

Original Paper

The Study of Pun Translation in Zhu Shenghao's Chinese Version of *King Lear* from the Perspective of Relevance Theory

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Abstract

As one of the most commonly used rhetorical devices by Shakespeare, pun plays a significant role in Shakespeare's works. In the translation of pun, it is quite important to handle it well so that the target text readers can understand Shakespeare's works better. There are plenty of puns in King Lear, which brings great challenges to translators. By analyzing the pun translation in Zhu Shenghao's version of King Lear from the perspective of relevance theory, this paper attempts to prove the explanatory power and guiding role of relevance theory in pun translation. By analyzing the translation of puns, it can figure out whether the translators have provided the best contextual effects and realized the optimal relevance in their translations.

Keywords

relevance theory, pun translation, King Lear

1. Introduction

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is widely regarded as one of the greatest playwrights and poets the world has ever known. Throughout his life, Shakespeare not only wrote many long poems and sonnets, but also left the world thirty-seven splendid plays, which cover a wide range of subjects and themes. Among those plays, *King Lear* occupies an incomparable status due to its flexible use of language, successful shaping of characters and the skillful application of rhetorical devices. With an increasing cultural exchanges between countries, Shakespeare's works have been translated into various languages. It is necessary and meaningful to conduct studies on *King Lear* and its translations. Among those Chinese versions of *King Lear*, the version of Zhu Shenghao enjoys a great reputation. Therefore, this paper chooses Zhu Shenghao's version of *King Lear* as the study text, analyzing the pun translation from the perspective of relevance theory.

According to the dictionary of Merriam-Webster, pun refers to the usually humorous use of a word in such a way as to suggest two or more meanings or the meaning of another word similar in sound (1842). Pun utilizes the structural features of language so as to perform certain communicative functions. Due to a different language structures, it is not easy to retain the phonological and semantic features of puns when translating into another language. Thus, it poses a question to translators and scholars that whether puns are translatable or not. By analyzing the translation of puns, it can figure out whether the translators have provided the best contextual effects and realized the optimal relevance in their translations.

2. Literature Review

Research on pun translation mostly focuses on the translatability of puns and the translation strategies of puns. Ke Ping (1998) claimed that puns were untranslatable because the dual senses of puns involved the phonetic and semantic features within the language which were conveyed as the information content in puns. Some scholars believed that the translatability was a question of degree. For instance, Li Guonan (1988) mentioned that translation had its limits but not all the puns were unable to translate. For translatable puns, it is suggested that puns should be preserved in the translation as much as possible; for untranslatable puns, the translator can choose the translation methods flexibly such as using other rhetorical techniques in Chinese to attempt to preserve the artistic effect of puns in the original text. In Theory of Functional Equivalence in Pun Translation, Jian Lihua and Xu Hualing (2006) believed that in order to translate puns, translators must get rid of the shackles of language form, devote themselves to language effect, find the best balance between being loyal to the original author and to the translator and readers, and pursue the maximum functional equivalence. In terms of pun translation techniques research, Lv Jun (1983) made a generalization about pun translation methods which included translating puns by puns, preserving the denotation of puns, preserving the connotation of puns, and adding comments or explanations. Xu Zhongbing (1988b) made a preliminary discussion on the categories and Chinese translation of English puns. He claimed that it was the most ideal translation method to retain the meaning of pun after translating into Chinese, besides which he also proposed methods of compensation, adding explanations, etc.

Researches on the translation of puns in Shakespeare's works focus more on case studies which analyse the text from different perspectives to study the translation strategies of translators or give suggestions on the translation of puns. Malcolm Offord (1897) analyzed the translation strategies adopted by different translators in dealing with Shakespeare's puns. Xu Zhongbing (1988a) took examples from Zhu Shenghao's translation of Shakespeare and generalized four translation strategies for translating puns by analyzing concrete cases. Li Jingjing (2013) conducted a cognitive study on the translation of puns in Shakespeare's plays based on meaning conceptual principles of Conceptual Blending Theory by analyzing puns from *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Measure for Measure*, *Henry IV*, and *Much Ado about Nothing*. In relevant literature, we can find that most scholars selected *Hamlet* as the study text to research on the translation of Shakespeare's puns, followed by *Romeo and Juliet*, *Much*

Ado about Nothing, *Love's Labour's Lost*, etc. For example, Miao Linna (2010) compared and analyzed the pun translation of two Chinese versions of *Hamlet* by Zhu Shenghao and Liangshiqiu on the basis of Delabastita's pun translation theory.

