

Original Paper

On the Translation of the Love Songs of Tsangyang Gyatso from the Perspective of Semiotics

LI Siyuan^{1*} & OU Xiaolin²

¹ School of Foreign Languages, Guangzhou Huali College, Jiangmen, China

² School of Foreign Languages & International Business, Guangdong Mechanical and Electrical Polytechnic, Guangzhou, China

* LI Siyuan, Guangzhou Huali College, No. 1 Huali Road, Xinhui District, Jiangmen 529100, P. R. China, E-mail: leemathewx@outlook.com

Received: May 06, 2023

Accepted: June 05, 2023

Online Published: June 09, 2023

doi:10.22158/eltls.v5n3p1

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/eltls.v5n3p1>

Abstract

The Love Songs of Tsangyang Gyatso is a masterpiece in the world of Tibetan poetry. In recent years, scholars have analysed and studied it from different perspectives and from different disciplines, but there have been fewer studies on its English translation. From the perspective of semiotics, the study analyses different translations of Love Songs of Tsangyang Gyatso, and takes semiotics as a theoretical basis and methodological support, providing a new perspective for translation studies.

Keywords

semiotics, translation study, ethnic minority classics, love songs of tsangyang gyatso

1. Introduction

Symbols are the basis for social exchange and cultural collisions, which are not only tools for portraying reality, but also a process for constructing it. In his *Course in General Linguistics*, the Swiss linguist F. D. Saussure (Saussure, 2011) used the word “sign” to denote the whole, replacing concepts and sound images with signified and signifier respectively, stating that “linguistic signs” are arbitrary. M. Foucault (1970), a French philosopher, defined signs as “the total knowledge of the laws of connection” in *L'archéologie du Savoir*. In 1976, the Italian scholar U. Eco defined semiotics as “the study of all things that can be regarded as signs” in *A Theory of Semiotics* (U. Eco, 1976, p. 7). In 1989, Japanese scholar Nagai Shigeo (1989) thought that if there is some relation of reference or representation between thing X and thing Y, “X can refer to or represent Y”, then X is the sign of Y, and Y in turn is the thing referred to or the meaning expressed by X. This relationship is defined by

Saussure as “signified” and “signifier”. While British scholar Daniel Chandler (1994) believed that “semiotics is the study of the doctrine of signs”.

The study of semiotics in China began in 1926 with Zhao Yuanren’s *Outline of Semiotics*, in which he argued that “the study of all symbols as a subject for the study of universal principles of nature and usage has not yet been done” (Zhao Yuanren, 1926, p. 572). In 1983, Jin Kemu defined semiotics in terms of broad and narrow semiotics. He pointed out that narrow linguistics refers to signs other than language, attributing the study of linguistic signs to linguistics, while broad linguistics is everything that has a symbolic meaning and role (Jin Kemu, 1983). As he gave his own viewpoint in his article *On Semiotics*, rather than introducing foreign theories, semiotics was thus truly discussed as a separate discipline in China.

Afterward, with the rise of “cultural fever”, more and more scholars began to study semiotics and apply it to different disciplines. In 1993, Zhao Yiheng defined semiotics as “signs are perceptions that are thought to carry meaning: meaning must be expressed in signs, and the purpose of signs is to express meaning. Conversely, there is no meaning that can be expressed without symbols, and there are no symbols that do not express meaning.” (Zhao Yiheng, 2013)

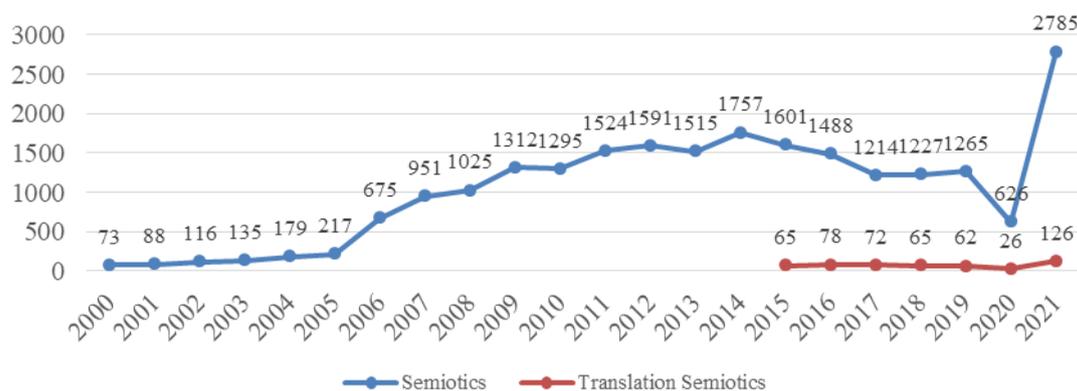


Figure 1. Research Volume of Semiotics and Translation Semiotics in China from 2000-2021

