

Original Paper

On Transference of Narrative Perspective in Fiction Translation—With English Translation of *Biancheng* as Example

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Abstract

*Narrative perspective is an extremely important narrative technique in novels, especially in modern novels. The use of narrative perspective complements the novel's theme and achieve certain narrative effects that are susceptible to neglect in translation. This paper utilizes the theory of narrative perspective in narratology as an analytical tool to investigate the impact of translators' handling of narrative perspective on the stylistic reproduction in English translations of novels. Focusing primarily on Gladys Yang's translation of *Biancheng* and occasionally comparing it with Ching Ti's translation, the paper aims to demonstrate the subtle stylistic implications of narrative perspective through textual analysis and how translators' approaches can minimize stylistic loss in translation.*

Keywords

*Narrative perspective, *Biancheng*, Stylistic loss*

1. Introduction

Compared to traditional novels, modern novels have shifted their focus towards the formal techniques of narrative, and a crucial aspect of these techniques is the flexible utilization of narrative perspectives. *Biancheng* (the Border Town), cherished by the author Mr. Shen Congwen himself, is hailed as a “timeless gem” (Hsia, 1971) and a representative of pastoral novels. Its tranquil and beautiful imagery and poetic language have long brought enjoyment to readers. This paper examines the two English translations of *Biancheng* from the perspective of narrative point of view (referred to as version a by Yang and version b by Ching), aiming to present the subtle stylistic implications of narrative point of view through textual analysis and how the translators' handling minimizes stylistic loss in translation.

2. The Definition and Classification of Narrative Perspective

The term “perspective” or “point of view” is a thorniest and most controversial issue in literary studies. Gerard Genette has defined it as “the inescapable adoption of a (limited) perspective in narrative, a viewpoint from which things are seen, felt, understood and assessed”. (Genette, 1980, p. 45) Scholars have put forward various ways of classifying narrative perspective since the beginning of the 20th century. N. Friedman’s classification in “Point of view in fiction” may be the most detailed one, sorting out eight different kinds. G. Genette puts forward a more concise trichotomy in *Narrative Discourse*, which is soon widely accepted in the circle of narratology studies (Shen, 2001, p. 221).

Instead of “point of view”, “visual field”, which to him are too technical visual terms, Genette decides on the more abstract “focalization” to illustrate his point.

Genette’s trichotomy is composed of zero focalization, internal focalization and external focalization.

Zero focalization, i.e., the omniscient point of view, enables the story to be narrated from any perspective. The narrator is above any character and all the happenings. He knows more than any character. This can be condensed into Todorov’s formula: narrator > character. **Internal focalization** means the narrator is limited to what a certain character knows, or in Todorov’s formula, narrator = character. **External focalization** means the narrator knows less than characters, or narrator < character.

To the second mode--internal focalization: narrator = character, Shen Dan expresses her disagreement. She argues that suppose the internal focalization is a multiple one, that is, the narrator goes into several characters’ inner worlds, surely he knows more than any character does. If the standard is the amount of information the narrator knows, internal focalization of this kind bears no difference from omniscient point of view. The differentiating property is not the amount of narration, but whose point of view the narration is made from. Shen Dan puts forward a modified set of formulas:

Zero focalization: omniscient narrator’s point of view

Internal focalization: figural point of view (one or more characters)

External focalization: on-looker’s point of view (Shen, 2001, p. 223)

Narrative perspective is of great importance in fiction. While maintaining a major point of view the narrator also makes various adjustments to shift the angle of vision so as to achieve the best narrative effect. (Shen & Sun, p. 51)

The following section is an analysis of the characteristics of narrative perspective in *Biancheng*.

3. The Characteristics of Narrative Perspective in *Biancheng*

In *Biancheng*, omniscient point of view is pervasive, and figural point of view is occasionally adopted. Liu Hongtao points out that the dominant omniscient point of view has a considerable bearing on the creation of pastoral atmosphere (Liu, 2005, p. 140). The key point is that the omniscient narrator can conveniently express his opinions, make explanations or judgments, so to a certain degree exert control on readers’ reception. To account for how exactly this controlling function is realized in *Biancheng*, an

understanding of the social reality of China at Shen Congwen's time is relevant.