Most of studies on *King Lear* focus on the connotation interpretation, linguistic meanings or rhetorical devices of the original text. For example, Ma Guangli (2007) studied the power discourse in *King Lear* from the aspect of New Historicism. Ma Fenying (2012) investigated the mad images in *King Lear* and the cultural implication conveyed by these mad images. For the translations of *King Lear*, most scholars tended to adopt different approaches to conduct comparative studies. For instance, Li Hong (2006) analyzed the three translations of *King Lear* in different periods on the basis of dynamics adaptability, and pointed out that the translation standards should be constantly reinterpreted so as to adapt to different times, contexts, and communicative purposes.

There are few literature that study and discuss the pun translation of *King Lear*, especially from the perspective of relevance theory. Therefore, research on the pun translations of Zhu Shenghao from the perspective of Relevance Theory is of great necessity and importance.

3. Introduction to Relevance Theory

Put forward by the French linguist Dan Sperber and the British linguist Deirdre in their book *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, Relevance Theory is the principle that the communication process involves not only encoding, transfer, and decoding of messages, but also numerous other elements, including inference and context. It is also called the principle of relevance. Sperber and Wilson have expanded and deepened discussions of relevance theory in numerous books and articles. They defined relevance as an assumption which "is relevant in a context if and only if it has some contextual effect in that context" (Sperber & Wilson, 2001). In communication, when the content of the information from the communicator is worthy of people's efforts to understand, the information is relevant and will achieve contextual effects. Information has relevance only if it has contextual effect in that context. The concept of relevance is a comparative concept. It is decided by two factors—processing effort and contextual effect. The more effort the reasoning process needs, the weaker the contextual effect will be and the weaker their relevance will be.

Relevance Theory is a communicative theory, in which communication is an ostensive-inferential process, a cognitive activity going on with the help of inference. Ostension and inference are two aspects of communication. For the speaker, communication is the process of ostension, which means to clearly express the communicative intentions when communicating. If the listener can understand the speaker's intention, then the act of ostension is successful. For the listener, communication is a process of reasoning. By decoding the intention of the speaker's ostension, and combining the previous information and the cognitive context, the listener can infer and get the right understanding of the information expressed by the speaker.

Relevance Theory is based on the Cognitive Principle and the Communicative Principle. The first one means that human cognition tends to seek the maximization of relevance and the second one means that every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance (Li, 2007). Furthermore, in discussion of relevance degree, Sperber and Wilson found that from a cognitive point of view, people usually use the least cognitive effort to achieve the greatest cognitive effect in the process of understanding content.

Later, Ernst August Gutt developed Relevance Theory of translation, which was published in 1991 as a book *Translation and Relevance: Cognitive and Context*. It was Gutt who, after reviewing many previous studies, first introduced relevance theory to translation. The relevance translation theory offers us a new inspiring perspective in translation and is both applicable and practicable. In Relevance Theory, relevance is capable of accounting for all the phenomena in translation studies. In Relevance Theory of translation, translation is a communication process of cognitive inferences. Gutt claimed that translation is an act of communication in nature and the speaker's intentions and the listener's expectations are two decisive factors for a successful communication (1991). Since translation is finished in line with the author's intentions and the reader's expectations, the translator's top priority is to make the writer's intentions and the targeted reader's expectations meet. Therefore, translation, in essence, is an act of communication. In verbal communication, what the two communication parties express must be relevant to the content expressed by the overall topic. Only in this way can the listener understand the speaker's intention. So, what Relevance Theory in translation pursues is the optimal relevance decided by optimal contextual effect.

Translation, in line with the principles of communication, is a special communication between two languages. Translators hold dual responsibilities of inference. In the first place, translators have to infer what it means in the source texts. In the second place, translators should have full knowledge of the target reader's cognitive context—the receptor's culture. In other words, translators need to be well acquainted with whether the contextual assumption the source writer intends to express exists in the context of the target reader or not. If it does exist, how much effort does the reader need to make to understand? Therefore, Relevance Theory plays an important role in restraining what the translation intends to convey and how to convey the intention to the target reader.

4. Cases Study in Pun Translation

As mentioned in the previous text, relevance theory plays an interpreting role in translation process and a guiding role in translation practice. In the first round of communication, the translator must have the cognitive environment of the ST readers so as to recognize the original author's informative intention. In the second round of communication, the translator has to correctly evaluate the cognitive environment of the TT readers, and convey the informative intention of the original author so as to meet the expectations of the TT readers of relevance. In order to ensure the success of communication, the translator needs to choose appropriate translation strategies.

