Original Paper

A Study on the Translation Strategies for English Prose from the Perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory—A Case Study of *The Death of the Moth* (Lu Gusun's Translation)

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Abstract

Prose translation serves as a vital channel for cross-cultural communication. Previous studies have primarily focused on evaluating the aesthetic value of translation, while lacking the theoretical analysis of translation strategies. Guided by Nida's functional equivalence theory, this study analyzes the English-Chinese translation strategies for prose at three levels: word, syntax, and text style, with Lu Gusun's translation of The Death of the Moth as a case study. The research demonstrates that under the guidance of functional equivalence theory, the foreignization strategy accurately conveys the original text's ideas, while the domestication strategy enhances readability for target-language readers. These two translation strategies complement each other, and integrating their strengths in translation helps readers understand the original text's essence. Thus, functional equivalence theory can assist translators in selecting appropriate strategies for English prose translation, enabling target-language readers to deeply comprehend both the translation and the embedded source-language culture.

Keywords

Prose, English-Chinese translation, functional equivalence theory, The Death of the Moth

1. Introduction

As an important carrier for cultural exchanges, English prose texts play a significant role in promoting cultural interaction between China and the West. Prose is characterized by language fluency, a flexible structure and the aesthetic principle of " apparent randomness with underlying coherence", naturally exuding genuine emotions and embodying the author's thoughts and ideas. However, challenges in translation arise from its scrupulously-selected language,free-flowing expressions, and complex long

sentences, which considerably affect whether the target-language readers can accept the source-language culture embedded in the prose. Therefore, the translators need to cope with the translation of vocabulary and sentences meticulously to ensure that the target-language readers can receive the similar thoughts and feelings as the original conveys.

Adeline Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) is one of the leading exponents of stream of consciousness literature, regarded as the pioneer of 20th-century modernism and feminism. Throughout her life, Woolf kept writing, authoring large amount of prose, diaries and other works. She believed that writing should get rid of superficial complicated surface, capturing humanity's "meaningful moments of existence" through the exploration of nature and the essence of life, and reveal the philosophy of life through the epiphany of characters (Yang, 2012). This idea is also reflected in *The Death of the Moth*. Therefore, the study on translation strategy of *The Death of the Moth* helps readers comprehend author's reflection on life, and provide efficient guidance for translation practice.

2. Literature Review

Existing studies on prose translation mainly focus on its aesthetic value, exploring how translation reproduces the aesthetic experience of original text from perspectives such as the beauty of imagery and artistic conception. For example, Zhou (2015) applied Professor Xu Yuanchong's two standards of "beauty" and "truth" for poetry to prose, analyzing how prose translation adhere to these two principles; Qiu (2021) holds that the translation of prose discourse rhythm is of great significance for the reconstruction of poetic value.

Previous studies on *The Death of the Moth* has primarily focused on its philosophical implications of life. For instance, Liu (2006) praised the greatness of life when translating this text, regarding the moth's struggle against fate as embodying "the beauty of survival and life"; Wang (2022) stated that "the vigorous development and upward strength of humanity represent the true meaning of life." Domestic studies on its translation mainly focus on evaluating the quality of translations or comparing differences among versions by Lu, Huang and Liu. Huang (2019) compared the translation respective advantages in these three versions from the perspectives of semiotic meaning, while Wang Yanjie(2019) held that Lu Gusun's version is a faithful reproduction of the original text under Peter Newmark's translation criticism theory. Macroscopically, these studies have laid the foundation for translation research by analyzing translated works using different theories; however, microscopically, they remained confined to single-dimensional theoretical analyses of translation practices.

Overall, current researches show an imbalance, with more studies on C-E translation, and fewer on E-C translation. From an vertical perspective, there is a lack of analysis of translation strategies for English prose, particularly those guided by functional equivalence theory. Few studies on *The Death of the Moth* and its translations have explored the selection of translation strategies or provided theoretical analyses. Therefore this study investigate Lu Gusun's translation strategies for *The Death of the Moth* and their underlying reasons, offering a novel perspective for prose translation research.

46

3. The Functional Equivalence Theory

Functional equivalence refers to achieving equivalence in form and content with the original text, rather than rigidly corresponding to literal meaning. Eugene Nida divided functional equivalence into two levels: the maximal equivalence and the minimal equivalence. The former means target-language readers can understand and appreciate the original text in the same way as source-language readers, while the latter means readers can comprehend the original text through the translated version. The former represents an ideal pursuit, and the latter is a practical minimum requirement (Nida, 2001). Nida's definition of translation essence encapsulates the core of this theory: " to reproduce in the receptor language the closest natural equivalence of the source-

language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style." (Nida & Taber, 1969).