2. Relationship between Semiotics and Translation Studies

The study of semiotics covers a wide range of fields, such as linguistics, sociology, and culture, and has a wide range of applications. As a discipline that studies how one sign system (e.g., language) is transformed into another, translation studies and semiotics are closely influenced by and interpenetrating with each other. Translation had become a focus of semiotic attention in the late nineteenth century, when the American semiotician P. Peirce conducted his research on semiotics (Zhao Xingzhi, 2017). The French scholar Paul Ricoeur analysed “what translation is” and “why translation is so important” from a philosophical and semiotic perspective, and also provided an in-depth study of translation research paradigms, translatability, and untranslatability (Recoeur, 2007).

Later, Chinese scholars conducted a lot of research on semiotics, gradually linked semiotics with

translation studies, and created the sub-discipline of “translation semiotics”. Its disciplinary connotations are explored at seven levels: symbolic process, symbolic act, symbolic relationship, symbolic hierarchy, inter-signality, symbolic function, and symbolic conservation (Wang Mingyu, 2016). Jia Hongwei (2016) argues that translation semiotics draws on the relevant theoretical and methodological guidance of semiotics to examine the issue of sign transformation in the translation process.

In addition, semiotics and translation studies are linked to some extent. Firstly, semiotics provides a theoretical basis and methodological support for translation studies. There are pragmatic, grammatical, and contextual relations between the signs in a semiotic system, and these relations have an important impact on the understanding of translation and the accuracy of translation results. Secondly, translation is a practical application of semiotic communication, providing empirical data and practical examples for semiotic research. Because translation activities involve communication and transmission between different sign systems and cultures, the relationship between the two needs to be understood and analysed in depth, which requires the use of the relevant theories and knowledge of semiotics. For example, in the translation process, the translator needs to consider the grammar, vocabulary, and pragmatics of the original language, as well as the cultural background and linguistic characteristics of the target language. Through the study of translation practice, one can explore a series of issues in semiotic communication, such as symbolic transformation, pragmatic effects, free translation, cultural shift, etc. These issues play an important role in promoting theoretical research and methodological innovation in semiotics. Furthermore, translation provides a broad research space for the interdisciplinary study of semiotics. For example, issues such as pragmatic problems, cultural differences, and linguistic variation in the translation process can all be used as objects of research in semiotics, which has an important role in promoting the theoretical construction and methodological innovation of semiotics. Therefore, the study of translation not only provides a broad research space for semiotics, but also promotes the interdisciplinary integration and development of semiotics.

3. Overview of *Love Songs of Tsangyang Gyatso* and Its Translations

Tsangyang Gyatso, the 6th Dalai Lama and a native of the Monpa ethnic group, is famous for his poetry and is the most representative folk poet in the history of Tibetan literature. *The Love Songs of Tsangyang Gyatso* is a compilation of sixty-six of the most representative poems written by Tsangyang Gyatso. In terms of writing style, *The Love Songs of Tsangyang Gyatso* often uses bixing, a rhetorical device, to express the feelings directly. The poems are written in the unique “xieti” form of Tibetan folk songs, with each poem basically consisting of four sentences of six lines and three pauses. The poem opened up a new style of Tibetan poetry and left a strong mark not only on the history of Tibetan literature, but also on the world literary scene.

In 1930, the Tibetan scholar Yu Daoquan first translated *The Love Songs of Tsangyang Gyatso* into Chinese and English, and subsequently, Chinese and Tibetan scholars began to study the content of

Tsangyang Gyatso's poetry and the cultural connotations it contained. After decades of development, Tsangyang Gyatso's poetry has now been translated into many languages, including more than ten Chinese translations at home and abroad, as well as English, French, Japanese, Russian, and Hindi translations, which have provided a wealth of material for the study of Tibetan studies and Tibetan poetry.

