Original Paper

A Study on the Idiomatic Phrases in English Translation of *Frog* Based on Translator Behavior Criticism

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Abstract

Idiomatic phrases are unique constructions in the Chinese language, which are fixed in terminology, closely semantically integrated, and phonetically harmonious. They are independently used lexical units in the language. Frog is written by Mo Yan, and it contains a lot of idiomatic phrases, which is a great challenge for translators. Based on the theory of Translator Behaviour Criticism, the "truth-seeking-pragmatic" continuum evaluation model is applied in this present research. This paper takes Ge Haowen's English translation as an example, exploring the translation strategies he chose in the face of different linguistic environments, and carrying out a descriptive analysis and research on the idiomatic phrases in it. To provide a reference to the foreign translation of Chinese literature, the angle of the study of Frog can be broadened and help translators to master the skills of translating Chinese idioms.

Keywords

Translator Behaviour Criticism, Idiomatic phrases, Frog

1. Introduction

Mo Yan, a Chinese vernacular literature writer, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2012. *Frog* is one of his masterpieces, which is set against the backdrop of nearly 60 years of rural fertility history in China, and tells the life of Auntie, a female country doctor of obstetrics and gynecology. While recounting the implementation of family planning in China to control population growth, it also depicts the embarrassing and contradictory state of mind of the intellectuals represented by Ke Dou at that time. Wolfgangkubin, a famous German sinologist, once said, "Translation takes credit for Mo Yan's award" (Chen & Li, 2013). As an excellent representative of Chinese literature disseminated abroad, the success of *Frog* is also closely related to translation, and its English translation by Ge Haowen has achieved considerable appreciation.

Mo Yan is known for his magical realism, and his works invariably show the characteristics of Chinese rural people, which contain a large number of spoken words, dialects, cultural-loaded words, and other information, with a strong vernacular flavor. In addition, the book *Frog* contains large-scale idiomatic phrases, which greatly increases the translation difficulty for translators. At present, most of the studies on *Frog* analyzed the translation from the traditional translation theories, such as Functional Equivalence Theory and Skopos Theory. At the same time, the scope of discussion is always based on the cultural-loaded words in the book, but the discussion on the idiomatic phrases is rare. Taking the English translation of *Frog* by Goldblatt as an example, this research uses the theory of Translator Behavior Criticism to analyze various translation strategies of idiomatic phrases in it, so as to explore Ge's "truth-seeking" and "pragmatic" tendencies.

2. The Overview of Translator Behavior Criticism

Translator behavior criticism is an original theoretical system based on "Translation Variation Theory" and "Ecological Translation", proposed by the Chinese scholar Zhou Lingshun, which is a further refinement of the critical study of translation (Zhou, 2023). The theory combines translation and sociological research, focusing on the study of the role of the translator in the process of translation socialization and the characteristics of his or her general behavior laws acting on the text (Zhou, 2014). The theory starts from the translator's behavior and gives an objective and fair evaluation of the translation quality. These evaluations are usually studied and analyzed from the dimensions of "in-translation" and "out-of-translation". "In-translation" refers to the internal analysis of the translation process, focusing on the "faithfulness" of the text, which is reflected in the choice of vocabulary and style, etc.; "Out-of-translation" refers to the external analysis of the quality of the translation, focusing on the "practicality" of the text, including the acceptability of the text and the social environment (Wei, 2023). Translators also have corresponding internal and external behaviors, and only through the effective combination of the two can they have excellent translations. The "truth-seeking and pragmatic" continuum evaluation model is thus established.

"Truth-seeking" is a necessity for the realization of translation, in which the translator, as a linguist, conveys the language of the original text faithfully to the reader. It is the translator's behavior to consider the original text, so the translator needs to faithfully convey the meaning of the original text to the reader. "Pragmatism" refers to the fact that on the basis of "truth-seeking", the translator, as a body of will, is responsible for the original text while taking other social factors into consideration. It requires not only faithfulness to the original text but also taking into account the needs of the readers. "Truth-seeking" and "pragmatism" are the two ends of the evaluation model, and there are various gradual changes between them. "True-seeking" and "pragmatism" are the two endpoints of the evaluation mode, and there are various gradient states between the two. Therefore, Translator Behaviour Criticism should first start from the "true-seeking degree", look at the extent to which the translator is "true-seeking", and then examine the extent to which the translator is "pragmatic" (Zhou,

2014). Therefore, an excellent translator needs to achieve a balance between the two. In this context, the translation of *Frog* can also be interpreted and analyzed with this model.