In brief, he emphasized that translation should prioritize equivalence, with " meaning (content) first, followed by style (form)", and that form should not be arbitrarily sacrificed. Equivalence in form requires preserving the original syntax and style as much as possible when content is accurately conveyed; when form conflicts with content, form should be modified to achieve equivalence in content. Equivalence in content means the translation should align with the target-language readers' cultural background and linguistic expression habits, allowing them to fully grasp the original text's emotions and ideas. The ultimate goal of both is to enable target-language readers of the translation to have a reading experience similar to that of source-language readers.

In recent years, most Chinese scholars have applied functional equivalence theory to practical texts such as film subtitles, medical texts, and publicity materials, rarely including prose. For example, Ma Jianli and Ou Licheng (2020) compared the translation of slang in animated films across mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, while Cao Sijia (2023) studied the translation of professional terms in the medical field. However, the characteristics of *The Death of the Moth* are well-suited to functional equivalence theory: Woolf's fragmented narrative and metaphorical language require translation to transcend equivalence in form and reconstruct equivalent emotional experiences in the target language. This theory helps translators recreate art while remaining faithful to the original text, striving to present its artistic value.

4. Analysis of Translation Strategies in *The Death of the Moth*

Domestication and foreignization are two commonly used translation strategies, which are unity of opposites and complement each other. Feng Quangong (2019) argued that "Domestication and foreignization strategies should not be rigidly applied or evaluated; a holistic and historical perspective is necessary when determining a dominant strategy." Therefore, considering prose's vivid imagery and profound artistic conception, guided by functional equivalence theory, translators must seek a balance between these two strategies to achieve optimal translation effects. This section analyzes the application of domestication and foreignization strategies in Lu Gusun's translation from the perspective of word, syntax, and text style.

4.1 Restoring Lexical Imagery

Prose features rich vocabulary and carefully selected words which involve imagery, emotions, and philosophical reflection, requiring meticulous selection of lexical meanings in the process of translation. Some scholars argue that "imagery in prose is an emotional projection of the author's real-life observations" (Yuan & Tu, 2021). Woolf excelled at using imagery to create metaphors, where imagery in her works often symbolize themes such as life and destiny. Thus, translators must fully understand the author's emotions to convey life's philosophy through translations. Lu's translation achieves a unity of form and spirit in terms of imagery through precise word choice and cultural adaptation.

4.1.1 Application of Foreignization Strategy

The foreignization strategy adapts to the linguistic characteristics of foreign cultures, incorporating foreign expressions to retain an exotic allure for target-language readers. Translators must have a deep understanding of both source and target languages and cultures to find the "most appropriate, natural, and equivalent" (Guo, 2000) target-language vocabulary in specific contexts to reproduce source-language messages.

Example 1:

Original: It was as if someone had taken a tiny bead of pure life and decking it as lightly as possible with down and feathers，had set it dancing and zigzagging to show us the true nature of life．

Translation: (飞蛾不但引人稀嘘，还同样令人惊叹，）使人感到似乎有谁取来一颗晶莹的生命之珠，以尽可能轻盈的手法饰以茸羽之后，使其翻跃起舞，左右飞旋，从而向我们显示生命的真谛。

Lu Gusun employs the foreignization strategy by preserving the original imagery of "a tiny bead". Guided by functional equivalence theory, this literal translation exposes Chinese readers to the original's unique expression and rhetorical effects similar to source-language readers. By comparing the moth to a bead, its transient life is presented as a vivid visual image, achieving lexical equivalence. In terms of meaning, the moth symbolizes vitality and perseverance in pursuing ideals. Chinese readers, like English readers, perceive the preciousness and uniqueness of life: though the moth's tiny life is insignificant to nature, it is full of vitality and shines brightly.

4.1.2 Application of Domestication Strategy

The domestication strategy localizes foreign cultures and make the source language closer to target-language readers, aligning with their expressive habits to promote comprehension. Facing cultural differences, translators must adjust translations flexibly based on the prose's diction, rhetorical devices, and stylistic features to conform to Chinese expression norms.

Example 2:

Original:Watching him, it seemed as if a fibre, very thin but pure, of the enormous energy of the world had been thrust into his frail and diminutive body.

