

A Study on Translation of Culture-loaded Words in the Goldblatts' *Three Sisters* from the Perspective of Skopos Theory

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ABSTRACT

Culture-loaded words reflect precious spiritual wealth that a nation has accumulated in a long history. Therefore, the translation of culture-loaded words, to a large extent, can affect the success of literary translation. *Yumi*, created by Bi Feiyu, consists of abundant culture-loaded words with Chinese characteristics. Its English version *Three Sisters* is translated by the Goldblatts. From the perspective of Skopos Theory, this paper analyzes the translation of culture-loaded words in *Three Sisters* translated by the Goldblatts. The study has shown that in order to achieve the aims of introducing Chinese culture to Western readers and ensuring best readability of the translation, the Goldblatts flexibly adopt translation methods such as literal translation, literal translation with explanation, free translation, omission, etc. Meanwhile, the study hopes to provide some suggestions for Chinese literary translators.

Keywords: Skopos Theory, *Three Sisters*, Culture-loaded Words, Translation Methods

1. INTRODUCTION

Yumi written by Bi Feiyu won the Third Lu Xun Literary Prize and its English version *Three Sisters* was awarded the 2010 Man Asian Literary Prize. The novel describes three sisters about their different courses of life and their struggles with fate, which reflects the plight of rural women under the patriarchal social system during the Cultural Revolution. This remarkable novel is full of culture-loaded words with distinctive Chinese feature. As is known that language is the cultural carrier, so translating of culture-loaded words is not only involved linguistic conversion, but also cultural communication. Culture-loaded words refer to those loaded with typical culture of a nation, which absolutely poses an obstacle to translating activities. Translators are required to process the translation of culture-loaded words in a flexible way. Therefore, it is of great significance to study translation methods of culture-loaded words in the Chinese-English translation version *Three Sisters* by the Goldblatts.

2. INTRODUCTION TO HANS VERMEER'S SKOPOS THEORY

In 1970s, Hans Vermeer brought forward Skopos Theory. He insists that the purpose of translation determines translators' choices of translation strategies and methods (Xie, 2008[1]). In the process of translating, translators should adhere to three rules, that is, skopos rule, coherence rule and fidelity rule (Liu, 2009[2]). Among those three rules, skopos rule occupies a dominated place. Translation is actually an action governed by its purpose (Reiß & Vermeer, 2014[3]). Translators should achieve the intended purposes of the target text by appropriate translation methods. And coherence rule refers to intratextual coherence in the target text. Translators need to take the cultural backgrounds of target readers into consideration. Then, target readers can understand the translation accurately and distinctly. At last, fidelity rule refers to the relationship between original text and target text, which demands that the target text should be faithful to the original text.

3. THE GOLDBLATTS' PURPOSES OF TRANSLATION

Howard Goldblatt is recognized as one of the most distinguished translators of Chinese literature. Since 1980s, he has devoted himself to translating Chinese literary works, making them accessible to Western readers. Gladys Yang ever praised his translation works of Chinese literature as presenting the features of contemporary British and American literature (Li, 2012[4]). Goldblatt collaborated with his wife Sylvia Lichun Lin in translating nearly 20 works, including *Three Sisters*. On the one hand, their translations aroused Western readers interests in Chinese literature and culture. Therefore, one translation purpose of the Goldblatts is to promote Chinese culture to the Western world. On the other hand, Goldblatt believed that translators should be responsible for authors, texts and target readers. Especially, target readers were the most important (Ji, 2009[5]). From this view, his another intended purpose is to maintain translation's readability. In sum, the above two purposes of translation determine translation methods of the Goldblatts.

4. TRANSLATION METHODS OF CULTURE-LOADED WORDS IN *THREE SISTERS*

Nida (1945)[6] ever divided culture-loaded words into five categories, that is, ecological culture-loaded words, material culture-loaded words, social culture-loaded words, religious culture-loaded words and linguistic culture-loaded words. There are a large number of culture-loaded words with Chinese characteristics in *Yumi*. It's ideal that the translation not only retains cultural characteristics of a language but also is readable for the Western readers. However, in practice, they can't be always attained at the same time. Therefore, based on the intended purposes of translation, translators should flexibly process culture-loaded words by different translation methods.

4.1 *Literal Translation*

In order to promote Chinese culture to the Western world, the Goldblatts use literal translation to process some culture-loaded words. To some extent, literal translation can keep the "foreign elements" of culture-loaded words. In this way, target readers can have the opportunity to directly contact with Chinese culture.

Example 1:

The original text: 真是黄泉路上不等人 (Bi, 2011:39[7]).

The Goldblatts' translation: As they say, "The road down to Yellow Springs waits for no one (Goldblatt & Lin, 2010[8])."

In Example 1, "黄泉路", a religious culture-loaded word, refers to the road that leads souls of the departed to the underworld according to Taoism. The Goldblatts render "黄泉路" into "the road down to Yellow Springs" by literal translation, which conforms to fidelity rule. This novel expression may originally make target readers confused. With continuing reading, they are able to understand its cultural connotations under the context. The employment of the literal translation keeps the distinct flavour of exotic religion for target readers, which succeeds to realize the purpose of spreading the unique Chinese culture contained in these Chinese culture-loaded words.

Example 2:

The original text: 这样好看的衣裳, 玉穗可是饿狗叼住了屎橛子, 咬住了决不会松口的 (Bi, 2011:87[7]).