Considering factors such as the translator's competence, translation purpose and the TT readers' cognitive expectations. Therefore, the translator should flexibly choose the translation method according to the specific situation. Here are some examples of pun translation in Zhu Shenghao's version.

Example 1:

GLOUCESTER: I have so often blushed to acknowledge him that now I am brazened To't.

KENT: I cannot conceive you.

GLOUCESTER: Sir, this young fellow's mother could; whereupon she grew round-womb and had indeed, sir, a son for her cradle ere she had a husband for her bed. (Shakespeare, 2014, p. 10)

Zhu's version:

格洛斯特：老哥，他的养育是我的责任。我常羞于认他，但次数一多，现在已经老脸皮了。

肯特：我搞不懂您的意思

格洛斯特：老哥，这小伙子的母亲可懂得搞；因此她的肚皮搞得远光，然后，老哥，枕边还没个丈夫，摇篮里就先有个儿子。您看出这犯了忌吧？(朱生豪, 2019, p. 3)

The word "conceive" in the original text is a homonymic pun, which means "to understand" or "to be regnant". What Kent wants to express is that he cannot understand what Lear has just said. But Gloucester uses the other sense of "conceive" in his answer, indicating that this young fellow's mother knows how to become pregnant, which brings about a punning effect. For the source text readers, they can easily deduce the original author's informative intention as long as they understand the dual meanings of the word. According to relevance theory, the translator should not only obtain the original author's communicative intention through inference, but also needs to consider how to manifest the informative intention to the target text readers.

In Zhu's translation, the word "conceive" is translated into "搞不懂". In Chinese the word "搞" can be followed by a complement, such as "搞不懂", which means "cannot understand". At the same time it can also be used as a verb which means to have sex with someone. Therefore in this translation the original pun is perfectly reproduced with a Chinese pun. The target text readers not only understand what the characters want to convey in a coherent way, but also obtain sufficient contextual effects with little effort. From the perspective of relevance theory, this translation realizes the communicative intentions of the original text. What's more, with minimal processing efforts the readers of Zhu's translation can infer from the context the dual meanings which the original author aims to deliver.

Example 2:

KENT: Repose you there while I to this hard house—more harder than the stones whereof 'tis raised, which even but now, demanding after you, denied me to come in—return and force their scant courtesy. (Shakespeare, 2014, p. 78)

Zhu's version:

肯特：这儿附近有一间茅屋可以替您挡挡风雨。我刚才曾经到那所冷酷的屋子里——那比它墙上的石块更冷酷无情的屋子——探问您的行踪，可是他们关上了门不让我进去；现在您且暂时躲一躲雨，我还要回去，非要他们讲一点人情不可。(朱生豪, 1994, p. 488)

The homonymic pun “hard” is used to describe the house and the stones, meaning “pitiless” and “solid” respectively. Kent plays with this word so as to satirize the callousness of those in Gloucester’s house. When the ST readers see the first “hard”, they will get the first information that people in the house are merciless by inferences. When they see the second “hard”, they can naturally deduce the connection between the two word of “hard” according to the context and realize the punning effect the original author intends to express. From the perspective of relevance theory, the ST readers can easily recognize the informative intention of the original author, so as to achieve the success of communication.

Zhu Shenghao replaces the pun in the source text with a pun in the target text, in an attempt to restore the context in the original text and help the TT readers to strengthen the contextual effect. The Chinese pun he employs is “冷酷”, which means “heartless” when it refers to the people in the house, and “cold” when refers to “屋子”. Since Zhu’s translation provides the same explicit stimulus as the original text, the processing efforts and contextual effects of the TT readers are similar to those of the ST readers. In other words, the TT readers can get the optimal relevance through Zhu’s translation. From the perspective of relevance theory, although the pun used by Zhu is not exactly the same with that of the original text, it can still enable the TT readers to obtain sufficient contextual effects with minimal efforts, so that it can achieve the optimal relevance.

The examples above show that the translator can find a suitable pun in the target text to translate the pun in source text. However, when the translator cannot find a suitable pun in the target text to replace the source text pun, he may adopt a compensatory translation strategy, which means rendering the ST pun into a rhetorical device so as to reproduce the effect of the ST pun. Here are the examples.

Example 3:

LEAR: What dost thou profess? What wouldst thou with us?