Translation:注视着它的时候，我觉得在它赢弱的小身体里，仿佛塞进了一缕纤细然而洗炼的世间奇伟的活力。

This sentence might seem awkward to Chinese readers, so Lu Gusun uses domestication strategy

48

instead of literal translation. He avoids the rigid reproduction of the original image "fibre" and renders it as "一缕活力" (a wisp of vitality). Later in the text, the translation highlights the moth's frail yet tenacious nature, accurately conveying the original's unique charm. Additionally, translating "thrust into" as "塞进" (shove into), a colloquial term, fits Chinese expression, while replacing "纯净"--which is more closer to the English meaning of "pure"--with "洗炼" (refined) enhances literary quality, implying that the refined texture of "vitality" creates a stronger semantic contrast with its "delicate"(纤细) essence.

The translation involves splitting the sentence and restructuring word order, moving "his frail and diminutive body" to the front and changing the passive voice of "had been thrust into" to an active voice, which makes the moth seem like a miracle casually created by nature. The contrasts between "纤细" and "奇伟", "赢弱" and "活力" are more intense, evoking a sense of life's tenacity and the sense of shock brought by destiny.

4.2 Reconstructing Syntactic Structures

Functional equivalence refers to "a dynamic and flexible transformation process rather than a rigid literal (or structural) equivalence" (Zhai, 2017). When meaning and form cannot be balanced, translators can transform the source language's deep structure into the target language's surface structure. By adjusting syntactic structure, target-language readers can more easily accept the translation.

4.2.1 Application of Domestication Strategy

Example 3:

Original: The rooks too were keeping one of their annual festivities; soaring round the tree tops until it looked as if a vast net with thousands of black knots in it had been cast up into the air; …… until every twig seemed to have a knot at the end of it. ......with the utmost clamour and vociferation, as though to be thrown into the air and settle slowly down upon the tree tops were a tremendously exciting experience.

Translation: 那些白嘴鸦像是正在欢庆某一次年会，绕着树梢盘旋，远远望去仿佛有一张缀有万千黑点的大网撒开在空中……直到林中的每一处枝头都落满黑点。……同时伴以不绝于耳的队队鸦噪，似乎一会儿急急腾空而去，一会儿徐徐栖落枝头，乃是极富刺激性的活动。

This description of rooks carries specific cultural backgrounds, which may be unfamiliar to modern urban readers. To achieve similar reader responses to the original, Lu Gusun adopts domestication, adapting the paragraph to Chinese readers' linguistic habits and cultural backgrounds. Translating "annual festivities" as "年会" (annual meeting) instead of "年度庆典" (annual celebration) better aligns with Chinese readers' understanding, as this choice forgoes literal equivalence to bridge the culture gap.

The paragraph employs multi-sensory descriptions: firstly visual description combines close-up and distant views, shifting from focal details to panoramic shots. The translation first describes the birds' action "soar" (盘旋), then introduces the metaphor from the perspective of "远远望去" (from a

49

distance), conforming to Chinese thinking patterns that describe phenomena before association. It expands the simple original description "every twig ...it" into "落满黑点" (covered with black dots), using the verb "落满" to animate the scene, maintaining stylistic consistency despite unequivalence in vocabulary. The auditory description "with the utmost...vociferation," originally a prepositional phrase, is transformed into a verb-object structure "伴以..." (accompanied by...), enhanced with additions like "不绝于耳" (incessant) and "队队" (groups of), vividly conveying the scene' hubbub.

Splitting the long sentence into "一会儿...一会儿..." slows the rhythm, while the reduplicated words "急急" (hurriedly) and "徐徐" (slowly) are more expressive and conform to Chinese rhythmic beauty. The combination of short and long sentences creates rhythmic beauty, brings the scene to life and allows readers to feel the vitality of life, achieving functional equivalence with the original.

4.2.2 Application of Foreignization Strategy

Example 4:

Original: Yet the power was there all the same, massed outside indifferent, impersonal, not attending to anything in particular. Somehow it was opposed to the little hay-coloured moth.

Translation:但是，那股力量依然聚集在那儿，一股冷漠超然、非人格化、不针对任何具体对象的力量。不知出于什么原因，与枯灰色的小飞蛾作对的，正是这股力量。

The original uses long sentences to create a gloomy, stagnant atmosphere. "Massed outside...in particular," an sentence with three postpositive attributives in English, is changed into a "run-on" sentence in Chinese with prepositive attributives, separated by commas. Translating "massed" literally as "聚集" preserves the original verb-phrase structure and the imagery of concentrated power, allowing Chinese readers to perceive the objective, alienated presence of the power.