The Goldblatts' translation: Something that nice on Yusui was like a hungry dog with a turd in its mouth—it cannot be pried out (Goldblatt & Lin, 2010[8]).

In Example 2, "恶狗叼住了屎橛子, 咬住了决不会松口的" belongs to language culture-loaded words. Yuxiu compares Yusui into "a hungry dog" (恶狗) to mock her foolish behavior of showing off in front of others. And the coarse language is in accordance with the situation that most rural residents were uneducated during the Cultural Revolution. Therefore, the use of literal translation keeps the bitter satire in the original text, which abides by fidelity rule.

4.2 *Literal Translation with Explanation*

In some cases, literal translation can't deliver cultural connotations in a way that target readers can accurately understand. Then, literal translation with explanation becomes a sensible choice to process the culture-loaded words. Necessary explanations can provide target readers with assistance in understanding cultural connotations.

Example 3:

The original text: 一年四季要是说起冷, 其实倒不在三九和四九 (Bi, 2011:52[7]).

The Goldblatts' translation: Where cold weather is concerned, neither the third nor the fourth nine-day period after the winter solstice ranks as the coldest (Goldblatt & Lin, 2010[8]).

The custom of "counting nine"(数九) is very prevalent in the rural areas of China. Every nine days after the winter solstice is one nine-day period with a total of nine. Considering that even some Chinese readers may not be familiar with the culture, the translators render "三九" and "四九" into "the third and the fourth nine-day period after the winter solstice" by literal translation with explanation. This translation complies with both skopos rule and fidelity rule, which makes the target text not only

faithful in conveying the message but also readable to the target readers.

Example 4:

The original text: 五月二十八号, 小满刚过去六天, 七天之后又是芒种 (Bi, 2011:77[7]).

The Goldblatts' translation: on the twenty-eighth of May, a mere six days after Lesser Fullness, the eighth of the twenty-four solar periods, when the winter wheat has become full, and one week before Grain in Beard, the ninth solar period (Goldblatt & Lin, 2010[8]).

Based on the sun's annual motion, the 24 solar terms were created by farmers in ancient China to guide the agricultural affairs and farming activities. “小满”和“芒种” in Example 4 reflect the maturity and harvest time of crops. If literally translated, they may cause confusion and bafflement. Then, the translators choose literal translation with explanation, which facilitates the reading process. Therefore, this translation corresponds with skopos rule and fidelity rule.

4.3 Free Translation

When content and form of the original text can't be retained in the target text at the same time, translators often choose to keep the former to remove cultural barriers for target readers. Otherwise, target readers may misinterpret and distort the cultural connotations. In this case, free translation becomes a proper alternative for translators.

Example 5:

The original text: 完全是一个城里人了, 都学会四两拨千斤了 (Bi, 2011:178[7]).

The Goldblatts' translation: but she had already begun to talk like a city girl who knows the value of understatement in important matters (Goldblatt & Lin, 2010[8]).

When Yuyang was admitted into the teach-training school, Yumi gave her a large sum of money and grain coupons. However, Yuyang didn't appear to be impressed for her sister's generosity. Thus, Yumi felt a sense of loss.

Originally, “四两拨千斤” refers to a martial arts skill of Tai Chi, which means one uses the opponent's momentum against him/her. The Goldblatts render it into “the value of understatement in important matters” by free translation, which realizes the purpose of increasing the readability of the target text for target readers. What's more, this translation makes the target text coherent, which exactly conforms to the coherence rule.

Example 6:

The original text: 青黄不接的时候, 多睡觉, 横着比竖着扛饿 (Bi, 2011:53[7]).

The Goldblatts' translation: During the period between harvests and plantings, they slept a lot, finding hunger easier to stave off horizontally than vertically (Goldblatt & Lin, 2010[8]).

“青黄不接的时候” means the period when harvested grain has run out and meanwhile crops in the land are not yet ripe. Some source-language readers may have no knowledge of the meaning of this ecological culture-loaded word, not to mention target readers. Therefore, the translators follow skopos rule to translate “青黄不接的时候” into “the period between harvests and plantings” by free translation, which conduces to accurate understanding of the cultural connotation.

4.4 Omission

Omission means to delete some words or expressions without changing the meaning of the original text, which makes the translation more concise or fits the language habit of the target readers better.

Example 7:

The original text: 但她的脸上没有一点巴结玉米的神情, 都没有看自己, 完全是有一说一, 有二说二的样子。看来是真心话 (Bi, 2011:39[7]).

The Goldblatts' translation: Not once did she look at Yumi as she spoke, which gave the impression that she was voicing her true feelings (Goldblatt & Lin, 2010[8]).

In Chinese, semantic repetition plays a role in enhancing the persuasion. In Example 7, “有一说一, 有二说二” means someone speaks honestly, which is exactly the same as “真心话”. But in English, people tend to omit repetition. Considering the language habit of target readers, the translators delete the translation of “有一说一, 有二说二”, which realizes the translation purpose of increasing the readability of the target text.

5. CONCLUSION

According to Skopos Theory, translators should define the translation purpose. According to the specific purpose, translators can flexibly process target texts by varied translation methods. With the development of globalization, it is of great significance to improve the influence of Chinese culture in the world. To better realize this purpose, translators should retain the readability of the target text with complying to the Western readers' habit of expression. Then, target readers can be touched by the charm of excellent Chinese culture.

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