

Two Possibilities of Translation from the Perspective of Linguistics

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Abstract: Translation, as an important carrier of cross-cultural activities, plays a significant role in cultural exchange and foreign relations, and its main purpose is to reproduce in the target language the information and ideas that the author of the original language wishes to convey. There are only two types of translation, translatable and untranslatable. The article discusses the two possibilities of translation from a linguistic point of view, analyzing and illustrating them with examples. On the premise that translation is possible, there are mainly two kinds of translation methods: semantic translation and communicative translation, while translation is considered impossible on the one hand because of the changes of the translation process and on the other hand because of the translator's inability to restore the linguistic characteristics of the original text, which may destroy the rhythm of the original text. Despite the existence of two possibilities for translation, it is generally accepted in contemporary academic circles that the possibility and impossibility of translation coexist.

Keywords: translatability; untranslatability; linguistics

1. Introduction

Although translation studies and linguistics exist as two independent disciplines, they are actually intertwined and closely integrated with each other. Linguistics plays a role that cannot be ignored in the process of translation work, and translation work is essential in the study and research of linguistics. Jakobson expressed the importance of symbols in his article *On Linguistic Aspects of Translation*. To understand a completely new thing without symbols, no matter how it is interpreted as anything, it cannot be understood, that is, meaning must exist with the help of symbols,^[1] only by understanding the meaning of the thing with the help of symbols and combining it with the context can we achieve the optimization of translation. Whether it is the symbols that help us understand the meaning, or the context that must be taken into account in order to achieve better translation results, they are all part of linguistics, which also shows the close connection between translation and linguistics. There are actually only two possibilities for translation: translatable and untranslatable. How to understand the two possibilities of translation from a linguistic perspective will be discussed and illustrated with examples in the article.

2. Translation is Possible

Jakobson cited Saussure's thoughts, taking understanding the word "cheese" as an example to illustrate that only by giving meaning to a symbol can it become an understandable symbol, and then made classifications of translation based on semiotic theory, and explains the principles and methods of translation from the linguistic level. Jakobson examines the nature of language from a linguistic perspective and points out that "all cognitive experiences and their classifications can be expressed in any existing language." As a language communicator, he believes that translation is possible, that all words have the same expressive ability, and once a vocabulary gap occurs, it can be filled by borrowing words, coining words, semantic conversion and other methods. This makes it possible to understand why language is expanded, developed and replaced in the process of interpretation.

John Wycliffe used an extreme translation method to translate the Bible between 1382 and 1395, a literal translation that put language at the top list, and translated the Latin Bible into medieval English. In the translation, English words replaced the original Latin words almost word for word, without considering any issues such as context, culture, word order, etc. Although Wycliffe's translation of the Bible is hailed as a milestone on the road to Bible translation, from a linguistic perspective, this linguistically dominated translation under the theory of translation equivalence cannot be accepted by

readers. Supporters believe that only by placing literal translation of words before cultural concerns can the authenticity of the original text be reflected, but take the Wycliffe Bible translation as an example, “Schal more be a friend” completely retains the Latin word order and it is obviously inappropriate to replace the English words in the translation process by retaining the Latin word order completely. This makes the translation not conform to the syntactic specifications of Middle English. Some linguists pointed out that Wycliffe’s views were too extreme, and literal translation of the whole text would lead to a decrease in translation accuracy and readability, and suggested that the concept of cultural background should be taken into account.

Nowadays, it is obvious that translation is no longer a simple word replacement game, and the proposal of “taking the concept of cultural background into account” is more reasonable. Cultural background is included in context, so we can understand that the possibility of translation is firstly based on context, the context can determine the meaning of words, any language is produced in a specific environment and cannot be separated from it. With the support of context, by combining English translation with a certain context can the translated text remain original and fit the theme of the sentence. Context, from a linguistic perspective, is the role that pragmatics plays in translation.

Translation based on context must take into account the two purposes of information exchange and cultural communication. On the one hand, it should emphasize the application scenarios of language, while accurately conveying basic information, pursuing life-oriented and localized expressions; on the other hand, it is necessary to emphasize the symbolic communication function of translation, conveying the literal meaning while taking into account the values, history and culture. On this basis, we simply believe that there are two main ways to realize the feasibility of translation: semantic translation and communicative translation, and cite the following examples:

A: Merry Christmas.

