have different perspectives, they are essentially discussions on language structure and national characteristics. The reason of this difference is that Lu Xun's analysis of language is mainly aimed at guiding the practice of translation and the reform of language.

Their similar ideas about the mental organization in language system can be found in two aspects, which is designation of concepts and the laws of syntax. When analyzing the former factors, they both extract the characteristics of national thinking from the most common and the least common concepts in national languages. Humboldt took Sanskrit as an example to illustrate that the prevailing number of philosophical words, whose concept are formed in the barest fashion possible, reflect the deeply abstractive temper of the nation [2]. Lu Xun also includes the lack of concepts in his discussion of the necessity of "stiff translation". He

points out that Classical Chinese language is so poor in lexical that even many of daily supplies don't have accurate names. This indicating that the discursive power of Classical Chinese is mainly controlled by the upper society. In addition, it also reflects the inconsistency between spoken language and written language [3]. When it comes to the laws of syntax, both of them conclude that the poverty and indefiniteness of forms are a bar to letting the thought roam in a compass of speech [2]. Lu Xun observes that Classical Chinese language is almost devoid of all parts of speech that express subtle distinctions and complex relationships, such as adjectives, verbs and prepositions [3]. This parataxis in classical Chinese, rather than the hypotaxis style in European syntax structure, leads to a lack of systematic and logical thinking in the nation world-view. This is also the crucial reason why Lu Xun believes that it is necessary to absorb Western grammar through "stiff translation".

Through the above comparison, it can be concluded that Lu Xun's argument on the necessity of "stiff translation" is highly consistent with Humboldt's theoretical framework of linguistic world-view. Although there is no direct evidence that Lu Xun ever came into contact with Humboldt's theoretical works, it can be speculated that Lu Xun's design for "stiff translation" strategy includes his cognition of the consistency between language and national world-view through the degree of theoretical compatibility mentioned above.

3. LU XUN'S REALIZATION OF THE SYMBOLIC CAPACITY OF LANGUAGE TO THINKING.

In addition to the connection between language and national characteristics, Lu Xun also attach importance to the individual language under the national language system through his discussion on readers' acceptance of the stiff translation. Lu Xun's opinion in this area is very similar to the initial formulation of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, which is the development of Humboldt's ideas. This hypothesis is a synthesis of Sapir's idea of linguistic determinism and Whorf's principle of linguistic relativity. Through this hypothesis, it can be seen that Lu Xun's cognition that individual language reflects and determines individual thinking.

It is obvious that in the practice of "stiff translation", Lu Xun paid much more attention to the language of the text than its content. Lu Xun's "stiff translation" began around 1930. At that time, most of the translation reforms focused on translating Western works in vernacular rather than Classical Chinese. However, Lu Xun went a step further to oppose the domestication strategy, which is the basic idea of Chinese traditional translation. In some texts, such as Lunacharsky's *On Art*, his retention of the word order of source text

resulted in the obscurities of sentences in the target text. Liang Shiqiu, a leading translator at that time, even criticizes that reading such works requires readers to find the location of syntactic clues with their fingers, just like looking at a map. While in the epilogue of his translation work *On Art*, Lu Xun mentions that he has also noticed the obstacles in reading caused by stiff translation, but he believes that once the strategy of domestication is adopted, the essential linguistic vigor of the original will be lost. Therefore, he would rather "sacrifice" the content to complete the reservation of language [4]. It can be concluded that Lu Xun does not ignore reader acceptance, but focuses on the influence of language of the text on readers.

On the other hand, one of the reasons Lu Xun deliberately makes stiff translations difficult to read is to convey his efforts in studying the theory in source text. In his work *Stiff Translation and the Class Nature of Literature*, Lu Xun compares the attempt at stiff translation with Prometheus stealing fire. He describes this practice as cooking his own meat by stealing fire from foreign countries and believes that readers could get the revolution ideas through chewing the "translator's body" which represent the language of stiff translation [1]. Pu Wang analyzes this metaphor as a self-torment and argue that Lu Xun's "stiff translation" is not to name a new method of literalism, but rather to signify the painful labor involved in his close engagement with Marxist theory in order to ensure that readers could get the revolutionary consciousness resulted from the "labor of the negative" through reading this obscure language [5]. This illustrates that rather than trace back to the initial intention and impact of the original text, the more important aim of translation in Lu Xun's mind is to provide his own impact through another exotic experience for its translation readers [6].

