



Basic Approaches to Improve Translation Quality Between English and Chinese

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The research is financed by the Jiangsu Provincial Research program "Translation classifications and Study of Translation Quality Assessment" (No.SJD740013)

Abstract

Translation quality assessment, with which both translation theory and practice are concerned, has been discussed and stressed. Translation quality improvement should also be reviewed before assessing and criticizing a translation version. It is very important for the beginners to have the textual awareness, to consider the intra-lingual, the extra-lingual and the transcultural aspects so as to improve translation quality in the process of translating. The awareness development and practice should be emphasized on. This paper attempts to explore several ways of improving translation quality, which emphasize translation accuracy, quality of writing and value of the text. Translation accuracy is the base of its quality improvement, quality of writing is the key to translation improvement, and the value of text is the essence of translation improvement.

Keywords: Translations, Improvement, Approaches, Quality

1. Introduction

My Chinese students of English translation have frequently asked me how we assess translation quality after they have finished their translation assignments. Frankly speaking, I have taught translation, as English to Chinese, or Chinese to English, for many years, but I have not translated many E to C and C to E texts, although I translate all the examples I use in class. My students ask me how we assess a translation. I think, as a matter of fact, the emphasis that both translation theory and practice lay is on the translation quality, which is one of the most important aspects in practical translation. This paper tries to explore some approaches for the beginners to improve their translation quality between English and Chinese. Whether or not a translation is good has been a priority. But different approaches define a 'good' translation differently, depending on the purpose of the assessment, and on the theoretical framework which the people assessing translation quality apply (Schaffner 1998:1). Generally, translation quality assessment is undertaken in the comparison between the source and target texts, which certainly consists of linguistic and functional comparison. What's more, the influences on translation quality are manifold. I think that some factors influencing translation quality primarily should be considered.

2. Textual Awareness

Firstly, translators can use their textual awareness in the process of translating. Textual awareness, I think, refers to the sense that the translator has of thoroughly reading and comprehending the whole text. Even though s/he just wants to translate a part of the text, s/he should read the whole text first before translating. I usually give my students a complete text each time, as their homework, since textual awareness requires a complete story. I wouldn't like to excerpt a book or an article for students' assignments because segments, in my opinion, will not give them a whole concept of the source. This is the basic step for improving translation quality. The more you understand the original, the better you will translate it. If the translator appreciates the text's multifaceted structure insufficiently, and shows linguistic insensitivity in translating, the result will lead to very unsatisfactory renderings of what he produces. Let us look at the following example, which is short but complete in plot, setting, character and other elements:

The original:

Fangzhi zailai

Piaoliang de nu xiaoshouyuan Ali xiaoshou yeji jingren, tonghangwen dou xiang ta taojiao tuixiao fangfa. Ta shuo: "wo meici shangmen,dou tong nage jiating de nan zhuren jiangming shangpin yongtu,ranhou shuo zheci,bubi jizhe

mai,yihou wo hui zailai. Zheshihou nan zhuren zongshi hen gaoxing, er nu zhuren ze mashang taoqian maixia.”

Translation version:

To Prevent My Return

Ah-li, a pretty sales girl, had a merit award for product promotion. And so her colleagues came over to ask her about her sales skills. She advised them, “Every time I come knocking at someone’s door to promote my product, without any exceptions, I introduce its uses to the host, and then I tell him not to pay right away because I will come later. The host is very pleased at hearing that, yet the hostess pays for it in no time to prevent me from coming back to visit her husband.” (My translation¹)

In spite of its shortness, it has a complete plot and other elements as a short story. In this way, students can fully understand the relationships between the main heroine *Ah-li* and other characters like the host and hostess. What’s more, they can clearly understand what happens in the story, that is, why *Ah-li* just talks to the host instead of the hostess, why the host is very pleased when hearing that, and why the hostess pays for the product immediately. Students can then successfully put it into English. I think that this is a very effective way to develop their textual awareness and promote translation quality, because short texts can be easily comprehended, fully rendered and simply used to master translation techniques. As a result, the value of the text can sufficiently be revealed in his/her translation. My experience shows that this approach is really suitable for the beginners. If we really want to select a passage or a part from a long text, even a novel, we should tell our students the gist and background of the text and help them understand what they translate.

3. Intra-lingual aspect

Secondly, a translation can be improved on a functional linguistic basis, in other words, a translator should know how both source and translated texts come to have meaning in the process of translating. I call the model “intra-lingual aspect”, which means that translation improvement is determined by linguistic concepts. In this respect, the notion of equivalence, on which the model is based, is related to the preservation of “meaning” across two different languages. This is House’s (1997:1) first question, “the relationship between a source text and its translation,” that she attempted to answer in her book *Translation Quality Assessment*. She uses the model, based on Halliday’s functional and systemic theory, to assess a translation, that is, “the semantic aspect of meaning, a pragmatic aspect and a textual aspect of meaning.” (House 1997:29-32) Her model, however, is a little bit different from my model, in which the semantic aspect of meaning refers to choice of words; the pragmatic aspect of meaning refers to a good and sufficient understanding of the original; and the textual aspect of meaning refers to the reorganization of the text, after completing the translation version.

