A Comparative Analysis of Pinger's Characterization as a Maid in the Dialogues of Two *Hong Lou Meng* Translations

From the Perspective of Register Theory

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Abstract. From the perspective of register theory in Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics and Culpeper's characterization model, this study examines the translation process of Pinger's dialogues in two different translations of the novel *Hong Lou Meng*. The research investigates how these translations can reflect different translators' misunderstandings toward the cultural and situational context, resulting in variations in translation styles and ultimately creating subtle differences in character portrayal compared to the original text. The findings reveal that the Yangs' translation exhibits more inconsistencies than the Hawkes' translation. However, the latter successfully captures Pinger's characterization as a maid in a more natural and vivid manner. These variations in translation styles and characterization shed light on the challenges faced by translators in accurately conveying the nuances of culture and context, highlighting the importance of considering register theory and characterization models in translation studies. Further research can explore additional examples from the novel to gain a comprehensive understanding of the translation process and its impact on character portrayal.

Keywords: *Hong Lou Meng*, Characterization, Register Theory

1 Introduction

Hong Lou Meng (hereinafter HLM), also known as The Dream of the Red Chamber and The Story of the Stone, has been considered an unparalleled novel and is in the list of "Four Classic Chinese Novels", depicting a realistic and vivid scene of aristocratic houses and minute elements of life and social structure during the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). The author Cao Xueqin who was born into a rich family but ended up abject due to the fickleness of the Qing Dynasty, finished the first 80 chapters of HLM, with the latter 40 chapters completed after Cao's death by the Qing scholar Gao E [1].

With its profound literary impact and social connotation, HLM has been translated into more than 20 languages, therefore providing numerous resources for relevant studies. Since the middle of the twentieth century, many English versions of HLM have

been published gradually, while only three complete translations have been acclaimed as the most popular ones, namely, The Story of the Stone, translated by David Hawkes and John Minford, The Red Chamber Dream, by B. S. Bonsall and A Dream of Red Mansions, by Xianyi Yang and his wife, Gladys Yang. Unfortunately, Bonsall's translation was never formally published, whose manuscript has been kept in the Library of the University of Hong Kong [2]; thus, the other two versions have been generally welcomed by people. It is easy to find that one of the most common narration methods to describe a character in HLM is speech presentation (SP) [3]. This is not only because the SP of the characters makes up most of the descriptive narration in HLM but also because Cao introduced more than 400 characters in the book, ranging from princes and palace officials to maids and street rascals, all of whom had distinct personalities with their unique speech habits, thus SP can better portray different characters and leave a lasting impression on the readers. Scholars reckon that Cao's narration in HLM seems to be extremely subjective because the whole novel was set in the background of the author's deep regret at the decline of the Jia family, which can be said to be a vivid reflection of the decline of the author's own family [4]. Most characters in HLM, to some extent, are embodiments of Cao's personal feelings toward the real world. Therefore, the translation of SP in HLM plays a rather important role in the meaning conveyance of the original works.

Although both translators asserted that they translated HLM faithfully, many characters are quite different from the original text under careful deliberation. From the perspective of register theory, such inconsistencies can be partly attributed to translators' distinctive understandings of the context of culture and situation [5], which lead to various translation strategies and, finally, to different characterizations.

The supporting character, Pinger, is the confidant maid of Xifeng and one of the most well-rounded borderline characters in HLM [6]. The current study, based on register theory in systemic functional linguistics (SFL), focuses on the dialogues of Pinger in Hawkes' and Yangs' translation as a linguistic indicator to investigate whether inconsistency between the translated versions and the original text of HLM can affect Pinger's characterization.

2   Methodology

With the purpose of discovering translation inconsistency in a borderline character's characterization process, this study will make use of two complementary theories, namely, register theory in SFL, which generally refers to the meaning system closely related to a specific situational type and characterization model proposed by Culpeper [7], which mainly implies the constructing process of an impression of character but is two-dimensional and static and lacks a sense of the communicative context [8], to conduct critical discourse analyses of the translations of Pinger's dialogues, so as to cast light on the inconsistency in Pinger's characterization caused by different translations.