According to Rong Liyu (2016), the English translation of Tsangyang Gyatso's poetry can be divided into three stages: the first stage is the indiscriminate stage of the English translation of Tsangyang Gyatso's poetry (1906-1930), which started with the publication of *Tibetan Folk Tales* by the Englishman William F. O'Connor; the second stage is the initial development of English translations of Tsangyang Gyatso's poetry (1930-1969), which was mainly represented by the publication of *The Love-songs of 6th Dalai Lama Tsangyang Gyatso* by Yu Daoquan, with full and single-volume translations by the translator as the main feature; and the third stage is the further development of the English translation of Tsangyang Gyatso's poetry (1969-present), which was mainly characterised by the diversification of the identity of the translators, and the translation of Tsangyang Gyatso's poetry began to be associated with the creation of English poetry.

Table 1. Publication of English Translations of the Love Songs of Tsangyang Gyatso (Partial)

No.	Translator	Publication	Publisher	Publishing Time
1	Yu Daoquan	Love Songs of the Sixth Dalai	Peiking Academia Sinica of the	1930
		La-ma	National Research Institute of	
		Tshangs-dbyangs-rgya-mtsho	History and Philology	1978
			Taipei Laoku Press	
2	Marion H. Duncan	Love Songs and Proverbs of Tibet	London: The Mitre Press	1961
3	Mark Tatz	Songs of the Sixth Dalai Lama	The Tibet Journal Vol. 6, No. 4 (Winter 1981)	1981
4	W. Tailin (Tibetan)	Love-songs of Tsangyang Gyatso	China Tibetology Press	2003
5	Paul D. Williams	Songs of Love, Poems of Sadness: The Erotic Verse of the Sixth Dalai Lama	London: I. B. Tauris	2005
6	Geoffrey R. Waters	White Crane: Love Songs of the Sixth Dalai Lama	Buffalo: White Pine Press	2007
7	Li Zhengshaun;	The Poems of Tsangyang Gyatso (in Chinese and	Hunan People's Publishing House	2015

Wang Miqing (English)

4. Semiotics in *the Love Songs of Tsangyang Gyatso*

According to the American semiotician C. W. Morris, signs are composed of a carrier, a signified and an interpreter, and the relationship between these three components makes up the linguistic meanings, referential meanings, and pragmatic meanings of linguistic signs (Morris, 1938, pp. 6-30). The linguistic meaning refers to the relationship between the symbol and the signified object directly; the referential meaning is the relationship between the signified object and the symbol; and the pragmatic meaning refers to the science of the relationship between the symbol and its interpretation.

According to semiotics, all factors involved in language-related matters contain specific meanings, including the sounds and shapes of symbols and the associative meanings that sounds bring to people in a particular culture, i.e., pragmatic meanings. Under the pragmatic meaning, the translation process should include all three meanings.

4.1 Linguistic Meaning

Linguistic meaning involves the levels of sound, word, sentence, and text, which is the relationship between symbols and language and can be expressed in terms of rhetorical devices and rhymes such as repetition of words, superlatives, and puns.

4.1.1 Rhetorical Level

Song 1 of the Love Songs of Tsangyang Gyatso:

Source Text:	G. R. Waters Version:	W. Tailin Version:
从东边的山尖上， 白亮的月儿出来了。 “未生娘”的脸儿， 在心中已渐渐地显现。	From the peaks of the eastern mountains A bright white moon has risen, And a young girl's face Shines round in my mind.	Whensoe'er the silvery moon Doth peep o'er the eastern horizon; Do I so yearn for the woman To whom I'm not born.

Song 1 is a famous piece from *The Love Songs of Tsangyang Gyatso*. The first two lines give emotion to the setting by describing it, while the last two lines are lyrical. Besides, “白亮的月儿” is used to describe the white face of the person, and in turn, “未生娘的脸儿” can describe a white moon in the sky, and the two set each other off, deepening the picture and making it deep and meaningful. In both translations, the adjectives “white” and “silver” are used to modify “moon”, but they do not succeed in evoking the face of the “未生娘”. In the W. Tai translation, the use of the verb “peep” vividly describes the moon rising slowly from the eastern tip of the mountain, which is a shy, gentle, and coy image of the “未生娘”, and is quite anthropomorphic.

In addition, the literal translation of “未生娘” is “ma-skyes-a-ma”, meaning “young girl”, but there are various translations in Tibetan, which can also be interpreted as “unborn mother”. There is a possible reference in the text to the fifth sede-pa, Sangye Gyatso, who nurtured and influenced Tsangyang

Gyatso, and it would be a perspective to understand as Tsangyang Gyatso's use of love to imply his political situation.