Contrary to the undisturbed little pastoral land in *Biancheng*, Chinese people at the early years of the Republic was living a life of chaos and sorrow in the teeth of imperial invasion from abroad and warlords fighting each other at home. The reality is, in fact, far from being pastoral, so efforts are called for to make the pastoral setting of *Biancheng* convincing and acceptable. What Shen Congwen makes use of are the vagueness of time and the distance of location—setting the story in an unclear “past” and an “other land” and thus achieving strangeness of time and place that leaves room for readers' imagination. But this is not sufficient. Behind the serene, natural life in *Biancheng*, people still read discordant elements such as hatred and ugliness. For example, just before Cuicui's first encounter with Nuorong, she overhears two boatmen talking about a prostitute, saying that her father had been murdered seven years earlier on Cotton Hill, slashed by a knife for seventeen times. What bitter hatred is there to justify the brutality? At this moment a reader might doubt the pastoral quality of the story, because although pastoral writings do not repel melancholy, or even find a tinge of sadness poetic, they are truly incompatible with brutality and harshness. Harshness in pastoral, if there is, should be carefully dealt with. Then how to? A narrator comes to the rescue. He appears at proper moments, expresses opinions or makes explanations, so as to dispel readers' doubts and exert control on readers. It need not be hidden that Shen Congwen resorts very much to narrator's voice in the construction of his idealized Chinese Shangri-la against a social reality where there is not sufficient well-being to support a pastoral writing. The following is a typical example:

两省接壤处，十余年来主持地方军事的，知道注重在安辑保守，处置还得法，并无特别变故发生。水陆商务既不至于受战争停顿，也不至于为土匪影响，一切莫不极有秩序，人民也莫不安分乐生。这些人，除了家中死了牛，翻了船，或发生别的死亡大变，为一种不幸所绊倒，觉得十分伤心外，中国其他地方正在如何不幸挣扎中的情形，似乎就还不曾为这边城人民所感到。(Shen, 2001, p. 244)

In the previous paragraph, the narrator, from an omniscient perspective, informs the readers that there have been no significant changes in the small town at the border of these two provinces. The transportation and business activities, both by land and water, have not been affected by war or bandits. Everything is in order, and the people of the border town have yet to feel the struggles of life in other parts of China amidst unfortunate circumstances. Other examples can be easily found in favorable judgments of the border town life littered in the text, such as “quiet tranquility”, “simple border ways”, “order reigns and men live well content with their lot”. However, if these positive, general comments are compared with some of the specific descriptions of townsfolk's experiences, readers find them contradictory. For example:

①某一年水若来得特别猛一些，沿河吊脚楼，必有一处两处为大水所冲去，大家皆在城上头呆望，受损失的也同样呆望着，对于所受的损失好象无话可说，与在自然安排下，眼见其他无可挽救的不幸来时相似。

②同样做什长的，有因革命成了伟人名人的，有杀头碎尸的...

③...于是凡因船只失事破产的船家...

This passage describes the unfortunate situation where everyone can only watch as the stilted houses along the river are washed away by floods in one or two places. It also mentions that some people who went to engage in revolution became great figures and celebrities, while others were brutally killed. Additionally, it mentions the bankruptcy of boatmen due to shipwrecks. However, overall, it is apparent that when readers' pastoral impressions are sort of disturbed by these unhappy descriptions, narrator's voice reassures them that all is well. Although omniscient point of view is dominant, the narrator occasionally shifts to a figural point of view, to express through a character's eye or mind, and thus brings the reader closer to the character, achieving immediacy and shortened narrative distance.

In the next section, attention will be directed to the transference of point of view in *Biancheng*. Given the fact that the transference of consistent omniscient point of view poses little additional difficulty, we will only concentrate on examples which involve subtle shifts of points of view and thus are susceptible to stylistic losses.

4. Reproduction of Subtle Shifts of Point of View and the Stylistic Loss

Shifts of point of view can occur between that of an omniscient narrator's, a character's or an on-looker's. In *Biancheng*'s case, it mostly happens between an omniscient point of view and a figural one. The following is a description of how Cuicui feels when her grandfather asks her feelings after the go-between sent by wharf-master Shun Shun leaves.

1 翠翠不知如何处理这个崭新问题，装作从容，怯怯的望着老祖父。又不便问什么，当然也不好回答。祖父又说：“大老是个有出息的人，为人又正直，又慷慨，你嫁了他，算是命好！”翠翠弄明白了，人来做媒的是大老！（Shen, 2001, p. 279）

The first part of the description of Cuicui's reaction to her grandfather's question is narrated from an omniscient point of view. The narrator sees through Cuicui, describes the confusion on her mind (have no idea how to deal with this new big problem) as well as her external behavior (give her grandfather a timid look). Then follows her grandfather's judgment of Number One and the possible marriage, in direct speech. It comes as a blow on Cuicui, for she has been thinking it is Number Two she secretly loves who sends the go-between. To reveal Cuicui's disappointment more vividly, the narrator subtly changes to Cuicui's point of view, the traces of which are the indicator “弄明白了” (she figured it out) as the starting point of her thought, and the exclamation mark as a marker of free direct speech. The desirable effect of this shift of point of view is that readers seem to be directly reading from Cuicui's mind without the narrator as the middleman and thus can perceive all the authenticity and intensity of her emotion.