3. Evaluation of English Translation Strategies for Idiomatic Phrases

Idiomatic phrases are important translation units, and they can often express the semantic and stylistic features of the original text more accurately if they are translated into idiomatic phrases in the translated text (Wang, 1987). In the Xinhua Dictionary, idiomatic phrases belong to the category of fixed phrases or sentences that are usually considered to be structurally stereotyped in the language to express their semantics as a whole. They include idioms, idiomatic expressions, hiatus, proverbs, and so on. They are composed of four or more characters and are widely used in Chinese, which has great cultural value. Due to the semantic gap between Chinese and English, it is a great challenge for translators to reveal the connotation of them. Supported by specific examples from *Frog*, the "truth-seeking-pragmatic" translators behavior continuum evaluation model is applied in the present research, in order to analyze the translation strategies of idioms, proverbs, and idiomatic expressions in it.

3.1 Evaluation of English Translation Strategies for Idioms

Idioms are words or phrases consisting of four or more characters, which are concise and rich in connotation. They have fixed structural forms and fixed expressions, becoming a major feature of traditional Chinese culture.

> Example 1:
>
> Original text: 它瘦骨伶仃，眼镜上方有两个深得可放进一枚鸡卵的凹陷。
>
> (Mo,2014:5)
>
> Translation: Skinny as a rail, the indentations above both eyes were so deep they could
>   accommodate hen's eggs.
>
> (Mo,2015:15)

"瘦骨伶仃" refers to people and animals that are extremely thin. It came from *Once Upon a Time in a Small Town*. The original text describes the appearance of the mad mule, highlighting its abnormal appearance, rationalizing the plot of the mule being kicked, and simultaneously reflecting the ability of the father to drive the mad mule with his feet. Goldblatt abides by the principle of "truth-seeking" here. The word "skinny" expresses the mule's thinness, and the subsequent modification "as a rail" emphasizes the feature. At this time, the direct expression of the literal meaning of the idiom will not cause dyslexia in the target language readers. In this context, the translator tilts the balance toward the "truth-seeking" end and retains the heterogeneous components of Chinese idioms in Mo Yan's original text, which is worthy of recognition.

> Example 2:
>
> Original text: 肖上唇龇着焦黄的大牙，简直是幸灾乐祸地对我说：你大爷爷和那匹骡子都
>   被炸碎了，是用两只筐子抬回来的。
>
> (Mo,2014:13)

Translation: <u>A gloating Xiao Shangchun flashed a yellow-toothed grin</u> as he continued: Your great-uncle and the mule he was riding were blown to bits, both carried back to the hospital in boxes.

(Mo,2015:24)

"幸灾乐祸" refers to seeing the disaster of others but very happy, and it first came from *Zuo Zhuan* written in Spring and Autumn Annals with derogatory meaning. In the original text, Xiao Shangchun got a grudge against his aunt, so he never told the truth about Grandpa's past, which may contained exaggerated and false elements. The situation highlights Xiao's image as a villain who speaks with no credibility. At this time, Goldblatt takes into account the "pragmatic" code of conduct, uses "gloating" to modify the image of Xiao Shangchun, and turns multiple verbs in the original text, such as "龇" and "说", into modifiers, avoiding too many miscellaneous verbs in translation. This way of translation is in line with the expression habits of the target language. From a "pragmatic" point of view, Goldblatt ensures the idiomatic translation through parts-of-speech conversion. At the same time, the translation conforms to the principle of "truth-seeking", retaining the true meaning of the original idioms.

Example 3:

Original text: 姑姑是天才的妇产科医生，她干这行脑子里有灵感，手上有感觉。见过她接生的女人或被她接生过的女人，都佩服得<u>五体投地</u>。

(Mo,2014:17)

Translation: Gugu was a natural genius as a woman's doctor. What her instinct told her, her hands put into practice. Women who witnessed her at work or those who were her patients <u>absolutely revered and admired her</u>.