4.1.2 Rhyme Level

Song 2 of the Love Songs of Tsangyang Gyatso:

Source Text	Yu Daoquan Version:	W. Tailin Version:
去年种下的幼苗， 今岁已成禾束； 青年老后的体躯， 比南方的弓还要弯。	The young sprouts planted last year, (Have become) bundles of straw this year. The aged bodies of (former) youths, Are more bent than the bows from the south.	As doth a slender sprout planted last year Fade into a dry straw by this year; So doth the slender figure of a young man Bend like the bow of the South as his age ran.

Although there is no obvious rhyme in the original text, the antithesis is more neat, as in the first two lines, “去年” and “今年”，and “幼苗” and “禾束”。The Yu's and Tai's translations are consistent in their translation of the rhyme of these two lines, using the same word “year” to create the effect of repetition. In terms of rhetoric, the use of “young” in the Yu's translation is rather bland, while the Tai's translation uses “slender” to personify the seedlings, making it more vivid.

In the translation of the last two lines, Yu attempts to use the words “youth” and “south” to create a rhyme, taking into account the contextual correspondence of the original, but does not entirely succeed. Since rhymes are rhyming parts in Chinese poetry and core phonemes (non-repetitive letter structures) in English poetry, i.e. “youth [ju:θ]” and “south [saʊθ]”, which only repeat the closed syllable “[θ]”, with weak rhythmicity. However, Tai's translation uses “man [mæn]” and “ran [ræn]”, which rhyme (rhyme generation) more effectively and are more catchy to read.

4.2 Referential Meaning

Referential meaning, also known as denotative meaning, is the objective world reflected by linguistic symbols and is the basic meaning of human beings in the process of communication. Throughout the poem, the referential meaning is expressed mainly in terms of lexical vacancies.

4.2.1 Free Translation

Song 15 of The Love Songs of Tsangyang Gyatso:

Source Text:	G. R. Waters Version:	W. Tailin Version:
有力的蜀葵花儿， “你”若去作供佛的物品， 也将我年幼的松石峰儿， 带到佛堂里去。	O blooming mallow flower, If you go as an offering, Let this young turquoise bee Go into the temple with you!	If thou, the mighty holly flower, Art to leave to the alter for an offer, O take me - thy little bumblebee, Into thy temple along with thee.

For the translations of “蜀葵花” and “松石蜂儿”, both Waters and Tailin have used the free translation. “蜀葵花”, or *althaea rosea* in its scientific name, is native to China and was first discovered in southwest Sichuan Province, hence the name “蜀葵”. Translating according to the general idea, without translating word for word, can not only preserve the cultural information of the source language text, but also be easily accepted by target audiences. In Waters translation, it is translated as “mallow”, and it is possible to use the mallow family instead of *althaea rosea*, which is more familiar to the target audiences, as in the case of cotton and mallow. While in the Tailin translation, he translates it as “mighty holly flower”, which dilutes the meaning of “蜀葵花”, but the meaning is not missing due to the presence of “holly”. Similarly, for the translation of “松石蜂儿”, Tailin’s “bumblebee” is rendered in free translation, while the Waters translation uses the literal translation into “turquoise bee”, which retains the meaning of the original but loses the imagery.

4.2.2 Transliteration

Transliteration, as opposed to free translation, is mainly applied to the transliteration of place names in *The Love Songs of Tsangyang Gyatso*, with free translation being the exception. However, if a minority language is transcribed directly into the Latin alphabet, whether for other ethnic groups or for the own, it may need to be converted into the mother script in order to be expressed. For example, the word “公[工]布” in Song 23 refers to Gongbujiangda County in south-eastern Tibet (meaning the mouth of a large valley in a depression), but directly is transcribed as “kong po rgya mda”, and non-native speakers will most likely not know where the location is referred to. If the transliteration is “Kong-po”, the sound is expressed and the original text is reflected to some extent, thus eliminating the need for the Hanyu Pinyin “Gongbujiangda”. However, the translation of the Waters translation as “Gong” is clearly a mistranslation caused by a lack of information about Tibetan regional culture.

“琼结” in Song 49 and “布达拉” in Song 50 are other examples, of taking the sound and giving up the form. “琼结” is said to be the birthplace of Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso. According to Tibetan scholars, it is about a two days journey southeast of Lhasa, which is transcribed as “phyongs rgyas”. In the Waters translation, it is translated as “Chongjay” and in the Tai’s translation as “Chong-gye”. Regardless of which translation is used, it will be clearer and easier to read than the transcription. Potalaka in Sanskrit is the transliteration of the word “布达拉”, which, if transcribed from Tibetan, is “pho brang po ta la”. With the exception of Tibetologists or scholars familiar with the laws of Tibetan phonetics, this translation is basically inaccessible to readers. It is much easier to transliterate it into English as “Potala”.