3.1 Choice of words

The accurate and proper choice of words is actually needed in translation, especially from English to Chinese or from Chinese to English. Vocabulary is the unstable element of a language as it undergoes constant changes both in form and content. In comparison with Chinese, English words are characterized by greater vacillation and flexibility than Chinese words, because both languages belong to two different families. In other words, each English word when used in different contexts will have a somewhat different meaning, whereas Chinese words are more rigorous, accurate and fixed in meaning. Sometimes it is hard for a translator to select its meaning when encountering a tricky word, which really requires accuracy in translation. For example, the English word *delicate* when modifying different nouns has different meanings in such phrases as *delicate skin*, *delicate vase*, *delicate question*, *delicate food*, and so on. This same English word should be translated into different Chinese versions as *jiaonen de pifu*, *yisui de huaping*, *weimiao de wenti* and *meiwei de shiwu* respectively. This requires a translator to be faithful to the original and pay special attention to polysemy, or the indeterminacy of the English language in choosing Chinese words so that s/he can improve the translation quality when translating. The English word *singer* could be translated into three Chinese terms *geshou*, *gexing*, *gechanhja*, which are different one from another in meaning. In the *Qing* Dynasty of China (ca 1898, A.D.), *Yan Fu* (1853—1921 A.D.), a noted translator, stated the famous criteria of translation “faithfulness, expressiveness (communicability) and elegance” (*xin, da, ya*) when he finished translating *Evolution and Ethics and Other Essays*. Faithfulness is most important because it is put in the first place in his translation criteria. So we can say that translation quality is strongly influenced by accuracy and faithfulness to the original and by the fidelity of the words we choose.

3.2 Sensitivity to connotation

By sensitivity to connotation, I mean that a complete and sufficient understanding of the original is necessary. A translator not only understands the surface meaning but also the deep meaning of a word, a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph and a discourse. As we know, every language has its connotative meanings in written or spoken communication, and it has “a force which may override literal sense and relay added effects such as those associated with, say, a request or admonition” (Hatim 1997:179-183). Although it is used in an utterance, it has proved extremely important, “particularly when force departs from conventional sense, or when the ultimate effect defies the expectations based on either facet.” (Hatim 1997:180) The power of words, then, lies in their associations—the things they bring up before our minds. They are powerfully used to express different thoughts and emotions, by which their association can

move people to laughs or tears. We should, therefore, learn to choose our words carefully and use them accurately, or they will make our translation versions silly and vulgar. If a translator cannot convey such connotations, the translation may be discounted. Let us take the English sentence “Every life has its roses and thorns” for example. Here the phrase “*roses and thorns*” implies happiness and hardship in one’s life. It cannot be literally translated into Chinese. We can find many examples to corroborate this one, for instance, “to rain dogs and cats”, “to mend one’s fences”, “lick one’s boots”, “break the ice”, etc. Chinese character *shu* (book), generally referring to a number of printed pages fastened together and enclosed in a cover, is sometimes associated with knowledge, wisdom, even beauty in Chinese. Also when we read the following dialogue,

Child: Mummy, can I go out to play?

Mother: With those holes in your trousers?

Child: No, with the girl next door.

we should really understand the humorous touch in it. Otherwise, its translation will lose the value of the text. Even the position of a word may have a significant meaning in a sentence. If we are not aware of their pragmatic aspect of meaning, the versions may be superficial, and even ridiculous.

3.3 Reorganization of the finished text

The reorganization of the finished text is a necessary procedure after completing the translation. Here, I mean that the translator, reading his/her version without looking back at the original, reorganizes the translation after s/he finishes it, and adds or omits something if necessary. Especially we may add some connectives and adverbs so that we can make the version coherent and cohesive. I think it is the right of a translator to make the version suitable to the reader's taste and ensure that the reader reads the text smoothly. Below is a Chinese paragraph that is smooth in expression, succinct in language, and well-organized in structure.

The original: Debing yiqian, wo shou fumu chongai, zai jia hengxingbadao, yidan geli, jujin zai huanyuan shanpo shang yichuang xiao fangzi li, wo dun gan da ru lenggong, shifen yuyu bu dezhi qilai. Yige chuntian de bangwan, yuanzhong baihua nufang, fumu zai yuanzhong she yan, yishi binke yunji,xiaoyu siyi. Wo zai shanpo de xiao wu li, qiaoqiao qianqi chuanglian, kuijian yuanzhong daqian shijie, yipian fanhua, ziji de ge jie, tang biao dixiong, ye chuancha qijian, gege xiqi yangyang. Yishashi, yizhen bei ren bingqi, wei shi suo yi de beifen dou shang xintou, jin buzhu tongku qilai.