This strategy of conveying ideas through language patterns is considered impossible among Chinese translators at the time. However in fact, it precisely conforms to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, no matter from the angle of "linguistic determinism" or "language relativity principle". In Sapir's idea, he believes that thought is the highest latent or potential content of speech, which is obtained by interpreting each of the elements in the flow of language as possessed of its very fullest conceptual value [7]. He also put up that the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously build on the language habits of the group [8]. From this point of view, readers' mental perception of the real world is based on their existing language habit. However, the defamiliarization brought by Lu Xun's stiff translation forces readers to put down or break their language habits when reading, which will also cause an impact on readers' cognition of the world based on it. This is exactly what Lu Xun expects to convey to the reader through stiff translation, the painful and destructive

nature of revolution. Moreover, Sapir believes that act of perception of individuals are at the mercy of the patterns called words. This also supports Lu Xun's worry about the hindrance to readers' understanding of revolutionary ideas by using the strategy of traditional domestication translation.

Lu Xun's radical view of the language-thought consistency seems closer to Sapir's determinism, while Whorf's views on contrastive linguistics, which is more moderate, also support Lu Xun's concern about the impact of translated texts on readers. He notes the grammatical systems of different native languages as shapers of individual ideas, but he focused more on the perspective of cross-language comparison. He believes that due to the existence of the mother tongue system, it is impossible for everyone to perceive the outside world without prejudice, even when he thinks he is at his most free [9]. The core of this relativistic idea is the relativity of concepts and their dependence on language. It means that it is impossible for all observers to reach the same understanding, even when they are facing the same physical evidence, unless they have similar or related grammatical backgrounds. Looking back at Lu Xun's stiff translation strategy, from this point of view, it is an attempt to create an improved target language that is close to the source language. Lu Xun defined this effort as making the concepts acquired by The Chinese reader equal to those acquired by the source language reader from the original text [2]. But in fact, language defamiliarization determines that Chinese readers cannot have the same experience of content as readers in the source language. As mentioned above, Lu Xun himself also realized this. Thus, it can be inferred that Lu Xun's idea of "equal" can only represent the same cognition based on similar language system.

However, Lu Xun's cognition on the relation of language and thought also has its over-radical side. Based on the realization that language determines thinking, he over-inferred that more advanced thought is certainly formed in a superior language system. Thus, came to the conclusion that Classical Chinese language is inferior and imperfect. This is probably because Lu Xun is influenced by the theory of evolution in his early years. In fact, many evolutionary linguists like Schleicher and Hovelacque have made similar deduction about superior and inferior languages [10]. This view is later regarded by linguists including Sapir and Whorf as the prevailing linguistic racism. Although this radical cognition is caused by Lu Xun's eager desire for revolution and lack of linguistic knowledge, it can also be seen as his tendency to regard language as thought itself rather than a determinant or shaper of thought.

By using Sapir-Whorf hypothesis to analyze Lu Xun's attitude towards readers' acceptance of stiff translated works, the conclusion can be drawn that Lu

Xun realizes the capability of language itself to convey and determines or even symbolizes individual thoughts.

4. THE EFFECT OF TRANSLATION ON LANGUAGE REFORM IN LU XUN'S MIND

The purpose of Lu Xun's "stiff translation" practice is to reform the Chinese language through translation and finally to promote the public thought. Through Humboldt's and his supporters' view about the link between individual language the dynamics of language systems, it can be seen that Lu Xun not only understand the importance of translation in language reform, but also recognizes the role of individuals in language reform.