(Mo,2015:24)

"五体投地" refers to hands, knees, and head together on the ground, describing a person's admiration to the extreme, and it first came from the *Buddhist Records of the Western World*. Mo Yan here mainly described the aunt's extraordinary talent in obstetrics and gynecology and her high level of skill. Blindly pursuing the "truth-seeking" principle, the translation of "五体投地" may cause misunderstanding among the target language readers. Here, Goldblatt uses the "pragmatic" principle to take into account the cultural differences of foreign readers and explains the meaning of "five bodies", which helps realize the connotation of "seeking truth", and break the different common sense and cultural backgrounds between China and other countries. In the case of affecting the target language readers and failing to convey the connotation of the source text promptly, Goldblatt chooses to abandon the literal meaning and put "pragmatism" first, making "truth-seeking" not only the principle of pursuing superficial form and literal meaning. It can be seen that Goldblatt is close to the "pragmatic" end on the "truth-pragmatic" continuum at this time because when "truth-seeking" takes or displaces some meaning from the original text, the translator takes "pragmatic" as the top (Zhou, 2014).

3.2 Evaluation of English Translation Strategies for Slangs

Slang is a kind of informal and colloquial word, that is easy to understand in people's daily lives, and

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has a strong local color.

Example 4:

Original text: 吕牙还想为田桂花争理，支书袁脸道：万医生没错，对这种拿着人命开玩笑的<u>巫婆</u>，就该严加惩治！田桂花，别<u>耍死狗</u>了，打你算轻的，应该送你进班房！

(Mo,2014:18)

Translation: There was more Lü Ya wanted to say in Tian Guihua's defence, but he was cut short by Yuan Lian: Doctor Wan did nothing wrong. Old witches who play games with people's lives deserve to be severely punished. Tian Guihua, stop <u>the phoney act</u>. You got off lightly with only being struck.

(Mo,2015:31)

In the original text, "耍死狗" is an extremely colloquial expression, which refers to the insolence of people playing rogue and unreasonable. It is the pet phrase in rural areas. Here, Mo conveys Tian Guihua as an unapologetic, uneducated old woman in the countryside, while using Yuan Lian's words to introduce the reader to the scene of rural China. As for the translation of commonalities in idioms, Goldblatt is inclined to the "pragmatic" end here. He retains the connotation of this slang in the content but does not literally translate it into "play the dead dog" in the form. If the principle of "truth-seeking" prevails, the target language readers will often mistake the real image of a dead dog for lack of relevant life background. At this time, the translation is inconsistent and illogical, which causes obstacles to the target language readers and lacks the expression connotation of Mo Yan's original text. In this case, "pragmatic" is a necessary choice. The word "phoney act" expresses Tian Guihua's false behavior at this time, which ceases obstacles to the target language readers, and achieves "truth-seeking" in connotation. It can be seen that "truth-seeking" and "pragmatic" are mutually conditional. "Pragmatic" makes "truth-seeking" not just the pursuit of formal "truth-seeking", so as to realize the harmonious unity of the two (Zhou, 2014).

Example 5:

Original text: **我说**：<u>王胆跟陈鼻好了</u>，你知道吗？她怔了一会，突然哈哈大笑起来。

(Mo,2003:37)

Translation: Did you know that <u>Wang Dan and Chen Bi like each other</u>? She froze briefly, then broke out laughing.

(Mo,2003:65)

In Chinese, "好了" means that two people are very close to each other. This slang is a very colloquial expression, which is familiar to Chinese readers. *Frog* describes the scene in which Wang and Chen fall in love. If the literal translation of "好" is fine according to the Chinese and English words, it is inconsistent with the connotation of the original text. At this point, "seeking truth" can no longer convey the meaning of the source text. To ensure that the reader's final understanding is consistent with the author's expression, the translator needs to lean toward the "pragmatic" end. Goldblatt interprets "好" here as "like each other." Such a translation is consistent with the original content and the original

intention of "seeking truth", which is an effective combination of these two principles. Therefore, in order to take care of the target language readers who may not have the reserves of relevant Chinese dialect culture, literal translation or literal translation annotations are not adopted to facilitate readers' understanding and ensure the fluency and conciseness of the translation (Wang, 2022).