2.1   Register Theory

The register was initially thought to serve as a kind of linguistic pattern that is frequently utilized in a specific setting or an immediate environment [9]. According to Halliday, the register is a meaning system that is generally connected with a certain situation context, and a culture context consists of a number of such situation contexts, with the former one determining the whole linguistic system, including subject matter and form of communication of an addressor [7]. More specifically, the context of the situation limits the scope of the actual use of language, and a change in it will cause language variation, which is called register, defined as a construction of meaning. Halliday divided the context of the situation into three main elements, namely, field, tenor and mode, from which investigations can be done to reveal the causes of language variations.

2.2   Characterization

With more than 400 characters with different personalities and social statuses in HLM, despite Cao's relatively objective narration, the translation of contexts related to a specific character largely determines his characterization. According to Culpeper, a mental representation of the character is most likely to be formed during the reading process and in his characterization model, and there are five important and identifiable components in the text comprehension process, namely, surface structure, textbase, situation model, prior knowledge and control system, which will at least involve readers in building representations for all relevant characters, building a representation of the circumstances the characters appears in and build a representation of what the writer of the text intends us to understand by the character dialogue [8].

   It is not hard to discover that there are some connections between these elements in the comprehension process or character-comprehending process and register theory. Prior knowledge refers to the knowledge held in long-term memory, ranging from knowledge of facts and knowledge about the future to knowledge about the past. The situation model largely contains prior knowledge and textual elements, the combination of which constructs a meaningful representation of the text. Textbase is like the situation model, but it only contains the propositional content of the text. The surface structure includes the unique linguistic choices of characters which will go through syntactic and semantic analyses to build the textbase and can somehow be incorporated into the situation model.

   From the above definitions, conclusions can be drawn that the prior knowledge and situation model share many similarities with the context of culture and situation in register theory. Later analysis attempts to focus on translators' comprehension process with the purpose of revealing translation inconsistency within the three elements of context in register theory.

3   Analysis

Disparities in translation purposes, life experience and language backgrounds lead to their varied translation styles and strategies [10]. In the translation of HLM, Hawkes preferred a more fluent approach in rendering the fictional dialogues which sound as if they were naturally spoken to the readers in English and will cause variations in reproducing the original meaning, thus delivering different characterization of the same character in the novel to target readers.

The following parts will mainly focus on analyzing the translations of Pinger's dialogues by the Yangs and Hawkes from three interrelated systems, namely, field, tenor and mode system, in register theory, with the purpose of discovering to what degree the two translations reproduce the original characteristics of Pinger in HLM.

3.1   Inconsistency in Field

The field in register theory represents the topic and subject of a conversation by referring to things that happened in the communication process with the subject matter of the addressor or addressee as the key component [7]. As a result, the field dictates the character of the communicating activity, serves as the primary part of the discourse, and impacts author's wording habits and discourse structures. This can be largely attributed to fact that once participators have decided on a subject of communication, they establish their vocabulary and speaking style in the corresponding field. The following are some comparative analyses of different translations to illustrate such inconsistency.

Example 1

平儿道: "别叫我说出好话来了。" (Pinger said, "Don't expect me to say anything nice to you.") [Chapter 21] [1]

"Don't make me say things you'll be sorry for!" [The Yangs] [11]

You'll make me say something I shall feel sorry for in a minute,' said Patience. [Hawkes] [12]

In Example 1, it is easy to find that the Yangs and Hawkes have totally different understandings of the Chinese idiom "好话" (haohua in Chinese Pinyin, which literally means words of praise in English). It can actually represent different meanings under various situation contexts. Generally speaking, it can be used as a speech act, in which the addresser expresses feelings or attitudes towards something, such as a congratulation and praise, or a speech act that commits the addresser to do something threatening in the future [13]. The context of the situation here is that Pinger, after being seen running outside and bawling at Jia Lian through the window by Xifeng, made this speech to vindicate herself and also to threaten Xifeng to stop her reprimand. The Yangs' imperative sentence obviously can better reflect Pinger's anger, while the threatening meaning in Hawkes' translation is relatively weak.