It can be analyzed that Lu Xun's eager in transforming language is based on his belief that the language reform promotes the national salvation. In his discussion on translation, he claimed that the purpose of translation is to establish a new modern Chinese language system, rather than introduce the content of the work to the readers. According to the doubt about the possibility of language reform, Lu Xun responded that even Classical Chinese is not invariable. There were many practices of improving language through translation in dynasties before, such as the syntax and vocabulary introduced by the translation of Buddhist scriptures in the Tang Dynasty [2]. He also cites the adoption of Western grammar in Japanese after the Meiji Restoration as an example. The language reform in Japan at that time is a de-Chinese character reform based on nationalism. When studying in Japan, Lu Xun saw the impact of this reform on the Japanese people. He believes that it is this kind of Europeanized linguistic reform that led to Japan's successful social transformation. Therefore, he not only carried out the practice of stiff translation, but also actively promoted the later Latinization of movement Chinese characters in 1930s.

Lu Xun's realization of the dynamic property of language system is the basis of his recognition that stiff translation can change language system. In this aspect, Humboldt shares a similar understanding. He claims that the dynamics of language system is based on the transformation of language from subject to object [3]. As a cultural background, language affects the national way of thinking as a subject. However, in specific literary works, language is recreated and understood through thinking, and becomes an object. Actually, both Humboldt and his supporter Sapir recognizes the role of literary works in the dynamic change of language system. However, they pay more attention to poetry, because poetry is often accompanied by the rework of language and the exploration of language boundaries [10]. On this point, Lu Xun's stiff translation works has achieved the same effect, through integrating new

vocabulary and grammar, and broadening the possibility of Chinese expression.

Lu Xun also attaches great importance to individual participation in language change. He advocates that on the one hand, translator should input Europeanized grammar as much as possible, on the other hand, they should try their best to digest and absorb [5]. In this way, although the translation works will be obscure, the available part of the grammar will be passed on, and the residues will naturally be left behind. In the practice of stiff translation, Lu Xun absorbs Europeanized grammar in the form of vernacular Chinese in his stiff translation work, and finally forms a Europeanized Chinese system in his own works. This kind of Europeanization seemed extreme at that time, but a large part of them, such as the use of post attributive and parenthesis, is indeed accepted and widely used in the modern Chinese system.

Lu Xun's insist on stiff translation are not only based on his firm belief in the possibility that his efforts will have an impact on the language system, but also on the expectation that readers will grasp the language in different forms and have an impact on the overall language system, just as Humboldt's argument. In Humboldt's discussion about the dynamic property of language system, he mentions that compared with the might of language, the power of individual is so small. But depending on the great plasticity of language, individuals can use different ways to grasp the form of language and rely on vivid spiritual strength to dominate the dead heritage. Because everyone reacts on the language individually and continuously, each generation will cause some changes in the language [3]. The translator's digestion and absorption of foreign grammar in Lu Xun's discussion, just like Humboldt's idea of grasping language with spiritual power, which refers to the transformation of the original language system through the creative thinking process of individuals.

In summary, Lu Xun's goal of reforming the national language system through stiff translation is based on his recognition that language is constantly changing between generations and the role of personal subjective initiative on the language system.

5. CONCLUSIONS

It is in Lu Xun's strategy of 'stiff translation' that his view of language is reflected. Within the framework of Humboldt's theory of a linguistic worldview and the coherence of linguistic thinking, this paper analyses Lu Xun's understanding of the national worldview and the symbols of thinking embedded in language. Lu Xun's view of language can be understood in two ways: firstly, from the perspective of the nation and the individual, language and thinking are congruent; secondly, he recognises the dynamic and malleable nature of the

language system and firmly believes in the active role of the individual in it.

Through Lu Xun's efforts to invest his view of language in the design of a 'stiff translation' strategy, the translator's initiative in the language system is emphasised. Although Lu Xun's view of language is immature, his assumptions and applications of the relationship between language and thought in the 'rigid translation' strategy not only expand the possibilities of Chinese expression, but also provide material for the establishment of the modern Chinese language system.

Lu Xun's practice also has inspire later Chinese translators. In formulating a translation strategy, apart from considering the accuracy, artistry and acceptability of the target text, translators should be more careful to consider their own expectations and conceptions of the language and culture.

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