B: Hallway’s secure. Hotel’s keeping things under wraps. And I should be home eating my wife’s kringle right now.

2.1. Semantic Translation

Semantic translation pursues the equivalence of wording and phrasing between the translated text and the original text. The translation should be as close as possible to the form of the original text, retaining the language, characteristics and style of the original text. This method has some similarities with Wycliffe’s proposition that semantic translation attaches great importance to the form of the original text and the original intention of the author, rather than the target language context and its expression, let alone turning the translated text into a product of the target language cultural situation.

In the original dialogues A and B, we first need to understand the word “kringle”, know the referent of kringle, and understand the universal meaning of kingle: ring cake, the name of Danish cake, ring structure domain. Based on the context of Christmas in the original text, choosing a suitable word meaning from the universal meaning of kingle and replace the original text with Chinese. Kingle here refers to a ring-shaped biscuit that Westerners eat at Christmas, that is, Christmas ring biscuits. Therefore, B of the conversation is translated as “Hallway’s secure. Hotel’s keeping things under wraps. And I should be home eating my wife’s Christmas ring biscuits right now.” In the Christmas scene, “kringle” is no longer a meaningless ring structure, but a figurative food. It can be seen from this translation process that the translation only considers the expression of the language and does not pay attention to the conversion of context in the target language. It retains the style and format of the original text and does not make any major changes. There is nothing inherently wrong with this translation, but for the target Chinese audience, it is a little difficult to get the emotional expression.

2.2. Communicative Translation

Different from semantic translation, communicative translation pays more attention to the effect of information transmission, “attempting to accurately convey the contextual meaning, ideological content and linguistic form of the original text in a way that is easily accepted and understood by the target readers.” Therefore, under communicative translation, we can explore better translation for A, B.

When we translate “kringle” as “Christmas ring biscuits” in Chinese instead of simply translating it into “ring cake”, “Danish cake” or “ring structure” from the literal meaning, we in fact complete the translation from the perspective of pragmatics. But we know that the context considered in pragmatics is not just the contact context, generally speaking, there are natural contexts, local contexts and self-created

artificial contexts, of which the natural environment refers to the living environment of the native speaker of the language, which we commonly understand as the cultural context. So for those who know the western cultural background, it is not difficult to understand the meaning of this passage: B was unable to reunite with his family at Christmas because of work. We know that Christmas is just like the Chinese New Year, so it is not difficult for us to feel B's helplessness and small complaints under this situation, but for people who do not understand Western culture at all, they may not be able to understand B's emotions, so the translation does not maximize the effect when the audience is Chinese, because we have not taken into account the cultural context. How can we make Chinese readers empathize with B and maximize the understanding of this passage? That is context transformation, we transform Christmas in the western context into Spring Festival in the Chinese context and also transform Christmas ring biscuits in the western context into dumpling in Chinese context, then translate the original text as "A: Happy Chinese New Year. B: Hallway's secure. Hotel's keeping things under wraps. And I should be home eating my wife's dumplings right now.". Obviously compared with the first translation under semantic translation, the communicative translation is more able to emotionally resonate with the Chinese audiences.

Obviously, this translation method is what we often call "domestication". Therefore, domestication is a translation method developed from the perspective of pragmatics, which can allow readers to understand the situation of the source language to the greatest extent and feel the same.

3. Translation is Impossible

Although Jakobson believes that translation is possible and fulfils the function of exchanging and transmitting information from a linguistic point of view, both in terms of semantics and context, but at the same time, there are also situations where translation is impossible: Poetry is untranslatable as pointed out by Jakobson.

Poetry translation means that the translator accurately conveys the form, connotation and image in the original text to the target language readers by converting the language, so that they will have similar emotional resonance as the target language readers. There are many controversies among researchers about whether poetry can be translated or not. Every language has its own unspeakable features, so some scholars believe that this "language blank" is an important reason why poetry is "untranslatable", but some scholars believe that "untranslatable" does not mean that poetry translation is completely unfeasible. Although there are differences in language, the emotional resonance is the same, so they try to use different means and translation strategies to make up for this regret and promote the spread of poetry literature.^[2]

As for the reasons why poetry cannot be translated, this article believes that there are mainly two reasons.