4.3 Pragmatic Meaning

Pragmatic meaning is the effect that linguistic symbols have on people and can also be referred to as symbolic meaning, associative meaning, etc. Translation is the process of intercultural communication between two languages. Linguistic symbols differ in different cultural contexts, and using them as a benchmark for translation in order to understand the differences in the pragmatic meanings contained in different cultures helps to achieve the function of intercultural communication.

Song 15 of The Love Songs of Tsangyang Gyatso:

Source Text: 住在布达拉时, 是瑞晋仓央嘉措. 在拉萨下面住时, 是浪子宕桑汪波.	Yu Daoquan Version: When I live at Potala, I am rig-hdsin-m Tshan-dbyangs-rgya-mtsho. When I stay at the Lhasa city below, I am Dang-bzang-dbang-po the libertine.	Waters Version: When I dwell in the Potala, My name is “Sagacious Ocean of Melody;” When I linger down in Shö, They call me “Mighty King of Lovers.”
-------------------------------------------------------------	--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

In the Yu’s translation, “瑞晋仓央嘉措” and “浪子宕桑汪波” have been translated in Wylie transcription. For the target audiences, it is unclear what is meant by “rig-hdsin-m Tshan-dbyangs-rgya-mtsho” and “Dang-bzang-dbang-po the libertine”. While in Waters translation, “Sagacious Ocean of Melody” originally referred to Sant Kavi Surdas, a blind Indian saint and poet of the 15th century, who composed nearly 10,000 poems in his masterpiece “Sur Sagar (Ocean of Melody)”, known for his devotional poems dedicated to Lord Krishna. Waters uses the term Sur Sagar to refer to Tsangyang Gyatso, highlighting his influence on Tibetan poetry and his important place in the history of Tibetan literature. “Mighty King of Lovers” tells the story of Tsangyang Gyatso, who went to Lhasa as a Dalai under the name “Dangsang Wangpo” to live a life of pleasure and drink, boasting that “I am the most beautiful lover in the world.”

In this case, in order to optimise the communication of the pragmatic meaning, the translations were made separately, with the Waters translation taking more account of the communication of the symbols in the translation process than the Yu’s translation.

5. Conclusion

Semiotics has an important application in translation practice. By studying the basic theories and application methods of semiotics, translators can better understand and translate symbols in different languages and cultures, improve the accuracy and quality of translation, promote mutual understanding and communication between different cultures, and advance the development and innovation of the discipline of translation. Therefore, semiotics should become an integral part of the discipline of translation.

References

- Chandler, D. (1994). *Semiotics for beginners*. University of Wales.
- China Tibetology Publishing House. (2011). *Three Hundred Years of Poetry by the Sixth Dalai Lama Tsangyang Gyatso*. Beijing: China Tibetology Publishing House.
- Eco, U. (1979). *A theory of semiotics*. Indiana University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1970). The archaeology of knowledge. *Social science information*, 9(1), 175-185.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/053901847000900108>

- JIA, H. W. (2016). Considerations over the Terms of Translation Semiotics. *Foreign Language Education*, 37(1), 4.
- JIN Kemu. (1983). On Semiotics. *Dushu*, (05), 68-76.
- Morris, C. W. (1938). Foundations of the Theory of Signs. In *International encyclopedia of unified science* (pp. 1-59). Chicago University Press.
- Nagai, S. (1989). *Semiotics*. Tokyo: Hokuju Shuppan Ltd.
- Ricoeur, P. (2007). *On translation*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203003831>
- RONG Liyu. (2016). English Dominant Poetics and English Translations of Tsangyangs Gyatso's Poems: In the Perspective of Rhyme. *Shandong Foreign Language Teaching*, (03), 101-107.
- Saussure, F. M. (2011). *Course in general linguistics*. Columbia University Press.
- WANG Mingyu. (2016). Disciplinary Connotation of Translation Semiotics. *Journal of PLA University of Foreign Languages*, 39(5), 11.
- ZHAO, X. Z. (2017). *Charles S. Peirce and Semiotics of Communication*. Nanjing: Nanjing University Press.
- ZHAO, Y. H. (2013). Redefinition of Sign and Semiotics. *Chinese Journal of Journalism & Communication*, 35(6), 9.
- ZHAO, Y. R. (1926). Outline of Semiotics. *Science*, 11(5), 571-591.