Translation version: Before catching the disease, I had been spoiled by my parents and had my own way in my family. Once quarantined and confined in a cabin on the hillside in the garden, I suddenly felt rather gloomy and depressed as if I were consigned to limbo. On a spring evening, my parents banqueted in the garden where all the flowers were blooming in full. In no time, all the guests came and gathered in crowds, talking and laughing. I, still in the cabin, quietly lifted the curtains of the window, through which I peeped at the busy outside world in a bustle. My brothers, sisters, and cousins, with joy and delight, busied themselves joining the guests. Momentarily, I had a grievous and indignant feeling that I was being deserted by the world, and forgotten by the people, and then I couldn’t help crying bitterly. (My translation)

The underlined parts in the above translation, which are not clearly found in the original, are our additions or adjustments, on the basis of context and logical analysis, after finishing translating. It is necessary for us to do so, as this helps reconstruct the complicated semantic relationships between sentences, say, the meaning cohesion of the translated text, and makes it clear and easy for the reader to follow the text smoothly. Furthermore, that is because the English language lays emphasis on hypotaxis and Chinese lays emphasis on parataxis.

The tense in the first sentence should be changed into the past participle tense “had been spoiled” in that the action in the context happened in a different period. The subjunctive mood in “I were consigned” is used to describe the depression and gloominess in the character's mood. The past progressive tense used in “were blooming in full” shows the environment of blooming flowers in the garden. The passive voice used in “was being deserted, and forgotten by” presents the character’s emotion or feeling at that moment. Such adverbs of time as “suddenly”, “in no time”, “momentarily” are employed to avoid repetition of time concepts and to show the hero’s psychological changes. The adverbs “once”, “rather”, “still”, and “then” are applied to serve as the connection of sentences and emphasis. All of these additions and adjustments make the translated text well-organized, coherent and cohesive and make the character in the text vivid and alive.

In summary, we consider the choice of words, sentence structure, and discourse when improving translation quality. We cannot overlook the role of linguistic aspects in the production of meaning in the process of translating. We may say that a version without fluent language is not a good translation; a version with considerable translationese, even clumsy words and sentences, is not a good translation either, lacking in organization.

4. Transcultural aspect

Thirdly, a translation can be improved by means of the culture-oriented model. I call it “the transcultural aspect”. As we know, every language contains its own customs, practices and traditions, which consist of its culture. Language and

culture are not separable. "Language is strongly influenced and shaped by culture just like a mirror. Culture is reflected in language, and at the same time it exists in the intellectual structures that a certain group uses as their language. In this sense, we ought to pay special attention to cultural aspects when we are engaged in the task of translation." (He Sanning 2005:213) Therefore the process of translation can be seen as a form of intercultural communication. If a translation does not convey such aspects, we can say it is not a good translation. Newmark has claimed² that the job of a translator is to expose the culture underlying the language he/she translates. The word "sexy", for instance, is a positive term in English, but its Chinese equivalent *xinggan* (sexy) suggests loose sex morality, which is generally rejected in Chinese culture. We should say that the cultural aspect is most difficult for a translator to deal with because cultures differ from one another and each is unique. As a result, difficulties often arise in translating between cultures and across cultures. Due to the relationship and between culture and language, translation is the process of rendering the culture underlying the language. Clearly, there are some lexical and cultural gaps between languages. For example, we cannot find equivalents in English for the Chinese titles *kezhang*, *chuzhang*, *juzhang*, *tingzhang*, *Wang Er shen*, *Xianglinsao*, *shifu*, *3etc*. The Chinese term "chuangsanyou" was once translated as "the 3-good", which doesn't make sense in English. In fact, it is short for "good order, good environment, and good service." Therefore we have to explore various ways and means of bridging the gaps in order to overcome the cultural differences. We cannot completely copy the cultures into our translations. But a satisfactory translation should show the reader the culture underlying the language. We should always remember that "The translator, not the author or the employer, is finally responsible for the text and the truth of the translation." (Newmark 2005:26-27)

5. Extra-lingual Aspect

Fourthly, translation quality should be considered in the extra-lingual aspect, that is, author, translator and reader. I call it "the trio model". Translations are dependent texts in two senses. They are dependent upon an original and its author and they are dependent upon its effects and the readership.