3.1. Create Rather Than Translate

There is no clear answer to the question of whether literary works with strong emotional and cultural atmosphere, such as poetry, can be translated or not. But when a translator tries to translate a literary work and convey the author's emotions, the test for the translator is no longer pure language ability, but more literary and creative ability. The translator is no longer a translator, but an author, a creator, trying to figure out the emotions of the original author and making secondary creation on the basis of the original text to make it readable and emotionally communicative to the target language audience. The emotions are interoperable. This process is no longer a pure language translation, but a process of literary recreation. The translator's own recreation on the theme of the source text has already jumped out of the category of translation, so we no longer call this process translation, and so we say that translation is impossible in this situation. Here we take a short passage from the English version of Neruda's poem and its two Chinese translations as an example:

English version: I feel your eyes traveling, and the autumn is far off;
gray beret, voice of a bird, hearts like a house
towards which deep longings migrated
and my kisses feel, happy as embers

After reading some Chinese translations and comparing these versions with the original English

version, we can find that all translators actually made their own literary creations based on their understanding of the main idea of the source text. For example, in the version of Huang Canran, the translation does not strictly follow the source text word for word. There is neither “ash-like” nor “collapse” in the original text, at the same time, the elements of the original text are not restored one by one, such as the omission of the phrase “towards which my deep longings migrated”. This is the result of the translator’s re-creation. What the translator wants to convey is emotion, not language.

Compared with Huang Canran’s translation, Li Zongrong follows the source text more closely, and the main image elements of the original text are displayed in the translation. Meanwhile, there is also no lack of own creation, which is especially reflected in the translation of “kiss” to “thousand kisses”. My kiss falls, but just one kiss doesn’t seem to be enough to express the depth of my love. How can I make you, can make my readers feel the depth of my love? The kiss is no longer just a kiss, but become thousands of kisses, thousands of kisses falling one after another, showing the love in my heart. After the translator’s recreation, emotions are vented through words.

When we jump out of the scope of translation and look at the recreation process of poetry, language is no longer the only criterion for judging the work, and we begin to analyze and appreciate literary works from the perspective of literary appreciation.

3.2. *Destroyed Rhythm*

China has a rich culture of ancient poetry and lyrics, including five-character quatrains, seven-character quatrains and other forms. Ancient poetry is different from vernacular Chinese in that it pays attention to rhythm. The combination of emotion and rhythm amplifies the charm of language, as it does in Western poetry. Western poetry is also divided into metrical poetry and free verse, which is not just a list of words and emotional outpouring. Such as the most familiar sonnet. Sonnet is a type of lyric poetry in Europe. The most important representative of sonnet is the Italian poet Petrarch. There are eleven stanzas per line of verse in his sonnets, usually in iambic pentameter. A further step forward than Petrarch are Shakespeare’s sonnets, with a more distinct and richer theme, twists and turns of ideas, and often point out the title of the poem in the last couplet. The structure of Shakespeare’s sonnet is also more rigorous, consisting of three quatrains and a couplet, with ten syllables per line and iambic pentameter. Take Shakespeare’s Sonnet 141 as an example:

Original Text: In faith I do not love thee with mine eyes
 For they in thee a thousand errors note;
 But `tis my heart that loves what they despise
 Who in despite of view is pleased to dote.
 Nor are mine ears with thy tongue`s tune delighted;
 Nor tender feeling to base touches prone
 Nor taste nor smell desire to be invited
 To any sensual feast with thee alone.
 But my five wits nor my five senses can
 Dissuade one foolish heart from serving thee
 Who leaves unswayed the likeness of a man
 Thy proud heart`s slave and vassal wretch to be.
 Only my plague thus far I count my gain
 That she that makes me sin awards me pain.

Here we make comparison between the original text and the Chinese version translated by Li Zongdai. From a structural point of view, the translation no longer strictly follows the rhythm of the original poem, nor does it use Chinese pauses to reflect the pentameter of the original poem, and it also does not reflect the rhyme characteristics of the original poem. However, from the perspective of emotion and information transmission, through translation, readers can fully understand the emotions and information to be expressed in the original text, so can we think that the translator has successfully translated the poem? Strictly speaking, no. Part of the charm of poetry comes from the rhythm and metre it follows. Obviously, the more rigorous the structure of the poetry, the more difficult it is to translate, and it is difficult to completely copy the rhythm of one language into another different language, just as the translator cannot restore Chinese quatrains in translated text. To a large extent, the translator can only respect the text and emotions and give up a certain amount of rhythm and metre, which makes that the rhythm and metre of the original text will be destroyed to a large extent during the translation process, in which case, we cannot say that poetry is translatable.