KENT: I do profess to be no less than I seem. (Shakespeare, 2014, p. 31)

Zhu’s version:

李尔：你干什么的？你来见我有什么事？

肯特：您瞧我像是干什么的，我就是干什么的。(朱生豪, 1994, p. 446)

The word “profess” in the original text is a play on words. Kent changes the sense of “profess” from “profession” to claim and to declare, with which he subtly answer Lear’s question in the sense of humour and tease. Since the main purpose of the original author is to use the pun to highlight the humor of Kent’s language, its semantics is less important than its function. Due to the difference between source language and target language, it’s hard to find an equivalent Chinese pun as the translation. Therefore, the translator choose apply related rhetorical device of repetition to compensate for the missing pun effect. Zhu repeats the phrase “干什么” to replace “to be no less than”. By repeating the phrase “干什么” three times, the readers will recognize the use of repetition more easily so that they will be aware that Kent is deliberately playing word games with Lear. In fact, from the perspective of relevance theory, whether the meaning of the second “profess” is translated or not does not have much impact on the contextual effects. The TT

readers can understand the original author's communicative intention with similar processing efforts and contextual effects.

Example 4:

LEAR: How old art thou?

KENT: Not so young, sir, to love a woman for sing, nor so old to dote on her for anything: I have years on my back forty-eight. (Shakespeare, 2014, p. 32)

Zhu's version:

李尔：你年纪多大了？

肯特：大爷，说我年轻，我也不算年轻，我不会为了一个女人会唱几句歌而害相思；说我年老，我也不算年老，我不会糊里糊涂地溺爱一个女人；我已经活过四十八个年头了。(朱生豪, 1994, p. 447)

The word “anything” in the original text is a sexual pun, with “thing” playing on the sense of “vagina”. It is an indirect way to play on words, expressing the underlying meaning about sex. Kent's implication here is that he is not odd enough to spoil a woman for sex. Considering the implied meaning of the pun in the original text, Zhu choose to implicitly convey the sexual meaning in Kent's words. The translator's translation methods have greatly minimized the TT readers' processing efforts in understanding what the original author intends to convey, which is helpful to achieve the optimal relevance. From the perspective of relevance theory, the translation strategy of rendering sexual puns into indirect expression combined with translation techniques can help the target readers get sufficient contextual effect. Therefore, when dealing with sexual puns, the translator can consider euphemisms if he cannot find an alternative pun in the target culture.

All the examples above are good ones. They prove that Zhu's translation are so successful that it can achieve optimal relevance according to the relevance theory. Nevertheless, there is also some translation that is not so suitable. Here is an example.

Example 5:

FOOL: But, for all this, thou shalt have as many dolours for thy daughters as thou canst tell in a year. (Shakespeare, 2014, p. 62)

弄人：虽然这样说，你的女儿们还要孝敬你数不清的烦恼哩。(朱生豪, 1994, p. 474)

In this example, Kent uses two puns in his words, conveying two different meanings through the collocation. The word “dolour” is a pun which has the same pronunciation as the word “dollar”. Therefore, it has double meanings of “grief” and “a silver coin” here. The word “tell” is the second pun which Kent uses in this sentence, which means “to count”. Kent's intention is to manifest to the readers that Lear's daughters will bring him endless grief which is as much as the amount of money he can count in a year. Since the ST readers are proficient in English, they can quickly associate the word “dolour” with the word “dollar” and grasp the implied meaning of the two puns. But the Zhu's translation in this example expresses only the meaning of grief that Lear's daughters will bring. It losses the second meaning about the “dollar” which can be inferred by the ST readers. To be exactly, the translation of the pun of “dolour”

is not successful. According to the relevance theory, it cannot achieve maximum relevance, nor can it fully realize the communicative intention from the author. Actually, Zhu can deliver the dual meanings of the pun by adding footnote which explains the use of puns in the original text as well as the implied meaning that Shakespeare intends to convey through puns.

5. Conclusion

According to the principle of relevance, the translator needs to accurately assess the communicative intention of the original author and the cognitive environment of the target readers, and then convey the informative intention of the original author to the target readers through various translation strategies, so as to meet the relevance expectations of the target readers. The thesis analyses some examples of pun translation in Zhu Shenghao's version of *King Lear* from the perspective of relevance theory, proving that the relevance theory has strong explanatory power guiding role. A good grasp of the framework of relevance theory can not only deepen the translator's understanding of the problems encountered, but also help the translator examine if his translation deliver the communicative intentions of the original text or if the translation have reach the TT readers' expectation. Although Shakespeare's puns are difficult to translate, they are not untranslatable. The translator can reasonably choose different translation methods based on the relevance principle, so as to match the TT readers with the original author's intention. There is no denying that Zhu's translation are successful and wonderful, but there are still some translations that can be improved.

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