In the second sentence, the moth is described as "枯灰色的" (hay-colored), retaining "hay" (干草) to describe color, even though "枯灰色" is not common in Chinese. This foreignization allows Chinese readers to appreciate the original's unique color description. Translating "was opposed to" as "与...作对的，正是..." (it is precisely this power that opposes...) uses an emphatic structure to highlight the confrontation between natural forces and the moth's tiny life. In this sentence, natural forces are metaphorized as fate, and the moth's struggle represents individual resistance against destiny, prompting readers to reflect on the philosophy of "life and fate." These sentences use foreignization from the perspective of words, and then adjust sentence structure and word order to ensure fluency. From the perspective of functional equivalence theory, Lu Gusun's translation effectively conveys the original's spirit, achieving equivalence in meaning and style.

4.3 Replicating Discursive Style

Prose features a free form, flexible writing style, and implicit yet profound expression. Due to these characteristics, prose translation often prioritizes equivalence in meaning over equivalence in form. Especially with abundant metaphors in the origina--such as those of life and death, and the power of nature—translators must transcend linguistic form to decode symbolic meanings at the semantic level, reproduce emotional traits at the stylistic level, and achieve similar reader responses at the reception

50

level. In such cases, translators do not solely rely on domestication or foreignization but combine both strategies to find a balance and achieve harmonious unity.

4.3.1 Application Mainly Based on Foreignization Strategy

Example 5

Original: The possibilities of pleasure seemed that morning so enormous and so various that to have only a moth's part in life, and a day moth's at that, appeared a hard fate, and his zest in enjoying his meagre opportunities to the full, pathetic. ... He was little or nothing but life.

Translation: 这天早晨，生命的乐趣表现得淋漓尽致又丰富多样。相比之下，作为一只飞蛾浮生在世，而且是只有一天生命的飞蛾，真是命运不济。虽则机遇不堪，飞蛾却仍在尽情享受，看到这种热情不禁引人稀嘘。...... 飞蛾虽小，甚至微不足道，却也是生灵。

In the first sentence, "enormous" and "various" are not literally translated as "巨大的"(huge) or "多样的"(diverse). This translation transcends lexical meanings to excavate the original text's connotations, highlighting the exuberance and wonder of life. The added attribute "生命的" (of life) before "乐趣" (pleasure) directly emphasizes the core theme of life's miracles, facilitating readers' understanding of the original's tenor. As a moth with only a day's life, its fate seems pitiful to humans, yet it fully enjoys its brief existence, embodying the essence of life.

Lu's domestication strategy not only preserves the stark contrast between the grandeur of nature and the moth's insignificance in the original but also highlights the symbolic meaning of life's tenacity in the face of powerful forces. The use of "却"(yet) in the second sentence shifts the focus to the latter part, emphasizing the author's praise and admiration, which aligns with the original's emotional tone. This creates equivalent reader responses: both appreciate the moth's tiny yet passionate existence, deeply understanding the author's awe and praise for life.

4.3.2 Application Mainly Based on Domestication Strategy

Example 6

Original: ......an oncoming doom which could, had it chosen, have submerged an entire city, not merely a city, but masses of human beings; nothing, I knew had any chance against death.

Translation: 毁灭伟力，只要它愿意，本可埋没整个一座城地；除了城池，还可夺去千万人的生命。我知道，与死神作搏斗，世间万物都无取胜的可能。

"Oncoming doom" is translated as "毁灭伟力" (devastating might), preserving the threatening connotation of "doom". Lu Gusun employs foreignization at the lexical level, using the less common term "伟力"(might) to draw attention, allowing Chinese readers to appreciate the original's unique style in word usage and approximate the source-language readers' response in terms of lexical meaning and style. The subjunctive structure "had it... city" is retained in the translation, first stating the condition "只要它愿意"(had it chosen) and then the hypothetical result "埋没城池" (submerge an entire city), maintaining logical equivalence with the original to convey the assumed scenario.

The final clause uses domestication by putting "I knew" forward to align with Chinese expressive habits, which prioritize stating cognition before content. This domestication in syntax enhances fluency,

enabling readers to sense the inviolable power of nature. The overall style preserves the original's solemn atmosphere, conveying reverence for death and the power of nature.

5. Conclusion

This study explores strategy selection for equivalence transformation in prose translation from a practical perspective. Prose translation is not merely a linguistic task but requires translators to possess profound literary foundation. Lu's translation skillfully integrates domestication and foreignization: it selectively preserves imagery and themes at the lexical level, adapts syntactic structures to Chinese reading habits through domestication, and accurately conveys the original's emotional meaning and reproduces its style at the discursive level. The flexible application of translation strategies has enabled Lu's version to obtain favorable reader responses. Evidently, prose translations guided by functional equivalence theory help readers accurately grasp the original's meaning, offering rich reading experiences and aesthetic enjoyment.

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