4. Linguistic Explanation of Translatability and Untranslatability

Most linguists, including Jakobson, hold the idea of “translatability”. Jakobson believes that all cognitive experiences and types of experience can be transmitted in any existing language. Nida and Taber also pointed out that what is expressed in one language can be expressed in another.^[3] The similarities in semantic and syntactic structures between different languages are the basis for translatability. Semantic translation is a kind of translation based on language commonality, using the target language to replace the semantic body in the syntactic structure of the original language, retaining the structure and characteristics of the original language to the greatest extent possible.

While there are commonalities in language, there are also commonalities in human thinking, which is something that can be translated and recognized like the objective world. Although people use different languages, the thinking forms possessed by humans are the same, and the logical thinking forms are also similar, so that interlingual conversion is possible. In order to maximize the translation’s acceptance and understanding by the target language audience, on the basis of semantic translation, more factors such as culture and emotion are taken into consideration, which becomes communicative translation.

Different languages have different characteristics and stylistic features, such as puns, rhythm and metre, etc., which will inevitably cause certain difficulties in translation. For example, Jakobson pointed out that if “traduttore, traditore” is translated as “the translator is a betrayer”, the original Italian aphorism will lose its humorous color and pun value. After conducting an in-depth analysis of the limits of untranslatability or translatability from the perspectives of linguistics and culture, Catford proposed two types of untranslatability, namely, linguistic untranslatability and cultural untranslatability. The former is mainly due to the polysemy of a word and the isomerism of words and grammar, while the latter is due to the fact that the functionally relevant contextual features of the original text do not exist in part of the culture of the target language.^[4] Therefore, the article divides untranslatability into two main cases. First of all, it is untranslatable because the process of translation has become a process of re-creation by the translator, due to the many differences in culture behind different languages, in order to enable readers to understand the information conveyed by the source text to the greatest extent, the translator recreates the work in the context of the source text and restores the work in the target language. Secondly, in literature, literary works in different languages have their own linguistic characteristics, such as rhythm, form and cultural imagery. Even if the translator achieves the transmission of emotions and information between the original author and the target language audience through his own re-creation, the original rhythm and style of the work may have changed and no longer have the characteristics of the original language, so this translation is still imperfect to some extent.

In terms of the commonality of language, translation is certainly possible; but in terms of the uniqueness of language, translation is impossible to a certain extent. Linguistic translation theorists have long been aware of the coexistence of translatability and untranslatability. Although the poems in each language are different, the inspiration and feelings of the poets are indeed closely related.^[5] Translators can establish emotional communication between authors and audiences using different languages by virtue of their profound literary literacy and superb language skills. However, various deviations and gaps caused by different cultural backgrounds will always exist, which can be remedied but cannot be eliminate. As translation theorist Georges Mounin put it, “translation is possible, but it does have limits.”

5. Conclusion

There is no doubt that translation and linguistics are closely related. The commonalities in the deep structure of language provide the possibility of translation, while the contexts of pragmatics make translation more responsive to the needs of the target audience and push translation towards optimization. At the same time, the uniqueness of different languages poses obstacles to translation, and the characteristics of one language cannot be completely copied into another different language through translation, so translation becomes impossible to a certain extent.

Under the premise of language commonality, semantic translation completes translation by substituting semantic bodies in different languages, which preserves the characteristics of the original language and respects the original text as much as possible. To achieve a better translation effect, communicative translation takes culture and other elements into account, and achieves a translation that is more in line with the habits of the target language audience through contextual transmission. And the reason why translation is impossible is reflected more in literary works. On the one hand, the process of translation becomes a process of creation for the translator; on the other hand, the translator is unable to

completely copy the linguistic features and style of the original language, and there is a high probability that the rhythm of the original text will be destroyed, which makes the translation work no longer complete.

Overall, the two possibilities of translation coexist. In most cases, translation is possible, but there is a limit beyond which translation is no longer possible.

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