Speaking of the author, some theorists may argue that the author just stays out of translation. They think that it is none of the author's business after he finishes his work. They feared that authorial intention cannot possibly control the meaning and social functioning of the linguistic and cultural constituents of the foreign text. "Under the burden of these fears, translation has long been neglected in the study of literature, even in our current situation, where the influx of poststructuralist thinking has decisively questioned author-oriented literary theory and criticism." (Venuti 1998:31-39) A good translation, in my opinion, should be deeply rooted in and closely related to a good original. If the original is badly written, it will take a translator much time to translate and improve it. He has to write better than the author of the original. If he advocates the principles of accuracy and faithfulness, he has to decide what to do in the face of the badly written original. That is why comparative model has to be done in translation studies and translation quality assessment. In the early stage of translation history, the author's function was thought of as more important than translator's in translating, whose job was just a kind of imitation. Recently some theorists have stated that the translator's function is more significant (Jin 2005:40-68). I think that both views are two extremes⁴. Actually, each of them has his own role in translating, all of them can make contributions to translation and its quality, and they never replace one another.

The translator is in duty bound to improve translation quality. The status of a translator is well respected and highlighted in contemporary translation theory. "The translator offers this new audience a target text whose composition is, of course, guided by the translator's assumptions about their needs, expectations, previous knowledge, and so on. These assumptions will obviously be different from those made by the original author, because source-text addressees and target-text addressees belong to different cultures and language communities. What the translator does is offer another kind of information in another form." (Nord 1997:35) A translator has the right to select among the aesthetic options about the text and style. In other words, a translator takes the active role, instead of that of a passive and negative imitator or copier, in the process of translating. Faithfulness is one matter, and creativeness is another. Faithfulness is a basic term, which we translators should insist on. With creativeness, especially in literary translation, a translation will be vitalized. On the other hand, the reader wants to get what he needs from the translation. A translator should be responsible to the reader. This is because a translator's duty is to serve and satisfy the reader. Newmark (2002:96) has summed up the translator's three responsibilities⁵, which has fully stated the translator's importance in translation. "...in principle, she must neither mislead her readers nor leave them the doubt about its meaning, unless the doubt or ambiguity is intended in the text." (Newmark 2005:26-27)

Speaking of the reader, some people argue that the reader has nothing to do with translation. The question is why we translate and whom we translate for. "Communicative translation addresses itself solely to the second reader, who does not anticipate difficulties or obscurities, and would expect a generous transfer of foreign elements into his own culture as well as his language where necessary." (Newmark 1981:39) Taking the readership into full consideration is an important aspect in translation quality. Our purpose is to introduce what we desire to translate to the reader of the target language. In this case, we manage to convert it into a reliable, well-written, and accurate text. This motivation will impel us unremittingly to improve translation quality. On the other hand, the reader's likes and dislikes are a yardstick

against which a “good” translation is measured. Therefore, we should always keep the awareness of readership in mind in the process of translating.

6. Conclusion

In short, we improve translation quality in the above-mentioned respects, which cover translation accuracy, quality of writing and value of the text. Translation accuracy is the base of its quality improvement because accuracy is one of the principles in translation, retaining as much of the sense as we translate. Quality of writing is the key to translation improvement because translators have to keep the version fluent, ensuring that the reader follows it as easily and smoothly as possible, and the value of text is the essence of translation improvement because one of a translator’s tasks is to transfer the cultural aspects from one language from another, avoiding cultural distortion in the version to the best of our ability.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my appreciation to my supervisor, Professor Peter Newmark, who has given me his guidance, his continuous as well as his unlimited support throughout this paper. I would like to thank Dr. Margaret Rogers for her revision and suggestions to my article.

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Notes

Note 1. The original text was once used as my students’ timed practice in class so as to test their translation speed and the degree of their understanding.

Note 2. This is the personal communication between Newmark and me when we discussed some translation theories in the face-to-face tutorial sessions.

Note 3. Such Chinese titles as kezhang, zhuzhang, juzhang and tingzhang are classified for different chiefs in government agency. We can’t find their equivalents in English. The titles Wang Er shen, Xianglin Sao, Shifu are something in English like Wang Er’s wife, Xianglin’s wife and teacher respectively, but they cannot literally be translated into English.

Note 4. Jin, Shenghua concluded that, in the early stage of translation circles, text analysis, including its authorship was only stressed rather than background information. Recently more and more theorists have only realized the importance of other aspects, instead of the translated and its translator. The way they undertake their research is unilateral.

Note 5. Newmark (2002) stated in his article *Translation Now* (*The Linguist* 41,3:96) , “Whatever the source language text, the translator’s responsibility is to convert it into a reliable, well-written(non-literary) text, irrespective of the forms and modes of such translations, which continue to multiply. The translator’s second responsibility is to mediate the essential and the implied truth, either of the valid text she has translated, or, where the text is deficient, i.e. inaccurate, biased or slipshod, through her extratextual resource. The translator’s third responsibility is to conform to what I believe to be the five universal and non-cultural concrete principles of translating, which indicate that it is a noble, truth-seeking activity: these principles are...”