Example 2

平儿气怯，忙住了手,哭道: "你们背地里说话，为什么拉我呢?"(Pinger, being frightened, quickly covered her mouth and cried out, "Why did you include me in your secret conversation?") [Chapter 44] [1]

Pinger fearing that he would beat her promptly left off, protesting tearfully, 'When you talk behind our backs, why drag me in?' [The Yangs] [11]

Patience, whose gentle nature was easily overawed, at once left off, tearfully protesting that it was cruel of them to speak about her in such a way behind her back. [Hawkes] [12]

The context of the situation of Example 2 in HLM, is that Pinger, being a maid, uttered these words to grumble at the situation with others after being reprimanded by Xifen. The inconsistency in the field is mainly caused by Yangs' and Hawkes' translation of "气怯" (qiqie in Chinese Pinyin, which literally means to feel timid or afraid about something in English). Compared with the Yangs' word-by-word translation, Hawkes makes a further explanation. That is the reason why Pinger felt afraid because of her "gentle nature". Although some readers who are familiar with the ancient Chinese hierarchy system may know the reason, a further explanation can better portray this borderline character, thus fully reproducing the original meaning.

From the above-mentioned examples, the conclusion can be drawn that inconsistencies in discourse structure, choice of words and translation methods may lead to failure in faithfully reproducing Pinger's characterization and readers' different understanding of the original field.

3.2   Inconsistency in Tenor

Tenor in register theory refers to the addressor, addressee and other people in the communication process, their social status and personalities and the relationship between them, composed of their social relationships and interpersonal relationships [7]. Different understandings of the social status and role relationships of characters in the communication activity may lead to disparate interpretations of the field. The followings are some examples to reveal such inconsistency in the Yangs' and Hawkes' translations.

Example 3

平儿一旁劝，一面催他，叫他快说。(Pinger, standing by, tried to persuade Xifeng and urged the maid, telling him to speak up quickly.) [Chapter 67] [1]

Pinger, trying to pacify Xifeng, urged the maid to hurry up. [The Yangs] [11]

Patience begged Xi-feng not to hurt the girl, at the same time urging the girl to make a clean breast of what she had to say. [Hawkes] [12]

Example 3 mainly involves three characters, namely, Pinger, Xifeng, and a little maid. The meaning of the word "劝"(quan in in Chinese Pinyin, which literally meaning to persuade someone in English), is much more than Pinger's persuasion. According to the Chinese hierarchy system, a maid is far from qualified to persuade her master. Hawkes uses "beg" to reproduce the original meaning and reveal the hierarchy distance between Pinger and Xifeng, which is more appropriate and can better reflect Pinger's

carefulness than Yangs' translation -- "pacify", which has no implication of the relationship between master and maid.

Example 4

如今便从赵姨娘屋里起了赃来也容易，我只怕又伤着一个好人的体面。(Now it's easy to find evidence of stolen things in Aunt Zhao's house, but I'm afraid it will once again harm someone's reputation as a good person.) [Chapter 61] [1]

Actually, I could easily find the evidence in Concubine Zhao's rooms, but I was afraid that would make another good person lose face. [The Yangs] [11]

We could of course clear this matter up quite easily by looking for the stolen bottle in Mrs. Zhao's room. The only reason I hesitate to do that is because I'm afraid it would make things difficult for a certain person whose feelings I do care about very much. [Hawkes] [12]