3.3 Evaluation of English Translation Strategies for Folk Adage

Folk adage is created by the masses and passed from mouth to mouth, which is a colloquial and popular language unit in China.

Example 6:

Original text: 姑姑说：王肝？他是癞蛤蟆想吃天鹅肉！小狮子嫁给谁也不会嫁给他！

(Mo,2014:80)

Translation: Wang Gan? Gugu remarked. He's the <u>proverbial toad wanting to taste the Swan's flesh.</u> If there's anyone, Little Lion won't marry, it's Wang Gan!

(MO,2015:104)

"癞蛤蟆想吃天鹅肉" refers to a person who does not work hard, but wants to get something without effort, which has a derogatory meaning. The original text expresses the great gap between Wang Dan and Xiao Shizi, which not only reflects Wang Dan's wishful thinking, but also expresses the aunt's strong dissatisfaction with Wang Dan and her strong feelings of contempt. At this time, Goldstein uses the literal translation method of "the proverbial toad wanting to taste the swan's flesh". The words "toad" and "swan" form a picture contrast. They are connected by the verb taste, which realizes the "truth-seeking" in meaning, and reflects the speaker's discourse feelings at this time. In addition, this translation makes the target language reader feel the cultural components of the original text, retains the national characteristics of Chinese colloquial expressions, and achieves the desired effect of "seeking truth". Therefore, in the case of fully expressing the connotation of the original text and retaining the heterogeneous components, the translator should give priority to "seeking truth" in translation, and highlight the national characteristics of the original text.

Example 7:

Original text: 爸爸，祝贺你们，<u>千年的铁树开了花，万年的枯枝发了芽</u>，你们创造了奇迹！

(Mo,2014:277)

Translation: Congratulations, Papa. <u>A thousand-year-old sago palm has flowered, a ten-thousand-year-old dead branch has sprouted</u>. You have created a miracle!

(MO,2015:314)

"千年的铁树开了花，万年的枯枝发了芽" refers to the occurrence of a miracle and the hard-won results. In the original text, the father had a child again in his middle age, which is a surprising thing. The translator needs to highlight the emotional color of surprise in the translation. Here, Goldblatt is biased towards the "truth-seeking" end and translates it literally to achieve the transmission of the original meaning. At the same time, such a translation method retains the heterogeneous components of Chinese colloquialisms and highlights Mo Yan's writing style of rural literature. Thus, it can be seen

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that Goldblatt mainly adopts the literal translation method for the treatment of colloquialisms. This translation treatment achieves the expected effect of "truth-seeking" in both form and content. This also shows that when "truth-seeking" is feasible and can achieve the corresponding social effect, "truth-seeking" is the best.

4. Conclusion

As a famous American sinologist, Goldblatt's Chinese language proficiency and understanding of Chinese culture are beyond doubt. He also pointed out that "local color" is the soul of Mo Yan's novels and the key part of "constituting its long-term attraction", but this writing feature also inevitably adds many difficulties to translation (Goldblatt, 2014). For the treatment of idioms in *Frog*, Goldblatt is not bound by the lack of corresponding Chinese and English words, but skillfully uses various translation strategies. Generally speaking, in the translation process, he reasonably follows the code of conduct of "truth-seeking" and "pragmatic", which better retains the Chinese national characteristics. This approach cleverly solves the reading obstacles of the target language readers and promotes the development of Chinese literature in the world. Goldblatt has a high "truth-seeking degree" in the translation of idioms and folk adages, reflecting the translator's attribute of "intermediary". In the process of translating slang, the "pragmatic degree" is high, and the interpretation of its connotation is often used in free translation and other translation strategies. There is no doubt that Goldblatt has well fulfilled the responsibility of a translator and is a model for the translation of Chinese literary works. This also gives translators a revelation that the application of the two translators' code of conduct, whether it is to choose one or both, should be determined according to the actual situation, and strive to achieve a balance between the two.

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