Look at Gladys Yang's rendition:

1a She has no idea what to say. Trying to collect herself, she shoots an appealing glance at her grandfather. Without knowing more, how can she answer? “Number One's got the makings of a fine

man”, says the old ferryman. “He’s straight and big-hearted. He’d make you a good husband.”

So the go-between came from Number One! (Yang, 1981, p. 60)

The rendition keeps Cuicui’s point of view by preserving free direct speech, the simple past tense (VS simple present tense throughout the whole text) and the exclamation mark. Even “翠翠弄明白了” (Now she understands) is omitted in order to expose Cuicui’s reaction to readers as early as possible. Thus readers intimately share Cuicui’s shock and disappointment.

Compare 1a with Ching Ti’s translation:

1b Now at last it was clear. It was Tianbao they were trying to marry her to. (Ching, 1982, p. 247)

The shift of point of view from an omniscient one to a figural one is neglected by the translator. The sentence is still rendered from an omniscient point of view. Admittedly, the paraphrasable material content remains the same, but stylistic value surely suffers. The internal focalization of Cuicui is replaced by an impersonal omniscient narrator’s statement so detached and cool. Therefore, the TL readers are deprived of the opportunity to know Cuicui’s true feelings for Nuorong, an opportunity not to be wasted, because in *Biancheng*, a novel bearing traits of Chinese ink-painting, their love is never said out but implied, and opportunities to see Cuicui reveal traces of her love for Nuorong are rare. So it is a pity that translator is not aware of the shift of point of view and to a certain degree hurt the characterization of Cuicui.

Another example:

2 远处鼓声已起来了，她知道绘有朱红长线的龙船这时节已下河了。细雨依然落个不止，溪面一片烟。（Shen, 2001, p. 265)

2a Meanwhile drums sound up in the distance. The long crimson dragon boats will soon be starting their race. (Yang, 1981, p. 44)

The indicator “她知道” (She knows) is omitted in the translation. Although both 2 and 2a are narrated from an omniscient point of view, “she knows” should be preserved because it implies Cuicui is thinking of Nuorong. Maybe Cuicui herself is not yet clear about her own feelings for Nuorong, she subconsciously cares for him--Nuorong the best rower is on the dragon boat. If “she knows” is removed, the dragon thing is no longer a part of Cuicui’s thought presentation, but an authorial statement of something in the objective world that exists independent of Cuicui. Therefore, the thematic meaning that Cuicui vaguely cares about Nuorong is lost and fictional facts constructed in readers’ mind are slightly altered.

Yet another example:

3 二老出北河下辰州走了六百里，沿河寻找那个可怜哥哥的尸骸，毫无结果，在各处税关上贴下招字，返回茶峒来了。过不久，他又过川东去办货，过渡时见到老船夫。老船夫看看那小伙子，好像已完全忘掉了从前的事情，就同他说话。（Shen, 2001, p. 279)

3a “Number two has gone six hundred li away to Chenzhou, trying in vain to find his brother’s remains. After posting up notices at every Customs House, he comes back to Chatong. Before long he sets off on another trip to eastern Sichuan and sees the ferryman when he comes to Green Stream. **Nuosong**

behaves as if all the past were forgotten. (Yang, 1981, p. 80)

Tianbao's death gives the old ferryman a heavy blow. Apparently Shun Shun and Number Two sort of hold it against him, think that his vague, roundabout way of treating Tianbao's proposal is to blame. The old ferryman is disturbed that this might ruin Cuicui's well-being and always wants to patch things up. Now he musters up his courage to talk to Nuosong first, for judging from Nuosong's looks, the old man thinks the young man has forgotten all the past. "As if all the past were forgotten" is seen from the old ferryman's perspective, but it is not a fictional "fact." However, the rendition "Nuosong behaves as if all the past were forgotten" turns the old ferryman's false impression into Nuosong's actual external behavior, which is contradictory to his cold attitude in the following conversation. The fact is that he hasn't got over the unpleasant past. So it is better to render it as follows:

"From his looks the old ferryman judges that he seems to have forgotten all the past, so he starts a talk."

5. Conclusion

Through a detailed analysis of both the original and English versions of *Biancheng*, we find out that the issue of stylistic loss caused by unintentional changes in perspective in the translation of novels has not received enough attention from translators. The value of the original language's form is not only reflected in the narrative content, but also in the unique narrative perspective that carries significant literary value. Translators should try to avoid imposing their own perspective and refrain from infringing upon or altering the narrative perspective of the original text. By conducting a meticulous analysis of the original text's style, translators should focus on the importance of preserving the original form in conveying the themes and aesthetic effects of the original work.

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