Example 4 is mainly about a theft case of the Essence of Roses. Pinger, the major investigator of this case, found out that it was the concubine Zhao who incited a maid called Caiyun to steal the Essence of Roses. Here the concubine Zhao is the mother of Tanchun, who is Pinger's direct superior. Considering their relationship, when announcing the investigation results, Pinger did not point out the thief and the mastermind behind the scenes. Instead, she used the sentence "一个好人的体面", (Yige Haoren de Timian in Chinese Pinyin, which literally means injuring the dignity of a good person in English), to implicate the result. The Yangs use "another good person" to imply Tanchun, while Hawkes uses "a certain person" and then adds extra modifiers. Obviously, the former is just a general reference and not as specific as the latter. Such imprecise expression or inconsistency in tenor will fail to reproduce the original context of the situation and Pinger's tactful personality, leading to readers' misunderstanding of the plot.

3.3   Inconsistency in Mode

The last element in register theory, mode mainly refers to the form of communication, and the intonation and figure of speech in the texts. Halliday and Hasan specify mode as unique language functions in a particular situation and rhetorical channel [7].

Example 5

平儿咬牙道:"没良心的东西，过了河就拆桥，明儿还想我替你撒谎！"(Pinger gritted her teeth and said, "You heartless person! After solving your own difficulties, you want me to lie for you tomorrow!") [Chapter 21] [1]

"You beast!" she cried through clenched teeth. "As soon as the river's crossed you pull down the bridge. Don't ever expect me to lie for you again." [The Yangs] [11]

Patience clenched her teeth in anger. 'You're mean! Burn the bridge when you're safely over the river - that's your way, isn't it? All right then, you needn't expect me to tell lies for you in future!' [Hawkes] [12]

As for Example 5, it is not hard to find that Pinger is speaking in a rather angry mood, and both translators successfully convey the literal meaning of the original text, but there are some differences in their transformation of the syntactic style. The whole original text is expressed through a single exclamation sentence; both translations retain the same sentence pattern of the words with the heaviest mood, say, "You beast!"

"You're mean!" As for the rest part, the Yangs only use two declarative sentences, compared with Hawkes' one disjunctive question sentence and exclamation sentence, which contain more illocutionary meanings, such as anger and threats [13]. The translator's subtle manipulation of mode can better transfer Pinger's commissive and threatening speech meaning, thus faithfully delivering a context that resembles the original to readers [14].

4   Discussion

Gutt pointed out that in the translation process, the translator acts both as a reader and as a speaker for the original work [15]. With their different language backgrounds, life experiences, and respective translation purposes, the Yangs and Hawkes would inevitably have different understandings towards the context of culture and situation in *Hongloumeng*. The case analysis shows that such a dual role of a translator would lead to some subtle differences in Pinger's characterization. Generally, there are more inconsistencies in the Yangs' translation than in the Hawkes'. The former prefers to adopt the word-for-word translation method, which sometimes would make it hard for readers to understand complex sentences or plots in this extraordinary novel, while the latter prefers to translate with necessary explanations and adaptations, reproducing Pinger's characterization as a maid in a more nature and vivid way.

5   Conclusion

This study sets out to compare the inconsistency in Pinger's characterization process in two HLM translations. By investigating the wording choices, idiom interpretation and syntactic structure in the translations of Pinger's dialogues by Hawkes and the Yangs, the conclusion can be drawn that the Yangs seem to adopt a more straight and elusive approach to translating HLM, as evidenced by Hawkes' seemingly liberal and free translation method. This difference in their translation methods is one of the main reasons that makes Hawkes' version more popular among the general public than the Yangs'.

   This study has yielded some preliminary evidence that the respective translator's comprehension of the original text or their understanding in the context of culture and situation may exert great influences on the translation styles. However, there are still some limitations in this study. In the current study, only translations of two translator groups (Hawkes and the Yangs) and only some texts related to Pinger's dialogues were sampled. In this regard, future research can compare more translated versions and analyze more character-related contexts of HLM to discover whether various translators' understandings of the original text led to relatively fixed inconsistency in reproducing the original context of the situation.

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